My Sister Died

Less and less the phone seemed to ring, and hardly at all if you discounted the telemarketers. And yet there it was, a personal message on his Voicemail when he came in the door with a small bag of groceries.

"Hi, Gideon. It's me, Jeanne, with some sad news. Ingrid has suffered cardiac arrest. The ambulance is taking her to the hospital as I speak."

Such a voice his niece had. Mournful and slow and rich with pathos, whether discussing family illness or the weather.

Hospital? Ingrid would be DOA. Seventy-nine-year-old women who weighed over three hundred pounds and whose LDL cholesterol numbers flew high off the chart did not survive such attacks. He envisioned weeping and wailing, a lot of serious emoting, up at the hospital. Perhaps best to delay his arrival to spare himself the spectacle. If that sounded mean, he supposed that it was.

But death was not only and always about tears.

Such a sister, Ingrid. Moody, stubborn. A consumer of fast food eaten right out of greasy bags. There were closet drinkers and closet eaters. Ingrid one of the latter, parking herself in front of the refrigerator in the crowded, rundown Upper West Side apartment late at night while everyone slept. Though not always closeted. Spooning Breyer's ice cream into her mouth right out of the quart-sized container while watching *Million Dollar Movie* on Channel 9 on the

second-hand black and white TV in the darkened living room. And telling the doctor essentially bah fung goo when he recommended cholesterol-lowering medication. A woman with her own purposes in life. A sister he hadn't known, or had known in only one dimension of her existence, he suspected.

He stared at the beige phone. Whether it was the death of his mother, his father, two other sisters, his brother, always it was the women who let him know. This was nothing to make a big deal of. It was just something to note.

He removed his pants and shirt and lay them neatly on a chair. The one-bedroom apartment was right under the roof and unbearable on sizzling summer days like this without the a/c, which was now kicking in. He then turned on the desktop computer, and while it booted up he unpacked the groceries in the kitchen. Two containers of tofu, one firm and one silken. Half a carton plus a vegetable or two was all he needed for dinner. A couple of containers of organic hummus, which he ate for lunch on those days he wasn't spooning almond butter into his mouth straight from the jar along with the orange and apple that completed his meal. Two cartons of soymilk beverage and a package of cinnamon-flavored rice cakes, those two items plus a banana sufficing for breakfast. And a small bag of organic salted pistachios that he had taken a liking to, while wondering whether a man with implants where he had once had teeth should be cracking nuts. If others wanted to eat croak food, that was their business.

"How soon can you be here?" Jeanne asked, when he returned her call.

"When I can," he said, reacting to some perceived tone of insolence in his niece's voice. Niece, my ass, he thought, getting off the phone. If the word conjured an image of youth, let it be said that Jeanne was fifty-eight. An uncle at the ripe old age of four. No spring chickens, either one of them.

The computer called to him. If there was death, there was also life. He clicked the download button for e-mail from his server. *Spamblocker. Expedia. Kayak. Film Forum. Daily Word. MoveOn.org.* Through narrowed eyes, he recited these and other names, hoping that the litany would lessen the likelihood of their appearance in his inbox and increase the probability of a personal message. Surely there was love out there, and surely he needed it. But tonight, as most nights, was a zero, causing him to groan. "You e-mail addict, you. Come along now into the real world," he whispered.

Along dark and chronically gritty Amsterdam Avenue the clack clack of dominoes emphatically laid on a flat table surface sounded in his ears. Around a fold-up table set out on the sidewalk a small group of older men for a night of winning and losing. Approaching a sullen strip where a housing project stood, he became more mindful of his step and demeanor among those who ruled the streets, detecting candidates for anger management classes in the rough conversations of the young. "Fuck you be doing that shit, Jim? Don't be playing me that way, less you want some action upside your head. Fuck with me, Jim, and I be getting into your control tower. I be getting into the working of your mind." The rough poetry of those staying this side of violence by living in their language and stretching it to its limit. And those herky-jerky hand and body movements. Everyone was angry, including him. Cooling mechanisms were needed.

His sister was gone, but what she had left behind wasn't.

He was soon in the world of his childhood, some of the premises still standing if the occupants had long since departed. The corner building on One Hundred Tenth Street in front of which his grade school friend Boris Siderenko, newly arrived from the Soviet Union, had his right eye plucked out by Frenchie the Algerian; two blocks beyond, another corner building

where his high school friend Sean had lived, his big head literally blown off when his troop truck rolled over a mine outside Saigon, the U.S. army returning his remains in a sealed casket. But a block north the row of tenements was long gone. On the stoops of those walkups he had hung out in his high school years with the neighborhood Irish. Kids with whom he would drink from quart bottles of Schaefer and Knickerbocker and Rheingold, local breweries that had passed from the scene. Through those kids he had met his high school girlfriend, Jane, who introduced him to the torment relationship can bring.

A cemetery of sorts the area was, and himself invisible, a ghost, rendered so by time and change. No wonder he meditated three times a day. Was there an option, given the reality that everything passes? What was he to hold onto? Thin air? In a way, yes. The breath was everything. Everything.

The hospital stood just beyond the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, outside of which he now paused. A strange, preposterous behemoth, the edifice as cold as the quarried stones cut and set in place with which it had been built. Grimy, incomplete. That time in sixth grade he had tossed a football along the transept during a commencement exercise in the cathedral. And shortly thereafter, his expulsion from the Episcopal school affiliated with the cathedral. The long ago. The person he no longer was.

But now he wasn't on the outside. Now he wasn't walking, having his thoughts, such as they were, his mind going here, there, and everywhere. Now he was inside the hospital staring down at Ingrid, who lay face up on a gurney, her body stashed in some small supply room behind a flimsy curtain, awaiting disposal. Some sort of breathing apparatus had been strapped tight over her nose, giving it the appearance of a snout. All life fled from that face, leaving her simply an eerie slab of flesh. We inhabit these bodies but are not these bodies. There is a spirit that

informs all life. So it occurred to him as he stared at his sister's corpse. Her fleshy premises had simply been vacated.

He shuddered seeing her son, Moses, standing behind her, stroking her face. He was teary-eyed, as were Jeanne and his remaining sister, Leah. Gideon was struck, not for the first time, by how disturbingly young Moses looked, almost boyish.

"Do you want to be alone so you can pay your respects?" Moses asked.

Respects? What kind of word was that? The question shouldn't have appalled Gideon, and yet it did. "No, not all. This is fine," Gideon said, as he turned to leave, feeling like some detective on *Law and Order* who has seen one too many dead folk.

Outside the supply room, in the waiting area, stood Leah's husband, Murray, his beard turned to gray and a few hapless strands of hair left on his well-shaped head. Some core of decency, a Jewish rectitude, made Murray a comfort to be around. Smart, but not someone to flaunt his brilliance. A Bronx High School of Science graduate with a Ph.D. in mathematics. And stability as well. His marriage to Leah now in its thirtieth year. Steady employment with an actuarial firm and Leah the dean of a Westchester college.

And he was happy too to see Ellie, Leah and Murray's daughter. Two years out of college and working for a publisher and living in Brooklyn. A tall, slender girl with a disposition toward amusement. Happy to see her youth and promise. Though not as happy to see her boyfriend, a handsome young name with an English accent. Not because Gideon disapproved. Nothing of the kind. It was just that the young man, Colin, was an outsider, and seeing with his outsider's eyes into family matters with judgmental eyes. Not that Colin was seeing through any such eyes at all necessarily, but it just felt that way, as it always had, to Gideon when strangers drew near.

"Colin thinks he's on something," Ellie said.

"Who is on something?" Gideon asked.

"Moses."

"What would he be on?" Gideon asked.

Colin had wandered over. "I have reason to believe he may be coked up," he said.

"That wouldn't be good," Gideon said.

"Not good at all," Ellie agreed.

Doctors in green scrubs and nurses in loose-fitting blue outfits appeared and disappeared in the corridors.

"Stand back from that door unless you want it to smash you in the face," the guard said. An automatic door. Gideon did as he had been told while noting the guard's choice of words and tone.

Leah joined them, finally able to release from her supply room vigil. A big woman who stood six feet tall, a height that rivaled Gideon's, she suddenly grabbed hold of his hair. "Such great hair," she said.

"Ouch. Stop," Gideon protested.

"It's not a rug, is it? My brother is not wearing a rug, is he?" she asked, finally letting go.

He felt no need to assert that his hair was his own, though the suggestion that it might not be was irksome. What bothered him more was that she had grabbed his hair at all and made a public comment, as if to place him at the center of attention. "I'm a little old for anyone to be making a fuss about my hair," he said.

"If you say so," Leah replied, with coldness in her voice.

His response had been visceral, as if his year-younger sister had touched a wound. But what was the wound that it required such a testy response from him? People did all kinds of odd

things around death. In his callow youth, he had picked up a girl outside the funeral home where a wake was being held for his deceased father. Life called to life when threatened with death. Perhaps all Leah had been doing was affirming that life was still in him. Why see the incident as evidence of some darker motive, some attempt to infantilize him? What was wrong with activating the lunatic narcissistic impulse in a sixty-two-year-old man who often looked to himself like a turkey buzzard, an *old* turkey buzzard, when he stared into the mirror?

"And Moses. You have really great hair," Leah went on. "But you need to take off that hat for us to see it." Moses was, in fact, wearing a hat, made of straw, and a bit small for his head. Was Moses in the grip of some screen image he had seen? The loose-fitting flowered shirt he wore outside his jeans, along with the hat, gave him the appearance of a small-time hood, like Johnny Boy in *Mean Streets,* or some such.

"And Murray, you have great hair, too," Leah went on, continuing to dispense her peculiar patronage, now grabbing for her husband's dwindling locks.

"Stop it. Just stop it," Murray protested.

Gideon felt less vindicated than embarrassed by his brother-in-law's annoyance with Leah's sudden grasping mania. Well, it was what it was.

Though the hour was late, and Leah and Murray lived about an hour's drive from the city, Leah was not ready to call it a night. None of them were, really. Gathering at Moses' apartment was not presented as an option, and for this Gideon was grateful, as it was not a place he liked to visit. He remembered it as an apartment poorly furnished and maintained throughout his growing up years and even shabbier when Ingrid and Moses became its sole occupants. Ideas for restaurants were proposed and rejected before one was settled on.

"But how long can Ingrid be left here? Has anyone checked with the hospital?" Gideon asked. He was thinking about the timeframe for funeral arrangements.

"Good point," Moses said. "This is all new to me."

A young fifty, Moses was indeed, Gideon thought.

All Columbia, all the time, the neighborhood still shouted. The row of frat buildings still there along One Hundred Fourteenth Street, in one of which he had gotten so drunk at a party he had no business being at as a sixteen-year-old high school student that he missed the PSAT the next morning. Remembered scenes of Columbia students in their freshman beanies in September and the hordes of testosterone-driven young men standing under a shower of panties tossed by shrieking Barnard girls from their dormitory windows into the spring air.

A different world now. He looked around at the few late-night diners in the restaurant. How many would remember that it used to be a Chock Full O' Nuts? Tuna fish sandwiches and clam chowder soup on Fridays. Lemon cream and blueberry cream pies. How many would care?

"I'll have a cup of coffee," Jeanne said.

"Five dollar minimum. Five dollar." Their waiter had a stern demeanor.

"To start with," Jeanne said.

"No start with. Dinner. Not coffee shop. Late. Very late. Go home. Sleepy sleep. Yes?"

It was like Jeanne to think she could plop her big ass any place she chose. Sooner or later she annoyed everyone, even Chinese waiters who spoke in truncated sentences. Gideon struggled to rise to the level of understanding and compassion for his niece, but often still saw her as the sullen and resentful girl foisted on his family when he was still a child. And yet, if he couldn't always rise to the level of love for his niece, it did seem to Gideon that justice required him to acknowledge the difficulty of her life and the triumph it represented. Not every thirteen-year-old

fled her broken home to begin a new life across the continent as a Haight-Ashbury flower child or, when the flowers wilted and died, gave her heart to a brutal, gun-wielding pimp, who turned her out on the street for tricks. It was useful to remember that she had spent her youth in seedy hotels with track marks in her arms and other bruises the results of beatings, and that she had witnessed others come to grisly ends at the hands of those who seemingly lived for violence. And it was also useful to remember that she was not that person anymore but a woman drug-free and employed and self-supporting.

"I'll have broccoli with garlic sauce," Gideon said, seeking to mollify the waiter.

"No one's going to want to kiss you," Jeanne said.

"That's disappointing to hear," Gideon said.

"I'm only kidding, Uncle."

"Easy on the uncle stuff," he said, stiffening in spite of himself.

"Whatever," Jeanne replied, as if that was the only word with which to meet the difficulties of his personality.

"Where's Moses?' Ellie asked. And in fact Moses was not to be seen.

"He'll be joining us in a few minutes. He had to run home to take care of something," Leah said. Her statement had a gravitas that did not invite further questions even as it allowed you to think them, and served as a reminder that his sister was complicated and not one thing or the other. He suspected her enduring hero was zany Lucille Ball even as another, Theodore Dreiser, entered his mind, not simply for his narrative gift but for his love and understanding of women. Ingrid had meant a lot to Leah; their oldest sister's passing would be hard for her.

And in fact Moses reappeared several minutes later, looking no more glassy-eyed than before.

Gideon turned to the young, on whom it was easier to bestow uncompromised affection. “You Brits are smarter than us Americans. You know that, don’t you?” Gideon said, addressing himself to Colin.

“Colin’s not smarter than me,” Ellie affirmed. She was enrolled in a master’s program in something called gender literature, if Gideon had gotten that right, and he suspected he hadn’t. But the field of interest, whatever its exact name, alerted him that she was attuned to differences between the sexes and clearly progressive about a woman’s role in society.

“Why would you think so?” Colin asked.

“You live in the language more than we Americans. Maybe it’s nothing more than that.”

“Well, I should think we would, given that the language was ours to begin with.”

“Yes, of course.” A touch of superciliousness seemed to be showing in Colin. Well, gender-aware Ellie would beat it out of him. Or perhaps not. The two had recently moved in together, in one of those Brooklyn neighborhoods that the young were reinvigorating. In the meantime, Gideon could focus on his steaming plate of broccoli and garlic sauce, which the nettled waiter had set down before him. The matter of hygiene was now on his mind. He recalled the chef’s response to complaining patrons—a gob of spit in their soup—in Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London,* and could only hope his Asian friend was more restrained or would reserve any expression of his ire for for the fare ordered by irksome Jeanne.

Soon the midnight hour struck, and no measure of family connection could keep him in his seat any longer, not even Jeanne declaring “I would like a piece of chocolate cake.”

“No chocolate cake. Chinese restaurant. Where you been?” the waiter asked.

“I’ll be in touch tomorrow,” Gideon said, addressing himself to Leah now as he left a twenty on the table.

"You're leaving?" Vera sounded astonished, and more.

"I have to." If there had been reproach in her voice, he would live with it. The Fat Man, in *The Maltese Falcon*, had said it best. "The best goodbyes are short." Or some such.

2. The Family, As Gideon Understood It to Be

Their parents had met in Central Park, sometime in the 1920s. Gideon's father tall, remote, Armenian. A traumatized man. He would have been a teenage boy living with his family in Constantinople when the genocide began in 1915. About those years he never spoke, at least to Gideon. "The authorities came for the family, but a Turkish servant saved them by saying they were not home." No more details were available about his father's miraculous survival than that brief account from his mother. "I don't know what would have happened to me without your mother. She is my rock. I was lost until I found her." So Gideon's father had said, a statement that struck Gideon, who was no more than a boy at the time, as evidence of his father's weakness.

Gideon's father stayed home with his firstborn in the basement apartment in New York City where the family lived while his mother worked as a domestic for a Park Avenue family. Gideon thought of Ingrid as her father's daughter more than he did the two who came along in the next five years, Naomi and Rachel. Altogether there were six children. The remaining three—Luke and Gideon and Leah—were close in age but separated from the others by a considerable number of years. No explanation was ever offered as to why twelve years should pass between Rachel's birth and Luke's arrival.

Gideon's mother had brought her own baggage to the New World. Born and raised on a poultry and timber farm in Sweden, she had witnessed the decline and death of her father from

drinking. “Go and find your father and smash his bottle against the rocks and bring him inside so he does not die of the cold,” her mother would instruct her. Gideon’s mother loved her father and grieved his loss. She herself never drank a drop of alcohol and warned her children against its perils. “Wine is a mocker; strong drink is raging,” she would say, quoting a Biblical proverb. Fear and her religious faith kept her safe from wine and stronger spirits. She worshiped at a Pentecostal church in Manhattan, where Gideon and the other children would often see her speak in tongues during the Sunday afternoon service. At night, when she couldn’t sleep, she would read the Bible. “At age thirty-two I came to understand that the world had nothing that I wanted,” she said to Gideon. Only later, when she was gone, did it occur to him to ask her why such a discovery occurred at age thirty-two.

The family circumstances improved when Maya, Gideon’s mother’s older sister, bought a building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and asked Gideon’s mother to help her manage the property. The building was a single-room occupancy residence, with the exception of two apartments. The ground-floor apartment Maya took, while the second floor apartment was where Gideon’s family lived.

Auntie Maya, as Gideon called her, had a vision of rooms filled with missionaries for Christ, a port of call on their travels. But her vision may have been stronger than her business acumen. She fell deeper and deeper into debt, and there came the day that the bank foreclosed. But all was not lost. The new owners gave her a long-term lease for the property, and so Gideon’s mother stayed on as well, as the building manager.

Gideon’s father was not part of the business. He worked at midtown restaurants as a cashier. In the evening he went to church, as he too had a hunger for God. Most nights he would arrive home late, when Gideon was already in bed. Hearing his father’s footsteps, Gideon would

grow tense. His father was temperamental. “Don’t make me get up. I just might lose control if I do,” his father would warn. Sometimes he would get up. Sometimes he would lose control. For a while Gideon had a secret fear that his father was Dracula, and confused Armenia with Transylvania.

Ingrid loved their father. He was part of her and she was part of him. But she could also be temperamental. “Don’t tell me to watch my tongue. And don’t threaten me either. You raise a hand to me and I’ll have the police on you,” she said, one morning, at the breakfast table. Seventeen years older than Gideon, she would have been in her early twenties at the time. “Police? Police? In Armenia you would be stoned to death for speaking to your father in such a way,” their father shouted. Gideon had never seen his sister move as fast as that morning, when she fled out the front door with their father in full pursuit.

From their father did Ingrid learn the power of a raised hand. “You just leave these brats with me. I’ll teach them to behave,” Ingrid would say, on those rare Sunday nights when his parents would attend a church service together. The brats she was referring to were Luke and Gideon and Leah, though mainly it was Luke and Gideon she dealt with harshly when she, like their father, was made to get up. She put them to bed in the room all three shared and expected them to stay there. The evening was her time to sit in the dark in the living room, the only light provided by the glow of the second-hand black-and-white TV, which she had turned to *Million Dollar Movie,* on Channel 9. Heaven for Ingrid was a good movie and the quart of Breyer’s vanilla fudge ice cream she ate right out of the carton with a tablespoon. Hell was those brats bursting into the living room laughing and shouting hysterically with a blanket over their heads.

They had provoked her. They had defied her. Though the three children had scampered back into bed, she had no choice but to punish them. Luke she slapped and slapped at, seeking his face under the covers he had sought for protection.

An image formed of her face in Gideon's mind. He saw her with her tongue pressed between her thick lips as she administered the blows to his brother and the fierce concentration she applied, and retained that same image of her face when it was his time for her blows.

Luke came up with names for Ingrid. He called her "The Load" and "The Mountain," as Ingrid was a large woman. As for Gideon, he saw darkness when his mind turned to her. He did not wish it so. The image was just there, enduring.

The children—Luke and Gideon, anyway—began to ask their mother why it was that Ingrid continued to live in the apartment. They began to feel that she was an imposition and that life would be happier without her around all the time. But their mother said, "You don't know what it is to have children. Ingrid has a condition. She cannot handle much stress. Your father has the same condition. These things you will come to understand."

In fact, Ingrid did move out of the apartment, if not the building. Gideon's mother gave her a room free of rent on the same floor. It was a room that Gideon never went to, though he imagined it had a fridge and a stove, like all the other single rooms in the building. Now Ingrid could live apart from the family, and yet still come to the breakfast and dinner table and watch TV in the living room at night.

Ingrid had a job, but she never talked about it, at least to Gideon. "Your sister is very private," his mother explained.

Gideon's other two older sisters, Naomi and Rachel, seemed to be in alliance against Ingrid. Now and then there were terrible fights between the two and Ingrid. Scratching, hair-pulling, gouging, biting. His sisters were not zany women, like Lucille Ball.

Naomi had rich black hair and dark, almond-shaped eyes. "An Armenian girl," Gideon's mother said. Rachel was fairer, with light brown hair. Rachel played Broadway show tunes on the upright piano in their parents' bedroom as Naomi sang. "I'm Going to Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair." "The Man Who Got Away." "Over the Rainbow." Naomi took singing lessons. Her hero was Judy Garland. She wanted so much to sing like her someday.

When Naomi was eighteen, she fell in love with a man named Chuck, a World War II veteran who was studying for a Ph.D. in mathematics on the GI Bill at Columbia University. Chuck had a room in the building and worked several nights a week as the night watchman for Auntie Maya. Though Chuck was in his early thirties, the age gap was no deterrent to marriage. Chuck's drinking, heavy to begin with, only increased. Gideon would see him in the lobby at night with his green pint bottles of wine and run from his harsh, booze-filled voice. Naomi took a job selling tickets in the small, tight booth of the Nemo Theater, down on One Hundred Tenth Street, but that only lasted a short while.

By the time Jeanne was born, Chuck had dropped his studies and could find no other work than his night watchman's duties. Gideon's mother allowed Naomi and Chuck to have a bigger room rent-free where they could raise their newborn daughter. But Naomi was developing a problem of her own through her reliance on Benzedrine to get her through the day. At night she would turn to alcohol to ease the inevitable crash and take sleeping pills as well. Several times she was taken by ambulance from the building in a coma, and was admitted to the psychiatric ward after she had been revived. If there was any doubt as to her intention, that doubt was

lessened by her appearance on the narrow ledge outside the room. Nine blocks below stood the hard pavement of Broadway, and the crowd that had gathered to stare up at the young woman in only her bathrobe as police and fire department officials tried to coax her back inside. Several times this same drama was enacted, followed by twenty-eight day stays at in the psychiatric unit of either Bellevue or St. Luke's Hospital.

Gideon's mother cried. "What is it I have done? What? Someone tell me, please."

Now bloated, Naomi would sing her Judy Garland songs in the lobby, in a voice that cracked, often forgetting the lyrics, as tenants rushed past. She and Chuck had become known throughout the neighborhood.

When Gideon asked why his mother let them continue to live in the building, he simply shook her head, as if there were things he did not understand.

But he did understand that the love he had felt for Naomi, the thrill he had known hearing her sing those show tunes while Rachel accompanied her on the piano and the magical allure of a beautiful older sister, had been dissipated by her taunts and betrayals and occasional physical abuse. "Flathead," or "Little Flathead," she would call him, or coax him to confess that he had taken money from his mother's purse, promising she would not go to his mother with his confession and then doing just that. Or calling him across the room, her warm smile drawing him eagerly, only to deal him a hard slap across the face with the explanation, "That's what you get for being a little flathead." The love died. He just wanted her to go away. And he wanted her drunken husband to go away. And as for Jeanne, who came more and more into his mother's care and ultimately had to live in the family's apartment because Naomi and Chuck could not care for her, mostly he saw her without seeing her, or if he saw her, it was as an extension of the unmanageability of her parents.

Moses was born seven years later, when Gideon was twelve. “Your sister is going to have a baby,” Gideon’s mother said. Ingrid’s increased size had come to be a mystery to him; it was as if she were going about with a pillow under her dress. “This is my son. No one deprives my son. No one. If you so much as hurt a hair on his head, I will come looking for you,” Ingrid said, and so, from the start, Gideon had apprehensions and concerns about the boy, some fear that he could, when grown, become an instrument of his destruction. And this fear was not allayed, when at age three, Moses struck him with a ball of mud while on a walk in the park and said, “Now you have been kissed by God.”

Ingrid was not an absent mother. True, she did not cook the boy’s meals or fully support him, but she took him unto her in that one room they shared on the same floor as the family’s apartment. The boy’s father was not discussed, not by Ingrid or by Gideon’s mother.

Unlike Jeanne, Moses never ran away. He had a mother from whom there was to be no running, given the closeness she had imposed in that one room. In fact, he grew up strong and handsome and happy. Yes, there were the occasional unprovoked punches to the faces of older men that brought him to the attention of the police, but he was developing all-American qualities with his broad shoulders and blond hair and athletic prowess to match his academic performance at Stuyvesant High School, an elite public school in lower Manhattan, where he quarterbacked the varsity football team. These things he did without a father but with a mother who stood by him.

Because he was a boy who could see cowardice in the faces of other boys who needed still other boys to band together and torment him with exclusion, he punched one such boy in the face in his first year at the State University at Binghamton. Unrepentant before the student court, the college expelled him, an insignificant blemish on his record until Brown University, which

had admitted him on full scholarship as a transfer student for his sophomore year, withdrew its offer.

Altogether, the year was not a good one for Moses but a very good one for Gideon. The week before his marriage, Gideon attended a party given by his youngest sister, Leah, who was finishing her doctoral thesis in English at Columbia University. Gideon's mother, Ingrid, and Moses were also present at the spacious Riverside Drive apartment Leah shared with Murray, whom she had recently married. That evening Moses caught Gideon's attention in a new and uncomfortable way. Wherever his fiancée, Celeste, went, from one room to another, Moses bird-dogged her with an energy that could only lead Gideon to conclude his nephew was under her spell, captivating Moses as she had captivated Gideon when they first met several years before. Gideon felt concern. He felt *threatened.* He felt, in that moment, that Moses could wreck the new life he was one week from beginning with Celeste and prevent him from fully establishing an identity separate from the family he had been born into. Like a man whose path is barred at the last second from fleeing through the door of a dark room into the sunlight, Gideon would be kept in the miserable fold of family through the sullying and degrading intention of Moses toward Celeste.

The following day, Gideon was chagrined. His insecurity the night before showed his lack of faith in Celeste and in himself. Even if Moses was out of control, Celeste would surely know how to deter him. No, he had simply been visited by childhood ghosts that told him he would wind up like Ingrid and Naomi in a furnished room and never escape into the world at large.

At the wedding reception the next week Gideon was stunned when Ingrid approached, amid the gaiety, and said, in a voice barbed with anger and outrage, "My son is in Riker's Island.

Do you know or even care?" It seemed, in that moment, that the nature of his relationship with his oldest sister was revealed for all time. He had everything and she had nothing, and because she had nothing and he had everything, then it was for her to hold him to account. He couldn't see her distress, how anguished or crushed she was, or if he did, it was an avalanche he must flee from. "But what is he there for?" Gideon asked, seeking to move the exchange to the level of information, not accusation. "Rape. They say he raped the girl." "The girl?" "The girl he went out with that night. Can you imagine?"

It was not the question to ask Gideon, or to ask him then, as the answer would not have comforted or pleased her.

A boy and a girl meet in a tai chi class. The boy asks the girl out. They meet for dinner at a restaurant, and afterward the boy walks with her back to her apartment building. Along the way, the boy has begun to develop a stomach problem and asks if he can use her bathroom. doesn't leave the apartment. When he falls asleep, the girl flees out the door wearing only a long sleep shirt and no underwear. It is 4:30 am and the girl is running down the street to a pay phone, where she calls 911. Bruised on her face and neck and arms and terror-struck, she is taken to a nearby hospital. The police find the boy passed out in her bed and place him under arrest for the crime of rape.

The trial took place down at grimy 100 Centre Street, where the term "forcible compulsion" was mentioned frequently. Though guilt was said to be hard to establish in such cases, the prosecutor had an enviable record of success. Moses' defense was essentially no defense. The girl, Alison Kemper, and he hit it off over dinner and she then invited him to her apartment, where they had consensual sex. No, he had not assaulted her when she refused his advances. No, he had not dragged her into the bathroom and held her down as he relieved

himself to prevent her from escaping after he had attacked her. No, he had not threatened her in any way. No, he could not explain how she had come to have so many bruises, and it was beyond his understanding why she should run out of her own apartment half-naked into the street in the dead of night. “Sometimes people have problems you don’t know about when you meet them. Sometimes people like to do things to themselves and say others did it to them. Sometimes people like to drop a dime on other people who’ve done nothing but bring pleasure into their lives. You know what I mean?” Moses said, to the prosecutor, demonstrating, at least to Gideon, the power of an unrepentant mind.

A number of Moses’ friends stood by him in the early stages of the trial, but their numbers began to dwindle as the case progressed. If Moses’ friends fell away, Ingrid remained, her rage directed at the young woman who had pressed charges against her son and the prosecution for supporting her claim and anyone who sought to question Moses’ innocence, including Gideon’s mother. “The little whore is trying to deprive me of my son,” Ingrid declared.

A mother’s love was understandable and expected, and yet, Ingrid’s blowtorch defense of her son made Gideon uneasy. He began to wonder if there were people who had the capacity to seal the truth away in some seep-proof chamber of their mind. That ability certainly seemed to be part of Moses’ mental makeup, although, perhaps with Moses, it was something more than concealment of the truth from himself. Troubled by the blind support that Ingrid and Moses’ friends were showing him, and his nephew’s own breezy dismissal of the charges, Gideon raised the matter when he had a moment alone with Moses outside the courtroom. “Is there anything you might have done to contribute to this problem?” Even as he asked, he worried that he was showing a lack of compassion and understanding. But those feelings were swept away by the look Moses met him with and the chill it summoned. A baleful stare, Moses’ eyes gone flat and

remorseless and impenetrable. The eyes of someone who could inflict serious harm. “Does my answer satisfy you?” Moses finally said. “I guess it has to,” Gideon replied.

And so, if Moses had closed off to him, so too did Gideon close off to Moses, at least in the matter of the court proceeding. Gideon saw the nimble, methodical prosecutor as the last line of defense against the implacable wrecking ball that Moses now represented, a self-serving, imperious id who had ravaged Alison Kemper and would do the same to Celeste if given half a chance.

“He has troubles. They were apparent early on,” Gideon’s mother said, sotto voce, as if, even with Ingrid out of earshot, candor was dangerous.

“How were they apparent?’ Gideon asked, but she would not say.

When the jury returned from its deliberations with a verdict of guilty, Moses’ demeanor was understandably different. A cry of protest that carried beyond the thick walls of the courtroom exploded from him at the cancellation of his freedom and he had to be dragged away.

Moses spent five years in the Clinton Correctional Facility, up near the Canadian border, a bleak and massive compound with guards in the towers armed with automatic weapons. Only once did Gideon visit him, in Moses’ second year of incarceration. Gideon suggested that Moses end his holdout against group therapy and other counseling being offered at the facility, asserting foolishly if earnestly that a personality profile attached to the crime of rape, Moses only grinned.

“How about you? Do you fit that profile?” Moses asked.

The rest of the visit was difficult. Leaving the exchange behind was like trying to ignore a rock in one’s shoe while walking.

While Moses was still serving his sentence, Gideon’s mother passed away. Except for the earlier time of day and the fact that the call Gideon received was from Leah, not Jeanne, with the

news that their mother had suffered a stroke, the situation was quite similar to that with Ingrid's passing. Their mother was being taken by ambulance from the apartment, where she had been found unconscious, to St. Luke's Hospital, Leah reported.

But his mother was not at the hospital when he arrived, and so he knew that her end had come. His sisters Ingrid and Rachel and Leah were all gathered in the living room of the family apartment, while in the next room, through the French doors whose glass panels had been rendered opaque by paint, sat a policewoman at the dining table, her squawk box now and then erupting, as she waited for the mortician to arrive. "Go on now, see your Momma. Unless you're afraid," the woman said, Gideon having a hard time determining whether she was being callous or kind before concluding that the officer probably didn't know either.

Beyond the kitchen was a narrow hallway where his mother lay on her back, a sheet covering her body but not her face. He had never spent time with a dead person before, except in a funeral parlor. The thought occurred to him that this time with her was meaningful, though how could anything that he did in regard to his mother be meaningful if she was dead? But she wasn't dead. That awareness made his time with her meaningful. She had just vacated the premises of her body and gone elsewhere. Surely anyone could see from her rapt expression that she had, in the process of transition, been exerting the maximum power of concentration to comprehend something being said by someone who commanded her full attention. What lingering fear of death could he have after witnessing such a sight?

He stayed with his mother for a half hour, at some earlier point wanting to leave but unable to do so, as if it would be a disservice to leave her even though it might be argued that she had left him. And another peculiarity of thought was operating to keep him in place. The longer he stayed with his mother, the more he was asserting his primacy of place in her life in the minds

of those sisters of his. No, he could not say he was above such calculations and mischief-making of the ego. And he was also aware that he was laughing at and scornful of those sisters of his, all their sobbing and their manifest tears that showed not their sorrow but their absolute contempt, as if his mother, with her ruined back and chronic pain that made life unbearable, should have endured for their sake. Why were they not rejoicing? Why was he not seeing tears of joy that she had finally said goodbye to all this suffering? If such a triumphal attitude was one to be suspicious of and noteworthy for its lack of compassion, he did not know to think so.

By this time and many years before, in fact, Naomi had, in Gideon's distancing words, vacated the premises of her body as well. But she was thirty-seven, not eighty-four, as his mother had been when she passed on. And she did not die in her room but in the polluted waters of the East River, where a police patrol boat found her body floating under the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge. Naomi had been a patient at Manhattan State Hospital, a mammoth complex of buildings on Ward's Island visible from the Triborough Bridge. Such institutions had become a second home to her, but unlike the psychiatric wards of Bellevue and St. Luke's, Manhattan State was now allowing the wolves in with the lambs. Or so Naomi said the day before the police boat discovered her body. "There are men here who ask me for cigarettes and money, and when I give them what they want, they hit me. And when I don't have any more to give them, they hit me more and more. I'm scared, Gideon, I'm scared." Gideon had not responded to his sister's call for help, and would have to live with this failure to care. And it came down to nothing more than that. He had not cared, or he had not cared sufficiently, or he had thought, *She is already dead anyway, dead in life, so what's the use?* These things he had thought as justification for inaction.

How an institutionalized woman could be found dead in the East River was never explained. In this period widespread abuse was reported at Manhattan State in the New York

papers: assaults and rape; incompetent and abusive staff; neglect. No one in the family seemed willing to pursue the path of inquiry. What they knew was painful enough. Did they really need anymore? And yet every time Gideon passed that human warehouse on the TriBorough Bridge in a car bound for LaGuardia Airport or wherever, he felt remiss. She was his sister. That did mean something.

Some years before the time of their mother's passing, the building came under new management. No longer would Ingrid be able to live rent-free in her single room. Other than their mother, no one else was living in the apartment, and so Ingrid moved back in. Rent control apartments fell to the next of kin living in them when the prime tenant died. Perhaps it had been Ingrid's plan all along to inherit the apartment as her due for a hard life. Among Gideon's childhood memories was the joy Ingrid for a period of time expressed over the lawsuit she had brought against a neighborhood hardware store whose misaligned cellar grate had caused her to trip and fall, with some injury to her knee. She spoke ecstatically of the trip she would take to Greece and the apartment she would rent and the color TV she would purchase with the money that would be awarded her after the jury ruled in her favor. And, of course, he remembered the darkness of her depression when the court found the store not to be liable for any injury she incurred. The episode was, for Gideon, a window into how his oldest sister thought, and the sense of injury she carried with her. If the store didn't pay, someone else would.

But Rachel, Gideon's third oldest sister, did have a room in the building. She did not walk out on the narrow ledge, as Naomi had, but she did open the window wide when darkness came and look up in the sky for signs of Jesus' coming, as it was written that he would return like a thief in the night. Gideon shuddered when he saw her in the living room the day of his mother's

passing. Ingrid and Leah would survive quite well, but Leah, in her sack of a dress and gunboat sneakers from the Salvation Army was a question mark.

In the long ago Rachel's scholarship to attend Vassar College had filled him with pride. She was like a powerful light that vanquished the family darkness. He grew up unaware that she had to be kept away from Luke and him as infants, and even the instances of verbal and physical cruelty she did display as he grew older did not turn her dark in his mind. He sensed her earnest desire to excel and move out of the family fold, and this drive made him love her. The floor of her room was a sea of books, and in his mind's eye he would always see her climbing the stairs to their second floor apartment cradling a stack of books against her chest.

But she was shy and plain and apart from the more polished girls at the college, who engaged easily with boys, while she remained unpinned through all four years. During the winter break of her freshman year she returned home and pushed their mother backward into the Christmas tree as she came to greet Rachel. "I've never asked anything of you and never will," she screamed, then fled before their father could annihilate her. She left college several weeks before graduation. Naomi said Rachel had learned she would not be graduating with honors, and that her pride had caused her to quit.

Rachel returned to New York City, but not to the building. Every side street on the Upper West Side had a single room occupancy, and she moved into a dark and dismal one on Ninety-seventh Street, off Broadway. During the day she worked for CBS-TV and at night she drank in neighborhood bars. By now the long thick braid into which she had woven her brown hair had been replaced with a hennaed duck's ass. There was a long purple overcoat she seemed to favor, even in warm weather, and day and night she wore dark sunglasses that covered half her face.

Gideon's encounters with her were brief and random. She seemed a woman in flight, though from what, he did not know.

Now and then she would roar into the building. At such times the smirk that had become her trademark expression was missing. Instead her face was a mask of fury as she tore up the steps and into the apartment. Once Gideon followed after her, fearing mayhem might be he purpose, but found her on the living room floor weeping as her mother held her and waved him away. And so he came to understand that her anger was a necessary prelude to reconciliation, if only temporarily, as inevitably the rage that separated her would build again. The ritual was not one he should interfere with, his mother's dismissal of him suggested.

Then it happened that their father died. Gideon was twenty-four at the time, and yes, Leah was on the line informing him of the loss and, in a teary state, asking on behalf of their mother for assurance that he would show up at the funeral. The only thing was, that for Gideon, the loss was not a loss, his father's death exposing him as an oedipal child in a triumphal mode, and in this demented state he showed up at the wake. Something strange, if not miraculous, happened following the burial. Rachel was struck sober. More than that she returned to the church of her childhood, accompanying their mother for Sunday services. The Good Book replaced the novels and works about history she had immersed herself in. The sunglasses disappeared and the braid returned. She scrubbed her face clean of garish makeup. She wore blouses and skirts and dresses sizes too big for her, with no regard to their color or cut or condition. She stopped working. "All my children are searching, and Rachel has found what she was looking for. The world has nothing she wants," their mother said of her third daughter, the same words she had used to describe herself.

As a child, Rachel had followed their mother about the apartment. “I would turn around while washing dishes in the sink and there Rachel would be,” their mother said. “She would just be standing behind me. ‘Is there something you want, Rachel?’ I would say, but she would not answer me. It was as if she needed some love I could not fully give her,” their mother went on. *For her bones to grow.* So Gideon continued their mother’s sentence, knowing it was wrong, inaccurate, but needing to say it anyway. Now, in her new and religious life, Rachel did not need to stand behind their mother, but she could come calling on her at the dinner hour. If their mother minded cooking for Hannah and Rachel, she did not say. They were her children and insurance against a crying loneliness. And, anyway, Rachel did not linger long. She was a woman who was leaving even as she arrived, agitation preventing her from sitting with others for more than a brief period of time. “Bye,” she would say, expelling the word like a bullet, when someone entered the space she had been sharing with their mother. In the morning she liked to sit in the Chock Full O’ Nuts and have two powdered doughnuts with her heavenly cup of coffee. Chock Full O’ Nuts was always sunlight on even the gloomiest day, and afterward she would head down to Riverside Park, rejoicing amid the trees and grass, before returning to her room for Bible reading, as by now her mind was on eternity.

But complex forces she could not, on her own, reckon with led Rachel to do strange, and sometimes, unwelcome things. With purity or perhaps vandalism as her intent, she would leave the water, both hot and cold, running full blast in the bathroom sink of their mother’s apartment. More personally threatening was the chokehold she would suddenly put on their mother, who no longer had the strength to defend herself. “This I cannot tolerate. I cannot. And I have told her so,” their mother said, in the last year of her life. A further concern was Rachel’s periodic

complaints of rat poisoning, though the interns in the emergency room at the hospital who examined her could find no evidence of any such problem.

The day of their mother's burial, Rachel was absent. She had been present at the wake and the funeral service, maintaining a quiet and composed manner. But her failure to show as their mother was being laid to rest was ominous, at least in Gideon's mind. They returned to the building and found her unconscious on the floor of her room. An uncapped and empty amber prescription bottle lay on the floor near her. Three weeks she lay in a coma at St. Luke's Hospital; when the doctors finally brought her back, her eyes, even from across the ward, had a hateful, penetrating quality, as if she were furiously beaming her ill will into all those who dared to approach. If she was pissed to find herself once more among the living, her stay was not long. She died within three weeks, and of course it was Leah on the line to give him the sad news.

(Sometimes Gideon wondered about his own hatefulness and if it was still alive and if he truly wished for all of them to be finally and utterly removed from the earth's surface, or for all but him to be removed so he could have the space he wanted, or thought he did. And what did "removed" even mean, since those who had disappeared were probably only hiding and waiting to yell "Surprise!" at the opportune moment.)

One other sibling, still occupying space upon the earth, was also counted as missing the funeral service for their mother, that being Luke. Only years later did he resurface with two teenage children and a wife with a brain aneurysm as the result of a bullet fired from a gun by her ex-husband. In addition to being broke, Luke had also grown obese. Getting up out of a chair was a logistical operation and he walked with a shuffling gait. Given the enormous quantities of food he ate and his lack of an exercise regimen, Luke was not long for this earth, Gideon sensed.

A drunk struggling to stay off alcohol, he relied on St. John's wort to keep his anxiety and depression at bay.

Neither Ingrid nor Leah saw anything amiss with Luke. They were only happy to have him back. "He's such a raconteur," Leah said. Raconteur? The word angered Gideon. He was shocked by the degree of jealousy it summoned in him that his sister was praising Luke and not him. But the word also dismayed him. His sister was not seeing someone who was jobless and living on his wife's disability check. She was not seeing that, in the main, Luke was a morose man who had lost touch with the world, a man who had come back to New York City not to live but to die. Gideon equated Leah's not seeing with not caring, his brother nothing more than a plaything to her, a source of amusement. A *raconteur.* And when, two years later, Luke collapsed of a heart attack in a supermarket shopping lot, and moaned, "I'm not ready to die. I'm not ready to die," as the medics tended to him, and then did die, Gideon remembered Leah's *raconteur* description and noted even more himself as the prophet of Luke's demise who had not cared enough to save his only brother.

His family. It made him feel safe—or unsafe—to think about them. It made him feel like he had something or had nothing.

3. Getting to Know You

"I can't do it, man. I just can't do it. The thought of a traditional funeral, with embalming and all the rest. No way, man. No way."

"What would you like to do?" Gideon asked. He had not expected to hear from Moses.

"I want her cremated. I talked to my mother about my Buddhism. She had an open mind. She would be all right with it." Moses' Buddhism, as people spoke about *their* music. Moses sounded like someone pleading his cause and unsure of his rights. His nephew *was* young, younger than his years. It was a painful thing to see.

"So if she would be all right with it and you're all right with it, then where's the problem?" Gideon had spent the morning researching funeral home services. The prices were steep and covering the expense could be a problem, as there were unanswered questions about Ingrid's finances and access to them. More than that, he was tired of staring at family bodies "prepared" by undertakers for viewing, remembering Leah wiping the garish lipstick from their mother's mouth, a cosmetic she had not used, and the neat part in Luke's hair as he lay, waxen, in the open casket at some funeral home in the Bronx that stank of chemicals. No one was lowering his body into the earth to rot, and he had a will that stated as much.

"I just wanted to talk about it. You know?"

Some unfriendly vibe had entered the conversation, and Gideon held himself responsible. Perhaps the question he had posed had been heard by Moses as condescending. Gideon spent an hour living with a sense of chagrin at a missed opportunity for closeness before calling his nephew back.

"Let's have dinner. Can you do that?"

"Sure. I can do that," Moses said, responding as if to a challenge.

And it was a challenge, as much for Gideon as for Moses. He had kept his nephew at bay. Not that Moses made any overtures to him, but the dutiful contact Gideon maintained with Ingrid was not extended to her son. Moments of awkwardness would have to be endured when Gideon called Ingrid and instead get Moses on the line, both of them knowing it was Moses' mother

whom Gideon wished to speak with or felt obliged to speak with, because it was hard to be with her as well.

And yet Gideon and Ingrid did get together because it was only right that a brother and a sister do just that. There was something unnatural, heartbreaking, inhuman, about complete apartness. They would go to the Hungarian Café, on Amsterdam Avenue, just across the street from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Even in cool weather, they would sit outside to avoid the packed scene within, young Columbia students with their faces in their laptops or textbooks. Gideon liked having free air space around them, as Ingrid's voice, generally bordering on crossness, was a loud and traveling sound. He would ask about Moses, and always the answer came back "Fine. He's doing fine," and because he heard finality in her tone, he understood not to pursue the matter further. Moses was off limits. None of his business. Moses was her personal sorrow.

Ingrid was an avid watcher of *Court TV.* "I knew the creep was guilty all along of the murder of his wife. You could see it in his eyes when the camera turned to him. He *looked* guilty," she said of one case, in which a husband was indeed convicted of murdering his wife and dropping her weighted body in a faraway lake. Of course, she wasn't alone in her infatuation with guilt and innocence and retribution, given the sizeable audiences these shows drew. Still, Gideon felt sad, thinking of this abiding interest of his sister's, and it reawakened in him a perception that had formed during the court drama involving Moses that possibly it had become her personal theater. She would surprise him, as when she spoke of the trip she had taken to Washington, D.C., with their father sometime after the war—World War II. Even if she could not remember details, it was something.

And he could also surprise her, as with his story of standing in the gymnasium at the St. George Hotel, among weightlifters and sweaty men and women in shorts on treadmills and Stairmasters down in Brooklyn Heights, and suddenly realizing he had been there, in that very space, as a boy, only back then, kids had cannon-balled off the high diving board into the chlorine water below, screams and shouts bouncing off the tiled walls and sometimes creating a deafening sound. She would come to the church for Luke and Leah as their Friday afternoon Bible study class was ending and take them for supper down the block at the Horn and Hardart Automat on the corner of Thirty-third and Eighth Avenue, right across from the old Pennsylvania Station. From there they would ride down to Clark Street, the first stop in Brooklyn on the West Side subway. As he shared this memory, the fear and apprehension her presence summoned was momentarily dissolved and a feeling of love surged through him for his sister, that she would introduce him to a world beyond the sometimes dreary and denouncing one of the church.

Then one day Ingrid suggested that he come directly to the apartment rather than meet her at the Hungarian Café. Her arthritis was limiting her mobility, she said. It wasn't her first such invitation. Several times, after walking her home from the café, she had invited him upstairs, but he had declined, giving one excuse or another, unable to simply say he was uncomfortable with the idea of being alone with her and possibly Moses in what had previously been the family home. It wasn't for him to say that fear drove him to decline or that a visit to the apartment felt as inviting as the prospect of entering a truly bad neighborhood. And perhaps he didn't need to tell her, as her tone of voice carried the hint of challenge and her slight smile suggested she sensed his reluctance. At such times he understood the advantages of age, that this was a woman who had seen him naked and bawling and feeding at his mother's breast.

What he couldn't say, she said for him. "What's the matter? You afraid that we're going to bite you or something?" she asked, in that reaching, grasping voice.

Columbia University had bought the building and turned it into a giant dormitory. His besotted brother-in-law Chuck was long gone from the lobby, where he had served as the night watchman. Gone too were the framed verses of scripture that his aunt had hung in the lobby and the upholstered chairs and antique side tables. A big desk had been installed, and the sullen uniformed guard required Gideon to sign the visitors' guest book.

The living room was full of clutter, movement confined to a narrow path between those boxes that hadn't been stored on ugly gray metal shelving around the perimeter of the room. The focal point was a giant flat-screen TV, turned now with the sound off to a preseason New York Giants' football game.

"So who are you going to vote for?" Ingrid said, before Gideon had sat down.

"Vote for?" Gideon asked, as if he didn't know the election to which she was referring.

"In the presidential election," she said.

"Oh, gee, that's some months off, isn't it?"

"Not that far off. If we don't all wake up, we'll soon have that crackhead sitting in the White House," Moses said.

"Who? John McCain? He doesn't look like a crackhead to me, nor does Barack Obama."

"You don't think Obama's a crackhead? He'd fit right in with those crackhead brothers up on Lenox Avenue and One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street," Moses went on.

"Crackhead brothers? One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Street?"

"You heard me. He puts up a front around white people, but when he's with the brothers, he starts his rap."

"So you're voting for McCain. Right?" Hannah asked, as if Moses' crude remarks made the choice an obvious one.

"I don't believe so," Gideon said.

"You don't believe so what? You're going to vote for Obama?"

"I believe so. Yes."

"How could you?" It was more a cry than a question. He saw that her face had been pulled tight with anger.

"I feel he's the better choice." He spoke quietly, as if a reasonable tone could dissipate their vehemence.

"Better choice? Better choice? The man is a socialist. Did you hear me, a socialist?"

"Is that so?"

"He wants to ruin the business community. That way he can place white people under his thumb. He's got a plan, believe me," Moses said.

Politics was divisive, Gideon recognized, and even more so in the red state/blue state time that they were living. All the more reason to steer clear of political conversation with those you sensed might respond differently in the voting booth. What surprised him most was that his sister would assume they shared the same preference and be genuinely taken back to learn that they didn't. Did she think that he was some appendage of her, as she seemed to about Moses? He had never pulled the Republican lever in his entire life, just as Ingrid had never strayed from the Grand Old Party. He wondered if she had forgotten the early days of the Watergate era, when she would prod him into discussion of Nixon and company, inevitably drawing forth his righteous anger that the president and his henchmen sought to subvert democratic processes and the law at every turn. The angrier he grew, the more it seemed to please Ingrid, if her smile meant anything.

Gideon wondered even then if his expressed outrage over Nixon's devious ways was a sort of substitute for Gideon's resentment over her treatment of him in his growing up years. She had inflicted an injury without acknowledging that she had done so, just as Nixon injured the country by stonewalling the special prosecutor as the investigation into presidential wrongdoing got underway.

And as for socialism, what on earth? Did his sister not understand that without the benefit of a government-regulated apartment one-tenth the market rate, she would have been living in the far reaches of the Bronx, not the Upper West Side of Manhattan? Or what about the Medicare coverage she received or the monthly Social Security check credited to her bank account by direct deposit each month?

Never mind Court TV or New York Giants football. His sister and nephew could only be getting their worldview from Fox News.

His nephew's remarks he didn't know what to make of. He could only wonder if it was a point of view that grew out of some colossal fear engendered by his prison experience.

The visit was a brief one. It had to be. Ingrid and Moses could not easily come back from their anger and disappointment, and Gideon felt tired and disheartened. His sister had pulled a cheap trick, badgering him into visiting only so she could browbeat him with the assistance of her threatening son. He wondered if they would even let him out the door. It was all too horrible.

And yet here Gideon was, despite that unfortunate political discussion, seated across from his nephew in a Greek restaurant and searching the laminated menu for an interesting vegetarian offering.

"I used to walk back and forth under the awning of this restaurant when I was a kid and always had some curiosity about it. And now I'm satisfying that curiosity."

"That's nice," Moses said

"It is nice to do something you've always wanted to do," Gideon said, taken back by Moses' curtness.

"You know the problem here?" Moses asked, putting down his menu.

"Is there a problem?"

"There's a definite problem, and it's simply this: I don't like you, and I never have. I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but I have to speak my truth."

"Yes, by all means, your truth." My Buddhism. My truth. Why not?

"And I don't need your shitty, understanding politeness. You hide behind it so people won't give you the punch in the face you deserve."

"Yes, of course," Gideon said.

"You see, there you go again, with your 'By all means' and 'Yes, of course.' But my mom had you pegged right. She always said you were a sneak."

"A sneak indeed."

"You crack me up. You're so fucking stupid."

"Laughter is good. We should all see the humor in things."

"Look, I'll tell you what. Let's just eat and not talk. How's that? Because I'm telling you flat out to stay out of my face with any uncle crap you might be planning to send my way. Got it?"

"Roger, over and out."

Moses looked at his uncle and shook his head.

The waiter arrived, providing welcome distraction. Gideon said, "Tell me, please, that you have spinach pie, as I have not been able to locate it on your menu."

"We have it indeed, sir, and you will not be disappointed."

"I have been by this restaurant many times, and now I have finally stepped in."

"You must come again, sir. And now, what will it be for you?" the waiter asked, addressing himself to Moses.

"Moussaka," Moses declared bluntly, as if in deliberate counterpoint to Gideon's chattiness.

"I have been a bit worried for you. This can't be an easy transition."

"I'm psyched and am staying focused," Moses replied.

"Pumped," Gideon offered.

"What?" Moses asked, sourness in his voice.

"I was just recognizing the language of sports you were using and thought to add my own." Exhortation was a good thing, or at least very American. All those thundering imperatives on TV. Just do it. Be the best that you can be. If people wanted or needed to be amped or pumped or psyched to get through the day, then so be it. Everyone required daily rejuvenation and reached for it in the ways they could.

"Thanks for nothing," Moses said.

"Meditation is my means for psyching and focusing myself." Gideon gave Moses the double OK sign, one with each hand. He understood that he was playing the fool, and that such a manner was ultimately lacking in amour propre. But he could not help himself. The alternative was to simply leave or endure an uncomfortable silence, and neither seemed a means to rapprochement with his wounded and troubled nephew, who was beginning, in his thorniness and bellicosity, to channel his mother.

"I've got that on my toolkit too. Don't be thinking you have more than me. All you've got is a little more money, and that's only because since 9/11 every employer does a background check. No one wants to hire me."

"No one?"

"I work for a friend of mine as a plumber's assistant when he needs help, but that's about it."

"Doors can open."

"And they can close too."

The waiter was an intervening angel of mercy with the steaming plate of moussaka he delivered to Moses, who quickly devoured the huge portion. The food seemed to ease his sense of grievance and allowed him to apply a softer and more expansive focus to the things of life.

"You probably think I don't know who my father was, just because my mom kept that a secret from you. But she talked with me a lot about him, and never in a bitter way. In fact, she said he was a good man. I can tell that surprises you, but you didn't know my mom the way I did. She met my father on the subway. They made eye contact, and when she got off at Times Square he followed after and approached her because that's what men who like women do. And my father liked my mom. He really did. It's just that he couldn't be with her. He was married and had a family back in Yugoslavia, where he was from. During World War II, he had fought with Tito's partisans against the Nazis, was captured, and spent three years in a concentration camp. The man had a hard life. Anyway, I looked him up in the Manhattan phone book when I was still in college and there he was. So I called him and said I wanted to get together. He was probably afraid I would be pissed at him for cutting out on my mom and me, but it wasn't like that because of the good things my mom had said about him. He had a small

apartment downtown and was living alone. His kids were all grown. His wife had died. He had continued with his seagoing ways. He said it was all he knew how to do. And that was that. I never saw him again and felt no need to see him again. He had nothing to give me and I had nothing to give him. There was nothing. Nothing. Just blankness between us. Sometimes people want to be making too much about this flesh and blood thing. You know what I'm saying? I think you do from what I see in your eyes."

The waiter came with the check and Moses offered no resistance when Gideon paid. Gideon chose to believe that Moses' acquiescence showed a degree of acceptance and trust in their relationship that wasn't fully apparent in his words.

"You see that red-haired woman over there? Tell me she doesn't look like that actress Cynthia Nixon on *Sex and the City*?" Moses said.

Gideon turned and noted the red-haired woman. She seemed to be part of two couples having dinner together. "She looks a lot younger than Cynthia Nixon."

"Young is good for me," Moses said. "Well, it's dog-walking time. I have these two Pomeranians. I can't tell you how many women come up to me and want to make a fuss over those dogs. I don't want you thinking that's why I have them. It isn't like that. Those dogs are about love. That's all they're about. You know what I'm saying?"

"I think I do," Gideon said. Allergies got in the way of his love of pooches. But he did suspect that dog owners formed a kind of subculture in the city and shared a bond of connection denied those without canine friends.

The street was lined with old buildings and stairways angling down to the sidewalk, reducing the walking space. A jogger came up fast behind them, running in place to maintain her momentum when she couldn't get past. A pretty girl with a ponytail and an iPod strapped to her

upper arm. They stepped aside so she could regain her stride. “She can run me over any time,” Moses said.

They came shortly to Broadway. On the other side of the boulevard stood the building. Gideon stared with approval at the upgrade Columbia had given the property. The façade had been steam-blasted free of grime, those crumbling cornices that had endangered the lives of pedestrians below for years had been shaved off, and the rotting wooden window frames had been replaced with those energy-efficient windows in metal frames. Gideon felt no tug of the past, no longing to stroll down memory lane. He wanted simply to change the channel, and that would only happen when he walked himself free of the neighborhood he was in.

“I’m OK with cremation if you are. But Ingrid was a Christian. You do know that, don’t you?” Gideon was only on the phone with Leah for a minute when he sensed the potential for trouble. It was the *you know that, don’t you?*

“I know.”

“I’m not trying to be incendiary here.”

His sister had integrity. That was the proper, the just, way to see the situation. She simply wanted to do right by their deceased sister. The last time—that being when his brother Luke passed on—they almost didn’t do right, at least by Leah’s standard of right. The discussion about possibly cremating Luke had made Leah, well, incendiary. “I want a traditional funeral and a burial. I want to bury a body, not a vase full of ashes. Am I being clear?” And so her fire put out the fire some had been discussing for Luke. But not everyone was happy with her forceful manner back then. Not that Leah seemed to care. Leah was better at burning people than at

applying the balm. Or as she put it, “I give resentments. I don’t get them.” A debatable credo, but there it was.

“Of course not. I can appreciate your concern,” Gideon said to her now.

“Never mind with the appreciating. I just want to know one thing.”

“What is that?” Gideon asked.

“Can you live with burning your sister so she is reduced to ashes?”

“To be honest, yes. I mean, I think of her corpse being held in some huge refrigerator in the hospital so it won’t begin to stink.”

“A charming image of our sister. What is your *point*?”

“Cremation, frankly, feels more pure than burial. That’s just my feeling. Anyway, Moses said he spoke with you and you were OK with cremation, too. And, not to be crass, but a traditional funeral is quite expensive.”

“I’m not opposed. I’m just asking. That’s all. I’m having some doubts.”

“It will be all right. You’ll see,” Gideon said, though that night he lay in bed imagining Ingrid having a righteous fit and threatening him with all manner of dire consequences for going along with having her body consumed by fire. Leave it to him and other family members to be too lazy and cheap to give their sister a decent burial. Well, he didn’t have to buy into such late night visitations and ruminations.

4. Celeste, Past and Present

If there was such a thing on the planet as unconditional love among adults—surely parents, some parents, had it for their children—then his regard for his ex-wife Celeste was as close as he would come in this lifetime to reaching such a state. Even after many years of separation and

then divorce—a decision reached by her, not him—this feeling of connection abided. Not every day and not every week, but twice a month, they would meet at a neighborhood macrobiotic restaurant, where now, as he entered, he saw her seated at a small table against the exposed brick wall.

"Have you been waiting long?" He didn't like to keep her waiting. She was not someone who took wasted time in stride.

"No. Not at all," Celeste said.

He ordered his usual, ginger tamari salmon but without the hijiki, requesting of the waiter an extra vegetable or more of the yams that came with the fish. Hijiki smelled too much like the seaweed it was and brought back the packed beaches in summer in the Coney Island days of his childhood. And he would have a cup of musky mu tea for its calming effect. Celeste, as usual, avoided the entrees and chose two appetizers and a cup of green tea.

"Is there going to be a traditional funeral?" Celeste asked.

"Oh, no. We settled that. Ingrid was cremated the other day."

"You must be so relieved. I know you were worried that Leah would prove difficult and try to have her way, which she did when Luke passed away."

"Well, I do feel it is for Moses, as the next of kin, to make such decisions, in the absence of Ingrid's wishes being in writing."

"Absolutely."

"Anyway, so far, so good. Leah got a bit testy, but that was all. She said she didn't want to get incendiary."

"Incendiary?"

"Well, yeah, that's what she said."

"So she knows she can be intemperate."

"I guess."

"It shows she's trying to learn from her mistakes."

"I get this feeling there's this underlying closeness that has led us to clash in the past, as if neither of us has been willing or able to acknowledge the bond of intimacy that exists. I suppose that sounds kind of crazy, but we did get close as children, almost too close. When it finally sinks in that Ingrid is gone, I wouldn't be surprised if Leah and I become shy with each other. We are the only ones left, unless you count Jeanne, who is still trying to be part of a family that only exists as a remnant. And, of course, Moses."

"Family is not easy."

For five years following Gideon's departure, Celeste did not speak with her stepfather. She had her reasons.

"No. But I'm unkind to Jeanne and it's doubtful that Moses and I will ever be close."

"Jeanne is difficult. I remember her calling from a pay phone down the block from where we lived and asking to use our bathroom. And after she did, she wouldn't leave." That would have been the early days of Jeanne's recovery from drugs and alcohol. She had been needy, sleeping on friends' sofas and sometimes in the recovery rooms where she was trying to reclaim her life.

"I did do some things for her. I helped her with money, for sure." He remembered her coming to his office one morning, where he handed her a check for a month's rent and a month's security for an apartment she had just found and how the act of giving was ruined when he blew up at her.

"You did a lot for her."

Celeste's reassurance was welcome, and yet he needed to go on. "She would call, seemingly just to chat, and as soon as I began to feel grateful to hear from her, she would ask for something. It was like she was reaching with a mechanical arm with a claw at the end of it. In spite of myself, I would feel used and tricked, like she was practicing the wiles of a hooker on me."

"She probably was."

"As the years passed, she became insolent, if that's the right word. An attitude of jeering hostility surfaced. After all the crap I had taken from her mother and father, I just didn't feel like tolerating it in her."

"You had every right not to tolerate it."

How much Gideon had needed Celeste's understanding and strength in his dealings with his family. But she had drawn on his strength as well. Would she have even come to terms with the wounds of her early years without the intimacy of their marriage to draw it forth? And did he not support her emotionally when she was virtually psychotic during the most intense phase of the healing process? How miraculous to be eased free of that dependency on women, first his mother and then his girlfriends and Celeste. He remembered the debilitating anxiety and the ache of longing for Celeste in those first couple of years of the separation, a kind of journey from loneliness to aloneness. In some way, she had been his teacher, his guide. And in some way he had been hers.

The check came, a stark reminder that the evening had no part two, nor had there been a part two for years. This was their life—dinner together twice a month at Baku, a few calls and e-mails in between, and a vibe of happiness, at least in Gideon, that this miracle of rapprochement had been achieved. They would not go to his apartment. There would be no physical intimacy.

"Maybe we could take a walk," he suggested, trying to keep the fear of possible rejection out of his voice.

"That sounds nice," Celeste said.

They placed their credit cards on top of the check. Right down the middle they split the bill. That had been Celeste's idea sometime ago. A better deal for him than for her, as he ate more, but after mild protests initially, an arrangement he had settled into. What did Celeste say? It's about the company, or something like that. She said it better than he could.

An evening breeze met them as they left the restaurant and walked west past Broadway and West End Avenue, as if surrendering to the lure of nature and the refuge it provided from concrete and rampaging traffic. Nearby, with the limestone cylinder of the Soldier's and Sailor's Monument towering above, an amateur performance of some Shakespeare play was in progress, though whether a history or comedy or tragedy Gideon didn't know and had no curiosity to explore. One day, maybe, he would be part of the small audience sitting on stone steps listening as a cloaked young man delivered lines of iambic pentameter into the soft air, but not this evening. Just as one day he would set aside the time and join the nature conservancy that was doing so much to restore the park, though in that moment he felt no desire to stand with trowel in dirt-caked hand deriving joy at the luminous white chrysanthemums and lilies and purple lilacs in bloom. No, he was content to walk the earth unencumbered and not attach himself to things of this earth that would inevitably die.

Or mostly he was. Now and then he would feel an impulse to purchase a camera, one of those digital things, not the heavy, bulky Nikon F3 that sat in disuse on a shelf in his closet. But no, no, that inner voice screamed when he saw a face on Broadway or wherever full of sorrow or anger or simply strangeness and felt he could demand that look of his subjects, capture it for all

time if only he had a lens to train on it. Don't go down that road, the voice cried. Don't do it. Don't think you can capture time. You will devote your life to the pursuit of an illusion. Worse, you will simply activate and feed an obsession. Your life will not be your own. You will wind up like that unfortunate street photographer Gary Winograd, who was reported to have over three thousand rolls of shot but undeveloped film in his studio because shooting had taken over his life, causing him to abandon follow-through. Do you want that sort of mental torture, Gideon? Do you?

When he asked himself that question, the answer was always no.

"I walk looking up these days. The trees are not what they used to be. They've turned unfriendly, treacherous. Branches snap and injure or even kill passersby underneath," Gideon said. "The savagery is indiscriminate. Men, women, children, babies."

"That's budget cuts, not treachery. Trees that need pruning go unattended to."

Celeste was right, of course. Still, he did listen for the crack of branches and lift his eyes when passing under plane and honey locust trees with thick, heavy limbs on the park's pathways.

They were on the lower level of the park now, with the West Side Highway in view. Beyond the zipping cars boats floated in the Hudson River, not only a couple of tankers but speedboats, some of them operated by wave-bashing showoffs making dangerous turns and cuts, disturbing the otherwise peaceful tableau with their violence. He suspected that some of the more daredevil ones, those who caused terror as they tore between the concrete pylons of the pier down near the Seventy-ninth Street boat basin, might be drunk or drugged. There were drunks behind the wheels of cars. Why wouldn't they be out on the water in their gas-powered boats as well? There was no need to bemoan the fact of such things in the world, and yet he did.

His legs had grown tired, and so they took a seat on a bench, an iron rail separating them from an overgrown knoll leading down to the highway and the river. “I feel a bit self-centered. I say each time we get together that I won’t talk so much about myself but that’s pretty much all I do,” he said, while staring straight ahead. He had seen himself as he imagined she saw him, and the perception, real or not, made him uncomfortable.

“I wouldn’t say you talk so much about yourself. You have a lot going on,” Celeste replied.

A lot going on. But she had a lot going on as well. Her mother had died several months before. And the year before that her nonagenarian stepfather had died after a long illness. A powerful man reduced to wearing a diaper. No, it was something else. She had found others to talk to about the things on her mind. She had moved on and he hadn’t. His emotional wiring remained configured for her, as a therapist had once said.

“Look.”

“Look at what?” he said, seeing nothing but the tall, leafy tree Celeste was pointing up at.

“Don’t you see the raccoon? And look, her baby is coming down after her.” Celeste loved animals, perhaps even more than people from the fuss she made over her two dogs and two cats.

And yes, there it was, the raccoon, inching its way down the trunk of the tree, with the baby right behind, both seemingly in danger of losing their footing. And yet, suppose, once the ring-eyed creature reached the bottom of the tree, it decided to streak their way and bite them? He wasn’t happy to see a wild animal in the city, even in a park. In Seattle some years before, a coyote had casually crossed his path as he walked through a garden. The animal possessed a feathery lightness, and the cold, indifferent yellow eyes it turned to Gideon froze him in his

tracks. His fear was not now on the same level, but even so, he said, “Perhaps we should move back a little.”

“Don’t worry so much. She won’t bite,” Celeste said, as if worry was his domain.

They came to her car a short while later, the doors unlocking and the taillights winking when she turned on the remote. She would drive up the West Side Highway and then over the George Washington Bridge to the house she had bought in Teaneck, New Jersey, when they separated. Sometimes he saw the Hudson River as a kind of moat she had needed when she fled the city and the ghosts of her past.

“I was wondering…well, never mind.”

“No, tell me. What?” she asked.

“Don’t feel obliged in any way, but I was wondering if you might want to attend the memorial service for Ingrid. It will probably be just a small thing.”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m not close with your family.”

“Yes, of course. I didn’t think so.”

Shortly, Celeste drove off. It used to be that he would gesture with his hand, moving it diagonally across his chest, as a reminder for her to put on her seatbelt, but it was something he had stopped doing, when he couldn’t even say, as he became afraid of summoning her anger by assuming too big a role in her life.

He walked slowly home in a swirl of raw emotion. Rebuffed. Ashamed. Something like that. Well, he would sort it out.

I regretted terribly saying I wouldn’t come to the memorial service. You were kind enough to attend the service for my mother. I’ll do whatever you want to support you.

—e-mail from Celeste

You got it right the first time. There is no need.

—reply from Gideon

The memorial service had been in the penthouse apartment on Riverside Drive where Celeste's parents had lived for many years. The sight of Celeste's older sister, Gretchen, had warmed him as he came in the half-open door, beyond which he could hear the voices of the gathered. He had always liked Gretchen. Even now, she had the look of a pissed off teenager in her virtually senior citizen face, the affronted visage of someone who had perhaps just been slapped. But after a half smile of recognition, she turned back to the person she had been engaged with, as if to say she had better people to speak with and that *she remembered.* Remembered the difficult days of his marriage to Celeste. Remembered things about him, unflattering things, things that gave her an accurate and negative picture of who he was. His judge. His jury. His executioner. All of it conveyed in that one faux smile.

A large gathering. Celeste's mother's longtime editor. Fellow writers. Actors. Musicians. Intellectuals with professorships at Ivy League universities. Even with the knowledge of the power of love, fear could still rule, keeping Gideon out of the flow of their conversation and subject to the merciless message of his own unworthiness, and so he stared at an oil painting of Celeste's mother as a young woman, seated in a chair with a book in her lap. The painting had lost some of its original luster, he suspected, but showed her in an attractive light as a slender woman with enormous eyes eager to take in the whole world. Her mother had wanted to like him, but soon came to see that his mind was dull and ordinary and that he was not of the same

intellectual caliber as her daughter, either by schooling or native intelligence. When told that he was working on a novel, she asked to see it and was appalled by its mediocrity. Even so, she recommended an agent, with whose doorman Gideon left the manuscript, only to receive, several days later, a gentle but firm rejection.

Other paintings, more valuable artwork, hung on the walls. Here a Corinth, there a Corinth. And a tortured wood sculpture on a stand by an artist whose name Gideon kept forgetting. A German name of many syllables. His mind emptying out. Incapable of retention of anything but batting averages.

“Hey there, Gideon.” Hearing his name spoken with enthusiasm, he turned to a woman with a mass of unruly gray, frizzy hair. The girlishness of the smile her face had surrendered to did not prevent him from noting the fuzz on her cheeks.

“Maude,” he said, giving her a hug.

“So how is retirement?”

“Heaven. That could change, I guess, but so far an effortless transition.” He was aware that he was talking with a woman fully in the game of life who knew how to work hard and make connections and build on them. A prominent defense attorney who gave dinner parties for twenty at her SoHo loft. Also a woman who happened to be Celeste’s best friend since childhood. Also a woman whom Celeste had told of his gross insecurities and angry outbursts.

“But what made you decide to leave?”

“I asked the same question of someone who left my company a few years ago. Her reply? ‘You’ll know when it’s time.’ And I guess I did.”

“But what will you do?”

"Well, work on personal projects. I have a lot of unfinished, poorly written material back in my apartment. Maybe I can give them a little more polish. I find that more satisfying than trying to be perfect for others."

"I'm sure you'll do just fine." He sensed, as Maude left him to circulate among the other guests, that she had no need to hear of the writing ambitions of a sixty-two-year-old man with a few meager publishing credits.

Soon the eulogies began. Such words of praise Garth Knobler, the family lawyer, spoke. Celeste's mother's impressive intellect. How he could hardly keep up with her. Gideon felt embarrassed for Knobler, seeing some aspect of himself in the sadly self-effacing man in a silk, pinstriped suit that spoke of wealth and power, the same expensive kind Knobler had been wearing the day Gideon showed up at his Park Avenue office to sign the divorce papers. Gideon had sought no representation for himself, having decided that availing himself of legal counsel would have been an unseemly intrusion into the realm of love. A man to whom Gideon had confided more than perhaps was wise about the major cause of the marital rupture, including a suggestion about serious impropriety on the part of Celeste's stepfather.

A number of the men and women reliant on walkers. A few in wheelchairs, with homecare attendants, mostly black, present to assist. One elderly woman supplied with an oxygen tank. A last gathering before the apartment was put on the market. Three mil. Four mil. Fifteen mil. Some of the artwork would be distributed among family members, the rest appraised and sold. A work crew would be brought in to renovate the property. All traces of the previous tenants would be gone. So Gideon thought listening to the eulogizers exercising their wit and offering humorous, touching anecdotes.

Maybe he too should say something. Maybe he should say that he swam in a lake covered with lily pads with Celeste's mother. Maybe he should say he felt more comfortable with Celeste's stepfather, before he knew what the man had been up to in his dark past. Maybe he should say…there was nothing to say. It was just about listening and then forgetting.

A buffet had been set out on a long table. Meats and sliced salmon and salad and cheeses and dips, as well as rich cakes and pastries. While others had moved away from the table to take their seats, one man hovered over it, a sour-looking sort with probably a fifty-inch waist. The man motioned to Celeste. Something intimate in his fetching gesture, as if he was used to calling to her. And now she was by his side as he pointed at this and that item. A man trying to do a good job. A man intent on pleasing. Celeste rewarded him with a pat on the arm, then returned to her seat.

The man was not new to Gideon. He had seen him once before, at the memorial service for Celeste's stepfather. In fact, Gideon had spoken with him, or tried to. "I'm glad to see I'm not the only one wearing a blazer," Gideon had remarked, as all the other men appeared to have shown up in more formal dress. But the man did not appear to share Gideon's gratitude, judging from the sour look on his Oliver Hardy face. Gideon now wondered if his attempt at identification with the man had elicited that expression of disapproval. Was it possible that the man knew who Gideon was in relation to Celeste and perceived him as a rival?

"So what did you think of Sidney?" Celeste asked, giving the Fat Man a name following her stepfather's memorial service.

"He's kind of a curmudgeon," Gideon had said.

"You're right about that. He can be pretty difficult," Celeste had replied, with a laugh.

"What does he do?"

"He's finishing his doctorate."

"I guess you're never too old to learn."

"He is sort of a perennial student."

A man who couldn't have the teaching career his mother and father both had developed, or any kind of career. Perhaps a man lost in neurosis on some therapist's couch and fated to thrash endlessly through the tall grass of childhood seeking for clues.

And yet a new element was added a year after the memorial service for Celeste's stepfather when she said, "I thought he wanted to be friends, but sometimes now, I wonder if it's something more he is after." Sidney had begun wining and dining her at expensive restaurants and taking her to concerts.

"Well, you can discourage him if it's not something you want." Gideon tried to keep fear out of his voice as he spoke, but Celeste's powers of detection were pretty keen. Over the years she had learned to read his moods.

"Of course it's nothing I want," she said, and there the conversation about Sidney ended, or almost ended. If Celeste did happen to mention him, it was to say that she was going to a dinner party being given by the Fat Man's mother. Always it was said just that way. Celeste was going to a dinner party hosted by the Fat Man's mother. It was never that she was going to see the Fat Man. What she didn't say was that she would be with the Fat Man and that the Fat Man in all likelihood would be with her, and be perceived in just that way by the Fat Man's mother and the guests. And the odds were that she would arrive with the Fat Man and leave with the Fat Man.

Or she couldn't see Gideon on a particular Sunday night because she was going to a concert with the Fat Man, information she would not have volunteered except that Gideon had compelled an answer from her with his invitation and she wasn't about to lie.

And now he remembered that Celeste had mentioned Viagra. But when? Was it in the park, on one of their after-dinner walks, the two of them seated on a bench with the sense of intimacy so strong but some thin membrane of inhibition—call it prohibition—keeping them from moving forward because of the profound sense that forward might be backward, or even more, that sleeping with Celeste had become as taboo as the thought of sleeping with his mother, were she still alive. Celeste laughing at the mention of the wonder drug.

The Fat Man. The Fat Man was taking Viagra and it had turned him into Studley. The Fat Man had made Gideon's ex-wife Celeste his own.

How appalling. What had he been doing with his life since the divorce that he should be in a state of acute jealousy over attentions paid to his ex-wife?

All of it becoming clear to him as he sat now at the memorial service for Celeste's mother. So clear that, from across the room, Celeste was staring at him. Did she see his thoughts, as those who are close can do? The whole business of connection something mysterious but real. And there she was working her way toward him.

"Are you OK? Are you having a good time?" she whispered. With him but not with him, in the way that a divorced person is with you and not with you and vice versa. Wanting to know he was OK so she did not have to fuss with him.

"I'm doing fine," he said.

He had gotten spoiled, or if spoiled was too harsh a word, then he had gotten used to a situation in which, given the ordeal of recovery from sustained abuse by a boundary-less stepfather, she was not available to men in the way that he was to women in their post-marital life.

The last couple of years of their marriage a difficult time for him and a nightmare for her. Her anger verging on the nuclear. A proxy he was for the rage she could not direct at the real perpetrator, her stepfather, their counselor suggested. “The marriage is dead. Now it will be for you to build a new relationship,” the counselor also said. Or as Celeste had said the day he moved out, “We have to start over.”

And they had started over. He lived in sublets that first year, praying for Celeste to call and ask him to come home. But the call didn’t come, and so he struggled to get by until the twice-monthly counseling sessions, where at least he could see her. A year passed, and though they still lived apart, they would meet between sessions for dinner or at museums or take walks. He was letting her come to him, as the counselor had suggested.

For that first year he had been content to live with other people’s furnishings and possessions; to think of taking a lease on an apartment had been too threatening, raising as it did the prospect of a permanent separation. But what he couldn’t do in that first year, he could in the second, committing to an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. And in that time he was able to remove his wedding band, Celeste having removed hers long before.

Though initially the prospect of dating was as unsettling as his name on an apartment lease, there came a time when he could see other women as well as Celeste. These attempts at connection ended quickly, but he persevered. Then, in the third year of their separation, he and Celeste resumed their physical relationship, at her request. She had come to sense in him some newfound strength and diminished neediness. By this time she had developed a network of

friends that soon included a man who grew large in Gideon's mind as a formidable rival with the potential to sweep him out of the way and claim Celeste for his own.

He reached out for another woman and fell in love, or what he understood to be love at the time. For a month or so, he continued to be intimate with Celeste as well until the day came when he felt his secret would destroy him. And so, before the counselor and Celeste, he confessed this new development, thus bringing to a sudden end the counseling sessions he and Celeste had grown used to.

Given the abuses in her home growing up, Celeste had placed no particular value on marriage and family life and even fidelity, but she was hurt by his admission and withdrew, and so he had no communication with her while this new involvement grew stronger by the day. The woman was warm and receiving as well as attractive, and she held his mind captive day and night. There had been a man in her life when Gideon entered the picture. In fact, this was a man the woman was planning to marry, though she noted more than once that he was being slow in closing the deal and that she had begun to have serious misgivings about his intentions. In any case, the man had pride of place in her life and Gideon came second, which meant that Gideon prayed for the woman to call as he had once prayed for Celeste to call, and was never so happy as when she did. So he would not get his hopes up, the woman made clear that Gideon was himself not marriageable, at least by her, given that he lacked the income of a provider such as she would need to start a family.

The relationship reached its peak at six months, and thereafter the times between their get-togethers grew steadily longer. Gideon found himself depressed. There was no movement in his life, only waiting. He tried several times to see other women, but they only made him miss the woman he had been seeing more.

The end came when the woman let it be known that she would be leaving the man because of his endless dawdling but also warned that Gideon should find no cause for rejoicing in this fact, as she would be seeing other men as well as him. This piece of information was presented to him in the main concourse of Grand Central Station, as good a place as any for him to commence a new phase of his journey. "Goodbye," he said to the woman, and fled, never to speak with her again.

Gideon returned to Celeste, who received him without rancor. No verbal communication was needed to convey that their intimacy, moving forward, would be on a mental, emotional, and spiritual plane but that a resumption of their physical connection would be like violating a strong taboo. By this time the word *marriage* had come to have little value in his mind. A marriage could fall away, but it was the *relationship* that truly mattered. Love was a pilot light that could never be permanently extinguished, and nothing was more important than nurturing that light.

We have to start over. If Celeste had known that, what more did she know?

Occasionally, feeling no sexual fire for women close to him in age, he would be drawn to younger women. But now, something was happening to deter him from them as well. He saw their creaturely nature, or imagined it, which was the same thing: their defecations and urinations and bathroom smells; the reflexive lifting of their fingers to their noses when in private; the quantities of bad food they ravenously devoured; the soil marks in their undergarments. And when he saw, he could not turn back, as the Buddha could not turn back when he had witnessed the palace courtesans, earlier in the evening so alluring, now grinding their teeth and drooling and groaning in fitful sleep. These things raised themselves as deterrents to the body and redirected him to the cultivation of the life of the spirit, such as someone reliant on Internet porn for relief could acquire.

5. Leah on the Line and the Past She Led Him back To

"You know that Ingrid meant a lot to me. You know that, don't you?" Gideon was on high alert to catch the drift of his remaining sister's words as he held the phone receiver.

"I do," Gideon said. "You and she were unusually close."

'What 's with the unusually?"

"I guess I should have just said close."

"I won't have her disrespected."

"Has someone disrespected her?"

"My sister has been reduced to ashes. Moses is carrying his mother around in an urn."

"Well, that's lighter than a casket."

"This is not funny."

"Of course not."

"I know you, Gideon. Sooner or later you mock everything."

"What am I mocking?"

"I don't know. I just don't feel like you are on my side."

"There are sides?"

"You see, there you go. You wouldn't care if we were all dead. That's the feeling I get from you. You're always just so *removed*."

"Is that right?"

"Look, I want to respect my sister by having a Christian service. Can you do that for me?"

"Do what, exactly?"

"Research such a site. I would, but I am swamped with work, and you are retired. Maybe you and Jeanne could help Moses to pull this together? He's feeling overwhelmed."

"I spoke with him the other day. He said he was psyched and focused," Gideon said.

"I speak with him every day," Vera replied.

"Why not have a simple service here at my apartment?"

"Is your apartment a Christian shrine?"

"You are committed to this idea, I see."

"I am committed to fulfilling my sister's wishes. Can you get to work on this? As I said, I am busy and you are retired."

"I will see what I can do."

"Give me your progress report by Sunday."

"Will do," Gideon said.

"Don't start, Gideon. Don't start."

'Well, I am going to start. I am going to start an exploration."

"Good boy."

Retired? Leah was right about that, though the word he preferred was *transitioned.* He had transitioned from the workplace into a new chapter of his life. No longer would he be at the financial mercy of an organization he had given twenty-five years of his life to. No more staring at the wall calendar in his office as the finish line—the date on which he could depart with a full pension—drew nearer, his longing for release sometimes reaching an almost unbearable level. What more of heaven on earth could he ask than to sit in a movie theater on a Sunday night with no concern for the workweek ahead?

In mind if not body, he had left the organization five years before his actual retirement date. In that last stretch he was named director of the publications department where he had served as an editor throughout his career. He found himself delegating editing assignments he himself used to take on to the small staff he had inherited, and was shocked to discover how quickly he lost all desire to do such work himself.

"But what will you do when you leave here?" asked Ariana, a graphic designer in the creative services department. She was young, half his age, with a three-year-old girl and newly separated from her husband. In some way Ariana was the work he occupied himself with during office hours. Would she stop by his office? Would she be available for lunch? Would she ever open herself to him, improbable as such a scenario was?

"My goal is a very modest one. I want to go home and get my papers in order."

"How long could that take?"

He wondered if the fact that she was foreign-born, Dutch, might account for her interest in him. Perhaps young European women could keep their hearts open to older men. It seemed like a comforting reason, if not a plausible one, for why American women her age, and older as well, routinely ignored him.

"What I mean is that I have personal projects that require my attention. I do not want to leave behind a one-bedroom apartment filled with poorly conceived, poorly written, poorly organized manuscripts. It's sort of troubling to me to think that I have labored to make the organization's publications shine, or at least be literate, while neglecting my own. I don't mean to say that these personal manuscripts of mine will, at the end of the day, be works of art, but at the least I can give them an upgrade from abysmal to mediocre."

"Some people leave their jobs and it's like they're waiting around to die. It was like that with an uncle of mine back in Holland. He passed away within a year of retiring from the printing company he had been with for thirty years."

"Dying is part of it, too. It's best to know what stage of life we are in, and that is easy to be distracted from, at least in America. My sense is that some preparation is needed to be willing to let go of this life."

"What sort of preparation?"

"Meditation plays a big part, and maybe I can increase the time I spend in that."

In such a way did he speak with Ariana, seeking to attract her to him while being careful not to make more of himself than he was. Because he was nobody, but like many nobodies, he had the belief that he still could be somebody, that is, if time didn't run out on him. His post-work life would not be running out the clock but racing against the clock, he suspected, and he was afraid that not even sitting in meditation three times daily or contemplating the fact that he was merely one of one billion souls on the weary and perhaps expiring planet would fully mitigate that drive.

"That's interesting," Ariana said. One of those words people used when they couldn't come up with something more specific. A word John Travolta seized on when it was applied to him by his dance partner in *Saturday Night Fever. Interesting*. The Brooklyn disco king held it up for inspection with a looked of puzzlement verging on suspicion.

There was one who, in this last phase of his work life, said she loved him though she was, in his mind, a perfect stranger. Unannounced she would arrive to sit with him, and the fear she engendered was far from the happiness he felt in the company of Ariana. This woman, Gladiola, was not merely his boss but had an idea of him as someone he could not possibly be. Inevitably

her admiration would turn to disappointment, and then it would only be a matter for the fraud police to remove him from the premises.

"Devastated…at a loss…was there nothing she could say or do to get him to change his mind?" With such language and the emotion it summoned in her was he confronted following Gladiola's receipt of his e-mail giving two months' departure notice. But teachers were appearing left and right, as they had been his whole life, only now he was recognizing them as such in the moment. Celeste was his supreme teacher, but Ariana and Gladiola were teachers of sorts as well. And Gladiola's lesson was a simple one: if people chose to think well of you, and chose to *wax effusive,* or were powerless not to wax effusive, then allow them their effusions, Gideon, just allow them. Love was not necessarily being beaten with a verbal stick. The universal chorus need not always be singing "How dog thou art." No, there was no need to take a flying leap off a rooftop because someone spoke in superlatives of you. You could simply say, "Gee, thank you. That is very kind. I'm very grateful for the confidence you and the organization have shown in me. And yet, I'm not fifty-two or forty-two. I'll soon be sixty-two, and I'm feeling this growing need for a change. It will be better for me but also better for the organization. You'll be able to get someone in here with more youthful energy and fresher ideas." With those few words was he able to bring the conversation back within the vibration of normalcy and move things forward on ground both he and Gladiola could walk on.

And here another teaching moment came, one that shone a light so bright on his restrictive past as to virtually render valueless those self-limiting years. Gladiola confessed that she was not the extroverted individual she appeared to be but in fact an extremely shy person. Drawing on her own farewell experience with the powerful ad agency Grachnon Folker, she said it had been her mindset to slip out the door quietly, and so she would have done if friends hadn't

insisted she owed it to herself, if no one else, to allow the company to say goodbye. Her friends' suggestion was completely counter-intuitive, and yet created enough doubt about the wisdom of her own plan, that she went with it. "You may want to consider doing the same," Gladiola said, and left him with those words.

For many reasons, which came down to little more than fear and shame, the idea of a party appalled him. He didn't do parties. He didn't do events. He had failed to show up for his senior prom, missed both his high school and college graduation, and was a frequent no-show at weddings. He lived his life in the solitary places and with an underlying sense of sadness that he had not done better. The schools he had attended were mediocre; he had flunked the physical for the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War, his weight too little for his height; apart from a handful of publications in small press magazines, he had achieved no success as a writer; he had not challenged himself in the workplace, remaining year after year with a slow-moving organization some characterized as a velvet prison and holding on for his pension; and, of course, the woman he professed to love had divorced him.

He was not good enough, and by extension, the family he had been born into was not good enough. Not good enough to be seen. Rubbish. Half-Armenian rubbish. Invisible types existing in deep shadow. Dull-minded, big-footed, mean, turned against themselves. Unlovely, as he was unlovely.

And there were other extensions, other lunacies of his mind. Even Celeste was not spared the tarnishing brush. The crew of under-forties with whom he worked, with their iPods and Blackberries and text messaging and online social networking passion, would see him with a woman of his generation, not theirs. Her presence would instantly incriminate him with old age,

negate the DHEA, the vitamins and herbs, the facial moisturizers he used to try to hold time in check even as he purported to be letting go.

A retirement party? He had not given or been given a party since those birthday parties of his childhood and adolescence.

No, no, hit him with a stick. Beat him like a dog. Beat him, he said. Beat him.

But Gladiola had spoken. She had laid down a challenge. Reverse the whole direction of your life, if only for an afternoon. Doubt the workings of your own mind. Cast aside the mentality of *undeserving.* Let people in, Gideon. Let them in. Honor your life by honoring the people who have been a part of it.

And so a date for the party was set because the only way *out* was *through,* his mind full of self-exhortation that required italics.

Gladiola Fichter, Felicia Sumner. Abigail Sloat. Mariposa Springtime. Avian Goodness. Hermione Gwalt. Thrushly Sorenson. Had Enough Hyacinth. Both Hands Bothner. Ariana Delft. Those who, with their names, lived within the established order and those seeking to contort themselves free of that which currently prevailed were present in the tenth floor assembly room.

As were Ingrid Garatdjian Hoxha (yes, she had taken the name of the father of her child, though he had not taken her for his lawful, wedded wife); Leah Garatdjian Popoff and her husband Murray Popoff and her daughter Ellie Popoff.

As was Celeste Golin.

Absent were his niece Jeanne Boilan. (She was busy. *Busy.)* and Moses Garatdjian Hoxha, who gave no reason and of whom no reason was asked.

Kind words were spoken about him, Gideon Garatdjian. *Responsible. Conscientious. Thorough. Poised. Calm. Thoughtful.* He listened without hearing, reeling at the reality of his workplace and his family and Celeste coming together.

Then spoke himself, the words he said now the same as had looped through his mind for the previous week. "My oldest sister, Ingrid. Seventeen years older. Which I only mention because longevity does not run in our family, at least among my siblings. So Ingrid is a beacon of hope and all I can say is keep breathing, Ingrid…and my youngest sister Leah is here, Leah being the true professional in the family, and her husband Murray and their beautiful daughter, my niece Ellie…and my ex-wife and best friend and soul mate Celeste is here, and if those words I have just spoken sound contradictory, I will leave it to bigger minds than I possess to explain how such a thing can come to be and only say that it is as I have said…Water towers? Have you noticed them, with their beanie tops and squat, cedar-shingled vats? One day, while on the top floor of the org, I saw them, that is, I really saw them and not only saw them but heard them. Those water towers were calling to me. And what were those water towers saying? They were saying simply this: 'we have been out here for the past twenty-five years, but you have not been out here. You have been on the other side of the sealed glass window. And now we are calling to you to come out, come out.' I believe you know what I mean. When we have these radical shifts of perception, when we see that where we have been is where we must be no more, then the time has come to let go. It becomes a matter of acquiescing with the decision that has been made…"

Things had been happening as he spoke. Small eruptions. Ingrid cried out at mention of her age, as if to smite him for his audacity. And Vera, her face backlit with a jeering smile to accompany her braggadocio, shouted "That's right. That's right," when he applied the words *real professional* to her. And Celeste's face had caught fire, an agony of rebuffing constriction, at

mention of her name and the soul mate avowal that attached, as if she might speak in protest and sink his enterprise or at least bring it in line with her less high-flown reality.

Well, Ingrid would find a way to bring her grouchy self back into the circle of love and there was no corrective for Leah's mindset but possibly the workings of time. As for Celeste, how she saw things was how she saw them. It unnerved him to even contemplate going down that road of exploration with eyes open. Her reaction was the one he most took to heart.

"What part of 'I am busy' do you not understand?" His niece Jeanne had spoken, a party bound to current idiom.

It had been a mistake to call. Why not withdraw now and not subject himself to such snark?

"No, of course, I understand."

"I don't think you do. Otherwise you would not even be asking. I have executive status. Did you hear me? I'm a member of the management team."

"The office management team."

"What?"

"You're an office manager." It was Gideon's understanding that such folk kept staff supplied with printer cartridges and paper clips and Post-It notes. But he was also aware of a malicious desire to bring his uncooperative niece down to a level where her job description had her powwowing with porters and others from the maintenance crew.

"I am responsible for maintaining existing technologies and introducing new ones. Respect is due," Jeanne said, as if reading from some overwrought position description.

Such a smelly, insane word the "r" word had become. Everyone in a state of umbrage at the lack of respect being shown them. "You are right, Jeanne. You do have large responsibilities and need to devote your full energies to meeting them."

"I am flying to San Francisco tonight for a three-day conference. The logistics of setting up this meeting is staggering."

"Do not let San Francisco stagger you. There are places to go and things to see."

"Schedule the service for next week or even later so I can be there."

"Yes, of course," Gideon said, making a face at the receiver as he hung up the phone.

Now and then the past would call him insistently to some childhood site. Inevitably, the visit would be disappointing, and of short duration, the past being not a space of glory but a rotted corpse. A playground of sorts in his early years, the tunnel, through adult eyes, seemed desolate and smelly and undoubtedly dangerous, graffiti blossoming like fireworks on its high walls. His occasional visits to the tabernacle where his family had worshiped years before proved equally unsatisfying. The flags of many nations that had once hung from the balcony where he had sat with his mother and Luke and Leah through droning sermons were gone, and the worshipers, mainly Korean, were but a scattered few. Here and there pews had been torn out, and flung bottles and rocks had left the rosette window pocked with holes and waiting for someone to finish the vandalism that had been started.

But nothing prepared Gideon for the sight that awaited him when he returned to the tabernacle to inquire about a memorial service. There was no tabernacle, decrepit or otherwise. The structure had been sheared clear of the two adjacent buildings and reduced to a level carpet of rubble in the vacant lot before him. He stared, stunned, for several minutes, and slowly

walked away, a ghost upon the earth, or slowly becoming one, he thought, as he approached the corner of Eighth Avenue and Thirty-third.

Across the street had once stood glorious Pennsylvania Station, a block-long triumph of granite columns and a marble concourse and exquisite wrought ironwork, an edifice that filled you with hope and expectation and excitement just to see. That too had met the wrecker's ball. In its place stood a cheesy cookie-cutter replacement. Everything to the grave headed.

Suddenly he was afraid, amid the rampaging vehicles that had claimed the city for their own, the tall buildings, the strange faces that passed him without a second glance. He thought of his mother, felt her absence and that of the community he lived without.

As his father before him, he walked. The city was for that. The blur of faces and buildings, one after another, so the eye did not know where to focus but on this and then that. The city nothing if not this and that and the next. Always the next block, the next store, the next face. All detail lost. Because walking was not about detail. It was not about seeing. It was about changing how he felt.

Though not entirely. A man of great celebrity, a man who knew everyone and everything, had mentioned a diner on one of his radio broadcasts. He said the diner must be visited but would say no more. Once there the visitor would recognize the unique quality and character of the place. The celebrity conveyed his full certainty by not elaborating and even daring to speak in an offhand manner. A man of his power had no need to oversell, he was telling his audience.

The diner was unusually big and featured a large tank full of tropical fish and did have a family feel to it, being owned and run by Greeks. And those big, comfortable booths and Formica tables did take him back to another time in the life of the city. But the place only increased Gideon's sadness, as it did not have the stamp of longevity on it, that is, it had been

there far longer than it would continue to be there; so it was written in the worried face of the old owner. These things Gideon noted in the hour he spent there over a greasy grilled cheese sandwich and a cup of chamomile tea, the place only highlighting his aloneness and the tropical fish only deepening his depression, as he had no names to apply to any of them.

I am a man who knows nothing but his own feelings, Gideon thought on this day, and even those I cannot sometimes put a name to.

If his small effort to find a site for a memorial service for his transitioned sister was fruitless on that day, there was no need for concern, as Moses surprised with a strong communication: "Listen up, folks, I stayed focused and it's a go. Pastor Sally Grimner of the Resurrection Lutheran Church has agreed to play ball with us. We've got our winning combination now."

Such joy Moses'gung-ho e-mail summoned in Gideon. There *was* a degree of competence in his ill-starred family, and there was a house of worship in the city that would receive them. They weren't so feeble and they weren't so alone.

The Lutherans were good people. Martin Luther nailing those 95 theses to the church door in protest against the excesses of the Catholic church. Garrison Keillor. He was a Lutheran. Or he used to be.

The scaffolding around the church, an unsightly brace, had been removed and its façade sandblasted free of grime. A few men and women with soup kitchen dolor sat on the front steps, waiting for such nourishment as the church would provide when it opened its doors to the

community's indigent. Moving past them, Gideon felt their presence as both a reproach and a reminder.

The interior was lovely, the high walls freshly painted and morning sunlight pouring through the stained glass windows and the clerestory windows above. A church that dispelled, not increased, gloom. To the side of the entrance stood an office, outside of which Leah and Jeanne and Moses had gathered with a black-robed woman with brilliant blond hair and sturdy good looks.

"This is my brother, Gideon. I want you to meet Pastor Grimner." Even as Leah spoke, an impression formed in Gideon of a woman who daily summoned in prayer and meditation the bliss she needed to one day at a time deal with the reality that she had found God but not a man. Her face said that she was alone, her injury-filled eyes howling a story of longing, of love gone bad or not having arrived at all. A lot to say about a pastor whom he had just met, but Gideon was feeling it about this woman who stood with her black jeans showing beneath her clerical robe. If he presumed to know such types, it was because he had slowly become one.

"I will say a few words and lead us in a few selected prayers, but that is all, as I really did not know Ingrid," Pastor Grimner said.

The pastor's restraint and modesty were cause for gratitude, as the mourners would be spared the excess of those clergypersons who felt obliged to compensate for their ignorance about the lives of the departed with forced oratory.

Some minutes later a woman caught his attention. "The move will be a challenge but we feel up to it," she was saying to Leah and Jeanne. The woman and her husband had bought a house with a different kind of heating system. Something called radiant heat. She was unsure of herself trying to explain exactly what sort of heat that might be, and it struck Gideon that this

woman with reddish-brown hair might be unsure of other things as well. A feeling of disgust rose in him for looking amused by her fumbled explanation. As if he, in his fragile state, had the right to laugh at anything or anyone. Besides, where did it ever get him but alone to cop such a supercilious attitude?

A guest of Leah's, the woman was. One of several. Leah was that way, able to bring the world into their family life in a way he had difficulty doing.

The pastor stood in one of the two raised pulpits at an angled distance from the pews. Why the architecture of the church positioned her not front and center but at one end of the altar area was a small mystery. Were the handful of mourners to receive an impression of a wingless angel hovering above? Such a notion did not seem in keeping with the modesty of the church.

Dutifully Gideon closed his eyes and bowed his head when Pastor Grimner prayed, but it was not a prayer that he could fully surrender to, nor were the verses of scripture she read within his ability to grasp. The most he could bring to the ceremony, as to many aspects of life, was the appearance of attentiveness and compliance. And sometimes not even the appearance as he reached for the heavy, hardbound hymnal slotted in the narrow rack attached to back of the pew in front of him. His spirits sank thinking of the sheer uselessness of human endeavor, men and women in their Sunday finest, now nothing more than skeletons buried deep in the earth, bellowing these same dusty hymns in earlier, more restrained times.

Gideon watched nervously as Moses replaced Pastor Grimner in the pulpit. His nephew had arrived jacketless, in a short-sleeved shirt with the collar turned up and the tails tucked into his loose-fitting khaki slacks. The Popeye Doyle hat he had left at home. Neither a boy nor a man but something in between. So he looked to Gideon, the stunted quality and the pain of his life somehow apparent in his face. Would his nephew now produce a sheaf of papers, a eulogy he

had labored night and day over, or would he just follow his heart and say what he felt? But a minute passed, and Moses said nothing. He simply stood with his head bowed. And then another. Seeing Moses return slowly to his pew, Gideon could feel only love and sorrow for his nephew, and painful regret at the barriers to love that had come between them. In saying nothing, Moses had said everything, at least to Gideon.

Leah followed, quoting several admonishing verses of scripture from an obscure book of the Old Testament. A tone of importance, of preachy didacticism, came into her voice, as Gideon noticed could happen when speakers hitched a verbal ride on a spiritual text. They were verses his mind couldn't retain, as his mind couldn't retain the content of the sermons of his childhood but only the fulminating tone in which they were delivered, a tone that said, "You're going to get it. Watch out, bub. You're in for it now." For a moment there, Leah as an angry prophet.

Gideon looked nervously over at Pastor Grimner for any sign that she felt affronted by his sister's thundering prophet pose; however, all he could see was a woman sitting quietly off to the side and giving Leah her full attention.

A change came over Leah when she drew on her own experience. The clerical robe fell away and a smile came to her face. "Ingrid was like a second mother to me. She was loving. She was protective. She was kind. She looked after me. There was the time she took me down to Woolworth's—some of you must remember that chain of stores—to pick out my Christmas gift. I chose a birdcage, but when the salesgirl, excuse me, salesperson, reached for the display model, Ingrid scolded her. My sister did have a temper. She could get ferocious."

Gideon felt humbled listening to the new perspective that Leah was providing, though he did, after some minutes, begin to ask himself what was so new about it? Ingrid had been loving

with her youngest sister; she had saved her temper for Luke and him and the sales staff at Woolworth's.

And then it was for Gideon to say a few words. "I'm preachy enough without a pulpit. Besides, I have a voice that travels three feet, so I will just stand here close to you. When I think of my sister Ingrid, I think of the year of her birth, 1930, and the history she lived through—the Great Depression, the Second World War—before my brother and Leah and me arrived on this planet. For many of those years my father couldn't find work and cared for her while my mother served as a domestic for a Park Avenue couple. My father would have been thirty the year of Ingrid's birth. Only a decade and a half before, he had been a teenage Armenian boy living with his family in Constantinople. Turkey had begun in earnest to deal with its 'Armenian problem.' I think of her name. Ingrid. Not her given name but a name she gave herself. Kohar was the name my father had given her. To my ears, such a name sounds exotic, but perhaps Ingrid found it burdensome, a name that would cause teasing among her peers in school. Possibly Ingrid wanted a world of hope and promise and excitement, not to be buried alive beneath the ashes of a culture my father could not bring himself to speak about, and saw herself as an American girl on American soil. When she could, she created her own identity. Ingrid, as in *Ingrid Bergman.* She wanted to be a screen star with radiant youth, not Kohar Garatdjian. I think of her sitting in the dark in the living room, the only light provided by the glow of our second-hand black and white TV as she watched *Million Dollar Movie.*

"But we were a family where boundaries were not always respected. As Leah noted, Ingrid had a temper, and as the years passed and she remained at home and life presented her with some serious disappointments, that temper would sometimes get the better of her and she would lash out physically. When an adult strikes a child, the child remembers and, inevitably,

begins to see the adult in terms of darkness. The perception is not willed but involuntary. For many years, her good qualities were obscured in my mind by this shroud. My heart wasn't as open to her as it should have been when she struggled through serious medical situations and other hardships. But as I grew older, I encountered my own difficulties. I came to see I was an apple fallen from the same tree. As we age, walls begin to come down…"

Jeanne popped up. "My aunt Ingrid was wonderful to me. Wonderful. She showed faithfulness. When my father died in a VA hospital in upstate New York, she was the only one in the family to offer to accompany me. The only one. Faithfulness…"

And so it went.

Gideon stood by the refreshments, bagels and pastries and other munchies set out on a side table, and those dispensers of Dunkin' Donuts coffee. A woman approached, the same woman who had been speaking about radiant heating, only now she was speaking to him, and to him alone. Her voice was soft, and delivered on a wavelength of sincerity he did not associate with the city or its inhabitants. It was a voice and a manner that said she was from a place far away and that it would take someone from a place far away to love him as she was loving him in that moment, loving him with that voice and manner and the recognition she gave, saying, "What you had to say was beautiful."

"I left out so much," Gideon replied.

"No, you were real," she went on. She was far from young and the mother of three children, two of them teenagers, and yet she was herself warm and radiant, like that heat she talked about. Her personality, her manner, made her so. A teacher of children with learning disabilities. A woman who cared. A woman who gave but who could also receive.

But now here was Murray, Leah's husband, putting his face close to the woman's, in such proximity as to make clear she was his and his alone, spouses notwithstanding. Displaced by the calculated intrusion and sensing a rival, Gideon drifted away, at an odd, excluding angle to everything around him.

And now another of Leah's friends approached. "I just closed on a one-bedroom…a tennis court and a swimming pool right downstairs…commute to Bronx Community College, where I teach three days a week…Planning a trip to Italy…" A woman recently divorced and with the vibration of a shark. Gideon hearing her without hearing her, just wanting her not to attack him.

The times when, as a child, Ingrid would take him and Luke and Vera to an indoor swimming pool, in which he would stay until his lips turned blue and goose bumps covered his flesh. He would run to the steam room, where he would stay until his skin wrinkled and began to itch. Driven from the steam bath, he could not return to the water, as now he could not return to life as he had known it, having experienced the warmth of the woman. He knew what he meant if no one else did.

A man approached, old, with a crazed smile. "Your mother was a saint. A saint. I should know. I lived in that building your family managed. Every morning I bowed down to her. Yes, I did. I owe everything to her. Everything. She loved me more than life itself. Do you know the first thing she ever said to me? Well, do you?" The man speaking, as if lacking all understanding of where he was.

"I have no idea," Gideon said.

"'Get an education, young man. Get an education.' Those were her very first words to me. The very first. And they changed my life."

"I'm so happy for you," Gideon said.

"Don't be happy for me. Be happy for yourself that you had such a wonderful mother. Be good for her every day of your life. Be good."

"Yes, of course," Gideon said.

"Smile, man. Smile. Let me see you smile now. God doesn't love a man who doesn't smile."

Gideon showed the man the smile that he could.

"Keep working on that smile. Keep working on it," the man said.

Gideon moved away, the man with his B movie mentality about the virtue of ma an oedipal irritant but of no particular consequence. Such people blindsided you from time to time, spewing words that followed from an agenda they themselves might hardly be aware of and lacked the capacity or the willingness to explore. Thus, the self-appointed face police of America, ready at any time to bust you, even at a memorial service.

The noonday sun had bleached the streets white, the air heavy with humidity and unmoving. A line had formed, mostly men and a few women waiting for the side door around the corner to open so they could descend the stairs to the basement for their meal. Lives reduced to relieving physical hunger. Or did they suffer the torment of regret for the whole fabric of the lives they had lost, if they ever had such lives to begin with?

"Sometimes it's hard to find any profit in thinking about the poor. All I really want to do is run from an insoluble problem back to my air-conditioned apartment," he said. Pastor Grimner had appeared on the front steps of the church, shed of her clerical robe and wearing only jeans and a white blouse.

"You're not alone with that feeling," she said.

"We had a mayor some years ago who, when he came into office, took a broom to the streets and swept up all the human refuse. They were taken in giant dumpsters to some remote site for disposal. That's the way it felt, anyway. And by and large, the citizenry acquiesced. Compassion for the homeless had disappeared. They were now simply an eyesore, an affront to the senses. We wanted them to go away."

"You have a lot on your mind."

"And you? Do you have a lot on your mind?"

"Them," she said, nodding toward the food line. "Come back and we'll talk."

Come back? Talk? He supposed he could do that. He would offer her his history, as insubstantial as air. Tell her that in the long ago a childhood friend had joined this very church and invited him to a service of which he remembered not a thing, and that this friend later died from a drug overdose. Or he could tell her that he had walked daily past this church on his way to a nearby school or that across the street had been a pizza shop called Johnny's, where you could get the chewiest slice in all of Manhattan, and that Johnny now owned another shop some blocks north. If you looked real hard, you could see the young man in the old man Johnny had become. He would tell her that Symphony Space, on the other side of Broadway and just a block away, had once simply been the Symphony Theater, with no dance performances or readings or Gilbert and Sullivan productions, and that, as a teenager, he had seen *Divorce, Italian Style,* and eaten slabs of vanilla ice cream sandwiched between small waffles while seated in the balcony. Perhaps she would care to know that the Ninety-third Street subway entrance had been built as an extension of the Ninety-sixth Street station and led to the closing of the station two b locks south. These and other crown jewels of his experience would he lay before her.

"Don't you live near here?" Leah had come out on the church steps.

“Three blocks away.” He wanted to believe he was hearing nothing more in her question than what she had asked.

“Three blocks away and you couldn’t even invite us over?"

He hadn’t hugged his sister. He hadn’t comforted her. He hadn’t shown the good will and the love toward her that a brother should. She had lost someone important to her, and he was not helping. “My apartment is small, and I’m not quite prepared, but we can do that.”

“Never mind. We wouldn’t want to put you out. We wouldn’t want to ask anything of you,” she said.

“It wouldn’t be putting me out. It’s just that I’m not quite prepared.”

“You’re never prepared,” she replied.

Leah was having a hard time recognizing when something was over. That was all her words meant, he told himself. Like that night when she wanted to hang around at the Chinese restaurant for dessert though it was past midnight and the place was trying to close.

“Ingrid was my sister, too,” he said.

“You don’t have any sisters. You don’t have anyone.”

“You’re my sister.”

“I’ve never wanted to be your sister.”

It was terrible love when you could not admit your love, but their love was just that way.

“Am I intruding?” Jeanne had shown her face.

Though it was not for him to say, Gideon looked at her as if her whole life had been an intrusion.

“No, you came just in time. Where are Murray and Ellie and Moses? Will you run in and get them? I’m tired. I want to go,” Leah said.

"Well, OK," Jeanne said, not flying into Leah's face with insolence, as she did with Gideon, who stood by witnessing the marvel of Leah's appropriating power, that she could call others to her and claim them for her own.

And now here they came, one by one, out onto the steps, Moses and Jeanne and Ellie. The one he most wanted to see, Radiant Heat, was not alone but still in the custody of Murray. It didn't occur to him to hand her a card or to request that she call him. It didn't occur to him that he had any alternative but to let her walk out of his life forever.

There they all were, drawn to Leah as by a centrifugal force around which they orbited. Gideon watched, in particular, the radiant heat woman as she moved off with them across Broadway.

"Hey," he suddenly called, though it was more of a cry. The party by now had reached the traffic island in the middle of Broadway, where the flow of cars had resumed, stalling their progression. The woman turned, having heard, and others turned with her, as if the business meant for her might be for their ears as well, causing his voice and presence to wither on their inspection. Radiant Heat gave him a small wave, and then the group moved on.

He could feel the depression coming on, calling to him now. Not even the sun powerful enough to burn it away. Walking home, that feeling of being a ghost upon the earth returned. How beastly the sun, scorching everything beneath it. And what were these gross creations contributing to the general misery, the vent of some newly arrived retro diner blowing the hot stench of antibiotics and hormone-corrupted beef out over the sidewalk and those ceaselessly rampaging cars all up and down the boulevard? Best to find shelter, rely on the a/c and other gross creations in his own apartment to provide comfort, the apartment Leah hadn't come to and

Radiant Heat hadn’t come to and few came to anymore, not that many ever had. There he would sit with a cool glass of water, safe for the time being from the fire that awaited him as well.