

Exotic Music of the Belly Dancer

A Novel

By Brian Sweany

The Writer's Coffee Shop 
Publishing **H**ouse

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Jennifer McGuire

This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, John H. Sweany, the greatest husband, the greatest father, and the greatest man I will ever know.

Miss you, Dad. Always

Since the earliest days of mankind, when movement was more natural than speech, dancing . . . has been the easiest and most popular form of communication. The Belly as Media. The Belly as Message . . . the center of birth and sexual movement. The place of the beginnings.

–Julie Russo Mishkin and Marta Schill, *The Compleat Belly Dancer*

Perhaps the most elusive and the most prominent part of a belly dancer's performance is the dancer's relationship with her self, and the communication of what that relationship is to the self. Fewer barriers allow more direct contact with the audience. The magic begins with the ability of the dancer to be open and honest in her expression . . . In the end, there is only the perceived difference between the audience and the performer.

–Yemaya, “In Touch,” *The Belly Dance Book: Rediscovering the Oldest Dance*

In my father's record collection, though, there were several belly dancing albums . . . When we were little, my brother, Robert, and I would dare each other to sneak peeks at the dancers on the covers; though it had never been expressly forbidden, it made us feel like we were doing something bold and naughty and usually sent us giggling to our rooms with brazen and glee.

–Anne Thomas Soffee, *Snake Hips: Belly Dancing and How I Found True Love*

Prologue 1986

My morning gets off to its usual start. I wake up. Masturbate. Eat some bacon and eggs. Drink a cup of creamed and sugared coffee. Have a frank discussion with my father about his testicles.

“A vasectomy *reversal*? Are you kidding me?”

“Oh come on, son. It’s not that big of a deal.” A bi-folded pamphlet sits on the table. Dad opens and reads the pamphlet aloud. “ ‘A small incision is made in the scrotal skin over the old vasectomy site. The two ends of the vas deferens are found and freed from the surrounding scar tissue.’ ”

He offers me the pamphlet. Something resembling a beat up three-wood taunts me on page two. I shake my head. “No, thanks.”

“That right there is the vas . . .” Dad runs his finger along the shaft of the three-wood. He taps once on the top of the club. “Then you have your epididymis and your testicle.” He points to the three-wood’s shaft one more time. “My vas is currently severed, and they’re going in and sewing it back together, more or less.”

I cringe at the thought of Dad’s nutsack getting sliced open. Mom hovers off to the side of the kitchen. She sips on her coffee in between bites of toast, reluctant to enter the fray. I don’t let her off that easy.

“You put him up to this?”

“Henry, your father and I have been talking about this for years.”

“Oh really?” I cringe at the sound of my given name. I hate the name

Henry. Hank is the only name to which I’ve answered for pretty much my entire fifteen years on this planet, having cast aside “Henry David” and my mother’s literary pretense—she’s never even fucking read *Walden*—at the precise moment I split her vagina with my freakishly oversized melon.

Dad sips his coffee. “Yes, really. Besides, if anyone’s at risk, it’s your

mother, not me.”

“Okay then, Mom, why the sudden interest in suicide?”

“Suicide?” Mom shrugs. She’s wearing her old cotton bathrobe and Dad’s slippers. She shuffles across the linoleum floor and sits next to me at the kitchen table. “They’ve made a lot of advances in prenatal care since I had you and your sister.”

“They have?”

“Sure.”

“Jesus, Mom! Last time I checked, I was born in 1971, not 1871. You had all kinds of problems with me and Jeanine. And Grandma Louise, what did she have, eight miscarriages or something?”

“My mother only had three miscarriages.”

“Only three? That’s a relief. How’s that twin sister of yours doing by the way?” It’s a callous reference to the premature twin my mother never knew. I’m curious as to how Mom’s twin would have turned out. It’s hard to picture anyone else looking back at me with that round, cherub-like face and its fountain of teased, hair sprayed, and overly dyed blondish hair. Harder still to imagine another woman dumb enough to contemplate reentering a world measured in dirty diapers and ear infections at the age of forty-one.

But Mom is unwavering.

“Women with much worse track records than mine are having babies nowadays.”

“Worse? Have you looked in the mirror lately?” “As a matter of fact, I have.”

“When’s the last time you just went for a walk?” “Can’t recall.”

“You can’t recall because you *don’t* walk. You don’t take care of yourself.”

“Oh, Hank, stop it!” Mom shakes her head, as if merely denying she’s sedentary and bookish might alter reality.

“Stop what?” I reach over and grab her wrist. She’s wearing a gold watch Dad gave her for their fifteenth anniversary two years ago. I turn her wrist so she can see the face of the watch. “What time you got? Because I’m looking at someone’s biological clock, and it says about quarter ’til midnight!”

“Quarter ’til midnight, my ass.” Grandpa George throws the morning newspaper on the table. Although our family has been in America for close to two hundred years, Grandpa looks fresh off the boat—a freckled, strawberry blond Irishman even at age eighty-one. His thick, Coke-bottle glasses magnify the size of his eyes to comical proportions. He’s more blind than farsighted at this point in his life.

Grandpa sips his coffee. “If that goddamn kid throws my paper in the bushes one more goddamn time . . .”

“Thanks, Dad,” Mom says.

“Thanks nothing,” Grandpa says. “Boy shouldn’t be talking to his mother like that.”

We moved Grandpa into our first floor guest room last year. Dad said it was the right thing to do. Grandpa had lived alone since Grandma Eleanor died of cancer in ’81, but sometime after the beginning of Reagan’s second term, he started forgetting things. He’d go out to meet his friends for breakfast, walking the same route along Kentucky Avenue on the southwest side of Indianapolis that he’d been walking for fifty years, and he’d get lost. Kentucky Avenue was no longer the best place to get lost. The old neighborhood wasn’t safe anymore. His favorite neighborhood stores—Murphy’s Mart, Woolworth’s, and Linder’s Ice Cream—had all gone out of business and been replaced by Mega Liquor World, Instamatic Cash Checking, and Rent-to-Own Furniture and Appliance Store. The Laundromat that used to have quarter washes and the machine that dispensed free popcorn now had ten-dollar hookers and a machine that dispensed fifty-cent condoms, and the house across the street that used to leak puppies and shirtless toddlers now leaked crack addicts and shirtless adults.

Within months, Dad’s selfless act started backfiring. Incontinence, feebleness, dementia—Grandpa George’s body and mind has been giving out on him, but we’re always there to patch him up. The other night, I caught Dad hovering over Grandpa’s bed when he slept. I asked him what he was doing. He told me he was praying for God to make his father whole again. Even though we keep starting over with a puzzle that’s missing another piece, Dad refuses to entertain the idea of a nursing home or assisted care living. Our

house has started to reek of urine—the smell of mortality and a son’s well-intentioned but misguided love.

A part of me cherishes Grandpa George living with us, and not because he’s a convenient scapegoat when Mom and Dad discover half-empty bottles in the liquor cabinet. Grandpa was my best friend for the first ten years of my life, and we had our rituals. Every Saturday morning when I was a kid we’d walk to Mr. Dan’s Diner for breakfast. We’d sit with Grandpa’s World War II buddies—guys with inexplicable nicknames like Beef, Old Crow, Buddha, and Skeckel—and we’d order biscuits and gravy with coffee. The gravy at Mr. Dan’s had too much pepper for most people, but that was the way Grandpa and I liked it. After our breakfast, we’d hop on a bus to downtown. Our schedule was pretty much the same every Saturday. We walked through the Children’s Museum and ate lunch at Shapiro’s, the old Jewish deli in downtown Indianapolis—Grandpa George’s favorite restaurant. After lunch, we stopped in St. John’s to kneel down and say some Hail Mary’s, and then Grandpa would buy me a model airplane at L.S. Ayres.

At the end of the day, Grandpa and I would get on a bus and then hop off a couple miles short of his house. This gave us time to pick boysenberries from bushes along the railroad tracks on Kentucky Avenue for Grandma Eleanor’s pies. The crickets chirping and that creosote smell of railroad ties would always make me think of summer. One day Grandpa told me the boysenberry bushes had come from the seeds left by passenger trains “dumping out their crappers.” I stopped picking boysenberries after that.

But back to the kitchen and my father’s testicles.

Grandpa George sets his coffee cup down on the table. “Now you listen here, Johnny, uh, Hank. What your mom and dad do behind closed doors is their own business.”

“Johnny-uh-hank” has been Grandpa’s unintentional nickname for me my whole life, as he never quite remembers I’m his grandson until halfway into my name.

“Well, Grandpa, I assumed Dad made it my business when he shoved his vas deferens in my face.”

“Take it easy, son,” Dad says, smiling. Smiling! And it isn’t just any smile. It’s one of those irrepressible John Fitzpatrick smiles that lights up a room while at the same time diffusing any situation. Dad tilts his head down, still smiling. He arches his dark, I-know-better-than-you eyebrows and points his pronounced Fitzpatrick nose at me.

“I’m going in for the procedure on Monday morning, and your Mom and I are taking this one day at a time. I only have a fifty–fifty shot at even regaining my fertility.”

He says *fertility* with an unmistakable reverence in his voice, as if his sperm is akin to the holiest of holy oils as opposed to what I dispense daily like party confetti. Chrism, jism—what’s the fucking difference?

“Whatever, Pops. They’re your balls.”

“Henry David Fitzpatrick!”

She nails me across the back of my bedhead with her open palm. It’s

more annoying than punitive, but it gets the job done. “Dammit, Mom!” She smacks me again. I bite my tongue. Mom’s raised hand is cocked and ready. Dad shoves two pieces of bacon into his mouth, smothering his laughter. Grandpa left the room unnoticed, shuffling out for his morning walk around the neighborhood with his sassafras cane.

Dad washes down his bacon with a swallow of coffee. He looks out the kitchen window at the ankle-high bluegrass waving in the morning breeze, its silver-green tapering off at the edge of the small lake behind our house. “That lawn isn’t going to cut itself.”

I grumble as I walk outside. I raise the garage door, then step out on the driveway. The morning dew on the grass mocks me with its promise of matted clumps clogging the lawnmower and two hours of frustration and under-my-breath profanity. The mower greets me with predictable ambivalence. A dozen futile pulls on the starter send me back into the house.

I don’t know when Dad ceded lawn duties over to me. The transition was imperceptible. Yesterday, I was a little kid sitting in the family room wearing my Miami Dolphins helmet and cursing the New York Jets—this was back in the late 70s when Shula was God in my world, long before the Colts came to

town—while Dad was outside coating himself in layers of grass, fertilizer, and gasoline. Today, I'm a teenager, no longer a Dolphins fan but still not enough of a Colts fan to care, bursting in on Mom and Dad coating themselves in pre-sex sweat.

I wish I could say this is the first time I've walked in on them. Hell, I wish I could say this is the first time I've walked in on them this week.

“Seriously, you two? I'm outside for five minutes and you're already dry-humping on the couch?” The inherent repulsiveness of parental copulation sends an acidic bacon and coffee burp up from my stomach.

“What's the problem, son?” Dad stands up, erection in tow, trying to cover himself. His robe leaves little to the imagination, so he turns sideways with his back away from me.

“Well, other than my disintegrating psyche, the stupid lawnmower won't start.”

“You prime her?” Dad asks.

“A bunch of times.”

“You probably flooded the engine. Is the sparkplug connected?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“She have plenty of gas in her?”

I shake my head. “You do realize I'm *not* retarded, right?”

“Understood.” Dad adjusts his robe over his still noticeable bulge. Mom gives his butt a squeeze as he walks past, pouring salt into my psychological wounds. “Let's have a look, then.”

There are few more timeless traditions than men yelling at inanimate objects. We stand in the driveway pleading with the four-wheeled, two-cycle engine to obey our commands. Dad can't get the mower started either, but he loves the old machine. Grandpa George bought it when Dad was in high school. It's one of those yellow metal Lawn-Boys from the mid-60s that manages to hurl everything it finds—sticks, rocks, dog poop, bird carcasses—back in your face. I don't like the mower so much.

Dad gives the starter a few more tugs. He comes as close as he's capable to cussing, managing a “sheee-oot.” Mom yells out the garage door, interrupting our exercise in futility with the news she's put on a second pot of coffee.

“Sounds good to me.” Dad pushes the mower back into the garage.

I nod. “Don’t have to ask me twice.”

My father looks at me. I look at him. We exchange wordless smiles. I enjoy Dad’s company more than I’m willing to admit.

Part I
1987-1989

Chapter 1

My family is semi-nomadic.

When I was born we lived in an apartment on the south side of Indianapolis off Thompson Road. It shared a parking lot with a Red Lobster. Our next door neighbor, Uncle Angelo, was a fat, bald guy with black-rimmed glasses and a salt-and-pepper mustache. He tended bar at the Milano Inn but moonlighted as the Fitzpatrick family's guardian angel. When someone broke into our apartment when Dad was out of town Mom grabbed me and went straight to Uncle Angelo's place.

"Debbie, you-anna-uh-Hank stay here with-uh-yur Aunt-uh-Pat," he said with his thick Italian brogue. He went over to our place in full crime-stopping gear—white ribbed tank top, stained boxer shorts, loaded rifle on his hip. Uncle Angelo's wife's name was Pasqualina or "Aunt Pat" to everyone who knew her. She fed me my first solid food—pasta in marinara sauce.

After the place on Thompson we moved a couple miles south to Southport, an incorporated town inside Indianapolis that got the *South* part of its name because it's on the far Southside of Indy and the *port* part of its name apparently because the town's founders had a perverse sense of irony about having a port in the middle of a waterless stretch of farmland. Our backyard overlooked the playground at St. Ambrose, the Catholic parish my family attended for most of the first ten years of my life. My sister, Jeanine, was born when I was three years old. Mom wrapped our piss-yellow, velvety living room couch in white sheets for Jeanine's first formal photo shoot. She was too fat to smile.

After I turned four we moved outside the city. Claiming it was "an unbelievable opportunity," Dad took a sales job with a Chrysler dealership in Kokomo. Mom had to pull up the olive-green shag carpet in our two-bedroom ranch because the floors smelled like cat urine, while Dad found out the deal he got on our house had less to do with his negotiating skills and more to do with the previous owner hanging herself in the garage. There was a large, gray gas tower crowned by red-and-white checkers that served as Mom's primary guidepost when she drove around the city. She spent most of

her day at the mall with me and Jeanine in lieu of fraternizing with our neighbors who had cigarettes permanently attached to their lips and drank Budweiser for breakfast. Mom was so depressed she started taking belly dancing lessons. It would be the only time in my mother's life she would feel inclined to do anything that could be interpreted as *exercise*, so essentially we should have been on suicide watch.

On some afternoons Mom would take me to see Dad at the dealership.

Dad showed me off to the wrinkled suits and grease monkeys, who I thought were the coolest bunch of guys I'd ever met. But mostly I stayed at home and did my best to stay out of the way of my mom's misery. My favorite thing to do was skip rocks across the creek running through our backyard, at least until a mosquito bit Grandma Eleanor and she almost died from encephalitis. We fled Dad's "unbelievable opportunity" after less than six months. As we were driving out of town for the last time, Dad thought Jeanine and I were sleeping when he pointed to his rearview mirror and said to Mom, "Hey Debbie, did you know *Kokomo* pronounced backward is *oh my cock?*"

After Kokomo, Dad got a job selling Mercedes while his family sought refuge in a newer neighborhood back in Southport just off Meridian Street called Clematis Gardens. No matter how many times Mom pointed out "clematis" was a flower and not a sexually transmitted disease, Dad still snickered at the name. The summer after my sixth birthday, we moved into an old farmhouse north of County Line Road, during which time I attended St. Ambrose through all of elementary school.

St. Ambrose had separate girls' and boys' monkey bars on opposite sides of the playground. The boys would "launch" periodic attacks into the girls' monkey bars, pretending with our outstretched arms and fake propeller noises to be fighter planes as we weaved in and out of the biting and scratching flurry of plaid skirts and white oxfords. In the first grade, I fell in love with Kimberly Thompson after she rescued me, bloodied and torn, following a kamikaze dive into the girls' monkey bars. As a token of my devotion, I stole a silver tin of consecrated hosts from the church sacristy for Kimberly. Stealing the body of Christ for love—where does a guy go from there to impress the ladies?

Kimberly refused my gift. She always did the right thing, except the time she swallowed aspirin when she had chicken pox. Mom made me wear my First Communion outfit to Kimberly's funeral—a navy-blue polyester suit with a powder-blue butterfly collar. I remember standing at the funeral and Mom whispering to me that Kimberly would have thought I was handsome. I remember thinking her casket was too small and that I hated my haircut.

We moved to Louisville, Kentucky the summer before my fifth grade year. Dad felt bad about moving out of state with his mother, Grandma Eleanor, getting sick. But the financial security afforded him as general manager of an International Harvester franchise in northern Kentucky was too good to pass up.

Our new house stood on a wooded hilltop just off Highway 42. Uncle Mitch and Aunt Ophelia drove down from Indianapolis to help us unpack. Uncle Mitch was not my real uncle, but Dad was an only child and Mitchell Hass had been Dad's best friend since they were kids. A month after I was born, Mom and Dad asked Mitch to be my godfather, so calling him "Uncle" became an afterthought. Three years after that, they extended the same courtesy to his wife, "Aunt" Ophelia, after Jeanine was born.

Our first night in the house, there was a thunderstorm that knocked out our power. Dad went down in the basement to check the fuse box. He left me alone with Uncle Mitch in my bedroom. It wasn't the first time or the last time Dad left me alone with him, and it wasn't the first or last time Uncle Mitch took advantage of the situation. My godfather handed me his beer and moved next to me on my bed. He winked at me and said, "Our little secret, Hank." It was my first beer. It tasted awful, but I kept the beer on my lips and drank the whole thing. I stared at the ceiling while Uncle Mitch put his hands down the front of my underwear. He liked touching me. A godfather's love measured by the length of his godson's erection.

Our little secret, Hank.

Dad cried when he told us the news. The owner of the International franchise fired Dad because his employees preferred Dad's leadership to that of the guy signing their checks—plus Dad busted said owner having drinks with his mistress. Dad was rewarded a nice severance package from a judge who agreed Dad's former boss was a complete asshole. It was the second time I

ever saw my father cry. The other time was when Grandma Eleanor died. Our Pentecostal cleaning lady, Charlotte Fayne, sang “The Old Rugged Cross” at the funeral. Charlotte wore her hair and skirts long because the Devil had a place reserved in hell for shorthaired women who wore pants.

We moved from Louisville back to the south side of Indianapolis—Beech Grove this time, a town that’s, of course, devoid of trees. Dad took a job as a stockbroker for Paine Webber. He worked sixteen hour days in a three by five cubicle doing a job a monkey flipping a coin could perform with equal competence. Dad’s new career came and went in a span of less than two years.

Those two years were much kinder to me. In addition to being the home of the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, Beech Grove staked its claim to a Chinese restaurant with the state’s largest indoor Koi pond and a Catholic school with the state’s largest pool of pubescent hormones. My seventh and eighth grade years at Our Lady of Perpetual Help were what I classify as my awkward, albeit enriching, years. Faced with the prospect of fading into adolescent obscurity, I compensated better than most for bad acne and twenty extra pounds. I quit football and became a wrestler, a sport my singlet-wearing fat ass inexplicably peddled into a higher-than-deserved social status. My sly sense of humor disarmed my peers and teachers into thinking I was harmless, and thanks to a couple years of cotillion, I could pull out dance moves that embarrassed the guys and enflamed the girls.

After a three-month flirtation with an eighth grade volleyball player during which I was crowned King of All Seventh Graders, I became drawn to Twyla Levine, a tall, brunette vixen who sat next to me in Mr. Marker’s seventh grade class. On an overnight field trip to St. Louis, Twyla and I made out during a game of spin the bottle. Later, on the bus ride home to Beech Grove, I put my hand up Twyla’s shirt and managed to fiddle with the elastic on her panties. Someone witnessed the panties episode, so by the time we got back to Beech Grove, Twyla had given me a hand job while I fingered her in the back of the bus. None of this was true, but over the years, as the story followed me and took on a life of its own, I never tried very hard to deny the rumors. Years later, I would have sworn on a stack of Bibles I lost my virginity in the back of that bus. True or not, you have to admit the image of a thirteen-year-old stumbling around a bus looking for a place to stick his dick has a humorously scandalous quality to it.

The truth was Twyla did give me an orgasm. After I got back from St. Louis I locked myself in the bathroom with Twyla—or at least, Twyla’s seventh grade class picture cut out of my yearbook and taped to the body of 1984 Playboy Playmate of the Year, Barbara Edwards. Twyla’s ambitions were “To fulfill my dream as a promising artist and actress and to contribute my share of help to the starving children of the world.” Her turn-ons were “Being a Sigma Chi sister of USC, drawing, traveling, and attending musicals.”

Even though I was a Notre Dame fan, I let the USC comment slide. Anything for Twyla.

In the wake of Dad’s stock broker experiment, a couple investors whose portfolios quadrupled on his watch set up my father as president of his own car dealership. We moved, again, putting down what turned out to be permanent roots in Empire Ridge, a mill town about halfway to Cincinnati. We said our driveway good-byes to our Beech Grove neighbors, a brand-new Oldsmobile Custom Cruiser station wagon hunched low over the tires with the weight of a couple more years of memories. I mailed a good-bye letter to Twyla, outing myself as the town pervert with the affecting words, “How about you take a picture of yourself naked and send it to me?” And in the fall of 1985, with the “Fitzpatrick Oldsmobile” marquee hoisted and lit and my family settling down after its eighth move in twelve years, I enrolled as a freshman at Empire Ridge Public High School.

It’s been more than two infant-free years since Dad reversed his sterility. Much like his failed attempts to cajole disinterested sperm cells into my mother’s worn-out uterus, I’m still finding my stride in Empire Ridge. I grew ten inches without gaining a pound, my complexion cleared up, and I carry one hundred and seventy pounds of taut muscle over a five foot ten inch frame. Student council, the wrestling team, Catholic youth group—everything to me is an opportunity for initiation. And there is no faster road to acceptance in a sleepy Indiana town than getting drunk, something I try to do as much as possible.

I hold the shot of Jim Beam to the light. Its amber glow is the color of hope—my hope it will somehow magically disappear without having to touch my lips. A goofy-looking guy sits next to me. He’s skinny, skinnier than me at least, and maybe a half inch taller, with a round face and hair sprouting random cowlicks rather than curls.

“Drink it, you fucking pussy.”

“Shut the fuck up, Hatch.”

Elias Hatcher has been my best friend since I met him at freshman orientation. Hatch is your typical child of divorce. His mother is a recovering hippy who now raises free-range ostriches somewhere in Oklahoma, his father a Vietnam vet turned semipro sport fisherman who’s spent the better part of the 80s chain smoking clove cigarettes and crawling out from the bottom of a liquor bottle. Hatch’s every move, at least in public when he has an audience, is a premeditated, loud, and more often than not obnoxious attempt to draw attention to himself. He is overly protective and sentimental toward his closest friends to the point of making you feel uncomfortable. Stick Jimmy Buffett’s “A Pirate Looks at Forty” in the tape deck, and Hatch is hugging you while bawling his eyes out— guaranteed. If you’re unwilling to commit any impulsive act—shotgun six beers in a row, jump off high bridges into shallow water, or drop everything and take a road trip because you’ve snagged some warm Stroh’s with your fake ID and need an excuse to drink it—Hatch invokes the word *pals* and you have no say in the matter.

Like tonight.

“We’ve almost downed this entire half gallon.” I hold up the nearly empty bottle of Jim Beam save for an inch of bourbon—the remains of a sobriety lost hours earlier. “How about we take a break?”

“Pals, Fitzy.” Hatch grabs the half gallon from me. He finishes it, drinking it straight from the bottle. “Bring it!”

“Come on, Hatch.”

“Pals!”

“But I can’t feel my legs.”

“Pals!”

“Ah, fuck it.” I open my mouth and raise the shot glass to my lips. I throw the warm brown liquid down the back of my throat, doing whatever I can to prevent the harsh, woody bite of cheap whiskey from gagging me. I slam the empty shot glass down.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Hatch offers me a large cup of Mountain Dew. “Chaser?”

I nod, grabbing the cup. I drink the lemony soda until it runs out the sides of my mouth and down my face.

Last weekend Hatch and I got kicked out of the big hockey matchup versus Prep. Half-cooked on a bottle of Jägermeister we split before the game, we started taking liberties with the last names of the Prep players. By the middle of the third period, Mrs. Pocock tired of the demonstrative harassment of her son and had us removed.

Founded as Whiskeyville by a couple drunken Scotch-Irish trappers in the eighteenth century, Empire Ridge was renamed in the 1920s in honor of the large quarry just outside of town that supplied every inch of limestone to the Empire State Building's exterior. Empire Ridge Preparatory Academy and Empire Ridge Public High School, or simply "Prep" and "the Ridge," are separated by a mere three and a half miles.

If the stereotypes are to be believed—and given that I have neither the time nor inclination to get to know most people beyond their subjectively imposed stereotypes—Prep is a bastion of entitled fucksticks. The school's coffers are lined by old money trust funds and new money CEOs who buy their "Prepsters" Beamers on their sixteenth birthdays. Meanwhile we "Ridgies" aspire to little more than attending the next pig roast, slugging pure grain alcohol, and shouting as racecars make left turns for three hours. Excepting the fact I have my own personal automobile pipeline courtesy of Dad, most of us Ridgies drive fifteen-year-old cars inherited from an older sibling—Camaros, Firebirds, Dodge Royal Monacos, and trucks. Lots and lots of trucks.

After the hockey game we were eating our way to sobriety at the McDonald's down the street when two Prep girls, one a petite brown-haired girl named Carrie, the other a taller brunette named Mary, introduced themselves. They were new in town, their fathers both engineers who'd transferred in from the East Coast. After a half hour of dedicated flirting on both sides, Mary invited us to her parents' cottage that following Saturday on Sweetwater Lake, punctuating her invitation with four very unfortunate words.

"Bring whoever you want."

Hatch has procured a new half gallon of Beam. He pours himself another shot. “Some party,” he says.

I wipe the traces of Mountain Dew from my mouth. “Yeah.”

By my rough calculations, “bring whoever you want” has translated into two hundred and fifty people since the party started. Hatch and I sit at a table on the second floor balcony overlooking the carnage. Every potted plant is dumped out on the floor, creating a carpet of peace lilies, rubber trees, philodendrons, and potting soil. There are zero exposed surfaces. Wine cooler bottles line the fireplace, cigarette butts floating in every third or fourth bottle. A case or so of shotgunned beer cans are piled high in the kitchen sink, and multiple decks of playing cards are crawling among the refuse.

I’ve been drinking off and on since we got here this morning, some eight hours ago. I’m wearing nothing but a towel. Someone bet me twenty bucks to walk out to the middle of Sweetwater, which is half-frozen at best. I won the bet, but I lost my clothes, plunging chest-deep into the lake as I was walking back to shore.

Steve Miller Band’s *Greatest Hits 1974–1978* starts up on the back deck of the house, replacing *Fore!* by Huey Lewis and the News, which somehow made the playlist. “Swingtown” is a few chords old before someone skips to “Jungle Love.” The techno introduction echoes across Sweetwater. Hatch and I simultaneously mimic the whistle with our fingers in our mouths, transitioning to dueling air guitars, and then dueling air drums. Aside from us both flubbing the second line and saying “you thought you’d been lonely before” instead of “you thought you had known me before,” we sound pretty good.

Hatch ducks into the bathroom, reemerging with two beers in one hand and a set of car keys in the other. “Shotgun?” He pretends as if I even have the option of saying no.

This time around I don’t even bother going through the motions. “Give it here.”

Hatch hands me the beer. We each take turns cutting a quarter-sized hole in the bottom half of our cans with his dirty car key.

Hatch drives a serious piece-of-shit Volkswagen Beetle that burns through a couple fan belts every month. His idea of a car stereo is me holding a boom box in my lap and making sure his fourth copy of Van Halen's *OU812* doesn't get eaten by his ravenous tape player. Hatch and I have developed a growing affection for Sammy Hagar, much to the distaste of our diehard David Lee Roth friends. Although Van Halen's self-titled '78 debut has to be considered one of rock's all-time great albums, lately I look to Roth less for his debatable musicianship and more for the gratuitous D-cups and G-strings in his music videos.

Hatch asks if I'm ready. Grunting in reply, I put my mouth on the opening of the can, careful not to cut my lips on the jagged aluminum edges. I pop the tab on the other side of the can and suck the beer through the opening. One full beer down in maybe five seconds. I let out a relieved belch. Hatch leaves a good three or four swallows in his can as he crushes it and throws it on the floor.

We work our way through three more beers. I point to the foam dripping out of his third can. "Fucking cheater." I punctuate the accusation with a loud, wet belch.

As is the natural order of a party in southern Indiana, Johnny Cougar's *Uh-huh* finds its way to the front of the playlist. The opening guitar riff of "Pink Houses" commands a wave of dutiful shouts and catcalls in the house. Although most Ridgies choose to defer to the more sentimental "Jack and Diane" or the more obvious "Small Town," for me and Hatch it doesn't get any better than "Pink Houses." This is our "New York, New York," our "Yellow Rose of Texas," our "Old Kentucky Home."

Hatch and I stand up. When "Pink Houses" plays, you're required to stand up. We hold our beers high in the air, crooning to no one in particular.

"Ahh, but ain't that America, for you and me . . ."

"Hank?"

Hatch and I turn to the sound of the voice. It's coming from the master bedroom. It's Mary.

"Yeah?"

Mary steps out of the room, my shirt and pants in her right hand. "I think

your clothes are dry. You want to come in and, uh, get dressed?”

“You tired of me walking around half-naked or something?”

Mary smiles and winks. “I’m hardly tired of that, Henry.” She turns and walks back into the bedroom.

I stand up. Hatch stands up as well, shaking his head. “Henry?” He punches me in the shoulder, then sings, “Little pink houses, for my pal, Fritzzy!”

“Oh, shut up.” I pretend as if the girl who has just invited me into her room to get undressed has not been flirting with me all day.

“Don’t forget this.” Hatch picks my beat-up leather wallet off the table and throws it at me. “Try to be careful in there.”

“Careful?” I feel the semi-permanent impression of the condom that’s been in there for upward of three years. “It’s not like she’s going to eat me.” “She might only be sixteen, but she’s an East Coast girl,” Hatch says.

“There’s no telling what she’ll do to you.”

Mary is sitting on the edge of the bed, smoking a cigarette. With her brunette hair she looks like a much younger, tanning bed version of Erin Gray—the *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* Erin Gray as opposed to the *Silver Spoons* Erin Gray. I try to picture her in one of Erin Gray’s signature skintight bodysuits, although the elongated cigarette in Mary’s left hand and the bottle of Heineken in her right skews the fantasy. “Here,” Mary says, patting the bed with her left hand. “Have a seat.”

I stumble forward. The alcohol in my system has made the outer edges of her face fuzzy. I manage to find my way to the bed and sit down beside her.

“Smoke?” Mary hands me a long white cigarette.

“Sure.” I roll the cigarette between my fingers. I grab the pack off the bed and hold it up to the light. “Menthols?”

Mary nods toward the closet to her right. “It’s the parents’ stash.”

“Please, allow me.” With a quick roll of Mary’s thumb a small tongue of fire ticks the end of my cigarette. She never looks at the cigarette, staring into my eyes and then down to my lips—textbook flirting. I stare at the cigarette—textbook avoidance.

Mary leans off the side of the bed. I hear the rattle of ice cubes. She produces another bottle of Heineken. The bottle is already open, like she was expecting me. “Beer?”

“Of course.” I take a quick swig. The beer tastes like canned corn, like all Heineken does in my opinion, but I pretend to like it. “Pretty fancy beer. Part of the parents’ stash, too?”

“Uh-huhhhh.” Her affirmative is more of a moan than a response. She sips her beer and then licks her lips. Her hand has somehow found its way onto my leg.

“Look, Mary, I—”

“You want to watch a movie?” Mary grabs my beer and sits it on the floor. I say nothing more, and I sit down beside her.

The videos are stacked on top of the television. Mary suggests *Peggy Sue Got Married*. I suggest *Hoosiers*. Somehow we decide *Crocodile Dundee* is a good compromise.

“Here you go.” Mary hands me my boxers and jeans but not my shirt.

“Thanks.” I maintain an awkward modesty for the moment, pulling my boxers and jeans on with my towel still attached at the waist. I stuff my wallet in my back pocket.

Mary is neither awkward nor modest in her intent. “Oh, you’re no fun.”

We sit on the floor in front of the bed. A half hour into the film, Mary has wedged herself under my arm, wrapping her right leg around my left leg. We are at the part when Sue Charlton tells Mick Dundee she can make it in the Outback on her own. Mick lets her go, but hangs back out of sight. Sue gets tired, takes a break by a watering hole, and undoes her pants. She’s wearing a black one-piece swimsuit, but with a thong back that’s all but swallowed up by her beautiful rotund ass.

As if that moment could have gotten any better, a crocodile lunges at Sue Charlton. Mary flinches, burying her face in my chest. She isn’t scared so much as looking for her opening. She runs her pursed lips up my chest, and

then starts nibbling the side of my neck. She presses her chest against mine. I can feel Mary's erect nipples beneath her shirt because she isn't wearing a bra. Mary finds her way to my fly as Mick Dundee saves his lady-in-distress. She unbuttons one button, then two, then a third. She is inside my jeans and past the slit in my boxers before I even know what's happening. We kiss but just for a second or two before she goes back to work on my neck. She kisses my neck and then starts to move down my chest. She bites my nipples, licks my navel, then . . .

"Wait a second, Mary." I push her away with my forearm and tuck myself inside my boxers, all in the same motion. "We can't do this."

"What?" Mary says.

The blood coursing through my drunk, engorged erection is equally taken aback with my decision. But this is not going to happen.

"I don't know what to say." I stand up, buttoning my fly. "I'm sorry."

Mary folds her arms in front of her chest. She seems more sad than angry. "Is it me? Did I do something wrong? I thought this is what you—"

"Oh no, Mary," I say. "It's not you at all." I offer my hand to her. She takes it, standing. We sit face-to-face on the bed.

"Then what's the problem?"

I scratch my chin. I grab the pack of menthols off the bed and pull out a cigarette. I offer it to Mary and light it for her. She takes a long, frustrated drag.

"My problem isn't so much a *what*," I say. "*It's a who.*"

"A who?" Mary blows her menthol disgust in my face. I wave it off, eyes squinting.

"Yeah, see, the thing is I kind of have a girlfriend." "Fuck you, Hank!"

"Mary, wait. Can I just—"

"Can you just what?"

"Can I, umm, have my shirt?"

Mary slams the door behind me as I walk out of the bedroom. I put on my clothes, scanning my general vicinity. No one is upstairs. Hatch has disappeared, which is a good thing. I'm not in the mood for him fucking with me, not to mention I still have an erection. I see the bathroom just to my right. I walk in, shut the door, and lock it.

I test the door, making sure the lock is secure. I pull my wallet out of my pants pocket. Inside is a picture of a headless belly dancer.

I was casually introduced to the record album *Exotic Music of the Belly Dancer* in the 1970s, back when my mom took belly dancing lessons in Kokomo. Soon thereafter, the album went into exile until Dad invested an obscene amount of money in a new stereo system and pulled his dusty old record collection out of the attic to justify his new investment.

The year was 1983. I had just finished listening to the *Urban Cowboy* movie soundtrack, an album I played on a regular basis from when I was nine years old until the LP disintegrated sometime in the mid-80s. I loved the album because it had the unedited version of the Charlie Daniels Band's "The Devil Went Down to Georgia" and my parents let me get away with screaming "son of a bitch" during the song. Granted, it isn't quite the glorious, profane karaoke experience of the *Grease* soundtrack. The song "Greased Lightning," which since 1978 has afforded me the opportunity to shout, without so much as a head-shaking reprisal, things like "you know that ain't no shit we'll be getting lots of tit," "you are supreme the chicks'll cream," and "you know that I ain't bragging she's a real pussy wagon."

For whatever reason that April day, only a few days after my twelfth birthday, I decided to stick *Urban Cowboy* toward the back of the collection rather than its usual place near the front with my parents' favorites: *Kenny Rogers Greatest Hits*, *Barry Manilow Live*, *Larry Gatlin & The Gatlin Brothers Greatest Hits*, *Helen Reddy's Greatest Hits (And More)*, the original Broadway cast recording of *Annie*, and of course Dad's prized *Chuck Mangione* albums. *Aside from Urban Cowboy and Grease, some Jim Croce, the soundtracks to Hair and Jesus Christ Superstar, a few Eagles albums, and exactly one Beatles album—A Hard Day's Night—my parents' taste in music sucks balls. When I slid my hand between the albums to make room for John*

Travolta in a black cowboy hat, a sexy headless belly dancer invited me into her world.

Even the album's title was fucking sexy: *Exotic Music of the Belly Dancer* by Mohammed El-Bakkar and His Oriental Ensemble. The album's title bar cut off the belly dancer's face, giving her an air of mystery. She appeared in profile on the cover, her body in the near perfect shape of a question mark. She was voluptuous and shirtless with silvery metallic cups crowning her smooth, bronzed breasts. Her abdomen muscles ran in a faint vertical line from her breasts to her navel. Below her navel she wore a small, red shimmy skirt fastened low on her hips and covered in dangling silver coins that matched her pasties. Finally, one solitary hand motioned behind her, fingers cupped and turned outward as if she were beckoning me to follow her.

I took the belly dancer to my bedroom and had my way with her.

When Dad told me he was phasing out his vinyls to make way for a cassette collection—a collection that, in continuing the Fitzpatrick musical tradition of sucking balls, would be dominated by compilations of movie and television theme songs—I took a box cutter to the front sleeve of *Exotic Music of the Belly Dancer*. For being folded and refolded into my wallet on multiple occasions over the last five years, my girl has held up pretty well. I hold on to her for emergency situations, like today.

The sink and toilet are to my left, a washer and dryer tucked in a closet to my right. Bright white crown moldings and baseboards trim walls of barn red. I reach for some toilet paper and undo my pants. Taking my erection in my hands, I look at my belly dancer.

Thanks to Mary, I'm pretty well primed, but I try to hold on as long as I can. I hover over the toilet, my pelvis thrusting, my pants pulled down to my knees. I close my eyes right when it starts.

I tuck the belly dancer back into my wallet. With a hand towel, I wipe the sweat off my face. I clean up and head downstairs.

Hatch is sitting on the family room couch watching a movie on the big screen projection television. Most of the crowd has cleared out. I try to sneak by him into the kitchen.

“Where the hell you think you’re going?” Hatch asks.

“Me?” I veer toward the couch, pretending as if this were my intention all along. I sit down. “Just looking for you.”

Hatch hands me a lukewarm, already opened beer. I force down a swallow of it. I wipe my mouth, looking at the animated image on the projection television. “What are you watching?”

“Some kind of cartoon.”

“That’s no ordinary cartoon. That’s *Fritz the Cat*.”

“Fritz the what?”

“Fritz the Cat. It was the first ever X-rated animated film.”

Hatch scratches his head. “Well, that explains a lot. I thought the dope was just making me see things. So this cartoon has a lot of psychedelic colors?”

“Yep.”

“And the occasional cow, pig, cat, or crow with enormous tits getting fucked by, what’s his name again?”

“Yep, a lot of big-breasted farm animals getting fucked by Fritz.”

“And a lot of them smoking weed?”

“Lots of weed smoking.”

“Okay, then . . .” Hatch pauses. He stares at the television. An effeminate crow shouts an expletive onscreen. Hatch sips his beer, sits it down on the coffee table. “But it still freaks me out.”

I force out one of those fake laughs, the kind you do when you’re thankful full frontal nudity, even the animated feline kind, can distract your buddy enough that he doesn’t remember to ask you—

“How’d it go with Mary, stud man?”

I play dumb. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t be a jackass.” Hatch punches me in the shoulder. “How was she?”

“Relax, dude.” I pull a bent menthol cigarette out of my back pocket. I light it with the still burning ember of a butt nesting in an ashtray on the coffee table.

“We just watched a movie.”

Hatch opens his mouth, speechless, but not for long, I suspect. He stands with his hands on his hips. “You’ve gotta be fist fucking me!”

“Nope.” I hold in a long drag of smoke. Man, I was one lame piece of shit.

Hatch points at me. “Man, you’re one lame piece of shit.”

“She’s just not my type.”

“Since when is drunk, hot, and naked not your type?”

He has a point. “I don’t know. I guess since . . . well, I don’t know.” “Since Laura maybe?”

Her name breaks the tenuous peace. “Listen, shithead.” I lurch up from the couch, so sudden and awkward the top of my head smacks the bottom of Hatch’s chin on the way up. “Leave her out of this!”

Hatch staggers back onto the couch. I hover over him, fists clenched, face reddening. He rubs his chin. “Jesus Christ, Fitzy. I’m just fucking with you.”

I relax my shoulders, the color already fading from my face. As always, this is the extent to which we argue, never beyond this point. I extend my hand to help him up. Hatch accepts the gesture.

“Sorry, buddy.” I pat him on the back. “Got any of that pot left?”

Hatch straightens his shirt. “Hello, remember me? I’m your best friend, Hatch, son of an alcoholic marine who’d whip my fucking ass if he ever

“So you’re *not* high right now?”

“I didn’t say that, did I? Yours truly is fucked up as a football bat.” Hatch motions to the backdoor. “Hockey team is out back lighting up.”

For whatever reason, our hockey team always has the best pot. I step aside, offering Hatch a path to the backdoor. “Ladies first, then.”

Hatch shakes his head, waves me off. “No, thanks. You go ahead. I need to come down off this buzz a little.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’m going to watch the rest of this movie, try to get my feet back under me.”

Hatch eyes the door to the upstairs bedroom as he says this. I pretend not to notice, but I know what he’s thinking. “Suit yourself.”

Chapter 2

“This is all Hatch’s fault, isn’t it?”

Dad made sure to wake me up early this morning, before my sister had to see anything. I’ve been back from the party for about five hours. I’m armed with a sleeve of Saltines, a glass of ginger ale, and one hell of a hangover. The smell of smoke and liquor is still on my breath, in my hair, in my clothes—the clothes I wore and slept in last night.

“Ease up, Dad.” I lift the ginger ale to my lips, drinking half the glass in one gulp. “Believe it or not, I’m perfectly capable of getting in trouble all by myself.”

The party at Sweetwater ended badly, at least for me. After I got high with the hockey team I walked in on Hatch losing his virginity to Mary on the bathroom floor. I hitched a ride home with the third-string goalie, trying not to replay in my mind the image of Hatch’s bare, sweaty ass bouncing up and down against Mary’s splayed legs, her feet propped against the edge of the toilet and the bathroom wall. I walked through the front door of my house around two a.m. to find Mom sitting in the family room. She told me my father was driving around Sweetwater looking for me. I tried to string a few words together before falling face first at her feet. Dad came home an hour later to find me passed out on the family room floor.

“How much did you drink yesterday?”

I bite down on a cracker. “Beats me, Dad. A case maybe?”

“A case . . . of beer?”

I look at my father like he’s one step away from the short bus. “Yes, it was beer.”

“Did you happen to think about anyone else but yourself last night?”

My throat constricts, the cracker sticking to the roof of my mouth.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ll tell you what it means.” Dad points at me. “Your father spent six

hours driving around town to three different houses that you or your friends were supposedly spending the night at, until he ended up at a house on Sweetwater Lake at two in the morning.”

I can tell Dad is pissed off. He always speaks in the third person when he’s pissed off.

I’m reminded of how bad we fucked things up. Yesterday morning I told Mom and Dad I was going sledding all day and then spending the night at Nicholas Truman’s house, Nick being my wrestling teammate. Nick told his parents he was going sledding and then spending the night at Joel Trudeau’s house, another wrestling teammate who I didn’t even hang out with. Joel, not in on the conspiracy, stayed home for family movie night and told his parents and my father sometime around midnight that he had no idea where we were. Meanwhile, a West German foreign exchange student named Marcus—name pronounced mar-KOOS who, like all European foreign exchange students, smells of armpit, swears in English at inappropriate times, and wears ugly bowling shoes—told his sponsor family he was going sledding and then spending the night at my house. From what I can surmise from Dad’s manic rambling, he drove up to Sweetwater Lake, walked in on Hatch and Mary in an amorous state, figured out I’d already left, and then snagged Nick Truman as a consolation prize.

“Six hours.” Dad points to my mother. She sits across the table from me, arms folded. “Meanwhile, a four months pregnant mother was up all night worried sick about her boy. I wonder when her son was drinking that twenty-fourth beer if he ever thought about the possibility of his mother losing another baby.”

I can’t believe Dad has the balls to even say this. Hell, his balls are the whole problem. I thought those few months before and after the vasectomy reversal were as close as the Fitzpatrick household would ever come to being dysfunctional, but Dad fucking Dixie cups and talking about sperm counts was nothing compared to Mom’s miscarriage. She got pregnant three months after the operation, lost the baby three months after that. Dad stumbled through a disaffected malaise. His interaction with the family became measured by the stack of greasy pizza boxes on the kitchen counter and the hours he spent fishing alone in our backyard for largemouth bass and channel cats. Mom wasn’t getting pregnant, because Dad wasn’t trying to get her

pregnant. And I came to the realization that when faced with death, at least the sudden and tragic kind, the invincible John Fitzpatrick threw in the cards just as fast as anyone else.

“Are you listening to me, Hank?”

If we were playing a game of euchre, Dad probably thinks he has the high card, the right bower. But, at best, he’s holding a guarded left, three low trumps at the most. *I was there with Mom in the days and weeks after her miscarriage. You remember that, Dad? Those nights when you couldn’t handle it? When Mom’s son, not her husband, crawled in bed with her and stroked her hair until she fell asleep?*

I look at the hand I’ve been dealt. I don’t have an obvious play here, but I go for it anyway. “Don’t you need to go fishing or something?” It’s the equivalent of throwing out an off-suite ace to sneak a point early in the game or else force your opponent to burn trump. Mom looks at me with her don’t-go-there eyes.

In Dad’s defense, he did put down the fishing pole. Although maybe not as soon as I would have liked, one day he put down the pole, walked up the stairs to the master bedroom, and scooped Mom up in his arms. The next day, he stopped ordering pizza. The day after that, he stopped ordering Chinese. The day after that, Mom made us our first home cooked meal in a month. And the night after, Mom came back from her obstetrician with a clean bill of health, and then my parents starting locking their bedroom door again. They assumed I didn’t notice, as I assume they don’t notice a son who goes through a box of Kleenex every other week without ever having a cold.

“What did you say, Hank?”

“Nothing, Dad.” Even with all this trump in my hand, I have no choice but to fold. “I guess I said I was sorry.”

“You guess?” Dad raises his open palm next to his head, closes it, and covers his mouth with his fist. He gets up from the table, refills his coffee, and then stands at the kitchen sink. He looks out the window at the old willow tree in our backyard—the middle of January exposing the ugliness of the tired tree’s

gray tentacles. The ends of some of the willow's limbs are submerged beneath the pond's frozen surface, hiding some of the ugliness. Dad stands there for what seems like a long time but is no more than ten seconds. He turns around and sits back down, pulls his chair closer to mine.

"Look, son, I know kids will be kids. And I know there are a lot of temptations out there your mother and I never faced."

"That's an understatement."

I've made it through the worst part of the storm, but Dad isn't in the mood for banter. "Don't start with me, Hank."

Of course, what I hear is, *Start with me, Hank.*

"You and Mom met each other at your college freshman orientation, dated exclusive for five years, and you both lost your virginity on your wedding night. You two weren't even in the same universe as me growing up."

"Don't be so glib, Hank."

"How many times have you been drunk, Dad?"

"I don't see what that has to do with—"

"How many?"

"Maybe three or four times."

"In your whole life?"

"Okay, son." Dad dips his chin in deference to me. "For the sake of argument, I'll concede your point."

"Thank you."

"Your point that you're just a stupid kid."

"Hey!"

I see the makings of a smile on Dad's face. "Tell me, oh wise one, would you ever sit down and drink twenty-four Cokes in one sitting?"

"Is that a trick question?"

"Just answer it."

"Of course not. I'd get sick." I try to pretend the irony escapes me. "Here's the deal." Dad stands up, walks around the table, and places his

hands on Mom's shoulders. "You're grounded for four weeks. No phone, no going out on weekends, and you come home straight from wrestling practice after school."

A slap on the wrist as punishments go, and yet what comes out of my mouth is, "No phone?"

"Except for . . ." Mom raises her hand in the air, index finger pointing back at my father.

Dad rolls his eyes as he sits back down. "Except for Laura."

"Really?"

Mom nods. "You can call Laura. No sense taking away the best part of your life just because the worst part got you in trouble. But no dates for four weeks."

My eventual escape from purgatory is secured. If things hold true to form, my parents will cave around the two- to two-and-a-half-week mark. I push my chair back from the table and stand up. I try to look repentant, but I can't help smiling. I walk around to stand between my parents. "I'm sorry."

Mom and Dad hug me, but briefly, as if to maintain the punitive illusion. I reach down and place my hand on my mother's distended belly beneath her old cotton robe.

"Really . . ." I choke up a little, Dad's earlier miscarriage allusion sneaking a punch into my midsection for real this time. "I am *very* sorry."

Mom understands. "We know."

I need to throw Dad some kind of bone, too. "Hey, Pops, how about I go shovel the driveway?"

Dad rustles the newspaper, not nearly as appreciative of my gesture as I had hoped. "Uncle Mitch is outside already doing it."

"Uncle Mitch?" I say. "What's he doing here?"

"I ended up buying that 1940 Series 90 from that farmer down in Kentucky."

"That old Oldsmobile?"

“That *classic* Oldsmobile. And yeah, that’s the one. Mitch volunteered to be my co-pilot. You know he and Aunt Ophelia are going through a rough patch. I just thought a road trip would be a nice distraction.”

“Oh,” I say, pretending to care. Uncle Mitch and Aunt Ophelia have been separated for a year. Ophelia is seeking an annulment, but no one seems to know why. I have my theories.

“Is that a problem, Hank?”

Is that a problem? It’s a simple question without a simple answer. A part of me thinks I’ve imagined it all. Okay, so maybe there was some skin-on-skin heavy petting, but how awful is that? It’s not like I ever wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat as the repressed memories come rushing back to me. It’s not like I don’t touch myself all the fucking time. Can the memories of a five-year-old or even a ten-year-old be trusted? I got past the flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*. Even the Oompa Loompas in *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* don’t scare me too much anymore. Maybe I need to stop looking underneath the bed for a reason to be afraid. What’s there to fear under that bed anyway? My dad’s discarded Playboys? Those old penny loafers, two sizes too small and scuffed beyond the reach of any polish? That paperback edition of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* I’ve tried to read because I want the artsy college chick who moved in across the street to think I’m cool and yet I never seem to get past the last sentence of Chapter Six: “But he took on so much and went so far in the end his real victim was himself.”

Who am I fucking kidding? Oompa Loompas still scare me shitless.

“Need a hand there?” I say.

My godfather hands me the shovel. He’s a little underdressed for the weather, wearing a jean jacket, a pair of faded jeans, and old tennis shoes. “Sure I can’t interest you in a beer or something?” he says.

“You’re just so fucking funny.”

“I’d like to think I am.”

Uncle Mitch’s laugh starts in his throat and comes out of his mouth and

nose at the same time, like a pig. He has a dark black receding hairline that frames a pitted face and a complexion made darker by his five o'clock shadow. A lit cigarette hangs out of his mouth. As he exhales, I can see and smell his three-packs-a-day breath.

Uncle Mitch smokes Merits. In the early 80s he switched brands from Kool because someone told him menthol cigarettes were bad for you. The sound of crinkling plastic reminds me of Uncle Mitch and his Merits. Whenever I slept over, he'd spoon with me on the living room floor while we watched Charlie Chan movies. He always forgot to take his Merits out of his front pants pocket. I could hear the crinkling plastic during the whole movie.

"You gave your parents a scare last night." "I realize that."

"You think you've learned your lesson?" "Probably not."

"I'm guessing John and Debbie want a bit more assurance than that."

"Come on, Uncle Mitch, you're a high school teacher. As the song goes, I am sixteen, going on seventeen."

"But your parents can't hide you away from the real world in an Austrian castle and dress you in curtains."

I shovel the snow in strips running perpendicular to the driveway as opposed to parallel. It's an old trick Grandpa Fred taught me that keeps the snow piled on the side of the driveway as opposed to in the street. Uncle Mitch follows me. I point to the house. "You can go in now if you want."

Uncle Mitch extracts another Merit, lights it, and inhales long and deep. "I like the fresh air."

I keep shoveling. I'm not comfortable around him, but I've had a lot of practice faking it.

"How's the job?" I ask. "You're teaching health and driver's education at East Catholic, right?"

"That's right."

"And you're an assistant coach for the girls' basketball team?"

"Assistant for the boys' team," Uncle Mitch says. "Great bunch of kids."

After being lost for a really long time, I finally feel like I'm making a difference."

"Lost? Is that what you call it?" I don't know where the question comes from, but the fact is I say it, and I've wanted to say it for years.

Uncle Mitch takes a tentative step toward me. "Hank, I don't know what you're trying to get at, but you know—"

"Don't bullshit me, Mitch!" I turn the shovel in my hands until I'm holding it like a baseball bat.

"Please, Hank." Uncle Mitch holds up his hand and waves it back and forth in a placating motion. "Life hasn't been easy for me. Your aunt Ophelia and I are trying really hard to work things out. Give me some credit."

"Give you some credit? For what?"

"I was a sick man." He holds the Merit to his mouth with one hand, reaches for my shoulder with the other. "But I'm better now."

"Sick?" I can feel my hands tightening around the shovel's handle. "It's not like you had a fucking cold."

"Hank . . ." Uncle Mitch looks down, noticing my hands. "I need you to put the shovel down."

"And I needed you to not give me hand jobs when I was ten years old."

"Look, I don't know what you think I did, but that never happened."

"It didn't?"

"No, it didn't. I mean, yeah, I know I'm overly affectionate, but that's just me. I'd never do something so horrible, so . . ."

"Monstrous?"

"You know Ophelia can't have kids. For all intents and purposes, you are my son. I love you."

Uncle Mitch draws closer, his steps more certain. I raise the shovel in the air, preparing to swing. "Stop!"

We stand there for a minute or two, not even inches apart. A physical and

emotional standoff. Uncle Mitch hazards the waters.

“What is it you want me to do, Hank?”

I look at the shovel at my hands. I shake my head, taking a few steps back. I throw the shovel on the ground. “Well, since you’re taking requests.”

“Yes, anything.”

“Get the fuck out of here.”

“What?”

“I know what you’ve done. You know what you’ve done. If you don’t want me to let Dad in on ‘our little secret,’ get in your car, drive out of this town and out of our lives.”

Uncle Mitch starts crying. “You can’t do this, Hank. You have no right. I was John’s best friend twenty years before you were even born. What am I supposed to tell him?”

“Tell him whatever you want. Tell him nothing. I suspect whatever you come up with will be preferable to what I have to say.”

“So that’s what this has come down to, son? You’re willing to break your father’s heart just like that?”

“No,” I say. “You were.”

He stands there for five minutes while I finish shoveling the driveway. But finally, irrevocably, Uncle Mitch gets in his car. I knock on the passenger-side window. He rolls it down.

“There’s just one more thing,” I say.

Red-faced and beaten-down, Uncle Mitch doesn’t even look at me. “What?”

“The next time you call me ‘son’ to my face, I’ll kill you.”

That comment catches him right on the jaw. He staggers a little, but he shakes it off. Now Uncle Mitch is looking at me. “What did you say, Hank?”

“Do you really want me to repeat it?”

Another standoff. I can see the conflict in his eyes. Dad's best friend is itching for a fight, but the monster Uncle Mitch has become knows he would lose.