Goldbergs

Richard Lapidus

The University of Montana

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Before

Bottles lined the nightstand. Plastic bottles. Days of the week pill holders. Meds-meds-meds-meds...Ruthie sang a new tune every time she said the words.

What can an orgasm be like?

She was fifteen then. If she ever had one, she can’t remember. Maybe the body responded. But dull, dulled by so many white ones and red ones and, one year when she was twenty-three, even blues. This was the blue year. Already married, already a mother. Stuck in the throes of a blue year.

One night, stop taking them. Such an easy decision.

Everything is awful afterwards, but in such stark relief. Touch a penny, trace the contours. Know exactly. Don’t settle for the truth averred, but for the truth revealed.

Touch your husband, Ruthie. Feel his chest, its rise and fall. He is flawed but without the medication, you can know his flaws and your own. They won’t be mysteries anymore.

How could she continue on?
If her children were younger, she knows what she would do. She’d sneak into their rooms, she’d press her chest to theirs and match her children’s heartbeats to her own.

Now she stays awake nights and listens to the house breathing.
If Goldberg knew the way to save his family, he would sacrifice anything to do so. Pikuach nefesh: to save one life, this was the greatest of all mitzvot. And if this was the greatest, what could God help but think about a man who saved his entire family? This is what Goldberg asked of himself every night before he went to bed and every morning he woke up with the realization that he still did not know what to do.

He would need a little help. This he decided after many hours of prayer and thought. Especially today, this day in which his only son would learn a difficult lesson when he faced the others, those who had been blessed with natural skills to hit, run, catch and throw at a level that Ruben could never hope to match.

Goldberg cautioned Ruben, his son, not because he wanted to worry the boy but because he wanted the boy not to expect too much. Goldberg had spent his whole life expecting things that didn’t come true and he didn’t want Ruben to have to endure the same heartbreaks and hardships as he had.

“Somebody’s going to throw you a curveball today. There’s no avoiding that fact. These pitchers are bound to
be the best you’ve seen so far. And the first time you see a curveball - the first time anybody sees a curveball, for that matter - it breaks you at your knees. Just breaks you into pieces,” Goldberg said, wagging his meaty index finger at his son. “You won’t know, you can’t comprehend, what has occurred. And why should you? You’re just a boy. I wouldn’t expect you to understand. A curveball is a magical, mysterious thing and it’s not to be trifled with. Science cannot explain the curveball, did you know that? It makes no sense, not in that way. Curveballs come from God and you’ll hit them when God decides you’re good and ready.”

Goldberg bit triumphantly into his pickle and touched the boy’s shoulder. He thought that he was doing a good job as a father. He didn’t know what he could do better and Ruben certainly never complained, though to tell the truth the boy hardly talked at all.

Ruben had a thin face. His mother fed him well and Goldberg was a good provider - nobody could ever say that Ruben or Hannah, his sister, lacked - but the boy’s face seemed more haggard each day and this day, gray as it was, Goldberg could hardly have thought his son might have been sketched in black and white. But look at me, Goldberg thought and touched his heavy belly. Couldn’t God have given me a son that was somewhere in between skinny or fat
like me? Would a little compromise have killed the Creator of the Universe?

Embarrassed at his blasphemy, Goldberg bit angrily into his pickle, again, and gave the boy a slight push on the shoulder. “Go on then,” Goldberg said.

“Okay,” Ruben replied in a voice as thin as his body.

He ran out onto the field and started to shag fly balls with the others.

A blonde woman climbed up the wooden stands and sat down directly in front of Goldberg, picking up each thigh as though her legs had no control of their own and arranging them on the stands, heavily and permanently. Goldberg wondered if she had hurt her legs somehow, but she hadn’t limped when she was walking. As she settled in, he realized just how teased up her hair was and that she was taller than he was, anyway. It was going to be difficult to see the action with this woman seated there. He whistled softly out through his teeth. So be it, he thought. I can move. No need to make a fuss.

But he didn’t want to move. He had sat down first. There was plenty of room. Who the hell did she think she was? She should find someplace else to sit. He drank his ginger ale and thought that if a foul ball hit the woman -
or almost hit the woman, he wasn’t a killer, god forbid - that wouldn’t be the worst thing in his day.

The boys finished warming up and woman still hadn’t moved. Goldberg was worried. He wondered if, perhaps, the woman had seen his look when she sat down or heard him whistle in annoyance. It made him uncomfortable to think that someone might be angry with him. Goldberg decided that if he made a little conversation, she would see that he was happy she was sitting there and any potential tension would instantly be alleviated. He tapped her on the shoulder and she turned around brusquely, as though he had disturbed her in the midst of something important, something far more essential than whatever piddling small talk a balding, paunchy Jew might make with her. There was no going back.

If somebody else had been sitting there, Goldberg would have pretended to have nothing to do with getting her attention, but he didn’t have that option. She looked hard at him and he had to say something.

He gave her his best smile, the one that twice forced Pincus of Pincus Home Furnishings to give Goldberg Salesman of the Month, and said, “Hello. Hey!” When she didn’t reply he asked, “Do you have a boy that’s playing?”

“The pitcher,” she said.

“Which one?” Goldberg asked.
"For the blue team," the woman said and turned around. This was a city-wide all star game. The best players from the best summer teams, all under fourteen. That Ruben had been included was a miracle to Goldberg, maybe even a mistake. Ruben had hit well all summer with even a home run or two but that was against nothing teams with lousy pitching. None of those had known a curveball from a herring. These were good players, these kids. He reminded Ruben of this on the subway ride over. "You don't know the level these others will be," Goldberg said, his lower lip trembling as though he might cry, "there'll be very good players there. Don't give the coach any lip if he doesn't play you. He's got lots of good players to use. You'll get your turn, maybe not this year, that's all."

Ruben wasn't on the blue team. He was on the red team, which was made up of players from the outer boroughs. The kids from the city looked like hot-shots. They were in the field first and they flung the ball around the horn like old hands. They looked bigger than the kids on Ruben's team. There were more blacks and spanish, though there were a couple of each on Ruben's team. The coach of Ruben's team wasn't so crazy about the blacks and spanish. He took some because he had to, but he didn't want too many of them. Goldberg felt his chest tighten up when he thought about
the thumping Ruben’s team was about to take. Still, he decided. It’s good for them to learn now. You can’t learn disappointment too early.

A pigeon landed next to Goldberg, not three feet away. He threw it a piece of pickle but the bird looked askance at him. “I don’t have any bread,” Goldberg said and smiled at the pigeon, so he could make it understand that he wanted to be friends even if he couldn’t give it any food.

The woman turned around. She was in the process of putting pink glitter lipstick on, which seemed a little strange for not such a young woman, and Goldberg saw that she was getting some of it on her front teeth. Do I say anything? he wondered. Better to leave it alone. She doesn’t seem like the type that would appreciate a helpful word from a friendly stranger.

“Who are you talking to?” the woman asked.

“Sorry?” Goldberg said.

“You said you didn’t have bread,” she said. “Are you talking to me? Are you talking to yourself? You’re not crazy are you? I don’t want to sit near a crazy person.”

“No,” Goldberg answered in a thin, nervous voice that he feared betrayed everything in him to this Amazon. “It’s the pigeon. I was talking to the pigeon.” He turned to show the woman the bird, but it was gone. “He was right here,”
Goldberg said, rattled. "He must have just flown away a second ago. A pigeon. I threw him a little pickle - a little nosh, even the birds deserve - and he didn't want any. He wanted bread. Pigeons, they always want bread, don't you know?"

"You're a crazy man. I knew it," the woman said. She stood up and Goldberg found himself staring at her legs, which were, though on the heavy side, not unattractive.

"I'm not crazy, missus," Goldberg said. "Please sit."

The woman looked hard at Goldberg and he rubbed his hands together to stop them from sweating so.

"The game's starting now," Goldberg said, and hoped that might placate her. She nodded uncertainly and sat down, but a little farther up the first base line this time and he knew it was so she could watch him out of the corner of her eye. She really thinks I might attack her! Goldberg thought. He was horrified that someone might think this of him and then, when he had a second to think on it, he changed his mind. Maybe he was the kind of man that people were scared of. Goldberg hadn't known that about himself and he didn't think the idea was all bad: that he was a dangerous man who had to be respected. He crunched his pickle loudly, finishing it in one masculine chomp. He felt a little dribble down his chin but he didn't bother to wipe
it with his sleeve. Dangerous men didn’t have to worry so much what they looked like, whether they made a mess or not. Let them make a mess. Who would say anything to such a man as Goldberg?

The PA announcer asked the crowd to rise for the anthem and Goldberg did, hitching his belt proudly over his belly. He looked down at the roots on the woman’s head and realized she wasn’t a blonde. Not a real one, anyway. He felt sorry for her, that she let other people dictate what she should look like. He would never be like that. After the anthem, he leaned over and said, “Good luck. I hope your son pitches well.”

“He will,” the woman said with determination, not turning around. Goldberg was surprised she didn’t turn around. He thought she should pay better attention when a potentially crazy man spoke to her. He thought the woman foolish. A mother shouldn’t take such chances, Goldberg decided. She has responsibilities.

The first batter for Ruben’s team stepped in and Goldberg was struck by how small he looked compared to the woman’s son on the mound. The pitcher was enormous and Ruben didn’t think there was any way he could be under thirteen, which all the boys were supposed to be.
Ah, to have a son like that, Goldberg thought. Practically an animal, that one.

The pitcher threw hard and after a called strike and a weak foul ball popped up into the screen, the batter hit a nothing grounder to the shortstop and was expertly thrown out. From where he was sitting, Goldberg could hear the pop of the ball hitting the first baseman’s glove and he thought it was for the best that Ruben not face this pitcher. It couldn’t end well.

But when the second batter came up, Goldberg realized that Ruben would have to face the pitcher, after all, that was Ruben in the on-deck circle. But the boy’s face was blurry from where Goldberg sat, the features running into one another, and Goldberg held out hope that it wasn’t even his son, just another player on the red team with a similar, slight build. Still, the boy’s movements were Ruben’s, the way he swung his bat around to get loose - stilted and wearily - seemed so typical of Ruben.

Goldberg began to bite his nails. How could he tell Ruben’s mother that he had been killed in a Little League game? This pitcher was certainly a killer, no doubt. He would probably end up in jail before he was eighteen.

Goldberg hardly saw the second batter, just heard some murmurs when he struck out, and then it was Ruben’s turn.
The PA announcer announced the name in a hollow, unimpressed voice - Ruben Goldberg - and Goldberg felt his upper lip begin to perspire.

The pitcher had been throwing only fastballs and this is what he used to start Ruben out. The first pitch tailed in and Ruben had to jump out of the way so it didn’t catch him in the kneecap. Vey iz mir, Goldberg thought. My God.

“He looks good,” the woman said over her shoulder to Goldberg. “He’s throwing hard - not as hard as normal, but hard.”

“Mm-hmm,” Goldberg said. That this woman with dyed blonde hair could have produced a man-child, a pitcher like this, was incredible. Why, she had been terrified of Goldberg not five minutes before! How could it happen that the killer was hers? Was he, perhaps, adopted?

Ruben stepped out of the batter’s box and banged at his spikes with the bat. He dug back in, his feet closer together than was usual for this age group, his right elbow raised and straight as Goldberg had showed him, the bat waggling loosely between his fingers just so.

The pitch seemed slower than the others, less wild and Goldberg leaned forward in anticipation. When he recognized that it was high and tight, almost into Ruben’s hands, Goldberg’s knees buckled and he twisted his chest to the
side as if to help his son avoid the pitch. But the ball dropped into the strike zone and Ruben swung quickly—probably the most decisive and beautiful thing Ruben might ever do in his life was swing a baseball bat, Goldberg knew—and the ball came off hard, straight back up the middle. Goldberg leaned forward and felt the button on his dungarees strain and cut into his stomach, but he didn’t mind. Ruben took a wide turn at first and when the centerfielder—who was only a child, after all—misplayed the ball and kicked it, Ruben had no trouble making it to second base standing up.

Goldberg inhaled sharply. Could this have happened? Could that really, really be his Ruben on second base, a double or even a single with an error, off a pitcher such as this? Goldberg didn’t know how to feel.

The woman turned around and said, “That one hit his curveball.” She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

“His curveball,” Goldberg repeated reverentially, “his curveball.”

“Yeah,” the woman said. “His father taught him a curve just for this game. He hadn’t wanted to teach him one for a while. You know what they say about it not being good for a growing boy’s arm.”

“I do,” Goldberg said. “I’ve heard that.”
He looked at Ruben standing on second base. His son looked far away. He had his hands on his knees and the helmet hid his eyes. His left foot was touching the side of the bag. There was no stealing in Little League.

“That’s my Ruben,” Goldberg told the woman.

“Yeah?” she said, surprised. “He looks like he’s a good hitter.”

“He is, oh, he is,” Goldberg said, keeping his voice light, but his eyes filled with tears of embarrassment, not for himself but for the woman. He lowered his head. He couldn’t bear to look at her, he couldn’t bear for her to know he understood her humiliation completely, that her words of goodwill were only words and they meant nothing real. She couldn’t fool Goldberg. After all, he had been there so many times himself: filled with the shame of broken dreams and false hope, the foreknowledge that someday nothing would be good enough, no smiles or jokes would be able to cover up the shards of things long gone.
2. Ruben

From second base, Ruben could see his father standing up and clapping loudly and enthusiastically and it didn’t occur to Ruben that beyond Goldberg’s happiness could lie anything deeper or darker, any cloud that separated him from less than totally loving his son or his family.

Ruben had hoped that Hannah would surprise him and come to the game, but she hadn’t. She didn’t like baseball, though she pretended she did for his sake. He felt guilty that he didn’t pretend to like some of the things that she was interested in. It seemed to Ruben that this was something a loving brother, which he considered himself to be, would do. Ruben knew that his mother, Ruthie, wasn’t going to come to the game. Of that there was no doubt in his mind and, though he felt guilty for this, he was glad she wouldn’t be there.

Ruben avoided looking at the second baseman, who he thought was making a mistake by playing so close to the bag. They didn’t allow stealing in for this age group, so why sneak in as though for a pickoff? It didn’t make any sense. Ruben blamed the coach for not waving the second baseman back into position.
The pitcher settled into his stretch, leaned over and looked hard at the catcher, who was desperately flashing two fingers. Ruben was pleased with this. He had hit a curve and he wanted to see what the next hitter would do with one, but the pitcher stepped off the mound and circled around, shaded his eyes because the sun was coming from centerfield and looked directly at Ruben.

The pitcher had a thin moustache. There was a boy at Ruben’s school with a moustache and while that boy was very proud of it, Ruben thought it looked ugly and he didn’t like the pitcher’s either.

The pitcher’s moustache was very dark and more wispy than filled out. Ruben wondered if girls thought he looked older and more attractive because of it. He ran his fingers over his own, perfectly smooth, upper lip. There was no texture there, not even a stray hair beginning to protrude. Goldberg shaved often, so Ruben knew that someday he would have to as well, he knew that was one of the many things you get from your father, and Ruben decided he looked forward to the day when he too would lather up and shave each morning. That would mean he was a man.

The pitcher took two steps towards second base and Ruben wondered whether he was mad or embarrassed, whether he wanted to fight Ruben because he doubled. It was luck,
Ruben wanted to say and he knew that was true. He didn’t know what he had done. Stepping into the batter’s box, he had promptly forgotten every piece of advice Goldberg had offered and Goldberg had been liberal with his advice all throughout the summer and into the early fall, as the season concluded.

Ruben’s team lost the game, which didn’t surprise him at all. He didn’t bring a change of shoes and so he walked to the subway station next to Goldberg, who raved and raved about Ruben’s acumen, listening to the sound his spikes made on the pavement. Periodically he checked over his shoulder to see if the metal spikes were sparking along the ground. When he decided that no, he wasn’t missing the sparks, there just weren’t any, Ruben began to drag one foot and then the other to see if this, perhaps, might cause some sparks.

“You stop that,” Goldberg said, “you’re going to ruin them.”

Ruben didn’t say anything but Goldberg’s logic annoyed him. This had been the last game of baseball season. And Ruben knew that the rest of him was growing fast and would for a long time, so he also knew that the spikes wouldn’t even fit next year, that they would have to buy new ones for him. Goldberg was always willing to spend money on
baseball equipment and now that his mother wasn’t well, he knew she wouldn’t protest. When Ruben had been a little boy, his mother had argued every expenditure, unless it was books for Hannah to study. She didn’t believe that sports were such an important thing, but for some time she hadn’t had an opinion on anything at all.
Ruben’s feat would help lift the darkness that had descended over the Goldberg family. Of this, Goldberg became increasingly confident as he thought of his son pulling in standing up to second.

To celebrate the success, Goldberg asked his son, “Would some ice cream for my boy at Mr. Stolzenberg’s be perfect or would it be perfect?”

“No thanks,” Ruben said and Goldberg felt some of the optimism drain from him. He sighed deeply and then thought, Don’t give up so easy. A little resiliency, this is something that is required of us in this life. So what if the boy wasn’t an ice cream lover. He was an athlete, after all. He believed in his body, in its sanctity and this was a wonderful thing after all, such dedication.

Ruthie answered the door. “Do you know what your son did today?” Goldberg asked her. He put his arm around the boy’s shoulder.

She pulled her housecoat tighter and the bright flowers on the fabric, covered with coffee stains, depressed Goldberg. They seemed such a half-hearted effort at competence and happiness. He smiled brightly. Her hair was unkempt and unwashed. Ruthie hadn’t been well. Often
she wouldn’t speak. When she did, she might not remember their names or she would accuse them of plotting against her. She heard voices. She had admitted to this when confronted by a fancy doctor at Mt. Sinai. If only the son of a bitch had kept his mouth shut, the idea never would have occurred to her. Voices! Insanity was supposed to be for the goyim. Cancer, Jews got cancer, and this Goldberg could handle. That was God’s will. This he did not comprehend.

The doctors knew what was wrong with her - part of it was a chemical imbalance, they knew this for sure - but they said they had no cure. Mental illness. Severe depression. Withdrawal. Possible schizophrenia. These were the words they used. They gave her medication but she didn’t take it - the medicine made her sick to her stomach, this was why she must have stopped taking it, and Goldberg couldn’t bring himself to pin her down, cover her nostrils so that she would gasp for air and dump a pill into her mouth. What if she gave up and never did open her mouth? How long would he hold her nostrils shut? He might make a mistake and keep them closed too long. Ruthie had been a beautiful bride. He couldn’t do it.

Goldberg decided to grind up her pills, to try and sneak the powder onto her food. Every Sunday they ordered
out, always for Chinese. Goldberg had a weakness for
Chinese food. One Sunday, while Ruthie was in the bathroom,
he dumped a fine, blue powder into the sauce for her moo
shu pork, then stirred the sauce around so none of the
tell-tale blue would be visible. Goldberg reasoned that the
sauce was the best place because it had a strong, fruity
taste and he didn’t think she would ever notice the
medication’s acrid taste. But the plan backfired. Ruthie
wouldn’t touch the sauce. “Don’t you want some sauce?”
Goldberg asked and tried to dump a portion onto her plate.
She knocked his hand away.

“No,” Ruthie said. “No thank you.” Goldberg wanted to
question her, to find out for sure what she knew, but that
would give him away. And then where would he be? No,
discretion would be best. But Ruthie explained anyway.

Ruthie claimed she had never liked moo shu sauce.
“It’s a little too much,” she said. “I like the moo shu by
itself. What do I need something else for?” He shrugged his
shoulders and pretended to acquiesce to this thinking.
Goldberg knew she was lying. The sauce, that might have
once been her favorite part of the meal. Maybe not that,
but he knew she had always used it in the past. Hadn’t she?
Goldberg was sure that Ruthie had seen him try and sneak it
in there. She knew what sort of man he was. One who loved
his wife and wanted her to be well, yes, but not just that. One who could lie and deceive. Goldberg imagined the thoughts she must be having about him - that the only reason he wanted her well was for his own purposes.

For years, Ruthie had taken the doctors’ medication. Various things, that’s what she’d say when people asked why she took all the pills. Goldberg heard them, he saw the questions and the distrust in their eyes. People didn’t understand anything. They wouldn’t try to understand. He, however, wouldn’t judge like that. Not his wife.

It was a month after Ruthie stopped the pills completely before Goldberg noticed a change. But soon he realized he had stopped spending much time talking to Ruthie. He wanted to help her but she cried all the time and his talking to her hadn’t helped anything, so he just about gave up. For this he felt guilty, but he didn’t know how to save her.

After Ruben’s success, Goldberg thought it might be a boost to Ruthie, something to pick her back up. Mothers take pride in their children’s accomplishments. Fathers too, he reminded himself.

“Your son hit a genuine double off a curveball today,” Goldberg said, “How about that?” Ruthie didn’t answer.
Goldberg thought her eyes were filling up with tears again. They often did.

"Give your mother a kiss, Ruben," Goldberg said. He pushed the boy forward with a hand at the small of his back. Ruben glanced up at his father and then leaned down to his mother, who was effectively blocking the doorway and any possibility of escape, and kissed her on top of her head. Goldberg worried that his son could see that she was losing her hair. Goldberg wouldn’t want that. A boy shouldn’t see age, not like that, not right in his face where there was no way to get space from it.

Goldberg didn’t think Ruben had noticed his mother’s crying. That was something. Ruben didn’t seem to notice anything. He certainly never remarked about anything unless he was asked directly and though Goldberg thought Ruben was a fine boy, a truly fine boy, he wished he spoke more. But the boy must listen, Goldberg was sure of that. Otherwise, how else would he have been able to hit the curveball like that?

Goldberg and Ruben sat silently at the kitchen table and fingered their hard boiled eggs in silence, waiting for Hannah to come home. Goldberg was mad because she should have been at her brother’s game. It was one thing for Ruthie not to go. Ruthie had problems. But Hannah was a
very smart girl - college bound, there could be no doubt -
and she was always at the library, studying studying
studying. Goldberg was proud that she was so smart. She
would be the first in the family to go to college, how
could he not be proud? Still, he wished she did something
other than study. He wished she went out on dates or went
to the movies - even by herself, there was a certain
nobility to that. Or, she could take an interest in her
family, her own blood, and go see her brother triumph in a
city-wide all-star game, an accomplishment too.

She came in the door with a clang and Ruthie jumped
from the settee in the living room and clutched her throat,
as though Hannah were a murderer, a wild killer come to
murder them in horrible ways. Hannah saw her mother jump
and rolled her eyes. She wasn’t a patient girl. She had no
time for anyone other than herself and her own schedule and
interests. Goldberg wondered if he had pushed her too hard
when she was a child. Was this, maybe, all his fault, all
this tsuris she had?

But that wasn’t it, he decided. We make our own beds,
he wanted to say, but there was no one to say it to, no one
who would understand.

Hannah stormed into her bedroom and slammed the door.
Goldberg stared at the closed door and when he looked over
at Ruben, Ruben was staring at the door as well. “She works hard,” Goldberg said. He didn’t like to apologize for her. He apologized for everybody, all the time, that’s what he thought. But family was important and he was bound and determined to hold his children together. He had failed with his wife, but Ruben and Hannah were another chance, weren’t they? He prayed that Hannah wasn’t already too far gone.

Hannah came out of the bedroom, now dressed only in a bathrobe and fuzzy slippers. “That’s some way to walk around the house, if you ask me,” Goldberg said.

She ignored him and patted her brother on the shoulder. “Did you have your baseball game today?”

“Yes,” Ruben said and looked at her and smiled. Goldberg felt better, a little less upset. It was good that Hannah remembered the game and good that Ruben noticed. He looked into the living room to see if Ruthie saw all that was going on. She had her eyes closed and he wondered if she was sleeping.

“So?” Hannah asked. “Don’t make me drag it out of you. Did you win?”

Ruben shook his head no.

Goldberg pounded the table happily with the flat of his hand. “No, the team didn’t win, but it was some game,
your brother was something great.” He leaned over and kissed Ruben loud on the cheek. His lips made a smacking sound on the boy’s skin.

Goldberg felt guilty for not having been completely and purely happy when Ruben had gotten his big hit. That had been a wonderful moment for the boy and instead of letting his son’s glory coat him, Goldberg hadn’t been able to keep his own failures out of his head. I should be a better man than that, he thought. That’s inexcusable. I love my son. And my daughter.

“He was something great,” Goldberg repeated. His tone was wistful and he knew he sounded old. A small part of him hoped Ruben and Hannah heard the sadness in his voice and took pity on him. He hated feeling weak that way, hoping for such a thing as pity, but it didn’t matter because he saw Hannah’s face and he knew it wasn’t to come.

She was glaring at him as though he thought she might punch him in the face. All that he had given her, all that he had done for her, and still she hated him so. It baffled Goldberg that there could be such hatred in a person. Ruben didn’t hate. Ruthie, for all her problems, had never hated. And Goldberg, he hated no one.

“I want to hear it from Ruben,” Hannah said. If Goldberg had the strength for it, he would have leaned
across the table and kissed Hannah like he had kissed Ruben. But he didn’t have the strength, neither that nor the bravery.

“I got a double off a curveball. Maybe a single with an error, that’s only fair,” Ruben said.

“Nonsense,” Goldberg said loudly. Too loud, Ruthie started up from the sofa as though someone had yelled her name. “You got a double and don’t let none of them tell you differently.”

“Any of them,” Hannah said. “Any of them. And who is this mysterious ‘them’ you refer to?” She ran her hands through her hair. She was the only one with blonde hair in the family. Goldberg couldn’t figure where she had gotten it. Him, Ruthie, neither had any blonde haired people in the family. When she was a little girl, it had made Goldberg feel so proud to see her yellow hair shining in the sun. It was something else. It still made him proud, but now he couldn’t tell her so. He couldn’t scoop her up into his arms and say, Look how beautiful my girl is.

“I’ve got to go study,” Hannah said. “Chem.”

“Oh,” Goldberg said. “Chemistry. Maybe I can help. I used to be quite the chemistry student when I was younger. Really good at that, it’s true, I was.”
Ruben giggled. “What is it?” Hannah asked. She sat down at the table. “You never laugh anymore.”

“Just...it’s just Goldberg doing experiments,” Ruben said, nodding his head at Goldberg, “and I laughed.”

“Laughter is good,” Goldberg said. “I don’t mind that you laugh at me. I know you only mean it in fun. And laughter, it heals everything.”

Hannah snorted loudly out her nose. Goldberg thought she sounded like a horse, or what he imagined a horse’s snort would sound like. He had actually never ridden a horse. He had been close to them when policeman rode by, he thought they were large foul smelling things that must be as vicious as they looked, but he didn’t know for sure. Maybe they didn’t snort at all. Maybe they were kindly animals who wanted only to help. This he had read in a book. There’s so much I should have done, Goldberg thought. I could have not been scared of horses and I could have learned to ride one. Just like in the movies.

“I’ve got to go study,” Hannah repeated. Goldberg looked up at her and his eyes were filled with longing, but she wouldn’t look at him, wouldn’t meet his eye, not even so that he could see how much she detested him, how embarrassed she was of him.
Hannah walked into her room slower, softer this time. Goldberg watched to see if she would turn around and look over her shoulder, but she didn’t.

Ruthie stood up from the couch and walked into the kitchen. She looked surprised to see Goldberg and Ruben sitting there. “Meyer! Ruben! Where have the two of you been?”

Goldberg looked down at his plate. He had made the hardboiled eggs. It wasn’t much, not even a bother, but Ruthie couldn’t be trusted or asked to do much of anything anymore. Hard boiled eggs were a curious thing. So often they ended up cracking in the water. Ruthie never let hers crack. Soon I won’t be able to leave her alone in the house, Goldberg thought. You never know what someone in her state might do. Somebody should always be with her. Then he worried for having thought that, because he realized that, of course, that somebody would have to be he. Who else could do it? The children had to go to school. Tomorrow was a work day, but he’d have to call the company and explain. It would be a sin not to miss work and take care of his wife. She was his wife and they were married. Marriage was a sacred trust. It was a mitzvah. And so was family. These things weren’t to be taken lightly. Wives had responsibilities just like husbands did. Different ones,
yes, but they weren’t free from burden. He was fulfilling his responsibilities and all he wished was that she would, that she could, do the same. Now Goldberg couldn’t go to the cup of corner for a little something to eat without thinking he’d come back and she’d have drenched herself in boiling water. Or what else, what worse could happen? She could touch the stove, not move her fingers once she felt the pain, she might watch the skin melt and fuse back together and turn her into something monstrous, worse than she was now. Goldberg felt the burden weighing him down. He could never forgive himself if she got hurt because nobody was there.

“I’m going to take some time off from work next week,” he said to Ruben, “to try and help your mother.”

Ruben stared up at him but Goldberg wasn’t sure how he was meant to interpret the stare. Such an inscrutable boy.

“Not that I’m promising anything,” Goldberg said, “You understand that, don’t you? She may, God forbid, not get so better. That’s just part of things.”

“I know,” Ruben said. But he smiled at Goldberg and Goldberg didn’t think the boy believed his own words. If Goldberg stayed home, mommy must get better. That was how children thought. They didn’t understand. A boy like that, young and not so smart, not like Hannah, he might believe
anything. Hannah would never believe that somehow Goldberg staying home from work could magically heal Ruthie. That’s what she called her mother, when she even spoke to her: Ruthie. Goldberg didn’t think it was right that children call their parents by their first names. It made them into equals but, more than that, it made it as though they weren’t even related. Strangers. And what could be worse than to be a stranger to your flesh, your child? Goldberg would have laughed if it weren’t such a tragedy.

“I’m going to go read,” Ruben said and his words struck Goldberg as hopeful. True, reading was an introspective activity, but the boy had announced his plans. That showed backbone and determination in a boy who, other than when on the baseball diamond, seemed to have nothing more to him than the ability to follow directions. And, even in baseball, Ruben was such an avid follower of advice and counsel from coaches and teammates alike, Goldberg couldn’t be sure that the boy possessed his own will. But he had hit that curveball, that goddamn curveball! That was truly a wonderful moment, Goldberg decided. Maybe it was only the start. Maybe everything in Ruben’s world would start changing for the better and then Goldberg wouldn’t worry so much, not if Ruben were saved. Things could improve. That happened all the time. One day
there was a war, the next day peace. Hannah might become
inger, Ruben would show more free will and Ruthie would
become whole again. These things could happen.

Caught up in his newfound optimism, though he hadn’t
completely forgotten his desperation of only minutes
before, Goldberg sprung up from his seat at the kitchen
table and took two loping steps - at least, he fancied them
loping because cowboys loped, though it was a small
apartment and he wasn’t a tall man and it wasn’t difficult
to cover much of it quickly - over to the couch to confront
Ruthie, to draw her out.

“Ruthie, dear. How are you doing today?” he asked her.
She was looking up at the ceiling. Goldberg looked up
there. He knew she wasn’t looking at anything, but he
thought that if, perhaps, he saw what she thought she saw,
they might understand one another better and be better able
to communicate. He saw paint beginning to chip and an ugly
overhead light fixture, too garish and invasive. Goldberg
had meant to buy a new fixture for a long time now. A new
fixture with a nice design would really make the living
room into a more special space.

“Hello,” Ruthie said out of the corner of her mouth.
“I’m going downstairs to watch. You can come if you don’t
get in the way.”
She was watching. This was what his bride had been reduced to.

Goldberg patted her on the shoulder. “Would you like to take a walk instead?” he asked. “Ruben and Hannah will keep an eye on things while we’re gone.”

“Alright,” Ruthie said and put her hand to her mouth and giggled like a schoolgirl. “I don’t mind taking a walk with you.”

The doctors had told him that certain mood swings were normal, unavoidable, but that she’d be there and she’d understand, that while she was taking her medication anything was okay. “Really,” the doctor had said, “don’t be frightened.”

Goldberg smiled at Ruthie. He would have liked to reach out and touch her face, but now wasn’t the time. “Okay,” he said. “We’ll take a walk. I’ll get your coat and hat. There’s a touch of fall in the air.”

Goldberg got Ruthie’s coat and hat. She got cold very easily, though it was warm outside, almost hot. But they were going to take a walk and, worst come to worst, she could always take them off and he could carry them.

Despite the mix-up about Mrs. Schick and mah jong, Goldberg still felt good. He thought maybe fresh air was all she needed and he knew it was a foolish thought, that
Ruthie needed so much more than that, but he couldn’t help himself.

“Hannah. Ruben. Your mother and I are going to go for a walk.”

Mumbled okays from behind their closed doors. It would have been nice if the two of them, or even one, had volunteered to come along, but hitting a curveball could only be the start of something. That of itself wasn’t significant enough to turn everything around in a flash. It would take time, but Goldberg didn’t consider himself the sort to expect instant gratification. He was willing to put in the work.

Goldberg held Ruthie’s hands as they went down the stairs. Sometimes, Mr. Willie, the super, waxed the floor. Not so often, but sometimes. God forbid she should slip.

Outside, the neighborhood seemed different to Goldberg. He knew so little of the names these days. He held tightly to Ruthie. He didn’t trust these people he didn’t know and he wondered if they knew him. He wondered if they said to themselves, Here comes the man with the crazy wife who never goes out. Goldberg would hate for people to think things like that.

“Where should we walk to?” he asked Ruthie, leaning in close to her as he spoke.
“Why don’t we go to the water and walk along the promenade?” she said.

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Goldberg answered. He thought it was a wonderful idea. The sun would be setting soon and they could look out over the city. The view was perfect and the promenade was always a good place for courting. He understood that Ruthie thought they were out on a date. She didn’t seem to know that she was already his wife, already the mother of two teenagers.

Goldberg thought this pretend romance was actually quite fun, though felt guilty for thinking this. A husband with a wife like Ruthie had a responsibility to be utterly distressed, on the verge of a breakdown of his own when he realized that his wife was losing her mind and rapidly. But on the other hand, he decided, what’s wrong with a little make believe once in a while? It helps Ruthie to pretend, it also can help me to have some fun again and not let the world weigh me down so.

They walked along the promenade with all the young couples and Goldberg wondered what those couples saw. Did they think it was wrong that two older people date this way? That would be silly of them, he decided. Any age, people deserve a little romance, nu?

“So. Have you been feeling alright?” Goldberg asked.
“Of course, Meyer, why do you ask?” Ruthie answered.

“No reason,” Goldberg said. Then he squeezed her hand a little tighter – as if he wanted to make sure she couldn’t get away – and continued, “Maybe I just thought that you hadn’t quite been yourself lately.”

She nodded and squeezed his hand back and Goldberg thought her eyes were staring at something far away and he wondered if she saw herself as if from a great distance and understood all his hopes and fears for her and the family, but that she just didn’t have the words.

“What day is today?” Ruthie asked.

“Sunday,” Goldberg said.

“I was wondering why you weren’t at work,” she said.

“Where do I work?” Goldberg asked. He felt short of breath.

“Where do you work?” Ruthie repeated, her tone amazed.

“What kind of question is that for a husband to ask his wife?”

“Just a joke,” Goldberg answered. She’s here, he thought. It’s all passed. But he wished she might answer. When they were in high school together, Goldberg had worked at a pharmacy after school. If she answered the question, would she say Schwartz’s Old-Fashioned Pharmacy?
“Maybe you would answer anyway,” Goldberg said, “to humor your husband.”

Ruthie rolled her eyes and giggled. “You’re something, you know that? You, my husband, are a piece of work.”

“I am, I am, I know I am,” Goldberg said and prayed that Ruthie might answer the question and put everything to rest, at least for this moment. “So?” he asked, making sure to keep his tone light. He didn’t want to let on exactly how sick she had been and exactly how worried he was. It was best that she didn’t know that.

“You really want me to answer the question?” she asked, smiling gaily. A hot dog vendor hocked his wares in a loud voice and Goldberg thought that he might stop and get a hot dog, that Ruthie might want one too. It was good for her to eat, for him too, to keep their strength up.

“Would you like a hot dog while you’re thinking?” Goldberg asked.

“No, but you get one,” Ruthie said, “and then I’ll answer your question.”

Goldberg held money out to the vendor and said, “With sauerkraut, mustard and ketchup. Please.”

The vendor scratched at his heavy beard and said, “For your wife too, yes?”

“No, no she doesn’t wish one, thanks,” Goldberg said.
He let go of Ruthie’s hand and paid and took an extra few napkins so he wouldn’t make a mess.

As they walked away, Ruthie took his arm and leaned in close to him. She hadn’t bathed that day or the day before. Goldberg wasn’t sure when she had bathed last. The old Ruthie, Ruthie before she got sick, would never have let a day go by without bathing. He could smell her body, rich and deep and pungent and he inhaled deeply, pretending he was smelling the hot dog, but really hoping to fill his nostrils with more of Ruthie’s odor. It wasn’t a pleasant smell, but it was an intimate smell and Goldberg thought it right that a husband and wife understand one another totally, that they not have any secrets between them and he wanted so badly to help Ruthie that he thought it wrong that he avoid anything at all about her, so he embraced even such an unpleasant aspect as her smell.

He bit deeply into his hot dog and chewed as they walked along. “Are you ready to tell me now where I work?” Goldberg asked.

“Where you work?” Ruthie repeated, as though she were hearing the question for the first time and was amazed, but Goldberg knew that she hadn’t forgotten, that she was just teasing him.

“That’s right,” he said.
Ruthie sighed extravagantly. “So we’re still harping on this are we?”

Goldberg took another bite and nodded his head. Despite the extra napkins, a piece of sauerkraut dribbled down his chin and landed on his shirt. He would have brushed the detritus off but he needed one hand to hold the hot dog and the other arm was pinioned to her hip. As a matter of fact, he could even feel the swell of her breast against his upper arm. He glanced down at the sauerkraut on his shirt and hoped that Ruthie didn’t notice. That might set her off on another digression, delay her from answering the all-important question.

“You work,” Ruthie began and then stopped.

“Go on,” Goldberg said, his mouth full.

“You shouldn’t speak and chew at the same time,” Ruthie said. “I tell that to Hannah and Ruben all the time.”

Goldberg stopped chewing and swallowed the lump of hot dog. It stuck in his throat going down, but he was so happy he couldn’t have cared. “Hannah and Ruben,” he repeated reverentially. That Ruthie knew the children, knew that she was their mother and responsible for reminding them of things like not eating when their mouths were full meant
everything. It meant that Ruthie understood, that she was okay, at least right then.

“Okay, okay,” Ruthie said, “you work –”

Goldberg cut her off by yelling, “No, stop. Don’t.”

She looked up at him quizzically and let go of his arm so she could take a step away from him and better study his face.

Goldberg knew she was startled by his reaction. He felt horrible for not having trusted her, for believing the worst of Ruthie, that inside she might really be nothing, a shell of a human, passing among others who only looked like her. “I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m so sorry.” Goldberg sank to his knees on the ground and Ruthie took his head in her hands.

“Don’t cry,” she said.

“I doubted you,” he said, “I never should have doubted you. I’m so sorry I did that.”

“Hush,” she said, “hush.” Goldberg realized that she hadn’t asked why he was crying and he wondered how much she knew.
4. Hannah

Hannah stared hard at the phone. She wanted to call a friend, make some plans to go to a movie, to eat a Chinese dinner with somebody else. She was seventeen years old and she couldn’t think of anybody, not a single soul, that she could call up and talk to, maybe spend a quiet Sunday night with.

In the early fall of 1969, people looked cool. Cooler than they ever had before, Hannah figured. She didn’t think once in the history of the world had the humans who sojourned there ever been such a good-looking and stylish bunch. Hannah wished she could count herself among them. But she lacked too much. She lacked the clothes and, more than that, the requisite swagger that the cool people had.

Hannah watched them from her window sill. She felt the heat sweep over her in waves and wondered if this was the best night could offer her: a peeper’s vantage point, a space where she could exist, if not exactly live.

Ruben was banging around in his room, probably looking for model airplane glue. He was in a big model airplane phase. The noise irritated Hannah and part of that irritation stemmed from the fact that she couldn’t remember being in a phase, in any phase. She had never taken up an
activity, a completely frivolous and insipid activity, in her life. She took piano lessons for eleven years, but that was because her father thought it best and, when she got older and Goldberg wasn’t forcing her to take the piano lessons, she knew it would make her more well-rounded and admissions committees were always looking for well-rounded. There was a piano in the living room and, if she had wanted, Hannah could have gone in there and played Tchaikovsky from memory. But the idea gave her no pleasure. If you asked her whether she loved music or even liked it, she would shrug her shoulders because she couldn’t be sure.

A loud noise came from the other room and Hannah knew it was Ruben throwing his shoes against the wall as he emptied out the closet, looking for the airplane glue. He always did that, flung his shoes out of the closet instead of just placing them on the ground. Hannah thought about leaving her room, leaving the books and papers scattered on the desk and on the floor, and going to her brother’s room, knocking gently on his door, asking if he wanted help looking or, maybe, just wanted some company. But she didn’t do that. She gave up on that thought and, instead, pounded on the wall with the flat of her hand. “Ruben!” she yelled. “Cut all that out, some of us are trying to study. Some of us have responsibilities.”
Hannah hated the shrill tone of her voice and the holier-than-thou attitude the words revealed. She knew what she sounded like and she didn’t believe that was what she thought, but she didn’t know how to speak differently. It’s not so easy to change yourself, Hannah thought. Ruben was a difficult boy, an especially difficult person to talk to or confide in. In theory, having a quiet and introverted brother was just fine. They could share their problems and come up with possible solutions. She could help him make friends and he would look up to her for her academic success and her other impressive qualities. But things hadn’t worked out that way. Instead they never spoke, at least not really. There was no closeness between them. Ruben stared at her with his hang dog eyes as if from across a great vacuum.

Hannah turned on her radio. She knew so little about pop music. She didn’t know the names of the bands or the names of the songs they sang. Once, to make herself more educated on the subject, she had listened all night to the radio and taken careful notes each time the DJ announced the line-up. She had written down key phrases from each song so that the next day at school, she might be better able to discuss the lyrics knowledgeably.
But at school the next day, there never was an opportunity to discuss the facts that she had memorized. The day had passed as uneventfully as any other and, when it was over, Hannah looked at the notes she had taken and realized just how absurd and idiotic the songs and bands were. She was glad not to be a screaming girl clutching an autograph or album to her throat. And what was it they lusted after? Deep brown eyes? The perfect ass? Bullshit. It was nothing they wanted, nothing they understood anyway, just adoration for the sake of it. A golden calf with no great secrets within. Those girls, they were boring and stupid and Hannah was determined to never be either of those things.

There was no reply from Ruben, just silence, and Hannah realized that there wasn’t going to be one. She picked up her chemistry textbook and laid down on her bed with it. She had read the relevant chapters three times already. There was no new information in there. Hannah took careful notes in the margins, anyway. She knew from experience that writing things made memorizing them easier. She wrote down facts and equations. She thought it might be nice to be in love, to have a boy swoon over her, but she quickly banished the thought from her head. Thoughts like that wouldn’t help with a chemistry exam.
She felt herself sweating in the stuffy room and opened her window higher. Hannah glanced down into the street and saw her parents returning hand in hand. Her father’s hair was mussed up, as though he had been awoken from a nap, and his head was down. Her mother was holding his hand in between the two of her own. With one hand she fiercely gripped Goldberg. With the other, she patted him over and over again. Hannah had read that behavioral repetition was a common sign of autism, that and a failure to function in connection with others. She had considered the possibility that her mother might be autistic, but now, despite the repetition of one hand patting another, Hannah didn’t think it was possible. Her mother hadn’t shown any signs of autism for years. How could she suddenly develop the disease?

Hannah wanted to call out to them but she couldn’t think of what to say. Hello? Mom? Dad? Ruthie? Goldberg? Father? Mother? None of it seemed appropriate and none of the words seemed to Hannah to be her own. They seemed to belong to someone else, something she had read, perhaps, and remembered.

Hannah watched from the window as her parents entered the building. She waited for them to climb the stairs and
when she heard the front door open, she came out of her room to greet them.

Goldberg’s eyes were red and Hannah thought he must have been crying, though she had never heard of her father crying and she could think of nothing that would make him do so.

“Papa, what is it?” Hannah asked in her gentlest voice.

“It’s nothing, sweetheart, ketzela,” Ruthie said, “papa just needs to sit down.”

Hannah didn’t understand what had come over her mother. This was the woman who not hours before had been crying and muttering to herself in Yiddish about her parents and her village in Russia. Hannah was an American - she did not understand these things and her mother was an old woman to her, insane. But this was so different. Her mother was in control and it was Goldberg who had to be supported to the couch.

“Ruben!” Ruthie called, “Come out and give me help.” Ruben was out of his room quickly and he took Goldberg’s weight from his mother and dragged him down to the sofa and put him gently on it. Tears streamed out of Goldberg’s eyes and Hannah felt shaky at her knees and sick to her stomach that her father should look this way.

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Hannah looked at Ruben, who was staring stone-faced down at his father, and she saw how tall and broad he had gotten, bigger, even, than their father.

As quickly as it had begun, it was over. Goldberg stopped crying and sat up slightly on the couch. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Nonsense,” Ruthie said, “sorry for what?”

Goldberg looked up at his children and Hannah could not meet his eyes as she didn’t understand what had happened to precipitate all this. She wanted to go back to her room, to close the door and open up her textbook, to reread the chapters she knew practically by heart. She began to move away and Goldberg called, “Wait, Hannah, I want to talk as a family.” She could see that he was trying to pull himself together, she could see that he was humiliated that his children saw him like this. She pitied him but she felt himself getting harder in spite of it.

“I’ll put on some tea,” Ruthie said and moved towards the kitchen. Hannah began to bite her fingernails. Ruben sat cross-legged on the ground and closed his eyes as though he might go to sleep.

“We’re not a family anymore,” Goldberg said, “not like we should be.”
"I have to study," Hannah said, her voice like ice. She didn’t want to have this conversation because she knew it would end up with more tears and she was sure it wouldn’t help anything.

"Do you hate me?" Goldberg asked her.

"What kind of a question is that?" Hannah said. "I have to study, that’s all. Do you think it’s easy to get into college? It requires study. Patience. Hard work."

"Shut up," Ruben said, "shut the hell up." His voice sounded weary, too weary for a kid.

Both Hannah and Goldberg looked shocked to hear Ruben speak. Hannah caught her breath sharply and decided she ought to feel outraged at her brother’s gall. She wagged her finger at Ruben and said, "What do you know? You’re just a kid. You haven’t worked for a thing in your life. You think that playing baseball is important. It’s not important. It’s nothing. It’s bullshit."

"Stop it!" Goldberg yelled. He wasn’t crying anymore now. He stared down while he yelled. "Stop it right now. I won’t have this. We can talk like families do, not yell, not scold, just talk."

Ruthie came in holding the tea kettle. Her face was blank, impassive, though Hannah thought she must have heard what had gone on. "Why are you fighting?" Ruthie asked.
Hannah thought her mother had no right to ask that question. Hannah was not a terrible person. She understood that no one chose to go insane, that it was no one’s fault and no one could just make it go away, choose to stop acting crazy. But because her mother was back, because she was functioning just for a minute, that didn’t give her the right to dictate to the others what people did. They were fighting because of her, of course. Why else would they be fighting? Because her insanity had wrecked the three of them. Hannah decided that she hated her mother very much, that if only her mother had gotten cancer or some other respectable disease and died, that the family could have recovered, but that this...this lunacy was not something anyone could recover from. Never.

Hannah ran to the front door, but Ruben blocked her path. “Siddown,” he said, “siddown right now. You can’t run out and leave me here with them.” He gestured at Goldberg and Ruthie with his thumb and Hannah saw the contempt and anger in it and she wondered that this was Ruben’s first explosion, that he hadn’t done so before. All of that bubbling beneath the surface, how could he keep it bottled up forever? Looking at the man standing in her path, Hannah felt possessed with a maternal instinct, as though if she were to reach out and grasp Ruben to her bosom, she could
heal all. Hannah stepped slowly to him and held her hand out.

“What?” he asked. “What do you want? What are you doing?”

With her hand, Hannah touched his shirt collar. It was frayed and dirty. Hannah wondered about her own clothes. The corduroys were hand me downs from a cousin. The sweater had once been Goldberg’s and was ripping at the sleeves. When her mother was well, she never would have allowed her children to dress this way and Hannah was ashamed that she didn’t do more each day to make herself look better and that she didn’t insist her brother do the same.

“Ruben, don’t be angry with me,” Hannah said, “I just didn’t want to stay and argue. It seems like that gets us nowhere. Christ. I mean, of course I love you, you’re my brother. You understand all that, right?”

Ruben nodded slowly and gently as though his anger had subsided.

Hannah moved her hand from his shirt to his cheek and placed it there. She felt the warmth beneath his skin. When they were kids, or at least when she still was, they used to hug all the time. She couldn’t remember the last time they had touched one another.
For a moment, she held her hand to his face and stayed silent. Then Ruben knocked her hand away and snapped, “If you’re going to leave, leave. Go study. That’s all you want to do, anyway, isn’t it? So go.”

Ruthie was crying. She ran forward to embrace the two of them, but Ruben moved out the way and Hannah was left pressed to her mother. Hannah smelled her mother’s unwashed skin and was angry again. This was all Ruthie’s fault. Children needed parents to be parents. Not lunatics. Hannah pushed away from Ruthie and out the door. Ruben made no attempt to stop her and Goldberg said nothing.

Hannah ran down the stairs and out into the street. She passed children skipping rope in the waning light, their footsteps tattooing an unholy rhythm onto the ground. The footsteps of different little girls clashed together. Hannah bit her lip and wished they could coordinate with one another, that each group could jump to the same beat and not battle for supremacy.

The subway station was empty. Hannah had never ridden the subway in the evening and she felt like being daring, doing something that she knew her father would hate. Her mother too, if her mother was in reality at that moment, Hannah thought bitterly. She spat on the ground. Young ladies don’t spit on the ground. And young ladies aren’t
the first ones in their family to go to college, that’s supposed to be for the young men, Hannah thought and tried to feel sorry for herself.

She put a token in and slipped through the turnstiles, onto a train bound for Manhattan. She sat down next to an old woman with a patchwork of clothes, coal black skin and a gold tooth that glinted in the fluorescent lights like a pirate’s.

“Where you going, honey?” the old woman cackled.

Hannah didn’t answer. She thought that if she ignored the woman, she might leave her alone.

“You running away from someone?” the old woman asked.

Hannah hugged her knees to her chest and wished someone else might sit nearby.

“That’s okay, you don’t have to tell me,” the old woman said. “I’m gonna find out anyways. I always do.”

“Leave me alone,” Hannah said.

“Oh, I’ll leave you alone,” the old woman said.

Hannah stood up to leave and the old woman reached out for her arm. “It’s okay, honey,” the old woman said.

“What kind of thing are you? Leave me alone,” Hannah said, but she didn’t jerk her arm away even though she felt the fingers trembling on her forearm and the touch was soft and weak and Hannah felt contaminated by it.
The subway screeched to a halt at the City Hall stop. Hannah climbed out. As she slipped out the door, she turned and yelled, "Fuck you, you old hag!"

She watched the old woman's face as the train pulled away. She was smiling and Hannah wondered whether she had even heard the words or understood them.
5. Ruthie

“So, tell your old mother about this great game of yours,” Ruthie said.

Ruben shrugged his shoulders happily and Ruthie realized that she was a good mother. Sons weren’t happy like that without a good mother.

“It wasn’t that great,” he said.

She turned to Goldberg. “Meyer, do you hear this? He’s humble. He must be my son, not yours. A son of yours would brag, would take all the credit, but not this one.”

Goldberg laughed and touched Ruthie’s arm.

“No, really, it wasn’t such a great game,” Ruben said.

“I just got this one hit that he’s proud of.”

“He? Who is this he?” Ruthie asked, teasing Ruben.

Ruben turned red. “Okay, sorry. Goldberg was proud.”

“Goldberg? Who do you call by their last name? We’re all Goldbergs here, you know.”

“Dad. Dad was proud.”

Such happiness in his voice. Ruthie had never seen Ruben like this. He was glowing. She would tell all the neighbors about the game she decided. Mrs. Schick especially. That one was always bragging about her children. This one was an accountant, that one a doctor.
Well, Ruben was a wonderful baseball player and no one, none of them, could claim that. There were millions of lawyers and doctors and Indian chiefs, but so few baseball players. “Meyer, how many professional players are there in this country?”

Goldberg scratched his chin and Ruthie thought he was dragging it out, enjoying seeming like an expert. “Do you mean Major Leaguers?” he asked.

“Do I mean Major Leaguers,” Ruthie mimicked his inflection. “Of course that’s what I mean,” she said.

“There are minor league players, too,” Ruben said. “They get paid, so they’re professionals, too. Right?” He turned to Goldberg for agreement.

“He’s right, Ruthie,” Goldberg said, grinning. She could see the thick yellow on his teeth. But he’s getting older, Ruthie thought. And I’m not the catch I once was.

“There’s maybe seven or eight hundred major leaguers, I guess,” Goldberg said.

“Ah! An answer, finally! Such a pleasure to ask a question and boom! Get an answer.” Ruthie felt a little tired, but she hadn’t enjoyed herself like this in such a long time. So there were a few hundred of them in the entire country. And how many doctors? It must be close to a million. Not that there was anything wrong with being a
doctor. She didn’t think that. If Hannah grew up to be a doctor, Ruthie would be very proud. But Ruben, he was the chosen of them. That he could do this tremendous accomplishment, whatever he had done in the game that afternoon, said so much. He would make the Goldbergs famous and the world would know that Ruben Goldberg was her son, her flesh and her blood.

“She’s kvelling. Look at this,” Goldberg said. He nudged Ruben with his foot. “Give your mother a kiss, let her be happy.”

“Yes, give me a kiss,” Ruthie said.

Ruben stood up sheepishly and ambled over to his mother. “I feel silly doing this,” he said.

“Why do you feel silly? Aren’t I your mother?”

“Because. I’m too old for this.”

Too old? The boy was too old to kiss his mother? How could Ruben have turned on her like this, Ruthie wondered. One minute they’re your son, they love you, you love them, then pfft! Gone!

Not that Ruben would decide to do this on his own. He knew what pain it would cause her. This couldn’t be her son, he wouldn’t act this way. Her son was dead. This was an impostor.
Ruben leaned down slowly to kiss her and Ruthie shoved him away. "Now, now you think it’s alright. Who told you it was okay now?" she yelled.

"What’re you talking about?" Ruben answered. She could see his eyes filling with water. If some smart scientist tested to see how much salt there was, there would be none. It was just water. Those weren’t tears. Tears were salty. More deception. They wouldn’t leave Ruthie alone. Somebody had put him up to this. No, not that. That meant he had been fooled. This wasn’t even Ruben. This was God knows who, but not her boy. Whoever had done it, they weren’t going to get away with it. Her own son! They would stop at nothing. Fucking animals. Lousy bastard son of a bitches. She’d show them. They weren’t going to get away with this.

"Get the fuck away from me," Ruthie said. The boy looked confused, but she knew this was part of the act. They wouldn’t have chosen him if he hadn’t been so perfect for the part. They made him look like a ragamuffin, a nothing. Because who would suspect the urchin, the beautiful child with this face? Not many, but Ruthie wasn’t part of the many. She was smarter. They knew it, otherwise they wouldn’t have gotten to her son this way. That must have taken delicate work. There was a good son still inside there, somewhere. They hadn’t killed him completely, not
yet, but he was buried so deep inside he might never see his mother again. That couldn’t be allowed.

“I don’t know you,” Ruthie said, as forcefully as she could muster. “You’re nothing to me.”

“Of course you know me,” Ruben said. Goldberg stood up and began backing away. What about him? Ruthie wondered. She didn’t know the answer to that yet. He was more difficult to read.

“Mom, of course you know me. It’s Ruben.”

He stepped closer with his arms half-extended from his chest, as if to pull her into him, and she wasn’t going to let him do that.

“Don’t you fucking touch me, you bastard,” Ruthie yelled. She clenched and unclenched her fists, looking for something to strike him with. She picked up her mug off the table and wondered if it would do as a weapon. It would have to.

“Ruben, let’s leave. Let’s leave your mother alone,” Goldberg said.

Ruben didn’t move.

“He’s not my son,” Ruthie hissed. She crouched down like a cat ready to pounce. “I don’t know Him.”

“I don’t know Him,” Ruben repeated. He turned to his father and said, “See? She doesn’t know me. I’m nothing,
right?” He spoke in a low voice, almost a whisper. Ruthie knew what he was thinking. He was thinking that he would be punished for failure. And he was right. They would. They didn’t let failure go unanswered. They would punish one of their own. But her son wasn’t her son. It wasn’t her son. Not anymore. And the only way to get him back was not to let them get to her. If that happened, they would never give Ruben back.

“Go away,” Ruthie said. She was frightened, not for herself, but for her son. “I don’t want anything to do with you. Can’t you leave us alone?”

“Us? Who? Who is this us? It’s just you, mom.” Ruben laid such angry emphasis on the word ‘mom’ that everything was confirmed for Ruthie. He was teasing her, taunting her.

“Stop it! The both of you!” Goldberg yelled. He tried to step between them but Ruben shouldered him aside forcefully. Ruthie saw that the power in the skinny body couldn’t be Ruben’s. And all this about baseball, that couldn’t be her son, either. Manipulating events. How long had her son been missing? Ruthie wondered. How long since they had taken over this vessel?

“Don’t you recognize me?” Ruben asked.

“I recognize you for what you are,” Ruthie said. She tried to stop her voice from trembling but she couldn’t.
“Don’t you recognize me?” Ruben repeated again. I recognize you! Ruthie wanted to shout. I know you’re in there, Ruben, my son, my boy. But she couldn’t say the words. That would give hope to this thing that wanted to take over her body, that planned on consuming her whole.

“Fuck you, mom,” Ruben said. He turned away from her and began to walk out of the room.

“I win!” Ruthie screamed as loud as she could. She had conquered the Philistines and they fled before her. This would be the beginning of something wonderful, she thought. A new time in her life, a time when my strength is too much for any other forces.

Ruben turned swiftly and ran at his mother. He struck her sharply across the face, his hand open but his callused palm harder than any fist could ever be. She felt her teeth chatter together from the blow and before her head struck the ground, she thought to herself that she had forced this demon into something he didn’t want. She had still won. Ruthie exulted in her victory, her arms reaching up to touch the sky, before closing her eyes and going to sleep.
Hannah wandered west. She wasn’t looking for anything in particular, she just wanted time away from home. After almost three hours of walking, she was lonely and she thought she might call home. She didn’t want to go back, she just wanted to know what was going on there. She wanted to know that the family was upset. She hoped they were sitting around the kitchen table, talking about all the ways they might apologize when Hannah came back, they prayed to God, safe and sound. She pictured her mother on the ground, swaying back and forth like a flickering candle, moaning “Hannah! My baby!” This was what it should be like when a child disappears, Hannah thought. She knew she hadn’t been away long enough for that, but she was saddened and she felt guilty for thinking such terrible thoughts about her mother before and so she decided to call, anyway, just to let them know she was alright and would soon be home.

Goldberg answered the phone.

“Papa. It’s Hannah.”

“Hannah,” Goldberg said. He enunciated the syllables in her name slowly, as if by naming them he could understand her, understand why she had left him. Hannah
could see his tongue and mouth shifting position as he drew her name out.

"Is everything alright at home?" Hannah asked.

"No," Goldberg said. "Your mother is at the hospital. Ruben is gone."

"What do you mean gone?" Hannah asked.

"He ran away."

Hannah started to cry. She sniffled and tried to choke back the tears. There was a man on the opposite corner watching her and Hannah knew better than to show weakness. If a man like that saw her crying, why that would only give him an excuse for rape. She knew this.

"What happened?" Hannah asked, though she already knew in her head. Her mother had slipped away again, had disappeared into the past or even become catatonic. Or she had fallen and cut her head. She had forgotten how to speak and her father became worried and called the hospital. She told him she was hearing voices and he had men in white strait jackets take her away. The bastard. The cold, cold bastard.

"Ruben hit her," Goldberg said. "She tried to kiss him and make him tell her about the baseball game. He was laughing, telling her about it. And then in the middle...she disappeared again. And she asked Ruben who he was. And he
hit her. She fell down. Her head hit the floor hard. It made an awful sound, like a tree branch snapping when the ice weighs it down too much.”

Hannah tried to picture Ruben striking her mother. It was impossible. Even with his new frame, the broad shoulders that had begun to make themselves known underneath his shirts, the legs growing quickly, and not skinny either, heavy and strong under the too short pants, they all sprung up as if out of nowhere, Hannah still couldn’t imagine her younger brother’s fists clenching, his biceps flexing. He was thirteen. How could he throw a punch at anybody, let alone at Ruthie? She wondered what kind of punch her brother threw, did he run windmilling at her, was it an open slap, but she knew better than to ask Goldberg, who would wonder why that mattered, that the punch was sin enough.

“Is she alright?” Hannah asked.

Goldberg just stared at her.

“It’s a stupid question,” Hannah said when he didn’t answer. “Because, I mean, how could Ruthie be alright. I shouldn’t have asked that.” Hannah felt herself cracking. She felt her stomach turning. There was something in her that she hated and Hannah fought it with everything she had but still she felt the wetness on her face.
“Where’s Ruben?” Hannah asked.

“The ambulance took her. The ambulance took her to the hospital. I should have ridden in the ambulance, that’s what I should have done,” Goldberg said.

“Where’s Ruben?” Hannah repeated. She was crying again and she knew the man across the street was still watching her, but she didn’t care.

“The reason why I didn’t go with the ambulance was that I called the police. I was so furious with Ruben. To hit his own mother. What kind of a son is this? This is more than a sin. It’s...it’s the worst kind of sin. So I called the police and Ruben watched me call them and then he tried to hit me too and I slapped him in the face and then he ran away. And then the ambulance came and took your mother and I went into the street to look for Ruben.”

“Are the police looking for him?” Hannah asked, trying to get the facts straight in her head. “He’s just a boy.”

“I have to go to the hospital and see how my Ruthie is doing,” Goldberg said. She could hear him banging around in the background and it sounded as though he was moving pots and pans and Hannah couldn’t think of any reason why Goldberg would be clanging pots and pans after what happened.

“I should have stayed home,” Hannah said.
“Yes. Yes,” Goldberg answered, but he sounded so distracted that Hannah didn’t think he had heard what she said.

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?” Hannah said. Goldberg said nothing.

“I have to go now,” Goldberg said. “I’m going to the hospital to see how Ruthie is doing.”

“Are the police looking for Ruben?” Hannah asked.

“Yes. I hope so. I don’t know,” Goldberg said.

“Goodbye.”

“What hospital?” Hannah screamed but he had hung up. Hannah hung up the phone and wondered how this happened. She wondered what she - clearly the only family member who was thinking clearly - ought to do first. Should she find what hospital her mother was in? Should she call the police station and ask them to leave her brother alone? Had they picked up her brother already?

The man who had watched her crossed the street towards her. He was tall and skinny, Spanish looking. He had a thin moustache and a black leather jacket. “Miss?” he said. “Miss, you okay?”

Hannah looked at him and wondered if he would know what to do. He didn’t look much older than Ruben, though. The moustache didn’t fool her.
“I think that you were crying,” the man said.

“No,” Hannah said and brushed by him. She felt his stomach as she pushed away and it was hard and bony and she wondered if that was because he couldn’t afford to eat or didn’t like to eat. Maybe he ate all the time, and it just didn’t matter. Hannah knew that sometimes, no matter what you do, you can’t have an effect on things. She ran down the street, not really headed anywhere in particular, and when she felt herself beginning to cry all over again, she hailed a cab and asked the driver to take her home. She hoped the house was empty when she got there. She felt too tired to see anyone. All she wanted to do was crawl into bed and sleep. And if she couldn’t sleep, she was going to study. She had a chemistry test tomorrow, no matter what.
Goldberg rolled over on the waiting room sofa. The hospital had crappy furniture. He knew a guy from the neighborhood who dealt in bulk and he wondered if he should call Morris and tell him to get down here and talk to whoever did the buying for the hospital. He thought somebody should know that no one, no matter how tired, would ever be able to sleep on this furniture. Morris supplied furniture for corporations, for their lobbies, and waiting rooms would be just up his alley.

Light streamed in through the windows and Goldberg pulled himself to his feet. He buttoned his pants back up. They had become unbuttoned somewhere in the night - sometimes he did that even with his pajamas so he could breathe a little better, sleep a little better. But he was always asleep when it happened. He would never have unbuttoned his pants in public. He checked his watch. It was six-thirty in the morning. He always woke up at six-thirty in the morning. Three hundred and sixty five days a year, since he was old enough to remember. It didn’t matter what had happened the night before, Goldberg’s body always knew when the day was starting. He took pride in this, his reliability. He didn’t need an alarm clock. Not once had he
ever been late for anything, not work or the dentist or Ruben’s baseball games.

Goldberg wondered where Ruben was. A policeman had spoken to him in the middle of the night, said they didn’t know where to look for him but they would be sure to keep an eye out. An eye out! His mother might die. He might have killed her. And they would keep an eye out. The policeman said that he was just a boy, that he was sure to come home in time, that he would feel terribly guilty, that he couldn’t be such a bad boy or he would have been in trouble long before. Goldberg asked if thirteen year olds were so often in trouble and the man grinned and said, “More than you would think.”

Goldberg snorted, hitched his pants a little higher and went down the hall to Ruthie’s room.

She hadn’t spoken since she had been hit. The doctors ran all kinds of tests and decided she had had a severe concussion and that the extent of her injuries might not be apparent for some time. “That can happen,” the boy doctor said. Then the boy doctor looked at Goldberg like he was a turd in a toilet bowl, like Goldberg chose this to happen to Ruthie. This look from a boy that couldn’t have been thirty. This judgment. Everybody judges, Goldberg thought, but nobody knows.
“Head injuries are tricky,” that’s what the nurse told Goldberg. “Best just to wait. We’ll know much more when she wakes up.”

Goldberg pulled a chair up next to Ruthie’s bed and took her hand in his and stroked it back and forth. Last night she had done the same for him and it had given him some comfort. He hoped that she might feel a similar comfort from him.

Her eyelids fluttered constantly, but she didn’t open up her eyes and Goldberg didn’t know if she was awake or asleep. They sat that way for a while — Goldberg wasn’t sure how long — him holding her hand and singing songs in Yiddish. He thought that maybe hearing that old language would comfort her, but he sang softly because he was embarrassed at his poor singing voice. Ruben had a wonderful singing voice when he was still very young. But his son hadn’t sung, at least not in Goldberg’s hearing, in a long time, years. Goldberg preferred Yiddish to English but never taught it to his children. It wouldn’t help them, speaking that way. But maybe it would remind Ruthie of her own childhood. Goldberg swore to himself that he didn’t care anymore. Ruthie could wake up and think she was eight years old or sixteen or even a newborn, just so long as she woke up. When he couldn’t remember a line, he hummed the
tune. The nurse checked in periodically and when she did Goldberg stared accusingly at her while she checked the various monitors, but there was no change. After a few hours of this, he fell back asleep holding her hand and dreamed of Ruben. He dreamed of Ruben running away from policemen. He dreamed of them catching his son, kicking Ruben in the chest and stomach until his ribs made the same sound Ruthie’s head had when she hit the floor. In the dream, Goldberg was there with the policemen, watching the whole thing. The police even used their nightsticks but though Goldberg didn’t participate in the beating, he made no attempt to stop it. He watched as though from a great distance and Ruben stared back at his father with big eyes that didn’t understand what was going on.

When he woke up, Goldberg spoke to Ruthie in a soft voice. “Ruben never meant it,” he said. “He lost his temper and it was a terrible thing, a shonda, but I know he never meant it. I’m going to tell the policemen to leave him alone. To stop looking. That way he’ll come home. Ruthie, the boy isn’t so bad. I don’t know what happened. I think that maybe it was because he doesn’t speak enough. Things build up in there and then they explode. I’m not defending him, God knows, but should he be in jail? Would that help any of us? I don’t know. I don’t think so.”
“It’s not your decision,” a voice said. It was Hannah’s voice and Goldberg turned around quickly, but made sure not to let go of Ruthie’s hand.

“It’s not up to you,” Hannah said, “whether or not to press charges. Only the victim can decide that and since the victim is in no shape to decide, then I think they ought to go ahead and find Ruben and lock him up.”

“He’s your brother,” Goldberg said, trying to sound angry at Hannah, but he couldn’t forget his dream and pretend that his own thoughts of revenge were any less real than hers.

“Where have you been?” Goldberg asked.

“I had to take an exam,” Hannah said. “I came as fast as I could.”

Goldberg looked at his watch and saw that it was ten o’clock. “It’s Sunday,” he said. “How can you take an exam on Sunday?”

“It’s Monday,” Hannah said. “You’re going a little crazy, Sunday was yesterday.”

Goldberg felt nauseous. “I’m missing work,” he said. His hands began to sweat. All his life, Goldberg had been a hard worker. Without certain things -- work and coffee, the paper and the radio -- things would fall apart.
“You were going to stay home with mama this week, anyway,” Hannah said. “Don’t you remember that? You were going to see what you could do about making her better. Not that you would have gotten anything done, it’s not like I believe that, but you did promise.”

Goldberg wanted Hannah out of the hospital room. He wanted her to go back home, to find something new to study. He didn’t want her near him or near Ruthie.

“Why don’t you go find Ruben?” Goldberg asked. “Either that or talk to the police and ask them to leave him alone.”

“We went over this,” Hannah said. “It’s not your decision.” She ran her tongue over her teeth, as if checking them for imperfections, and Goldberg felt shocked. How could she be worrying about her looks at a time like this? he thought.

On the edge of the bed, wedged against the metal rail that kept Ruthie from rolling out of bed and onto the floor, was a plastic cup filled with ice. Ruthie wasn’t supposed to drink - not that she could, she wasn’t even conscious - and Goldberg took an ice chip and rubbed it on her lips in a circular motion, letting it melt slowly into her mouth until there was nothing left in his hands but water.
He turned around to see if Hannah was still watching. She was. She didn’t seem to have moved at all. “Is there someone I should call, papa?” Hannah asked. She softened her gaze and Goldberg wondered why, wondered if, perhaps, he had done something right and not even noticed.

“I can’t think of anybody,” Goldberg said. Both his parents and Ruthie’s parents were gone, passed away years before. And their close friends had disappeared as surely as if death had taken them, though Goldberg couldn’t fathom the reasons for their evaporation. He didn’t want to blame Ruthie, but he wondered if they had started being friendless when she got sick. But he wouldn’t Ruthie. If their friends had been better people, they might have stuck by for longer.

“Nobody at all?” Hannah asked and her voice sounded sad. Goldberg shook his head. He hoped she didn’t pity her parents for being so lonely. She must have had lots of school friends and a popular girl like that might not understand how others weren’t always popular. How sometimes people weren’t hated, but they surely weren’t loved either. Goldberg felt a stab of self-pity rush into his body and he shook violently as the chill descended down his spine. It was the same chill he got when wonderful things happened,
like when Ruben hit the curveball for a double and he was as proud as he had ever been in his life.

There was a knock on the hospital room door and Hannah stepped aside to reveal a thin man with a moustache, wearing a coat and red tie. The man had red freckles that matched the tie and a shock of reddish blonde hair. He was a striking looking man and Goldberg recognized him, but he couldn’t seem to remember from where. He wondered if, perhaps, he was from their neighborhood. Maybe even their block, Goldberg thought, and that would be embarrassing, to not know someone who lived just next door! That would be mortifying.

“Mr. Goldberg?” the man asked. Hannah was standing too close to the man as though she was going to grab him by the neck and kiss his face. Goldberg had never seen his daughter like this. The stress, he thought, it can’t be good for any of us. But still. A little decency. And the man didn’t like it, didn’t like how close she was. Goldberg thought that if he could see her breath, like when it was cold outside, he’d see it spreading all over the man’s skin, enveloping him.

“Mr. Goldberg, I’m Detective Kelleher. We spoke earlier?”

But, in fact, he didn’t. How he could have forgotten a man with red hair and red freckles and even a red tie was difficult to understand and Goldberg was worried that it had happened. He didn’t know what that meant. Did it mean, perhaps, that he was soon going to be like Ruthie had been before Ruben hit her? Goldberg pictured himself making the same descent as she had. He pictured forgetting that he was married, forgetting his age, forgetting his children.

“Mr. Goldberg, your son was picked up outside of Grand Central Station. He’s locked up in the station house. He’s only a boy. He’s much younger than I thought. He confessed. He said he did it. We thought you should know.”

“When can he come visit his mother?” Goldberg asked.

Detective Kelleher blinked and turned around, as though to see if Goldberg might have been talking to someone else, someone lurking over his shoulder. The detective turned back to Goldberg and spoke slowly, as if to someone who didn’t speak the language well. “I’m not sure that I understand. You want Ruben to visit his mother? Would he want to visit his mother?”

“Of course,” Goldberg said, trying to be firm. Dealing with the police made him nervous, though he knew that you were supposed to get nervous when you dealt with the
police, that if you didn’t get nervous, it was probably a
sign that there was something wrong with you.

“I guess that as soon as he gets bailed out, he’ll be
free to go. And then Ruben can visit his mother here.”
Detective Kelleher put a long, thin white finger to the
bridge of his nose as if he had a terrible pain there. The
finger was startlingly white, almost glaring under the
fluorescent lighting.

“Good,” Goldberg said. “How much do I pay you?”

“Me?” Detective Kelleher said. “No, that’s not how it
works.”

Hannah stepped in front of her father, blocking him
from the detective’s view. “Thank you, detective,” she
said, “Can you take me to where my brother is staying? I’ll
pay his bail.”

“You don’t need to bail him out,” Detective Kelleher
said. “I shouldn’t have said that. He’s...how old? Fifteen?”

“Thirteen,” Goldberg said over Hannah’s shoulder. She
flicked her wrist dismissively at Goldberg and it had the
effect of driving Goldberg’s words back at him and out of
the detective’s earshot.

“He’s thirteen,” Hannah said. “But I’m eighteen now.”
Goldberg tried to see around Hannah. He craned his
neck but the most he could see were Kelleher’s hands on his
hips, his brown brogans, his belt with a gold buckle. A sensible dresser, Goldberg thought. He must be a good policeman, a sensible dresser like that.

Hannah and Detective Kelleher were leaning too close for Goldberg to hear what they said. They were now confidants, lovers who didn’t have any need or desire to include a third party who had nothing to contribute. Goldberg wondered absently as he found another piece of ice in the cup to rub on Ruthie’s lips whether it was possible that Hannah and Detective Kelleher had a, here he pursed his lips in distaste at the childish idiom, a past. But where? How?

“Ruthie?” Goldberg whispered. “Can you hear me? I think that perhaps Hannah is in love with a policeman, a shaygetz, an Irisher.”

Goldberg paused. For this, Ruthie would rise up from the dead and strike out. She couldn’t let an accusation like that go unanswered. It wasn’t possible. If there were any sensation left in Ruthie and she understood him, she would not let this go. But she did and Goldberg began to cry anew.

“Papa? It’s going to be okay. I’m going with Detective Kelleher now,” Hannah said. “I’m going to get Ruben out and I’ll bring him here. Okay? Okay, Papa?”
Goldberg couldn’t look up. His neck wouldn’t support the weight. He waved his hand absently. “Go,” he said, “go.”
Hannah fought down her childish desire to ask the detective to work the siren. She didn’t want him to look at her that way, they way you’d like at a kid. She wondered how old he was. He couldn’t be more than twenty-five or thirty. She was nearly eighteen. Nearly in college. The first in the family to do so. And this one, such freckles on him. He looked like a boy. He looked no older than Ruben, not really.

“What’s going to happen to Ruben?” Hannah asked.

“It’s difficult to say. I’d say that a lot of it depends on what happens with your mother.”

The detective let out a long, patient sigh as a convertible filled with kids cut out in front of him at the red light while he rolled up to the red light. But he didn’t hit the horn or turn on the lights and pull them over like another cop might have done and Hannah thought he must be a patient man, not one to rush into something, not unreliable as she had always heard the Irish were.

“I’m off to college in the fall, you know,” Hannah said. Her head lolled in his direction.

“Yeah? That’s something. That’s terrific. Me, I never got the chance. Or maybe I had it and I didn’t take it.”
“You could go now, Detective Kelleher. You’re still so young.”

The detective shrugged his shoulders slightly and if Hannah hadn’t been watching him so closely, she didn’t think she would have noticed at all.

“I’m not so young as you think,” he said.

“How old are you?” Hannah asked.

The detective laughed and Hannah immediately blushed. She knew better than to ask a stranger a question like that. You weren’t supposed to ask people about their age. Many people found it offensive.

“I got a young face,” the detective said. “Look at my hands. They tell more than my face does. You can tell a lot by a person’s hands.”

He held out his right hand to her and Hannah wondered if she could take it in hers to study it. She reached out tentatively and her fingers touched the underside of his palm. The detective turned his head to look at her.

“See?” he said.


He nodded.

She wanted to keep holding his hand but she made herself let go. He put his hand back onto the steering wheel and Hannah wondered if her fingers had made a mark on
his palm. She wished she could crane her head underneath the steering wheel and look up at his hand and see the spot where she had held him.

“You shouldn’t call me detective,” he said. “You can call me Brian.”

“Hannah,” she said and couldn’t bring herself to say any more.

They pulled up to the precinct house and Brian parked right in front.

“It’s not supposed to work this way,” he said.

“What’s not supposed to work this way?”

“I’m not supposed to just let Ruben go home with you. He’s supposed to go through Central Booking and there’s supposed to be a hearing. But I think what happened was an accident and he’s just a boy and I don’t want to make this any worse than it must already be. He’s in holding but he hasn’t gone into the system. That won’t help anything and if you’re responsible with him and don’t leave him alone, we can always backtrack and bring him in again. But you’ve got to be responsible or I won’t let him leave. Do you understand that?”

It was the longest he has spoken to her and Hannah felt exhilarated at the attention.
“I’ll make sure, Brian,” she said. Hannah didn’t know many who weren’t Jewish. A few, but not many, only from school. Well, she knew them, of course, but by sight or name, no more than that. She looked forward to college where she could meet all sorts of people. But she had always thought Brian was a Jewish name. She hoped he wasn’t half-Jewish. That would make what was happening only half as important. He sure didn’t look it, though.

“Come on then,” he said, his voice brusque and thick and she wondered if he was bored with her or even angry with her.

Brian waved them past the front desk. Hannah’s breath was short in the precinct house. All those police and she thought they all were staring at her, wondering what she was doing there.

When they reached the holding cells, Brian and Hannah stared in on Ruben. Brian’s eyes were expressionless but Hannah sneaked glances at him between trying to look tearful and worried. Ruben lay on the wooden bench staring at the wall, seemingly oblivious to their presence.

“I wasn’t going to put him in with the others,” Brian said, pointing down the hall where men crowded together. They were hooting at the Hannah and Brian and Hannah didn’t
know why they were screaming, she couldn’t understand what they were screaming.

“Don’t be scared,” Brian said. “There’s nothing to be scared of.”

Hannah smiled at him. She was pleased. She liked the idea that she was scared, which she wasn’t, and she liked the idea that Brian wanted to take care of her even more.

Ruben sat up on the bench and turned to face them.

“Can I go home?” he asked.

“Ruben. What have you done?” Hannah asked.

Brian stood leaned up against the bars and put his face between the metal poles. Hannah stood back a distance.

The corridor was only in gray and brown colors. It looked tired and Hannah wondered if these cells could really hold all those men down at the other end. It seemed to her that if they mustered together and worked as one, it shouldn’t be that difficult to break out. The idea didn’t worry her. She found it strangely pleasing. Then Brian would really have to defend her and she could see just how dedicated to the proposition he truly was.

“Can I go home now?” Ruben repeated.

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Brian nodded to a guard at the entrance to the corridor and the man brought over a set of keys. It took
Brian a minute of fumbling to find the right one. He unlocked the door, opened it, and motioned for Ruben to come out with a wave of his hand.

Ruben looked tired to Hannah, but beyond that he looked okay.

Brian led them down the hall, walking one after the other, Ruben between Brian and Hannah and she wondered if that had just happened or if Brian had meant for it to develop this way, as though Ruben were being escorted. She certainly hadn’t chosen to walk last. She would have liked to be closer to Brian, to have had the opportunity to study him more without his knowing it, but somehow Ruben had been inserted in the middle and she found herself staring at the back of Ruben’s head rather than Brian’s.

Ruben had thin brown hair. Of course he wasn’t balding yet, she thought, but she didn’t think the years when he would be were so far away. His shoulders, which just the day before had seemed surprisingly wide and powerful to her, had somehow returned to being a boy’s shoulders, sloped in and trembling.

Brian walked them to the front of the precinct house, past the oak front desk, which to Hannah seemed surprisingly dignified and posh for a police station. He stopped at the door and turned around to face Ruben. He
took Ruben’s arm in his and held it tightly. “Do you know how your mother is?”

“No,” Ruben said.

“You haven’t asked either,” Brian said.

“No.”

“Does that mean that you don’t care?” Brian leaned in close to Ruben and from her perspective, Hannah couldn’t make out any space between them as Brian bent his neck slightly so as to stare down at Ruben and make Ruben tilt his head backwards to meet his eyes. But Ruben wasn’t interested in meeting anybody’s eyes. He turned his head to the side.

“I asked you a question, you little fucker,” Brian said.

Ruben stayed silent.

“You don’t give a damn what happens to your mother, your own mother, do you?”

Hannah could feel herself sweating under her arms. Ruben was part of her family, but she didn’t want Brian to think that he was representative of all the family. She wasn’t like that, she wasn’t cruel.

“Yes I do,” Ruben said.

“Then why didn’t you ask about her?”

“I didn’t hit her hard. She’s okay.”
“She’s not okay. Maybe I should put you back in that cell. Maybe that’s where you belong.”

“No!” Hannah interrupted, surprised at herself. She repeated the word again but this time in a quieter, more controlled voice.

“Go on then, but you remember Hannah, he’s your responsibility.” Hannah wondered if she had ruined everything. She hoped Ruben was worth it.
Goldberg got himself a candy bar out of the vending machine. It fell loudly, almost too loudly, into the slot at the bottom and Goldberg looked around guiltily to see who else had seen him buy the candy. He wasn’t supposed to be eating candy. He was supposed to watch his weight. Ruthie was so skinny, like a little sparrow really, and he thought that perhaps if she had been heavier, had a little more meat on his bones, she wouldn’t have gotten hurt so badly, and then he felt guilty for thinking this, for thinking that it might somehow be her fault and not Ruben’s.

Ruthie was afflicted. How could Ruben not understand this? He was thirteen, not all grown-up certainly, but already a bar mitzvah and to understand that his mother was sick and couldn’t be held responsible for things like forgetting where she was or who she was talking to, that the boy should understand, thirteen or no.

Goldberg went to the nurses’ station and asked for a phone book. He found the number for the precinct house and dialed it. He asked to speak to Detective Kelleher.

“Kelleher.”
“This is Mr. Goldberg. My wife, Ruthie, my son, Ruben. You rode in the car with my daughter, Hannah.”

“Yessir, what can I do for you?”

“Ruben is gone?”

“Yes. He went home with his sister not 15 minutes ago.”

“He is alright?”

“Yes.” The detective’s voice was cold and Goldberg heard the disapproval over the phone. The detective couldn’t be a father, he couldn’t be. Any father would understand that you still cared, no matter how horrible a child you had. You don’t stop the caring, things don’t work that way. Maybe even sometimes it would be better if you could, but that was impossible.

“Nu. Ruben is gone home with Hannah. What do you think they will talk about?” Goldberg asked.

In the background of the police station, Goldberg could hear people shouting. That his children would have to be in a place like that was awful. But how could he have gone himself? He had his Ruthie unconscious in a bed. What kind of man would leave his wife like that? Goldberg nodded to himself, satisfied that his course of action had been the only logical one.

“You like my daughter, isn’t that so?” Goldberg asked.
“Excuse me?” the detective said.

“I know, I wasn’t always like the way you see me now. I once was young like you, had thoughts like you. You’re an Irish, aren’t you?”

“I’m Irish,” the detective said. “I’ve got to go, sir. Please let me know if there’s a development with your wife.”

“A development? What development? She’ll be fine. She’ll wake up soon, you’ll see. And then, I’ll take her home.” Goldberg paused and sniffled loudly. Only he could catch a cold at this time of year, so warm yet.

“But that’s not the development you mean,” Goldberg continued. “You think that maybe that’s not what happens next. You think that maybe Ruthie doesn’t wake up or when she does wake up, something’s worse. There’s nothing worse than this sleeping. I don’t think there is a worse. But you want the blood and gore, Detective Kelleher, that’s your business.”

There was silence from the other end.

“My business is sales. Home furnishings. All sorts, really. That’s my business.”

“Sir, I’ve got to go now.” Then there was a click and a pause, as though the very phone lines somehow needed to recover, and then the dial tone loud in Goldberg’s ear.
Goldberg hung up the phone reluctantly. He didn’t want to go back to Ruthie’s room and watch her sleep some more. The boy doctor had said that, in a way, sleep wasn’t such a bad thing for Ruthie. It meant that her body could have the opportunity to try and heal itself. The boy doctor said that lots of times the body woke up when it was ready, when it had been returned closer to its state of natural equilibrium. He told Goldberg to try not to worry.

Rat momser. What did he know? Another boy trying to tell everyone else what to think and do. He and the detective should spend time together.

Goldberg walked down the hall and found Ruthie’s room. She wasn’t alone anymore. An old black man, maybe in his eighties, wearing a green fedora with a black band around it and a tan-colored corduroy suit hovered over her, staring down. His hand was raised and though it trembled in the air as though a hurricane only he could feel raged back and forth across the room, Goldberg still worried.

“What do you want?” Goldberg yelled. He clenched and unclenched his fists.

The man turned slowly to look at him. His eyes were filled with milky liquid and Goldberg wondered if the man could see him at all. He thought maybe he was blind and had gotten lost trying to get back to his own room. “Can I help
you?” Goldberg asked, his tone softer. This was an old man. He had probably scared him half to death by yelling like that. He didn’t mean to scare the old man.

“I was just visiting,” the man said. “Is this your wife?”

The man couldn’t be blind.

Goldberg nodded.

“She’s sleeping,” he said.

“She looks real peaceful,” the man said.

“I guess she does.”

“What happened? Did she have a stroke?”

“No,” Goldberg said. “My son hit her and she fell and knocked her head hard.”

The man nodded slowly. “You got problems, sonny.”

“Maybe.”

“Ain’t no maybe. You do. I know. I got problems too.”

“What are yours?”

“Specifics aren’t that important.”

“But I told you what happened with Ruthie. Maybe I shouldn’t have, but I did. And then you don’t want to tell me. I don’t know—” Goldberg’s voice cracked and trailed off somewhat and he regrouped and tried again. “I said something and now it’s your responsibility to do the same. Because what I said about my son, it’s true.”
“Of course it’s true. Why would you lie? You’re not a liar, young man.”

Goldberg felt his ears get hot. He wasn’t a young man. Nobody called him that, it had been years since he had thought of himself that way.

“I can’t tell you my problems because you can see them. I’m old. I’m going to die. I’m going to die soon.”

“Don’t be silly,” Goldberg said and stepped close to the old man and put his hand on the man’s shoulder. It occurred to Goldberg that this was the first time he had ever touched a black person, but that didn’t bother him one iota.
Hannah came into the room first and she entered like a hurricane, thrashing and fighting, knocking over the clipboard that held Ruthie’s chart.

Ruben entered slowly and he looked around the room, taking in each piece of furniture, the plain lamp next to the bed, the nurse’s call button that was a solid red - does it change colors or blink when you press it, Hannah didn’t know - anything that might keep the focus off Ruthie, ghost-white in the bed, whiter even than the sheets that Goldberg had pulled up to her chin, though it was warm outside. Hannah wondered if she could untuck the sheets, that maybe that would make Ruthie more comfortable. She didn’t know if there was some medical reason Ruthie was covered that way. The sheets were so tight that Hannah wondered if maybe they functioned as a strait jacket.

Hannah took two quick steps up to the bed and stared hard into at her mother to try and decipher whether Ruthie might actually be a threat to herself or to others, but Ruthie appeared to be dead. It was only the slightest rhythmic rise and fall of her chest that gave any indication that Ruthie was still breathing. She was silent, no air whistling out of her mouth or nostrils and Hannah hoped
that was also what she slept like. She didn’t like the idea that she snored or air whistled out her nose, that others might know this horrible thing about her that she might never know. One day, when she spent a night in bed with Brian, she would ask him and he would tell her the truth and Hannah would deal with it.

“You’ve come to visit,” Goldberg said flatly.

“Of course we came to visit. She’s our mother. Did you think we’d just go home?” Hannah said.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Goldberg said.

Ruben said nothing. He looked at his mother but stood with his back to the doorframe.

“Who’s this?” Hannah asked, nodded at the black man standing across the bed from her.

“Is the boy the one that did it?” the man asked.

Goldberg nodded.

“What did you tell him for?” Hannah asked. “Do you know this man?”

“I know him,” Goldberg said, “he’s a friend of mine.”

“Since when?” Hannah asked, sneering.

“Young lady, I’m just gonna go. But there is no reason for you to be like this to me. I’m just trying to help things.” The man shuffled towards the door, pulling his threadbare sweater closer around him as he passed Hannah
and she thought the man might be scared of her. The man paused at the door and considered Ruben.

“You’re going to burn in hell for what you done,” the man said. Ruben said nothing, only looked down at his tennis shoes.

The man walked into the hallway and the family stayed silent as they listened to his footsteps click down the hallway. The hospital was quieter than Hannah thought it would be. It surprised her that she could hear the man walking so clearly and for so long.

Ruben stepped into the room. “I’m sorry, daddy,” Ruben said.

“It isn’t me you’re supposed to apologize to,” Goldberg said.

“But she can’t hear me,” Ruben said, “she’s unconscious.”

“She has a name,” Goldberg said sharply. He moved away from his son to the window and looked out.

“Mommy can’t hear me,” Ruben said.

“You’re the reason that she can’t,” Goldberg said, “and she isn’t unconscious. She’s asleep. There’s a difference.”

“Is there?” Hannah interrupted. “I’m not so sure that there is.”
“Of course there is,” Goldberg said. He turned to face his daughter and then Ruben, in his turn, looked away from his father.

Goldberg’s breath was ragged and unnatural. “Sit down,” Hannah said and pointed to the tan backed chair that stood nestled in the corner of the room, the chair where people sat while their wives and husbands and children slept or even died.

“Don’t you tell me what to do,” Goldberg said. He walked quickly over to Hannah and slapped her sharply across her mouth. She felt her eyes fill up with tears.

“Don’t hit her,” Ruben said.

“Get the hell out of here,” Goldberg said, “just get the hell out of here. I don’t want her to wake up while you’re here. That would just make things worse. So you get the hell out of here.”

Hannah led Ruben by the hand into the hallway. His hand was callused, more so than she would have expected from a schoolboy’s. She thought that it must have been from baseball, that he must have practiced often so that he could be so good a hitter as Goldberg had said. Yesterday seemed long past.
“Don’t worry,” Hannah said. She swiped the back of her hand across her eyes. “He’s just upset. We should go home, Brian wants you to stay at home.”

Ruben looked into the room and then turned away and walked down the hall, back to the elevators. Hannah caught up to him. His legs had gotten longer and his strides were greater than hers and she had to take two bounding steps to catch up.

Ruben hit the elevator button and they waited side by side.

“Who’s Brian?” he asked.

Hannah hesitated, wondering if Ruben would be angry that she called the detective who had arrested him by his first name. She didn’t want Ruben to think that she was somehow betraying him.

“Brian is Detective Kelleher.”

“You call him Brian?”

Ruben didn’t sound angry and he didn’t sound surprised. His voice lacked intonation of any kind, the syllables and the words so unaccented as to seem stilted, as though he had just learned the language and was fluent, but not sure where the emotion belonged in English.

“I like him,” Hannah said.
Ruben didn’t respond and the elevator doors opened up and they stepped on.

“Let’s go home,” Hannah said and Ruben nodded.
Brian didn’t particularly like coffee. He thought the taste too bitter. He huddled over his desk and took a long pull, anyway. It was something that he had picked up from the others he worked with and it had just become a habit, but he didn’t think he really enjoyed it, though the idea of doing something he didn’t enjoy didn’t bother Brian enough that he would make an effort to stop. It had a certain nobility to it - it tasted bad, but legions of cops had sat at this desk or similar ones anyway and drunk bad coffee and gone about their business. Not that Brian ever could have admitted out loud that a little coffee made him feel macho or like a team member, a contributor to the ongoing masculinity of this world, but he knew that was part of it. It disappointed him that he should fall such easy prey to superficial and silly urges. But still...he couldn’t very well grumble about the job over a cup of Earl Grey, now could he? Brian looked down at the coffee and caught himself before he said, You’re all I’ve got.

He laughed at himself, but the laugh was an uninvited interloper in the squad room chatter and Brian stifled it before he went too far and someone said, “Kelleher - what the fuck is so funny?”
On his desk were papers. Piles and piles of papers and he touched his hand to his hand to check and see if he had a headache, if all this paperwork was finally driving him to the edge. A true cop always teetered on ‘the edge’ but didn’t go over. That was all Brian wanted.

He had to fill out a report on the boy, Ruben, who hit his mother. Brian understood why he had sent the boy home with his sister but he was still confident it had been a mistake. He found the Goldberg’s number on the original arrest report the patrolman had filled out and called. He wasn’t sure what he planned to say. It was almost midnight. If he woke the Goldbergs up, so be it. Sleep or lack thereof wasn’t this family’s biggest problem.

Hannah answered the phone on the second ring and Brian wondered why she had been awake.

“Hannah?”

“Brian?”

“Yes.”

Then a pause while they each decided what to say. Across the room, Flores and McCauley argued with one another. The overweight P.R. cop leaned in close and gesticulated wildly. There were large sweat patches on his back and underneath his arms and McCauley leaned back, though without moving his feet, to avoid touching or
smelling the other man. Brian considered saying goodbye and hanging up to watch them argue. He wouldn’t mind breaking up a fight. It would be a good way to liven up the evening. He was on duty until five. It seemed a slow night, but there weren’t many slow nights. Not in this job, Brian wanted to say to somebody. A junkie would likely kill another junkie within the hour, but it’s not like junkies killing junkies required or even allowed for any real police work. It was just one of those things.

But Brian didn’t hang up. Partially because he didn’t want to be rude - he had called and risked waking the house up at midnight, though that hadn’t proven to be the case - and now he had to have something to talk about. But also because he liked the way the girl sounded. That is, he enjoyed the timbre of her voice. Most girls - young women? - Brian knew had this high-pitched quality that he found intensely irritating. Hannah was different, or her voice was, anyway. The voice was lower - both in volume and pitch. Her voice belonged to an older woman, someone who had had a few too many cigarettes and seen too much of the world. Maybe Hannah’s voice was that way because of her problems. But he wasn’t all that interested in the reason why, it was enough that her voice was so attractive.

“Where’s Ruben, where’s your brother?” Brian asked.
“He’s asleep in his room,” Hannah said.

“Did you talk about it? What did he say happened?”

“I asked him, I tried, but he kinda just shrugged his shoulders and went to sleep. My brother doesn’t talk very much.”

“Would you like to have coffee?” Brian blurted out.

“Yeah,” she said, “I would.”

“You’re not supposed to leave the apartment. I told you not to leave the apartment, to keep Ruben with you at all times so he doesn’t run away again.”

“You just asked me to have coffee with you. I didn’t ask you. You asked me.” It sounded like she was crying or maybe almost crying and Brian tugged at his shirt collar. He needed to get new shirts, the ones he had now were all too tight.

“I know I asked you. I’m sorry. Don’t be upset.”

“I’m not upset.”

“I forgot for a second and then I remembered, that’s why I said that. I wasn’t trying to test you or anything.” Brian laughed loudly and hoped it would put her at ease.

Flores was trying to grab McCauley by the throat but the taller man held him away. They fell onto a desk together and Flores began punching McCauley in the head until he was dragged away by a uniform. Brian was sorry he
hadn’t got to break it up. He should have gotten off the phone as soon as things started. This conversation wasn’t going anywhere.

“So you know he’s there,” Brian said, “you know he’s asleep.”

“Yeah, I do.” She hesitated and Brian could hear her draw her breath in on the other end of the line. “There’s a diner on the corner, where I am. A greek place. We could get coffee there.”

“Ruben.”

“He’ll never know I’m gone. I study so hard anyway, I’m always up most of the night. Ruben’s asleep. He won’t know a thing. He’ll just sleep.”

“No. I can’t do that.”

Brian hung up quickly. The wall clock hadn’t moved at all. There wasn’t much air circulating in the squad room. He hoped a junkie killed another junkie soon so he could at least go outside.
Ruben packed the gym bag as quietly as he could. He wasn’t going to go jail, he knew that. He was very sorry for what had happened with Ruthie. But it was an accident and when she woke up - if she woke up, he corrected himself - she would know that.

In the gym bag he put certain things. He put two pairs of socks, two of underwear, two tee-shirts, a pair of jeans, his mitt and a rawhide regulation ball still shiny white.

There wasn’t much to Ruben’s room. Mets baseball cards stuck to the wall (Cleon Jones, Donn Clendenon, Tommie Agee, Jerry Koosman), clothes scattered, a model Piper Cub airplane and the Spirit of St. Louis, a propeller missing. Ruben listened for voices out in the hallway. Hannah had been on the phone before, then he had heard her go in her room and cry loudly. The sobs weren’t clear, which Ruben knew meant that she had her face pressed tight to her pillow.

He couldn’t find anything else to pack and he couldn’t hear any stirring from Hannah’s room. The clock said 2:14 now. It was late. She didn’t have a test the next day or he would have heard about it. She must have cried herself to sleep.
Ruben cracked open the door as quietly as he could, being careful to turn the handle completely so there was no click as he pulled it open. It was dark in the hallway. He felt dizzy but exhilarated, the way he felt when he sneaked cigarettes out his bedroom window while Goldberg and Ruthie slept. This thought made Ruben take two soft steps back into his room and slide open a dresser drawer. From underneath a collection of worn sweatshirts, frayed at the neck and the cuffs, he dug out a crushed pack of Camel Lights.

He closed his door. This way if Hannah woke up in the middle of the night she wouldn’t think to look in on him and she wouldn’t know he was gone until breakfast.

The front door was tricky. It squeaked every time, but Ruben accepted this. He thought about greasing it again, the way Goldberg did periodically, but he thought the noise he’d make by rummaging around would be louder than the squeak and, besides, he wasn’t even sure where you were supposed to put the grease and what if after all that rummaging it still squeaked and it made even more noise? He slipped the chain off the door and turned the key in the lock. He opened the front door.

“Ruben.”
It was Hannah and she wasn’t even undressed. Her light
sure hadn’t been on and Ruben wondered if she had been
waiting for this. She was smart. Maybe she was so much
smarter than he was that she knew he wouldn’t want to go to
jail and so she had waited patiently for him to crack.

“I’ve gotta leave,” he said.

“Yeah, I know.” She scratched absently at her chin.

“Do you know where you’re going to go?”

“No. I thought I’d just wander around for a while
until I figured out what to do.”

“That’s a boy’s plan,” Hannah said.

Ruben shrugged his shoulders noncommittally.

“You can’t think like a boy if you’re going to run
away from this,” she said.

She held out her hand. There were two twenty dollar
bills inside. “Did you even bring any money?” she asked.

“I didn’t have any,” he said. “I thought about
bringing some but I didn’t know where to get any.”

This wasn’t true. The thought of money had never even
entered Ruben’s calculations.

He stared at her hand, loath to take the bills.

“Go on,” she said and he did. Their hands touched but
she didn’t look at him.
“There’s a house for runaways on Atlantic, near to where the deli is. You can walk there from here. They’re going to ask your name and you make something up. And then tomorrow, they’re going to talk to you. You need to have a story made up for that too. How you got there, that sort of thing.”

Ruben nodded and moved as though to leave.

“Did you bring your toothbrush and some toothpaste?” Hannah asked.

She held up a finger to tell him to wait a minute and disappeared into the bathroom and then reappeared with his toothbrush and a tube of Crest. Ruben nodded solemnly and stepped through the door.

“Just a day or two,” Hannah called after him, “until all this is straightened out”

Ruben went out into the hallway, down the stairs and walked outside.

The streets were poorly lit, but seemed to shine. It had drizzled not long before and the effect on the black pavement was striking, turning broken glass into crystal and pot holes into terrifying pits that looked as though they descended forever. Groups of men loitered on the corners, talking in low voices and passing cigarettes back and forth to one another. Ruben walked past them quickly
and they didn’t say anything to him, but one stepped aside as he came down the sidewalk and Ruben was grateful for the gesture.

Some of the blocks were emptier than others, and it was on these that Ruben felt like everybody was hiding and waiting to jump out at him. He crossed the street often, trying to stay active and make himself brave. He didn’t think Brooklyn could ever be so quiet. He stopped only once and this was to unzip the gym bag and take the baseball out of the bag. Then he walked on again, pounding the ball into the palm of one hand then the other.

The lobby of the runaways’ house was locked but there was a doorbell. Ruben rang it once and then stepped back down the steps and looked in. He wasn’t going to go in if he didn’t like the looks of whomever answered the door.

A tall, skinny man opened it up. The man wore a green tank top and jeans with holes at the knees. He had a ferret’s narrow, suspicious face, but his eyes were wide and welcoming. The man worked a toothpick from corner to corner of his mouth.

“Come on in, brother,” the man said.

Ruben wasn’t much impressed but he did anyways.
13. Hannah

“I need to speak to Detective Kelleher. Can I speak to Detective Kelleher? It’s really important. It’s Hannah. Please tell him that my brother must have sneaked out during the night. Please tell him my brother’s gone and I don’t know where he is.”

Brian banged on the door with his fist and Hannah answered right away. She had changed into a bathrobe and had the robe pulled tight around her, but only loosely knotted.

“What happened?” Brian asked. He didn’t ask to come in. He pushed past Hannah and went into the living room and plopped down as though he had done all this thousands of times before.

The sofa had a brown afghan that Ruthie had knitted years before when she took a needlepoint class. When Hannah was young, perhaps ten or eleven, Ruthie had gone through a series of stages, all of which revolved around adult education classes that were held at Brooklyn College. Besides Needlepoint, Ruthie had taken French Romanticism, Contemporary American Art and Auto Repair, this last one even though the Goldbergs had never owned a car and Goldberg considered them wastes of money when there was a
perfectly good public transportation system, this and the parking situation in their neighborhood, which was that there weren’t spots and when there were spots your car always got broken into or pissed on by shvartzes.

“I don’t know what happened,” Hannah said. “I thought he was doing better and we talked about mom and he was asleep when I was on the phone with you and when I woke up to look in on him, he wasn’t there. Do you want some coffee?”

He nodded yes and she put a pot onto the stove.

“I could really get in big trouble for this.”

“I’m sorry,” she yelled from the kitchen.

“You don’t sound sorry.”

“He’s my brother, of course I’m sorry.”

Brian sighed elaborately and came into the kitchen. He stood close to Hannah and she could hear his breath behind her and she turned around.

He had been wearing a brown tie earlier in the evening, but he wasn’t wearing that anymore and she wondered briefly why not. She wondered whether he hadn’t been expecting to leave the precinct house and if that was why he had taken it off. This made the most sense to her.

Hannah’s forehead matched perfectly up to Brian’s chin. She tried to speak but found herself speaking into
his neck and she felt herself leaning in as though to bite him in the tight, white flesh. She stepped back and left the room quickly.

“We need to go find him,” Brian said.

“I know.” Hannah wondered whether she had gotten herself into something more than she expected, but it was too late and she stepped into her bedroom found a pair of jeans and a faded sweatshirt. Brian leaned against the doorframe and watched her without saying a word. Hannah would have asked him to step out and give her some privacy, but his mind seemed to be elsewhere and she was scared to ask him, so she turned her back and hoped that he wasn’t watching.

“Where do you think we should go first?” Hannah asked as to Brian’s back as he opened the door to the apartment building.

“You’re supposed to know that,” he said without turning, but he turned walked west deliberately, as though he knew exactly where Ruben was and it was just a matter of announcing his presence. Hannah tried to draw even with him, but his steps were too long and she couldn’t catch up.
Goldberg rolled Ruthie over onto her side and massaged her shoulders and her neck.

"Everything hurts," she said.

"We’ll get out of here soon."

"But I feel okay. Just sore, I guess."

"Doctors want to do some more tests, but then we can go."

She smelled stale and unwashed and Goldberg leaned back a little bit, but only enough so she wouldn’t notice.

"Do you remember what happened?" he asked.

"Not really. I don’t remember much."

"That’s natural, that’s for the best."

"So I just slipped, right?"

"I didn’t see it, but I guess that’s what happened."

Ruthie slid out from underneath his hands and moved to the edge of the bed and tried to stand up. He walked around to the other side and pulled her up. She took a few steps around the room, placing her feet down gingerly. She walked as though her feet might break, as though she wasn’t confident of their mettle.

"Where are the children?" Ruthie asked, "I want to call them."
“They’re at home.”

Ruthie sat back down on the bed, winded and trembling. “Bring me the phone,” she said.

Goldberg dialed their apartment and but didn’t hand the receiver to her. He thought he ought to explain to Hannah or Ruben, whoever answered the phone, that they weren’t going to say anything, that it was best that Ruthie not know what had happened. It was over and it wasn’t going to happen again.

Nobody answered and after six rings he hung up. “They’re not there?” she asked.

“No. Or maybe they’re asleep. They may just not have heard the phone ring. They’ve been staying here a lot. They just went home. They’re good kids.”

“Oh, I know that. Of course they are.”
There was a sign on the wall that said “No Smoking” but there wasn’t anybody else in the room and, besides, Ruben felt contrary to rules. Runaways were street kids, he figured, and they were expected to have trouble adjusting, they were expected to be used to doing what they felt like, so he lit one and decided it made him better fit the part.

He laid down on the bed, propped the pillow up and ashed onto the floor when he needed to. The room was plain, wooden walls and white sheets on the bed. There was a bathroom down the hall, the ferret man had shown him the bathroom, and Ruben hadn’t yet heard or seen any other runaways. He took a long drag and blew the smoke out of his nostrils. He wasn’t ever going to jail, he was sure of that.

There was a quick knock at the door and the ferret man leaned in. Ruben didn’t have time to put the cigarette out and try to hide the evidence and he thought that the ferret man must’ve smelled the smoke and was coming to yell at him and maybe kick him out. Ruben lay perfectly still, the cigarette dangling from his hand off the bed, almost touching the floor. The bed was low to the ground. Ruben shifted slightly and the frame squeaked.
“How’s it going, brother?” the ferret man asked.
Ruben nodded and smiled.
“I see you’re doing okay, making yourself at home.”
Ruben decided to brazen it out. He brought the cigarette to his mouth and took a drag. The ferret man didn’t seem too concerned about it and Ruben figured that if it didn’t bother the man, it oughtn’t bother him either.
“How’d you come to be here?”
“I ran away from home.”
The ferret man tilted his head back and let out a loud, startling laugh. The toothpick he was working stayed clenched between his teeth, probably so it didn’t fall down his throat when he laughed. Ruben figured that if the ferret man wasn’t careful, a toothpick might be enough to kill a man if it fell down his throat and got caught in there.
“Did you take a shower, anything like that?”
Ruben shook his head no.
“Okay, well why don’t we get you into the shower, get you cleaned up, get you ready. You’ll want to call your parents, at least let them know that you’re okay. You look like you just run away. Besides, if you’d been out on the street a real long while, I’d have met you by now. You would’ve already visited me here. So how about it? You want
to call somebody, let them know where you are and that you’re okay? Or even just that you’re okay?”

“No,” Ruben said. Hannah knew where he was. She knew how to find him if that was what she wanted to do. Ruthie was probably dead by now and if she was, that meant that Goldberg had the police out looking for him.

The ferret man smiled and said, “That’s for the best. Let’s get you into that shower, get you into some clean clothes. We got extra clothes around here.”

Ruben didn’t think he was dirty. He didn’t know why he needed to put on different clothes or why he had to shower but he was tired and scared and didn’t feel like making a big deal out of a small request.

“I brought my own clothes,” he said.

“See! I knew you just ran away tonight! I can always tell. Well, get your clothes and we’ll get you cleaned up.”

Ruben took his change out of his gym bag and tucked it under his arm. He stood up and followed the ferret man down the hall, even though he already knew where the bathroom was. The man seemed to have forgotten that he had already shown him all this.

“You get undressed and get on in there,” the ferret man said, “and I’ll go down and get you a towel out of the closet.”
Ruben did as he was told. He folded up his clothes and placed them neatly on the shower bench. The first blast of water was freezing cold and Ruben reached up and shoved the shower head away from him. He stood there dripping and testing the water with his hand, waiting for it to warm up. When it did, he turned the nozzle back onto him and closed his eyes. The ferret man was right. The shower did make him feel better.

“You already got some hair down there,” the ferret man said. Ruben hadn’t heard him come back in. A white towel was slung over the man’s shoulder. “I thought you’d be too young for that to have happened already.”

Ruben shrugged his shoulders and turned off the water and reached for the towel on the ferret man’s shoulder but the man stepped back nimbly.

“You haven’t been in there very long. You really think you’re clean already?”

“I didn’t think I was dirty before.”

“Don’t be a smartass. Turn that water back on and get clean.”

“I am.”

“Did you hear what I said to you? You want to stay at this place, you’re going to have to listen to me.” The ferret man spoke calmly in a soft, steady voice.
Ruben made no effort to turn the water back on. He turned to the back wall so the ferret man couldn’t watch him. The ferret man stepped into the shower area and took a step towards Ruben, then Ruben heard a grunt and the sound of the man slipping on the wet tiled floor. Ruben looked down at him, then quickly stepped around him, trying to get away, but the ferret man grabbed his back foot and held on.

“Now you’re in trouble, son,” the ferret said, his voice coming out in awkward, painful gasps. He must have turned his ankle when he fell. Ruben couldn’t think why else the man would be in such pain. “Now come on and help me up,” the ferret man said and smiled up at Ruben but Ruben knew the smile was directed more at his crotch.

Ruben stomped down hard on the man’s face, terrified that he might miss and slip and fall on top of the ferret man. But his heel landed square on the ferret man’s nose and he heard the cracking and Ruben knew the nose was broken, and Ruben began to shake with relief. He was going to get away and the ferret man wasn’t going to have him.

The hand let go of his other foot and Ruben snatched his clothes up off the bench. He made it to the door before he turned around and when he did, he saw blood pouring out of the ferret man’s nose and mixing with the water on the floor and turning the white tiles into pink. The man held
his hands up to his face and blood came through his fingers and dripped down onto the floor.

"I’m going to get dressed and leave this place," Ruben said. "You better leave me alone or else I’ll hurt you worse." He was crying, he could taste the salt water on his lips and the taste somehow comforted him with its familiarity. The man wasn’t looking and Ruben thought that if he kept the tremors out of his voice, the man might be scared and might believe what he said.

The man cursed at him, but Ruben was already out the door and into the hallway, clutching his clothes and sneakers, trying to cover himself. The hallway was still empty and he got dressed there, ran to the room, packed his gym bag and ran outside. The first five blocks, he didn’t slow down, shoving his way past people, not seeing their faces, hot tears stinging in his eyes. After that he gradually slowed to a jog, then he turned a few corners just to be sure nobody was following him and started walking, his breaths quick and gasped as he tried to clear his head. He thought about the way the man’s nose had snapped, about the sound it made. And once he was far enough away, he realized that the sound didn’t bother him, that it wasn’t his fault, that the ferret man deserved it.
16. Ruthie

By mid-afternoon, after a complete CAT scan and an EKG, the doctors let Ruthie go home. They said that Ruthie’s problems wouldn’t be affected one way or the other, that she had just fallen hard, and this lack of understanding made Ruthie smile. She knew what had happened and she knew the repercussions. Her own son, so easily owned by, was not the only one who wished her ill. Doctors thought they understood. They understood the physical chain — what caused what — but they didn’t understand the things that came before the physical.

Ruben’s hand had looked so large coming at her. It didn’t seem like it could belong to her son. She remembered all of it and she remembered why he had hit her. She didn’t blame him for it. Not Ruben. She blamed his body, yes, but that was not the same thing. And it was true, for a mother to forget who her son was, this was a terrible thing.

Goldberg unlocked the door and edged her forward with a little pressure on the small of her back, guiding her in. She didn’t protest.

“Hannah?” he called, “Ruben? Your mother is home.”

There was no answer. Ruthie knew how long she had slept for, Goldberg had told her and he had told her how he
was at her side the entire time and he had told her that
their friends turned out to be not friends at all, that
none of them had seen fit to visit at all, though he wasn’t
positively sure that they knew, but he didn’t see how they
couldn’t have known. Still, the idea of sleep sounded great
to Ruthie. Sleep in her own bed had to be better than
sleeping in a hospital bed. Somehow, she didn’t think that
could really be called sleep at all.

Ruthie knew her survival depended on going home. Where
they couldn’t make her take drugs. For almost 25 years,
Ruthie had flat-lined. That’s what her father called it. To
flatline, to stay on an even keel. You’re on an even keel,
bubbuleh! This was good to them. They thought they
understood everything.

25 years with a blanket over your head. Muted. Tears
don’t count, not when they mean nothing to you. And neither
joy. Joy can be a physical reaction. It can be like a
sneeze. Ruthie learned this slowly. She knew pain now, but
she knew it. She couldn’t back down from that.

She wondered where Hannah could have gone to.
Medicated, would Ruthie ever have loved her two children
with such vigor, with such resolve?

Better not to dwell, Ruthie thought. You’re alive,
look after your children.
Ruthie figured that Ruben was too embarrassed to be at home. He was a good boy. She was sure he wasn’t there because he couldn’t yet face her. Poor boy. Ruben didn’t deserve such trouble.

She touched her hand to her forehead. The swelling was almost gone. It was bandaged, not from the fall, but from where they had drilled a hole into her skull and drained fluid so as to release the pressure on her brain. This was, the doctors told her, the tricky part but it had gone well and now she was sure to be okay.

“I don’t understand,” Goldberg said. He pulled a chair out from the kitchen table and guided Ruthie by her elbow down into it. She didn’t want to sit down in the kitchen - that would mean a talk - she just wanted to go to their room and sleep. But nor did she feel like causing a fuss. Goldberg was a sensitive man. Ruthie wouldn’t want that he might take something the wrong way.

“They should be home,” Goldberg continued, “I told them to stay at home.”

“Maybe they just went to get some food to eat,” she said. She didn’t care. All Ruthie wanted was rest. Not talk, just rest.

“We will wait,” Goldberg announced and sat across from Ruthie at the table. He put his hands to his head and let
his elbows rest on the table so that they supported his entire body, as though he couldn’t manage to keep upright if the table wasn’t there.

“You should rest,” Ruthie said, hoping that Goldberg would say yes and that she too could rest.

“I can’t rest. I don’t know where they are. You go.” He waved his hand in the direction of their bedroom.

Ruthie stood up and smiled. “I’m going to lie down. Please wake me when the children get home.”

Goldberg stood up quickly and smiled back and she could tell that he was feigning enthusiasm. “Lie down, Ruthie. I’ll wake you when the children return.”

She nodded and walked slowly to their bedroom. She could feel his eyes heavy on her back and she hesitated. Perhaps it was better to stay and wait. Perhaps that was a mother’s duty. But Ruthie couldn’t do it. She closed the door quietly behind her and lay down, still dressed as she was when she left the hospital. She looked at the wall. She saw nothing that could help her.
They drove around in Brian’s car to the four places, spots where Hannah knew Ruben went after school, before they found him. Brian saw Ruben first, leaning over an arcade game and pressing the buttons angrily, so absorbed that he didn’t see Brian until it was too late. Brian yanked him roughly by his shirt and the little jerkoff glanced over his shoulder at the screen to see if his spaceship, or whatever it was, had been evaporated. All that had gone on in the last few days and Ruben still cared about his game. That pissed Brian off.

“What the hell are you doing here? I told you to stay at home with your sister. You think this is a game?”

Ruben closed his eyes and Brian shook him again, harder this time.

“Where have you been?”

“Nowhere,” Ruben said. Brian grabbed a handful of Ruben’s shirt with his hand and pulled the boy up onto his toes. He wondered if Hannah was concentrating on his strength, his control of the situation. Tough love. She’d understand that that’s what it was Brian was doing.

Ruben closed his right fist and tried to punch Brian, but it only hit the cop in the shoulder. It didn’t hurt,
but it made Brian wonder how far to take this ‘tough love’ thing. Should he slap the kid? Would that be too much? He settled for twisting Ruben’s arms and locking them behind the kid’s scrawny back.

Hannah put her hand on Brian’s shoulder and said, “Okay, let’s take him home now.” He couldn’t hear in her voice what she thought of the encounter. He had hoped for something more tangible - a quivering, a shaky voice that allowed that he was doing what needed to be done. But, Brian reminded himself, it’s partially the calm, mature quality of her voice that you like so much. You can’t have it both ways.

Brian pushed Ruben away and stepped quickly backwards, his free hand brushing her chest as he did so, the force causing her to stumble.

“Hey!” Hannah said, surprised.

He turned to face her. Ruben wasn’t going anywhere. “You didn’t know he was going to be here?” Brian asked.

“No.”

“Bullshit.”

This girl had been playing with him. She knew where her brother was all along and he was angry. She had been in control - he had been along just for what? For kicks? To amuse her? Brian felt embarrassed of the way he had thought
before. How he could have expected this girl to be cowed and impressed by him was beyond him. So fucking stupid. That’s what he was. He felt like walking away, pretending nothing had happened.

He might have done just that, stomped off and tried to forget the Goldberg family had Ruben not punched him again, this time in the back, in the kidneys where you feel it, even if it is thrown by a kid. Brian spun Ruben around hard and pulled handcuffs out from his belt, slammed the boy up against the front of the arcade game so that Ruben’s feet lifted off the ground and he was leaning against the knobs and buttons.

“Brian! You don’t have to do that,” Hannah yelled, her voice breaking.

Here was a reaction from her. He had gotten it, it just took a little help from Ruben.

“Shut up.” Ruben tried to push off from the arcade game and Brian grabbed the boy’s shoulders, picking him up and holding him against the wall. Ruben’s eyes filled, but he didn’t cry.

Brian held him there for a moment and as he held him and didn’t hit Ruben, he felt the boy’s body loosen itself, relax from its defensive posture.
Brian inhaled and exhaled, slowly and deeply, trying to slow everything down. He didn’t want the situation to get out of hand. Brian had ambitions - he was never going to do something he’d regret. He wasn’t going to make that kind of mistake.

“Okay, Ruben?” he said. “I’m going to put these on you just so you don’t try and hit me and we’re going to go to the car and talk, okay?”

Ruben nodded okay and Brian snapped the cuffs closed. He grasped Ruben by the crook of his elbow and led him out to the car. Hannah followed the two of them, crying and Brian wondered if whatever her plan had been had backfired. He couldn’t be sure. She was smart. Very. So maybe this had been her plan all along. The girl was cagey, he’d give her that.

Brian pushed Ruben gently into the backseat. He knew he had overreacted, that he was being too hard on the boy and he was trying to control his anger, his exhaustion, to balance those factors with the way he felt about Hannah, which he knew he didn’t understand. He pointed to the front seat and said to Hannah, “It’s alright, just sit. It’s over now. I’m not mad anymore.”

He turned and kneeled down on the seat of the car. Ruben slid away from him towards the other door.
“I’m going to take you home now and then we’re going to call your father at the hospital and tell him what happened. Then it’ll be up to him what to do. Turn around and I’ll take those cuffs off.”

Ruben rotated his body slowly, suspiciously. Brian unlocked the cuffs and patted the boy on his shoulder. “I’m sorry I got so mad, Ruben. It’s over now. Next time you hit a cop though, you know what’ll happen, don’t you?”

The boy didn’t say anything and Brian took his silence as agreement.

Brian sat down in the driver’s seat next to Hannah. She had her face pressed to the cage and was crying, trying to talk to her brother, but Ruben ignored her and looked out the window, refusing to meet her gaze. Brian was impressed, despite himself. At least Ruben wasn’t a bawler. Most were. Thirteen years old, sixty years old. It didn’t matter.

Brian liked thinking of suspects as ‘bawlers.’ He’d have to remember to use that one at the station.

Brian remembered the feel of Hannah’s breasts as he pushed her back. Fuller than he thought they would be, heavier and harder. She hid her breasts under sweatshirts. He wouldn’t have guessed they were quite so substantial.
Brian started the car and still Hannah wouldn’t look at him. “I know you really love your brother, I can see that,” Brian said, “and I don’t think he’s a bad kid, I really don’t.”

Hannah turned to him. “Ruben’s in the car you know. He can hear every word we say,” she said.

Brian looked in the back seat at the boy. “I’ll take you back now,” Brian said.

“Home?”

“Yeah.”

Goldberg answered the door while Hannah was turning her key in the lock. He unlatched the chain and opened the door. His face was red, his eyes too, and Brian thought he had either been drinking or crying, maybe both.

“Here they are,” Brian said and pushed Ruben and Hannah forward.

“She didn’t do anything wrong,” Goldberg said dully.

“No. She didn’t do anything wrong. And neither did Ruben. Not on purpose. The boy was just scared.”

Ruben slid past his father and on in.

“Go see your mother, but don’t wake her up if she’s sleeping,” Goldberg said, “and she doesn’t remember. She forgot all about it. You don’t have to tell her. There’s no need for that.”
Ruben nodded.

Brian turned in the doorway. He didn’t see much reason for him to stay, now that they were back from the hospital. Goldberg followed him into the hallway. “Did you ever play baseball?” he asked.

Brian smiled. He couldn’t imagine thinking about baseball if he were Goldberg. Not at a time like this.

“Yeah, I did.”

“You were good, no?”

“Yeah, I was pretty good.”

“What’d you play?”

“Papa,” Hannah interrupted. Goldberg coughed and Brian looked away. The man seemed embarrassed.

“We’re just talking,” Goldberg just said.

“Go get some sleep, Hannah,” Brian said. She leaned up next to him and kissed him on the cheek. Brian flushed.

Hannah went inside and closed the door gently. Brian and Goldberg were left facing one another.

“It’s okay. Boys and girls, you know. You’re an Irish, she shouldn’t be so interested in a shaygetz, but I can live with this. She’s spent some time with you. Time when she was upset. I don’t spend too much time on things that I shouldn’t.”
Brian had no idea what this was supposed to mean. He made to move to the stairs and Goldberg stopped him by inserting himself in his path so that Goldberg’s paunch jutted out and almost touched the tips of Brian’s jacket hanging loose from his body.

“You didn’t answer my question. What’d you play?”

“Mostly I played centerfield.”

“You look like a centerfielder.”

“How’s that?” Brian asked, smiling tiredly.

Goldberg reached his hand out to touch the detective’s face and patted him gently on the cheek. “You know, lanky, lean. Probably pretty quick. I bet you were a spray hitter, took the ball okay to the opposite field.”

Brian nodded and said, “I guess I did.”

“My Ruben, he hit a curveball. We were celebrating. It wasn’t long after that all this nonsense started. Never thought it would happen to us. We’re Jews, you know.”

“I know,” Brian said and laughed.

“Ruben, he hit a curveball the other day. Up the middle, it sneaked in between the outfielders. He got a double. Well, maybe you’d have to call it a single with an error. To be fair.”

“Mr. Goldberg-“
“This is a terrible thing that happened. But this boy’s got potential. Hannah, well, she’s already angry. It might be too late for her. It might be that she’ll be unhappy forever. But Ruben has shown something. He did something terrible, unforgivable. But what else can we do but forgive?”

“It’s not my decision to make,” Brian said. He was dead tired and didn’t feel like he had gotten anything done, even though he had found the boy and taken him home. He didn’t know that Ruben deserved to be at home. Brian heard sirens outside. He wondered absently what was going on. He wondered if he was supposed to be somewhere else, not listening to Goldberg try to convince him that Ruben wasn’t bad, just because he had gotten lucky and hit a curveball.

“You don’t forget your first curveball, do you?” Goldberg asked. “It’s a special moment, great, sure, but all of a sudden there’s options you’ve never seen before. And there are just going to be more and more. And you’re going to have to make a decision and a lot more in the future. You remember your first one, don’t you.”

“Yeah, I do,” Brian said and pushed past Goldberg and onto the stairs. He walked down.
He missed his first curve. His second and third, too. The fourth one, he was already older than Ruben. He closed his eyes and swung from his heels. When he heard the contact, he opened his eyes and stood transfixed, more surprised than anyone else in the place. It carried far, out over the centerfielder’s head. But the centerfielder on the other team was good. A Spanish kid who Brian heard was going to be in the major leagues someday. That’s what the coaches had said about him in the dugout. The Spanish kid never hesitated. He was running from the sound. He made it to the spot before the ball did and camped out underneath. He made the catch one-handed, the kind of thing Brian never did, though he always wanted to. Brian knew how good it looked, but he could never commit himself like that. Because you could drop the ball that way. It happened all the time.

Brian was just reaching first base when the Spanish kid made the catch. And with a flick of the wrist, he sent it flying back to the infield, over the second baseman’s head, landing a foot or two away from the mound. Brian went back to the dugout and thought that he might never hit a curveball as hard as that again.
18. Hannah

By the end of the next day, a Tuesday, the Goldbergs knew that no charges would be brought against Ruben and Hannah had no more excuses to see Brian, so she abandoned all pretenses and went straight from school to the precinct house and insisted to the desk sergeant that she had to see Brian Kelleher, that it was a matter of life and death. She wouldn’t give her name. She was nervous and, besides, she thought it a spontaneous meeting would be better, that his reaction to an unknown would be more telling than whatever reaction he put together on his way downstairs. And what if he didn’t even come down, what if he refused to see her? That would be unbearable.

Hannah clutched her book bag to her chest, then thought better of that, remembering the weight of Brian’s hand there, and placed the bag on the floor at her feet. The desk sergeant spoke in a low voice on the phone. Hannah couldn’t hear what he was saying, but he was looking at her and speaking and she decided he must be describing her. So Brian would know it was she, but there was nothing to be done about it. Or else he wouldn’t recognize the description, he would already have returned to his life without the Goldbergs.
A uniformed officer approached her and stared her down.

"Can I help you?" the man said.

"I’m just waiting for someone," Hannah said.

"You’re just waiting for someone. Who’re you just waiting for?"

"Brian. I mean, Detective Kelleher."

"Oh. Brian. Well, in that case. You told the sergeant and he called upstairs?"

"Yes."

The officer walked away shaking his head. Hannah continued to stare at the stairs. Every minute a different pair of brown brogans started the climb down and then extended on into legs and then a waist, a torso and a face, and none of them were Brian.

When this had gone on for ten minutes, Hannah approached the desk sergeant a second time. He didn’t look up when she cleared her throat. "Excuse me. Did he say he was coming down?"

"Who’s that?" the sergeant asked, head still buried in his paperwork. He was bald on top and had tried to comb the hair from the side of his head over the middle so as to hide the scalp. The top of his head was florid. It looked
painful to the touch. Hannah fought the urge to reach out and place her hands there, like a healer in a revival tent.

"Detective Kelleher," Hannah said.

"Oh, yeah. Detective Kelleher will be down in a minute. Just sit tight."

Hannah thanked the man though she was upset that he didn’t seem particularly interested in her problem.

She sat on the bench in the clearing. Her feet touched the floor and she placed them down heavily. She tried to swing her legs back and forth, to make herself feel like a little girl, but her feet scraped the floor and each movement was more an effort than an escape.

Brian tapped her on the shoulder and he was smiling.

“What are you doing here?”

Hannah hesitated, unsure of what to say. She hadn’t imagined that it would go like this. He was supposed to say something else. She wasn’t sure what, just not that. But at least he was smiling. That was good.

When she didn’t answer, Brian sat down on the bench next to her. “So your father got the message, right? Nobody’s going to prosecute this. It was a terrible mistake. He did get the message, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Hannah said and stood up suddenly. She didn’t want to be there. She wanted to be at home, in her room.
She had work to do. Tests were coming up. College wasn’t going to be easy. Anybody who wasn’t prepared might get eaten alive. They could send her back home to Brooklyn in shame. She might end up like Ruthie, spending her life cooking and cleaning until she went crazy and didn’t recognize her own son.

Hannah started for the door and Brian chased after her. “Where the hell do you think you’re going? You can’t come in here like that, then just run away without saying anything. What do you want from me?”

Hannah raised her hand and tried to slap him across the face but he grabbed her wrist and held it tight. “What the fuck is the matter with you? Why are you slapping me?”

She knew that everybody was watching them. She could see a bead of sweat on Brian’s upper lip and she knew he didn’t like these scenes, but she wanted to stick her tongue out and taste that bead of sweat.

“I’m sorry,” she said coldly, restraining herself.

“Let’s take a walk,” he said.

“It’s raining.”

“That’s okay.”

“Okay.”
Ruben sat on his bed, put his chin on his chest and looked down on his body. He was lucky. The ferret man should have gotten him. And Ruben wasn’t going to let the happen to the next kid. He clenched his fists and decided that stopping the ferret man would be a good deed, a mitzvah.

The best thing Ruben had was the baseball bat, an aluminum one with rubber grip on the handle, the grip worn thin in places and covered with white athletic tape.

It wasn’t even Ruben’s bat. It was Joey Terranova’s bat. Joey was from his team, the summer’s Little League team, not the all-star team that had only played the one game. Ruben had borrowed the bat for the game and hadn’t had a chance to return it yet. It had a thinner handle than what he normally swung and he thought it might help him against all-star game pitching, but the bat seemed as though if he broke his wrists hard enough, the it might snap in two right at the handle, though Ruben knew this could never happen. Those things were built to last.

The bat wouldn’t fit into the gym bag. It was too big. Ruben would have waited for the next day or the day after that, sometime when his parents weren’t home and he didn’t
have to deal with them when he sneaked a bat out, but it
couldn’t be that way. This had to happen today or it wasn’t
going to happen at all.

Ruben tucked the bat under his arm and strolled as
casually as he could into the living room. Goldberg was
sitting on the couch, reading the Post. Ruthie was in the
kitchen, doing the dishes and smoking a cigarette. She kept
ashing into the dishwasher and Ruben didn’t see what the
point was of doing the dishes in the first place if she was
going to wash them with dirty water. If either of them
asked, he’d say he was going to give the bat back. But
neither Goldberg nor Ruthie looked up as Ruben went out the
door and left. Going down the building stairs, Ruben hoped
that maybe a worried look passed between his parents just
as soon as he closed the front door. Maybe his father had
taken his head in his hands or his mother had to sit down
because she felt so weak. He thought maybe they were trying
to give him space, but that they worried about him and
cared for his welfare. That was the way he wanted his
parents to be, but even if they weren’t, it wouldn’t change
what he was going to do.

It was hotter than Ruben expected outside and he was
sweating by the time he reached the runaways’ house. The
house was locked up again, which surprised Ruben since it
was the middle of the day. He knew he had broken the ferret man’s nose. He hoped that the ferret man hadn’t shut down the house because of that. Ruben still thought there were kids who needed a place to go and maybe the ferret man didn’t try this with everyone. Ruben suspected something about himself, something that was queer, something that made him look like a fag. Why else would the ferret man have been so sure that Ruben was right?

He hefted the bat onto his left shoulder, holding it by reaching across his chest with his right hand, gripping it loosely around the handle.

He rang the door bell. There were lights on inside and Ruben thought he could make out shadows moving around, ducking and folding themselves into corners. He thought the shadows knew why he was there.

It wasn’t the ferret man who answered the door. It was a black kid. He couldn’t have been much older than Ruben.

“What do you want?” the kid asked, but he smiled and Ruben knew he wasn’t as unfriendly as the words sounded.

“I need a place to stay,” Ruben said.

“You what?”

“I gotta stay somewhere. I can’t stay at home. I stayed here before. Once. A long time ago.”

“How old are you?”
"Thirteen." Ruben answered truthfully and as soon as the words were gone, he regretted them. He had to get in the habit of lying. That was important.

"Come on in," the black kid said. "What do you have a bat for? You play baseball all the time?" He let out a high-pitched giggle and it turned into hiccups. Ruben could see the boy's diaphragm spasming, trying to regain control. The hiccups looked painful and Ruben wondered if the laugh had been worth it. He didn't think so. He didn't see what was so funny.

"Okay, I'll get you a bed and some towels. You got nothing else?"

"No."

The black kid held out his hand. "My name's Joseph," he said and smiled. He was missing a tooth in the front, one of the big ones on the top that everybody sees. If you're missing that, everybody'll know right away. Ruben ran his tongue over his own front teeth. They felt scummy, unwashed, but they felt solid and permanent.

"Hey. I'm Kenny."

"Okay, Kenny. Let's get you all set up."

"You work here?" Ruben asked.

"You might say that. It's more like I live here sometimes and, when I do, I pay some rent by helping out."
“Where do you live when you don’t live here?”

“Oh, you know. Around.”

“What do you eat?” Ruben asked.

“Nathan’s! Man, you don’t know a thing about being on the outside. I eat at Nathan’s. They’re pretty nice there. They slip me enough.”

“That’s not bad.”

“Who owns this place?” Ruben asked. He thought it was important to know ferret man’s real name. That hadn’t ever come up when he was there the first time.

“This guy. His name’s Tee. Or that’s what people call him.”

“He got a pointy sort of face?”

Joseph nodded. “He’s a funny looking fucker.”

He opened a door and pointed Ruben inside where there was an empty, unmade bed and across from it one that was neatly made up, with a white sheet peeking out over the top of a thin gray blanket. “I’ll get you a sheet. You can room with me if that doesn’t bother you.”

“No. Yeah. That’s good,” Ruben said and smiled. He liked Joseph and Joseph seemed to like him. That was good. Ruben didn’t have much by way of real friends. Not real ones. He knew guys from school and sports. And he guessed that Hannah was his friend, but she was his sister and that
didn’t really count. She had to be nice to him. It was a sin to be mean to your brother, your blood. Wasn’t it? Ruben wasn’t sure. There were 613 mitzvot but there was no list of sins, not that Ruben knew of anyway. It seemed to him that almost anything could be a sin if it was at the wrong time.

Joseph grabbed the barrel of the bat. “You mind if I take a crack?” he asked.

Ruben shook his head no.

Right away Ruben could see problems with Joseph’s stance and then, when he swung, there were so many he didn’t know what to do.

In the stance, he had his legs spread too far apart. It was like he was trying to do a split. He was just going to end up swinging with his arms. That wouldn’t do. And his hands weren’t even together on the bat and, besides that, they were crossed, the left on top of the right even though Joseph was a righty. Both elbows were cocked at right angles, not just the back one.

The swing was worse. He moved his back foot up to compensate for the spread between his feet. His head jerked up and he looked at the ceiling before the bat had even entered the strike zone. He ended up with one hand on the bat, his left one, his right one held up like a
conductor’s, his body corkscrewed dramatically. But Reggie Jackson corkscrewed on his home runs. Ruben wondered if maybe this was how black ballplayers hit, but he didn’t see how that could be since he could think of ten of them off the top of his head who didn’t corkscrew. “Good, real good,” Ruben said.

He felt bad that Joseph was a runaway, that nobody had ever shown him how to properly swing a baseball bat, but now wasn’t the time to correct that.

“Do you know if Tee’s around?” Ruben asked. Joseph hadn’t moved out of his stance and Ruben thought maybe he had hurt himself, that he wasn’t ever going to break it, even that he couldn’t.

Just as suddenly and viciously as he had swung, Joseph unscrewed himself and stood up straight and looked at a spot out the door, something over Ruben’s head. “Whoo-wee, I must’ve caught a hold of that sucker,” Joseph said. “It’s still flying, isn’t it? Here’s Tee now. Tee, what’d you think of that shot?”

Ruben didn’t turn around. His legs wouldn’t work and his stomach was filled with rumblings and churnings that hadn’t been there before. Joseph was holding the bat. That wasn’t the way it was supposed to be. And Tee was coming
from behind him. He might recognize Ruben and hit him first.

“That was some cut,” Tee said, “and I doubt that ball’s ever coming back. I gotta hand it to you, Joseph, you can make them fly.”

“Can I see the bat?” Ruben asked in a low voice. “I’ll give it back, you can show Tee that swing again in a second, can I just see it now?”

“Sure,” Joseph said, his voice rising, strained as though he knew something was coming. He passed the bat back to Ruben, but held onto it as Ruben tried to pull it away. Then he let go and it was firm in Ruben’s hands. Ruben could hear the footfalls on the uneven wooden floor as Tee stepped closer.

“Who you got with you, Joseph?” Tee asked.

“Oh, this is Kenny,” Joseph said and reached out as though to touch Ruben on the shoulder, but Ruben ducked beneath his touch and spun around.

Tee was much closer than he had expected. The way he had it all played out in his head, he’d take two running steps at Tee, enough time to see his face change as he realized who was coming at him as he realized what was about to happen.
But Tee was too close, so close that Ruben would never have been able to extend his arms all the way, to get a full and complete swing but he swung anyway, though it felt awkward and against everything he been taught.

He didn’t hesitate, scared as he was. The first swing caught Tee on the arm as he tried to ward off the blow and the sound it made as the bat struck and shattered bone was convincing. It was a sound that said there could be no going back.

Tee went down from the force. It was an overhand blow, not a baseball cut, but a swing that’s sole design was brutality. It had nothing to do with skill.

The second one landed full on Tee’s ribcage. This one was better from purist’s standpoint, more of a true swing than a hack. Still not level, but it was a swing that could have put a ball into play. The sound was quieter, more dulled and even restrained than the sound of bat and bone, and Ruben figured that he hadn’t caught the man’s ribs. Still, he knew it had landed full on in the belly flesh. That was enough. It was a lot.

Joseph hadn’t made a sound. Not a scream or a whimper. Nor had he moved to defend Tee or to run away himself. Ruben didn’t turn to look at Joseph. He didn’t want to. The gesture might be misinterpreted. Joseph might think he was
next, he might think that this was a random act of a lunatic. Ruben liked Joseph. He didn’t want to involve him any more than was necessary.

Ruben knelt quickly and looked at Tee’s face, tried to gauge his eyes. Tee had a splint taped to his nose. His eyes opened and closed but the action wasn’t blinking. It was more considered than that. Closed to fight the pain, open to try and confront it, to make some sort of reckoning of the damage and the situation. His moans were pitiful, a series of low, indistinct keening sounds that belonged to an animal, not to anyone or anything who could ever have been like him.

Ruben leaned in closer, so that the man might have a chance to recognize him. “Do you know me?” Ruben asked in a quiet voice.

Joseph was moving behind him now. Ruben could make out the sounds of his feet shuffling in place, unsure of themselves. “Shit, Kenny. I mean, fuck. Shit. Oh Lord. Kenny, what’d you do?”

“It’s okay, Joseph,” Ruben said, “it’s gonna be alright for you now.”

“Alright? Man, what wasn’t alright before? Now, now things are messed up.
Ruben waved his hand in Joseph’s direction. “Shah,” he said. He was in control. Joseph would respect that. Joseph would be able to read the situation. Joseph was smart.

“Hey, Tee,” Ruben said. His mouth almost touched the man’s nose. “Do you know me?” Tee moved his right arm, the arm that had been hit on the first blow, and tried to grab Ruben’s shirt. Ruben pushed the hand away lightly with the bat and Tee gave up defending himself. “Do you know me?” Ruben repeated.

“No,” Tee gasped between sobs and moans, “no.”

Ruben stood up. Tee was lying. He was sure of it. Ruben walked away quickly, still holding the bat. Halfway down the stairs he realized he hadn’t said goodbye to Joseph but it was too late to go back now. He thought Joseph would understand.

Out the front door and onto the street, the pedestrians barely moving, not watching him, existing only for themselves, unconcerned with what had just happened, what happened often. Ruben smiled at a tall woman with outsized breasts and he found himself attracted to her, wishing he could hug her close to him. But then the corner was there and then Ruben had crossed the street and when he looked back the woman was gone.
He threw the bat into an abandoned lot half a block away from home.
20. Goldberg

Ruthie had her back to him. Goldberg reached over and touched her shoulder lightly. A wife was supposed to give herself to her husband. It had been so long. He knew it was selfish of him, horrible of him really, but he wanted her and Goldberg managed to convince himself that what he was to do would bring them back together, help reform the Goldbergs into a family again. So it would be a mitzvah, it really would be.

“Hi,” Ruthie said as she rolled over. Goldberg was relieved he didn’t have to fight to wake her up. That would have made everything all the more awkward. Her bandages were at the beginning of her hair line and Goldberg was afraid to stroke her head, afraid it was still too tender.

“You feeling okay?” he asked, “is it real terrible?”

“It’s not too bad. I mean it hurts, yes, but there are worse things. Right?”

“Definitely. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I’m okay.”

He put his hand on her hip. It felt hard, bonier than he remembered. She hadn’t been in the hospital long enough to lose any real weight. Something was changing Ruthie, she was morphing into something tougher, more resilient.
Goldberg had never figured out the proper way, or if there even was one, to ask for sex from his wife. Usually, if he kissed her in bed, she understood what that meant. Sometimes he had to go so far as to say, “Please?” and then she responded.

He leaned in to kiss her but she put her hands on his chest and stopped him. “We going to fuck?” she asked.

Goldberg pulled back farther from her, as if trying to flee her grip. When the surprise had subsided and he could think about what had just happened, he realized that he didn’t mind what she had said or even how she had said it. The truth was, he sort of liked it. And though he was ashamed for having wife who spoke this way and of the way it made him feel, Goldberg grinned and nodded. Ruthie grinned back at him and said, “Okay,” and they fucked.

Goldberg knew the popular mythology of married life: that at first, everything’s all passion and roses, but when reality sets in it’s different, the kids are always around, you never get the chance for romance by yourself. But it had never been that way for them. An attraction, yes, certainly. But passion? No, this was not the right word. Their marriage was an arranged one. Or, at least, the introduction was. A shiddach. Of course, they never would have been forced to marry if there hadn’t been something
there. Goldberg’s people and Ruthie’s people, they weren’t throwbacks. They knew what century it was. Not like the Chasidim, their eyes always closing more and more. Goldberg considered himself a worldly enough man.

A spark, that’s what he had been looking for when he met Ruthie. Goldberg believed in sparks. But the passion was never like this.

Goldberg laid on his back and stared up at the ceiling. Light from outside sneaked through the closed curtains, found patches to inhabit on the walls, turning what always had been drab into brilliant portals leading to a newer world.

Ruthie was on her stomach, asleep. Her head rested on her pillow but the pressure on her wound didn’t seem to bother her. Her hair was pushed up and draped over the top of her head so that her neck laid bare except for a few strands who wouldn’t cooperate. Goldberg put two fingers there and felt the skin’s tension. “Do you want water?” he asked, knowing she was asleep, “I’m going to get some water.”

He wore only his pajama bottoms, tied loosely under his belly. It was past midnight and both children’s lights were off. Hannah hadn’t studied at all tonight and since Ruben had been in his room, he had done nothing but study.
Perhaps the incident had not been such a terrible thing. Perhaps it was, indeed, a blessing, a mysterious gift from God. This, which would have seemed so absurd mere hours before, made sense to Goldberg. He filled a glass with water from the tap and waited while the cloudiness dispersed.

He stared outside, at the traffic down below. The poor bastards. They had no control over anything, didn’t they understand that? Their fates weren’t their own. The strangest things could change their worlds. He sat at the table and lusted after his wife some more. Though he was physically spent, he felt as though he was only now awakening from a slumber that he had been in. His face was flushed and, as Goldberg brought the glass up to his mouth, his hand trembled. Trying to put the glass back down on the table, he missed the edge and it slipped from his grasp and shattered on the floor. Goldberg’s first thought was that he wasn’t wearing shoes, that he would be lucky not to have his feet ripped to shreds.

Ruben couldn’t have been sleeping. Though dressed only in his underwear, he was out of his room before Goldberg had come up with a plan for how to go get shoes and clean up the mess without permanently injuring himself.

“What happened?” Ruben asked.
Goldberg held his right hand up to Ruben, palm facing out. “Stop,” he said, “there’s glass everywhere. You don’t want to cut yourself, do you?” He gave a high-pitched giggle and grinned to himself. What a strange night it had been.

Ruben shook his head no but he didn’t stop. He stepped cautiously forward to his father, but he didn’t look down.

“Stop!” Goldberg repeated, this time not worrying about his voice, not worrying about waking up Ruthie and Hannah, making sure that Ruben understood.

Again Ruben didn’t stop. He came closer, walking faster now. Two steps away from Goldberg he winced. Ruben’s eyes twitched, but he made no sound and he continued on.

“Why are you doing this?” Goldberg pleaded. He began to cry.

Ruben stopped in front of him and held his hand out. “Go on, take it,” Ruben said, “it doesn’t hurt so bad. I’ll help you.”

“You’ll help me? My god. Where have you gone, Ruben? I don’t understand. This isn’t you.”

Ruben tilted his head up and stared at the ceiling and let out a long laugh. “I’m different, pop. I’m a different man.”
“A different man.” Goldberg repeated. He touched his hand to his forehead and moved back and forth as though davening. He didn’t recognize his boy, his boy who thought he was already a man, but who had to walk on broken glass, to hurt himself to believe this. This couldn’t be Goldberg’s Ruben. This he wouldn’t accept.

Goldberg looked down at Ruben’s feet. He expected to see blood creeping out from underneath the skin, a thin but indistinguishable trickle. There was nothing there, no blood. Ruben stood perfectly still, not rocking or switching weight from foot to foot. To Goldberg it seemed that Ruben was deliberately pressing down with his feet, pushing the shards deeper into his skin.

Goldberg didn’t realize he was crying until Ruben reached out and to touch his face, to wipe the tears away. Goldberg recoiled from his son and touched himself to see what the boy was reaching for. The wetness surprised him. When he cried on his walk with Ruthie, he had known it was going to happen. His stomach churned, his head spun, everything in him signaled grief. But this, this was his son walking on broken glass, and more than anything else, he felt confused.

“I’ll have to call the rabbi,” Goldberg said and Ruben gave such a smile that Goldberg wondered if this was what
the boy had wanted all along. Goldberg felt as though he had lost a war and he worried that Ruben wasn’t going to be a good winner.

The boy spun on his heel like a soldier turning to a cry of “About face!”

He walked away from his father, smears of blood marking the linoleum behind him as his. He hesitated underneath the entrance to the living room. “Better to call Detective Kelleher,” Ruben said to the emptiness in front of him.
Ruben slept with his feet still bleeding. When he woke up, he decided he didn’t feel like going to school because school had nothing to do with his life anymore.

He limped out of his bedroom. His parents’ bedroom door was closed and Ruben knocked softly.

“Come in,” Goldberg said.

Goldberg was stroking Ruthie’s hair. She was lying on top of the covers and though her eyes were closed, Ruben didn’t think Ruthie was asleep.

“I feel sick today,” Ruben said. “I didn’t think I should go to school because I feel so sick.”

Goldberg nodded slowly. “You scared me the other night,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” Ruben said. He knew that Goldberg wasn’t going to argue his skipping school then. Some of the fight was gone from Goldberg now. He wasn’t the same father he had been at that baseball game when Ruben hit his double. Then Goldberg had been proud and Ruben felt loved that day. It wasn’t that his father didn’t love him anymore. Ruben didn’t think that. But everything had changed and it wasn’t enough anymore.

“Are your feet okay?” Goldberg asked.
Ruben didn’t answer.

“Okay, then,” Goldberg said, “there’s alcohol and band-aids in the medicine cabinet.”

In his room, Ruben carefully tweezed each piece of glass out of his foot, placing the shards into a pile on his bedspread. Then he bathed each cut in rubbing alcohol, which he figured would stop any possibility of infection, though it stung terribly and Ruben thought he might cry.

He got back into bed, propping his feet up on his second pillow, the one he never used, and tried to fall asleep.

When he woke up it was lunchtime and Ruben was hungry and Ruben found himself wishing he had a friend he could call to go to lunch with. Even if everybody he knew wasn’t in school, who could he call? They thought he was weird. And he was. The ferret man, Tee, never would have picked on him if he hadn’t seen it too.

But there was Joseph. Joseph hadn’t minded him that day. He hadn’t thought Ruben was queer. They had talked, they had done okay.

Ruben had never had a black friend before. Not that he had one now, he corrected himself, but maybe he would. Ruben pulled on his jeans and found his thickest sweat socks to cushion the pain each step would mean. His
parents’ bedroom door was still closed and Ruben hoped they were happy together in there. He wrote a note – “I’m going to have lunch at Nathan’s with my friend Joseph” – and taped it to his parents’ bedroom door. He knew Goldberg wouldn’t mind that he left. Partially because Ruben out of the house gave Goldberg some relief, he didn’t have to study every movement and sweat every gesture. But also because Ruben was meeting a friend – Goldberg would like that. It would make him think Ruben was normal after all.
They sat on the bench together and watched the homeless go by. This was their third walk. They had kissed and come close to sleeping together after the first walk, stopping back in Brian’s small, clean apartment, but Hannah had gotten scared — she was inexperienced and Brian sensed this and put his pants back on and said, “Don’t worry,” — but she looked forward to this time together with a naïve certainty that this was right and the way things ought to go.

First a bag lady pulling a cart filled with bottles and cans, smiling at all and checking the garbage cans that ringed the path. After her, a thin Hispanic man with scars on his face, talking to himself, wearing a red sweater and jeans, both of which were in better shape than Hannah expected.

Hannah clutched Brian’s arm to her side. He pointed at the Hispanic and said, “I know that guy. I forget his name. Angel, maybe. He’s got lots of problems, but he’s not a bad guy.”

“You ever talk to him?” Hannah asked. She tilted her head in Brian’s direction but couldn’t bring herself to put it on his shoulder. She felt close, though, almost there.
“Not really, once or twice maybe. He doesn’t have much to say. He’s just fried. He’s been to jail couple of times.”

“Didn’t they rehabilitate him? Or give him some counseling? If he’s crazy, what’s he doing out here, sleeping out here?”

Brian pulled his arm out of Hannah’s grasp and leaned forward so he could look back at her. “Huh,” he snorted.

Hannah felt stupid and looked away. She knew Brian wasn’t impressed by her studies. Around him, she felt too liberal, too young, but she also felt vulnerable and at the same time protected, and it was this feeling that kept her from telling him how well she had done on her boards, from defending herself with articles she had read in political magazines and books about the homeless she had taken out from the library.

“He attacked an old lady. An old crazy lady,” Brian said, “but he hurt her bad.”

Hannah looked at him and wondered if this contempt and this anger was what he felt towards Ruben. Could he hate Ruben, think he was trash that belonged in jail? Yes, she answered to herself, he could, and so could she.

Brian relaxed and slumped back on the bench, drained by the flash.
"I’m sorry," Hannah said.

"Don’t be sorry," Brian answered. He kissed her on the cheek and repeated, "don’t be sorry."

They sat and watched the man. He stooped over and picked up a rock. He tossed it up and down in his hand and it reminded Hannah of the way Ruben fondled a baseball, the way he held it as though the only weight it had was the weight he put upon it. Ruben, her brother, had the ability to control gravity and this thought made Hannah draw in her breath sharply. The man threw the rock angrily at the ground and though it skipped away and came close to hitting a teenage boy walking by, Hannah could see that his skill wasn’t equivalent to her brother’s. His arm didn’t move fluidly. His motion was herky-jerky, parts being added to create a whole. Ruben - a boy who in so many of the most essential ways was nothing more than a collection that equaled a dubious sum - threw a baseball in a complete and seamless motion.

The teenager stared down at the rock and then up at the man. The teenage was broad and tall with muscles that pushed against the fabric of his shirt. A vertical scar began an inch beneath his left eye and ran down until it was even with his lip. He looked tough and capable and he gave the Hispanic man a long, studied look, and Hannah
wondered what violence she was about to behold. But the teenager thought better of pursuing the matter and walked away and Hannah couldn’t be sure how she felt about this abrupt dismissal.

“Let’s go,” Hannah said but Brian didn’t respond. He stood up and took two steps toward the Hispanic man. The man saw him and moved away quickly and Brian turned back to Hannah and smiled, satisfied.

“Yeah, let’s go,” he said.

“You want to come to the apartment and see my mother?” Hannah asked. “She’s doing so much better, you won’t recognize her.”

Brian shrugged his shoulders slowly and elaborately, drawing out each gesture as if shrugging required skill and concentration, something only Brian could master.

“Forget it,” Hannah said, “it’s not important.”

“No, no, let’s go,” Brian said and took her hand. They walked together to his squad car, parked in front of a fire hydrant.

Hannah let them in. Goldberg glanced up and smiled absently. Then he looked up again, realized Brian behind her, and jumped up from the sofa. “I’m taking some time off work,” Goldberg said.
“Hi, Mr. Goldberg. It’s good to see you,” Brian answered.

“Hi, hello, sit down. I just wanted you to know that I’m not at work for a reason. To take care of Ruthie. To hold my family together.”

“I understand, sir. I’d do the same thing.”

Goldberg nodded warily. Hannah pulled Brian by his shirt. “Siddown,” she said, “and I’ll make everybody some coffee.”

“Where’s Ruthie?” Hannah asked Goldberg.

He shrugged his shoulders noncommittally.

“Well, what about Ruben?” she asked. “Where’s he?”

Again Goldberg did nothing more than shrug his shoulders, as if that could explain everything.

They sat together around the kitchen table and Hannah went through possibilities. Her parents’ bedroom door was open, so she wasn’t lying down, as she often did. She couldn’t be out, could she? Perhaps at the laundromat. This sounded good, convincing, to Hannah. Ruthie could be at the laundromat. After all, somebody had to go the laundromat. But the change jar on the kitchen counter was full, stocked with quarters. She wouldn’t have gone without the quarters. They never made change right at that place. Besides, Goldberg liked to get rid of the quarters. It bothered him,
frustrated his sense of decorum, to let them build up in the small jar. She could be visiting friends. That could be. She had been incapacitated for so long. And since the incident, she had actually seemed a little better. Maybe she was catching up with people she hadn’t spoken to in forever. Hannah pictured her mother drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes around another kitchen table and the image comforted her. But what friends? Goldberg and Ruthie never called anyone and no one ever called them.

Hannah didn’t understand. If there was any way that Ruthie could be at the kitchen table with Hannah, Goldberg and Brian, then of course she would be. In the girls’ bathroom at school, Hannah often overheard her classmates – the ones who cut class, snapped gum and wore too much makeup – talking about what a hassle it was having to introduce Johnny or Anthony or Mike to their mothers. But the mothers always wanted to meet the boys and Ruthie was a mother too. She ought to be at the table, making small talk. It wouldn’t be a hassle to Hannah. She thought Ruthie would like Brian.

Hannah thought about how Ruthie always, even at her worst moments, like being around people drinking coffee at the kitchen table. Hannah thought it somehow comforted
Ruthie, the interaction between people, coffee just a useful medium for spending time with others.

And Ruben, where was he? He wasn’t at school. School was out for the day. And he certainly wasn’t at the library. Baseball season was over. He had no friends. None. Hannah thought this must be part of the Goldberg curse, not having friends. She felt a little better when she thought of Brian, she thought that he was her friend and her boyfriend, that maybe there really wasn’t any Goldberg curse. But she couldn’t get past the facts: Ruthie was gone, Ruben was gone. If it had been only one and not the other, Hannah wouldn’t have panicked. One could be explained away. But she had studied economics at school. That subject might become her eventual major in college. And economics didn’t believe in coincidences and neither did Hannah.

She tried not to imagine the horrible things, tried to keep them out of her head, but it was impossible.

“Don’t think I’m irresponsible for not being at work,” Goldberg said. “I think it would be more irresponsible to go to work.” His tone was truculent, defensive.

“Oh, I agree, sir,” Brian said. Brian’s respect was obviously so important to Goldberg. Hannah didn’t know why. Perhaps because Brian was a cop. Goldberg was intensely
patriotic. He was the sort of immigrant father who stressed to his children what a wonderful country America was, how anybody could be anything in America. And though Hannah had long mocked this attitude, such naivete!, she understood the urge to prove himself.

Hannah put her hand to her head and mumbled through her fingers, “Nobody thinks you’re irresponsible for staying home a little to try and help your family, but where is your family? Where is Ruthie and where is Ruben? That’s who you’ve got to help.”

The two men ignored her. Perhaps not on purpose, but they ignored her, nonetheless. Instead they gazed at one another and Hannah felt a pang of desperation as the sized up the other’s capabilities. They were missing the point here and they didn’t understand her.

Perhaps Ruthie was dead. That was an explanation. Hannah hated herself for thinking this, but there it was. Ruben was on the run, again. This time he would really go to jail, when they caught him. And Brian wouldn’t want anything to do with Hannah. Already he thought she was too young. Now, not only was she going to be too young, but she would be damaged goods, part of a family with a psychopath.

There was nothing she could do. Hannah squirmed in her seat. She said nothing, didn’t even listen. She had no
plan. If Ruben had made everything into shit again, that was that. It was out of her control. That little bastard. He belonged in jail. Jail was the best someone like him could hope for.

They discussed nothing. Politics. Brian’s job. The lack of rain. Nothing at all. Hannah was disappointed. Or she thought she was. She wasn’t sure because all she could think about was Ruthie and Ruben, missing. The steam rose up from the coffee and Hannah put her hand over the top to trap it on her palm, to see the condensation. Anything to distract herself from the thoughts she was having, but it was too hot and she had to draw her hand away.

Besides, as far as Goldberg and Brian went, there wasn’t anything to be disappointed about. They were getting along fine. It really wasn’t so bad between them. Sure, they weren’t hugging and kissing, but what could a girl expect of her father and her boyfriend? Especially an older boyfriend - probably too old, she knew - and an Irish one at that. Brian told a joke and Goldberg laughed, though Hannah didn’t think he had gotten it. She knew she hadn’t. Something about pregnant women and the food requests they made.

When the tension had built up in Hannah, when the words they were speaking had turned into so much static,
she stood up quickly. She had to. Her insides were churning, she couldn’t take it anymore. That her brother was, what? A killer. Her mother sprawled out in an alley, her head bashed in with a baseball bat, a bottle of Manischewitz. And Hannah was supposed to sit there and listen to her father, the man who should be on his knees crying because his world had collapsed around him, bullshitting away with a cop, a cop who didn’t understand what was going on around him. This was too much.

Her arm banged the table and knocked her cup of coffee over. The black sludge - and that’s what it was because Goldberg couldn’t make coffee to save his life - ran off the table in a malicious stream, as if gravitated towards Goldberg’s white legs, unprotected in his bermuda shorts. The liquid was still hot and not only did it hit Goldberg in the lap, it burned him bad enough that he screamed. Well why didn’t you move? Hannah thought. She didn’t feel much sympathy. A little burn, this was the least of what he should worry about. He shouldn’t even feel it. He brushed his hands back and forth in his lap like pistons pumping on a factory floor.

“What, what is it?” Brian asked. His voice was raised and this was the first time his voice had louder than the
normal speaking level. Even when arresting Ruben, his voice had never risen to a level that betrayed his anger.

"My legs! My fucking legs!" Goldberg yelled.

Hannah had heard her father use obscenities rarely. Once, watching the Mets lose a playoff game, he yelled, "Fuck you," at the television screen. And when he hadn’t made a sale in almost three weeks, he said in a low, sad voice, "Those fuckers are killing me." She knew he was in pain. He wouldn’t have spoken like that if he weren’t in pain. But so what.

"She’s dead, isn’t she?" Hannah asked, but she knew the answer.

"Who’s dead?" Brian said.

"Ruthie. My mother. Ruben killed her."

Goldberg stopped moving his hands. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"You know," she said.

"My god," Goldberg said. His voice was despondent, but not the kind of despondency Hannah expected. He was shocked. He didn’t know anything. "This can’t be," Goldberg said.

"Okay," Hannah said, "but where is she? And where is Ruben?"
“Ruthie went for a walk,” Goldberg said. He was crying. “She’s been doing so great and she felt like going for a walk alone and I thought, just down to the promenade and back, it’ll be okay. It’s the middle of the day.” He turned to Brian and continued, “It isn’t bad on the promenade, certainly not in the middle of the day. Right?”

“No, it’s fine there,” Brian said. Brian’s face was very red as though he was embarrassed about something.

“And Ruben?” Hannah said, though she already knew she had been wrong, that everything was okay.

Goldberg collapsed back into his chair. He had forgotten about the coffee and Hannah, who couldn’t meet his eyes, watched droplets continue to make their way from the edge of the table into his lap. She hoped they had cooled down somewhat. She hoped he wasn’t still being burned and that he was too upset to notice.

“Ruben is with a friend,” Goldberg said.

“He doesn’t have friends,” Hannah answered suspiciously.

“A boy he met. Joey? Joseph. Joseph, I think. He’s black. Ruben said he was black. I don’t mind that.”

Hannah believed Goldberg. He’d never invent a black friend for Ruben. It was true that it wouldn’t bother him but he’d never think of it. It was too odd, too off, to be
a lie. She breathed slowly and counted the exhalations so that they would be even, trying to calm herself through rhythm. Relax, she thought. He’s made a friend too. A friend named Joseph. A black friend. She smiled at Brian, but he didn’t smile back. She didn’t blame him.
23. Ruben

“Kenny!” Joseph yelled when Ruben came into Nathan’s. He was seated at a corner table near the window with a pile of food in front of him.

Ruben walked over to the table and stood there, not moving.

“Come on,” Joseph said and pointed to the seat across from him.

Ruben pulled the chair out and sat down.

“Take the fries,” Joseph said. “Dig in. I can’t finish all this anyways.”

Joseph scarfed down his hot dog without thinking and Ruben watched, fascinated. He had never seen anyone eat like this before. Goldberg, and Ruthie while she was well, had always been a stickler for what he called proper eating habits. That is, one was supposed to eat slowly and decorously or else one would get horribly ill and be stuck on a toilet seat for an eternity.

That the speed with which he ate seemed to have no effect on Joseph confused Ruben. Could black people have different digestive tracts than whites? While the idea seemed ludicrous to Ruben -- his parents always talked about the importance of racial tolerance, how black people
and white people and other kinds were all the same deep down -- but he knew nothing about black people, and so he wasn’t able to dismiss the idea right away. He also knew that hot dogs were trayf, and that, as a result, they were more dangerous to Jews than to other people, and Ruben thought this must be related to his parents’ eating habit concerns.

They were at Nathan’s. They were there for food and video games. Ruben had expected Joseph to fear him, to not want to have anything to with him after what he had done, but this wasn’t the case and Ruben was happy, though a little fear, a little respect for a killer like Ruben wouldn’t have been too disappointing either.

“I never thought I’d see you again,” Joseph said. “I thought you’d head out of town. To Miami. That’s where I’d go if I went somewhere else. I’d go someplace where all the women are beautiful and they wear bikinis all the time. And those girls put out. You know the Miami girls put out. I’d do great down there.”

“They wear bikinis all the time in Miami?” Ruben asked. The idea of girls putting out was too much for him. He knew what it meant; at least he mostly did, though he was unsure of some of the details of putting out. But bikinis...bikinis were enough to mull over. He tried to
picture women that he found attractive - girls from school, his sixth grade science teacher Mrs. Piazzola - in bikinis. Mrs. Piazzola was a cherubic, dark-haired woman. A gypsy, that’s what Goldberg had described her as after parent-teacher conferences that year. He had said to Ruben, “That’s a gypsy, your science teacher. Yes she is.” Ruben had nodded his head in agreement, though this too was a mysterious term to him. It must mean rounded women with heavy breasts that pushed against shirts. That was what he figured.

“Yeah, all the time,” Joseph answered. “You should be down there. Sunny Miami.”

“It’s pretty sunny here,” Ruben said.

“Today. Today it’s sunny. But tomorrow and the next day, you never know. It’ll stop being sunny real soon. Changes are coming.”

Ruben nodded, mad at himself for saying something stupid. Of course Miami was bound to be sunnier than Brooklyn. And fall was just about there and then winter. Joseph was right. Soon, real soon, he would regret not being in Miami.

“More than that,” Joseph said, “You shouldn’t be in Nathan’s. Cops come here all the time.” Joseph took a long
swig of Coca-cola to wash down his food and he smiled, wide-lipped and big teeth at Ruben.

Ruben picked at his french fries, playing with them. He picked up a lone fry, a long and thin, drooping fry. First he doused it with salt. Then he covered it with ketchup. Then pepper. It grew heavy in his hand and he thought it might break from the weight. It felt substantial, but it certainly wasn’t anything Ruben was interested in eating.

“You’re right,” Ruben said.

“So. You haven’t answered the big question,” Joseph said.

“What’s that?”

“What’d you do it for?”

Ruben didn’t want to answer and decided he just wasn’t going to. That part wasn’t Joseph’s business. He hadn’t come to Nathan’s to talk about things like that. They were supposed to be friends. They were supposed to spend their time doing what friends do, which Ruben figured was play pinball and eat their french fries and hot dogs. That fucking ferret man had nothing to do with anything.

“You don’t want to talk about it, okay,” Joseph said.

“I understand. I don’t mean, I understand like I understand why you don’t want to talk about it, though I understand
that part, too. I mean, I understand like I understand why you did it and I’m not going to make you say it.”

Ruben nodded and Joseph took the nod as a ‘thank you,’ which it was. “You’re welcome,” Joseph said. Then he punched Ruben on the arm. This was the second time Joseph had done that, Ruben noted, but neither time bothered him.

“Let’s play pinball,” Joseph said, “you ain’t interested in those french fries anyway.”

They left their food at the table. Ruben looked over his shoulder at the mess they had made and he giggled to himself at the fact that if you didn’t clear your place at Nathan’s, nobody made a big deal out of it.

They played seven games of pinball. Joseph had the money. Ruben didn’t have any but they switched off games anyway.

When two cops came in, patrolmen with dark blue uniforms and big smiles for one of the girls who worked behind the counter, Joseph nudged him and asked, “How do you know I won’t tell them what you did? Tee’s awful messed up, you know. He’s not dead, least that’s what I heard from this guy they sent to take his place, but he’s awful messed up. If I told those cops what you did, there’d probably be a big reward. They came and asked a whole bunch of questions after you beat up on Tee. I told them you were a
kid named Ralph. I told them you had come to Brooklyn from the city. I said you were running away from your stepdad and that his name was Mr. Johnson. But you never know, maybe I’ll remember some more stuff now. Maybe my forgetting was only temporary.” He cackled loudly and then stopped to whistle through his teeth. Ruben couldn’t whistle through his teeth, he couldn’t whistle at all, and he thought about asking Joseph to teach him.

“I don’t know,” Ruben said, “I guess you could turn me into the cops. I guess that’d be really easy.”

“Sure would!”

“Are you going to?”

Joseph put his hand to his chin and feigned deep thought. The pinball fell down past his shutters during the lapse in concentration. “Nah. I guess I’ll let you go.”

Ruben smiled at Joseph. He felt no fear. The cops weren’t going to recognize him. Nothing was going to happen.

“My real name isn’t Kenny,” Ruben said, “I just made that up.”

Joseph shrugged his shoulders and concentrated on the machine. He didn’t seem a bit surprised.

“It’s Ruben.”
“Ruben? I thought only black folks had kids named Ruben.”

“You pronounce it Ruven. And I didn’t know there were any black folks with kids named Ruben,” Ruben said. His voice had begun to imitate Joseph’s, mimicking the inflections and the tenor.

“Oh, lots,” Joseph said. He turned to Ruben and Ruben could see that the game was over.

“You want to come over to my house?” Ruben asked.

“Yeah, okay.” Joseph didn’t seem surprised that Ruben wasn’t much of a runaway.

“My mother’s crazy,” Ruben blurted out.

“You still want me to come over?” Joseph asked.

“Yeah,” Ruben said. He kicked at his left foot with his right. “I just thought you should know.”

“It doesn’t bother you?” Joseph asked.

It did bother Joseph. He hated that he had a fucking lunatic for a mother. After all, how could you not hate something like that? But if Joseph was going to be his friend, Ruben figured best to get something like this out of the way. Because if they became buddies, always hanging around one another, and then Joseph found out, well, then he’d have lost a lot more. It didn’t matter as much yet.
“It’s lousy,” Ruben said. He forced a grin and tried to close the deal, saying, “but for you, you know, it’ll be cool! Yeah, she’s a psycho, but not so you’re going to be scared or anything.”


They took the subway back from Coney Island and made fun of the bums sleeping across the seats. Ruben had always been scared of them, but Joseph wasn’t scared of them at all and soon Ruben found that neither was he.
24. Brian

Brian’s father spent most of his time playing cards. There was a group of them, all Irish, all retired from the police force and the fire department, and they spent all day at the VFW playing penny a hand poker.

Joe Kelleher looked up when Brian came in and waved him to a chair. The VFW hall was mostly a bar with black and white pictures of uniformed soldiers hanging on the wall in wooden frames. There were hundreds, maybe thousands, of those pictures in there. When he was still a boy, Brian had asked his father, “Which one of these is you?”

And Joe Kelleher could only shrug his shoulders and say, “My picture’s not up on the wall.”

When Brian asked why not, Joe Kelleher said, “Because I’m still alive.” Both of them, if only for that moment, had been disappointed that Joe Kelleher hadn’t been killed in action, serving his country. Then a little boy could have seen his father’s picture up on the wall. That Brian would never have existed if Joe Kelleher, clean-shaven and ready to go into Sicily as part of the invasion force, wasn’t really relevant then. This was about what might have been.
Neither did it concern Joe Kelleher, not then, and it was this lust for heroism that Brian had inherited from his father. His father, also on the job until his retirement, had been an honest, if inefficient cop. He had arrested a serial rapist once. That had been the highlight of Joe Kelleher’s career. And though Brian had far greater ambitions, he hadn’t yet reached such a climactic moment in his career and, in his darker moments, despaired that he ever would.

“How’s it going, son?” Joe Kelleher asked.

Brian shrugged his shoulders. He hadn’t anticipated feeling about Hannah the way he did. It wasn’t as thought there was something he needed to discuss with his father, not yet anyway. But he was the type who planned ahead. Brian was an inveterate list maker. On today’s list he had added, using an arrow to point to the time when it ought to happen, ‘talk to dad on Hannah.’

If it had just been Hannah, not the baggage she carried with her, then maybe Brian wouldn’t have felt the need to speak to his father. But there was also her family. Brian wasn’t at all sure what to make of her family. And nor, he knew, would his father approve of the Goldbergs’ being, after all, Jews. This was not Joe Kelleher’s speed. Neither of the Kelleher males, and there were no other sons
for Joe Kelleher nor even daughters, were prejudiced men. Joe Kelleher’s attitude, which he had long espoused to his son, was, “You gotta judge people individually, not by what they’re born into.” But nor did Joe Kelleher want his son involved with someone who wasn’t Irish-Catholic, let alone Jewish and Brian suspected that if it hadn’t been for the heightened circumstances under which he met Hannah, he never would have given her a second’s thought, as he tended to share his father’s views on so many things.

“I met a girl,” Brian said.

“See that?” Joe Kelleher nudged the fat man with the sweaty bald pate. Brian knew most of his father’s poker cronies, but this man was new to him. “And we all thought Brian liked boys.” Turning back to his son, Joe Kelleher said, “I’m sorry I ever lost faith in you, son.”

Brian was used to his father’s cracks. In truth, he liked the jokes. They were the same jokes he made in the squad room to other cops, the same jokes men had always made to one another. Still, he wanted to talk seriously and he realized that that couldn’t happen at the card table, with Joe Kelleher putting on a show for the crowd.

“That’s funny, pop, real funny,” Brian said, but he grinned to show he wasn’t angry. “Hey, can I talk to you alone for a minute?”
“She must be something, boyos, if he needs to talk to me alone for a minute. Usually my son does everything he can to keep from being alone with me at all.” The crowd chuckled at Jo Kelleher’s humor and waved him away, to go be with his blood and do some fatherly counseling.

Brian’s mother had passed away five years before of uteran cancer. There was nothing the doctors could do by the time they found out. Brian was already grown, but he cried like a baby at his mother’s wake and thinking about her still made him teary-eyed as he had loved his mother very much. Still, he knew there was something of Ann Kelleher in Ruthie. Or was there? He wasn’t sure if he was just saying that to convince himself. But, no, that wasn’t it. And so Brian figured that, even if there was no physical resemblance, that if there was a similarity between Ann Kelleher and Hannah, Joe Kelleher could be convinced. A good widower, Joe Kelleher would never bear to hear a word spoken ill of his wife and Brian planned on using this to his advantage. All he’d have to do was mention his dead mother’s name and his father would agree and they would hug and that would be that.

They sat together at the end of the bar. Joe Kelleher waved to the bartender, a hard-bitten woman whose name Brian could never remember, her perpetual raccoon eyes from
lack of sleep being her most distinctive quality, to bring
him a drink and one for his son too. Brian waved her off,
saying, “Just him. I’m still a working stiff,” smiling to
soothe any possible offense taken from his words.

After the drink was put in front of his father -
Dewars neat - Brian said, “I’ve become involved with a girl
and I know you won’t approve of her so I thought it best to
tell you up front and get any bad reactions out of the
way.”

Joe Kelleher sipped at his drink and then put it down
and started fiddling with his watch. It was too bright in
the VFW for Brian’s tastes. He would have preferred a
darker place to talk about this. He always figured that
darkness provided some semblance of protection. Under the
glaring harshness of the fluorescent bulbs, there was
nowhere and nothing he could hide. Still, he reminded
himself, you showed up and found your dad to come clean. So
don’t forget that.

“How do you know I won’t like her, Brian?” Joe
Kelleher asked. “I’ve liked all your girlfriends in the
past. Maybe. I guess I didn’t like that bitch, Tina Miller.
But neither did you.”

Brian exhaled loudly through his nose. “Her name is
Hannah Goldberg,” he said. Then, speaking in a rush so as
to get it all out, he said, "I met her through work, which is a bad place to meet anybody, I know, but there it is. I was working on this thing involving her kid brother. Her kid brother who’s only thirteen, hit their mom. Or slapped her, I should say. And she fell and hit her head and had to go the hospital. She’s alright now, but she’s crazy. I mean she was crazy before and she’s no crazier now. Forgets stuff. Thinks she’s a kid again. And their father is no great shakes either. Just a little man in a little world. He’s a salesman of some sort. A bullshit job. I can’t remember what he sells. He can’t handle the boy or the wife."

Joe Kelleher took a longer drink of his Dewars. "What about the girl?" he asked in a low voice, "What kind of fuck-up is she?"

"She isn’t a fuck-up at all," Brian said. "She’s a senior in high school. She’s going on to college, she’ll get a scholarship because she’s so smart. She’ll be the first in the family to go to college. And she’s pretty. And she reminds me of mom."

Joe Kelleher stood up and said, "No."

"What do you mean no?"

"What’d you come here for?"

"To tell you about this girl."
“That’s a lie. You came here for me to tell you it’s okay, that I don’t mind. Well, the answer is no. It’s not okay and I do mind.”

Joe walked quickly off and rejoined the card table. One of the men said something to him, but Brian couldn’t hear what, but Joe Kelleher silenced the man with a wave of his hand. Brian walked slowly out of the VFW. Twice he turned around to say something to his father, maybe to try again, and twice he turned back unsure what he was supposed to say to make it better.

He called Hannah from a pay phone. Someone had written on it, “Fuck you.” Brian read it and smiled. He loved the graffiti, the challenge, it made him feel gritty.

The sun was setting now and the streets, which Brian usually thought of as teeming with human refuse because that was how he had been brought up to believe cops thought, didn’t seem so bad. The orange glow, even through the plexiglass of the phone booth, bathed the pavement in a gentle light and made the pedestrians indistinct and somehow less permanent. They were only forms moving around. Brian didn’t have to watch them and think, That guy’s high, or, That’s a hooker buying baby food before she starts her night shift. They were more ethereal than that and Brian swore that whatever divine force was briefly touching the
streets was what he needed to make his father see in
Hannah.

Goldberg answered the phone as though he was expecting
an important call. It rang twice, but somehow Brian was
sure that Goldberg had been sitting besides the phone and
that he let it ring twice to feign nonchalance.

“Hi, Mr. Goldberg. It’s Brian Kelleher. Detective
Kelleher. Could I speak to Hannah please?”

“Ruben’s here. He came back. And he didn’t come back
alone.”

Brian waited patiently. Goldberg was a man who needed
to get things off his chest and would do so at his
convenience.

Goldberg cleared his throat elaborately and continued.
“It’s good that he’s making friends. I like that. His
friend is named Joseph and he’s a black fellow. That’s
good, too. I believe in races being friendly with one
another. Do you believe that?”

“Yes, I do,” Brian said.

“Why don’t you come over and meet this Joseph?”

“Now?”

“Sure, now. Hannah ran out to the grocery store.
She’ll be back by the time you come over.”
“I’d like that, Mr. Goldberg, but I’m on a night tour this week so I can’t.”

“Mister, he says. I don’t need to be a mister. Just plain Goldberg will do fine.”

“Could you please just tell Hannah that I called?”

“Sure, I’ll tell her.”

“Goodbye, Goldberg,” Brian said. He felt foolish referring to the man by his last name like that. You don’t just call people by their last names, Brian thought. It happens, it happens constantly, but it’s something that develops. You can’t just ask someone to call you by your last name. Everybody’s preference ought to be their first name, if they have a preference. And then their friends ignore this preference and call them by their last name. That’s the way these things were supposed to work.

Brian hung up the phone and walked to the precinct house, trying not to step on cracks in the sidewalk, compensating when he did by stepping on an extra one with the opposite foot, keeping things balanced. He was not the type to fall head over heels for someone, he reminded himself. Brian Kelleher had always before been a practical man.
25. Ruthie

The two boys standing side by side puzzled Ruthie. She recognized one. She felt herself crying but she didn’t know exactly why and she turned away and went into the kitchen quickly so that the boys wouldn’t notice.

Ruthie loved having children over in the apartment. She didn’t want to talk to them, not necessarily, but it made her feel good, listening to the way they spoke to one another, watching their body language the awkward, unformed parts of their gestures. She understood them better than they ever could have known. And if they saw her cry, they might feel as though they weren’t welcome and not want to come back.

Ruthie opened up the refrigerator and looked inside. She would have to make dinner soon and she wondered if the boys were staying. She would make more if they were. Boys had such appetites!

“Ruthie,” a voice said and when she looked up, Ruthie saw her daughter Hannah holding brown bags in each arm.

“Groceries!” Ruthie said in a triumphant voice.

Where last week Hannah might have rolled her eyes, Ruthie’s comment elicited only a barely perceptible nod of her head, a nod that Ruthie didn’t even catch so
concentrated was she on the bags and the possibilities for what was inside.

"I got a brisket and some baked apples for dessert," Hannah said and she set the bags down on the kitchen counter.

Ruthie attacked the bags methodically, or, at least, trying to be methodical though what she really wanted to do was to tear the brown paper apart and what was inside all at once. Instead she forced herself to slowly empty out the items and pile them on the counter, then fold up the bags and place them in the stack behind the door, where brown paper bags, properly folded, had always gone.

"Joseph’s staying for dinner," Hannah said, "Ruben asked Goldberg if that was alright and Goldberg said yeah."

"Of course it’s alright. What wouldn’t be alright about it?" Ruthie asked, laughing nervously. She didn’t remember that she hadn’t known who Ruben was just a minute ago, let alone who Joseph was. Now, however, she bustled around, preparing the kitchen for cooking.

Hannah left the room quickly as though there was something going on that she couldn’t bear to watch and Ruthie sensed her discomfort in her quick, angry stride. Ruthie sighed to herself and decided to pay Hannah no mind. She had always been a moody girl and what she needed was a
boyfriend and less time worrying about her studies. Hannah had already accomplished so much, Ruthie reasoned, when was she going to stop fretting about life as though it was a race and start relaxing and enjoying the ride?

Ruthie continued wiping down counters and putting cans away, stopping only to glimpse out the kitchen window where it was already dark. When did the sun set? Ruthie wondered briefly before going back to her preparations.

The trick to a successful brisket was the dried onion soup and the chili sauce. When cooked, the flavors sunk in to the meat, permeating each layer but not dominating things. Brisket was Goldberg’s favorite meal. She knew it reminded him of the holidays. It had always been – in both their houses when they were children as well as after they got married – Ruthie and Goldberg’s Yom Kippur break-the-fast meal. Many did bagels and lox, whitefish and herring as side dishes, but Ruthie suspected that this was because the meal required less preparation and some used shul as an excuse to avoid putting together a dish that required time and energy.

When she brought the brisket out to the table, everybody was already seated, and Ruthie hoped that they hadn’t been there too long. The brisket had been pre-
cooked, but putting the flavoring on and heating it up to the right tenderness had taken longer than she expected.

A bead of sweat perched itself in the cleft above Ruthie’s upper lip and she licked it away with her tongue.

“It looks good,” Joseph said. His napkin was inserted into his tee-shirt like a lobster bib and Ruthie wanted to tell him to put it in his lap, but she thought that was his own mother’s job and she didn’t want to offend the boy, because perhaps that’s how his mother ate as well. The boy was black, after all, and Ruthie had never been to dinner at a black person’s home and maybe that was a custom of theirs. When she noticed that Ruben had done the same with his napkin, Ruthie faced a crisis whether to correct her son in the presence of a guest who might be offended. She decided to say nothing, though after she carved the brisket, she flounced the napkin into her lap with a deliberateness that she hoped might be noticed by Ruben. He didn’t move his, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t noticed. Ruthie thought it likely that he wanted to be just as careful about offending the boy as she had been and she was pleased with the white boy’s restraint. Next meal, next time, he would lay his napkin properly across his lap as he had been taught and, for this moment, Ruthie would let it go.
The dining room table was slightly uneven and whenever the Goldbergs ate, Ruthie felt as though she were at sea, rocking back and forth in the waves, though of course the table stayed put and the unevenness didn’t shift to the other side. Several times Ruthie had mentioned this unevenness to Goldberg and always he grunted, a noise Ruthie took to mean he would get to the table legs and fix them, though he had yet to do so.

They ate quietly and vigorously until Goldberg pushed his chair back from the table. He patted his belly and said, “How about that brisket?” It was what he always said after a meal he enjoyed. Sometimes it was “How about that chicken?” and sometimes “How about that strudel?” but always the same format.

“You’re a wonder worker, Ruthie,” the man said. Ruthie thought the man was disgusting, his pores seemed to leak grease. She could smell him. If only he would, at least, wipe his chin with his napkin, that would be a start. But Ruthie remembered that the napkins were linen and sacrificing good linen to a man such as this might be foolish.

“Thanks, Mrs. Goldberg,” the black fellow said and Ruthie felt her face grow red as she wondered what the fellow was thanking her for.
And who was Mrs. Goldberg? Who was this person the boy was thanking? Ruthie thought. She had cooked the dinner. Somebody else was getting the credit. It didn’t make sense.

Ruthie kept her head lowered and tried to look innocent. No point in letting all these people know how angry she was inside. She wasn’t going to take it, but now wasn’t the time to act. There would be a time, it would come soon. She would just have to be patient.

“She’s just in one of her quiet moods, Joseph,” Goldberg said and smiled paternally.

The smile frightened Ruthie because she didn’t know what it meant. Obviously these people had met before. This wasn’t an accident, a chance encounter. This was the beginning of a carefully thought out plan. Something scripted. Her job — more than that, her salvation — would be to interrupt the script. To try and see where They were going and beat them there. To make it so things would go the way she dictated. At least with regards to herself.

Ruthie’s head hurt. She felt her temples throb back and forth. She began to raise the index fingers on each hand up to her head to gauge the violence inside her, but she managed to catch herself in time. No show of weakness, you little bitch! Ruthie reminded herself. They’ll eat you alive that way.
Hannah cleared her throat and asked, “Would anybody like some more?”

Now why ask that? So pushy. But people weren’t pushy without a point. They weren’t pushy just for the sake of it, were they? No, she wanted something. That much was clear.

And what she wanted soon became apparent to Ruthie. The food. She had done something to the food. That’s why she forced it on Ruthie so. Poison. It had to be. What else could one do to food? But how would she make Ruthie take the poisoned section?

It mustn’t matter to her. That was how important Ruthie was. They’d kill anyone to get to her. Either that or they were all in on it. That made more sense. All of them, together, trying to poison her. For what seemed like the first time in a long while, Ruthie understood.

Ruthie smiled sweetly. “No thank you,” she said, “I don’t eat poison.” Better to let them all know how much she knew. Or was it? Maybe she ought to just keep her mouth shut. Had she just made a critical error? She’d beat Them to it, if that’s what it came down to. They wouldn’t get her. Ruthie would rather kill herself than be a pawn, someone to be dominated and turned into a slave.
Ruthie slid her hand up the table and stealthily grasped the handle of the brisket’s carving knife with two fingers and pulled it back, smiling all the while so that if any of Them were watching her, they’d suspect nothing. Just another smiling mother. Maybe getting ready to cut more food, to feed these people. But a danger to their plans? This they would never think.

“Are you okay, Mrs. Goldberg?” Joseph asked.

Ruthie sprang back from the table, moving fluidly and purposefully. She held the knife in front of her, daring any approach. She didn’t know how she’d been caught making preparations, but she had. That part, the element of surprise, was over and done with.

Now that it was out in the open, Ruthie felt happier. There was no more pretense. She slashed at the air.

“Stay away from me,” she said. “Just stay back and we won’t have a problem.”

“Ruthie,” Goldberg pleaded, “put the knife down, please. Nobody wants to hurt you.”

Ruben ran out of the room and Ruthie thought to herself, Good, that’s one less for me.

“I’m calling the cops,” Hannah said and picked up the phone.
Ruthie saw Hannah on the phone and wondered who she could be calling in the middle of dinner.

“Hannah, that’s rude, using the phone like that while we’re all eating. Whatever it is, can’t it wait?” She turned to face Joseph who instantly stepped back from her. His fists were clenched and his lower lip trembled as though he might be about to break down.

“What? What is it?” Ruthie asked Ruben’s friend. She couldn’t remember his name and that embarrassed her. A mother should know her son’s friends’ names. How terrible. How embarrassing.

“Nothing, Mrs. Goldberg. I...I just wasn’t feeling so well, but I feel better now.”

“I hope it wasn’t from dinner,” Ruthie joked and Joseph smiled back and she felt better. She couldn’t remember all Ruben’s and Hannah’s friends names, now could she? It just wasn’t possible.

Hannah hung up the phone. “I’ll go get Ruben,” she said.

“Where did Ruben go?” Ruthie asked Goldberg.

“Nowhere,” Goldberg said. He pulled his chair out and sat down. So did Ruthie. She placed the knife back onto the table top and smiled widely so all could see her teeth, how white and clean they were.
Goldberg woke up, got dressed, prodded Ruthie out of bed and into clothes she could wear in public, and took Ruthie to synagogue to see the rabbi.

Congregation Beth Shalom was headed by Rabbi Solomon Mazur. A good man. A revered man in his shul, which drew from all over Brooklyn - though, of course, not Williamsburg or other areas dominated by fanatics, people who wouldn’t acknowledge what century it was.

Rabbi Mazur was a short man, even shorter than Goldberg, but his arms were long. Goldberg imagined that if the Rabbi’s arms were just a bit longer his knuckles might scrape on the ground.

Last night couldn’t happen again. The rabbi would have to help.

Goldberg knocked on the door and the rabbi asked to speak to the two of them together. Goldberg and Ruthie sat down on the deep couch in his office. Goldberg wondered if the rabbi took naps here on breaks during the High Holidays. He pictured the rabbi snoring and he felt himself smiling. Embarrassed, Goldberg quickly hid the smile. It wasn’t appropriate.
The rabbi crossed his legs and put one hand to his chin, stroking his beard. Goldberg wanted, needed, a rabbi who stroked his beard? He wanted a venerable rebbe, not some schnook fresh out of Jewish Theological Seminary.

“Ruthie, your husband wants me to speak with you, to help you,” the rabbi said.

Ruthie cocked her head and stared curiously at the rabbi. Not now, Goldberg thought. Please, show respect. He’s a rabbi. He’s not just some jerk doctor. Do what you will with them. I don’t like it, but I’ll live. But not the rabbi. Please, not him.

Ruthie couldn’t hear her husband’s pleas. He knew that. What he didn’t know was if Ruthie would have cared even if she could.

“Meyer, why don’t you excuse us?” Rabbi Mazur asked.

“Perhaps this would be easier for Ruthie if it were just the two of us. Yes, Ruthie?”

Goldberg left the room. He walked slowly, dragging his feet slightly on the carpet. He wanted the rabbi to know he didn’t think this was necessary. Ruthie was his wife, after all. She should be able to speak in front of him. A husband loves his wife and a wife loves her husband. There was no room in Goldberg for something less than that. No room that he’d admit to himself, anyway. Husbands love wives and vice
versa. That’s how God intended it. But, despite his misgivings, Goldberg was not the one to question his rabbi, a learned man, a tzaddik.

He sat on the hard bench outside the rabbi’s office and waited. Goldberg felt like a student again, in trouble and waiting for the principal to scold him. He felt that queasiness in his stomach, but wanted to go in anyway, to get whatever was waiting him over with.

For almost a half-hour, he sat there. He leaned over and put his ear close to the door, but the synagogue was built sturdily, the oak door too thick to hear anything.

After Goldberg had counted the panels on the walls - thirty six up and down the hall - the rabbi poked his neck out the office door.

"Meyer. Sorry you had to wait so long. Come in."

Ruthie’s face wore the same expression it had when Goldberg had left the room. He wondered if she had said anything at all, or if the rabbi had kept up an uninterrupted monologue for the half-hour he’d been outside.

The rabbi looked at Ruthie, then turned to Goldberg and spoke, his index fingers tapping together.

"Years ago, if someone had come to their rabbi with a situation like this, the rabbi might have taken drastic
measures. He might have jumped to conclusions, said, It’s a dybbuk! He would have gathered a minyan. They would have tried an exorcism, tried to rid Ruthie’s body of whatever demons she has trapped inside of her. Would that rabbi have been wrong? Does Ruthie have demons? Yes, I think, but not in the way he thinks. There is no dybbuk here, Ruthie’s disturbed. A minyan won’t be what’s going to help her. Pray, yes. I’m not saying to give up on religion. Now might be when you need religion the most. But I cannot exorcise Ruthie. Something in her has gone wrong. It’s not that something foreign has come in. So what am I saying? I’m saying you need to talk more to the doctors. What you’ve been doing now, the two of you, that hasn’t been enough. You’re scared of doctors, Meyer, I see it in your eyes. But they’re the only people who can help you. God, He can help you, but we cannot fathom his plan and so we pray for the best. But we also must take control of our own lives. And this means doctors. Hospitals. More pills. Taking the pills. Don’t despair.”

Goldberg led Ruthie out of the office, then out of the synagogue, then home. Okay, he decided. The rabbi is right. This isn’t Cracow, this isn’t the 18th century. There is no dybbuk. There is only illness. And though he didn’t like
this answer, Goldberg acquiesced, turned to the doctors, those who the state had certified, not the Almighty.

At home, Goldberg did what he had been told. He called the hospital and heard that there was nothing they could do over the phone. “There’s no magic fix that way,” the doctor said and Goldberg heard the sneer in his voice.

Goldberg told him about the “episode.” This was the favored word for Ruthie’s temporary lunacy. The doctor asked if Ruthie had been taking her medication. Goldberg said yes, of course she had. He wasn’t exactly sure if she had. But no one would listen to him if he said no. Anyone there would shrug and say, “Why not?” And then Goldberg would have no answer. They would mock him then. Not hidden, out in the open then. Goldberg hated himself for being frightened, but he couldn’t bear the idea of their laughter.

Goldberg had to make sure they understood just how bad things had gotten. “Check her in to Bellevue,” the doctor said. “It’s the only thing you can do for her.” But Goldberg knew what Bellevue was like. He knew how patients drooled and stared, how they attacked one another with plastic spoons. Animals, that’s what they were.

“If it was your wife, would you send her to such a place?” Goldberg asked the voice. There was a pause, then
the answer yes. But the answer was unconvincing. The doctor knew it and tried to make up for his error.

“It’s not a wonderful place but she could be a danger. To others, to herself. Your wife needs immediate treatment, she needs round the clock care.”

“Is that so?”

“Mr. Goldberg, you’re not being cold-hearted if you do this. You love your wife. I hear it in your voice. But you can’t help her.”

“Would you send your own wife to Bellevue? Or your daughter, your son?” Goldberg asked.

“Yes, I would. If I had to. And you have to,” the voice said.

“You’re a liar, that’s what you are.”

Another pause. Goldberg regretted his words. He didn’t know this man, someone who was trying to help people. He might be wrong, but he wasn’t trying to hurt anyone. This man believed what he was saying and Goldberg thought not many people believed their words, not anymore.

“There’s someone you should talk to then. Out-patient help, at least. I mean you really should have her in an institution. But if you refuse, there’s someone you have to talk to. Not really you, mostly Ruthie. Ruthie needs to be examined. The episodes are getting worse.”

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“Who is this someone?”

That was how they came to Dr. Brooks’ name and number. And though this too embarrassed and angered Goldberg - that the world should know their secrets, this was what it had to be - he took down the information. You reach a point that something, some outside intervention, is unavoidable, even if you don’t like or trust the intervention that’s called for. You’re only human, Goldberg reminded himself. He had taken Ruthie to their rabbi, but that had been different. Not such desperation then. But this, this Dr. Brooks...seeing this man, it meant panic, but Goldberg recognized that’s where they were at and decided to deal with it.

After Ruthie brandished the knife at dinner then slipped easily back to the shell that was most often her, Goldberg had to explain everything: I’m your husband, that’s why you’re sleeping in the same bed as me. You always brush your teeth twice after dinner. Don’t worry about the living room, your children will clean it all up. Ruben and Hannah. Thirteen and seventeen. Two of them. That was Ruben’s friend Joseph. Did you think you had a black child? Wouldn’t that be something, though! Ha ha ha. That would be something!
They said Dr. Brooks would be the man to talk to, that Dr. Brooks had treated everybody from people who thought they were dogs to people who forgot how to speak English. Goldberg called up this Dr. Brooks, he told the secretary it was an emergency, which it was, and she said, “Nine a.m. sharp. Not a minute later. Dr. Brooks can’t be kept waiting.” And Goldberg said he’d be there.

For three hours, until she fell asleep and Goldberg could see her chest rising and falling rhythmically, undisturbed, Ruthie didn’t say a word.

On the subway, the next day, Goldberg had to lead Ruthie by her hand. She wouldn’t say a word. People stared at them and Goldberg wanted to shout Fuck you and go to hell! But he wasn’t the kind of man who would do that. They probably did make an unusual pair.

They sat between a businessman in coat and tie and what appeared to be a hooker. The hooker wore fishnet stockings and a black brasserie and a skirt that was almost invisible. Before Ruthie got sick, Goldberg could have nudged her ever so slightly with his thigh and they would have met eyes and passed a look that said, Check her out! But now they couldn’t do that. If Goldberg nudged her, she wouldn’t even know what that meant. She wouldn’t know to look. Goldberg had been forced to think about hooker alone
and it bothered him that there was no-one to share his observations with after they got off the subway train.

And after the subway, the streets were too crowded and Goldberg felt a headache starting behind his left eye. It pulsed forward, pushing so that Goldberg wouldn’t have been surprised if the eye popped clear out of his head and rolled down the dirty sidewalk. Nor would it have surprised Goldberg if the eye somersaulting away made faster progress than he and Ruthie could. She walked like an old woman, tiny little bird-like steps, and despite the fact that he periodically placed his hand in the small of her back and gently shoved her forward, Ruthie resisted any change of speed with a ferocity that caught Goldberg off guard.

Goldberg felt himself sweating beneath his tie and he hoped the sweat didn’t show through on his collar. He wouldn’t want any doctor, even a doctor like Dr. Brooks, to see him having sweated through his shirt and jacket.

They made it to the waiting room and Goldberg sat Ruthie down in a hard-backed chair. She didn’t seem to mind being instructed and guided now that they had made it to the doctor’s. It was only on the way that she had been so difficult.

“We’ve got, I mean my wife’s got, a nine o’clock appointment with the doctor,” Goldberg said to the
secretary, a pinched-lipped woman with her hair up in a tight bun.

The secretary fiddled with her papers, shuffling a few out of the way and said, “Goldberg? Ruthie Goldberg?”

Goldberg nodded, but since the secretary wasn’t looking at him - she was busy breathing angrily through her nostrils, like an animal about to charge - she didn’t notice. She looked up in annoyance and Goldberg said, “Yes, that’s us. That’s Ruthie.”

Not my Ruthie. What he would have normally said. Nobody wants to claim a meshugenehkopf as theirs, Goldberg told himself.

The secretary pointed a long, white finger, a finger that reminded Goldberg of his grandmother’s scolding hands, at the chairs where Ruthie was already sitting.

“Don’t I have to fill something out?” Goldberg asked.

The secretary continued pointing and said nothing and Goldberg went sheepishly to his chair next to Ruthie.

Together they sat in silence.

When he could take no more, Goldberg began a ritual of manic watch checking, hoping that something of his impatience and the urgency of the situation would come across to the secretary who seemed to have no desire to have anything to do with Goldberg. When the watch read
9:13, which was approximately what Goldberg had known it would read since he had checked only a minute or two before, he leaned over to Ruthie, and though she hadn’t been understating him much of late, though she hadn’t even known who he was, he said, “They tell you, they remind you, Be sure to come on time! Then they make you wait. It takes some nerve. Some nerve.”

Ruthie stared at him, unblinking, her gaze penetrating Goldberg until he was forced to look away. “We shouldn’t be here,” Goldberg mumbled, not wanting to try looking at Ruthie again. “We don’t belong in here. The world will know. These guys, these shrinks, they’re goddamn quacks. What’s a quack going to help? They don’t help, they make things worse.”

He sighed heavily and decided to see what the magazines had to offer. The doctor’s waiting room was unlike any other doctor’s office Goldberg had ever been to before. He figured this difference, which manifested itself in the magazine selection, was because it was a psychiatrist’s office. The magazines were better and despite the secretary’s inexcusable rudeness and the doctor’s tardiness, Goldberg was impressed. Not just Life, New York and People. Field & Stream, Sports Illustrated, The New Yorker and Time. Outside, Harper’s, the Middlebury

Goldberg decided that the doctor had this wide a selection because of the disturbed clientele he was forced to cater to. Likely many of his patients were truly and completely crazy, not the kind of people one would want, or even dare, to enrage by not having a publication they were interested in reading.

Goldberg read Field & Stream. He liked to read about hunting and fishing. Those were things he had never had the chance to do but, someday, he planned on becoming proficient at both. He thought about himself hunched over next to a tree, clad entirely in black watch flannel, which was what he thought a proper hunter ought to wear, wearing a lined cap with flaps that came down over his ears. He would need a dog, he decided. A hound of some sort. Something to smell out where the animals were, but something that wouldn’t be so stupid as to do a lot of barking and scare them off. Goldberg didn’t much like dogs, but he thought that hunting wouldn’t quite be the same without one, that it wouldn’t even be hunting. More like walking in the woods with a gun.

The truth was, Goldberg didn’t much like guns and even thinking about them made him sweat. He had seen them
before. As a young man visiting the newly established State of Israel, he had coerced a soldier into letting him fire his machine gun. The recoil of the shots had scared Goldberg, almost knocking him over, and since then he hadn’t touched one. But, for the purposes of hunting, he would learn. And besides, it would be a vastly different gun than the weapon he had held in the Sinai Desert. A hunter’s gun, not for a soldier. Different things completely.

Goldberg decided the entire idea was a foolish one and he patted the Field & Stream magazine as though it was his dog and it was the magazine he had to comfort after another fruitless day combing the woods. But with Ruthie and the kids, Goldberg knew he wouldn’t get the chance to fulfill this dream.

He turned to Ruthie to try and see what she was looking at, to try and see what she understood or didn’t understand at that very moment in time. She was staring at something, but for the life of him, Goldberg couldn’t figure out what could captivate her imagination so.

Standing in her field of vision was almost nothing. A tan chair, empty. A fern (or some sort of plant, Goldberg didn’t know much about plants) in a white ceramic pot. The pot, in Goldberg’s opinion, was a little hoity-toity for a
doctor’s office, which was supposed to be purely functional, but it wasn’t Goldberg’s money spent on it, so he decided, what did he care? Still, Goldberg thought the doctor shouldn’t be so blatant about the fees he was charging. People knew you had to pay through the nose for a good doctor, and Dr. Brooks was certainly a good doctor, but he didn’t need to go smushing their noses in it. And even if that was what Ruthie was staring at, Goldberg couldn’t understand what a ceramic pot, a tan chair with no-one in it or even the plain white wall behind the two, had to hold her attention so.

When the secretary finally motioned for them to go in, Goldberg thought she was lucky. Another minute and he would have lost it. He gave her a hard look as they walked into the doctor’s inner office. She didn’t seem to notice. Then Goldberg noticed that no-one had come out when they went in. Did that mean the doctor hadn’t been seeing anyone while they were waiting? That he was talking to his mistress on the phone or practicing his putting stroke? That son of a bitch.

Goldberg decided he was definitely going to say something, but that he would wait until the appointment was over. A wise man knew when to hold his tongue, he figured,
and there was no percentage in making the doctor an enemy before he even began whatever it was that he did to people.

The doctor had a little head and a sharp, pointed beard. He looked to Goldberg like an oversized elf. He wore reading glasses slid down almost to the tip of his nose and held up by a red strap.

Dr. Brooks leaned forward and held out his hand. Goldberg shook it first. It was soft and fleshy and indicative of a man who had never picked up a tool in his life and Goldberg found his dislike of the doctor growing. Dr. Brooks then held out his hand to Ruthie. She stared down at it, fascinated, like a cat greeting a new object, preparatory to batting the object for the next few hours. Goldberg wondered if Ruthie was going to do that, if she would tilt her head and then lightly paw Dr. Brooks’s hand with her own. Goldberg took her hand gently in his and guided it into the doctor’s. Once their hands were together, her grip hardened and something in her remembered what hands did when they were in that position and they shook hands properly without Goldberg’s further intervention.

“Sit, please,” Dr. Brooks said.

He began the “session” - the word the doctor’s secretary had used over the phone to refer to their
appointment, a goyishe word that Goldberg found discomforting - by explaining why they were there and not in the hospital. While he spoke, he patted Ruthie’s hand and then Goldberg’s. Goldberg didn’t want to be touched with that milquetoast hand of his, but it was unavoidable. Clearly Dr. Brooks thought these gentle pats and moments of extended eye contact would be somehow gratifying and comforting.

Neither of the Goldbergs spoke for the first ten minutes of the session, the time when the doctor explained how Ruthie’s situation couldn’t be the result of the head injury - which Goldberg thought amazingly obvious since she had had problems before the incident with Ruben - and why the only option left when one carefully ruled out as much as one could was schizophrenia. But we know all this, Goldberg wanted to yell. For a second, he wished he could be like Ruthie so that he could jump across the room and throttle the doctor, so he could call him a quack. Then the world would shrug their shoulders and say in sad voices, He’s a sick man.

I am a sick man, a sick man for envying my wife’s pain, Goldberg lamented to himself. He lowered his head and looked at the carpet, an pale gray pattern with barely discernible shapes and swirls.
“Mrs. Goldberg, may I call you Ruthie?” Dr. Brooks asked, his first attempt to say anything to one of the Goldbergs that would require a response.

“Call her Ruthie, it doesn’t matter,” Goldberg answered.

The doctor leaned back in his chair. The Goldbergs sat close to one another on a leather couch that smelled of pipe smoke. The doctor leaned back in his reclining easy chair. “Perhaps it would be best, Mr. Goldberg if you waited outside and let Ruthie and I try to talk in private.”

“You’re going to talk to her?” Goldberg asked, amazed. The whole point of their being at this head doctor was that Ruthie wouldn’t talk because she couldn’t remember anything or when she did remember something it was made up, so how in God’s name was he planning on having a conversation with a woman who wouldn’t talk? It wasn’t just that, either. Goldberg didn’t trust this Dr. Brooks. That elfin face of his didn’t exactly make him look like a man you’d want to count on. They should just leave, Goldberg thought. Whatever happened in their session would just make things worse. Fucking leave, Goldberg thought, but he did nothing.

“I’d like to try and have a conversation with Ruthie in private, Mr. Goldberg,” the doctor said, his hands
massaging the temples at the side of his head as though he was the one in pain, as though he was the one who needed psychological help.

“Fine,” Goldberg said and stomped out of the room. He didn’t slam the door to the office, but only because he saw a thin woman in the waiting room, already crying, her face streaked with mascara. He didn’t know who this was but he was sure that she didn’t need doors slammed anywhere near her.
27. Ruthie

“Ruthie can you hear me?” Dr. Brooks asked.

Ruthie could, in fact, hear him. She could hear every word he was saying and, more than that, she understood him. But why should she answer? Why should she, who had given so much in this world, talk with a smart doctor? If he was so smart, he didn’t need Ruthie and she wasn’t going to help him get where he was going.

The doctor continued speaking but Ruthie had given up listening. She was thinking about her bedroom when she had been a little girl. She had loved animals. She made her parents take her to the zoo every week. They rode the subway for hour after hour to get up to the Bronx, but it had been more than worth the effort. All sorts of animals, though the sea lions were Ruthie’s favorites. They had beautiful faces, peaceful and playful at the same time.

Ruthie smiled, recollecting how she had begged and begged her mother to let her keep a sea lion as a pet. She told her mother, “I’ll take care of her, we’ll be best friends and she won’t be any trouble at all. I promise! I’ll keep her in my room and she won’t be loud except when you want her to bark because you like the sound so much.
Only then. And when she does bark like that, you’ll love it.”

Ruthie remembered the conversation perfectly. She remembered the happiness the child’s plan gave her mother and she felt her mother’s happiness now, the aftermath of that pure innocence washing over her and taking her far away from the doctor’s offices.

She had even gone with Goldberg to the zoo, once when they were courting and though the plans for the wedding were made, set and incontrovertible like an edict from on high, Ruthie still wasn’t sure that she could go through with this odd little marriage to this odd little man and so she fantasized about robbing a bank, filling her pockets and her shoes and her raincoat with money and going far away, to another state or another country.

The doctor was patting Ruthie on the hand now and she patted him back. He was a good man. He wouldn’t have acted the way Goldberg did at the zoo.

It was winter and the sea lions were somewhere indoors. Ruthie missed them but there was nothing to be done. But Ruthie still wanted to walk around the zoo, even though there was so much less to see in the winter. But it was such a comforting place and Ruthie was far happier there than anywhere else she had ever been. They walked
past the rows of empty cages. Goldberg asked her if she wanted to go to one of the indoor exhibitions, the bird house, perhaps. But Ruthie said no. She didn’t like the indoor exhibitions. It was always overheated and claustrophobic. And the animals didn’t like it either. They slept or they shrieked. There was no playfulness to them, only anger and disappointment at being locked up that way.

But Goldberg insisted. He said, “We’ve come all this way to see animals. What point is there to wander around the zoo and look at places where animals used to be but aren’t anymore and won’t be until sometime in March? Or April? The point is, they’re not here now.”

Ruthie could still smell them. Especially the big cats. She could never mistake that odor. But she knew better than to point this out to Goldberg. It would have come off like a joke, which wasn’t at all what she intended. She found the sound strangely comforting. When Goldberg said, “Follow me, don’t be scared,” Ruthie did, though the last thing she was was scared. She was sad, that’s all.

The Bird House was, as she feared, the worst. Cackles and squawks and whizzing around into things. Could this be an existence? The sign said that the zoo had made every effort to ensure that the exotic birds’ habit be as close
as was humanly possible to their natural home. Ruthie didn’t doubt the zoo’s efforts. In fact, the Bird House was everything she imagined the jungle to be. But nor was she convinced that the birds ever enjoyed this atmosphere and they probably had always found it as oppressive and disorganized as she. However, the atmosphere of panic did not excuse Goldberg’s behavior.

A parrot of some sort, one with a colorful beak but a dark and disappointingly drab body, flew up fast up to the clear plexi-glass and smashed hard into it, a desperate attempt at a prison break. Goldberg looked at Ruthie, saw that she was alright, and smashed the flat of his hand against the glass, though the sign requested that visitors not touch the divider as it might frighten the birds. Twice, three times, four times he smashed the flat of his right hand against the plexi-glass. Each time more birds appeared from out of nowhere and began to fly madly around, clearly terrified. Goldberg smiled at Ruthie and she understood that he thought he had been chivalrous, that he thought he had protected her from something.

The bearded man was writing on a yellow legal pad. He wasn’t just writing, he was scribbling madly as though if he didn’t hurry and get down everything he wanted to, he
would forget and all those great ideas would be lost forever.

Ruthie tried to stifle her laugh. She didn’t want to seem rude to the bearded man, she didn’t like to be impolite to strangers because that wasn’t the way she was raised, but he looked so funny, his speed like a character’s in a silent movie, darting and herky-jerky and with a little imagination, Ruthie could hear a player piano. She half expected a break in the action and a sign that said: A Bearded Man writes his life story! Hopes to get it all down before he forgets!

Ruthie tried to stop from laughing but once she realized this was inevitable, she let loose, throwing her head back and holding her hands over her eyes. He looked so absurd. What could she do?

To try and stop herself, though it was too late and her rudeness was already apparent to anybody, Ruthie concentrated on only bad things. She thought about death and fire and dogs being kicked by people. She thought about a boy slapping her hard across the face, about the sound her head made when it slammed against a hard surface.

This was how she regained control of herself. She knew she could look at anybody or anything now and nothing would
make her laugh. So Ruthie took her hands away from her eyes and looked up at the bearded man.

He had stopped writing and was staring straight at Ruthie and she smiled her apologetic half-smile, something to make up for the horrible way she had acted to this gentleman.

"Don’t cry, Ruthie, it’s alright, you’ll be okay," the bearded man said. He stood up from his chair and brought a box of tissues over to Ruthie. He sat next to her, perched on the arm of the sofa, and dabbed at her eyes. She let him do this. She didn’t mind. Ruthie thought it was wonderful that there were strangers in this world who would still take the time to help. She hadn’t thought anybody was like that anymore. How reassuring!
28. Brian

His shift started earlier in the day than usual. A four to ten. Much better. Working during daylight always seemed a treat.

Brian hadn’t been given too much responsibility since becoming a detective. None of the old-timers trusted him. Not yet, anyway. They were set in their ways, though Brian would have liked to explain that, despite his youth, he was an old timer at heart, a cop who brooked no nonsense. Brian hadn’t yet said anything though. He was able to put his ambition aside and change their minds through his work, not what he said. But first he needed a case that would be important enough to merit such a drastic change. This was not going to be the case.

The Lieutenant didn’t give much information to him whether because he didn’t have more to give or because he was like the others and didn’t think highly of him, Brian didn’t know. What he did say was this: the man who ran the Parker House for Runaway Youth on the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Nevins Street had been badly beaten with an aluminum baseball bat, wielded by one of his charges who didn’t seek any counsel or kindness. The man’s name was Timothy Donner. He was a white male, 33 years old, resided
at the Parker House for Runaway Youth and also rented an apartment in Red Hook.

Okay, Brian figured, it could still be a high profile case. Sure there was no murder, no corpse and thus no autopsy with the grisly revelations science could always provide, but if a minor committed a criminal act, the press was sure to be interested. Especially a vicious and unprovoked attack, which this, for all intents, seemed to be.

Timothy Donner was in the hospital and was expecting a detective to come speak to him. He had checked himself in that morning when he still couldn’t move his arm and still couldn’t breathe without sharp pains in his chest. The Lieutenant, having finished his litany of facts, looked up from the yellow legal pad and asked, “Questions?”

Brian turned to his partner, a grizzled veteran who was trying to hang on for a full pension without getting beaten by some jerk, but his partner’s lips were sealed shut. Moisan wasn’t the type who asked questions. He was far too lazy for that. What’s more, he thought poorly of questioning anyone other than a suspect – and even then he would question only reluctantly – and this was one of the myriad of reasons he detested Brian and Brian detested him. Another reason was that Brian also thought the man a brute,
a throwback who would rather hit than think. He had been sick the day the Goldberg family drama began to play itself out, but Brian was confident that had he been there, he would have used his usual tact and pushed somebody in the stomach or, failing that, frightened some pedestrian half to death. Moisan wasn’t a careful man, which was, in Brian’s opinion, always an unattractive quality but doubly so in a cop. He was the kind of man who, once he got his pension, would sit around making up stories about great feats of his. The stories would bore everyone but no one would say anything because a confrontation with such a nasty person was rarely worth the risk.

“Did it happen this morning?” Brian asked.

“No,” the Lieutenant said, “four days ago.” Brian thought he could make out a smile playing on the corners of his lips, creeping up despite the Lieutenant’s best efforts at leadership.

“Who were the responding officers?”

“There were none.”

Brian imagined Moisan’s spine tingling with excitement. This would be a good case for an asshole like him. One in which, it seemed, no arrests were likely to be made, but would take time anyway and, maybe, a little
overtime. Brian felt the back of his neck get hot. He hated that fucking Moisan.

Moisan drove to St. Patrick’s Hospital slowly. Not carefully, but slowly. He still almost hit a two bike messengers and a nurse walking out of the emergency room. He parked illegally in a handicapped spot, tugged his tie down from his throat, and got out of the car and grunted at Brian to come along. Brian removed his pen and pad from his breast pocket so that he wouldn’t have to fumble during the interview. He had never been a Boy Scout, that hadn’t been a big thing in Sheepshead Bay, where he grew up, but he knew the motto, ‘Hurry up then wait.’ Or was it, ‘Always Be Prepared?’ Or was one of those for the Marines? Fuck it. He couldn’t remember for sure, but either way Moisan ought to have taken lessons on the concept years before, that was what Brian figured. Moisan was an asshole. He wanted to get through each day, he wanted to get his twenty-five years in and get all he could in vesting. Not Brian. He wanted those things too, but he wanted more than that. Moisan was a married man, though this was almost impossible to believe. Brian was pretty sure he even had grandchildren, though he wasn’t a sharing man who flipped open his wallet to show off pictures, at least not with someone he disliked as much as the almost-rookie Brian Kelleher, so Brian couldn’t be
sure. But he certainly had a wife and Brian wasn’t so young that he couldn’t understand how worried Mrs. Moisan — whatever had possessed any woman to marry such a man Brian could never understand — must be each day and night when her husband went off to work. And Brian thought of Hannah then. He thought what it would be like to say goodbye to her, to kiss her on the cheek and on the lips, to press them there while she clutched his coat and went off to a dangerous job. The answering pressure in his pants told him his body liked the fantasy.

But that isn’t right, he reminded himself. She’s a college girl, or soon will be. She’s not the type to be content to sit at home and watch the plants grow. And I wouldn’t want her if she were. He told himself this and fervently hoped it was true.

“Let me talk to the guy,” Moisan said. They were entering the elevator, which would take them up to Timothy Donner’s private room on the seventh floor, which was being paid for by the Parker House for Runaway Youth.

Brian said nothing, but decided that if he had something to say and if Moisan wasn’t doing things right, he’d step in. He wasn’t going to let a half-assed job ruin his chances in the Department.
Timothy Donner was asleep when they entered his room. The room looked comfortable to Brian. Probably it was bigger than his own studio apartment. But that wasn’t saying much! he joked to himself. A vase of flowers sat on the nightstand. There were no books, no magazines. Timothy Donner wasn’t much of a reader, Brian figured, unless he was in too much pain to concentrate.

Moisan tapped the man lightly on his shoulder. He was sleeping on his side so Brian could see that Timothy Donner was wearing a hospital gown. Usually patients wore pajamas unless they were being examined right then and there. But Timothy Donner wasn’t the type of man to change clothes too often, Brian noted to himself. But, again, he reminded himself with the codicil that the man must be in significant pain and maybe this was the reason he still wore the gown. Brian was glad he hadn’t made that observation to Moisan. Moisan wouldn’t have been at all interested in the train of thought.

The opening at the back faced the two detectives and it was obvious that Timothy Donner was heavily taped and bandaged around his ribcage, but the areas above and below these precautions was still yellow and black, changing colors as the bruise healed. The colors reminded Brian of perverse fall foliage. An autumn without any of the colors
that tourists liked so much. No reds or oranges, though when the bruise was fresher, perhaps there had been.

The man rolled over and his left arm, which was in a hard cast, came out from underneath the cover sheet. “We’re NYPD detectives,” Moisan said. He didn’t bother to take out his shield, though Brian did his, as was procedure when identifying oneself. For this effort, Moisan shot him a look that Brian understood to be disdain. Brian shrugged his shoulders and Moisan looked away, placated.

Chickenshit, Brian thought angrily of himself. Why should I care what Moisan thinks of me? But he did and he wanted his partner to like him, even though he despised him so.

“What happened to you, Mr. Donner?” Moisan asked.

“Four days ago. I was working, like always, at the Parker House,” Timothy Donner said. He had trouble speaking and it was obvious that each word hurt to say, as if the breath necessary was coming up from the ribs rather than the lungs.

“A kid comes in, doesn’t say a word to me, hits me with a baseball bat. A fucking lunatic.” Timothy Donner collapsed onto his pillow, spent.

“Can you describe him?” Moisan asked.

“Just a kid. I don’t know.”

“Sir?” Brian asked.
“Okay, fine, fuck you. A white kid. Fifteen, sixteen.
Tall, kind of built. Brown hair. I don’t know what else.”

“Had you seen him before?”

“No. No. No, fuck no. Are we through?”

Moisan nodded at the man. “Okay,” Moisan said, “we’ll go ask questions near Parker House, see if anybody suspicious who fits that description had been lurking around and was spotted by anybody. What’d the doctors say?”

Timothy Donner closed his eyes then opened them again. “I’ll live,” he said, “but doctors said that my injuries could have some permanent effects. Permanent effects. That’s the phrase the insensitive jerk chooses.”

“Like what?” Brian asked.

“Like it’ll hurt for a long fucking time,” Timothy Donner snapped back, suddenly not seeming so short of breath. He had a mean, ugly face and he reminded Brian of an animal. His nose had a thin strip of white tape on it and looked as though it had been broken, though not as recently as the attack at Parker House. Probably he lost a bar brawl, Brian decided. He looked like the type of man who started fights and was surprised and angry when he couldn’t finish them.
“Come on, let’s go,” Moisan said to Brian, and turning to face Timothy Donner again, he continued, saying, “We’ll let you rest, Mr. Donner.”

“I got more questions,” Brian whispered to Moisan, but the whisper was low and Moisan couldn’t hear him.

“What? What’re you trying to say?” Moisan snapped.

“I got more questions,” Brian said, this time in a louder voice.

“Well ask them, I’m in goddamn pain,” Timothy Donner said, pulling the bedsheets up around his chin as though to protect himself from Brian’s questions.

“I just want to know how come you waited four days to go to the hospital, how come then you didn’t even want to report it and wouldn’t have if the doctors hadn’t insisted.”

Moisan snorted under his breath, a frustrated, hoarse sound that could only have been the product of age, cigarettes and whiskeys. “Who’re you trying to look at?” Moisan said. “You probably think the man did it to himself.”

Timothy Donner smiled gratefuly at Detective Moisan. He knew an ally when he saw, and heard, one.

“Let’s go,” Moisan said and pushed Brian in his back. Brian left quietly. It didn’t seem to him that the question
was worthy making a fuss over, though as soon as he left the room he wished he had gotten an answer and he wished, he prayed, that he would soon begin to stand up to Moisan, that if it couldn’t happen then it would happen very soon.

They walked down the hall together, making way for an orderly pushing a wheelchair with an old lady in it. The lady could have been Brian’s grandmother and he did a double take to make sure it wasn’t, though his grandmother had been dead for years. She wore a thin nightgown over green and red hospital issue pajamas. The orderly, a tall black man, pushed the chair with one hand and with the other he stroked the old woman’s hair, talking to her as they made their way slowly down the corridor. Brian thought to himself that he would have far preferred to be working on her case. Correcting himself for making such a vicious statement, Brian clarified that he wouldn’t want someone’s grandmother to ever get hurt, but if she did, he’d want to help her far more than he wanted to help Timothy Donner. Still, he counseled himself, this is the job and you don’t get to choose. And assholes deserve justice as much as good people, though maybe that shouldn’t be.

Brian and Moisan didn’t go to the Parker House to make follow-up interviews with neighbors to the building. Instead, at Moisan’s insistence, they drove all the way
over the Brooklyn Bridge and stopped at Katz’s delicatessen so Moisan could get the “perfect” sandwich, as he termed it, which was hot pastrami on thin cut rye with mustard and a pickle (wrapped separately so it wouldn’t make the sandwich all soggy). Brian didn’t get anything. He wasn’t hungry.
29. Hannah

Age didn’t factor into things. Love knew no such boundaries. And even if love did know some age related boundaries, this was a few years she was thinking about. It wasn’t like she was a child or Brian was a dirty old man. And yes, Hannah was going away to college, but she wouldn’t be so far away. Besides, she told herself, you can’t live in fear and you can’t plan out every little thing in the world. Something wonderful is happening, just let it happen.

All these ideas were pieces of advice Hannah had cribbed from various women’s magazines. Of course she knew these things herself and she didn’t need some trashy article to confirm anything, but then it was nice to see that people agreed with her.

She opened up the door to her bedroom and went to see what the rest of the family was doing. Ruben and Joseph were in his bedroom with the door closed. She knocked on the door and heard whispers.

“Who is it?” Ruben asked.

“It’s me,” Hannah said.

There was no answer. He was probably waiting for her to say what she wanted, but Hannah didn’t want anything.
And besides, Ruben wasn’t exactly the perfect candidate to talk with about Brian, which was all that Hannah really felt like talking about. She had tried to study, but the words seemed to all run together and not mean anything.

“What’s up?” Ruben called.

“I’m coming in,” Hannah said. She turned the handle and pushed, but the door only opened a fraction and then held fast. Ruben must have put in a hook and eyehole. That was just like him. The rest of the world would have to adjust to Ruben, God forbid he adjust to anybody else.

“What is it?” Ruben called. She could hear the exasperation in his voice. He was doing something with Joseph, some childish nonsense. She didn’t need or want to hang out with him anyway.

“Nothing,” Hannah snapped and pulled the door back shut. She’d let them be. They were only kids. It’s not like talking with either of them could ever prove particularly interesting.

In the living room, Ruthie sat silently on the sofa with her hands in her lap, a distant smile on her face. Hannah walked up behind her and kissed her on top of her head.

Goldberg sat cross-legged on the floor, facing Ruthie. A pile of brochures was in his lap.
“What do you have there?” Hannah asked.

He looked up at Hannah and studied her before answering. She didn’t like the look he was giving her. It was one of calculation. What would a man need to calculate before speaking with his own daughter?

Goldberg pushed the brochures out of his lap and onto the carpeted floor. The shag carpet was wearing thin, not just in spots, but all over the place. Hannah thought maybe it was worth mentioning to her father. Maybe then he’d go back to work and stop loitering around the apartment like some kind of ghoul. If she pointed out how rundown their home could look without some immediate action to rectify the situation, maybe he’d understand that somebody needed to make money.

Goldberg stood up and stepped close to Hannah. Instinctively she stepped back. They stood on opposite sides of the sofa, standing directly over Ruthie. She didn’t seem to know, or care, that they were hovering above her and that she was a buffer. Goldberg didn’t even bother to look down at her, much less speak to her, and Hannah wondered if he even knew Ruthie was there.

“I was looking at brochures from care institutions,” Goldberg said.

“Care institutions?”
“They’re like hospitals, I guess. They help people who are severely upset or unhappy or what have you. People...well, people like your mother.”

“My mother,” Hannah repeated. The words swirled in her mouth and she knew she had swallowed the last syllable. Her habit of trailing off at the end of words and sentences would never do, not if she was going to make her mark in this world. According to Guidance Counselor Brophy at Hannah’s school, public speaking was an essential tool that no aspiring young man or woman could do without.

“Did you hear what I said?” Goldberg asked.

Hannah had certainly heard, but she hadn’t processed the information yet. So caught up with her analysis of her own speech deficiencies, Hannah had missed the essential information Goldberg was imparting to her. From the tone of his voice, she rethought what he had told her.

“You’re sending mom away?” Hannah said.

“Now you call her mom. When she was all okay, when we were all okay, you never called her mom. Then, then it was Ruthie this and Goldberg that.”

He was crying and Hannah didn’t know why the word “mom” had set him off so. Or maybe she did. She didn’t want to think about that.

“Why are you doing this?” Hannah asked.
“We went to the doctor this morning, while you were at school, your mother and I did,” Goldberg said. “Do you know what he told me after he spoke to your mother – or spoke at her, I should say – for almost an hour? He said that Ruthie needs psychological care and constant monitoring and control. He said part of what she’s going through is an extreme depression, one in which she is preventing herself from...from being a goddamn person!”

Goldberg was shouting now and when he shouted, little bits of spittle flew out of his mouth and Hannah watched the white droplets perch themselves in Ruthie’s hair.

“You don’t have to yell at me,” Hannah said. “I didn’t do this.”

Goldberg’s head fell into his chest.

“I’m sorry.”

He returned to where he was sitting before and sat back down, cross-legged again. As he folded one leg over the other, Hannah could see that his arthritis was bothering him, that the position was a terrible one in which for him to sit. She didn’t understand why he was sitting that way, when there were perfectly usable chairs and tables right in the apartment, unoccupied and waiting for a pile of brochures. Goldberg pulled a red pen out of his breast pocket and began circling things and making tiny
notations on the pamphlet he was looking at. He held that one up to her so the front, a picture of a ducks walking near water and a smiling man kneeling down to give them bread crusts, was staring out at Hannah.

"Silver Lake," Goldberg said. "It looks great but it's in Vermont." He grinned and Hannah noted the discoloration of his teeth. Like the apartment, they needed money and work thrown at them before their age showed too much to ever be reversed. "Now how in the world are any of us ever going to go visit Ruthie up in Vermont?"

"I don't know," Hannah said. "Are you sure?"

"Am I sure of what? Silver Lake? No. I'm not sure of that. But somewhere, yeah, that I'm sure of. You want to look at brochures with me? Why don't you help me out?"

Hannah shrugged her shoulders. The day had started out so well. She had been happy. She had Brian to think about. This she didn't understand. How could a day be torched so quickly?

She kissed her mother once more on the head and walked around the sofa and sat down on the floor next to her father. She folded her legs up into a cross-legged position without using her hands and she caught a rueful grin from Goldberg as he watched her settle in. He passed her a stack of brochures. The one on top was for The Second Wind
Institute. Hannah opened it up. They seemed to feature arts and crafts. There were photographs of young men and women in khakis looking at canvases, covered with color. To Hannah, the hospital seemed great, an artists retreat.

“Do you know what one of these hospitals costs?” Goldberg asked Hannah, but before she could reply, he said, “More than you could imagine. And there’s no financial aid for them. Not like this college of yours. There should be a system, you’re crazy enough, we’ll pay. Slightly crazy people have to pay full rate.” He laughed bitterly and Hannah wished he would stop talking because what if Ruthie could actually hear them? What if she understood every word Goldberg said?

“Don’t say she’s crazy,” Hannah said. She scratched at her ankle. She wasn’t wearing socks and her feet were sweaty, so much so that the sweat seemed to be traveling up her leg. It was disgusting and Hannah was glad Brian hadn’t seen her like this. No man would want a girl – a woman, she corrected herself – who sweated like this. And they shouldn’t.

Ruthie was overdressed and Hannah wondered how sweaty she must be underneath. She knew her mother still showered, but she thought that it wasn’t without Goldberg’s help, and
there was no way she could get all that clean with a man trying to shower her.

“She’s not crazy," Hannah repeated, this time in a lower voice. The second time, the words weren’t for Ruthie’s benefit or Goldberg’s, rather Hannah knew she was trying to convince herself.

“Maybe that word’s wrong," Goldberg conceded. “I’ll give you that. It’s a hard word. But the point is that she needs help. And who am I kidding? Silver Lake? Point Pleasant? The Gutman Institute? Second Wind?” As he spoke, he grabbed brochures off the floor and away from Hannah and threw them across the room like frisbees. They sailed dangerously close to Ruthie’s hand and Hannah would have hated her father but for the fact that he wasn’t looking up and had no idea where they were flying. But that was his way: to throw without looking. Hannah thought maybe she was too generous and that wasn’t enough of an excuse anymore.

“You make it sound as though mom is responsible,” Hannah said.

“There she goes with the ‘mom’ again. The world’s greatest daughter when it’s too late. And yeah, maybe I don’t make it sound as though it doesn’t have anything to do with her. It does. This isn’t cancer. This isn’t the kind of thing that you grin and bear and the world thinks
you’re being noble. You’re sick with this, yeah, but don’t tell me it’s cancer.”

Hannah stood up and looked down on her father. There was so little hair left on top and she could see that what was there had grayed considerably since she had last noticed. “I’ve gotta go take a shower,” Hannah said.

“Take your mother with you,” Goldberg said. “Please?”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean? It’s been too long. I think maybe Dr. Brooks, the shrink, noticed the smell this morning. I can’t be sure but I think I saw him recoil a little bit. Give me a break, won’t you. I don’t want to shower her. This is my wife. This is the woman I married because I thought she was beautiful and sexy and I gotta shower her. And I may for the rest of her life because I can’t pay for these private hospitals and I know what the State ones are like. Fucking hellholes. Fucking son-of-a-bitching hellholes!” Tears poured down Goldberg’s face. There was no discernible break from one to the other. These were not slow, sad tears that dripped individually, with paths and destinies of their own. They were fast and hard tears and seemed to Hannah to be more like a leak had sprung and water was pouring out, rather than droplets.
“Okay, Goldberg,” Hannah said. She wanted to call him dad, but it was too late for that. She wouldn’t really mean the word, the affection and closeness it implied, and he would know it. From his cross-legged position he slumped over onto the carpet so his backside stuck up in the air like a beacon. He buried his face in his arms and Hannah could see his body shake, see the fat on his love handles move in rhythm with his sobs.

“Ruthie?” Hannah asked. She placed her hand on top of her mother’s and squeezed. “Why don’t we take a shower together? We’ll get you all cleaned up.”
30. Ruben

The Goldbergs’ apartment building could never have been mistaken for a brownstone, not even in its best days. There were too many floors and the windows and the ceilings weren’t high enough. Washing hung out those windows over the ledges and overweight men in sleeveless tee-shirts and women in flowered dresses faded by sunlight and years leaned outside and yelled back and forth to one another when it was too hot inside. The conversations had once been in Yiddish, then Spanish, then English again. And now it was Russian, which Ruben spoke only a little bit of. He liked the building when the tenants were Hispanics. He liked the rhythm of their speech and especially the fact that he understood nothing of what they were saying. He didn’t want to understand. There was no need to know who was broke and who was in trouble and who was beating who. He didn’t want these things to become his business because then he thought he’d be too scared to help someone who needed help. Now he was thirteen and Ruben had proven to himself once and for all that he wasn’t helpless.

In his lifetime, or what he could remember of it anyway, there had been only one air-conditioning unit hanging out a window and this had been Mrs. Petrovsky’s.
Last summer or the summer before that, Ruben couldn’t remember which, Mrs. Petrovsky’s air conditioner had fallen from its precarious perch. It shattered into a thousand pieces on the ground and Ruthie, who was well then, said, “Good riddance. Maybe Mrs. Petrovsky won’t be such a shut-in if she isn’t too high and mighty to have a talk with the rest of us once in a while.”

Ruben remembered thinking that this couldn’t be his mother speaking. She was too kind and gentle a woman for words such as these. But, looking back, he remembered what a long and hot day it had been. He remembered that his father had had too much to drink with Mr. Pincus after work, though his father thought the man a godforsaken Polack, and so perhaps Ruthie hadn’t meant what she said, perhaps she had only been driven to it by circumstances beyond her control.

This was what had happened to Ruben. He had become someone he never meant to be, driven there by circumstances. But nor would he go back to the boy he was before. Ruthie hadn’t gone back either. She had gone crazy. It wasn’t a choice she had made, but Ruben didn’t remember ever hearing his mother say an unkind word after that day when Mrs. Petrovsky’s air conditioner fell out the window. He thought to himself that he wouldn’t make whatever
sacrifices and choices his mother made not to turn angry and bitter at the world. It wasn’t worth it to him.

The only resemblance the Goldbergs’ building held to a brownstone was its outdoor stair leading up to the front door. They were the most distinguished feature to the building and whenever Ruben walked inside, he liked to take his time on those stairs and look down and pretend they led somewhere more glamorous than apartment 4F.

It was against these steps that he and Joseph played stoop ball. They used a tennis ball. Passersby stopped to watch. One decided to stay, a businessman in a gray pinstriped suit, a man whose constant glances over his shoulder made Ruben think that the man was lost and scared. He leaned tentatively against a Buick and watched them, furtively at first, sneaking glances as though he were embarrassed that the boys might notice his interest, even his admiration. Soon the man slumped against the car, stopped worrying so much about getting grease on his suit, and watched more and more intently, so much so that Ruben could hear him whistle exasperatedly through his teeth after Joseph committed an error.

Goldberg had warned Ruben not to play too much stoopball, when the boy had once suggested a game with his father. He said that it developed skills that were contrary
to baseball, that were misleading and would only create bad habits. Goldberg had refused to play and it was only rarely that Ruben found an opponent, so it was only rarely that his father had anything to worry about.

Joseph, however, was more than willing to play and thought it a fine suggestion. They played evenly for the first inning or two. Then Ruben began to pull away and he could see the frustration in Joseph’s face. Ruben thought maybe they ought to stop or that he ought to stop piling on the runs so. He didn’t want to alienate Joseph, his one friend.

“Let’s do something else,” Ruben said. Joseph shook his head tightly.

“You sure?” Ruben asked. Again Joseph shook his head.

After this the score got worse. Most of the problem was that Joseph wasn’t a good fielder. Too many would-be outs were fumbled by the boy. Ruben began to pop up the ball more, but these two were fumbled by Joseph. After seven innings, it was 13 to 3 and Joseph said, “Enough.”

They sat down on the steps together. They sat close and Ruben could feel the heat and the sweat coursing down Joseph’s thighs. He imagined the beads of sweat were jumping onto him, penetrating his Levis and soaking into his skin. He imagined Joseph was becoming part of him and
Ruben knew that this was what it was like to have friends, to feel part of someone else.

A local streetwalker, a “woman of the night” was what Goldberg called hookers, strolled on by. Joseph grinned widely and yelled, “Hey!”

The hooker turned around and walked up to them. She was wearing black fishnet stockings, short cut leather pants that hugged her ass, and a red halter top. She didn’t turn Ruben on. He was too scared of her to be turned on. Sure, he had seen prostitutes before. All the time. But to talk to one? This was nothing he had ever done before.

“You’re a little young to be calling for a person like that,” the hooker said.


“I don’t have anything,” Ruben whispered. He tried to keep his voice low, he was embarrassed he didn’t have money and he didn’t want the hooker to know. She was older and he wanted her to respect him.

“I’ve got a little bit,” Joseph said to Ruben. Then, turning to the hooker, he called out, “What’s it going to take? How much?”
“Baby, you’re way too young for this.” She snapped her gum and fidgeted in her purse. Ruben wondered what she could be looking for.

“Just answer the question,” Ruben said. His voice surprised him, he hadn’t planned to say that. A harder part of himself, the part that had beaten Tee and maybe even the part that had slapped his mother, blurted it out. Ruben smiled, his confidence growing. A hooker wasn’t going to treat him like trash. No way.

She blinked her eyes and stared at Ruben. It was a long look, one in which she was considering him and considering how strong this skinny little kid really was. “Forget it,” she said, “I’ve got adults to deal with. I’ve got business to conduct and you don’t have any money. Do you?”

“I got twenty seven bucks,” Joseph said.

Ruben stood up and took a step closer to the hooker. She took two steps down the street.

“Twenty seven dollars,” Joseph repeated, this time in a louder voice. “How’s that sound to you?”

“Fucking whore,” Ruben said.

He loved feeling powerful and he realized that he never felt as powerful as he did when he was cruel. He picked up a crumbling piece of pavement from the foot of
the steps and tossed it lightly up and down in his hands. "Now how about that twenty seven dollars?" Ruben asked, his voice trembling with excitement.

"T-that’s not enough," the hooker said, the words sticking in her throat. She started to walk away. Ruben followed her. He took long steps so she couldn’t pull away, not without running, which wouldn’t be easy in spiked heels.

"Ruben, forget it," Joseph said. "Let her go. Let’s play some more." Ruben could hear that Joseph’s voice had changed. He was normally so confident, so in control. Ruben learned things from Joseph, that was the way things went. Not the other way around. But Ruben understood that when he got mean like this, he controlled everything. He controlled this hooker, he controlled Joseph. Goldberg feared him when he was like this, Hannah too. A crazy mother couldn’t control anything in her life. She couldn’t control when to shower, how to buy groceries. Her life was completely dictated by others. And Ruben was determined not to end up that way. If being like this was the only way to guarantee control, Ruben could live with that. And he could learn to like it. He was pretty sure he already had.

The hooker turned around and saw Ruben following her and she started to run. Ruben didn’t bother chasing her. He
heaved the piece of pavement after her. It fell far short, breaking in half on the street, little rocks skidding away from the larger one. An old man leaned out his window and yelled, “What the hell are you kids doing? I’m going to call the cops.”

Ruben looked up at the man and smiled. Then he walked back to the steps and sat down next to Joseph. Joseph wouldn’t look at him. Ruben put his hand on Joseph’s shoulder and patted him there. “Don’t worry,” Ruben said. “It’s okay, I was just screwing around.”
Despite everything that had happened, Goldberg’s big crusade was for them to all eat dinner as a family. Hannah said that she wanted to eat dinner with Brian, to keep him company because he worked so hard and it was important for him to relax at dinnertime.

Goldberg put his hand to his forehead as though a terrible pain was cutting through him. So melodramatic, Hannah thought. She knew she was being uncharitable, but couldn’t her father ever just say what he had to say without the song and dance? It was pathetic, really.

“We’ve got so little left,” Goldberg said. “I’m dependent on meals, and so are you, to maintain a semblance of family. When I was a child, we always, always ate dinner with one another. It wasn’t even a question, or an issue. When you’re married, you’ll eat dinner with your husband and your children and then you’ll understand. For now, you’ll just have to trust me.”

“Come off it, Goldberg,” Hannah snarled. “Your problem is that you have this idealized notion of family, that to you it means this perfect, Von Trapps bullshit. That’s not the way it is. She’s crazy. You’re all crazy. So am I,
probably. Hey, after all, I’ve got Goldberg blood coursing through my veins."

“Von Trapps? You have to mention Nazis? This is what you resort to when someone doesn’t agree with you? I’ve seen the movie.”

Hannah wished he was kidding. She did, because then that would mean that she didn’t have to feel such utter scorn for her father. But he wasn’t and she wasn’t going to pretend that she didn’t.

“They weren’t the Nazis,” Hannah said softly, struggling to control herself so she could leave, so she wouldn’t be drawn into a protracted fight that gained nothing. Brian was expecting her. He’d be so disappointed if she wasn’t coming. It couldn be a cause of more major problems between them. Boys had the frailest egos, they felt slighted so easily. Maybe, she thought, it was better just to ignore Goldberg, to shove past him and leave.

“You can think they weren’t the Nazis,” Goldberg said darkly. “Go ahead and think that if it makes you happy.”

“I’ve gotta go,” Hannah said.

“Go then.”

Hannah walked quickly out the front door. She felt guilty not being there. It would leave Ruthie, Goldberg and Ruben to have their pretty little family dinner, not the
most functional threesome, but she had a life and she
wasn’t going to let it be torpedoed by her family.

She met Brian outside the precinct house. He smiled
when he saw her and even kissed her, though other cops were
around and they might be watching. They were uniformed cops
and Hannah thought that she would have liked to see Brian
in uniform. He would have looked cute that way, though she
was glad that he was higher up than that.

They went to eat at Seven Woks together, a greasy
spoon Chinese restaurant that Hannah had a fondness for. It
was where she had eaten before the SATs.

“Are you kidding me?” Brian asked, grinning widely, as
he stared at the front of the restaurant.

“Actually, they have great egg rolls and dumplings.
All their appetizer type dishes are terrific. I’m going get
a couple of appetizers together. That makes a good dinner
without even a main meal.”

“Why don’t we go get a steak? Wouldn’t you like a good
steak? Besides, this can’t be kosher.”

“Neither would the steak. Not at McSorley’s or
Shanahan’s or O’Donnell’s or whichever Irish hangout you’d
drag me to,” Hannah said, laughing. This was perfect. She
had never been so happy.

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Brian shrugged his shoulders elaborately and opened the door for her.

They ordered and chatted and Hannah couldn’t have even swore as to what Brian was talking about. And when they were halfway through their first order of pork fried dumplings, Brian put his chopsticks down - he could use chopsticks perfectly, Hannah loved that about him - and said, “How’s Ruben doing?”

“Fine.”

“Okay. Yeah, that’s good. I was just wondering. I just thought it might be hard for him and your mother to be there, you know, back living together and all.”

“I’d rather not talk about my family,” Hannah said. She reached across the table and grabbed one of Brian’s dumplings.

“You’re not even done with your own,” he said, smiling.

“So?”

They ate silently, the only sounds those of tea being slurped and chopsticks clattering together.

“There’s a runaway house on Atlantic, not far from where your apartment,” Brian said. “Do you know it?”

“I think so,” Hannah said. She kept looking down. Why did he have to push the point so? Why couldn’t Brian just
be with her and not be such a cop? People wouldn’t separate her from her family and it infuriated Hannah so.

“Your brother never went there by any chance, did he?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said.

“It’s just that it’s not far from your house. There was an attack there and I thought Ruben might have seen it. Not seen it. He couldn’t have seen it. I just thought he might know something about it.”

“I doubt it.”

“But you don’t know if that’s where he stayed when he ran away?”

She couldn’t say yes. Hannah felt the urge to explain, because there was a very logical explanation: she knew about the shelter, she knew Ruben would be safe there, she knew that Brain would look with her if Ruben was missing. But Hannah decided she couldn’t tell the truth because then Brian would know that she had lied about Ruben stealing away in the middle of the night without her knowing. And then Brian would think of her as a liar. Forever.

She hoped she didn’t sound too snappish or shrill. She knew she was a good liar - it was easy, all you had to do was convince yourself that the lie was actually the truth and Hannah had never seen Ruben at the runaway shelter. He
said he had been there. Big deal. He probably was off doing something horrible and didn’t want to confess.

Hannah poured more soy sauce for herself and decided to pour some for Brian. That might distract him from this line of questioning. It was the sort of gesture that husbands and wives had for themselves, a small consideration that told so much. She didn’t know if Goldberg had ever poured soy sauce for Ruthie. She could see how he might have once, before any of this. Though Hannah had done some reading on schizophrenia and found out that it almost always began to manifest itself far younger than Ruthie’s age. So, maybe, there never had been a ‘before any of this.’ Hannah tried to remember from when she was a child if Ruthie had ever acted crazy. She couldn’t but that might have been because she had blocked it out. Repressed memory was something else Hannah had read about. If she was a psych major in college, which seemed to be a good idea, she’d learn more about this and be able to better help her mother.

“No. I don’t know what he did that night. He probably wandered around. That’s all.”

Brian nodded his head and seemed to accept her explanation.
Hannah pushed her plate away from her. Her appetite hadn’t been what she expected. She wasn’t the kind of girl who ate like a bird. Not one of those nervous types. No way. But sometimes she wasn’t hungry and Brian, or anybody, would have to understand that.

“I had a fight with my father before I met you,” Hannah said. She knew it was foolish. The last thing Brian wanted to hear or needed to hear was more bullshit about her fucked up family. She continued anyway.

“We were fighting about...I don’t know. It’s hard to say. Just fighting, I guess. I feel a little lousy about it. I guess, in the end, we were fighting about The Sound of Music, whether or not the Von Trapps were the Nazis or the good guys.”

“They were the good guys,” Brian interrupted.

“Yeah. I know. I know it, you know it. Most everybody who’s ever seen the movie or the play knows it. But my father, he figures they’re named Von Something-or-other, they must be Nazis too.”

Brian picked up her plate and brought it close to him, holding it up for inspection, trying to decide if Hannah’s leftovers were worthwhile. He must have decided no because he shoved it on top of his dirty plate. It wasn’t like Hannah planned on saying anything, but she found this
irksome. After all, now the bottom of her plate was covered with the sauce from Brian’s plate. And yes, she was finished, but what if she changed her mind? People decided they were finished then changed their minds and decided they could stuff a little more Moo Shu or General Tsao’s chicken in there. He didn’t know – he couldn’t know – that this wasn’t what was going to happen. Maybe, Hannah decided, she and Brian ought to cool it a little bit. She was tired of apologizing for her family. And he was pretty old, after all.

“Are you going home now?” Brian asked. He leaned forward expectantly and Hannah thought he was concentrating too hard for such a simple question.

“I was going to, yeah,” she said.

“I need to come with you. I need to talk to your brother,” Brian said. “He’ll be home, won’t he?”

“I guess. But what do you need to talk to Ruben about? Is it this Parker House? He wasn’t there.”

“You don’t know that, right? You just assume he wasn’t there because he didn’t mention being there. But, if he had gone there, it would have been about the same time this guy was attacked. Even if he just walked by. You never know who you see that’ll be important later on.”
Hannah shrugged her shoulders. She stared at the cleft in Brian’s chin, but tried to make it seem as though she wasn’t, in fact, looking at him but at a point somewhere beyond him. Not that it mattered. He wasn’t paying attention to her, anyway. Right then it seemed that all he was interested in was where Ruben had or had not been. Fine. So he’d come home with her and hang out with the happy and joyous Goldberg clan. He had seen so much of them. He was due to see Ruthie have a fit. That was about the one Goldberg family shame he had yet to witness.
Ruthie had been okay through dinner. She didn’t talk much, but okay. That was all Goldberg dared hope anymore. God punished the prideful man. This would not be Goldberg’s sin. He had others, he was mortal so he had millions of them, but not too much pride. Not after everything, anyway.

Ruben had been as reticent as his mother during the meal, that plus an added surly air that Ruthie lacked. With Ruthie, she was quiet because she wasn’t aware that others were around. Ruben, this was another case entirely. His silence was anger, things building up inside him that he never let out. Goldberg thought that boys needed to vent their anger, to blow up once in a while even if that was unpleasant, so that they wouldn’t be hateful men. Men who were hateful, these were criminals, wife-beaters and bank robbers. Different forms maybe, but Goldberg understood that their problems weren’t so far off from anybody else’s. Goldberg took it upon himself to draw Ruben out, to make him confront his anger.

He knocked on the boy’s door and opened it. Ruben sat bare chested on his bed. The window was open and cool night air blew in. Ruben faced out and didn’t turn around when his father entered.
“Son. Are you alright?” he asked. Goldberg kept his voice low so as to sound controlled, but its waver gave him away. “I know things have been tough on you. We should talk about it. That’s one thing the Catholics have on us, you know. Confession. What a thought. To tell everything and to know that then and there God forgives you. Everything’s okay. Pfft! Like that, done. But they’ve got the right idea, Catholics. You must confront what is making you angry, get it out into the open where you can see and understand. Burying things will only make them worse. Talk. Thought. Prayer. That’s all that we can do to make it stop.”

Still facing away, Ruben shrugged his shoulders, the blades rising and falling noticeably with the gesture. “We got Yom Kippur, don’t we? Isn’t that the day when all sins are forgiven?”

This was good, Goldberg figured. He sat down on the edge of Ruben’s bed and smiled to himself. The boy was taking an interest in religion, in God, in his faith. How screwed up could a religious boy be? Granted, the information he had wasn’t right, but he was trying to learn and to apply what he learned. A father couldn’t ask for more of his son.
“This isn’t exactly right,” Goldberg said. “The truth is far more complex than this. It’s next week, Yom Kippur is, you know. But the part you’re confused on, let me help you.”

“I doubt I’m the real confused one in this family,” Ruben snapped. As he finished speaking, he turned to glare at his father. Goldberg wanted to get up and leave then, but it was too late. That would be giving up on the boy, giving up on what he had gone in there to do.

“No. It’s not just that. See, Ruben, Yom Kippur is the day on which God forgives sins between man and God. But those sins that are between man and man, those aren’t forgiven by God. You must seek forgiveness for sins between man and man from the one you hurt.”

“Not all sins are sins.”

What this meant Goldberg did not know. Ruben was too young for terrible sins. Yet he clearly had something specific he was thinking of and from the way he spoke, it must be something awful, beyond comprehension.

“A sin is a sin,” Goldberg said, trying to be strong and lay down a hard line for Ruben to follow.

“Even if it’s committed on someone who isn’t a good person?” Ruben asked. “You want me to, what, turn the other cheek?” Ruben said, his voice mocking.
“That isn’t ours,” Goldberg said. “That’s theirs, this turning the other cheek business.”

“So it’s okay to strike out? To hurt someone who needs hurting?” Ruben smiled. “Fuck,” he said and the harshness of this word that didn’t belong in a conversation about God and Yom Kippur struck Goldberg like a punch to the nose. “Fuck,” Ruben repeated again, “then I’m just fine. You can go now.”

“God is the arm of retribution,” Goldberg said. “Not you. Not me. Nobody. No person can do this. We don’t have the right to make the decision.”

“I do,” Ruben said. “I’ve got that right. Maybe not always, but sometimes.”

Goldberg was sure now that he didn’t want to be having this conversation. He was sure that whatever he was learning or would learn would not be things he wanted to know about his son.

“I think I heard Ruthie call me,” Goldberg muttered and stood to leave.

“I didn’t,” Ruben said.

“Yes, I must have. I should see that she’s alright.”

“She’s never alright. She’s snapped. She’s fucked. Whatever it was holding Ruthie together, it’s over now.”
Goldberg pointed his finger out at his son. His hands looked old, he knew that. They were more lined than they used to be. He remembered how strong his hands had been once, the power with which they could grip a bat and swing. Now, even to himself, they appeared flaccid, almost lifeless. He tried to make himself angry, to scare his son who needed no one and never would again. Goldberg knew that but he also knew it was a father’s duty not to let this happen without a fight. He wouldn’t give up so easy.

“You don’t speak about your mother this way,” Goldberg said. “You speak about your mother with respect. She’s your mother, never forget this. Without her, what are you? You’re nothing. You’re less than nothing.” His hand was trembling and he hoped that Ruben might see it as rage but Goldberg thought that perhaps he was too transparent for that, that his fear was as evident to his son as it was to him. What a thing, to fear your child who you love and who was supposed to love you. There was no love in Ruben. Had there ever been? Goldberg wasn’t sure. Just those few days ago, after Ruben tattooed that curveball for a double, Goldberg had been sure that he and Ruben had reached something special in their relationship. So fast, this downfall. So very fast.
Ruben stood up from the bed and stared at his father. “Would you like to know what the sin was that I was talking about?”

Goldberg lowered his hand and turned away. “I have to see to your mother.”

“Don’t you want to know?” Ruben taunted him. “You’re my father. I think that makes you as responsible as it makes me.”

“I’m going now,” Goldberg said but he couldn’t make his feet respond to his words. It wasn’t just his arm that was trembling now, it was his entire body.

“I’ll tell you what it was. It was an awful thing. I better tell somebody. Talk. Prayer. Thought. The only way, that’s what you said. Well, I want to talk.”

What is my duty? Goldberg prayed. There was no answer. He walked out the door of the room and was a step into the hallway when he felt Ruben’s weight striking his back.

Goldberg went down in a pile, face first, Ruben’s fists pummeling, desperately seeking his face. Goldberg knew better than to roll over. If he did, there was nothing, no acceptable outcome, to something already gone wrong. He could be struck in the face or he could strike out. He was not a man who would ever - could ever - hit his son. Better that the boy hit him. And, utilitarian as it
seemed, better the boy hit him in the back then in the face.

“This is what I did!” Ruben screamed. “I killed a man! You wanted to know! Do you know now? Do you?”

Ruthie came into the hallway to see what all the commotion was about. From his position on the floor, Goldberg could see only her legs and chest, he couldn’t make out her face to try and guess what she might have been feeling. Her bathrobe was open and she was naked underneath. Her skin looked taut, almost the same as it had when he first married her and Goldberg thought his wife, even after the world had passed her by, was still an attractive woman. Goldberg wondered absently why she had taken off her clothes. Perhaps she had been calling to him, perhaps she meant for them to make love but that he had not gotten there in time.

Ruben’s fists fell harder and harder, clinging tenaciously to a rhythm he must have heard tattooed in his brain - bam, bam, pause, bam, bam, pause. His hysteria seemed to have passed, but Goldberg knew that this did not mean his anger would die and he would leave his father be.

Goldberg tried to smile up at his wife and he craned his neck up to do so. This was the only invitation Ruben needed and he took his father by his hair and slammed his
head down into the floor. Goldberg hoped that Ruthie had seen him smile. He thought this might comfort her.

Goldberg tried to speak but he couldn’t. He knew what he wanted to say though. He thought that if he could take his son by his shoulders and lower the boy’s head against his chest, he could run his hands through his hair like when Ruben was a baby and kiss him and whisper into his ear, “There’s too much love in this world, too much wanting, and we can never get away.” And then Ruben might understand and their silences could be free of hate.
33. Ruthie

Ruthie remembered nothing of the evening up until the point where she saw her son straddling her husband’s unconscious body. She felt no shock, neither joy nor sadness. Instead, she thought only that what she was witnessing was the inevitable, that she could only be next. We are all killing one another, Ruthie thought. Slowly or quickly, I’m not sure that it matters.

Ruben did not stop hammering his father’s head into the ground though it was obvious that Goldberg was not responding. Instead, he kept going and Ruthie was moved by the economy of his motions. She thought that this boy, whomever the killer was, knew what he was doing. He was, in every sense, a demon. They had sent such an experienced and thorough killer could only indicate a true respect for Ruthie, an understanding that she was as fearsome as any they had faced, at least thus far. There was no doubt in her mind: the killer was capable and, this she had to face, more capable than she.

Ruthie was tired of waiting and watching, tired of being on guard all the time. How long can I hold out? Ruthie asked herself. Certainly not forever. I’m human. So be it.
Ruthie walked into the kitchen. Her legs were shaky but her mind was made up. She looked for the knives in their wooden rack, but there were none there. Somebody had hidden them. They forces working against Ruthie were more complex and diverse than she had thought. Because why would the killer have hidden them? It wouldn’t make any sense. She was ready to give up, to let him have what he wanted. So why fight to keep her alive? Unless to toy with her still longer. That or somebody, something, else had use for her. There must be still more working against Ruthie and this realization only added to her burdens. The one thing she knew was that she was tired of being a pawn.

Ruthie opened up a drawer and it made a long, pained squeak. Somebody should have oiled that years ago. God, Ruthie reflected exasperatedly, this apartment was just falling to pieces. Best that she leave. Everything was just becoming too complicated in Brooklyn and Ruthie felt a pang of nostalgia for the time in her life when squeaky drawers and hidden knives wouldn’t have irked her so.

She considered what the utensils had to offer. She pulled a butter knife out and tested the blade against her thumb. It felt ineffectual. Ruthie held the butter knife up in front of her eyes. It glinted in the light. Ruthie
placed the blade firmly against her throat and drew it across. Nothing. It wouldn’t do.

Rummaging around in the kitchen drawer - the top one to the right of the stove - Ruthie came across the scissors. They had red, plastic handles. She tested the tip with her finger. It didn’t break the skin, not from a little trial touch, but the blade pushed in quickly and sharply enough that Ruthie drew her breath in through her mouth. This would do, she thought. It would definitely do.

Ruthie marched purposefully, holding the scissors by the blade, away from her body, as she had been taught as a young girl. This way, if you fell, it would only cut your hand. There was no way to fall on the blade and have it impale itself in your chest or stomach, someplace where it could do real and significant damage. Ruthie’s mother had told her that careless little girls had been killed by running through their home with a scissor, holding it by the handle.

Goldberg was in the same position as Ruthie had last seen him. A small pool of blood had developed around his left temple and Ruthie hoped that it wouldn’t make it to the carpet that signified the start of the living room. If it did, it would never come out.
Whereas her legs had been shaking on her way to the kitchen, Ruthie now felt no fear. She had a purpose and she understood completely that she was doing the right thing. What was there to fear for one who acted correctly? Suicide was wrong. But this would not be suicide. They were going to kill her. This there could be no doubt of. Better that it be by her own design and in a manner of her own choosing than whatever sick and perverse way The Others would concoct.

Ruben no longer straddled his father. He was, instead, leaning against the white wall. He was sweating profusely and Ruthie saw the beads gather and meander down from his forehead onto his cheek, downward until they curved towards the corner where the upper and lower lip met.

He did not speak and neither did she while they considered one another. Ruthie tried to lock eyes with the killer, but he would not meet her gaze. He seemed to stare, instead, somewhere at her midsection and Ruthie realized that he was looking for the spot where he should attack her, he was searching for where she was most vulnerable. Ruthie realized that he was staring fixedly at her breasts. This did not bother her. She thought it logical. Beneath that flesh was her heart and this method would mean a quick and relatively painless death. There was little by way of
bone or thick muscle to impede his progress if he went through her breasts and into her heart. Again, Ruthie realized that she was doing the right thing. One such as this would not fail - these would be her terms. God would understand.

Ruthie stepped towards Ruben and held the scissors out to him. He drew back slightly as though he were frightened of her.

"Take these," she said.

He stared, this time at her face, and did not move.

"It’s alright," Ruthie said. "Go on, take them."

Ruthie moved her hand insistently forward, stepping as she did so that she touched his right hand with the hard plastic handle of the scissors.

"Go on," she repeated. "Use them. That’s what you have to do, isn’t it? I won’t fight you."

Ruben took the scissors from her and gripped them hard. Ruthie looked down at his hand and she could see the veins bulging out in his hand.

"You want me to use these?" he said.

"Yes."

"Mom?"

Ruthie didn’t answer.

"I can’t do it, mom."
“Use them,” she snapped harshly. She didn’t appreciate this One dragging the process out longer than it needed to be. He was an assassin, a good one. This conversation had no business taking place.

Ruben looked down at the floor.

“Fucking use them,” Ruthie said.

“Mom?”

“You do it now, you son of a bitch!”

Ruben blinked hard then stepped quickly forward. With his forearm, he shoved Ruthie aside. She stumbled backward but managed to regain his balance. Ruben straddled Goldberg and plunged the scissors with as much force as he could muster into the exposed back.

Blood spat up half-heartedly upwards, but with enough force to catch Ruben, who leaned in closely as he worked, in the face. Ruthie didn’t understand what had happened, how her husband had come to be prostrate on the floor, her son crouching over him with a bloody pair of scissors.

Goldberg’s body twitched. Ruthie wondered if this was voluntary. She began to cry and Ruben looked up and saw her and he, too, began to cry.
“Ruben,” Ruthie screamed, “What in God’s name have you done?” She heard the words come out of her mouth and she thought they came from a person who now saw everything the way it was meant to be seen, a person who recognized horror manifested, but she knew this was only a sensation and that she didn’t yet understand or appreciate how evil worked.
Hannah fiddled with the lock and Brian realized before she did that the door wasn’t locked and that was why she couldn’t seem to be able to turn the key.

Hannah pushed the door ajar and said, “Go on.”

Brian stepped through easily.

The first thing he noticed was the blood on Ruben’s face. The boy’s pallor emphasized the dark red so that the color appeared to be moving, enveloping his face, more a virus than a stain.

Brian saw the body on the floor, Ruben above it with the scissors, and understood immediately what had happened, and what would if he didn’t put a stop to it. The boy had snapped. Whatever had occurred at the Parker House was peanuts - and it was obvious to Brian that the boy was capable of more than anyone other than he could ever have guessed.

Brian was off-duty. He kept his service weapon, a .40 caliber Sig Sauer P239 semi-automatic, locked in his desk drawer. But he also had an off-duty carry gun, a Smith & Wesson J frame .38 Special, a small enough gun so that he could wear it comfortably in an ankle holster. Occasionally Brian used his shoulder holster or clipped the Beretta to
his belt, but he didn’t feel comfortable with this, not when he was off-duty and an old woman passing by might catch sight and have a heart-attack. This way, no one would accidentally notice his gun and become suspicious.

Brian reached down for his ankle as quickly and gracefully as he could. Still, he tripped in the process and sprawled to the ground. He could feel Hannah staring down at him and he wondered if she had yet noticed her brother, her father’s body and the catatonic look on her mother’s face.

Ruben watched closely. He wasn’t moving - he didn’t even seem to be breathing. He held the scissors loosely in front of his belly button.

Brian’s first shot almost blew his foot off. The velcro holster hadn’t come free as easily as he expected and he had already jerked the trigger before the gun was pointed anywhere in particular.

For the second shot, he stared straight at Ruben and exhaled as he squeezed the trigger, trying consciously to slow his body down.

The bullet struck Ruben in the chest, just beneath his right pectoral, a target Brian had clearly seen due to Ruben’s thin frame and his bare chest. Ruben flew backwards
off his father and hit the wall hard, harder than Brian could ever have expected.

Hannah was screaming in the background – though the scream seemed more like a dull drone than anything else, so shocked were his eardrums from the Sig’s noise – and he felt her grabbing at his arm.

Brian scrambled to his feet, pushing himself up with his hands even though he knew it was dumb to do this while he was gripping the pistol and elbowed Hannah purposefully out of his way, hoping she realized he wasn’t acting out of anger but because he had to have his hands free so that he could react. A civilian hanging on his arm wouldn’t do anybody any good.

Brian approached Ruben and stood over his body. Blood oozed slowly out of the entry wound, but the larger amount seemed to have gone out his back and splattered up against the wall.

When he was satisfied that the boy was dead, Brian turned to Ruthie. “Are you alright?” he asked.

Her lips moved but no sound came out.

“Are you alright?” Brian repeated.

Ruthie formed a perfect O with her lips and slumped silently down to the ground in a fluid motion, folding her legs up Indian style.
She didn’t move.
Hannah could make nothing of her exam. The numbers, the symbols, they meant nothing to her though she had stared at them for weeks in preparation.

This was it. The end of her first semester, already on academic probation, they would send her home.

Which was where? Another thing to worry about. Another thing Hannah refused to acknowledge. The psychiatrist, Dr. Brooks, had told Hannah he had seen her mother and her father. “I didn’t see it coming,” Dr. Brooks had said, “how could you have?” She shrugged her shoulders at him.

“Acknowledge what has happened,” he told Hannah, all the time. Every week, Tuesdays and Thursdays. That was his mantra. Life insurance paid for the doctor and Hannah went to most of their appointments. From her father’s checking account, which was now part of Hannah’s desk work, she knew her mother had seen Dr. Brooks. She called him up to say that Ruthie wouldn’t be coming in anymore and he asked her if she wanted to come in. Not wanting to be difficult, Hannah said yes, which was how she came to hear Dr. Brooks’ reprimand of “Acknowledge!” bi-weekly.

“I’ve acknowledged,” Hannah had said at the most recent visit, just yesterday, and the doctor had folded his
legs and clasped his hands. He shook his head slowly. He didn’t believe her, but Hannah didn’t care. Or she couldn’t care. But she was telling the truth. What she meant was: I acknowledge what happened, I acknowledge it wasn’t my fault, but I can’t study, that’s what I’m dealing with right now, today. Not death and heartbreak and lives torn asunder. Today I have to study and nothing will stick and exams start tomorrow.

And what she really had wanted to say to Dr. Brooks, what she was ashamed of but felt someday she’d have to say to him if he kept after her, was, “Tragedies change.” Because Hannah was on to a new one and that was an ugly truth that she recognized. Ruben and Goldberg were gone, Hannah had thought, and today’s tragedy is my exam.

Hannah didn’t say any of this. That wasn’t what he wanted to hear, it wasn’t within a psychiatrist’s area of expertise.

Hannah stared patiently at her exam paper, waiting for the numbers and letters to come together and equal something legible

“I acknowledge,” Hannah said out loud and a boy with eyebrows so blond and transparent against his skin they appeared to be plucked turned and frowned at her for breaking his concentration. “Sorry,” Hannah mouthed at him.
She glanced out the window. The exam room overlooked the university’s baseball field. The players down there couldn’t have been a team. They looked like children from the window, small and slight, wearing disparate tee-shirts and sweatshirts, mostly without caps. But they moved their bodies with purpose and dignity and Hannah drew her breath in at the sight of it.

She watched an outfielder, his black hair strangely visible from the window, shag fly balls. The first two were no problem. A quick step to the left and one that came right to him. He caught the balls one-handed, a child showboating for his friends, and Hannah smiled, thinking how her father wouldn’t have approved.

The third fly ball was short and after a moment’s hesitation, the outfielder broke full speed towards it. He tripped before he could get to the ball and planted himself face first in the still browning autumn grass. He lay there, enjoying the feel, then rose to his knees and shrugged his shoulders at the others.

Hannah turned back to the white pieces of paper in front of her. She shuffled them together and rotated them around in a circle. She tried to find the strength to care what they said but instead she found herself thinking of Goldberg, his paunch straining at his waist as he hopped
around the living room, telling Ruben what was so essential and life-giving and life-ending about a curveball, Ruben sitting cross-legged on the floor, back to the couch, transfixed by his father. Where was Ruthie then? Hannah couldn’t remember. In Hannah’s mind, her mother seemed encased by shadows, peeking round the corner now and then to smile shyly. Hannah wondered what had been behind that smile, how far into the future her mother had seen and whether, had she known, anything would have changed.

“Where does passion come from?” Hannah asked the blond boy’s back. He didn’t answer. Hannah sighed and resolved to keep looking.