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Creating a Genuine Rogue: Successful Narrative Techniques for Exploring the Difference Between Dishonesty and Morality in an Unreliable Narrator

An Introductory Essay and an Original Novel

Alan Kravitz

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Abstract

This essay explores the techniques that contemporary authors use in order to make dishonest or unlikeable characters—often known as tricksters—compelling and believable. Many of fiction's most memorable characters have been tricksters. By examining novels by three contemporary authors—Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys*, Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*, and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*—we find that specific literary tools must be employed by the author in order to make these characters understandable, and even identifiable, to the reader. Authors who use these techniques can successfully create what Chabon himself calls a "genuine rogue." These rogues often lie, cheat, and make life difficult for other main characters in the novel. Still, they go on to expose deep truths about the people and worlds they inhabit.

The characters examined in this essay are Grady Tripp from *Wonder Boys*, Howard Belsey from *On Beauty*, and Richard Katz from *Freedom*. In looking closely at these characters, we find that Chabon, Smith, and Franzen employ a variety of tools in order to make these characters multi-dimensional and even relatable. In *Wonder Boys*, Chabon relies heavily on metaphor. When Grady talks about August Van Zorn, his first major literary hero, we discover that August's misfortunes mirror Grady's. In *On Beauty*, Smith makes effective use of dialogue to show how Howard's actions affect the lives of those around him. In *Freedom*, Franzen gives Richard the pivotal act of exposing a private diary—an act that leads to the breakup of the novel's lead characters.

In using these techniques successfully, Chabon, Smith, and Franzen have created characters who audaciously expose important truths, even if they have to lie and cheat in the process.

These techniques are of major interest to me, because the protagonist in my novel (which accompanies this essay), could very well be classified as a “genuine rogue.” Andy lies and cheats constantly. He hurts the people in his life, yet he also makes them see things about themselves that they might never have seen otherwise. He does bad things to people, but he is not a villain. As a writer, I am using the techniques employed so successfully by Chabon, Smith, and Franzen in the hope that readers will at least understand Andy—and quite possibly relate to him in ways that will make him a compelling protagonist to follow.

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Chapter I

Creating a Genuine Rogue: Successful Narrative Techniques for Exploring the Difference Between Dishonesty and Morality in an Unreliable Character

When an author has a protagonist who is blatantly dishonest—often referred to as a "trickster," or an unreliable narrator if the story is told in the first person—what techniques must the author use to ensure that the reader will want to invest time in following that protagonist?

There is no question that, from the earliest days of storytelling, characters have often been driven by dishonesty. For great fiction to evolve around such a character, an author must, however, find ways to communicate much more than mere understanding of the protagonist's motives. The author must create a vivid portrait of the protagonist's sense of morality and fairness. Many of literature's seminal characters, from Hamlet to Joseph K to Scarlett O'Hara, spend much of their time lying and making life difficult for those around them. Yet instead of considering them "villains," readers and audiences are most often on their side, even going so far as to imagine themselves acting in exactly the same way. Thus, dishonesty is taken out of the realm of the immoral, and actually becomes accepted within the reader's own moral compass.

Compelling fiction can be created when a reader accepts, and even supports, a character's blatant lies and cover-ups. In her essay "Perfectly Flawed: In Defense of Unlikable Characters", author Lionel Shriver argues:

> . . . Readers want to be engaged more than they want to be seduced. When purely affectionate and approving, a reader's relationship to a

> character is flat. When positive feelings mix with censure and consternation, the relationship is dynamic. In fact, authorial elicitation of the reader's frantic if impotent warning "Oh no, don't do that!" is a powerful literary tool, for dismay generates energy and intensifies engagement. (n. pag.)

Shriver, who has created several "unlikable" protagonists (including Eva, a woman at odds with normality because of her inability to love her own son, in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*), believes that it is "easy to craft nice characters," but she labels this "a cheap courting of your (the reader's) approval." Instead, she says, "I try to duplicate in fiction the complex, contradictory, and infuriating people I meet on the other side of my study door. When fiction works, readers can develop the same nuanced, conflicted relationships to characters that they have in their own friends and family."

These are the very types of characters that intrigue me as a reader. I have always been attracted to fiction in which the author makes the reader understand that there are times when lying becomes morally advantageous in the protagonist's world. Many of my favorite fictional characters, from Huck Finn to Holden Caulfield, have lied and cheated when they believed it was necessary to do so. In her book *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Fiction,* author Jeanne Rosier Smith describes a literary trickster this way: "Interpreter, storyteller, and transformer, the trickster is a master of borders and exchange, injecting multiple perspectives to challenge all that is stultifying, stratified, bland, or prescriptive." (Preface)

In other words, effective tricksters may lie and cheat constantly, yet they do so in search of—or in deference to—larger truths, be they truths concerning unfairness of the world they inhabit, or the daunting task of being "different" in societies that often

favor and reward the status quo. This is why the author must master the difficult task of creating a vivid picture of the world according to that character, and expose these larger truths. Otherwise, there is the risk of the character coming off as a complete louse, someone that very few people would want to follow.

In my essay, I will consider the techniques an author uses to create tricksters who are believable and multi-dimensional, despite their undeniable dishonesty. These are characters who become infinitely compelling, because they make lying and cheating understood, and even acceptable, to the reader. I will examine three novels where the author has done this successfully: Michael Chabon's *Wonder Boys,* Zadie Smith's *On Beauty,* and Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom*. The protagonists in *Wonder Boys* and *On Beauty* have two things in common with Andy Prystowski, the protagonist of my as yet untitled novel. They are both esteemed university professors who have made names for themselves in literary and academic circles, and they both lie constantly, to the point where their dishonesty ruins important personal relationships and impacts their professional and creative worlds as well. Yet, no matter whether they get away with their dishonesty, Grady Tripp (*Wonder Boys*) and Howard Belsey (*On Beauty*), both emerge as flawed heroes.

Richard Katz, the character whom I will examine from *Freedom*, has slightly less in common with Andy. He is not the novel's protagonist. He is "merely an interesting supporting actor" (Franzen 377) in the lives of Walter and Patty Berglund, the couple whose marriage and life stories anchor *Freedom*. He is also a rock musician, as opposed to an academic. While there are no doubt pressures in the music industry, Richard does not share the same professional circles and expectations that Grady,

Howard, and Andy share. Still, he shares a core rouge trait with these characters: He has lied to—and hurt—many people throughout his life. He is well aware of this, and yet he continues doing this throughout *Freedom*. Yet Franzen makes us understand why Richard acts the way that he does. In doing so, Franzen has also created a flawed hero—someone who is compelling, even if he is not always (and some might say, hardly ever) likable.

In this essay, I will explore in greater depth the ways in which Chabon, Smith, and Franzen create "genuine rogue" characters who build their own moral universe—and dare readers to become part of that universe.

Creating the "Genuine Rogue"

In *Wonder Boys*, Michael Chabon gave himself the challenge of eliciting support for Grady Tripp, a novelist and creative writing professor who has achieved both literary and academic success, yet responds to his good fortune by habitually sabotaging his relations with nearly everyone close to him.

Wonder Boys is written in first-person voice, so Chabon presents Grady as an unreliable narrator. Early in the novel, we learn that Grady has been cheating on his wife by carrying on an affair with Sara Gaskell, his boss's wife. *Wonder Boys* starts on the day Grady wakes up to find a note from his third wife, Emily, telling him that she's leaving him. Though the exact contents of the note are not revealed, Grady has a gut feeling that Emily found out about Sara. Yet Grady does not reveal the breakup to the reader until after he drives to Emily's office, hoping to pick her up from work. He explains that, after spending much of the day in a marijuana haze, that he hoped he'd

"just imagined it all" (29). He is as dishonest with himself as he is with others. Not surprisingly, he also lies easily to Sara. When he and one of his students go snooping in Sara's house, the student accidently shoots and kills her dog. Grady deals with that by stuffing the dog's body in the trunk of his car, and letting Sara think the dog has gone missing.

From the start of *Wonder Boys*, Chabon effectively uses metaphor and symbolism to help readers understand Grady's propensity for—and even championing of—dishonesty. The metaphor in this case is August Van Zorn, a fellow writer whom Grady admires. Van Zorn never actually appears in *Wonder Boys*, yet Chabon structures the novel in a way that makes Van Zorn a looming presence. As Grady narrates the story, his reverence for Van Zorn is the first thing we learn about him. We also learn that Grady and Van Zorn are bound together by tragedy; in this case, suicide. Young Grady was raised by his grandmother after his father killed himself. Van Zorn lived in a room above them—a room that once belonged to Grady's father—in part to shield himself from the grief of his wife's suicide. One day, when Grady was 14, he takes a lunch tray up to Van Zorn. He finds him "with a tiny black-rimmed hole in his left temple, sitting, still slowly rocking, in his brentwood chair" (4). In short order, Grady reveals other things he and Van Zorn have in common: a love of booze and a battle with insomnia, a combination that Grady calls "the midnight disease" (5). Chabon has Grady revealing these details even before the novel's plot begins. Though Grady tells us that he holds Van Zorn in high regard because he was the first writer he ever knew, the reader already gets a sense that there is something deeper. When Grady reveals that Van Zorn "has set the kind of example that, as a writer, I've been living up

to ever since. I only hope I haven't invented him" (5), he reveals a fiction writer's sense of the dramatic. The reader understands that Grady has already "invented" Van Zorn. He has probably told so many Van Zorn stories that even he can no longer tell fact from fiction. If honesty is blurred in the service of telling a great story or creating a vivid character, so be it.

Grady alludes to Van Zorn throughout *Wonder Boys*, and often under circumstances that celebrate dishonesty. Terry Crabtree, Grady's editor, became his close friend after they both got away with plagiarizing a Van Zorn story as part of a college writing class. With this kind of history, Chabon makes Grady utterly believable when he says "the best keep on lying successfully long after they've been discovered" (251).

Chabon himself alluded to his own admiration of a certain kind of cheater in his essay "On Canseco", which is included in his book *Manhood for Amateurs*. Here, he writes about the former baseball player Jose Canseco. Once an admired all-star with the Oakland Athletics, Canseco wrote about his admitted steroid use in a tell-all book that named other players who allegedly joined him—making himself out as a hero even though he lied about his own steroid use for years. In the essay, Chabon labels Canseco as "greedy, faithless, selfish, embittered, scornful, and everlastingly a showboat" (146). Yet in the same essay, he goes on to write about how much he likes—and even admires—Canseco.

> Canseco has been described as a charmer and a clown, but in fact, he is a rogue, a genuine one, and genuine ones are rare, inside baseball and out. It's not enough to flout the law, to be a rogue—break promises, shirk responsibilities, cheat—you must also, at least some of the time, and with the same abandon, do your best, play by the rules, keep faith with your creditors and dependents, obey orders, throw out the runner at

> home plate with a dead strike from deep right field. Above all, you must do these things, as you do their opposites, for no particular reason, because you feel like it or do not, because nothing matters, and everything's a joke, and nobody knows anything, and most of all, as Rhett Butler once codified for rogues, everywhere, because you do not give a damn. (147)

To Chabon, people like Canseco can lie with abandon, yet still be considered heroic, because they are masters at exposing a truth greater than their own personal demons. (In Canseco's case, the now well-documented widespread steroid use in baseball.)

> They were the ones, the Ulysses and Sinbads and Raleighs, who sailed to places we couldn't imagine, and then they returned, after a career of wonder, calamity, and chagrin, not one whit better than when they were when they left. And surely not better than we—possibly worse. Yet in the end, they were the only ones fit to make the voyage, and when they came back, they carried a truth in their baggage that no one else would be clown enough, and rogue enough, and hero enough, to speak. (149)

In *Wonder Boys*, Chabon has created his own "genuine rogue" in the person of Grady Tripp, who with all his foibles exposes a universal truth about the difficulty of mere mortals attempting to create something immortal in the form of great literature. Early on in *Wonder Boys*, Grady hints at the toll that this quest has taken, both in his life and in his relationships. In high school he read Jack Kerouac, and from that point on, he, in his own words "conceived the usual picture of myself as an out-law-poet-pathfinder, a kind of Zen-masterly John C. Freemont on amphetamines with a marbled dime-store pad of lined paper pad in the back pocket of my denim pants. I still see myself that way, I suppose, and I'm probably none the better for it" (17). While he expresses some of the proverbial writer's romanticism that often comes from Kerouac inspiration, he very quickly knocks that romanticism by alluding to the dangers of hanging on to that image. He knows the toll that his writer's life takes. Yet even though

he knows that he's "probably none the better for it" (17), he makes the reader believe that there is no way for him to exist without seeing himself in Kerouac's image.

A mutual attraction for literature was one of the sparks that drew Grady and Sara together. Speaking about her voracious love of books, Grady says "my lover was an addict and I was a manufacturer of her particular drug of choice" (39). Through the course of the novel, Sara will discover Grady's lies. When that discovery endangers their relationship, Grady makes what even he considers "a cynical and pathetic last attempt" (336) to save it: He suggests that he wants to marry her. Sara doesn't say a word. However, her actions reveal her undeniable hurt and frustration.

> She flattened her left hand against my stomach and held it there a moment, keeping me literally at arm's length. Then, as if teetering on a narrow shelf of rock, high above a canyon, with my back to the blue abyss, she gave me the gentlest of shoves. Before I fell I noticed, with a pang, the pale glint of her wedding band. Then, I hit the floor. Hard. She stepped over me, into the outer office, and then strode off toward the Hurley Room, her heels knocking marble, the hem of her pleated skirt flicking at the air behind her like the tooth of a lash. After a moment, I heard voices echoing in the hall and the chime of an elevator. Then, I heard nothing at all. And that, those who know me well would have unquestionably concluded, was exactly the response I deserved. (337)

Here, we see what makes Grady both annoying and compelling. We see his writer's gift for simile and storytelling. Yet we also see that he is completely aware of the emotional damage that he causes. Here, Grady does not fault Sara for her response. In fact, he validates her, despite the emotional damage he has caused.

As the novel concludes, Sara goes beyond forgiving Grady for his lies; she marries him. Life with Grady may be infuriating, but it's never boring. It's a price she is willing to pay for living with a creative man who comes up with stories for a living.

Examining the Muddled Narrative

In Smith's *On Beauty*, Howard Belsey is an art history professor at a fictitious Boston-area college, Wellington (widely thought to be inspired by Harvard, as Smith is herself a former Radcliffe Fellow), who has dedicated his life to teaching and writing about Rembrandt. Throughout the novel, Howard constantly challenges widely held assumptions about Rembrandt. Yet, in a perceptive and effective twist, Howard steadfastly believes that Rembrandt is overrated. He has spent years of his life dedicated to an artist whom he does not even like. By exposing this major contradiction in Howard's professional life, Smith gives a glimpse into the psyche of a man who, though brilliant, has continually made curious—if not flat out bad—choices in his life.

Any discussion of *On Beauty* would be incomplete without acknowledging that the novel's narrative structure pays homage to E.M. Forster's *Howards End*. Even before *On Beauty* was published, Smith has repeatedly cited Forster as an influence for her own fiction. During a 2003 lecture at Harvard, she told students that Forster's characters, "don't know what they want, or how to get it" (Potier) and that Forster's narrative structure, often criticized for being muddled and meandering, serve his characters well. "Forster himself was conscious of the connection between the style and the ethics in interesting ways," she said. "He felt his infamous muddles had value, and the more controlled, clear Austen-like elements of his style were actually ethically problematic" (Potier).

In *On Beauty*, Smith builds an appropriate muddled, meandering structure to replicate the complex, complicated world in which Howard Belsey operates. In chapter after chapter, we see Howard dealing with a plethora of people in his life: his wife, his

children, his mistresses, his students, his academic allies, and his academic enemies. Over and over again, we see one trait very clearly. Howard is indeed a very Forster-inspired character who doesn't know what he wants, or how to get it. By the nature of his stature as a professor at a major university, people look to Howard for answers. Yet deep down, Howard is not sure that he has valid answers. His insecurities affect every single one of his relationships.

Like Grady Tripp, Howard is a womanizer and a philanderer. However, in *On Beauty*, Howard and his African-American wife, Kiki, are trying to keep their marriage together as they reach their 30th anniversary. Using a third person omniscient point of view, Smith sets the story nearly a year after Kiki confronted Howard with a condom she found in his suit pocket. Yet even though he admitted to indiscretion, he is still holding on to a lie. Howard told Kiki it was only a one-night stand with a stranger, when in fact, he had been carrying on an affair with Claire, a fellow Wellington professor and one of the Belseys' closest friends.

Smith maps out the damage caused by Howard's dishonesty in a scene from Howard and Kiki's anniversary party. In front of a large group of family, friends, and associates, Howard makes a toast to his wife. But instead of quoting the toast verbatim, Smith uses her third person narrative to go deep into Howard's psyche:

> How much worse would it have been had he told the truth? It would only have packed misery upon misery. As it stood, a few of his closest friendships had been imperiled; those people Kiki had spoken to were disappointed in him and had told him so. A year later, this party was a test of their respect for him, and now, realizing that he had passed the test, Howard had to restrain himself from crying with relief before each new person who was kind to him. (109)

Here, Smith lays out Howard's incessant need for respect and admiration as an explanation for Howard's dishonesty. Yet, she goes deeper by providing a moral argument as well. Telling the truth would hurt Kiki and their friends much more than they have been, and would cause them even more grief than they've experienced. Thus, Howard is presented as still having a moral backbone, even though he continues to lie about his extramarital relationship. Smith makes Howard's dishonesty palpable to readers on several levels. She creates believable reasons for it, and she gives the novel added drama and conflict by making readers wonder how long Howard will be able to keep his affair a secret. This keeps Howard from being an insufferable character, and instead makes him multi-dimensional and interesting. Readers may scoff at his actions, but they will still turn the page.

Kiki will discover the truth about Howard's affair during the course of *On Beauty*, and the profound pain Howard inflicts finally does cause the couple to separate. In scenes between Howard and Kiki, Smith relies heavily on dialogue to show the differences between them. During one of their arguments, Howard hesitantly brings up Kiki's weight gain during their marriage as a contributor to his attraction for Claire.

> Howard passed his satchel from his right hand to his left and opened the front door. He was that lawyer again, simplifying a complex case for a desperate, simple-minded client who would not take his advice.
>
> `It's true that men—they respond to beauty…it doesn't end for them, this…this *concern* with beauty as a physical actuality in the world—and that's clearly imprisoning and it infantilizes…but it's *true* and…I don't know how else to explain what—'
>
> `Get away from me.'
>
> 'Fine.'

> `I'm not interested in your aesthetic theories. Save them for Claire. She loves them.'
>
> Howard sighed. `I wasn't giving you a theory.'
>
> `You think you're some great philosophical I-don't-fucking-know-what because you can't keep your dick in your pants? You're not Rembrandt, Howard. And don't kid yourself: honey, I look at boys *all the time*—all the time. I see pretty boys every day of the week, and I think about their cocks, and what they would look like buck naked…'
>
> `You're being really vulgar, now.'
>
> `But I'm an adult, Howard. And I've chosen my life. I thought you had, too. But you're still running after pussy, apparently.'
>
> `But she's not…' said Howard, lowering his voice to an exasperated whisper, `you know…she's *our* age, older, I think—you talk as if it were a student like one of Erskine's…or…But in fact, I didn't-'
>
> `You want a *fucking* prize?' (207-208)

Here, the extended dialogue serves two purposes. It shows Kiki as a street-smart, people-smart woman who can see through Howard. In many ways, she becomes a conduit for the reader, who by this time, can also see through Howard. Yet the dialogue's rhythm—the incomplete thoughts, the desperate attempts at rationalization—also show Howard at his most vulnerable. Even a pathetic thought about Claire being the same age comes off as a feeble attempt to reduce the damage he's caused. Smith herself has said that in fiction, "Real empathy makes cruelty an impossibility" (Vida, *The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers* 169). Here, as throughout *On Beauty*, Smith shows Howard's empathy. Though it's an obviously weak attempt, he wants to spare Kiki any harsh feelings. He tries to tell her that it's not her fault—that men in general are "imprisoned and infantilized" by their obsession with female beauty. Even Howard's mention of Claire's age shows empathy. It's his own

feeble way of telling Kiki that she would probably feel even worse had Claire been a much younger woman. This may not make him likeable or forgivable, but it does make him human—perhaps even identifiable—for the reader.

As a result, it's not surprising to find out that even with the bitterness that comes with the end of a long marriage, Kiki still possesses an innate connection to Howard. In the book's last scene, Howard is giving one of his Rembrandt lectures, and Kiki is there to support him. Though Smith is deliberately ambiguous about whether they will get back together, she makes it clear, with lines like "He looked out into the audience once more and saw Kiki only. He smiled at her. She smiled. She looked away, but she smiled" (443), that Kiki cannot—and will not—sever ties with Howard completely. Is all forgiven? Probably not. But the woman whom Howard has hurt the most with his dishonesty has learned to accept him for what he is. Howard is still as iconoclastic as ever, failing to see anything other than what he's used to seeing in Rembrandt's work, or in his life. Kiki is the one who has evolved, once again serving as a conduit for the reader.

Exposing the "Dirty Truth."

Though *Freedom* is the story of a married couple, Patty and Walter Berglund, and their children, there is no doubt that the character of Richard Katz plays a significant role in their lives, and by extension, in *Freedom* as well. Richard is introduced to us as Walter's college roommate. Through almost the entire course of *Freedom,* Richard remains close friends with Walter. Yet he will also carry on a significant, emotionally charged affair with Patty. Richard is a rock musician who will

achieve—and lose—commercial success. He will also use the emotional baggage of his affair with Patty as the basis for several of his songs. In this sense, Franzen effectively uses the creation of art (in this case, rock music) as a prism for examination of the dishonesty that inherently comes with engaging in extra-marital affairs. Patty will be the inspiration for many of Richard's songs, but Richard will write the lyrics with just the right amount of vague, secretive references, so that only Patty be able to figure out those references. He wants to spare her and Walter any unnecessary pain and embarrassment.

Art also has a profound effect on Patty's actions, as evidenced in the scene at the Berglunds' lake house, where Richard and Patty will consummate their affair. Here, Franzen effectively uses Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as a structural element. Immediately before Patty lets herself into Richard's bedroom and gets in bed with him, we read:

> The autobiographer wonders whether things might have gone differently if she hadn't reached the very pages in which Natasha Rostov, who was obviously meant for the goofy and good Pierre, falls in love with his great cool friend Prince Andréi. Patty had not seen this coming. Pierre's loss unfolded, as she read it, like a catastrophe in slow motion. Things probably would not have gone any differently, but the effect those pages had on her, their pertinence, was almost psychedelic. She read past midnight, absorbed now even by the military stuff, and was relieved to see, when she turned the lamp off, that the twilight finally was gone. (166)

Quickly, Richard leaves the lake house as part of an ultimately unsuccessful effort to end the affair before any more damage is done. As soon as Richard leaves, Franzen again uses *War and Peace* to foreshadow what's happening—and about to happen—to Richard, Patty, and Walter.

> And he (Richard) went.
> And she (Patty) became a better reader. At first in desperate escapism, later in search of help. By the time Walter returned from Saskatchewan,

> she'd dispatched the remainder of *War and Peace* in three marathon reading days. Natasha had promised herself to Andréi but was then corrupted by the wicked Anatole, and Andréi went off in despair to get himself mortally wounded in battle, surviving only long enough to be nursed by Natasha and forgive her, whereupon excellent old Pierre, who had done some growing up and deep thinking as a prisoner of war, stepped forward to present himself as Natasha's consolation prize; and lots of babies followed. Patty felt she'd lived an entire compressed lifetime in those three days, and when her own Pierre returned from the wilderness, badly sunburned despite religious slatherings of maximum-strength sunblock, she was ready to try to love him again. (175-176)

In his review of *Freedom, New York Times Book Review* editor Sam Tanenhaus singled out this scene, referring to it as "Franzen's self-mocking acknowledgment that not even the greatest literature can save us from ourselves, because nothing finally can override the imperative to be free." Franzen shows us that while the quest for so-called "freedom" is an inherently human trait, it often becomes a futile and disappointing exercise. Even when Patty is with the man she really loves (Richard), as opposed to the man she is supposed to love (Walter), her "freedom" is interrupted by self-doubt.

The *War and Peace* references also guide us, as readers, in understanding Richard's and Patty's choice to begin their affair, and thus deceive Walter, who means a great deal to both of them. In a perfect world, Richard and Patty were meant for one another. But the world they inhabit, as was the case with Natasha and Andréi, is far from perfect. We understand that their affair is born not out of an innate desire to harm another human being; but instead out of an innate desire to be true to themselves, and make sense of the world around them. Thus, a more personal honesty emerges amid this dishonesty. As Franzen demonstrates with this placement of *War and Peace* within his own narrative, this combination often helps to create the foundation for engrossing and compelling characters.

Franzen also uses a subtle but masterful narrative technique concerning Richard. Up until the time that he and Patty begin their affair, as well as his rising success with his group Walnut Surprise, Richard is referenced in the narrative by his first name. However, in subsequent chapters, he is referred to in the narrative as Katz—a much more formal, but less personal, choice.

Though *Freedom* presents itself as a third person narrative, we learn later that the sections about Patty are actually the manuscript that Patty is secretly writing—she is an autobiographer who cannot see herself as a first person narrator. With this revelation, Patty's point of view becomes a first person account, masquerading as a third person account. This makes Richard's sudden reference as Katz all the more telling. With Patty in control the story, this technique reveals a powerful truth: that Richard's success, both in his ability to get close to Patty, and in his career, comes at a cost. When he moved on from band to band—and from woman to woman—he was Richard, with all the closeness that a first name basis implies. Now, he's Katz, complete with the distance that a last name basis implies. Patty is well aware of the stereotypical rock musician's life, one that indicates that Richard will always have other women available. She is also aware of how much she would hurt Walter if she ever left him. In her case, the Katz reference symbolizes a subliminal line drawn to protect herself from jealousy and disappointment. Patty will share fulfilling sex and deep revelations with Richard. However, she will not share her life with him. She is creating her own distance between herself and Richard. She will not leave Walter on her own accord. Richard knows this. He knows all too well that these attempts at personal protection are really illusions. He has the artist's ability to see how unfair—and even cruel—that humans

can be toward one another. To have a shot at fairness and survival, he believes that he must make unorthodox choices—even if those choices may hurt those closest to him.

Perhaps none of Richard's choices in *Freedom* symbolize his moral ambiguity more than when he visits the Berglunds' home in Washington D.C. and discovers that Patty has secretly been writing her life story—the story that will eventually become her part of *Freedom*. Richard immediately begins reading the manuscript, and Franzen quickly brings his ego, his selfishness, and his propensity for defeatism into focus.

> He noted how much more interested he was in the pages about himself than in the other pages; it confirmed his long-standing suspicion that people ultimately only want to read about themselves. He noted further, with pleasure, that this self of his had genuinely fascinated Patty; it reminded him of why he liked her. And yet his clearest sensation, when he read the last page and let his now very watery wad plop into the vase, was of defeat. Not defeat by Patty, her writing skills were impressive, but he could hold his own in the self-expression department. The person who'd defeated him was Walter, because the document had obviously been written for Walter, as a kind of heartsick, undeliverable apology to him. (377)

After reading the manuscript, Richard sneaks out of the Berglunds' home, and out of their lives. Before he does, he commits an act that will profoundly reverberate throughout his life, and the lives of the Berglunds, from this point on: He takes Patty's manuscript and places it in Walter's home office, right in the center of his desktop. Compellingly, Franzen presents this not as an act of unbridled malice, but as one of a perverse moral strength.

> Somebody had to clear the air around here, somebody had to put an end to the bullshit, and Patty obviously was not up to it. And so she wanted Katz to do the dirty work? Well, fine. He was ready to be the nonpussy of the outfit. His job in life was to speak the dirty truth. To be the dick. (378)

Thus Richard—an active participant in deceiving his best friend—becomes a purveyor of a "dirty truth." On a subconscious level, Richard understands the gravity of what he has done. Right after leaving the Berglunds, he briefly contemplates suicide as he walks across a Georgetown bridge. He rationalizes that "he could free Patty and Walter of the bother of him, free himself of the bother of being a bother" (379). The suicidal pangs quickly fade when Richard looks down at the "much-trampled patch of gravel and bare dirt" where he was likely to land. Franzen writes: "(Katz) asked himself whether this nondescript bit of land was worthy of killing him. Him the great Richard Katz. Was it worthy? He laughed at the question and continued across the bridge" (379).

Walter responds to the manuscript by throwing Patty out of the house—and by cutting off his friendship with Richard. Here, in quick order, we see how Richard's rogue qualities have detrimental effects on the people around him. Yet those same qualities force Walter and Patty to face difficult realities about their marriage—realities that might have never otherwise surfaced beyond the subconscious. At the same time, those very same rogue qualities help Richard to save himself from suicide and move on. He is the embodiment of a genuine rogue—a habitual deceiver who, at the same time, will risk the loss of close friendships, and even his will to live, in order to expose a "dirty truth."

My Narrative Choices

In writing my own novel, one of the biggest challenges I face is how to take a protagonist who is dishonest, selfish, stubborn, and egocentric, and turn him into someone that readers would want to follow for hundreds of pages.

The "genuine rogue" in my novel is Andy Prystowski, a professor of Shakespeare and English literature at Barrington, an elite Boston college. As the novel opens, he is traveling from Boston to Miami for the funeral of his Aunt Mildred, a woman who lived with Down syndrome, yet still managed to help raise Andy when he was growing up.

In much the same way that Chabon used Van Zorn as a metaphor in *Wonder Boys*, there are two characters in my novel who, while not appearing as part of the current narrative, will still serve as key metaphors for the story. One is Aunt Mildred, who appears in the novel only through Andy's first-person recollections. Through his remembrances, we learn that as Andy was growing up, he took great pleasure in getting away with mean practical jokes on Mildred. Through his recollections of Aunt Mildred, Andy will also reveal that he was bullied and abused as a child. This includes incest with his mother, Brenda. With Mildred, he could turn his inner torment around. He could get away with things—and he loved it. Similar to Grady Tripp's handling of his father's and Van Zorn's suicides, these remembrances serve as a vehicle to inform readers about Andy's abuse. Yet, outside the context of these remembrances, Andy will be guarded in what he reveals about this issue. The reader has to draw his/her own conclusions as to how Andy's childhood has affected him.

The second character who appears only peripherally in my novel is André Tchaíkowsky, a little-known Polish pianist who lived for Shakespeare, *Hamlet* in particular. During his lifetime, André had one major wish: to appear onstage in a production of *Hamlet*. He never got that wish. However, in a turn of events that is actually based on a true story, he stipulated in his will that upon his death, his skull would be given to the Royal Shakespeare Company, for the expressed purpose of being used in *Hamlet* productions. In my novel, Andy gains possession of André's skull, and he brings it with him to Miami. In a modern variation of Hamlet's iconic soliloquies, Andy will often talk to André's skull, in the hopes of gaining wisdom and guidance. Through much of my novel, Andy can only imagine André through what he knows of André's desire to appear in *Hamlet*, and the unusual way André went about achieving his dream. However, when he is in Miami, Andy will have a surprise meeting with Marina, André's sister, who happens to live in Miami. In the process, Marina will dispel some of Andy's idealized notions about André, just as Brenda will dispel some of his idealized notions about Mildred. I hope that these revelations will guide the reader in understanding how, similar to Grady in *Wonder Boys*, Andy's flair for narrative embellishment comes from his own blurred lines about what is true, and what is not.

At the same time, I realize that there is a major difference between Chabon's metaphor and my own. Even with all his flaws, Van Zorn was someone whom Grady wanted to emulate. Andy, on the other hand, certainly has never wanted to emulate Mildred or André. He has always seen himself as superior to both of them. In this case,

Andy has much more in common with Howard Belsey in *On Beauty* than he does with Grady Tripp.

On Beauty is told from a third person point of view, and that choice suits the novel wonderfully, showcasing Smith's talent for making insightful and pointed commentary in service to her characters. I have thought seriously about using the third person voice for my novel, mainly for the opportunity to "open it up." Yet even with the obvious advantages that the third person voice presents, that choice does not feel right to me in the case of my novel. Like Grady, Andy is very much the chief focal point of his own life, with an excellent track record of sabotaging any chance for happiness. He is quite aware of this, and I find that awareness to be a very compelling mix within the confines of first person narration.

Without the benefit of third person point of view that Smith used in *On Beauty*, my aim is emulate her perceptive ear for dialogue, and use dialogue for major stretches to give voice to my other major characters who must deal with Andy in one way or another. Through their words, these characters will hopefully present a much more believable portrait of Andy than he could ever present on his own. This portrait will come somewhat through dialogue with Mildred, even though she now exists only as a memory, and with André, who exists only through Andy's assumptions of who he might have been. Mostly it comes from the present-day scenes with two important people in Andy's life: his mother, Brenda, and his boyfriend, Zach.

Brenda is a recovering drug addict who made many mistakes raising Andy, but who has since turned her life around in ways Andy cannot fully recognize. After Mildred's funeral, Andy gets a hold of Mildred's possessions without Brenda's

knowledge. But in going through them, he will discover more about Brenda than he will about Mildred. He will find a photo of Brenda in an affectionate, loving embrace with Annette—a woman whom Andy always thought was simply a good friend of his mother. With this photo, he will begin to discover that Brenda has been in a long-term relationship with Annette. Even though Andy is gay, Brenda has hidden her bisexuality from him out of fear that he would not understand it. Indeed Andy is very angry when he finds out. It upsets the image he always had about Brenda and he cannot accept this.

As Smith did so well in *On Beauty*, I hope to convey these revelations through heavy use of dialogue in scenes between Andy and Brenda. In the following scene, they talk about Brenda's relationship with Annette.

> "For the record, I would have been happy to have a lesbian mother."
>
> "For the record, I'm bisexual. Even now, I believe that my relationship with your father was very much a satisfying relationship, if you know what I mean, as were my encounters with some other men."
>
> "Some other men?"
>
> "Not all of them."
>
> "Well, gee mother, that's such good news. How 'bout those smelly, drunken assholes who beat the crap out of me? Are they on your good list or your bad list?"
>
> "Of course, Andy, they were on my bad list. Anyone who hurt you was on my bad list."
>
> "Then why did you keep seeing those jerks? Why did you keep letting things happen?"
>
> "I was hiding from a lot of things, Andy. The pain of your father's death. I swear, I loved your father. I really did."
>
> "So you substituted his love with losers and jerks. Wonderful."
>
> "I don't expect you to understand."

“Oh and let’s not forget me! The little man in your bed when none of the assholes were around.”

“You slept with me because you were scared of the dark. That’s the only reason!”

“Is that so?”

“That’s what I know!”

“Oh my God. After all these years, that’s what you’re still telling yourself.”

“I saw that you were scared. And I saw you needed comfort. I gave it to you!”

“Wow. I tell ‘ya, mother. I’m speechless. You’re one of the few people who can leave me speechless. Did Annette ever know about our arrangement?”

“Of course not.”

“Gee. I guess that’s a relief.”

“I was a mess, Andrew! I don’t deny that! Even when it came to Annette. There was what I was feeling for her and the pain of not really being able to have her. People of your generation, I don’t expect you to understand what that felt like. But I was having to put on so many masks, Andy. So many masks.”

“Putting on masks. It’s interesting that you put it in those terms.”

“Why?”

“I often write about putting on masks when I write about Shakespeare. People put on masks in every damn play the Bard wrote. Sometimes they do it to spare people’s feelings. Sometimes, they do it because the truth just fucking sucks. I just thought, maybe you got that term from reading my books.”

“Okay. Maybe.”

“You’re not sure.”

“Andy, you’re not the only one who uses the term ‘putting on masks’.”

> "So I take that as a 'no'."
>
> "Why are we getting off track?"
>
> "Do you even read my books, mother?"
>
> "Of course I do!"
>
> "Then what can you tell me about them?"
>
> "Oh, for God sakes, Andrew. It's the middle of the night. You wanted the story of me and Annette? I'm telling you. You want apologies? I've got those, too. I'm sorry that I wasn't honest with you. I'm sorry that I'm not as smart as you. What more do you want? I just wish you'd accept my apologies. And not just for my benefit. For your benefit, too."
>
> "For me. Really?"
>
> "Yes. I've learned this in recovery. Forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself."
>
> "Well mother, I guess I'm not one for giving myself gifts. Except maybe the gift of a good long grudge. Those are always fun. I'm sure they'll be the inspirations for some future books you won't understand."

In scenes such as the one above, I hope to show Andy's selfishness and innate self-loathing, both of which impede many of his relationships. He warms up to his mother's confession only when he considers that his books might have had some influence on her. There is a part of him that wants to forgive Brenda, but that part will not win out. Andy knows this. He has seen—and been influenced by—Shakespeare plays such as *Hamlet* too many times. He identifies so well with the revenge themes of these plays. But when it comes to examining his own life, Andy will not consider the ultimate price that characters such as Hamlet pay for their own revenge fixations. As with many of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, Andy's ego and hubris will get in the way.

I also hope to flesh out a more multi-dimensional portrait of Andy through heavy use of dialogue in his scenes with Zach. This is an older man/younger man relationship, as well as professor/grad student relationship. This type of relationship has been portrayed often in literature, so much so that there are countless stereotypes that come with it. As a writer, I am not worried about how stereotypical Andy and Zach might be. However, I am concerned about how real and believable they are. In *On Beauty*, Smith masterfully fleshed out Howard and Kiki in ways that made readers understand both their differences and their affection for one another. Through use of dialogue, I hope to do the same with Andy and Zach. Late in my novel, after a particularly emotional conversation with his mother, Andy feels the need to call Zach.

> I walked back to the Mustang and looked at the GPS. Really, I didn't even need it. I sure as shit knew how to get back to South Beach. Yet, by osmosis, I pushed Zach's number. He answered with:
>
> "So how was this afternoon's drama?"
>
> "Dramatic. What was it that Nietzsche said: Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes."
>
> "True. But Oscar Wilde said that."
>
> "Really? No."
>
> "Yes, sir. I'm Googling it now to prove I'm right."
>
> "You don't have to do that."
>
> "Considering that I live with you, yes I do. And look at that! I am so fucking right! Sending it to your email right now."
>
> "Okay, so Wilde said that. God, can't you just concentrate on one thing? Like talking to me?"
>
> "Okay. I'm concentrating. I swear. Tell me what happened between you and your mom."

In scenes such as the one above, I hope to emulate Smith's usage of dialogue to explore the complexities of relationships, especially in the academic world. Zach, the grad student, takes particular pride in correcting Andy, the professor. Andy does not like being corrected. For Zach, he will make a begrudging exception. Andy's retort about Zach's concentration shows his affection, and his selfishness. He wants Zach to focus only on him.

While I do not believe that my narrative choices will be as heavily influenced by Franzen's *Freedom* as much as they will be by *Wonder Boys* and *On Beauty*, I do believe that the significance of Richard's pivotal act (taking Patty's manuscript and leaving it with Walter) mirrors the significance of one of Andy's pivotal acts—letting Zach take the fall for an act of plagiarism that Andy actually committed (albeit accidentally.) In *Freedom*, Franzen masterfully justified Richard's behavior. Richard is undeniably selfish, and there's no question that as a result, he hopes Patty will now become more available to him. Yet simultaneously, he also sees himself as taking a moral high ground, and doing Patty and Walter a favor by exposing Patty's innermost thoughts. It is my intention to expose a similar combination of selfishness and moral justification in Andy's case. He will not come clean about his own plagiarism, mainly out of fear of what that would do to his reputation. Yet he honestly believes that he is powerful enough to save Zach from being expelled; that just a few phone calls to the right people will fix the problem.

Late in my novel, Andy runs into Zach at a wedding. By this time, Zach has been expelled from Barrington. He has discovered Andy's ruse, and realized that he never did anything wrong. Zach has ended their relationship, yet he decided not to

fight his expulsion from Barrington. Andy is relieved, because this saves him from the possibility of public embarrassment. In the following scene, Andy sees Zach for the first time since finding about Zach's decision.

> Zachie, of course, looked absolutely dashing in his tux. His shoulders were a little too arched back for my taste, but I did not begrudge him. As the "elder statesman," I felt it my duty to speak first.
>
> "I wondered whether you'd make it."
>
> "And miss the chance to see you bumble awkwardly? I wouldn't have missed that for the world."
>
> I looked down at my mimosa and laughed.
>
> "I deserved that barb."
>
> "That's an understatement."
>
> I reached out and put my hand on Zachie's shoulder. I was grateful that he did nothing to remove it.
>
> "I can't thank you enough, Zachie, for not pursuing this further…"
>
> "Don't, Andy. Just don't. You may find this hard to believe, but my decision had nothing to do with you. I just don't have it within me to be the good little soldier for justice here…to face all the accusations and brickbats coming my way."
>
> "I wouldn't have thrown them at you."
>
> "No, you would have done something worse. You would have had others throw them for you. You would have feigned indignation publically. But privately, you would have patted your pals on the back."
>
> I took a heavy swig of my drink.
>
> "You always did know me way too well, Zachie. That was one of the negatives."
>
> "You know what my biggest mistake was?"
>
> "What?"

“It wasn’t trusting you. I don’t blame myself for that. No. My biggest mistake was thinking that loving you was the best way to get through to you. Little did I know that loving you is the worst way to get through to you.”

Zachie paused. He made sure to look me straight in the eyes. Immediately, I looked away—toward the canapé, the grass anything I could.

“So, what are your plans now? Are you applying to other schools?”

“Not now. In two weeks, I’m taking off for India. I’m gonna spend a year there. I’m getting there just in time for Holi. It’ll be so great just to dance and sing and have everyone spray all these gorgeous colored powders and water all over me. I can’t wait to just breathe in all that joy. I’d say I could use it, don’t you think?”

I cried when Zachie told me this. I’ll admit that. But they weren’t tears of sadness. I was actually happy for him. I answered his rhetorical question in the affirmative, and then some.

“You know what I’ve always loved about you?”

“What?”

“You’re not a victim. And that’s good because I hate victims. Victims are weak. Victims are all `woe is me.’ Like Sebastian in *Brideshead Revisited*. A colorful character, but Christ, what a complainer.”

“Now, don’t you go trashing one of my favorite classics, just because it’s not Shakespeare.”

“I’m not trashing it. I’m just making a point. You’re not like Sebastian, Zachie. You’re not weak. You’re not going to wind up tortured like he did.”

“I never thought I was like Sebastian. I just loved him because he loved stuffed bears. You couldn’t figure that out, could you?”

I couldn’t. But I could never admit that. So I changed the subject.

“Listen. If you ever need a recommendation; a call, a letter, anything…”

“Yes, thank you. I may well have to take you up on that. You are, after all, Andy Prystowski—one hell of a connection.”

"There's only one thing I ask of you."

"What's that?"

"A dance. At the reception."

"Let's not push it."

Here, even though Andy has ruined his own boyfriend's academic reputation—not to mention their relationship—he still sees himself as someone who's doing Zach a favor, just as Richard saw himself when he had Patty's manuscript in his hands. He tells himself that Zach will be better off outside Barrington, just as Richard convinced himself that Walter and Patty would be better off if they were separated. Andy still cares for Zach, and wants to do right by him. He is genuinely happy for Zach when he hears about his plans for a spiritual journey in India. He admires Zach's resilience. He wants Zach to be okay after all that has happened, and is overcome with joy (hence the tears of joy), when he realizes that Zach will find a way to come out of the experience in a healthy way. Here, Andy is showing his more positive human attributes.

At the same time, he is also showing his propensity for protecting himself, and his own interests, at the cost of others. When Zach tells Andy that stuffed bears—and nothing really deeper—were the real connection between himself and Sebastian in *Brideshead Revisited,* Andy will not give Zach the satisfaction of acknowledgement. Andy withstood being corrected by Zach when they were together. Now that they are separated, Andy's ego and pride will get in the way. In this scene, we see what draws people to Andy. Yet, we also see Andy's habitual stubbornness and egotism that eventually hurts people and turns them away. Zach will take Andy up on a

recommendation, but only because of the academic weight of Andy's name. However, he will not give him the satisfaction of a dance.

In my novel, Brenda will also commit a questionable moral act that will cost someone else dearly. Brenda works for a local restaurant, and her boss will threaten to fire her for taking too much food for Mildred's *shiva*. Threatened with losing her job, Brenda will make up a story about Carmine, one of her condo's guardsmen, stealing the food. This story will eventually lead to Carmine getting fired. Brenda feels awful about it, but will do nothing to stop it. When Andy finds out about it, he will actually begin feeling closer to Brenda. He will find an odd comfort when he considers the notion that she still has a dark side.

I hope to show this growing closeness through the use of dual references, just as Franzen did for Richard. Through most of the novel, Andy will refer to Brenda as *mother*—with all the distance and coldness that title implies. Yet as he begins to understand her more, he will unconsciously start calling her *mom*. In the following scene, Brenda and Andy are on the beach, and she has just told him how bad she feels about Carmine. She explains that she did it because she needed her job, not only for the money, but also "because it's demanding. And as much as it's not easy working for that dipshit, demanding is good 'cause it keeps me busy. And busy is good because it keeps me out of trouble." Andy responds with:

> Mom did not have to say any more, which was good, because for a while, she didn't. She just continued staring out at the ocean. Finally, she got philosophical. Well, philosophical for her, anyway.
>
> "It's a fine line, isn't it, between trouble and no trouble."
>
> "I can't disagree with that."

"Every time I look at the ocean, I look out at all that water, going east and west, as far as I can see, and I think of how small I am in the scheme of things. How small we all are. And that's good, you know? It's good to know that we don't amount to a hill of beans in this world. Andy, you would know this. Who was the author who said that? Who was the author who said `*We don't amount to a hill of beans in this world'*?"

"Now that's from *Casablanca*. It's what Bogie says to Ingrid Bergman. But that's not exactly what he says. The correct line is, `*It doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world'*. You've got to put that quote in context. He's talking about people's problems. Not people as human beings themselves."

"Okay!"

"And the writers of that script were two brothers, Julius and Philip Epstein. Writers is the key word here, mother, because, as brilliant as that script was, screenwriters are not authors."

"Why are we talking about this?"

"Because you referred to them as authors! Screenwriters, especially ones who sell out to the Hollywood machine, are hacks. Not authors. Never have been. Never will be."

"Well, okay. Screenwriter. Author. Whatever. They wrote those lines. I like writers who write things like that. I mean, `*We don't amount to a hill of beans in this world'*…

"Were you even listening to me just now? That's not the right..."

"Who doesn't *get* that? You don't have to have that *explained* to you."

With this, mom looked me square in the face. I could have, for the umpteenth time, reminded her that she need not understand every word of Shakespeare in order to "get" him. But I did not. Instead, with a heavily beating heart, I put my arm around her. This was not done easily. Even as I reached over, there were those childhood flashbacks that people like me wish would go the fuck away, but they never do: times when all I was doing was "my job," comforting mother, only to have her do things back that I can't bear to think about, save for that quizzical look of one male child protective services worker, who suddenly became a lot less quizzical after mother put her arms around him.

In the paragraph above, my use of both mom and mother is deliberate. Even as Andy is developing a deeper understanding of Brenda, he still subconsciously distances himself (through the mother reference) from the pain of his past. Brenda will notice Andy's growing use of mom references, and will play up its significance. Andy will downplay this. It is my hope, however, that this change in reference will give the reader an opportunity to "get ahead" of Andy in a satisfactory way. The reader will understand that Andy is growing closer to Brenda, even before Andy fully comprehends this development.

I am also using dual references for Zach. As indicated in the example on Page 27, he will always be Zachie when Andy refers to him affectionately. Otherwise, it will just be straightforward Zach. Again, Andy does this without fully realizing its significance. As is the case with Patty's Richard/Katz duality in *Freedom*, it will be up to readers to draw their own conclusions about this.

Andy's relationships with both his mother and Zach will change considerably throughout my novel. So will the way he thinks about both Mildred and André. Yet even with all these factors, Andy himself does not change in any major ways. He is still who he is used to being. While the reader may not consider this to be a satisfying payoff, I consider it an honest payoff. To accomplish this, I will emulate Chabon's use of metaphor in *Wonder Boys*, Smith's use of dialogue and artistic references in *On Beauty*, and Franzen's exploration of name references and questionable acts in *Freedom*. In all three of these novels, the metamorphosis experienced by Grady, Howard and Richard is subtle at best. While I hope readers can find subtle changes in

Andy from the first page to the last, my goal is to use his stubbornness, his egotism and his dishonesty in ways that make readers accept him, even if they don't like him.

It is my hope that readers would welcome Andy Prystowski into the club of genuine rouges, alongside Grady Tripp, Howard Belsey and Richard Katz. These are characters who—right or wrong—have the audacity to believe in their actions, even when society tells them they shouldn't. Their lies and mistakes do not repel readers. Instead, these very foibles compel readers to enter the fascinating, complicated moral universe that these rogues inhabit.

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Chapter II

Original Untitled Novel

By

Alan Kravitz

Alan Kravitz
First to Mid-Section Chapters of Novel

The first time Shakespeare really clicked for me, I was 11 years old. I know that because my mother had just received the date she wanted for my bar mitzvah, which was a year and a half away, but I was already starting to prepare for that special day when I became a man.

Of course, as with most things having to do with organized religion, I already knew this was bullshit. The way I saw it, I already was a man. After all, I already held down several jobs. Keeping mother's uppers and downers organized. Hiding the gin she'd use to swallow those uppers and downers. Tolerating the cavalcade of losers she batted her deep-blues at. And at the same time, caring for my Aunt Mildred, who was supposed to be caring for me. Men do those things, and at 11, I was a man. Baseball, football, bikes; all kid stuff.

But how could I not go along with the "becoming a man" thing? After all, mother had secured a prime date—December 28, right between Christmas and New Years. That meant all the relatives from up north would be off from work and school, and they'd have no excuse for not coming.

Right around that time, I came home from school one day and instead of starting my homework, I watched Laurence Olivier as *Hamlet* on the afternoon movie with Aunt Mildred. I had no idea what anyone was saying. This was an English that was stilted and actually pretty ridiculous. But I figured out pretty quickly that Hamlet's father died, and that was enough to pique my interest. My father died, too. His Scarlet Fever-damaged ticker stopped ticking when I was 18 months old. But until I met

Hamlet, I'd never met anyone else whose father left the building so young. Though he was older, I sensed that this "becoming a man" thing weighed on Hamlet's mind, too.

I also figured out pretty quickly that Hamlet couldn't stand his mother's new husband. Here again, he and I were simpatico. Sort of. Mother never remarried after dad died, but she was always looking to, in her words, "hitch myself to a star." (Horrid I know, but I digress.) Let's just say no one mother ever hitched herself to was star material. I didn't then—let alone now—bother remembering their names. The belt lashings and name calling were enough, along with the occasional jerk who thought nothing of wandering around our apartment buck naked and greeting me in the morning with something like, "Hey kid. Do you know if the 7 11's open? I'm outta smokes." Here, I reasoned that my travails were tougher than Hamlet's. He just had one devious step-dad to deal with. He had it easy.

Then came the gravedigger scene. This was the scene where I thought: "this Shakespeare has got to be a fucking genius." Why? Because of the "If you don't like me, go fuck yourself" attitude of the gravedigger. Here he is, digging what we know is Ophelia's grave. He's singing a tune I'd never heard, but I knew it had to be a happy, calming tune, just from the rhythm of the whistles.

Then, all of the sudden, he takes a skull, looks at it, then puts it on a bed of dirt right outside the grave. And I'm thinking: This is *so cool*! He handled that skull as normally as he would a sandwich. At last, here's someone who sees death as a normal way of life. Maybe this was heady stuff for an 11-year-old, but I was already a veteran of people saying one ridiculous thing after another whenever they talked about my father's death. Always in hushed tones, they'd tell me:

You're father's gone to a much better place.

You're father's looking down on you, I know it!

God doesn't give you any more than you can handle.

I mean, what was I supposed to say to that? What's *anyone* supposed to say to that?

Here's what I finally came up with, whenever I heard that flowery crap: *My father's dead.*

I'd always stretch the *dead* as long as I could, like the little drama queen I already was. If I was 11 and up for an Oscar, this would be the scene they'd play at the ceremony when they read my name as a nominee. Some Anne Bancroft type would rub her hands on my shoulder, and with her melodramatic *Your father loved you very, very much,* my eyes would dart at hers and then: *My father's dead.*

Cut. End scene. How could I *not* win with a performance like that?

Alas, in my real life, Anne Bancroft was nowhere to be found. But this gravedigger? He was real. And I was there, right beside Hamlet and Horatio, listening closely as Hamlet asked him about his life. And oh, how the gravedigger answered:

Hamlet: Excuse me, sir, whose grave is this?

Gravedigger: It's mine, sir!

Hamlet: What man dost thou dig it for?

Gravedigger: For no man, sir.

Hamlet: What woman, then?

Gravedigger: For none either.

Hamlet: Then who is to be buried in it?

Gravedigger: One that was a woman, sir, but, rest her soul, she's dead.

Hamlet (to Horatio):

How absolute that knave is!

Now, at 11, I had no clue what a knave was. But this would be where I would have jumped in.

Andy: Why yes, Hamlet! How absolute! In fact, more absolute then you know! You don't even know it's Ophelia's grave! But this gravedigger does! And he has no problem at all saying the word (big pause here) dead! Absolutely!

But at least Hamlet didn't freak out at the sight of the skull. In fact, when he learns that it's the skull of his former jester Yorick, (*Alas, poor Yorick*), he becomes ever more curious about it. Just like I was. At one point, he even rubs the skull gently on his left cheek, almost as if he was going to kiss it. I couldn't understand what Hamlet was saying, but I didn't care. I wanted to take that skull and rub it against my cheek.

The sound of Aunt Mildred snoring, alas, interrupted my longing. I turned around and there she was, sitting at the dining room table, her arms folded and her head tilted, an errant string of saliva flowing from her open mouth down to the lap of her flowered, *shmata* dress. It wasn't unusual to catch Aunt Mildred sleeping. It was what she did when the world just seemed too much for her, which was quite often. If I'd come from a family that actually talked to each other, I'd have known she had Down syndrome. Instead, I had to figure this out myself, and have it confirmed on my own by her doctors years later.

But when I was 11, she was just “slow in the head.” While mother worked, she looked after me when I came home from school. This responsibility was the only thing that kept Aunt Mildred from the confines of a mental institution. If mother had her way, she would have been in the cuckoo’s nest, but Aunt Mildred’s care services came free, and that was the only price mother could afford to pay, given her inability to hold a job.

Aunt Mildred always looked old, even when she was young. She was in her 20s when I was 11, but I thought she could be the same age as the gravedigger. I could not have her remain asleep as I was having this cinematic revelation. I got up off the floor, ran over to her and shook her flabby arms. Her eyes jolted open.

“Aunt Mildred, Aunt Mildred! You’ve got to see this.”

“See what, *tatala*?”

“This! This scene!”

“I don’t really like this movie, Andy. It’s not a musical.”

“I know, but you’ve got to see this. If you watch, you won’t be afraid of death.”

“Huh?”

“Death! What nobody in this world ever talks about! But Hamlet, the gravedigger, Shakespeare—they’re talking about it.”

Aunt Mildred did not answer. She just shook her head. Did she even understand the concept of death? I don’t know. All I do know is that she ran to the television and shut it off.

“Hey, I was…”

“We shouldn’t watch this, Andy. It’s not a musical.”

“I know but…”

"You be a good boy and start your homework. I'll start dinner."

As Aunt Mildred walked toward the kitchen, I stopped in front of her.

"Don't you want to talk about death?"

"No. Not really."

"About my father?"

At that, her eyes watered.

"Your father. He was my brother."

"Yes, Aunt Mildred. My father was your brother. And he's dead."

Aunt Mildred tried to get around me, but at 11, I was already too fast for her.

"Don't say that, Andy!"

I wasn't angry when she said this. I'd heard it so many times before, from mother, from the family, from everyone. I was just trying to make a point—that death is part of life. Aunt Mildred would not hear it. Instead, she turned away and said, "I know." Over and over again. She always did this when she was uncertain. "I know" was her mantra, her words of armor whenever she went to that space in her head that only she—and none of us who knew her—would ever know.

Already, I knew not to push her further. Could I have easily turned that television back on? Of course. But I went to my bedroom to start my homework. I did, however, create one more bit of drama. I turned and yelled, at the top of my lungs:

"You don't have to be scared of death!"

A long pause. And then: "I have to be scared of not having dinner when your mother comes home. And you have to be scared of not having homework done."

I laughed. Neither of us ever quite knew whether “Good Mother” or “Bad Mother” would walk through the door. To hear mother tell it, she was “unique” and no one in the world understood her. But she was—and is—bipolar, I fact that I know from one of her all too rare forays into honesty. After finding out about one of my ill-fated attempts “to end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to,” she confessed that I may have inherited my pension for hopping on the crazy train from her. (Alas, I just got Depression—the lows without mother’s highs—but I’m getting ahead of myself.) So to review: Dead father. Crazy mother. “Slow in the head” aunt. Those were the cards I was dealt. And at 11, I already figured out that my deal was shitty. My cousins, aunts, and uncles would often tell me these were the best years of my life. I wanted to shout at them, “Are you fucking kidding me? You mean it gets worse?” But I never said that out loud. I had already learned that if I ever had a chance of making it in the world, I had to most often be a good boy. And just from her being her, I learned that from Aunt Mildred.

I left her so she could go make dinner. I went in the room and started my homework. On this day, Hamlet had to freak out over Ophelia’s suicide without me. But I just knew I’d return to him, and for once, I didn’t worry about what kind of mother I’d face when she walked in.

I knew her, Horatio. She bore me on her back a million times.

***

I thought about this as Zach drove me to Logan, my American Airlines flight waiting to take me back to Miami for Aunt Mildred’s funeral. It was one of those dreaded early winter days, where it was already dark at 4:30 in the afternoon. Zach drove too fast, as

24-year-olds often do, and the bump of the wheels as Zach careened across the Zakim Bridge caused the contents of my satchel to shift.

Zach was talking to me, but I wasn't listening. I unfastened the double latches of my satchel and made sure Andre was still intact. He was.

I should explain Andre. If you'll allow me, some back story. André Tchaíkowsky was a little-known Polish pianist who lived for Shakespeare, *Hamlet* in particular. After he died of cancer at age 46, he donated his body to science. But he had a rather unusual proviso: that his skull "shall be offered by the institution receiving my body to the Royal Shakespeare Company for use in theatrical performances of *Hamlet*."

Fortunately, the RSC accepted his request. But for nearly 20 years, no actor would dare use it onstage. At most, some actors would use it in rehearsal, but they'd get freaked out. Then five years ago, Colin Northrup, that dashing young British heartthrob, caused a minor scandal when he decided to use it onstage. And so, in the internationally acclaimed RSC production of *Hamlet*, featuring Colin Northrup in the lead role, audiences saw an actual skull during the gravedigger scene. So did Broadway audiences when the play transferred to the Golden Theatre. Only they didn't know it until *Hamlet* finished its limited run at the Golden. Both Colin Northrup and his brilliant director, Arianna Valenti, had the fortitude to realize that audiences would be uncomfortable if they knew this ahead of time.

And they were right, considering the tumult that Colin caused when, in one of his umpteen interviews after the Tony nominations came out, he admitted to using, well, Andre. He was refreshingly candid, saying that Andre actually helped him with

his performance. If I remember correctly, he credited André with helping him “get beyond all these Shakespearian clichés, to investigate something deeper. You can't hold a real human skull in your hand and not be moved by the realization that your own skull sits just beneath your skin, that you will be reduced to that at some stage. André's skull was a profound memento mori, which perhaps no prop skull could quite provide."

With that statement, I loved Colin Northrup even more than I did before, which was already considerable since he had the talent to actually make Rochester three-dimensional in a recent Masterpiece Theatre production of *Jane Eyre,* and the body to pose in his underwear for GQ. Here was somebody who not only admitted to Shakespeare’s clichés—and let’s face it, the Bard was *full* of them—but also to say something so basic and true: that we will ALL one day look just like André. But according to all the press and blogosphere chatter afterward, Colin was a “freak.” “A prima donna actor pushing the envelope to get attention.” They say all this carrying on caused him to lose the Best Actor Tony, and I believe that, considering they had the gall to give it to that over-rated Gary Reimer—for yet another revival of *On Golden Pond*.

As soon as I heard of Andre’s existence, I knew I had to have him. Immediately, I did what I always do after a seminal production of *Hamlet*. I contacted the theater’s artistic director and asked for the skull for my safekeeping at home. If I may be so forward, this has gotten quite easy over the years. All it normally takes is a combination of one or more of the following:

- A mention on the acknowledgment page of my upcoming Shakespeare book (thanks to the Bard’s remarkable combination of universal popularity and infamous ambiguity, there’s *always* an upcoming Shakespeare book)

- A generous donation to the almost always struggling theatre that staged this particular *Hamlet*
- A roll in the hay with said artistic director, under the proviso that he looks something resembling Colin Northrup (if he does not—or if the he is a she--proviso may be negotiated, providing that copious amounts of pot and liquor are involved.)

With any one or a combination thereof, the skull becomes mine, destined for safekeeping and museum-quality display in my living room's glass breakfront. In Andre's case, I've known Arianna for years, so all it really took was assurance that I would take special care of Andre, and return him to the RSC whenever they do *Hamlet* again.

Honestly, I wasn't sure Arianna would approve of my taking Andre away from his protected menagerie and bringing him with me to Miami. But after I got the news of my aunt's death and turned to the breakfront for comfort, I knew I would not leave without Andre. Every time I look at him, I marvel at how he very much looks like other replicas created by so many theatrical set decorators: He's a gorgeous charcoal grey, and when the light hits him correctly, he radiates a calming white from the tip of his head to the uneven black holes that, when Andre was alive, served as vessels for the eyes that once allowed Andre the privilege of seeing Sir Richard Burton as *Hamlet* (according to Andre, the transformative theatrical experience of his life.) His teeth are still remarkably noticeable, and I can tell that Andre took good care of them. They have no spaces in between them. The one big difference between Andre and many of his artistic replicas lies near the bridge of his nose. There are unmistakable red splotches,

running in a slightly crocked vertical line from the top of the bridge to the bottom. Me being of curious mind, I asked a doctor friend at Barrington Medical School what causes this. In my own drama, I thought they might be blood, which of course is featured prominently and symbolically in many Shakespeare plays (especially *King Lear*, for anyone who remembers the fate of poor Gloucester.) But alas, the red is simply the result of prolonged bone calcification, which apparently happens to all of us, no matter how we spend our eternities.

I opened my satchel to make sure Andre was still intact. I opened the lid of the Macy's box I gave him for protection, and peeked between the mounds of packing foam. Andre looked fine. But some of the foam pieces scattered on the floor of Zach's Prius.

"Will you please be careful," Zach ordered, stretching "please" as if it had multiple syllables. He explained that he just cleaned the car, which was not shocking, as he was always cleaning his car. He was always cleaning everything, and though I am nobody's idea of a slob, he made me think I was. It was one of the push-pulls of our relationship. As we sat in rush hour traffic in the Ted Williams Tunnel, I knew to apologize immediately. Zach had that forlorn look in his eyes. It was *not* about the traffic. Or the packing foam.

"Look. Are you upset that you're not coming with me?"

A sigh.

"No! No, of course not. I get it."

"It's…you know you haven't met any of my family yet. To go to a funeral? Wouldn't that be awkward?"

"Daddy, don't put this on me. I would be…look let's just…you're gonna call them about postponing the hearing, right?"

The hearing in question was Zach's upcoming academic probation hearing. Some more back story. You know my book, *In Bed With Shakespeare*? Well, let's just say that some of that "mellifluous, thought-provoking prose," as the *New York Review of Books* put it, may not have been my prose. I say "may not" because, fucking Christ, I was writing that book under a lot of pressure, on a tight deadline. And God, I hated my new editor. I know I'm dating myself, but when I wrote my first book 25 years ago, editors still actually *liked* literature. Now they like what sells. I didn't even want to call the book *In Bed With Shakespeare*, because if you read it, you know that it was not about Shakespeare's sex life. They took my rumination one of the literary world's most enduring mysteries—that of Shakespeare's will, where his only bequeath to his wife Anne was to leave her his "second-best bed"—and had me sex the book up as much as possible. Never mind that this bequest—one of the most infamous "fuck yous" in the history of famous deaths, from the man who gave the world *Romeo and Juliet* and the most often quoted love poems in the English cannon—is widely thought to be indicative of a *lack* of sex, or love or affection, that Shakespeare had in real life for Anne. No, in an era where the latest filmed version of *Hamlet* was set in South Beach (no, I'm not kidding), I was told –pretty much ordered, actually—to "bring Shakespeare's fuckability factor up a few notches."

So I'm trying to write this book in a way that I hated and didn't feel right, but I had to do it because I was under contract, and well, Barrington just loves it when one of their professors shoots the shit with Charlie Rose. And if I wouldn't be on the top of

PBS's speed dial, God knows I could name at least a half dozen other ideologues in my own department who would sell their children for that honor. So I may have, well, made it a little too easy for myself. I honestly can't even remember. But when one young author named Jocelyn Greer came forward with graphs on English estate laws and customs in the early 1600s that were way too similar to mine—and proof that she wrote her musings five years before I wrote mine—well, I freaked. And by freaked, I mean that I threw Zach under the bus. See, Zach was one of my research assistants when I wrote the book. I figured he'd be a safe target. Without naming him publically, of course, I would chastise my young, inexperienced research assistant for not being as careful as he should have with his record keeping and footnotes. I would issue a sincere mea culpa, add new footnotes for the paperback, and just tell Zach to be more careful next time. Well, they went for it: Jocelyn, Barrington, and even Zach, who, though he wracked his brain to even recall his research on that section, ultimately came to me and said, "Well, if you insist that I messed up, I must have. I am so sorry."

I thought that would settle it. What I didn't count on was Barrington stiffening it's plagiarism penalties and coming down on Zach. They put him on academic probation, and the hearing he mentioned was one where they would decide whether he could stay at Barrington, or whether he'd be expelled.

So yes, Zach was on probation for something he didn't do. His only real crime was putting too much trust in me. And yes, I was an asshole for letting that happen. But just so you know, I was pretty sure that I could get them to drop any charges at Zach's hearing. As Zach drove me to Logan, I assured him that I personally would call the

dean, explain my situation, and ask them to reschedule the hearing. I put all that right on my Smartphone's "to do" list, right up there with scoring weed and quick sex.

"Thank you. That makes me feel better. Are you sure you have everything you need for the funeral?"

I did. Suit for the funeral. Change of clothes for a week. And Speedos. (It was Miami, after all, and one could not be without those.) All in my Louis Vuitton, along with my laptop, which I had to move to the big suitcase so it wouldn't bump Andre in the satchel. André's only company, aside from my eticket, was a copy of what was then Phillip Roth's latest book, *Everyman*, which I knew I'd like due to Roth's late-life propensity for examining death from all angles.

"Yes, my love. I have everything."

"I still can't believe you're taking Andre on board."

"Well I am not going to take the risk of them losing the suitcase with him in it."

"At least in the suitcase, there's less chance of security finding it. What if you go through the metal detector and security stops you? What are you going to say?"

This was one of Zach's endearing traits. He worried much more than a 24-year-old should. He was really closer to my age that way. He had already reminded me that it would not be a good idea to take some of our cannabis with me on the plane, that it would be best if I used one of his connections once I landed in Miami Nice. Of course, it wasn't like I didn't have connections of my own. Fucking Christ—weed's been a prime survival tool of mine since I was 15.

But I promised to get in touch with Zach's "good friend" Jacques if I wanted to score weed in Miami. Zach knew Jacques from a previous winter break trip to South Beach—a jaunt that he invited me on, but that I foolishly refused, thinking at that point that I was too ancient for South Beach, and that he was just being kind. I figured that Jacques would probably tell Zach if I didn't get with him, and I didn't want Zachie to think that he couldn't keep tabs on me. You can put what I know about relationships on the head of a needle and still have room for the Five Books of Moses, but one thing I do know is that people talk. And I also knew that as I inched closer to my fifth decade, I would do best to try and keep a guy who, after a night of my silence following news of my aunt's death, shook me and proclaimed: "I may be young, but in this relationship, I deserve omniscience!"

As Zach pulled into Logan, I told him not to worry and he gave me one of his "whatever" looks. He feigned complete concentration on hitting the right airport lane to drop me off, but I figured there was plenty of room in that inquisitive head of his for other thoughts. What is it that Beatrice says to Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*; *"I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing."*

Well, Zach was Beatrice. I was the one wanting omniscience.

I put my hand on his right leg and gave him a little massage. That was my little code for "everything's gonna be okay," and he always smiled when I did it. It's what I did two years before at our annual Barrington holiday mixer at the dutifully ornate Commander's Club. There among the marble busts of Barrington's founders, all us preening professors stood, drink in hand, with our current and former students. When

we weren't out-quoting ourselves on Proust or Nietzsche or Gunter Gras, we were reminding ourselves that the thing we really wanted was to get laid.

I don't mind saying that I wanted Zach from the moment I laid eyes on him in my class. It was his arms I noticed first. He was wearing a short-sleeve Ralph Lauren, one of those preeminent New England plaid shirts, but with splashy pastel outlines, and his arms were all wiry and sinewy. I hoped my smile wasn't too obvious when I saw them. But just so I don't completely sound like a hopeless cliché, I didn't sleep with him until after he deservedly got his A. Oh, for sure we were flirting in that professorly, studently way that's familiar to anyone in my profession since *Lolita*, and probably much further back. We tried to be subtle, but I'm sure we weren't.

But that mixer did me in. There he was, eyes glued to his iPhone, like everyone his age is nowadays, and he came at me with:

"I wonder if I look like a young Truman Capote."

Quite the opener, even in room with people pontificating gems like "I find myself mesmerized by the psychoanalytic drawings of Jackson Pollack" and "my goal in life is to come up with a new word for feminism."

I asked Zach to explain himself. He showed me a photo of Capote at 22, before *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, before the toxic adulation, before the downward spiral that turned him into his own egotistical, booze-soaked cliché. This was the Capote of slender frame, with angelic tufts of blonde hair, and piercing, curious eyes, the good boy who you just knew was about to go bad. And save for the fact that Zach was more muscular, he could well have passed for a Capote doppelganger.

I validated Zach's observation, offered to refill his nearly empty glass (he was drinking a cosmopolitan), replenished my own glass with the same (though I've always thought *Sex and the City* make cosmos overrated) and got into a discussion of whether *The Grass Harp* or *In Cold Blood* should be considered Capote's best work. Such is the way that these intellectual mating dances always start. I knew at that moment I'd be taking Zach to my place that night, maybe even spending the night. In fact, I presented my defense of *In Cold Blood* more decisively than I probably needed to, just watch Zach's literary juices rev up while defending *The Grass Harp*.

And I was right. I took Zach back to my place. Suffice to say this. He thought my skull menagerie was "cool." I almost—but not quite—lost all his attention when he discovered my collection of Ginsberg poems and started devouring them. And honestly, we spent a great deal of the night talking about Ginsberg and Lionel Trilling. Zack said something like, "It sounds like Trilling was an asshole, taking Ginsberg as a protégé like he did and then dissing him after *Howl* came out." I countered with the bravery it took for Trilling to be so brutally honest, and the well-proven fact that Ginsberg made way too many demands on Trilling's time, and professors like Trilling must do whatever they can to have some semblance of a life. Sure, we were going back and forth about this with weed and alcohol—not to mention naked—but that's what we talked about.

As Zach pulled up to the American Airlines drop-off and got my suitcase out of the trunk like a gentleman, I did something that I knew would make him even happier than the kiss I gave him. Without his asking, I collected all the little foam pieces from the floor and placed them in the little plastic bag hooked to the glove compartment

knob. I knew I should do things like this in a relationship. I also knew that probably—maybe unconsciously but probably very consciously—I would continue doing things to fuck it up.

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I didn't want to admit this to Zach, but I too was concerned about whether Andre would pass through Logan security. As it turned out, he had no problems. I was relived. Then, memories of Aunt Mildred came flooding back. As I took the escalator to get to my gate, I remembered when I was little, and I drove her crazy by running up the escalators at Jordan Marsh or Burdines, pretending to get lost and enjoying hiding behind some counter and watching her freak out trying to find me.

When I passed the Dunkin Donuts kiosk, I thought of her love for sweets, even after she was diagnosed with diabetes—hell, especially after she was diagnosed with diabetes. Just try to pass dietetic cookies off as regular cookies, and as soon as she took a bite, she'd wince.

"My brain might be slow, but my taste buds are just fine," she'd say.

Already, I missed Zach. I would have enjoyed telling him about these little flashbacks. I looked at my iPhone to see if he texted me. He hadn't. I told myself, "He's driving. It's good that he hasn't texted you." That was quite plausible. I actually had an hour to kill because, being as responsible as he is, he insisted on driving me much earlier than I would have ever considered on my own. Of course, I could have texted him, but I didn't. Instead, I debated whether or not to get a little smashed before my flight.

The pros, of course, were obvious. I had the time. And honestly, smashed is the best way to fly. It makes you totally forget about how boxed in, susceptible to imbeciles, and privy to screaming kids that you're going to be for the next few hours.

But in this case, there were cons, too. I wanted to plan Aunt Mildred's funeral, but I had no idea how I was going to do that, considering that mother was already taking charge of everything. Being of sound mind would have been an advantage here.

Plus, there was no question that right when I got off the plane, and before I even got to my hotel, I was going to go right to Jacques. And honestly, I'm at the age where alcohol and pot don't agree with me anymore. At this point in the day, I was still thinking logically. That would not be the case later on, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

As I sat at Logan and contemplated what I would do for the next hour, my phone rang. I was sure it was Zach. I fished the phone out of my coat pocket as fast as I could. Then I saw the name of the caller. I sat back and took a deep breath.

"Yes, mother. I'm at the gate. Don't worry."

"Well, hello to you too, Andy. I'm glad. But that's not why I'm calling."

"What's up?"

"Is your *friend* with you?"

"Mother, I told you. He's just too busy with school and everything."

"I was just asking. Calm down. Listen. The reason I called: Do you know Mildred's Hebrew name?"

"No. Why?"

"The rabbi wants to know for the service."

"Ma, I don't even know my own Hebrew name. Just tell him we don't know."

"There's got to be a way we can figure it out. Do me a favor and look it up on that phone of yours. You're always telling me how you can find everything on your phone. There's got to be a way to figure that out online. Her middle name was Isabelle."

"I know that."

"Well, I'm just saying. Just look up what's Hebrew for Mildred and Isabelle. I want to be able to tell the rabbi something."

"Why is this so important?"

A long sigh on the other line.

"Andy, would it be so terrible to have the rabbi think that we lead some kind of Jewish life?"

With this, I don't recall if I laughed out loud, or to myself. Was this the same woman who, when I was little and asked for help with my Hebrew homework, would respond with, "How the hell should I know this crap?" Now she was Golda Fucking Meir.

I told her I'd see what I could find on the Internet. I also offered to pay for the funeral.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not being…"

"Andy, it's covered. I had her on my life insurance policy. It's taken care of. But thank you. That's sweet of you."

It also wasn't what I really wanted to offer. So I had to go for broke.

"Ma, I want to do a eulogy."

“No. No eulogies.”

“Ma, come on…”

“It’s not like you don’t have a role. You’re a pallbearer.”

“Fine, but what’s wrong with me saying a few words?”

“She didn’t want that, Andy. She told me herself. She just wanted a simple graveside service and that’s what she’s getting. She thought that was the best thing and so do I.”

“You mean, you thought it was the best thing.”

As soon as those words tumbled out of my mouth, I wanted them back. Not because I didn’t think they were true. But because of what I knew was coming.

“I can see it’s already starting.”

“What’s starting?”

“It must be such a burden, being smarter than everyone else.”

“Oh, come on…”

“You think that because you’re a talking head on PBS that you know everything. Well, my son, I will tell you this. There are a lot of things you don’t know. A lot of things.”

“Ma, Aunt Mildred raised me. I got my love of Shakespeare from her even though she didn’t understand him. I got my sense of curiosity from her, I got…”

“And you got nothing from me, right?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“If you spoke, then everyone would be reminded that I wasn’t there for you…”

“I wouldn’t say it that way...”

“It doesn’t matter. I would know. I would be reminded. I am not gonna let that happen. Not in the middle of a funeral service.”

With that, I took a deep breath and reminded mother that I would look up Aunt Mildred’s Hebrew name. I said goodbye quickly and told her my battery was running low. More than anything, I wanted to hang up the phone before she did. With that, at least, I succeeded. Before I knew it, I sat myself down at Beantown Bob’s and ordered up a Bloody Mary. It would be the first of several.

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I may be a lush at times, but I’ll say this. I’m a functioning lush. Mother’s old habits of making a fool of herself have not rubbed off on me. After the Bloody Marys, I recall this much:

First, Zach did text me: “Stay safe. XXXO u and miss u.” I responded by telling him I loved him and missed him, too. Only, I spelled it out because I refused to participate in the dumbing down of the English language. This was another push-pull in our relationship; even if the rest of his generation was using u for y-o-u, why did Zach have to do that? I would share my concerns that this would turn his brain to mush. He would respond by rolling his eyes and ignoring me.

Second, I got on the plane, no problem.

Third, the male steward was adorable, especially when he demonstrated the seatbelt buckle because the film they always use now was out of whack.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I remember, I awoke to the words “approaching our descent into Miami.” Soon as we landed, I gave Jacques a call.

Only then did it dawn on me how little I actually knew about him. But he picked up right away, as though he'd been expecting me.

"Oh, of course yes. Zachary tweeted me and told me about you. I'm so deeply sorry for your loss," he said in an accent that sounded so continental. Right away, I could picture him in a fancy restaurant, going up to the maitre d' and securing a table, no matter how mobbed the place was.

I asked him where he was from and how he knew Zach. He told me he was from Montenegro and that he met Zach three years ago when Zach was in South Beach for spring break.

"We connected right away. I took him around and showed him a very good time. That was way before you, my dear. Way before you."

The fact that Jacques felt the need to emphasize that pretty much told me all I needed to know. I wanted to get down to business, but Jacques beat me to it.

"Look, I know exactly what you want. And I've got it. Where are you staying?"

"The Delano. Do you know it?"

I heard a devilish laugh.

"Do I know the Delano? That's precious. Call me when you get settled, professor. I'll be waiting."

I said okay and heard a fast click. A little bit of South Beach attitude before I even got to South Beach. I couldn't help but smile.

After I grabbed my bag, I picked up my rental car—a fire-engine red Mustang convertible. At the risk of sounding like a straight man, I nearly ejaculated just looking at it. This was a South Beach car! That enthusiasm lasted until I turned the ignition and

battled the fucking GPS. See, here's my gripe with GPS. It presumes that we are all just good little do-bes who will just do whatever we are told to. It does not take into account the Nietzsche-loving Holden Caulfield devotees like myself, who when we are told do something, we cannot help ourselves but feel the innate need to do something else. So, I absolutely plead guilty if my crime here was not following directions. What I did not anticipate, however, was the extent to which this particular GPS would not shut the fuck up. Over and over: "Wrong turn. Please turn around. Wrong turn. Please turn around."

I might have put up with this crap under normal circumstances. But I was still buzzed from the alcohol and all these missives were giving me a headache. And besides, I knew better roads to turn onto than this God-forsaken box. At least I thought I did. I'll admit something else. I probably turned onto some roads that I shouldn't have turned onto. But Christ, I remember damn well that once upon a time, I would turn onto said road and it would get me to South Beach. How was I to know that condo construction, road widening, and the need to construct new buildings in every conceivable pastel color would change things so much. So between this, and between my knowing that salmon have survived for centuries by going against the tide, was I so wrong for not following the GPS? Did I deserve to be yelled at by some idiotic box? Or to be driving around in circles, seeing the fucking causeway that would take me to my Promised Land, but having no clue how to get on it?

Desperate, I stopped at the first parking meter I could find and called Zach. From this, I did learn another key lesson. When you travel without your lover, and you call him for the first time, and you open with "I want to shoot this fuckin GPS", the

conversation tends to go downhill from there. Said lover, especially if he is young, becomes automatically smug, insisting that he is being kept in said relationship "primarily for tech support." He will ask repeated rhetorical questions about how one could get so lost, especially in a city where one grew up. He will remind one, over and over of the irony that he, from a distance of thousands of miles, and having experienced Miami only sporadically on vacations, is being the one called to guide said expert back on his desired path. I endured all of this. And to my credit, when Zach yelled at me, "If you'd shut up for one second and listen to me, I'll tell you how to get to your hotel," I did shut up. He said it with such force. Such conviction. Such a commanding sense of himself. I envied him. I hated myself, but I would never tell him that.

Somehow, Zachie calmed me down. Somehow, he was able to tell me just what button to push to turn off the GPS, and even though I swear that I had already pushed the same button, when he told me to push it, it stopped. No more "Wrong turn. Please turn around." And somehow, using God knows what from his own technological arsenal, he directed me onto the causeway, into South Beach, and right to the Delano, only from my giving him the Delano's address. I know I thanked him profusely, I'm pretty sure I told him I loved him. And when I pulled up hotel, I told that stupid little box "go fuck yourself."

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It was nearly 11:30 at night when I got settled in my room at the Delano, which, if you know anything about the Delano, could be described simply as: white on white on white on white. The Delano is famous for its white rooms that make you think you're walking into someone's version of an angelic dream as soon as you open the door.

White bed. White floor. White drapes. The only hint of any other color came from the green orchard and hedgerow popping out of the enormous white vase. I would hate this almost anywhere else, but in South Beach, it works. In a place where the women have too much make-up and too high heals, and men slick their hair as if they're cast in Scorsese's next gangster film, at least the denizens of this little neon playground know that it's all fake on some level. It's the polar opposite of academia, where people either have no idea how full of shit they really are, or worse, they do know, but they hide behind writing their Revolutionary New Book or starting a Revolutionary New Movement or making a Revolutionary New Discovery, all of which will only make them more insufferable than they already are—a malady that they will surely get away with, as students will always need recommendations, television will always need talking heads, and the A-listers will always need "top draws" to invite to their soirées. No, compared to that set, South Beach was its own Nirvana—a fake hotel room in a fake locale creating its own sort of reality. At least that's how I saw it.

There was also the fact that the room made me immediately horny. I got out my white laptop, plopped down on my white bed and Skyped Zach. He opened with a "Hi" where that single syllable dragged out as though "hi" was a three- or four-syllable word. I just knew that he really was glad to hear from me, and that made me smile. When that young Capote-esque face appeared on my screen, it was doing what it often did—bopping around, looking every which direction at a multitude of gizmos before it. Like a pilot in his cockpit, Zach was at his usual alcove in our home, mastering his own universe.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to find just the right words for a guest blog post I'm writing."

"Which blog?"

"Do you really care?"

I didn't. I told Zach that. And the kid smiled. That crazy kid actually smiled when I said that. He sat back in his aerodynamic chair and ran his fingers through his hair.

"I didn't think so. Looks like you got there safe."

"I did."

"Have you called Jacques?"

"He's next. You were first."

"Sweet, daddyo. Have you called your mother?"

"No. She's last."

"You should call her."

"I know."

"Just to let her know you got in okay."

"*I know!* Christ, you are so good at telling me what to do."

"I'm glad you think so. Now, take off your clothes."

"Zach!"

"Your shirt first. Unbutton it. Slow."

I wanted to. I did. But the story of that congressman whose career ended when he accidently sent a Twitpick of him in his underwear? That's what I thought of. I gave Zach a line about "someone of my stature having to be very careful." As soon as I said

it, I knew I was one of those pretentious assholes I normally hate. Zach got up from his chair and positioned himself so that his torso was front and center on my screen.

"You're lucky I have no stature. I've got nothing to worry about."

He unbuttoned his shirt, unzipped his jeans and pulled down his briefs. The more nude he got, the more he laughed and smiled. Yes, I was excited. Quite excited. But I could just watch. As Zach caressed himself and pleasured himself, I could not help but wonder; how was it that he was able to free himself of all the shame, self-hatred and guilt that I had when I was his age? I had no idea. But I was instantly jealous of Zach's daring and audacity. It's always been rumored that Kafka envisioned ejaculating blood when he had sex. So yes, as crazy as it sounds, while Zach looked as though he was at the edge of ecstasy, I thought of Kafka. God, was that man fucked up. At least I wasn't as fucked up as he was. I made myself feel better by thinking that way.

Zach suddenly looked right into the camera.

"Are you enjoying my little show?"

"Of course I am."

"Then smile."

"Zach…"

"Even though you feel shitty. Do it for me. If you're not gonna show me your dick, you could at least show me your smile."

I smiled. Even though I felt Zach was forcing it. I smiled as wide as I could. The more I thought about it, just his asking me this request really did make my smile more genuine. With that, Zach laid back in his chair and began beating his dick hard. I put my hand on my dick, though I tried to do it in a way that Zach wouldn't notice. He was

so far gone into his own space, I doubt he would have noticed anyway. Zach being gloriously young as he is, he came pretty quickly. Oh, how he smiled.

"My. You should be very proud of yourself," I said, realizing how lame those words were even as they were tripping out of my mouth.

"It was nothing," Zach responded, grinning devilishly. Like the neat freak that he is, he was already reaching for tissue to clean himself up. Still he managed to scoop a wad of cum with his index finger and swallow it, just because he figured that would turn me on. It did.

"It was definitely something," I told him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. It was good for me, too. Nothing like a quickie when you're nervous about things. Releases endorphins!"

And with that, I detected a hint of vulnerability in Zach's voice. I assured him that I would not forget to call about postponing his hearing. As quickly as I could, I changed the subject so that he wouldn't think of making one of his endless inquiries about that topic, and told him I loved him. He laughed a nervous laugh, said that was "sweet" and told me he loved me too, sort of like Annie Hall would say to Alvy Singer if she automatically repeated something someone said to her. (*Oh well, La Di Da. La Di Da. La La*).

With that, Zach ended the Skype section. Then I got a call from mother. I sighed and let it go to voice mail. Did you get in yet? I checked the airline and they said the plane got in, but I haven't heard from you yet. Just let me know you got in…blah, blah blah. I wasn't ready to call her back yet. No way. Instead, I flipped through my iPhoto files and found one of my favorite photos of Zachie. It was from last October's

Barrington Gay Lesbian Caucus Halloween Party, where we went as Charles and Sebastian from *Brideshead Revisited*. He was Sebastian and I was Charles. Zachie looked so adorable in his royal blue and white English vest, with a matching top hat and of course, one of his four (yes, four) teddy bears as Aloysius. I tore off my pants and my boxers and jerked off. And I meant it. In that brief moment, I knew I was lucky to have him. Only after that did I text mother. I got in. Don't worry. See you tomorrow. That's when I realized I still had no pot. I called Jacques immediately.

"So professor, you've landed," said the smooth voice on the other end. "Are you relaxing at the Delano?"

"Relaxing isn't the right word. I need what you've got," I said, realizing right away how ridiculous I must have sounded. Jacques let out a devilish burst of laughter.

"Well. I must get over there as quick as I can and show you what I've got. I normally meet customers in public places first. But if you're with Zach, I know you're A-1. Just stay where you are, darling, and let the front desk know to expect me in 15 minutes."

I gave Jacques my room number and reminded him to be discreet.

"Oh yes, because you're the only author and professor on the planet who ever does weed, right? No worries, my dear. I'm a seasoned pro when it comes to discretion. You really do need some weed, don't you?"

I heard a click on the other end before I had a chance to answer.

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True to his word, Jacques showed up at my door 15 minutes later. I saw right away that South Beach was treating him quite well. He was tanned and sinewy, the type that

could actually get away with 2- or 3-day-old scruff and a lime green polo shirt. When I opened the door, he immediately tipped his straw fedora.

"Hello, professor, so nice to finally meet you. Again, my condolences."

I thanked him, invited him in, and offered to take his backpack. He obliged, of course removing the backpack in just the right way so that I could not miss the unmistakable LV logos that scream Louis Vuitton to the world.

"I know the circumstances are unfortunate, but you picked a good time to be here. I swear I just saw Leo DiCaprio in the lobby. He's filming a movie here, you know. Don't be surprised if you run into him a lot."

Without my even inviting him, Jacques sat himself down on the white sofa. The way his legs and his cargo shorts complemented one another, I did not mind. If anything, I was a little lost for conversation. I forced myself to make some.

"Do you know Leo?"

Again, that devilish laugh.

"Now, professor, if I'm discreet with you, that means I'm discreet with everyone, right?"

Oh, this guy was good. Really good.

"So professor, do you have time for a drink, or is this strictly business?"

I've always hated being called professor. It's such a foreboding, intimidating word. But Jacques was exactly the type who, if he met me before I worked my ass off to become whatever the fuck it is I've become, would have completely ignored me. I've always worked out, and I've always tried to look as good as I can. Being somewhat of a celebrity, being gay, and having a lover half your age—those three factors alone would

cause any man to be concerned about appearance. I could still fit comfortably in size 32 pants. Zachie always told me how other guys were looking at me, even if I never picked up on them. Still, with Jacques, I was way out of my league. With him, I needed that scholarly title. I surmised that it—and the probability that he'd seen Zach naked—was one of the few things that kept him making eye contact with me.

Though every ounce of common sense would have dictated refusing a drink, I did no such thing. I raided the mini bar and fixed a vodka/cranberry (for Jacques) and a dirty martini (for me.) When I brought the drinks over, I resisted the urge to sit right beside Jacques. Instead, I planted myself on the (of course, very white) chair by the credenza. This would be one of the few smart moves I made that night.

Jacques took a sip of his drink, complimented my bartending skills, crossed his legs and began wiggling his foot—a move that meant god-only-knew-what but that drove me crazy just wondering. He had me—the way that the young and gorgeous can always have you, because they can get away with just about anything, and they know it. Even worse, Jacques had brains, too. Right after telling me that he was a third-year med student at the University of Miami, he told me about how, in one of his public health classes, he discovered Shakespeare's well-documented interest in health and medicine by reading one of my books, *Shakespeare's Globe: The Highlights and Lowlifes of the Elizabethan Theatre*, where I surmise that Shakespeare's interest in health and wellness came in no small part because his plays were performed in London's Bankside, a variable den of iniquity crawling with bars and brothels, where Shakespeare often had to contend with actors, directors and audiences who paid a little too much of a price for having partaken in those, shall I say, other forms of entertainment. "I would have loved

to have lived during that time," Jacques told me, smiling and wondering aloud about all the debauchery he could have gotten into. And lord have mercy, Jacques even remembered this line from *Cymbeline*:

By medicine life will be prolonged, yet death

Will seize the doctor too.

Jacques took out several plastic bags from his backpack and displayed them on the white coffee table. In explaining them, he had the tone of a sommelier showcasing an assortment of fine wines. I was impressed, but I made him cut to the chase. I wanted the most potent pot he had. He then proceeded to show me what he called his "AK47, My top of the line." Of course, I wanted the AK47—until Jacques told me an eighth of an ounce was 60 bucks.

"Are you kidding me," I shrieked. "In Boston, I could get something like this for 30, 40 bucks, tops."

But Jacques was ready for me.

"You could not get this in Boston because I'm not in Boston. You want the finest weed? You've gotta pay for it." With that, he unzipped one of the side compartments of his Louis and took out some rolling papers. "Tell you what. I'll give you a little taste. Like the ice cream man."

I inhaled—and sure enough, I felt as though my brain could already explode. All I could mutter was, "Wow."

"Citrusy, isn't it? That's one of my secrets. I know that fruit has advantages beside what your mother tells you."

All of the sudden, 60 for an eighth was a bargain. Then and there, I handed Jacques five $100 bills. I'd have handed him more, but that's all the cash I had on me. I wasn't even sure it was going to be enough for the week. (Turned out, it wasn't.)

Jacques took the cash and got out his own little measurement kit.

"A fine choice, professor. Thank you."

I complimented Jacques on his salesmanship. He laughed.

"Yeah, well, have you seen what med school costs these days? It's totally fucking out of control. And even if I look like a trust fund kid, believe me, I'm not. My dad's a police officer in Montenegro. My mom teaches English to grade schoolers. Neither of them make what they should."

I found myself enthralled by Jacques' story—probably a little jealous. He seemed *proud* of his parents.

"Well, what does it say that drug dealers do so much better than cops and teachers, huh?"

"Tell me about it. I'm nothing if not resourceful. I take advantage of America's fucked up drug laws. I make sure that my select clientele gets the most mind-blowing high they've ever had, and 10 years from now, I'll be one of the few doctors my age who doesn't have his balls tied by student loan debt. I'll actually be able to bring my mom and dad over here and buy a nice little dream house for them."

By this point, Jacques was just about finished with his measuring.

"Tell you what. I'm gonna give you a little extra, cause I like you. And I can tell, Zach's right about you."

Right about me? Jacques put forth that last clause with just the right amount of certainty—and authority—that I had to inquire.

"Right about me. Really? How so?"

"Well, he loves you. That's for sure. I mean, I know you're wondering. Nothing happened between us. And the reason for that is 'cause Zach said it wouldn't be worth it. Which I thought was so sweet—even though personally, I think monogamy's about as realistic as Santa Claus, you know what I mean?"

I did know what Jacques meant, but I was careful not to say anything. I felt as though I was being tested. And already, I knew I wasn't going to pass the test. I just let Jacques continue.

"Really, when Zach was here, we spent most of the time talking. I could definitely see why Oxford accepted him."

With that, I nearly dropped one of the plastic bags Jacques had just given me. Oxford? I asked Jacques what he meant.

"Oh, shit. There I go, Chatty Cathy. Uh, forget what I said."

"No! Are you kidding? Zachie was accepted to Oxford? He never told me that!"

"That's right. He didn't. He didn't want you to know. He didn't want you know because if he went, he'd be away from you for, oh, I forget how long, but that's not the point. He didn't want to be away from you, so he declined the fellowship.

I couldn't look at Jacques as he told me this. I looked everywhere else. The white ceiling. The white floor. The white bed. I rolled a joint as fast as I could and asked Jacques for his lighter. Well, probably, I said something along the lines of "Where's your fucking lighter. I need your fucking lighter!" Jacques lit my joint, still

managing to look as classy as Cary Grant might have had the rules been a little different when he made films.

"Look, I've said too much already, I know. But I gotta tell 'ya. Zach didn't sound disappointed at all when he told me about turning down Oxford. He was okay with it. He knew he'd have other opportunities. I mean, he's at fucking Barrington, right? Bottom line, professor, he wanted to be with you. That's a beautiful thing, isn't it?"

Jacques could not have done worse than end that last little soliloquy with a question. Why? Because he put the onus on me to respond. And in that situation, that was not the thing to do. How did I respond? By pinning him against the white wall. By ripping off his clothes and mine and fucking him against said white wall. In the white bathroom. On the white floor. On the white bed.

Not that Jacques resisted at all. In fact, he smiled and laughed through most of it, as though he was a kid on a roller coaster. He was, as I recall, quite versatile, too. The only thing he was concerned about was protecting his stash. At one point—right after I pulled his briefs down, I believe—Jacques excused himself and placed his Louis on an out-of-the-way corner of the work-desk—which, this being a hotel work desk, was so tiny that only members of Cirque du Soleil could possibly get nasty there. Jacques even asked if I minded, and I was so impressed with his attention to detail that I offered to provide his stash even more protection by opening my little storage closet and offering a space right next to my satchel—and Andre. Our own little Vuitton Club, side by side. Jacques thanked me and took me up on the offer. Briefly, I imagined Andre getting high off the aroma of the potent stash.

That thought pretty much ended when Jacques shoved his dick in my mouth. Not that I minded. Especially with all the pot and dirty martinis I continually ingested. In fact, my only worry after a while was whether our little escapade was getting a little predictable. That's when I—the usual prince of respectability and decorum—decided it would be fun to go skinny-dipping in the Delano pool. So I went to the closet and grabbed two (of course) white bathrobes and two (of course) white pairs of elastic slippers, (those very smart operators of the Delano always suspect there will be a need for two of these items), and off we went. I remember the light of the half moon, and a lot of splashing. I also remember yelling out for Leo DiCaprio. I'd wanted him—really wanted him—ever since *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*. And the rumors of him being one of Hollywood's ultimate skirt chasers, getting lucky with all those supermodels, only made me want him more. I wanted Leo to join us in the pool. To take part in our merry bacchanal. And I guess I made that claim a little too loudly, because even Jacques tried to shush me. He tried by kissing me, which only made him hotter to me. Only a gnarly hotel knave, who came out and informed us that neither skinny-dipping nor excessively loud noises were allowed, interrupted my delirium.

Of course, I didn't like this. But even in my inebriated state, I thought: how fucking hard is it to be rude and shocking in South Beach? And yet, I managed it! I—the one scholarly, utterly professional and respectable Andy Prystowski—was at this moment, the most obnoxious creature in this playground of iniquity! I loved it!

I got out of the pool and put my robe and slippers back on. So did Jacques. He did most of the apologizing to the hotel knave. We got back in my room, and Jacques asked if he could take a shower and clean off all the chlorine. Of course, I said yes. Of

course, I thought I'd join him. I opened the shower curtain, which was, of course, white.

And that's when things got a little weird. He had the gall to ask me if he could shower alone.

"I just need a little break, professor. You're wearing me out."

He was bullshitting me. I knew it. How dare he! I mean, come on. I was his paying customer. I must have said something terrible to him—called him an asshole or something like that. But while I was yelling at him, I let him shower alone. If that's what he wanted, I let him do it. Aunt Mildred always said I was a good boy. She always patted me on the back after one of mother's rants. She said I was good. And I *was* good. I let Jacques shower alone, but I wasn't going to let him out of my sight. While he showered, I sat myself on the toilet. I probably looked like Rodin's The Thinker, if The Thinker ever OD'd on booze, drugs and sex. Jacques finally got out of the shower and dried himself.

"You know why Shakespeare's plays still resonate?", he espoused suddenly—a rhetorical question that of course got me to look right at him, even against my will. "If you ask me, I'd boil it down to one word: Hubris. That's become one of my favorite words. Shakespeare lets his characters get all high and mighty. But if they get too high and mighty, they pay a price. Don't they, professor?"

At this point, Jacques removed his towel and playfully threw it at me. All my anger at him dissolved in that instant, replaced by a sense of awe and wonder at his ability to make a scholarly point while not minding one bit that he was completely naked.

"You got a little too high and mighty, tonight, professor. Which is okay, but you sure don't want to wind up like Macbeth or Julius Caesar, do you, now?"

I realized then that it had been a long time—too long, since my last drink or pot hit. I got up and went toward the mini-bar, but Jacques took one of the clean towels off the rack and tossed it my way. He suggested that I get in the shower, and I did—but only after he promised me that he'd still be there when I got out.

"Of course I'll be here," he chided. "I still have to dry my hair."

I did what Jacques wanted me to do. I got in the shower. It had one of those aerodynamic massage water heads, which I immediately turned on so that the water pounded me like bricks. And I made the water hot. Very hot. I wished like hell that I had at least snuck by Jacques and taken another drink or another pot hit. I felt the pangs of a monstrous headache. And worse, the pangs of—everything. I was, at once, the little boy, being told by mother how shitty life was; how shitty I was. I was the freshman at Harvard, so lost among a sea of trust fund babies who wouldn't even look at me when they heard I still hadn't been to Paris. I was the man who pretty much fucked up every relationship I'd ever been in; the first few, admittedly, because I tried so hard to tell myself that I liked vaginas and then realized that was impossible. But even when I became true to myself, I was almost always the one leaving before things got boring—which for me could happen within hours of that first kiss. Unless, of course, I really liked the guy, or loved the guy, or whatever. Then, I did what I was doing right there at the Delano, which was everything I could to drive them away. To spare them the pain of loving me, I'd tell them. Zachie—he turned fucking Oxford down because he didn't want to be away from me. And of course, he didn't tell me because he knew I'd never

let him turn Oxford down. And yet there I was, literally and figuratively fucking that sweet kid over in the worst ways possible.

I know I cried in that aerodynamic shower. I remember worrying that Jacques would hear me. When I was a kid, I used to stay in showers as long as I could, literally until my skin got pruney. Showers were my nirvana; I could get mother or any one of her parade of losers to think I was being a good boy, that I was getting as clean and spiff as could be. Little did they know that every minute I spent in there was one minute I avoided with them. I'd have stayed in that Delano shower for an infinitely long time, too, had it not been for the fact that, suddenly, that boiling hot water became ice cold. I reasoned that the Delano was one of those increasing number of places that, thanks to Al Gore and company, now monitored things like hot water use. At that moment, I hated Al Gore. But then again, at that moment, I pretty much hated everyone and everything. I got out of the shower, toweled off, opened the bathroom door and found Jacques—with Andre right in the palm of his hand. I nearly fainted.

"What are you doing with that? Be careful with that!"

I moved over to try and protect Andre, but Jacques moved away quickly, now holding Andre even higher in the air.

"Don't worry professor. Where did you get this?"

"Where did I get it? What does that matter? How did you find it?"

"Your manbag was open. Don't get so freaky. I know to be careful with these things. This is so cool. I'm surprised they let you bring something like this here."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Are you kidding me? This is a real skull, my man!"

Suddenly, it was as though I was frozen in time. I had never met anyone who could tell a real skull from a fake one before. I had to bluff Jacques. I knew that. It was just that, after mass quantities of booze, pot, sex and self-hatred, I wasn't sure I was up for it. As soon as I started telling Jacques some story about the Barrington Theatre Company's art department, he stopped me.

"Don't bullshit me, professor. You're talking to someone who's sat through quite a lot of anatomy lectures. You wanna know how I know?"

Jacques then pointed to those copious red splotches.

"Calcification, professor. Happens to all of us. No artist is gonna know all that, or if they did, they're fuckin' obsessive-compulsive as hell. Tell me! How'd you get this?"

By this point, Jacques was bouncing Andre like a ball, from one hand to the other. I wanted to intercept, but Jacques was taking full advantage of his one-upsmanship.

"Stop that! You're gonna break it!"

"It's the precious balance of life, professor! These things don't break so easily. I mean, come on…"

"I'm asking you nicely one last time. Put that down!"

Jacques didn't. He said he wouldn't until I told him the story. I said, no story until he put the skull down.

"Oh professor, you're such a tease…"

With that, I bolted over to Jacques, plowed both my hands toward his neck and pinned him against the wall, and looked into his now suddenly stunned eyes.

"You are forgetting, you little brat, that I know your last name. I know the dean of your med school's name. With one phone call, I could make your life very miserable. Now. Give me that skull."

With that, Jacques gently handed Andre back to me, and my heart went back to beating normally. Only then did it dawn on me. I didn't know Jacques' last name. And I sure as shit didn't know his dean's name. But damn if I still wasn't a convincing little liar when I needed to be.

"I'm sorry, professor. I was just having a little fun. You're not going to call my dean, are you?"

With that, I fought hard to stifle a smile. I told Jacques I wouldn't do that---as long as he would keep his mouth shut to Zach about anything that went on here aside from our little business transaction. Looking as relieved as anyone escaping a guillotine, Jacques agreed. I went and rolled another joint. I lit it—nowhere near as classy as Cary Grant would have done it—and offered a hit to Jacques.

"No, that's okay," he mumbled as he was putting now his shirt. "I've had enough."

I sat myself down on the bed and watched Jacques get dressed. He performed this task with the agility and know-how of someone quite experienced with having to find his clothes on the ground. But as I looked at Jacques' face, I swear I saw a little boy. A little boy probably dealing with a shittier deck of cards in life that he was letting on. I pictured his policeman father beating him. His teacher mother yelling at him. I lifted Andre and began telling his story to Jacques. I told him all about Andre's history, how I got him and why I brought him with me to Miami. I felt like a real dad probably

feels, telling a great story to a son. Jacques lapped it up. By the time he was fully dressed, he was sitting by me on the bed, his eyes fixed on Andre.

"Well, it sure goes to show that there are always crazy ways to get what you want in life," Jacques said.

He got up, collected his Louis and kissed me on the cheek.

"Good luck tomorrow, professor. You and Andre both. Call me if you need more weed, okay?"

Jacques went toward the door, but I decided to be a gentleman and open it for him. It provided me with one more opportunity to let him know I had power over him.

"Remember," I told him, before placing my index finger on my lips. Jacques copied me, and parted with "Thank you. Thank you so much."

As Jacques hoisted his Louis and darted off into what was left of the hot, crazy night, I closed the door, took yet one more pot hit, looked out once more at moon, and recalled one of my favorite *Hamlet* quotes:

The devil hath the power

to assume a pleasing shape.

Then I noticed the time on the digital clock: 3:37 a.m. Realizing that I had to be up by 8 a.m., I immediately thought of some more succinct verbiage:

"Oh, shit."

***

Oh, how to describe my headache the next morning. The Delano phone rang right at 8, with what I knew was my wake-up call. The phone, being a modern phone, whirred more than rang. Still, even the whirring sound was a sound, and with what seemed like

herds of elephants stomping on my head, any sound was an enemy at that moment. For what I wanted to be forever, I remained defiantly face-down on my (of course) white pillow, briefly thinking of smothering myself but just as quickly dismissing the idea. Aunt Mildred wouldn't like it. And besides, if I spent a fortune on weed, I would be damned if I was not going to get the most out of it.

So yes, I got my squishy nude ass out of bed. I went to open the (of course) white drapes, but I quickly realized what a bad idea that was when the sunlight blinded me. I felt like a traveler on a way station to heaven, which felt doubly wrong because I don't believe in heaven; and even if I did, I sure as shit wasn't going there. So I drew back the curtains, which, being white as they were, still let in way too much sunlight.

I traipsed over to the mini-bar and made life a little better for some Amazon bean farmers with the full pot of fair-trade coffee I brewed. Then I rolled a joint and set my sights on the pot, but where was the lighter? I couldn't find the fucking lighter. I remembered that Jacques used his the night before, but damn it, I had one, too. I knew it! I tore through the drawers. Not there. I tore through my suitcase. Nada. Then I pulled out my satchel, which I opened gently. I hoisted Andre. And with all that was in me, I let loose with my own impromptu soliloquy:

Oh man, you've got to help me.

All day today, but especially now.

Where is that fucking lighter?

You've gotta send me a sign, Andre.

I know you know where it is.

I mean, come on. You know how fucked up

Real real life is! You lived in dreary Eastern Europe

With dreary people. You must have—I hope you did—

Light up. A lot. I mean, to even think of wanting to be in

Hamlet that way, to even think to donate your fucking head

The way you did;

Well, you had to be on drugs to do that!

So I know you know my plight!

All I need now is my lighter. That's it. And you're gonna

Tell me where it is.

I'm gonna shut up now.

And you're gonna tell me.

I placed Andre right by the baggie with the pot. I sat my ass on the side of the bed and laid my head back. I was greeted not with the Answer I Wanted, but with another elephantine burst of pain in my head. Then Aunt Mildred, telling me I was a good boy. I swear, she actually believed it when she told me that. Lighter or not, I had to get my bad ass up. I had to get into the shower and get ready. And I did. I gathered what was left of my stamina and my dignity and got myself to the shower. But not before rolling a joint anyway and taking it with me to the shower. I could still at least smell that mind-bending citrus. And I pictured myself looking as desperate as I actually felt, like any of those gazillion Annie Leibovitz photos of rock stars I'd seen where they're supposedly "cleaning up" in the bathroom, yet I knew for damn sure they were anything but clean.

With my joint firmly in my mouth, I closed my still white shower curtains and blasted the water, which thankfully at that point was back to full hotness. Yes, I knew the adage of a cold shower actually being more advantageous here, but fuck if I was going to take one. The hot water—and my AK47—would wake me enough, thank you. I bowed my head like a bad boy in school, and let the water and the weed do whatever the hell they were going to do. The pounding in my head was still monstrous, but it was starting to become slightly more bearable—until I heard my phone ring. Who the fuck could be calling then? Whoever it was would have to wait. Until the pain subsided. Until I could no longer smell citrus. Until the damn Delano started rationing hot water again.

When all that happened, I got out of the shower, dried myself and checked my cell. Zach's name blared on it. I looked over at Andre. These are the kinds of signs you give me? These?

I hit play and listened to the sound of Zach's voice. There was an air of forlornness and resignation in it, but also hints of his Southern accent when he told me that he wanted to make sure I was up, and he was there with me in spirit, and that he loved me. Very much. I remember him adding those words. I thought of hitting the call back button immediately, but no. I put the phone down. I took another smell of my citrusy pot and, in the immortal words of Dolly Parton, poured myself another "cup of ambition." I shaved and brushed my teeth and checked the weather forecast (70 percent chance of rain, it said) and plied on my Hugo Boss suit and all the accoutrements that no self-respecting pointy-headed gay academic would ever be without, even in mourning. I took out my satchel, placed Andre in it and draped him over my shoulder.

As I checked to make sure I had my room key, I nearly tripped—on my stupid little lighter, right on the floor underneath the flat screen television, which was a goddamn ridiculous place for it because I hadn't even watched television since I got to South Beach. But at least I could put it right by the pot baggie that I placed in the back pocket of the satchel. I could at least fully load my AK47, instead of having to stop at some drug store for some "ammo." There was that.

I dragged myself to the lobby and asked for a cab to take me to mother's. I was told there would be one in five minutes. I noticed the time: a little after 9 a.m. Zach, I was sure, would be out running, or at the gym. I called him back then and yes, I got his voice mail. I thanked him for his call and reassured him that I was up. And I told him not to ever turn down Oxford. When a boy from Bumblefuck, Alabama gets a chance to become a Rhodes Scholar, he takes that chance. Period. With that, I hung up. My cab was ready, and Andre and I were on our way to face a day that I already wanted to forget.

***

As if I needed another reason to hate Donald Trump, my ride to mother's that morning gave me one. Her neighborhood used to be kind of pleasantly seedy. Not a slum, exactly, but you'd still find colorful little holes in the wall and characters Jimmy Buffett might sing about. Now, as soon as I rode up Collins Avenue, past Bal Harbour and into mother's home turf of Sunny Isles Beach, Trump's name was everywhere. On billboards. On condos. He was taking over and changing everything. Gone was any hint of actual character. Now everything was shiny, happy and luxurious, and it could all be yours for as little as 325 (in the thousands, of course) down. I shook my head. I

wondered how mother could even afford to live here. Yes, she had a steady job, but she didn't have that kind of money. I knew that one of her loser paramours left her the condo, but still. Prices had to be going up. I immediately surmised that during this trip, mother would ask me for money. I just told myself to be prepared for it. I had no idea if I'd say yes or not, but I sighed, telling myself to be ready; telling myself that no matter how I would respond to that question, I'd wind up the loser.

As the cab turned left off Collins and onto my mother's street, I noticed puffs of grey in the clouds. Just then, I remembered that I did not bring my umbrella. With everything in me, I wanted to roll a joint right there. But I didn't. Someone might see me. And I was sufficiently down enough from last night that I actually cared if someone saw me. We got to the automatic security gate that separated mother and her neighbors from riff raff, whom I gathered right away would not want to take anything from any of these people anyway. There used to be a human guarding this gate, but now, everything was automatic, which meant that I had to call mother on my cell for her to buzz us in. So I called.

"Andy, is that you?"

"Yes, mother."

"Finally. Wait a second."

Even if I wanted to say something, I knew she was off the phone already. She buzzed us, and the cabdriver sped past the parking lot toward the entrance. I made sure Andre was with me, got out and paid the cab driver. I walked into the lobby. As I walked toward the elevator, an elderly security guard stopped me.

"Excuse me, sir. You have to sign in."

Fuck—another level of security. I told the guy I was Brenda Prystowski's son. He was not impressed.

"I don't care who you are. I don't know you. And if I don't know you, you have to sign in."

I sighed. Couldn't mother have at least told these knaves I was coming? He dialed mother. Again, she answered. Again, I was "buzzed" in.

"Thank you," I told the knave. "Is there anyone ELSE I need to check in with?"

"Oh," said the knave, "we're always having to check in when we're not expected to, aren't we."

I turned from him. Not that I really wanted to go toward mother, but I wanted to turn away from this guy even more. I got in the elevator, pressed 5, and mercifully watched the doors close before some young thing got in with her two kids, screaming god-knows-what in Spanish. I got off on the fifth floor, and walked the long corridor down to mother's condo. I didn't want to think anymore. I knew I had Andre. I knew I had my AK47. I knew I just had to do this. I took a deep breath, swallowed and knocked. I was barely finished knocking when the door swung open.

There she was. Looking very pretty. Calm even.

"There you are," she said, opening her arms, embracing me and pulling me toward her far too unexpectedly. "You're home."

I could only mutter a lame, "Thank you, mother. Good to be here." Right away, mother took my coat and my satchel and asked if I'd had anything to eat. I hadn't, and I told her so.

"Sit down. The family car'll be here in 10 minutes, I can make you a bagel."

"Mother, you don't have to…"

"Andy, sit down in the dining room. You can't tell me you're not hungry."

I sat down in the dining room. From there, I could see the kitchen—and enough food to feed Angola.

"I'll get you a raisin bagel. You always liked those. I'd toast it but we don't have time. If you'd have come a little sooner…"

Mother's voice trailed off and she didn't finish the sentence. It was as if she instinctively knew how to let guilt waft into the air. I just slouched in the chair and kept quiet. As she navigated a sea of cellophane, dishes and silverware, she told me the order of the day, and how, while we were at the funeral, her team from the Bagel Barn was going to come in, unwrap everything, and make sure that our grieving hoard will have plenty to eat when we come back for shiva. I asked her how many were coming and she said "Lots of people. You know how they all come out of the woodwork when someone dies. What do you want to drink? I don't have time for coffee, but there's orange juice, grape juice, iced tea or water. Take your pick." With no scientific evidence whatsoever, I quickly surmised that any acidic drink would not be good for me, considering my night last night. And iced tea had caffeine in it, so I picked that.

As she poured the tea, mother said she was sorry that "my friend" couldn't come. I thanked her as she served me the tea and the bagel.

"Here. Eat up and drink up. You look like you need it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. Hurry up. The car'll be here any minute."

"I want to know what you…"

“Andy, I’m sorry! Not even five minutes in, and already, I’m sorry. I thought you looked hungry and thirsty, okay? Just hurry up and don’t read anything into anything.”

With that, I shut up and ate. It was a pretty decent bagel, even if it wasn’t toasted. The tea was unsweetened. I thought of asking mother for sugar, but then I thought, no. Just shut up, eat and drink. Shut up, eat and drink. The silence was punctured by mother telling me she was “trying, really trying,” and telling me she was sorry one more time. I told her, “No worries, mother, forget it” and went back to eating. Then mother’s phone rang: the family car was out front. I took one more bite from the bagel and a swig of the tea. I went to put the plate and glass in the kitchen, but mother stopped me. She would take care of that. I put on my coat and secured my satchel.

“You’re taking that bag?”

“Yes, mother, I am.”

“Fine. Whatever.”

Mother and I left the condo, walked down the long, cold corridor and got in the elevator for the lobby. We were greeted by the old knave who made me sign in.

“Mrs. Prystowski, they’re waiting right ahead for you.”

“Thank you, Carmine. I see them.”

I thanked Carmine, too. He hardly waited until I got those words out when he added: “Sonny, we all have things waiting right ahead of us, don’t we?”

I didn’t look back at him. I got inside that family car as fast as I could.

***

“Oh, no more rain. I wanna make it stop. I wanna make it stop right now!”

As I stared out the window of the black Weinstein and Sons funeral home family car on the way to the cemetery, Aunt Mildred's words ran through my head like a wailing siren.

Mother sat with me, on the opposite side of the back seat. While I shivered, mother pleaded with the driver to blast the air conditioning, not believing him when he told her it was already up as high as it could go.

I could hear her, but I wasn't really listening. All I noticed were the ominous black clouds covering the summer sky. If they had tails, I'd swear they were tornados. When the family car came for us just a half hour ago, the June sun was bright, with only a hint of grey. But Miami fools you that way. Yes, she entices with that world-famous year-round warmth, but there are those black clouds that come from out of nowhere, and when they burst, out come prickly needles of rain, followed by thick, soupy air that leaves the unprepared soaking and sweating. Usually, it's all over in 10 minutes. Sometimes less. But if you're unlucky enough to be caught without an umbrella, it will feel as though infinite buckets of water are being poured on you continuously. It's not ideal weather for a graveside service, and especially not for Aunt Mildred's service. She always hated rain and thunder scared the crap out of her. If the thunder continued, she'd run toward her bed and crawl into the fetal position until it stopped. Of course, I asked her why she was so scared. Her answer was: "You're too young, *tatala*." Finally, one rainy day when I was 11, she gave me somewhat of an answer. When she was little, her father did "an awful thing" to her, and the first time he did this "awful thing," it was thundering. She never told me what this "awful thing" was, but she didn't have to. I

knew. I was mother's "little man" and I knew. So even though I've never been much of a praying man, I looked up and said to myself: "these dark clouds have to go."

As the car pulled through the cemetery gate and slowed to a crawl, mother popped open her compact for one last quick look. She seemed to be cursing herself under her breath. She tossed the compact back in her purse and opened the car door before the driver came to a complete stop.

"Andrew, look at me. Am I sweating?"

"No, mother, you look fine," I replied, taking in her dark blue dress, pearl necklace and sapphire earrings. She probably thought I didn't mean it, but I did. I wondered briefly whether mother would return the compliment, but I quickly reminded myself not to expect miracles. Her only remark concerned my satchel.

"Why don't you leave that in the car?"

"Well, if it rains and we need to make a dash, I can cover my head. Or I'll give it to you to cover your head."

Honestly, I was impressed with how fast I came up with that one. Mother totally bought it. Her eyes darted between my face and Andre's protective covering, and she even managed a faint smile.

"Thank you, Andy. Very thoughtful."

Mother reached for my hand, and I took hers. It was cold. All that damn air conditioning in the family car. I arched my shoulders and said, "Let's do this." Mother and I were escorted into the family waiting room. The assembled parties were already there: the small band of cousins who make up what's left of our family, and mother's

conclave of friends, most of whom were busy sharing their Smartphone photos of all of them "rocking out" at Neil Diamond's American Airlines Arena concert.

Of course, when mother and I walked in, everyone snapped to attention with a sea of *I'm so sorry*s, *I'm here if you need me*s, and *She was such an inspiration*s. Mother and I held hands, pasted smiles on our faces and muttered our *Thank you so much for coming*s. We separated rather quickly, with mother running to greet her good friend Annette.

Annette had always struck me as a Mamie Eisenhower type. As always, her short cropped hair and fine-tailored dress were immaculate, and her smile was sincere, even if it looked slightly forced. I had known Annette since I was 8, when she and her husband Harry moved to Miami from Chicago. She always struck me as a kind woman—one of the few who would let mother ramble on endlessly with just a well-placed "uh huh" or "oh my goodness" to let mother know she was still there. On weekends, Harry would go boating, but Annette stayed behind. Mother would go over to Annette's often when Harry was on his boat, which I liked because when she came back, she was usually in one of her calmer moods.

With Annette commandeering mother's attention, I was left to make small talk with the rest of the assembled parties. It mostly consisted of the obligatory *How are you*s, with most not picking up the hint that as far as I was concerned, the perfect answer was a simple *I'm fine*. So I smiled at all the children's photos, said thank you when so-and-so told me they liked one of my books or saw me on PBS, and nodded at all the family public relations updates that were suddenly before me. It's not that I minded this. I didn't. But, when suddenly bombarded with tales of kids' straight As or

spouses “unbelievable” promotions, I’m the type of person who automatically wonders what the family’s *not* telling me. It’s just the way I am. But of course, I just smiled and took it all in, telling myself that, in their own ways, the assembled parties were probably just as fucked up as I was.

Finally, mother and I were escorted by the sons of Mr. Weinstein – they told us their names but I only noticed how good-looking they were in their starched up, buttoned up sort of way – into their father’s office to discuss final arrangements. The sons excused themselves, telling us they must round up a load of umbrellas and help pitch a makeshift canopy, just in case. Mother and I were left to talk shop with Rabbi Farber and the elder Mr. Weinstein. The rabbi did most of the talking, starting off with the requisite condolences. Mr. Weinstein stood by quietly, taking notes. I figured he was doing this just to look busy. Was “I’m so sorry for your loss” such an original pearl of wisdom that it needed to be written down? I’m sure he was pissed, because mother had already passed on what he proudly called the “Cadillac of caskets,” in favor of what I guess would be the “Toyota of caskets” – a basic, functional wood surface with just enough white velvet inside to keep Aunt Mildred comfortable. It wasn’t lacquered, with gold-plated handles like the “Cadillac,” but it was not setting us back another thousand dollars, either. As assistant manager of the Bagel Barn, mother might have gotten discounts on the finest bialys and smoked salmon spreads, but she did not earn a lot of money.

After offering the obligatory condolences, Rabbi Farber asked us once more what Mildred’s Hebrew name was. Mother’s eyes darted at me and I realized just then that I completely forgot to look that up. I tried covering my bases, saying that I made a

note of it on my phone. But when I pulled my phone out and desperately Goggled Hebrew names, all I got were sites where I had to either scroll through endless names until I got what I wanted, or worse, endless shit about Jewish history and "meaning" until I got what I wanted. If there was a Hebrew name site with a great search engine, I was not finding it at that moment. Already frustrated in this moment of dealing with a man who did not know Aunt Mildred at all, yet somehow he--and not I--got to say things about her, I reached for something I felt sorely lacking in this exchange. The truth.

"Look, Rabbi, no offense, but we're not really into all that stuff, okay?"

Mother sighed. Rabbi Farber looked down at his notepad. "Okay, sure. As you wish."

I just sat there, stone-faced. Rabbi Farber pulled up a chair and sat down beside us. He was about to preside over a service for a woman he never met. Hell, he barely knew me or mother. The only reason he was here was because he was Cousin Geraldine's rabbi, and she got him cheap. He asked about what Aunt Mildred was like, how close she was with the family and what her interests were. Mother gave a bunch of perfunctory answers that were complete bullshit. Why, *of course* she was a source of pride and joy for our family. We gave her all the support she needed. Oh, and we learned so much from her. And she was never ever a burden to anyone. I had to interrupt. I was going to explode if I didn't.

"She loved Shakespeare," I blurted. Mother rolled her eyes, but let me go on. I told the rabbi about my recording of the sonnets and about our mutual love of *Hamlet*. Whatever I said, I must have said with conviction, because the rabbi asked me if I'd

like to say a few words at the service. I couldn't say yes fast enough, but mother interrupted.

"Rabbi, I told you she did not want any big speeches. Only you. You're going to welcome everyone, thank them for coming, say the *Kaddish*, give us some dirt to put on the casket, and make sure everyone has directions to my condo for the *shiva*. That's it. Over and out. No one wants to get drenched. Plus, I've got a ton of cold cuts waiting at home and I don't want them to spoil. You got that?"

The rabbi sighed. His eyebrows arched, he starred at mother.

"I mean, not that we didn't all love Mildred, of course we did," mother said, her eyes shifting between the rabbi and a stoic Mr. Weinstein. "But she was a very simple woman, so it's appropriate that we have a very simple service." Mother's eyes shifted down toward her dress.

"I think Andrew can speak if he wants to, and we can still keep it a simple service," the rabbi said.

He was only concerned that I did not have time to prepare. If only he knew me, I thought, but of course, I didn't say that. I told him not to worry. Mother was still incredulous, demanding to know what I was going to say. Shakespeare, of course, was a no-brainer. But as if on cue, a clap of thunder jolted all of us. "Aunt Mildred hated rain," I blurted. "And thunder scared the crap out of her. I can mention that. And of course, she really was the one who raised me. I can certainly talk about that." The rabbi's smile broadened, and I looked over at mother. She once again looked down at her dress.

"Yes, that is true, I can't deny that she raised you." With that, she bit her lip.

The rabbi looked relieved, probably because I just made his job a lot easier. With that, it was time to head for the gravesite. We all got up, and Mr. Weinstein opened the door for mother and myself. As we walked toward the car, mother could only mutter a few whispered words. “Please don’t embarrass me. Please.” I know a lot of sons who would rightfully be quite wounded if their mothers told them that right before a funeral. Not me. I let those words go right past me. “Nothing to worry about, mother. Nothing at all.”

Finally, it was time. Mother and I headed back to the family car, and everyone followed us in their cars to the gravesite. (This being Miami, no one *walks* to gravesites. *Everyone* drives.) As the clouds continued blackening, my mind raced to King Lear and that momentous scene with Lear and his fool in the torrential rain, when Lear curses the weather and, in a not-so-subtle sign of his increasing insanity, challenges nature to give it to him even harder. When he bellows

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!

it is his trusted Fool who tells him

holy water in a dry house is better than this rainwater out o' door.

I recalled the time I shared this scene with Aunt Mildred, and explained the symbolism of the rain, both in connection to Lear’s personal storms, and to the larger-world battles between man and nature. I had to be in my 20s at the time. Aunt Mildred’s response: “Why is *he* called a fool? He’s not a fool. King Lear’s the dummy for being out in the rain like that.” I never could argue with her there.

I thought of this until the car turned toward the last section of graves (Aunt Mildred would be in the “common folk” section of the cemetery, far from the

ostentatious mausoleums and family plots.) That's when I saw them. Aunt Mildred's gravediggers. There were two of them. The taller, lankier one was a black man who looked like he was in his 30s. The shorter one definitely looked Latin, with olive skin and jet-black hair. One right after the other, they shoveled mountains of dirt into the grave. But once they saw our car, they stopped. Immediately, they grabbed their shovels and walked a good 20 feet away from the grave. During the service, their only job was to wait patiently in the distance. To be as invisible as possible. I couldn't take my eyes off of them—and not because either of them was particularly my type, because they weren't. The truth: I'd have rather gone over and sat with them than with mother or anyone else there.

The family car pulled to a stop, and I dutifully got out and assumed my pallbearer role. Considering that we only had to carry the casket a few feet, it wasn't much of a role, but it didn't stop one of my cousins—I can't even remember who—for making the obligatory "gee, I hope I don't drop her" remark under his breath. Dutifully, we set the casket down and I took my seat next to mother. As I did, I looked up and noticed the sun suddenly deciding to make an appearance, trying its mightiest to shine through the clouds. Don't think I'm getting all *Touched By an Angel* here. This sunny-rainy-sunny shit happens all the time in Miami. But it did make me smile.

As the service was about to start, I felt a hand squeeze my right hand. Mother's. It was still a cold hand. I literally felt all the bones in my body constrict. With all that was in me, I needed a joint. That would have been classic. Certainly, it would have upset mother, but along with helping me cope, it would have served such an ironic trajectory. With her booze and pills, she embarrassed the hell out of me growing up.

Now she was Miss Recovery and I was the loose cannon. Oh, how that would have served her right.

The rabbi began the service but, true to my nature, I wasn't really listening. I did pay attention, though, when he got to Aunt Mildred. As expected, his remarks were about 20 percent truth, and 80 percent bullshit. If I had a scorecard, it would go like this:

- *She lived with Down syndrome* -- True.
- *But she never let that stop her from living a full, beautiful life* – Bullshit.
- *She was loved and supported by so many family and friends* – Sort of bullshit. Supported? Sure. But loved? I thought tolerated would be more accurate.
- *She loved Shakespeare, and she was so proud of her nephew, Andy* – True. I gave the rabbi points there.
- *And in her later years, she was cared for by her sister-in-law Brenda, who could not have cared for her more.* – Not just bullshit, but a bullshit avalanche. That one almost made me laugh.
- *And Andy and Brenda loved her so*. – That too, I'm afraid, was bullshit. In mother's case, for sure. But also in mine. For I long ago came to the conclusion that love is an unachievable construct. Oh, I told Aunt Mildred I loved her. Hell, I said that to Zach, too. But I could only go as far as wanting to mean it. I was certainly glad she was in my life, but that was as far as I could go. She did tell me she loved me, and you know what? I think she really did mean it. She was very pure that way. As the rabbi spoke, I thought that maybe the love she said

she had for me could somehow cover up for the love I was incapable of feeling, even for her.

When the rabbi finally called me up, I got myself free of mother's hand, stood up, and took a deep breath. I left my satchel at my chair. I felt naked without it, but whatever the force that was pulling me at the time, which could have been anything from the booze and drugs of last night to the fake sentimental crap I just heard, it told me to leave Andre sit. I saw the looks on the faces of my mother and the small gathering. These were not looks of comfort. They were looks of concern—looks that told me that no matter what I did or said, I was still a freak to these people. Yet—and I'm sure this was the drugs and the booze—that was okay. It was absolutely fine. I actually got comfortable very quickly.

I started by thanking the rabbi for his kind words. I mean, what else could I say? But then very quickly, I spoke about the human propensity for pleasantries such as these. I told the assembled about how, when I was growing up, every poem I ever wrote was "beautiful" to Aunt Mildred. Every song I sang was "like Sinatra." Every outfit I wore made me look "so handsome." All those pleasantries. All those words I always wanted to hear. Of course, as I got older, I knew I would hear them, which made me want to sing for her and write for her and recite every Shakespearean soliloquy for her even more. Oh, I knew damn well she really didn't understand them, but that wasn't the point. I knew that after I finished, she would tell me how wonderful I was.

When I said this, I made sure I looked straight at mother. I swear, I could feel that gulp of saliva she obviously took. So I continued by saying that I needed to hear those pleasantries from Aunt Mildred—after all, there sure weren't many other people

who gave them to me. Seriously, that was the only allusion I made to my miserable childhood. And yet, even those few words were enough to cause fidgeting. And so, very gently, I thought, I went into the unfortunate differences between pleasantries and truth. Because I've never sang like Sinatra. Yeah, my books on Shakespeare have sold, but as a writer, I'm much more lucky than I am good. Handsome? When I look in the mirror, all I see is my new wrinkles. Step into any South Beach playground on any night, and thousands of guys will put me to shame. And yet, I loved Aunt Mildred because she told me those pleasantries—those lies.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the rabbi's face contort, as though he was about to pass gas. And I loved it. In fact, I had to do my best to stifle a smile. That's when my eyes shifted toward my satchel. That was the moment! I felt light on my feet as I walked over to the satchel, unzipped it and removed Andre from his confines. I made sure to hold him and present him as most Hamlets do, cradling him in the palm of my hand, and using my fingers to steady the back of his head. Oh yes, I saw heads turning toward one another. I saw mouths moving, too, but I paid no attention to what was coming out of them. I didn't care! I hoisted Andre toward the rays of that sudden sun, and I told the assembled that this—this!—was what we were really here for today. Not any of these pleasantries. For this is what is becoming of Aunt Mildred today. This is what will become of all of us. This is truth!

I went right into Hamlet's Yorrick speech, slightly altered for the occasion.

Alas, Aunt Mildred! I knew her, Horatio: a woman
of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: she hath
borne me on her back a thousand times; and now, how

abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rims at
it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know
not how oft. Where be your gibes now? your
gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment,
that were wont to set the table on a roar?

As I recited those words, I felt as though I was fucking born to say them. I knew them to be the perfect words for the moment. I looked up at that bright, shiny Miami sun. That sun that, just a short time ago, hesitated behind clouds. But there it was—right there for Andre to see it. My eyes darted right into the rays. If I'd had wings, I'd have flown right into them with Andre; a scene more patently glorious than anything Chagall could imagine. As I sure as hell knew there was no heaven, I didn't amuse myself with the idea that Aunt Mildred was actually hearing them. But I knew that if she could hear them, she'd say they were "wonderful. Just wonderful." Then, she would ask what a gambol was, even though I'd already told her a thousand times before.

Of course, the way my crazy mind works, I couldn't just stay in the moment. I briefly flirted with the idea of putting Andre's name into my little speech, maybe even explaining his story. But I didn't. This was Aunt Mildred's moment. I didn't even tell the assembled that they were seeing a real skull. Not that I didn't want to. But, well aware that most cannot handle this truth, I let that one go. I sensed that I was already going too far for many of the assembled. And while I certainly wanted to puncture pretention, I didn't think it was right to burst it wide open. Aunt Mildred would not have liked that. So on I went with my Yorick interpretation, until, thinking I was in danger of becoming a hopeless cliché, I quickly mixed it up by injecting choice words

from yet another *Hamlet* soliloquy, *What a piece of work is man?* With these words, I turned from Andre and faced the assembled. And right to their horrified faces, I uttered:

In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god!

The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals.

And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

Then and there, those words had more meaning to me than they ever had before. They speak of beauty, but they are leveled with truth—truth that we will all become this quintessence of dust. As I finished reciting those words, I turned my head to the gravediggers, those two men forced by mores and pleasantries to sit silently far away. I motioned them with my hand and asked them to come join me. I thought we all could benefit from hearing what they had to say. They looked at each other nervously, then they looked toward the rabbi—who was now looking at me nervously. I heard mother ask me to sit down, but I ignored her. Sheepishly, the gravediggers walked over toward me. As they got up close, I saw their names on their ID badges—Rafael Navarro and Phillipe Medor. As I turned toward the assembled and introduced them, I saw mother making angry faces at the rabbi. If only she knew how little that fazed me. When they think you're a freak to begin with, what the fuck do you have to lose, right? I turned toward Rafael and Phillipe and asked them to comment on what an honor it must be to truly be the ones who will bid Aunt Mildred adieu from this earth—not me, not any of the assembled and certainly not the rabbi—but them, Rafael and Phillipe.

Only then did I hit a bit of a snag. Turned out, neither Rafael nor Phillipe spoke English very well. This being Miami, I should not have been shocked by that, but I was. I could not speak French or Creole, and though I took Spanish as a teen, I knew it was

quite shaky. I started asking Rafael questions in Spanish, but I knew I was flailing. That's when the rabbi grabbed my hand, and in the most authoritative tone he could muster, said, "You'd better sit down, Andy."

But then I heard from Rafael, who said quietly, "It's a job, man. It pay good. I have baby girl. It pay good." With that, I did sit down. Not because the rabbi or anyone else wanted me to. I sat down because Rafael, in his broken English, gave me what I needed, what we all needed. He gave me truth. He punctured my own narcissistic pretentions. How could he feel anything for Aunt Mildred? He wouldn't have known her if he tripped over her. He was there for a paycheck. "It pay good." How could I not love that? Those were the three most honest words spoken that this service. I bet the rabbi would never admit he was there for the paycheck.

After I sat, I turned toward mother. She said nothing and looked ahead toward the rabbi. She did not offer her hand to me again.

The rabbi went on with the rest of the service, basically saying Kaddish, giving the assembled directions to mother's for shiva, and in accordance with Jewish custom, asking any of the assembled to take the accompanying shovel and pour dirt on Aunt Mildred's casket. According to Jewish tradition, this is done as a last act of kindness, seeing that one's body, the so-called "vessel of one's soul," is buried properly and with dignity. Of course, it's the gravediggers—the paid strangers—who actually do this. Those of us in suits and Chanel and dark sunglasses and hats? It's just symbolism, so we can tell ourselves we've done everything we could.

I went and took the shovel, and poured a mountain of dirt on the casket. I was supposed to place it back in the ground, but I didn't. Instead, I handed it to mother. She

took it. And after she shoveled her own little dirt mound, she told me, “You’re not riding back with me in the family car. Please. I can’t deal with you right now.”

When she said this, I felt—nothing. Not angry or sad or bitter or defiant. Just nothing. I looked at the faces of the assembled. Sure, they offered the obligatory kisses and I’m sorrys, but no more. I didn’t even want to ask any of them for a ride back to mother’s. I had my phone and I could call a cab if needed. In fact, I automatically considered that option preferable. Just then, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Annette. “I’m going back with your mother, Andy. But I drove here, so here are the keys to my car. It’s the blue Buick right there,” she said, pointing honestly to a palm tree, but doing it in a way that I could figure out where her car was. She gave me the keys and a kiss on the cheek, then moved away so quickly that I’m not sure she heard me thank her. She walked quickly toward mother, and when mother saw her, she collapsed in Annette’s arms. I’m sure she was crying. She looked like she was, anyway. And I thought, if she’s crying because of me, because of what I did, well then, good. Yes, I felt that way. Good. I might have even smiled faintly. Shitty, I know. But that’s how I felt. Honestly.

As the rays of the sun gave way quickly to oven-hot humidity, the assembled parties began leaving quickly. I walked over to Annette’s car and felt my phone vibrate. Zach. I didn’t answer. I didn’t want to. Or maybe I was afraid to. Who knows? All I know is, as I opened the car door, put my satchel on the front passenger seat and took one last look at Aunt Mildred’s gravesite, I saw Raphael and Philippe, who were doing all the backbreaking work that I and the assembled parties were not. I just had to unzip the satchel and take Andre out. I walked over to Raphael and Philippe, and introduced them to Andre. I told them his whole story, how he finally got his wish to be in *Hamlet*,

and how, despite this most creative and organic of wishes, he is still an outsider, shunned by those stupid mortals who would rather not hear his truth. How appropriate that moment was! Andre and Aunt Mildred and Raphael and Phillipe. This was my shiva.

Raphael and Phillipe just looked at one another and continued shoveling. Finally, Raphael said, “So sorry sir. Must work! Must work!” Pointing at his watch, he added. “More funeral soon. Must work!”

I understood. I backed away. And I cried, so much that when I pressed Annette’s key to open her car door, I couldn’t see what the fuck I was pressing and opened her trunk instead. My phone vibrated again. This time it was Zach, texting me. “How did the service go? Thinking of you. I love you.” I noticed that he spelled y-o-u. No u standing for you. You’d think I would have texted him back. But no. I just put the phone down, started the ignition, muted Annette’s Barry Manilow CD as fast as I could and fumbled until I found acceptable music. I landed on something Vivaldi-esque and drove off. In the distance, I noticed heavy black clouds looming once more.

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! Spout, rain!

I uttered, again and again, as I drove out of the cemetery and headed on into my own shitty storms.

***

I finally did call Zach back as I drove back to mother’s condo. It was the right thing to do—and I was admittedly curious to find out whether Jacques had called him and spilled any beans. Apparently, he hadn’t, and the conversation went pretty normally, save for Zach’s crazy answers about why he turned down Oxford. It was early in our

relationship. He really didn't want to be in England for two years. He really just applied because people told him he should apply. He was so laissez–faire about it, I wanted to strangle him. I was kind. I really was. I told him, this wasn't over, we'd talk about this. He laughed and said "Well, after this week, Oxford may not want me anymore anyway." It wasn't a mean barb—it was a self-deprecating one. Still, it stung.

"Zachie, I promise, I'll make a call, I'll fix this…"

"I know. Don't worry. Spend time with your mother."

It was then that he picked to once again tell me that he loved me. Like that, I started crying, so much so that I had a hard time paying attention to the road. I don't even remember if I told Zach that I loved him, too. I must have, because the conversation ended rather pleasantly, and only because, when I got back to the condo, I swore I would have to call mother again to buzz me in. I didn't this time. No, now it was the voice of Carmine, the knave, who greeted me, telling me that due to the funeral traffic, I had permission to go to the resident's gate. "Isn't it nice," the voice said, "when we can just pass through so unexpectedly?" No, it was not nice at all. First, it would have been nice to know this before I had to back up and get in another lane. And second, I was only passing through to get to a bunch of people who I really didn't want to be with, and who, I was sure, did not want to be with me, either. Knaves were supposed to be smart. Carmine failed that test.

***

When I got back to the condo, the assembled parties were already there. By this time, mother's team from the Bagel Barn had indeed unwrapped everything, and the place smelled pretty much like a deli. That was fine with me. If I had to express pleasant

small talk with the masses, I could at least do so with mounds of bagels and lox at my disposal. The shiva went as most shivas do, a bunch of Jews eating and laughing, doing as much as possible to mitigate the fact that someone important is no longer there. The afternoon went fairly well. But as day turned into night, and the assembled parties began leaving, I realized that I would have to face mother alone. Oh, I could have left when they began leaving, but mother kept giving me these looks—piercing is how I would describe them—that let me know that would not be a good idea. I still had days when I had to deal with her. I knew that it would be best to face the music sooner, rather than later. When the last guests left, I decided to walk them out to the lobby. I didn't even have to. I just wanted to delay the inevitable. When I got to the lobby, who was there but Carmine. He started speaking. I stopped him.

"Please, Carmine. Shut up. Just shut up."

***

I opened the door to my mother's condo and saw that she was already tidying up. She even had the folding chairs stacked away in the corner, which was ridiculous, because everyone was coming back tomorrow and we'd have to unfold the damn things all over again. I took a deep breath and said nothing.

When I found my mother, she was in the kitchen, cramming what was left of the turkey, pastrami, corned beef, smoked salmon, cream cheese, tuna salad and coleslaw into her refrigerator.

I saw that she had already wrapped all the cold cuts. Now, she was spooning the coleslaw into a Tupperware container, burping it no less than three times before stacking it away. She was still angry with me about my eulogy this morning. I could

tell, because she was looking at the food, not at me. If she wanted it that way, fine. At that moment, it wasn't my job to talk to her anyway. It was my job to help clean up. The sooner that was done, the sooner I'd be free for what was left of the night. I walked into the kitchen, but mother stopped me, pointing her index finger at me as though I'd just crossed the street without looking.

"No no, you stay out!," she said, her finger pointing toward the dining room, in case I couldn't figure out where the kitchen ended and the dining room began. "Let me do this."

"But mom, let me…"

"Out! Let me!"

"Okay. What else do you need me to do?"

"Andrew, one thing at a time! Please!"

I surrendered immediately. Resisting, I knew, was futile. Should I dare rush into the kitchen and grab, say, the smoked salmon, I would certainly be chastised for stacking it incorrectly. I would interminably alter the intrinsic equilibrium of mother's universe. She would have to – God forbid – move things around to correct this travesty. And her verbal arsenal would be unrelenting. How, she would wonder, could I consider myself a smart, accomplished man if I do not know the Exact Place Where Smoked Salmon Is Kept.

So I parked my ass down on a dining room chair, grabbed some delectably soft, chewy chocolate fudge cookies from atop the mountain of untouched food still on the dining room table (mother had only confiscated the food that needed refrigeration), hoping against hope that the sugar would drown my feelings of smallness and

uselessness. Nietzsche, who, by the way, always credited *Hamlet* as an influence, would call this "entering into an ascetic condition," where one sees the cruelty of reality and knows that the most effective thing he can do about it is to do nothing at all. In other words, his glimpse into the cruel truth overcomes every driving motive to act. What a thrill it would have been to moderate a conversation between Hamlet and Nietzsche at that moment.

I could still see mother from the dining room, though I concentrated more on the dark fudge chips in my cookie. Mother was not looking my way at all. Not that that stopped her.

"Andrew, did you taste the Bagel Barn's new key lime pie-flavored cream cheese? Isn't it out of this world? We just introduced it two weeks ago and I tell you, it's flying off the shelves."

Okay, now she wanted to talk. I guessed that the piercing silence was getting to her. I stared at my half-eaten cookie and cursed my return to my own cruel truth. Yes, I did taste the new key lime pie-flavored cream cheese. It tasted nothing like key lime pie. Or cream cheese.

"It's delicious," I told my mother.

"See what you're missing by not living down here?"

Here we go. Already starting. Here she is, pissed as hell at me, and what did she want? More opportunities to be pissed as hell at me. Unbelievable!

"Well, mom, I do think it's possible to ship cream cheese to Boston."

"I guess."

Mother tossed an empty plastic wrap cylinder into the trash, then stuffed the last of the cold cuts into the fridge. She used the entire left side of her body to shove the door closed.

"Be very careful opening the fridge. I don't want anything to spill."

"I'll be careful, mom."

As mother turned and prowled around her kitchen cabinets—she just knew she had more Saran Wrap somewhere!—I scrunched down to scoop up some errant cookie crumbs that fell right in front of me on the dining room carpet. With all that was in me, I could not let mother see them. Obviously, I did not know how to store things in the kitchen. Did I really need a harangue on the Proper Way to Eat a Cookie?

"Andrew, did you see someone move the Saran Wrap?"

She was, I knew, really asking me if I moved the Saran Wrap.

"No, mom, I did not see anyone move the Saran Wrap."

"Boy. I thought people like you notice everything."

I laughed a faint laugh – deliberately muffled to a mere whimper so that only I could hear it. Mother's condo walls seemed suddenly narrower to me. People like me, huh? Was that a harmless joust – or a poisonous stab? I didn't want to ask. It was all so much easier when I could blame everything on mother's pills. Or booze. It's not her, I could tell myself. It's the uppers. The downers. The endless parade of jerks she screwed. The whatever. Now, she no longer drowned her sorrows and rage in a sea of substances or worthless relationships. Now her only addiction stemmed from her innate need to be absolutely impossible. But God forbid I should ever call her on that. No, no – she's a survivor! She's true to herself! Oprah would have given her a big hug.

But me? I got up and got my coat. And of course, my satchel with Andre. My job was to help mother, but mother did not need my help. Oh, she most certainly groused for a moment or two, but really, she had no problem locating that extra roll of Saran Wrap, which some clueless soul (not me, I swear) had the audacity to leave on top of the refrigerator. For all intents and purposes, my job was done. I looked at my watch. A quarter to nine. Still plenty of time to rest and prepare myself for another round with the family tomorrow. Or better yet, still plenty of time to get laid. Maybe even some Skype sex with Zach.

"Where are you going?"

"My hotel. It's late. I'm tired. Been a long day."

"Wait!"

My Armani jacket was already across my shoulders and my satchel strapped, and the front door beckoned well within my sight. Still, against my better judgment, I obeyed. Mother ran into the dining room and stood right in front of me, clutching the Saran Wrap in her right hand.

"That was a ridiculous thing you did this morning. How dare you."

I'm a good foot and a half taller than mother, so she really had to stretch her neck to look up at me. She made up for it by raising her right hand and shaking the Saran Wrap at me. Suddenly, the Saran Wrap looked like Laertes' sword.

"I thought it was appropriate."

"Appropriate? Were we at a horror movie? No! We were at a funeral! Who the hell wants to see a skull at a cemetery?"

"Now come on, mother, everyone knows it wasn't a real skull. What do you take me for? It was just a prop."

"Well, it was a very tasteless prop. I've never been so humiliated in all my life."

If mother knew about Andre. If she only knew. But no way would I tell her. When a music critic once asked Paul Westerberg some pompous question about truth in music, the great alt rocker leaned in and growled, "The truth is so overrated." And that was one of the largest truths he told.

The veins in mother's neck seemed ready to pop.

A hit. A very palpable hit.

"It was not tasteless."

"Yeah? You're a majority of one there."

"Just what do you think is at a cemetery, mother, underneath all those fancy stones and manicured lawns? Skulls! And bones, too! Don't you see, mother, this is one of the reasons why the gravedigger scene is so powerful. Shakespeare is telling us…"

"Will you stop with Shakespeare? Christ! Not everyone is obsessed like you are!"

"Aunt Mildred…"

"What about her?"

"She loved Shakespeare. She loved it when I read Shakespeare. She was the first one who told me I was good at reading Shakespeare. What I did this morning, I did for her. And I know she would have loved it."

A layer of water formed around my eyes, blurring my vision.

O! that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew;

Those words, embedded in my brain, were of little comfort. I should have run out the front door.

"Listen here! I planned everything for this service. All you did was fly in. I was very clear with what I wanted…"

"That's right. What YOU wanted."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What about what Aunt Mildred wanted?"

"What are you talking about? She was a very simple woman. I wanted a simple service…"

"YOU wanted, 'you' being the key pronoun."

"Don't talk to me like I'm one of your students."

"You didn't even ask Aunt Mildred what she wanted, did you? The whole time she was sick, you never asked her what she wanted for her service."

"That's not true! And the whole time she was sick, I was the one taking care of her. You were the one up in Boston."

"That's where Barrington is, mother. It'd be one hell of a commute from Miami."

"And you don't have to be there. You could teach all your nonsense about a dead playwright just as easily down here."

That, ladies and gentlemen, was the piercing stab of a sword dipped in poison. Laertes would have loved it. All I could do was shake my head and look down at the carpet. Oh, I wanted to respond, but it was if my own sword had been stripped from my

hands. I knew mother sensed my weakness. God knows, I avoided looking at her, but I could literally hear her breathing.

"If you lived down here," she continued, lowering her voice to a deceptively softer, slower tone, "she wouldn't have cried out for you so much, always asking just for you."

With that, I swallowed an unnecessary large volume of saliva. And damn if my eyes weren't watering again.

***

I never called or visited Aunt Mildred as often as I promised. This much was true. But absolutely, I made sure I saw her at least once a year. Plus, I always called her on her birthday. And when her diabetes got worse, I increased my calls to once a month, no matter how many student papers I had to critique or publishing deadlines I had to meet. Oh, and once, for her birthday (I forget which one), I sat down with a tape recorder and recorded Shakespeare's sonnets – all 154 of them. It took me a full week because my voice got tired from projecting so much. But I did that just for Aunt Mildred. The sonnets, interpreted only for her, so she could hear my voice whenever she wanted. Get this, when I first played it for her, she was sure I screwed up. If it's poetry, she wondered, shouldn't it rhyme more? I tell you, she always said the darnedest things. She always told me she loved those tapes. I always told myself they made up for my absence.

A single tear ran down my left cheek. Now, I defiantly looked up at my mother. I wanted her to see what she'd done. But she just stood there, staring at me. Instantly, I

became what I always became when I looked so intently at my mother. I became a 5-year-old.

***

For more than five centuries, much ink has been spilled about the fact that when writing *Hamlet*, Shakespeare placed the most confrontational scene between Hamlet and his mother in, of all places, Queen Gertrude's bedchamber. Not in a living room or a dining area, but in a bedchamber, with an enormous double bed front and center. Almost always, Gertrude is on the bed as Hamlet tries in vain to tell her how much she's ruining her life with dastardly Claudius. And almost always, Gertrude tries comforting Hamlet, while still on the bed. In some productions, she does nothing more than rub his shoulders. But in a much critically divided production that hit Broadway 20 years ago, that lauded British actress Penelope Kemp shocked audiences when, during that pivotal moment when after Hamlet commands Gertrude to

go not to mine uncle's bed.
Assume a virtue if you have it not.

she took Hamlet in her arms and kissed him right on the mouth. Hamlet, as played by the rather mesmerizing Bradley Ives, did not resist. The kiss often caused gasps in the audience, as it did with me, and I even knew about it before it happened. Of course, Shakespeare could never address incest directly during his time. But this was hardly the first production to hint that the mother-son relationship here had crossed into unspeakable territory. I had often questioned this myself, somewhat privately, until this production. Then, after I saw this affirmation of something I'd often suspected, I wrote my now-infamous *Why the Bedroom?* commentary in *The Atlantic*, where I not only defended the notion of a sexual history between Hamlet and Gertrude, but I also

presented Hamlet's accidental stabbing of Polonius in that scene as evidence that Shakespeare knew of the scars incest causes. In my article, I speculated that the stabbing of Polonius could well have been a plot device to show the guilt Hamlet carries—only it may not have really been about Polonius at all. It may have been about what he and his mother might have done in that bed. After all, I concluded, it's understandable to explain guilt about an accidental stabbing. But to explain the guilt that one feels as an incest survivor? I hope I've explained my point.

Well, you should have seen the letters I got afterward. I was labeled "a freak," "a left-wing" lunatic—and much worse—for even insinuating that *Hamlet* dealt with incest. When the media, and *The Atlantic* editors, asked me to write an editorial response to the letters, I said what I often do when forced to be somewhat humble; that this was only my interpretation, and that anyone was free to interpret *Hamlet* as they see fit. What I did not tell them, was how well I knew my subject; that the reason I gasped when I saw this production, even though I knew the scene was coming, was because for one moment, I was 5 again. I was my mother's "little man" in her double bed, on just about any night when one of her parade of losers was not there. And I carried the guilt, always. When I was 12 and mother, in one of her drunken rages, mushed up my first attempt at poetry into a paper ball and tried to ram it down my throat, only to have Aunt Mildred stop it by coming between my mother and myself with her heft, it was my fault. When I was 19 and mother threatened to kill herself if I told anyone I was gay, it was my fault. That's what I thought of in that one moment when I saw Gertrude kiss Hamlet. And that's what I thought in that one moment when

mother pointed her Saran Wrap at me. Any second, I thought, she was going to break out a victory grin. Instead, she looked down at her Saran Wrap.

"Don't go yet. I need help wrapping all this food."

She handed me the Saran Wrap. I sighed, then gently removed the satchel and draped my jacket over one of the dining room chairs. With my left hand, I dried my wet cheek myself. Then, I began wrapping. I took one sheet of the wrap and covered the brownies. Soon as I put them down, mother took the wrap from my hand and put another sheet on those very same brownies.

"There," she said, now cracking the smile I thought I'd see a minute ago. "THAT's how it's done."

***

By osmosis, we started a pattern. I provided the first layer of wrap; mother finished it off with the second. I looked at mother, who was still smiling. Was she grinning because she won our latest joust, or was it merely the freshly-wrapped food that gives her little fits of pleasure? As I really didn't care to know the answer, I wasn't going to ask. But I did wonder, how could something so banal as double-wrapping food bring anyone a smile? I suppose one could take joy in the fact that, because of this simple action, our guests would be assured of enjoying fresh, tasty food. But simple is the key adjective here. This act of simply wrapping – it is just way too easy for anyone to claim credit for being good at. Did mother actually think this took talent? And did she not realize that while Shakespeare may be dead, critics, editors, deans, jealous fellow professors, students and students' parents most certainly are not? Not to mention

all these criminally young, ambitious upstarts who think they're already in my league just because they've got a fucking book contract or an essay in *The New Republic*.

I noticed that, when you double wrap brownies, the icing on top smears heavily on the bottom layer of the wrap. It didn't take a genius to figure out that when the top brownies are unwrapped, their most decadently delicious parts would be compromised at best, or utterly torn from them at worst. These brownies should have been stored in some container, or if they had to be wrapped, one single layer, applied loosely, might have at least given the icing some breathing space. Now, just like mother, I smiled without saying a word. Mother might have thought I'm enjoying this. But I smiled because I knew these brownies were going to look like shit tomorrow. Aunt Mildred would have never wrapped brownies this way. She would want the icing to stay on. She would know I wouldn't eat them if the icing didn't stay on. Just like I got some sweet revenge with my eulogy that morning, I was getting even more now.

"I bet Aunt Mildred still has the tapes I gave her," I uttered suddenly, not realizing until the words were out that I uttered them in the present tense.

"What tapes?"

"The tapes of Shakespeare's sonnets. You know, the ones I recorded for her birthday once?"

"Oh. Those."

"Yes, mother. Those. I'll bet she still has – had them."

"Maybe."

"Well, if she did have them, where would they be?"

"I guess with all her stuff at the home."

"You guess."

"I haven't picked up her things yet, okay? It's not like I've had a whole lot of time. I told them I'd stop by there tomorrow morning before shiva."

"Okay then, I'll go with you…"

"No, I'll do it. It won't take long."

"How do you know that?"

Mother threw her hands in the air.

"How do I know that – listen to you. Your aunt didn't exactly have an estate, you know. They told me they've already bagged all her things."

"*They* bagged her things?"

"Yes, Andrew, they did. What – do you think they turn her room into a shrine? I'm sure they cleared everything soon as the funeral home came for the body."

I tried imagining the conversation the workers at the home must have had while they were putting what's left of Aunt Mildred's existence into bags. Shakespeare often used this technique with astonishing effect: giving lesser characters – often on the low end of the economic strata – opportunities to offer boldly honest insights. Remember the Motley Fool in *As You Like It*, and of course, the gravediggers in *Hamlet*?

But honestly, I could not imagine what Aunt Mildred's aides would say. And the reason for that? With the sole exception of those sonnet tapes, I had no idea what's in those bags. Oh, I was sure there were the perfunctory items: dresses, glasses, etc. But exactly *what* dresses, or glasses or anything? Mother thought people like me notice everything. How horridly wrong she was.

Now, I needed to see not just the tapes. I needed to see everything in those bags. I put down the Saran Wrap, despite the fact that there were still two full plates of brownies that needed their protective cover.

"What are you doing," mother admonished, "We're almost done. Continue!"

I looked down toward mother's face and stared her squarely in the eye.

"Mother, I will pick up Aunt Mildred's things."

"Again with her things! I said I'll do it!"

"But I want to do it! It's important…"

"Nothing that that woman owned is important. Stopping off at the home is Number One on my list for tomorrow morning. I'm going, and I'm going myself. Do I make myself clear?"

Ah yes, that cliché rhetorical question that parents have used through the ages to try and silence their children. Resistance was indeed futile – but revenge was not. And passive aggressive behavior, when done out of necessity and with copious attention toward intrinsically determining what one could reasonably get away with; well, I believe that has saved more souls from the brink than God and Zoloft combined. I played the role of the obedient son. I picked the Saran Wrap back up, resumed my duties. Hell, I even cracked a smile when I told mother that I had given up, that if she wanted to go to the home tomorrow, I would not stop her.

What I did not tell her was that it would be quite unnecessary to make that stop. After all, I had a rental car, I knew exactly where the home was, and the night was still young. Getting rest, getting laid and Zach could wait. What was it that Aunt Mildred

had in those bags – why was mother so determined to get to them first? I had to find out that night.

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From a distance, Oceanview Place looked like an old family home. A four-story structure complete with French doors and a sloping, slanted roof, it was surrounded by pristine royal palm trees and lush bougainvillea plants, all encased by a paneled gate that has to be at least 15 feet high. Only if you looked closely did you notice the strands of barbed wire along the top of the gate, and the wrought iron on all the windows that was there as much for protection as for decoration. There was a faux-wood sign by the front door. All it said was OCEANVIEW.

Aunt Mildred never really understood the name, and I can't say I blame her, since Oceanview Place was nowhere near the ocean. It was a full 10 miles west of any stretch of beach, in a quiet, secluded area just off Broward Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale. Whenever I took a walk with Aunt Mildred, she'd see the nameplate above the door and ask me why she couldn't see the ocean. I had a great response. I'd say "'Cause it's not even close to here, Aunt Mildred, and whoever named this place must have been retarded!" She'd stare straight ahead for a few seconds, then arch her eyebrows and laugh. Politically correct, it most certainly was not. But that was the point. I could be that way with Aunt Mildred, and she'd go right along with me. She'd even respond with something like "I think it was one of the patients!" Then, every time we would share this bit of repartee, Aunt Mildred would end it by telling me about a different fellow patient whom she thought might have been the culprit in coming up with such a stupid name. Maybe it was Hattie, who apparently found it amusing to

remove rolls of toilet paper from the bathroom stalls, then give them to her friends as gifts. Or maybe it was Marie, who seemed pretty normal to Aunt Mildred – except that she didn't like ice cream. ("Once we went on a field trip to the store with the 31 flavors, any she didn't want ANY of the 31 flavors," Aunt Mildred would tell me, her eyes wincing at the thought.)

As I pulled the Mustang into the Oceanview parking lot, the last strains of Blind Melon's *No Rain* played on the radio. I considered this a good sign, because once, when Aunt Mildred visited me in Boston, she saw the video on MTV. Certainly, I'm dating myself, but this was back when MTV actually played music. The Blind Melon video was one of its best. This was the one where a be-speckled little girl pranced around in a bee costume.

That little girl was instantly likeable because she danced with remarkable abandon, in direct retaliation for the way society treated her. In that sense, she reminded me of Aunt Mildred. I remember saying to her, "Hey, look, Aunt Mildred. That's you in the video," and boy, did her face turn beet red.

"Oh, no it's not."

"Oh, yes it is, Aunt Mildred. See that girl? That's you. You're a rock star!"

With that, she carefully studied the "bee girl." When Aunt Mildred curiously looked back at screen, then at me, I knew I had her.

"Do you think that's me?"

"That's you, Aunt Mildred. You're famous. I have the world famous Aunt Mildred sitting right here on my sofa!"

Aunt Mildred laughed.

"Well, Andy, if you say so."

"I say so. I know so."

"Okay, then. It's me."

I blurted the lyrics, and Aunt Mildred tried heartily to sing along:

All I can say

Is that my life is pretty plain

I like watchin'

The puddles gather rain

I asked her if she liked the song. She said no.

***

I parked the car and tried turning the knob on the front gate. It was locked. I tried pushing the gate open, but no dice. Suddenly, I was startled by a muffled female voice coming through the intercom, asking, "Can I help you."

I told the voice who I was and why I was there. I was told that it was way past visiting hours, and I'd have to come back tomorrow.

This answer was not only unacceptable – it was unrealistic. The female attached to this voice did not know who she was dealing with. Somehow, some way, I was getting in there tonight – though I had no idea how. I walked away from the gate and back to the Mustang. I opened the door, planted my ass in the bucket seat and rolled down the window. I was tempted to open the glove compartment and retrieve what was left of the pot I had, but I knew better than to take such a risk in public. Call it smarts or Jewish neurosis or both; I was sure that the second I lit up, some *Smokey and the Bandit* type Florida sheriff would somehow be right there to grab me.

Instead, I opened my satchel and my Macy's box, and just stared at Andre. I could see him looking up at me, from his position on the front passenger floor. I laughed, but it was not a laugh of joy. No. It was one of nervousness, even emptiness. My phone vibrated and I noticed Zach was texting me. I didn't read it, just like I hadn't read any of his texts since the funeral. I wanted to. Really, I did. But what could I have said to him beyond the most banal things that everyone says after funerals? I'll respond to him, I told myself, when I have something intelligent to say. No, it was just me and Andre. I was certainly not a praying man, but as I stared at this man who really in his life wanted nothing more than to be onstage during Hamlet, and found a decidedly unorthodox way of getting his wish, it was as though I was praying. I wanted answers from Andre. About the Meaning of Life. About the Keys to Understanding Humanity. And how the hell I could break into this building.

For that question, at least, I believe Andre sent some vibes my way. I suddenly realized that I'd been in this place countless times and I knew the layout quite well. I knew where the cleaning supplies were and where the linen closet was, and I even knew where the staff lockers were, as it has not been beyond me to spy on cute male doctors or nurses slipping into – or better yet, out of – their scrubs. Aunt Mildred's things could be near any of those places, and I didn't think I'd have any trouble finding them. If I could just get in.

There had to be some back door, which, at some point, would be opened by some low-wage soul doing something thankless like taking out the trash. I could stand by this door, and just go whiz right past this low-wage soul when the door opened. And

if he would even dare freak out or attempt to report me, why, I will just win him over with my wit and charm. Or, failing that, bribe him.

It wasn't the greatest plan in the world, but it was the only one my weary mind could think of. Just as I was about to get out of the car again, I heard three taps on my driver's side window. As I turned, I saw a breathtakingly angelic face – a man with warm, welcoming eyes a glorious smile, and blonde hair that I knew was not natural, but still highlighted with impeccable precision.

I did not recognize this face. But it recognized me.

"Andy? What are you doing here?"

I pressed the window button down and stared closer into the face of this angel. It was not at all hard to do. But it was baffling nonetheless.

"Do we know each other?"

The angel laughed a deep, gravelly laugh. A little devilish, actually.

"Yes, we know each other. We've known each other for several years, as a matter of fact."

I hated moments like this. I can't tell you how many times former students have come up to me and said, "Do you remember me?" My stock answer is always, "Why of course I do." But I just knew I couldn't get away with that here.

The angel now laughed even harder. He leaned over and placed his hands on the roof of the car.

"Man oh, man oh man, Andy Prystowski. This is indeed a surprise."

Immediately, I got out of the car, forcing the angel take his hands off the roof and pull back, ever slightly.

"You'll have to forgive me," I told him. "I've had a rough day."

"I know," he responded. "I'm very sorry about your aunt." His mouth barely moved when he said this. It was as though he knew I'd heard that line so many times today, and I was quite numb to it.

I slammed the car door louder than I should have.

"How do you know me? And my aunt?"

Again, that smile. I wanted to shake him by the scruff of his neck.

"I'm David. Your aunt's head nurse."

I literally felt my chin drop to the ground.

"But you…"

"I've lost a lot of weight since the last time you were down here. Gastric bypass. And I color my hair now."

I muttered a pathetic apology, but David stopped me.

"No need. I'm only laughing because I get that a lot now."

I looked closer. Only then did it dawn on me that David was in nurses' scrubs. I couldn't help but look deeper into his eyes.

"Honestly David, I don't know what to say right now. I realize how awkward this is."

"Well, it's not everyday that I find someone I know locked in his car around midnight."

"How long have you been staring at me?"

"Not long. You've been pretty deep in thought, I must say. You didn't even hear me calling you 'til I tapped on your window. I'll bet you didn't even hear me pull up."

I didn't. Finally, I noticed his car – one of those cookie cutter American compacts that look so cheap and boxy – right beside my Mustang. David moved toward the back of his car and manually opened the trunk with his key. How quaint, I thought. He hoisted out several reusable bags filled with groceries.

"I'll make a deal with you. You help me with these and I'll be only mildly authoritative when I ask you what you're doing here at this hour."

Yes! No need to hatch some diabolical plan. I was getting in!

David handed me two bags, which were surprisingly heavy. As I grunted to my inner self, David talked about state budget cuts that have forced staff to buy many of their own supplies – and to pay for them out of their own pockets. He said this quite matter-of-factly, without a trace of bitterness. As he placed one of his bags on the ground and punched in his entrance code, he asked me to speak quietly, for fear we'll wake the residents. How could I not agree? I knew I was ever so close to seeing what mother didn't want me to see.

Still, I got a lump in my throat when I walked in. When you enter Oceanview, you don't see a lobby. You walk into a living room, just as you'd see in a regular house. Whenever I'd visit Aunt Mildred, she'd always wait for me on the oversized beige sofa. It's one of those sofas that practically swallows you when you sit on it, and with her heft, Aunt Mildred always had trouble getting up. She would always ask me to hold out both my hands so she could balance herself. I always questioned her motives. She never grimaced when she tried to get up. She smiled. I think she just wanted to hold my hands. Suddenly, I wandered what other dirty little tricks she'd played on me, and just the idea of them made me miss her even more.

David jolted me out of my melancholy by introducing me to Charlotte, another nurse. I quickly realized she was the one who told me I couldn't get in before.

"What's this David," she said, "all those hours at the gym and you still need help with the bags."

"That's what I love about you, Charlotte. The compassion of Florence Nightingale. You can start putting these things away anytime now."

"Yeah but it's more fun embarrassing you."

Her eyes shifted my way.

"A year ago he was like 'nobody wants me, nobody looks at me.' Now he's Hercules. He needs to be brought down a little, you know."

"And you always do such a swell job of that," said David, hauling the last of the bags to the nurse's station. "There. Your turn to do some actual work."

They both looked my way and it dawned on me that I hadn't said anything about why I was there. Once I explained, Charlotte threw her hands up in mock horror and sat down at what I assumed was her computer.

"Oh, goodness. You're the one I just turned away, aren't you?"

"Yes. Now if you don't mind…"

"Says here that a Brenda Prystowski is coming by tomorrow to pick up Mildred's belongings."

"I'm Brenda's son. I thought I could get them now."

"Perhaps I should call Brenda…"

"No! I mean, you'll wake her and, and I just don't know what to tell you except, that I really need to do this. If I could just go to her room, I won't be long, I promise."

I started toward Aunt Mildred's room, but Charlotte stopped me, informing me that, true to mother's prediction, someone else was already in there.

David put his hand on my shoulder and told me that Aunt Mildred's possessions were in the storage closet. He asked me to follow him into his office, where he had the keys. Charlotte, with a knowing look in her eyes, went to check on the housemates and "make sure they're down."

***

David led me to his office, which was right beside the communal kitchen. If this were a normal house, this is where the broom closet might be – and his office wasn't much bigger. David flicked the light on and asked me to take a seat. On either side of me, there were over-stacked bookshelves, and the tiny space made them alarmingly cavernous. Most of the shelves held medical books and files, but there was – right at my eye level – a copy of Auden's *On This Island*. David's desk was impeccably neat, and as he closed the door, sat down and leaned forward, the desk seemed much smaller.

"So Andy," he starts, "it's quite unusual that we get such strident requests to go through a deceased housemate's belongings – especially when it's so late, and especially when we've already made arrangements to give those belongings to someone else. If you don't mind my asking, why are you so anxious to get them?"

For a split second, I did mind. But then I saw the way David looked at me. He wasn't asking to be nosey or mean. It was as if he was inviting me somewhere. I had no idea where, but I didn't mind. I couldn't stop looking at him. And he read Auden. I couldn't answer him. I tried, but there were no words. The only thing I could think to do was to turn my phone off.

I was the one who kissed him first. I needed this. It was my right, damn it. David pulled me over toward him and took me in his arms. He went slow. “Faster,” I whispered. He tried, but he was still too slow. Then, and only then, did I think of Zach. I pulled away.

We tripped over our words, racing to say how sorry we were. My apology included the perfunctory “it’s not you, it’s me” bullshit and David gave me some story about always wanting me and never thinking he could have me. I didn’t believe him, just like I didn’t believe his claim that he never did this sort of thing.

The buzzer rang. It was Charlotte on the intercom, saying something about a medical emergency with one of the residents. David jolted to attention.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” he told me. “This one could take a while. I know it.”

I told him I understood. What else could I say? David gave me a single silver key. He pointed toward the storage closet.

“Wait for me down here, okay? I may be awhile, but don’t leave.”

I promised David I’d stay, though I was pretty sure I wouldn’t. I came here on a mission, and I accomplished it. I got what I wanted. That’s what I told myself, over and over. I went to the storage closet, turned the key and the door squeaked open. There they were – three large, white plastic bags, all with “Mildred Prystowski, 655031” scrolled in magic marker.

I sighed. An entire life, down to this. I tore open the bags. Out came seven over-size *shmata* dresses, each one with different florals; seven pairs of extra large white panties; another seven pairs of stockings; a make-up kit (odd, since Aunt Mildred always looked like she never used any make-up); her large, heavy glasses; one quilt

(with roses on it); one pair of white, fuzzy slippers; a sealed plastic bag with all her toiletries; her wallet and change purse; and three pairs of old shoes (all flats), two of which had small holes on the bottom.

Then, out popped the tape with the sonnets. Of course, she kept it, like I knew she would.

There was a framed photo of me when I was 7. I was eating a Baskin Robbins ice cream cone, vanilla, I think, and I was smiling, only the ice cream was running down my face, because at that age, I still hadn't mastered the fine art of licking ice cream. This, I knew, was the only photo Aunt Mildred ever kept out on her night table.

Finally, there was a photo album. I open it to find mother's friend Annette. In the first page of photos, she is applying rouge on Aunt Mildred's cheeks. The make-up bag now made sense.

Then I turned the page, and there they were--photos of Annette and my mother, kissing. The way I just kissed David. I couldn't breathe. I dropped the album, and I pinched myself to make sure this wasn't some fucked up reaction from the pot. I couldn't take my eyes off my mother. She had her eyes closed for the kiss, but even without the ability to look into her eyes, I saw a calmness I never saw before. It was as though Annette could just lift her up and sweep her away. But Annette was just a friend, I told myself. How could she do this? How could mother look so content? And how could mother react with such drama when I told her I was gay? When I was 20 and mother visited my dorm, and commented on how tastefully decorated it was, then followed that with a huge sigh and a direct question: Are you gay?, I had the foolish temerity to tell her "yes, I was." She responded by throwing up. Then by

threatening to kill herself if I ever told anyone she knew. How could this be that same woman?

Quickly, I tossed everything back in the bags, hoisted them, and bolted out the door.

As soon as I got in the car, I started the engine and immediately reached for the sonnets tape. Not to hear the sound of my own voice, which I've always hated. No, I just needed those words—those words wrung from the deepest depths of hope and pain. There's always been vociferous debate over whether or not the sonnets were autobiographical. I've never uncovered any evidence of that, but I've always believed that they had to be drawn in some way from Shakespeare's life. Throughout the many of the sonnets, we have this wise old poet, speaking to a handsome young lord, advising him, praising him and nagging him like any good father would do. Then the poet reveals his "dark lady"—his mistress. And how does this young lord repay the wise old man? Well, according to many interpretations, he foists himself upon the old poet's mistress and drives one hell of a wedge into the poet's relationship. Talk about some fucked up boundaries, right? I needed those words; those words spilled from the mind of someone who knew all too well about fucked up boundaries.

I went to put the tape in the cassette player only to realize that the car had no cassette player. Of course! It was all about CDs and satellite radio and iPods and whatnot. Who the hell played tapes anymore?

As I pulled out of Oceanview, I turned east on Sunrise Boulevard toward the beach. If I had common sense, I would have gotten on I-95, which would have taken me to South Beach a lot faster. But I had no common sense. Hell, I didn't even know

where I was going. To mother; to the Delano; to the pastel neon of any number of gay bars along the way. They all flashed in and out of my head, but found no definitive place there.

I needed to roll down the window and just drive toward the beach. Typical of South Florida in July, the air was thick with humidity. But if I drove fast enough, I caught a breeze. And as I turned south on A1A and heard squawking gulls near the ocean, I felt the breeze at my back. I also smelled the grease of cheap seafood shacks and the shrieks of twentysomethings out for some thrills, but I blocked them out as best I could. I blocked them out with the words of the sonnets I knew by heart. I started saying them out loud, to God and anyone who could hear. It was Sonnet 138 that had the most meaning.

When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies

That second line has always slayed me:

I do believe her, though I know she lies.

The poet *knows* his mistress lies. Yet he *believes* her. How can that be? How can you *believe* something you *know* to be false? Yet the poet makes us understand. He continues:

That e might think me some untutor'd youth,
Unlearned in the world's false subtleties.
Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
Although she knows my days are past the best,
Simply I credit her false speaking tongue:
On both sides thus is simple truth suppress'd

And there lies the reality: the poet and his mistress survive on lies. She about their relationship. He about the way she thinks of him. And the genius is that this is okay with the poet! Preferred as a matter of fact. Sonnet 138 celebrates the lies we tell one another. More than anything else Shakespeare ever wrote, Shakespeare exposes even the notion of truth as something that we humans would rather not handle. And never did those words ring truer to me than they did at that moment, driving at double speed down A1A with the ocean breeze at my back. I repeated that sonnet over and over, each time, louder than the last. Every time I spoke those mellifluous words, I came to believe that I did not want to know the truth about my mother, about Zach, about how much Aunt Mildred understood, about anything. And the more I didn't want the truth, the more I just plain fucking didn't care. About anyone or anything. There in my Mustang, with the gentle waves and swaying Coconut Palms on my left and those rowdy twentysomethings on my right, I entered a reality more satisfying than anything pot could ever conjure up. I couldn't help but laugh, especially when I got to the sonnet's last line:

And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be.

Translation: it's our lies, and not our truths that give us whatever modicum of contentment we have. And that was just fine with me. As I stopped at a red light, I finally turned my phone back on and played back the messages. Zach left several, each one growing more worried, then angry. David left one too. Something about his always thinking of me as somewhat of a jerk, and me proving it just now. And still, he ended by saying how sorry he was about Aunt Mildred's death. That made me laugh even

more. I mean, the irony! If you're going to be mad, then damn it, be mad. Don't give me some sappy platitude.

I looked down at Andre. He wanted nothing more than to be on stage, in *Hamlet*. In the most creative way possible, he got his wish. Yet, here's someone whose truth makes people freak out. I looked at him and said, "You're one of the lucky ones, my friend. You. Dad. And now Aunt Mildred." I looked down on him, then up at the clear crescent moon. I still had no clue where I was headed. I just kept my foot on the gas and drove on with that humid breeze at my back.

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As I kept driving, I made the mistake of staying on Collins Avenue. I say that because, coming from the north, and heading to South Beach or my hotel or wherever else I had in mind, I had to pass Sunny Isles Beach. Which meant I had to pass mother's condo. I did not even think of this until I saw mother's condo, at which point I jerked back in my seat and yelled "fuck" to no one in particular. I guess I could have driven right past it, and no one except me and Andre would have known. Alas, the ghosts in my head would not let me do that. I thought of paying mother a little surprise visit, but because of that stupid security gate, the surprise would be muted. I could not just pound the door and yell—a scenario that would have made that option much more desirable at that moment. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I did know that I needed another joint. I pulled into the parking lot of a 7-11, made sure there were no police cars in sight, and lit up. I was mildly amused and distracted by the sight and sound of an overweight hooker—with way too much makeup and way too short short-shorts—arguing with a "customer" outside the store. ("I *do not* do that! I don't care *how* much money you got.

Aint no fucking way I'm putting that on *my* menu, honey. I aint no freaky-deaky. You want that? You gotta go to LaTish.") I craned my head to see if her soon to be unsatisfied customer was cute. If he was, then perhaps I could offer my freaky-deaky services. Alas, with his toothpick frame, balding head and moustache (I bet he still thought that made him cool) I immediately pegged him as some *schlumpadink* accountant whose only joy in life comes courtesy of sites like chickswithfatasses.org. This thought was confirmed when Miss I Do Not Do That tried to run away from the car, only her too-high heels made her about as fast as a turtle. And still, this yutz could not catch her. Even though he was in a goddamn car! I thought, how much of a complete loser do you have to be if, even with the benefit of four wheels and an engine, you still could not catch a fat hooker in heels? Did he just give up? If he did, then I hated him right there. How could I have any respect for someone who gave up so easily? But then if he couldn't even go after her; well then, I was not sure this guy was even fit to be alive. It wasn't as though the car was not working; I saw him drive off. Just the very idea that he let go like that was something I could hardly fathom. I'll say one thing about myself; I don't let go of anything.

I just sat there, digesting this little drama. And suddenly, it hit me. By *it*, I mean, first, a big fucking burst of giggles. God, when I was a teen, pot gave me the giggles right away. Now that I was an older, more experienced, respectable pothead, it took much longer to go the full Spicoli. I didn't know if it was that big-assed hooker just clumping away from The Loser, or The Loser himself in all his loser-ness. But at that moment, I was convulsing. I'm pretty sure I peed my pants a little, and I didn't fucking care. And the glorious thing was that I thought of absolutely nothing. Oh, maybe I

thought of the big-assed hooker, but that was it. No death. No Aunt Mildred. No mother. No family. No classes. No book commitments. No back-stabbing colleagues. No gazillions of students wanting gazillions of recommendations. No worrying about my work's "fuckability factor." No worrying about my "fuckability factor." And almost no Shakespeare or any other literary lion who normally roams my brain. Almost is a key word here. For, after I stormed the 7-11 for the obligatory munchies (pretty much one of everything considered even remotely edible), I noticed a small pocket knife laying in the parking lot. Miss "I do not do that" must have dropped it when she fled Mr. Accountant. I picked up the knife, and knew right then and there I was going to take it. That's when I thought of Shakespeare—*Macbeth*, to be precise. Yes, into my crazy, weary head, Lord and Lady Macbeth floated blissfully, especially after Macbeth stabs King Duncan, causing himself and the Mrs. endless ruminations on the perks of power and delicious deviousness of getting away with murder.

Damn if the Lord and the Lady didn't make me think of mother and what I could do with that pocket knife. And oh, how this made me giggle even more. This, I believe, is part of Shakespeare's genius: more than anyone who ever lived, he understood that within every human being, there lies the capacity for both good and horrendous evil. So yes, I thought of murdering mother. Before you judge me, reader, which is understandable as I continue my tale, remember this: you've thought of murdering someone, too. Don't tell me you haven't. Trust me, Mother Fucking Theresa thought of murdering someone too. The only difference is, most of us know better than to act on it.

At that moment, that pocket knife was mine. And at that moment, I decided: I was going to pay mother a little visit. I got back in the Mustang, placed my new find in my satchel, right next to Andre, and sped off. My only concern was controlling my giggles. I dove into the munchie bag, ripped open the wrapper of whatever I could get my hands on, and stuffed my face. That seemed to do the trick. I pulled up to mother's gate, punched in her phone number on my cell, and took one more bite of a surprisingly decent cherry pastry while waiting for her to answer.

"Andy," the voice mumbled on the intercom. "Are you okay?"

Quickly swallowing what was left of the pastry, I said, "We need to talk."

"At this hour?"

"Yes mother. Right now."

At first, there was no response. I repeated myself a few times. A little desperate—and still very high—I raised my voice a few decibels. Finally: "Okay. Don't yell. You'll wake up China. Come on up. There's no valet at this hour, so you'll have to park yourself in the guest lot. You remember where the guest lot is, right? It's right by…"

I cut mother off, reminding her that I did indeed know where the guest lot was. It was, like most condo guest lots, as far away from the condo as possible. I parked the Mustang, popped the top back into place, and with one of the few shreds of sanity I still had in me, made sure I took my satchel, with Andre and my new little friend. As I walked what seemed like miles to the entrance, with a swift ocean breeze smacking me right in the face, that knife gave me utter confidence. I was a fucking king. I was in control. Of what, I had no idea. But it was something. In fact, I was so in control that

not even the sight of Carmine (did this guy ever fucking sleep) in the lobby, intimidated me, save for the fact that in my delirium, his menacing, snaky eyes made him look like a Picasso painting gone horribly wrong. He moved his mouth, but I don't even remember what he said. I just remember that I did not have to sign in. He knew who I was, damn it! I whirred past him, uttering a thank you at best, and pressed the button for the elevator. I got off on mother's floor and sprinted down that long, cold hallway. I rang the doorbell. I heard mother say she was coming, but she did not answer fast enough. I knocked. Then I banged. Finally, mother opened the door. I forced myself inside, without waiting for an invitation. Mother took one look at me and opened our little conversation with, "Good god, you're a mess." With that, I giggled. A lot. I just couldn't help it. For, in my two score-plus years of having to deal with this woman, those might have been the truest words she ever said to me.

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I sat down at the dining room table, feeling like a private investigator. I told mother I was going to get right to the point. I asked her, "Are you and Annette lovers?" Immediately, mother turned her head away from me and looked upward. Even before she answered with a soft "yes," I knew it was true. I was stunned; not by her answer, so much as the plaintive certainty of it. She—the very same woman who threatened to kill herself if I dared tell anyone I was gay—she was in a relationship with a woman. All I could muster for a response was a banal "I see."

"How did you find out?"

"I went to Oceanview…"

"Even though I told you not to…"

"I went to Oceanview and I got Aunt Mildred's things…"

"Who gave them to you? I specifically told them not to…"

"I have my ways and I got them. And I emptied them out. And out came…"

"The photos. Of Annette and myself…"

"Yes, mother. Out came those photos."

Mother looked away from me and toward her terrace, where if she even wanted to look at the ocean, the evidence of Donald Trump's empire blocked the view.

"That was in San Juan two years ago. Our first cruise."

"Really? I didn't even know you went to San Juan."

"There's a lot of things you don't know about me."

"Apparently!"

Apparently when I said "apparently," I screamed it. I heard a rustling in mother's bedroom. I jumped up to check it out. Mother pleaded with me to sit down, but I ignored her. I opened mother's bedroom door. I looked at mother's bed. There was Annette. It was dark. I couldn't see her face. All I heard were murmurs from her: "Andy, please." "Andy please." Then mother, roaring in front of me like a lioness.

"Andy, get out of my bedroom. Out! You want to talk to me? Fine. We'll talk in the living room. You leave Annette alone."

Mother went to her nightstand and took out a pair of ear buds. She plugged them into her Smartphone and gave them to Annette.

"Here, sweetie. Put these in. I've got a whole playlist of nice, soothing sounds. Waterfalls. Birds chirping. You name it. You listen to this. It'll block everything out, I promise."

Annette told her not to be silly, not to bother. And just from the way she said it, I knew right then and there that mother and Annette were in the kind of relationship where one is always telling the other “don’t be silly,” and the other is silly anyway, and they wind up sitting on the beach in matching Chaise lounges ‘til death do them part. I walked out of mother’s bedroom on my own and inched toward the terrace. A normal man would have been happy for them—especially a normal gay man. But I was not a normal man. All I could think of were those ridiculous ear buds. How, when I was 5 or 6 or 7, I would have loved a pair of those to drown out all the screaming. How I never got them, and not just because Steve Fucking Jobs wasn’t dominating the fucking electronics universe then.

***

I kept staring out at what I could make of the ocean in between the ugly logos of the oligarch Trump’s empire. Then I heard the screen door open. I did everything I could not to look at mother.

“I swear, I was going to tell you this week. Hand to God.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Truth be told, Annette and I have been spending time together for going on 40 years now.”

“Spending time? How quaint. So tell me, mother. How exactly did you two start spending time?”

“It wasn’t long after Annette and Harry moved into our building. Do you remember Annette’s husband, Harry?”

“Not really.”

“He was a vile, vulgar man. He used to go on these fishing trips to the Caribbean a lot and he never took his own wife. Annette would get lonely. She’d call me. We’d go shopping. Things like that.”

“Shopping? Sure.”

“I swear, in the beginning, that’s all it was. Annette and me, we didn’t know what everyone knows today. Back then, when you were a young girl, you got married in your 20s. If you didn’t, you were an old maid. That was that. We didn’t know any better.”

“So how did it start?”

“Well, I’ll never forget it. One day, we went shopping at Burdines and Annette saw this pair of long, shimmering earrings that she just had to have. She’s always been a girlie girl. And she can wear long earrings. She has the neck for them. I don’t. Anyway, she had to have them and the second we got back in the car, she had to try them on. Well, she dropped them. And I found them. I handed them back to her. And we looked at each other. She gave me one of those looks. How can I describe it to you? Like Juliet gives Romeo.”

“Juliet gives Romeo lots of looks, mother. Tell me more specifically what you mean.”

“Oh God, Andy, please. I’m not one of your students. I think you know what I mean.”

“Go on.”

"Well, what can I tell you, except that's where it started. We had to be very careful. And we were. We never did anything except when Harry was away, pretending he was Hemmingway. That macho shit."

"Don't talk about Hemmingway that way. He literally changed the face of literature."

"Who's talking about Hemmingway? I was talking about Harry! He was the macho shit."

"Oh."

"But Annette stayed married to him 'til the day he died. That was seven years ago. I begged her to leave him. But she wouldn't. She made a commitment. And it meant something. She wouldn't break it. Sure, she cried when Harry died. But I must say, I've made her happier in the past seven years than she's been her whole life."

"Wow. Happy. What a concept. Well, for the record, I would have been happy to have a lesbian mother."

"For the record, I'm bisexual. Even now, I believe that my relationship with your father was very much a satisfying relationship, if you know what I mean, as were my encounters with some other men."

"*Some* other men?"

"Not all of them."

"Well, gee mother, that's such good news. How 'bout those smelly, drunken assholes who beat the crap out of me? Are they on your good list or your bad list?"

"Of course, Andy, they were on my bad list. Anyone who hurt you was on my bad list."

“Then why did you keep seeing those jerks? Why did you keep letting things happen?”

“I was hiding from a lot of things, Andy. The pain of your father’s death. I swear, I loved your father. I really did.”

“So you substituted his love with losers and jerks. Wonderful.”

“I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Oh and let’s not forget me! The little man in your bed when none of the assholes were around.”

“You slept with me because you were scared of the dark. That’s the only reason!”

“Is that so?”

“That’s what I know!”

“Oh my God. After all these years, that’s what you’re still telling yourself.”

“I saw that you were scared. And I saw you needed comfort. I gave it to you!”

“Wow. I tell ‘ya, mother. I’m speechless. You’re one of the few people who can leave me speechless. Did Annette ever know about our arrangement?”

“Of course not.”

“Gee. I guess that’s a relief.”

“I was a mess, Andrew! I don’t deny that! Even when it came to Annette. There was what I was feeling for her and the pain of not really being able to have her. People of your generation, Andy. I don’t expect you to understand what that felt like. But I was having to put on so many masks, Andy. So many masks.”

“Putting on masks. It’s interesting that you put it in those terms.”

"Why?"

"I often write about putting on masks when I write about Shakespeare. People put on masks in every damn play the Bard wrote. Sometimes they do it to spare people's feelings. Sometimes, they do it because the truth just fucking sucks. I just thought, maybe you got that term from reading my books."

"Okay. Maybe."

"You're not sure."

"Andy, you're not the only one you uses the term 'putting on masks'."

"So I take that as a 'no'."

"Why are we getting off track?"

"Do you even read my books, mother?"

"Of course I do!"

"Then what can you tell me about them?"

"Oh, for God sakes, Andrew. It's the middle of the night. You wanted the story of me and Annette? I'm telling you. You want apologies? I've got those, too. I'm sorry that I wasn't honest with you. I'm sorry that I'm not as smart as you. What more do you want? I just wish you'd accept my apologies. And not just for my benefit. For your benefit, too."

"For me. Really?"

"Yes. I've learned this in recovery. Forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself."

“Well mother, I guess I’m not one for giving myself gifts. Except maybe the gift of a good long grudge. Those are always fun. I’m sure they’ll be the inspirations for some future books you won’t understand.”

I thought to myself, “accept her apology, you asshole.” But I didn’t tell her that I accepted it. I just couldn’t. Searching for something to say, I decided to ask mother about the photos I found in Aunt Mildred’s bag.

“That was two years ago. Condado Beach, San Juan. Oh, my God. The ocean was the most beautiful turquoise you’ve ever seen in your life. Annette and I, we had such a nice time there. Anyway, we were just walking on the beach, holding hands, and before we knew it, this strange guy comes up to us. He sees Annette’s camera around her neck, and he offers to take our picture. At first, we just posed and smiled. But then, get this: He says to us, “Come on! Act like you love each other. Because I can tell that you do!” Can you even imagine someone saying that?”

Mother’s eyes were watering. I’ll admit, I was a little jealous. She went on to explain that with that direction from this complete stranger, she and Annette “felt a freedom” that they never felt before. Hence the passionate kisses.

There was a part of me that wanted to be happy for mother. I swear, it was there. But there was that other part of me that latched on to that word—freedom—and all I could think of was the Great god Janice wailing “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose.” I thought of that line over and over. I thought of Janice singing it. Because her voice was, and is, original and unmistakable. But also because it gave me something else to think about beside mother being so god-dammed happy. I just could not think of that, totally. But I paid just enough attention to mother’s story so that she

could not accuse me of ignoring her. I asked her how the photos found their way to Aunt Mildred's.

"You know how that photo wound up on Mildred's nightstand?"

"How would I know?"

"Well I'll tell you. A few years ago, Annette's car was in for repairs, and she asked if I'd chauffer her on a few errands. I said sure, as long as she didn't mind stopping to see Mildred, since I was planning on doing that. Well. They hadn't seen each other in years, and as soon as Annette walked in, it was as if all those years just slipped away. Annette just has that way about her. She saw that Mildred's hair wasn't combed very well that day, and Annette's always been such a pro with hair and make-up. Annette just sat beside her and asked her, 'Would you like me to comb your hair just a bit?' Before you know it, they had a whole little hair and make-up session going on. Oh goodness, they laughed like they were teen-agers at a sleep-away. Well, then Mildred started requesting that Annette come with me on visits. Mildred just took me aside one day and told me I'd never looked happier. And then I just told her about me and Annette. I didn't know how much Mildred understood about those things, so I just said that Annette and I were 'together.' And when I said that, your Aunt Mildred gave me the biggest smile. Over and over again, she kept saying That's so nice. I'm so glad.' I mean, she wouldn't stop saying it. You know how she could be sometimes with the repetition. To get her to stop, I asked her if she'd like a photo of us. It just came out of me. So I had that one framed and I gave it to her. She always kept it right on her nightstand, next to your picture."

"How long did she have that photo?"

"Oh, I'd say about three years now."

"How come I never saw it?"

"I took the photo away when I knew you were coming. I told her I needed to talk to you. I think she understood."

"You *think* she understood?"

"She had a brain, Andy!"

"Don't even go there with telling me that. I always knew…"

"She didn't tell you about Annette and I, did she?"

"No. She did not."

"Then as far as I'm concerned, she understood."

With this, I stared up at the sky. How could Aunt Mildred not tell me about this? Wasn't she always my confidant? When I was growing up, wasn't it me and her against the world? Why would she keep this from me? Ah, but then I realized—mother. She was afraid of mother. She was afraid that if I knew, I could come back to mother. And mother would retaliate. Oh yes she would. Mother thought her so-called recovery could fool people into thinking she was so different now. But Aunt Mildred was not fooled. She knew how vindictive mother could be. I wouldn't put it past mother to stop visiting Aunt Mildred if she found out that I knew. Yes, it was mother. It always came back to mother.

Funny. You can spend your whole life doing everything you can to run from who you are; to run from the shitty cards you've been dealt. And you can't do it. No matter how many books you escape into; drugs and drinks you escape into; prestigious degrees you escape into; hot men with firm asses you escape into; enigmatic lives of

enigmatic playwrights you escape into; at the end of the day, you are who you fucking are. Every play Shakespeare ever wrote has someone running from the past and putting on masks to do it. Fuck, most of them have several characters running from the past and putting on masks to do it. But holy shit, do those masks ever come off. And when they do, you're a little boy with no ear buds protecting you. No protection from the sounds of loser men you don't know and don't want to know, yelling words that you don't know, except that, from the ferociousness of them, you know they're horrible. Not from the sounds of your mother, who's supposed to be your hero, coming into your room when those other men aren't around, egging you on to be her "little man" and you kind of know what those words mean and you hate them, but you do what you do because she's your mother, you *want* her to be your hero, you're little and you have no choice, not having any fucking clue that your being a good little Samaritan will mark you—haunt you—for the rest of your life. Just try to tell others. No one wants to hear it. No one wants to believe it. Except, of course, for shrinks who will nod, write you copious prescriptions, and make observations that you think are brilliant at the time, only to be questioned when you eventually discover—out of second or third party relations, or even better, through gossip at one of the gazillion functions where professors go to preen—that said shrinks are actually so fucked up personally themselves that they make you look like Andy Hardy. Maybe if you're a little lucky, you can tell an aunt who probably doesn't understand what you're telling her anyway, but she's still on your side because, at the end of the day, she has no heroes either. She will, with the mentality that she does have, sense that you need her. And she will be there. But then, she will die. And then, you will find out that she kept things from you. Fortunately, copious drugs

and drink can make you forget for a little while. But they wear off. You begin noticing the proverbial “real world” again. Even the little details. Hell, especially the little details. Like the ear buds that your mother never gave to you. You notice all that. And you hate it all. There’s just one thing you don’t hate: the little pocket knife you just picked up. That little sucker gives you power. You’re not sure over what, but you are sure of that power. And oh, do you think of using it. On the woman who was not your hero. On yourself. On both. Hell, it even makes you smile a little.

Alas, all you do is think about it. Why is that? Once again, Shakespeare. Murder didn’t serve Lord and Lady Macbeth all that well. And poor Hamlet didn’t exactly get to celebrate when Claudius kicked the bucket. Shakespeare shows us, again and again, how fucking difficult it is to have something of a conscience.

I must have looked up that sky for a long time, because the next thing I knew, mother was tapping me on the shoulder and asking if I was okay. I told her I was and she responded with, “You’re on something. I know you are. And don’t tell me you’re not. I know.” She offered the couch so I could “sleep it off.”

I didn’t take it. I went inside, made sure I had everything, said good night to mother, and charged toward the door. Mother pleaded for us to continue talking and I said “yes.” At the time, I said that just so she wouldn’t give me an argument. I left her condo, walked down the hall, and tossed a useless little knife into the trash compactor. I got to the lobby. Carmine was still there. Looking. Straight fucking through me.

“Good night, sir.”

“Stop staring at me.”

“I’m not staring at you.”

“I perceive differently.”

“You perceive incorrectly.”

With that, I walked out into the balmy, breezy Miami Beach air. I checked my Smartphone for the time: 4:12 a.m. I thought of Zachie. I thought, if he ever gave me his earphones, I would not hear comforting sounds. I’d only hear the so-called sounds of so-called singers and bands that I would not want to know. I laughed at that thought. My finger just seemed to automatically punch his number. He answered.

“Daddyo!”

“Good evening.”

“You mean good morning.”

“That, too. Are you alone.”

“What kind of question is that to start with?”

I wondered that myself as soon as Zachie responded. But I didn’t take the question back.

“I invited the Barrington rowing team here for an orgy, but they left ‘cause they were freaked out by your skulls. How’s that?”

“Terrible.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because it’s an ungodly hour. And you sound terrible.”

Why was I calling Zachie? At that point, I really didn’t know. I got in the Mustang, stared at the GPS, and came up with my answer.

“I need you to guide me back to the hotel.”

“Again?”

“Please. I need your voice. Tell me how to get back.”

And Zachie did. He got out of his hopefully lonely bed and got out his whatever-the-fuck he uses, and told me when to turn left, when to turn right, when to just go straight ahead. I loved the smooth, silky sound of his voice. I loved that I had someone who I could call after 4 in the morning, and he wouldn’t freak out.

Zachie guided me back to the white-on-white of my hotel. When I got there, I suggested Skype sex. He was too tired. I loved that. A 25-year-old being too tired for a 49-year-old. We said good night. He told me he loved me. I’m sure I told him that I loved him too.

I lay down on my white bed and stared up at my white ceiling. I should have tried getting some sleep, but I couldn’t. So I got out my laptop and opened it. I started composing an email to every Barrington professor and administrator charged with determining Zachie’s fate. And, oh, those emails were glowing. On I wrote about how smart Zachie was. How talented. How I wish more kids today were like him. And of course, how sorry he was for plagiarizing, how this was a first time offense, and how personally sure I was that it would never happen again. It wasn’t just a form email. No sir. I wrote individual messages to each one on that committee. I put a lot of effort into this. I remember, because when I finally closed my laptop, “The Today Show” was just coming on. I hadn’t slept at all, but damn. I was doing my best to protect Zachie. That’s what you’re supposed to do when you love someone, and that’s what I did.

I hit “send,” just as Matt Lauer started talking about the latest stalemate between Democrats and Republicans.

I was not somebody who kills with a pocket knife. I was not that somebody at all.

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Additional Chapters: Middle to End of Novel

Zach Arriving in Miami

It was Zach. With a woman I'd never seen before in my life.

"Surprise," Zach shouted, the understatement of the morning. I murmured a weak "surprise indeed" before asking what he was doing here. And who was this woman.

"As far as what I'm doing here. Well, my lover's in pain, and I've come to comfort him. And as far as this woman is concerned, daddyo, let me introduce you to Marina, Andre's sister."

Marina removed her sunglasses, extended her hand, and in a heavy accent, told me how pleased she was to meet me. I'm sure I said the same to her. After all, what else could I say after being so blind-sided?

Over brunch, Zach filled in some gaps. For a while, he had been researching Andre's life online. Through a combination of those ancestry sites and (of course) Facebook, he discovered Marina and found that she lived in Miami Beach. He was going to surprise me the next time we visited South Beach. Of course, fate intervened.

The whole idea that he would do this for me just bowled me over. I was content knowing only what I knew about Andre. This was all Zach's doing. Zach's curiosity.

Deep down, I felt I didn't deserve it. Maybe that's why I was so defensive when Marina excused herself to go to the ladies room.

"I can't believe you did this!"

"Well, I'm nothing if not full of surprises."

"The day after your hearing? With all you've got going on? You still haven't told me about the hearing."

"I told you it went okay. The committee got your email. Thank you. I did the best I could. And now I wait. Nothing more to it than that. And if I have to wait, I could do worse than the Delano on South Beach. And after the crazy few days you've had, I'm sure you won't mind the company."

"Of course not. You'll stay with me."

"Not that you've been completely alone, I'm sure."

Zach said that with slightly upturned lip, one that was all too quick to wrap itself around his mimosa. I thought of Jacques instantly. Did he get to Zach? What did Zach know? I thought of asking Zach what he meant by that last statement, but I didn't want to open myself up. I told him that, aside from the family and a very satisfactory pot sale, I had been alone. Zach rolled his eyes and paused. Then he changed the subject.

"You'll be happy to know that Marina lives here, so you won't have to put her up at the Delano. And she really is a simple woman of very simple tastes. I told her about this fabulous deli called The Bagel Barn, with outstanding service thanks to this incredible manager named Brenda Prystowski, and Marina can't wait to try it. That's where we're brunching tomorrow. Now, I doubt that you have to make reservations at a

deli, but I think it would be nice to give your mother a heads up. Are you going to do that, or am I?"

"Oh my God. This is how you want to meet my mother?"

"Professor, why don't you answer my question before I answer yours? Are you going to call your mother, or am I?"

As Zach laid this on me, I couldn't help but stare into his almond eyes, which seemed both cold and calm all at once. I wanted to throttle him. And I wanted to rip his clothes off and fuck him.

"My mother's not working this week due to the funeral."

"Good. Then she'll join us. The more the merrier."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Marina returning.

"I'll call her," I told Zach.

"I'm sure you will."

Marina smiled as she returned to the table.

"So. I hear you are in temporary custody of my brother's head. Are you enjoying his company?"

I told Marina that I was, although enjoying was not the right word. She asked me what I wanted to know about Andre that I did not already know. I thought of a million questions at once. But mainly I thought that I could use a joint. Badly. But as much as I loved pot, I sure as hell knew enough not to do it in public. I excused myself and went back to my room to light up. I took a hit, and it was like chocolate ice cream and great sex all at once. And I needed it. I had no idea what just hit me, and I sure as hell had no idea what was about to hit me. Didn't I know all I wanted to know about

Andre? And if I told Zach that it really wasn't a good idea for him to come down here, why didn't he listen to me?

I got a text from Zach. "The brunch check came. What's your room number?" I gave it to him. He asked if I was coming back out, but I had to stay with my joint. I just had to. A few minutes later, I heard a knock at my door. I asked who it was, though I already knew. I snuffed out what was left of my joint and opened the door. I could tell Zach knew what I was up to, just by the way Zach took a huge sniff when he walked in.

"I just have to unpack a few things," he said, gently placing his rucksack on the bed. "Why don't you and Marina get acquainted in the meantime?"

Marina managed to sit down right by the joint I just ditched. She smiled when she noticed it. I jumped up and threw it in the trash. She leaned back on the sofa and asked where her brother was. I found my satchel, opened it and took Andre out. Marina gasped the moment she saw him, and her eyes started watering. She asked if she could hold him and I handed him over. I was a little hesitant, but how could I say no?

She told me that, thanks to her brother's request, she had been to London to see him to see *Hamlet* with Colin Northrup. She went to New York when it was on Broadway, too.

"I was complete wreck through the whole play," she said in her Polish accent as she caressed Andre's skull. "My brother finally got his dream. And yet, if you asked me why I was crying, I would tell you only that it was because the production was so good. Colin hadn't made comments about Andre yet, so I kept quiet about who my brother

was and what he did. Even after his death, I could not be totally open when it came to him."

As Marina spoke, she could hardly take her eyes off the two holes that had once been Andre's eyes. She would briefly turn to look my way, but just as quickly, she turned back. It was only as she did this that I really got comfortable with her even being there. Marina was stout, with close-cropped, highlighted brown hair that was just spiky enough to tell me that she tries to look like she belongs in South Beach. She was a good 25 to 30 pounds overweight, and I kind of hated myself for even noticing that. But as Marina started talking more about Andre, I was entranced.

Marina and Andre were born two and a half years apart, in Gdansk, Poland. Marina was the eldest. Their parents were shopkeepers, and they instilled a love of the arts in their children. Marina took ballet and Andre took piano. Marina couldn't quite recall exactly how old Andre was when he developed an interest in acting, but it was definitely there by the time Andre entered high school. His class was doing a production of *Hamlet*. Andre tried out for the lead, but wound up getting the part of the gravedigger instead. Andre didn't mind. The gravedigger was a small part, but a good part. And he certainly didn't mind the strapping, blue-eyed boy playing *Hamlet*. They would rehearse their scene over and over, even when they didn't have to. The blue-eyed boy's father was a doctor, and the enterprising young lads even went so far as to borrow one of the father's "teaching skulls" for the scene. The skull was a prosthetic, but apparently quite realistic. The strapping blue-eyed boy would painstakingly explain the lobes of the brain and their functions, and Andre would listen intently. Not because he

was really interested, but because it was the strapping blue eyed boy who was explaining it.

It was something everyone noticed—Marina, for sure, but also their parents. The parents were the problem. They pulled Andre out of acting class and out of *Hamlet*. He never went back to acting, but there was no way he was going to give up the piano. No matter what his parents thought, he was going to be an artist. He had the talent to become a soloist; just not the drive. He made ends meet by teaching and playing in small orchestras. He never had much fun money, but if there was a Shakespeare play in town, he was there. And if there was a book on Shakespeare, he'd read it. That included my books.

This is where Andre's story took a crazy turn. As Marina continued, she started laughing.

"You don't remember, do you?" she asked.

"Remember what?"

"London. Charing Cross Road. I think it was five years ago. You met Andre. You had nice time with Andre."

I felt my jaw drop. Years ago, I was at Foyles, that legendary bookstore, reading and signing copies of *You Do Love Shakespeare, You Just Don't Know It*, my comprehensive tome on Shakespeare's imprint on any and all forms of pop culture. According to Marina, Andre came to hear me talk and to chat with me at the signing. At this point in my life, these signings and chats have all run into one another. Ask me to recall certain individuals, and I become a blank. A polite blank, mind you (" *Of course* I remember you. How could I forget?"), but a blank. If anything, I'm more apt to recall

stupid questions people ask. So I guess it's a good thing that I don't remember much of our conversation.

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Scene With Andy and Brenda on Beach Near Brenda's Condo

When I found mother at the beach, she was staring out at the ocean, in the exact Chaise lounge I imagined her having. I said my hello and mother looked up for me, if only for a second, before turning her gaze back to the water.

Mother explained how she got Carmine fired, and if I do say so myself, the building blocks of her nefarious plot were impressive. Her asshole boss accused her of taking too much food for the shiva. Immediately, she got Diego to cover for her by saying he had to run back to the Bagel Barn and get more cottage cheese because he saw Carmine take it. He had to leave the tray with the guard while he brought the other goodies up because the condo's one luggage dolly wasn't available. So the guard stole the cream cheese. The asshole boss didn't believe this story, so mother produced a letter on condo board stationery corroborating it. She did not mean for the actual condo board president to know anything about it, but the actual condo board president caught mother in the office, taking condo board letterhead. When condo board president asked what was going on, mother couldn't think of anything else to do but to spill her whole bullshit story.

Damned if the condo board president didn't buy it—so much so that, on the spot, she actually did write the letter herself. Isn't it terrible how you just can't trust "the help?" And when the honor of such a fine, upstanding woman as mother is actually questioned? Well, who wouldn't stand up for her? Mother presented the letter to her

asshole boss. Her asshole boss let the whole thing go. The condo president emailed a copy of the letter to condo board. Bye bye, Carmine.

"I never thought Carmine would get fired. Poor man. He's got two daughters in college, Stacy and Daphne, I think."

"He'll get something else…"

"That's not the point. It's what I did," mother said, her voice breaking with a slight cough and a need to clear her throat. "What I did to cover my own ass."

Oh, the irony. And how I could have responded. For this, of course, was a subject I knew a lot about. But I did not respond in any other way, except to ask her why she decided that poor Carmine was expendable. Without hesitation, mother responded:

"My job. I need my job."

"For the money?"

"Well yeah, but, more because it's demanding. And as much as it's not easy working for that dipshit, demanding is good 'cause it keeps me busy. And busy is good because it keeps me out of trouble."

Mom did not have to say any more, which was good, because for a while, she didn't. She just continued staring at the ocean. Finally, she got philosophical. Well, philosophical for her, anyway.

"It's a fine line, isn't it, between trouble and no trouble."

"I can't disagree with that."

"Every time I look at the ocean, I look out at all that water, going north and south, as far as I can see, and I think of how small I am in the scheme of things. How

small we all are. And that's good, you know? It's good to know that we don't amount to a hill of beans in this world. Andy, you would know this. Who was the author who said that? Who was the author who said `*We don't amount to a hill of beans in this world*'?"

"Now that's from *Casablanca*. It's what Bogie says to Ingrid Bergman. But that's not exactly what he says. The correct line is, `*It doesn't take much to see that the problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world'*. You've got to put that quote in context. He's talking about people's problems. Not people as human beings themselves."

"Okay!"

"And the writers of that script were two brothers, Julius and Philip Epstein. Writers is the key word here, mother, because, as brilliant as that script was, screenwriters are not authors."

"Why are we talking about this?"

"Because you referred to them as authors! Screenwriters, especially ones who sell out to the Hollywood machine, are hacks. Not authors. Never have been. Never will be."

"Well, okay. Screenwriter. Author. Whatever. They wrote those lines. I like writers who write things like that. I mean, `*We don't amount to a hill of beans in this world'*…

"Were you even listening to me just now? That's not the right..."

"Who doesn't *get* that? You don't have to have that *explained* to you."

With this, mom looked me square in the eye. I could have, for the umpteenth time, remind her that she need not understand every word of Shakespeare in order to "get" him. But I did not. Instead, with a heavily beating heart, I put my arm around her. This was not done easily. Even as I reached over, there were those childhood flashbacks that people like me wish would go the fuck away, but they never do: times when all I was doing was "my job," comforting mother, only to have her do things back that I can't bear to think about, save for that quizzical look of one male child protective services worker, who suddenly became a lot less quizzical after mother put her arms around him. I tried batting away those flashes by looking at the ocean, just like mom was doing. Suddenly, it was a little less calm, with some whiteheads forming a few feet from shore and crashing onto the sand. There must be a storm forming, I thought. Sure enough, I looked up and saw splotches of grey in the clouds. My gaze was interrupted by the touch of mom's hand. She had, I noticed, decided to hold the hand I was using to comfort her.

"You know, your friend? I like him."

Zach. Oh boy. What a time to bring him up.

"I'm glad, mother. I like him too."

"I mean, what a thoughtful thing he did, finding Andre's sister and everything. If that doesn't show how much he cares about you, I don't know what does. Whatever you do, Andrew, don't let this one go."

I laughed a little. Not a happy laugh. No, it was one rife with nerves. After that, the words just spilled out—words that let mom know that she was not the only one throwing someone under the bus. I told her about the plagiarism charge, and how I put

it on Zach, and how the funeral allowed me a convenient out from attending his disciplinary hearing. The confession, I must admit, felt liberating, even though I could tell, from mom's increasingly hardened face, the gravity of knowing how much I was ruining the life of someone who dared to care about me so much. With her voice slightly more stern than it was before my confession, mom started asking questions.

"They're not going to throw him out of Barrington, are they?"

"Not necessarily. I wrote everyone on that board some very laudatory emails."

"Emails!"

"Not just any emails. Emails from me! Emails that I slaved over. My name means something to them!"

"For God's sake, Andy. Can't you just admit that you made a mistake? You're *tenured*. What can they do to you?"

"It's not what Barrington can do to me, mother. It's what everyone who wants what I have can do to me. It's the books I want to write. The NPR appearances I still want to make. All that comes to an end if I admit that I plagiarized someone. At my level, you just don't admit things like that."

"Oh God. At your level…"

Mom's voice trailed off. She was staring squarely at the ocean again, and suddenly, her hand was gone from mine.

"Look, I'm sure he'll reapply to Oxford, and I'm sure they'll accept him."

"With plagiarism on his record? Plagiarism that he didn't even do?"

"I know people there. I'll fix it."

"Yeah, like you're fixing it now."

“They haven’t expelled him. And my emails do mean something!”

“Good God! You really think you can turn yourself into some kind of savior for this!”

With this, mom got up from her lounge. As she made no effort to collect her belongings, I surmised she did this only for the honor of towering over me.

“You know what Zach told me at brunch? He told me he dreamed his whole life of going to Barrington. And he doesn’t even want to go to Oxford because he doesn’t want to be away from you.”

“Oh, trust me, mother. Zach is more ambitious than he lets on. You think little elves told Oxford about him? He applied there, mother. Without even telling me! I’m sorry, but no one applies to Oxford if they don’t really want to go.”

“Says you, right? Says that hallowed scholar, Andy Prystowski. How could you do this, Andrew? Especially to someone who loves you?”

To this, I stood up. Now, I towered above the Chaise.

“How could I do this, mother? Well, just maybe, I learned from you.”

“Don’t even go there, okay? I don’t have tenure like you do. I need my job. And I don’t love Carmine.”

“As if *that* makes it fine for you to do what you did.”

“It makes a difference, Andrew. It makes a big difference.”

“Yeah? Since when are you so concerned about my love for another man? You. The same woman who, when I opened up and said, `Mother, I’m gay, your response was…”

“Oh, here we go…”

“Your response was, `You better keep this quiet. Or I’ll kill myself’.” That’s what I got from you. Shame and threats.”

“And I was wrong! For the millionth time, I was wrong. I’d give my right arm to take that back. That and so many other things. And God, Andrew, I’ve tried; I’ve tried every way I can to make amends to you.”

“Is this an example of your world-famous amends, mother? Keeping your lesbian relationship…”

“Bisexual relationship…”

“Your whatever relationship. Keeping it a secret from me? Me—of all people?”

“I kept it a secret because…”

“Because why?”

“Because I was waiting for the right time and the right time never came.”

“Just what time were you waiting for?”

“A time when you didn’t hate me!”

With this, mom started crying. No matter how he feels about her, a son never wants to see his mother cry. I turned my eyes to the ocean to see how small I could feel. Have I hated my own mother? Yes. At times. And no, at other times. How could I tell her that? I just stayed silent. Mother, however, could not remain silent.

“You don’t think I know how you feel about me? I’ve known it forever. And I don’t know what I have to do to make you realize that I’m different now. But damn it, Andy, I am.”

I laughed when she said this. A gargantuan, ironic laugh. Mom could have gone on and on about how much she “changed.” This was a woman who was *still* tied to her

secrets. This was a woman who would not hesitate to cover her ass, at the expense of someone else's. Oh, for those wondrous moments when generations realize how much they have in common! In the oddest, and yet the most deliciously ironic of ways, I felt closer to mom at that moment than I had in years.

Alas, the feeling was not mutual. Not after I told mom that she was the same insecure, pathetic woman she had always been. And certainly not after I insisted that, if she *had* killed herself all those years ago, she'd have done us both a favor. Cruel, I know. Did I mean those words? No. And yes. I meant them in the sense that, if she had decided to, as Hamlet would have put it, "*end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to,*" she'd have saved herself a lot of strife.

I will admit that I failed to convey those thoughts properly. And that mom slapped me across the face. Hard. Hard enough for me to be begrudgingly impressed by her arm strength. But I did not tell her this. I was too busy absorbing her suggestion that I should just go back to Boston on the next flight; that, now that Aunt Mildred was in the ground ("in the ground" being my words; "passed on" being mom's), there really was no reason for me to stay in Miami.

Was I hurt? Of course. But I had weapons in my arsenal. We had all these plans now with mother's new pals, Zach and Marina. What would I say to them if I just dropped everything and went back to Boston? Whack, whack, whack. I might have been bleeding, but I was still in the swordfight.

Alas, mom was still fighting, too.

"You're never going to tell Zach what you did. Are you?"

I knew, in that instant, the threat behind that question. Mom now knew Zach. For fuck's sake—she *liked* Zach! I realized that I had to convince her that I was going to tell Zach. Because, damn it, she could now very well tell him. I had to be convincing. I just had to. And damn if I wasn't! I put my hand on mom's shoulder, and even though she tried batting it away, I persisted. Yes, *of course* I was going to tell Zach. But it had to be at the right time.

"After all mom, you've just met Zach. You don't know how fragile he really is. Now, just between you and me, he tried to take his *own* life last year."

Mom's sudden "Oh my God" told me that my performance was a good one. And damn it if I didn't know Zach well enough to concoct, on the spot, a scenario that would not be beyond him. I told her it was a combination of booze and pills, since I remembered a conversation Zach and I once had about what actually happens to the character of Sebastian in *Brideshead Revisited*. (We never actually see Sebastian dying in the novel and Waugh is not very explicit about it, leaving it as grist for bored intellectuals to ruminate over when they get high.) Zach was convinced that Sebastian would take his own life with booze and pills. I don't recall it being an especially convincing argument, but I do remember that, after his explanation, Zach cuddled with one of his teddy bears, and I found this so outrageously sexy that I did not bother to challenge him. So—booze and pills. I told mom a story about booze and pills. And if I had not come home when I did, well...I'll be damned if my eyes didn't water. Shit, what an actor I was!

"So mom, I'll tell him. I will. And it has to come from me. It has to come from someone who knows how to handle him. Don't you agree?"

Thank goodness, she said yes. Yes! Her voice was not as tense as it had been minutes before. She told me that she still wanted to be alone at that moment. But "Why don't you get on the next flight to Boston?" became "Do you mind if I just go home now and take a nap? I need to clear my head."

Who knows? She might have been telling the truth. I didn't care. She left me with. "Andy, you called me mom. Just now. I want you to know that I noticed that."

With that, she walked away, easily hauling her Chaise Lounge in a way that convinced me that she must have been working out. Okay, I called her mom. And she called me Andy. Not Andrew. Did I care to shout that back at her and make a big, dramatic scene out of it? No, I did not.

I walked back to the Mustang and looked at the GPS. Really, I didn't even need it. I sure as shit knew how to get back to South Beach. Yet, by osmosis, I pushed Zach's number. He answered with:

"So how was this afternoon's drama?"

"Dramatic. What was it that Nietzsche said: Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes."

"True. But Oscar Wilde said that."

"Really? No."

"Yes, sir. I'm Googling it now to prove I'm right."

"You don't have to do that."

"Considering that I live with you, yes I do. And look at that. I am so fucking right! Sending it to your email right now."

“Okay, so Wilde said that. God, can’t you just concentrate on one thing? Like talking to me?”

“Okay. I’m concentrating. I swear. Tell me what happened between you and your mom.”

I wanted to tell Zach what happened. But when I opened my mouth, “I love you” came out. Over and over. Followed by a few “I need yous.” Then came the tears. Then the “I’m sorrys.”

“For what?”

“What do you mean?”

“What are you sorry for?”

“Everything,” I cried.

“Honey, you’re not making sense.”

“Just everything.”

A better man would have told Zach everything right there. A better man would have been a lot more specific.

But it all worked. At least it did then. Zach told me he loved me, too. And that he accepted my crappy apology. If he only knew.

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Andy and Zach at Brenda’s Wedding

Zachie, of course, looked absolutely dashing in his tux. His shoulders were a little too arched back for my taste, but I did not begrudge him. As the “elder statesman,” I felt it my duty to speak first.

“I wondered whether you’d make it.”

“And miss the chance to see you bumble awkwardly? I wouldn’t have missed that for the world.”

I looked down at my mimosa and laughed.

“I deserved that barb.”

“That’s an understatement.”

I reached out and put my hand on Zachie’s shoulder. I was grateful that he did nothing to remove it.

“I can’t thank you enough, Zachie, for not pursuing this further…”

“Don’t, Andy. Just don’t. You may find this hard to believe, but my decision had nothing to do with you. I just don’t have it within me to be the good little soldier for justice here…to face all the accusations and brickbats coming my way.”

“I wouldn’t have thrown them at you.”

“No, you would have done something worse. You would have had others throw them for you. You would have feigned indignation publically. But privately, you would have patted your pals on the back.”

I took a heavy swig of my drink.

“You always did know me way too well, Zachie. That was one of the negatives.”

“You know what my biggest mistake was?”

“What.”

"It wasn't trusting you. I don't blame myself for that. No. My biggest mistake was thinking that loving you was the best way to get through to you. Little did I know that loving you is the *worst* way to get through to you."

Zachie paused. He made sure to look me straight in the eyes. Immediately, I looked away—toward the canapé, the grass, anything I could.

"So, what are your plans now? Are you applying to other schools?"

"Not now. In two weeks, I'm taking off for India. I'm gonna spend a year there. I'm getting there just in time for Holi. It'll be so great just to dance and sing and have everyone spray all these gorgeous colored powders and water all over me. I can't wait to just breathe in all that joy. I'd say I could use it, don't you think?"

I cried when Zachie told me this. I'll admit that. But they weren't tears of sadness. I was actually happy for him. I answered his rhetorical question in the affirmative, and then some.

"You know what I've always loved about you?"

"What?"

"You're not a victim. And that's good because I hate victims. Victims are weak. Victims are all `woe is me.' Like Sebastian in *Brideshead Revisited*. A colorful character, but Christ, what a complainer."

"Now, don't you go trashing one of my favorite classics, just because it's not Shakespeare."

"I'm not trashing it. I'm just making a point. You're not like Sebastian, Zachie. You're not weak. You're not going to wind up tortured like he did."

“I never thought I was like Sebastian. I just loved him because he loved stuffed bears. You couldn’t figure that out, could you?”

I couldn’t. But I could never admit that. So I changed the subject.

“Listen. If you ever need a recommendation; a call, a letter, anything…”

“Yes, thank you. I may well have to take you up on that. You are, after all, Andy Prystowski—one hell of a connection.”

“There’s only one thing I ask of you.”

“What’s that?”

“A dance. At the reception.”

“Let’s not push it.”