PROLOGUE, 1968

It was a spring evening and he had come in too soon. Beyond the dining room window the catalpa tossed heavily, leaves grown huge this week, trailing seedpods comically like tassels. The light over the houses was a charged blue, not as in winter when it drained abruptly into night, but softer, a presence, almost liquid, an invitation, a tease. In the street, a car circled a second time, its radio up, and he leaned in to hear but caught only the thin edge of a melody before it turned the corner and faded.

Nathan was fourteen and after two hours of basketball had run the mile home, could have run another. He sat in his damp clothes with his body humming. A plate of food was in front of him, chicken, potatoes, beans boiled until their skin came loose, but he wasn't eating. The sweatshirt against his neck just beginning to cool, his calves, the area between his shoulders throbbing an agreeable ache. He watched his mother cut small pieces of chicken with a knife, her eyes fixed on the news across the room. His father, the *Post* beside his plate, also not eating, glancing from time to time at his food as if surprised to find it there, stabbing something without looking and bringing it to his mouth. Nathan reached past his father for the carton of milk, looked at his parents, at the newscaster a blank moment, then back out the window.

Long ago—he couldn't even remember when—he had devel-

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The letter sat before him, unopened, propped against a coffee mug. He had known it was there, somehow, even before he found it among the wad of junk mail, bills, and offers of credit cards he neither wanted nor could afford that plugged the brass box in the lobby. He had paused with the tiny key in his hand but then opened the box and reached in, not because suspicions were silly—the opposite, if anything, was true—but because whatever was there had arrived, was already unavoidable. There was a letter for Janet also, from her mother, and he placed it on the bench by the door where they left each other's mail before discarding the rest under the sink and filling the pot for coffee. He hadn't slept in thirty hours and he didn't want more coffee, he wanted a drink. But he didn't want a drink, either.

He had two cups, making repeated circuits from the kitchen, where the letter lay on the table, to the living room that sloped east toward Mass. Ave., to their bedroom in back, where the sheets were still twisted and hanging to the floor. He thought of lying on the bed, pulling the stale warm darkness of the room over his head with the blankets, but returned to the kitchen with the dull resignation he had felt opening the mailbox, nothing else to do.

The lamp with its weighted cord shifted in the draft of the floor heater, marking circles of pale light on the table. Across the street a

man came out of his house, looked around him, zipped a bright blue parka over his stomach, and began walking toward the avenue. Idly, Nathan leaned in his chair to see which direction he turned at the corner.

The letter, in the emphatic, slashing hand that could only be Daniel's, was addressed to His Holiness Msgr. Nathaniel Mirsky, SJ, DDS, LSD, and had been mailed six days ago from San Francisco. The postmark was smudged, off kilter, but he could make out the city and date. There was no return address.

He was still at the table when Janet arrived. He heard her kick off her shoes, heard her open her letter and sit on the bench in the hall, and over the next few minutes heard her laugh and exclaim to herself. His head felt exactly as if two hands pressed hard behind the temples, something in his chest darted and clenched, a pulled muscle, heartburn, early signs of infarction. A brief hope had flared when she came in; now he was even more alone. Across the street the man had returned, wearing a *Hogan's Heroes* hat, fleece-lined with flaps that could be pulled down over the ears. He was a portly gentleman in a blue parka, which also looked new, and he stopped at the top of the stairs before going inside, looking around with a pleased expression as if all his prospects were improved, now he'd gotten a warm new hat.

Nathan made a sound. In the hall Janet heard him and said, "Nate? Are you here, honey?"

She came into the kitchen holding her letter, a bag of groceries in which he could see a baguette and a bottle of wine. She was in her stockings, and she walked with feet slightly splayed, flat-footed, which always made Nathan think, for some reason, of a small child, and which, for some reason, he found quite sexy. She put the bag on the table in front of the letter, leaned against the sink and said, "Listen to this. It's about Dana." She picked up a foot and began massaging the toes, one by one, through the sheer stocking. Dana was eleven, her sister back in Cleveland, and Nathan liked hearing about her, more, anyway, than about Janet's parents, who even over

the phone—the mother flirty and solicitous, the father bluffly man-to-man, always with some home-improvement project he wanted to discuss—seemed to be asking for something Nathan didn't have in him to give. Janet read from the letter.

" 'Yesterday, after dinner, she was on the phone with Carrie, one of her friends. Oh, it's the thing now, talking on the phone. If you come into the room she stops and stares until you leave, and if you stay she says huffily, "I can't talk right now. I'll have to call you back." ' "

Janet paused, looked up at him with a pleasure-filled, disarming smile that ratcheted the pain in his chest. Please, he found himself thinking. And then, Please what? "Let me find the good part," Janet said.

She came to the table and sat, the angle of the lamp illuminating the slope of her breasts in the white dress shirt, the slight pucker of the material when she leaned forward. She put a foot onto Nathan's shoe and continued reading. Two months ago she had moved out, gone to her mother's for a week. Things were bad between them. Nathan had agreed to counseling, Janet had returned, and since they had moved around each other with a studied gaiety and hopefulness that filled Nathan with a queasy despair.

" 'So, later, I just couldn't help myself. I said, "Honey, who were you and Carrie talking about?" She's in bed, reading *Narnia* (again), she's brushed and put up her hair and put on moisturizer, but still in her bunny pajamas, of course. "Amanda Vukovich," she said. "She's a ho." "A what?" I said. "A hoe?" "A *ho*, Mom. *You* know—she'd have sex with like anybody who asked her." ' "

Janet put the letter down and looked at him. She laughed. "My God," she said, "my pigtailed, Wonder Bread, Episcopalian sister. Ho ho ho. I blame MTV."

Janet began unloading groceries, filling a pot for pasta. When she handed Nathan a corkscrew for the wine, she took the shopping bag from the table and saw the letter against the coffee mug.

"Oh," she said, said it again, and sat. She reached over for his

hand but he moved to scratch something on his face. She let her hand drop to his knee. "Oh, Nathan," Janet said. "Have you read it?" He knew she was looking at him. When he didn't answer, she kissed him lightly on the hair, left him to open the wine, and began heating the marinara. Nathan wondered what the man in the new hat was doing, was he wearing it inside? He'd like to knock on his door, find out. He felt the urge to run, to cry, to scream. He saw how the night would unfold and closed his eyes against it.

They drank the wine, and when the bottle was finished opened another, and after that Nathan got the scotch from the cupboard and the weed from the freezer. In the periphery of his awareness he could see Janet moving carefully, trying, in the way she arranged their dinner, the pretty salad with the carrot shavings and cherry tomatoes, the nice sweater she changed into, the way she accepted the joint from him a few times though she rarely enjoyed getting high, and never in the middle of the week, when she was tired from work. He was aware of all this, the way she let her hands or lips linger on him just long enough to have him know she was available, and as he poured his second scotch he resolved not to look at her anymore.

Later they made love, and she left him dozing heavily while she went to shower. He woke, hearing her cleaning the dishes, watering plants, opening the bills she had retrieved from the trash. From Mass. Ave. he could faintly hear music starting up at the Plough. He wondered if Robin was there, or Nicki. Or Eleanor. He lay in the dark, listening, until, much later, Janet came in.

She sat on the edge of the bed and began brushing her hair. He moved over and put a hand under her T-shirt, holding a breast from below.

"Hello," she said. "Somebody want dessert?"

He pulled her into bed, slid her T-shirt over her head, her sweatpants and underwear off. He was like a man running too long, knowing only that he had to finish before he could stop. Janet lay under him, looking at him with her bright, kindly eyes. "C'mere,"

she said, putting her arms behind his head to draw his face to her. Nathan took her by the shoulders and turned her, and when she lay on her stomach he put his hands under her hips and lifted. With his palms, trying to be gentle, he eased her cheeks apart and positioned himself.

"Honey," she said, her voice muffled by the pillow. "Sweetheart, no, not now, okay? Not right now. Maybe later we could."

He ignored her, began pressing against her.

"Nathan," she said. "Let me do you, okay? I'm really in the mood."

He was nearly ready. He rocked back and forth, pressing against her until he was hard. He pulled away a moment, saw her long white back, the silken hair covering her averted face. Outside Irish music surged when someone opened the door to the Plough. Somebody called somebody's name.

He moved in hard, once, twice. Janet let out a short scream, pressing her face into the pillow, reaching back to clench one of his hands. He kept moving, steadying himself against her. Soon she let go of his hand, was silent and didn't stir in front of him. He couldn't even hear her breathing. He prayed for it to be over and prayed she wouldn't turn and look at him, this woman who on his best days, his naïve hopeful lighter days, he tried to love. He closed his eyes and finished.

In the morning, Nathan waited until Janet was gone, pretending to sleep, trying to. Despite himself he attempted to gauge her mood, listening for her voice in the shower, whether she put things down more heavily than usual as she moved in the bathroom and kitchen. He couldn't tell. She closed the door behind her, and, though that was what he had been waiting for, he lay in bed a while longer, determined not to think about anything. When he did get up he called Dr. Ammons' secretary at the hospital, who was completely mystified by what he told her.

"You'll be missing rounds, then, Dr. Mirsky? And your shift?"

He had said he was leaving for a few weeks, maybe longer, of course he'd be missing goddamn rounds. "Just give him the message, please," Nathan said, and after a moment, as if she was giving him time to take it all back, she hung up.

He packed, unwilling to decide what he might need, sweaters or T-shirts or maybe even a tie, tossing in whatever his hands found until the old Samsonite he'd inherited from Daniel when he went off to college was nearly full. He topped it with a handful of underwear and socks from the dirty clothes hamper at the bottom of their closet. He sat at the table in the kitchen, trying to compose a note. "Hey," he began, "I gotta take care of some stuff . . ." He tore the paper from the pad and began again. "I'll call from New York . . . ," the next note said, and the next, "J, I need . . . ," and the last, "Janet, I'm sorry." He left this one, threw the others in the trash, and went through the apartment one more time to see if he'd forgotten anything. In their bedroom he paused at the dresser, looking at the dish she kept her rings in, the assortment of clips for her hair. He stood before her part of the closet a moment, then kneeled to put the clothes he'd scattered back in the basket. He thought of making the bed, but the inadequacy of the gesture struck him as obscene. So did the note he had left for her on the table, which he stuffed in his pocket along with the still unopened letter, before taking his suitcase and locking the door behind him.

"Fucking old men," Mirsky thought, looking balefully around the locker room. They had a smell that even chlorine couldn't hide—fish about to go bad, or a day-old sandwich left in the sun. He couldn't help himself as he scanned the truly astonishing array before him—hairy backs and ears, speckled bald pates, scrotums dangling like watch fobs, skin withered and flaked and rumpled like canvas. Disgusting. He forced himself to look away, to avoid seeing

himself in the row of mirrors opposite the lockers. Not that he held illusions he was any different.

At the other end of the locker benches, Melamed was dressing, talking with someone Mirsky recognized, but whose name he had forgotten. Melamed was an importer, retired, a snappy dresser with pressed pants and jackets with handkerchiefs in the pockets. He wore goggles to do his laps, a silly tight cap with a boomerang on the side. Sometimes they talked about medicine. Melamed asked about Nathan up in Boston, and Mirsky saw the man was offering him the opportunity to be proud, which he accepted, if grudgingly. Melamed had no children of his own.

"Tell him," the other man was saying to Melamed, gesturing over at Mirsky while pulling on a spotted yellow undershirt. "Ask him if police brutality's the biggest problem we got." As he sat on the bench to pull off his shorts, Mirsky caught a glimpse of the man's left forearm, the black numbers faded to green but still visible, like those on Mirsky's own arm under his shirt. Maybe years ago they might have sat somewhere, he and this man, and talked about it, where they had lived, their experiences. Not now. Mirsky turned his back and hung his pants by a belt loop in the locker.

"I didn't say it was our biggest problem," Melamed said, quietly. They had been discussing the case in the Bronx, two police emptying their guns into a black grandmother. The man was defending the police, saying you could ride the subway now without risking your life. He shrugged impatiently at both Melamed and Mirsky and shuffled off to put his head under the hand drier.

"How is it?" Melamed said to Mirsky. "The shoulder." He had seen it the day before.

"Fine," Mirsky said, though at that moment he was taking off his shirt, which caused him to wince. He saw Melamed staring at the wide bandage, the bruised skin, yellow and blue, leaking around it.

The two men continued in silence a few moments, Mirsky pulling on his baggy trunks, Melamed folding his towel, loading the

little shoulder bag that had the same boomerang as his cap. When he was dressed he walked over and stood before Mirsky.

"I just heard," he said, "about your boy." Then he added Mirsky's first name. "Sol. I wanted to tell you I'm sorry."

Mirsky nodded in acknowledgment, but Melamed didn't move. Mirsky looked up at him, the creased face and berserk eyebrows, the patient gaze of a man used to soliciting complaint, offering comfort. Mirsky realized distantly it would be nice, were the circumstances entirely different, to speak with him. But they weren't. He had nothing to say, to him or to anybody. At least with Melamed he didn't have to try. They stayed there another moment, then Melamed gently touched him on the arm and left.

The pool was half full, aged men and women, the only ones at the Y in the middle of the day, struggling through the lime-blue water, bobbing like seals by the tiled rim, talking. The high opaque windows let in a diffuse sunlight, and the air was saturated with the oppressive humidity and odor of the place, chemical, human, old masonry and pipes. Years ago Mirsky would rush right in, welcoming the bracing shock the cold gave his system. Now he had to wait while two *alter kockers* stood arguing on the steps into the water. For ten cents he'd drown them both.

His stroke was makeshift, inefficient, a spastic forward plunging that filled his mouth with water and every few feet left him submerged, goggling at the legs of the other swimmers until he was forced to surface, gasping, half blind. But here he was every morning, as he had been over forty years now, doing his twenty laps, chuffing and splashing and clearing a wide berth, slowly forgetting himself in the movement and the sounds of his own labored breathing, his world constricted finally into blank walls and ceiling, the cracked blue bottom of the pool and the shimmering expanse of green water before and around him.

He swam a lap, two more. His left arm was nearly useless, but he kept going, an occasional sharper sting telling him he'd torn away

another piece of bandage, using this as a goad to swim harder. When he stopped to get his wind he saw three women by the steps looking at him. One looked away, embarrassed, another smiled compassionately. He lunged back in.

It was six days ago. He'd hung up the phone, some stranger, a girl, telling him the news. He had walked around the apartment, waiting for an impulse, a clue about what he was to do next. He had called Nathan in Boston but found he couldn't utter any words once the machine picked up. He called again, this time forced himself to leave a brief message, then, as if it were any other Tuesday morning, got his ratty Mets gym bag from the floor of the bathroom, the dank towel and trunks and shampoo still wadded inside, and left for the Y.

Except it wasn't any other day. The colors of cars and buses were too bright, the sounds of horns and voices out of sync, as if dubbed onto the action. His head was filled with roaring and everything seemed far off. When the boy turned the corner and made directly for him, Mirsky had to remind himself to look down, deflect what he could of the menace. But the boy came right up and grabbed him with one hand, then his bag with the other. Too startled to let go, Mirsky hung on, feeling his cap sliding off his head, catching at the boy's jacket, then putting both hands on the strap of the gym bag. The boy dragged him up the sidewalk.

"I'll fuck you up, old man," the boy said. "Let go." He was dark-skinned and thin and astonishingly young. He kept looking around him. Mirsky said nothing, but held on.

Inside the bag were just his wet clothing and shampoo, no money, nothing of value. He could have told the boy this, but he didn't. He held on grimly and the boy hauled him toward the street.

"Let go," the boy said, through gritted teeth, then whispered it. "Let go." His bright brown eyes were focused on Mirsky now, scared as badly as the old man. He couldn't be more than thirteen.

"No," Mirsky said.

The boy shoved him and he stumbled, landing hard and awkwardly on the curb's stone edge, flashing streaks of light in his head and a searing pain down his arm, but he held on.

"Tell me," Mirsky said, half gasping, his body in the street. "Tell me. Why you need it."

This enraged the boy. With a violent tug he pulled the bag from Mirsky's hands and stood glowering. "Don't fuckin' need nothin', old man," the boy said, aiming a sharp kick near Mirsky's head but stopping short of contact before running up the street toward the subway.

The shoulder was sprained but not dislocated, he was bruised and badly scraped but nothing was broken. The nurse who put on the dressing at the emergency room looked at the already impressive contusion and told him he was lucky. He would have laughed in her face if he could have found the energy.

Mirsky realized he had stopped counting laps. He was in the deep end and suddenly exhausted, stomach cramping, shoulder throbbing hot pain, breath impossible to coax into his lungs. He held his injured arm to his chest and paddled to the wall, where he waited for his bearings to return. He didn't know how long he waited. Nearby, an ancient white-haired man who seemed to be here always, no matter what time you arrived, stood with a confused look on his face, which slowly relaxed. "Fucking old men," Mirsky muttered, pulling himself toward the steps, not needing to look to see the spreading oily cloud about the man's legs.

The letter began full force, no greeting or introduction, as if Nathan were joining the middle of a conversation. All Daniel's letters were this way.

There was this girl—I don't think you knew her, two years behind me, in ninth grade. New girl, pretty, very thin . . .

Nathan had pulled off at a rest stop on 84, two hours out of Boston, when weariness came crashing over him in great waves that left him wrenching awake, once with his right wheels on the shoulder. The rest stop was long, dingy block washrooms and gated candy machines on an island between the parking spaces. Nathan drove to the far end, to the area set aside for buses, took one of the last spots under a bare sycamore, and didn't remember shutting off the engine before dropping into sleep.

He was unsure how long he had been out when he was roused by voices. A school bus parked a few spaces over, kids lining up for a trip to the restroom. He was groggy, unsure for a moment where he was, a sensation strengthened by the vague impression something was wrong with these kids. He sat up and rubbed a hand across his face. He looked closer. Down syndrome kids—Special Needs Children nowadays, "retarded," or things less kind, when he was young. They stood in a shambling queue by the front of the bus, a dozen or so; more, those who didn't need the restroom, were visible through the windows. There was an air of gleeful hilarity, laughter, calling, someone Nathan couldn't see chanting. They were dressed like typical teenagers, floppy pants and tees, printed designer sweatshirts and backward baseball caps. But the clothing hung awkwardly, half tucked, pulled sideways. Nathan rubbed his mouth and the back of his neck and reached over to start the engine.

A new voice cut through the clamor, crisp, authoritative. "Children," it called out. "Children." And this, too, seemed oddly off—they were adults, nearly. A teacher stepped from the bus and instructed them to place a hand on the shoulder of the person before them; she herself took the first girl by the hand and they trooped by Nathan's car, smiling, craning their heads about, talking to one another. A girl with glasses so thick her eyes floated behind them looked at Nathan and smiled. A boy, tapering head lolling on his already man-sized neck, was last in line. When he saw Nathan in the car he let go of the boy in front of him, looked over, and shot

out a finger, an uncanny, uncannily graceful rendering of the hipster greeting Nathan saw kids perform on the street, or in movies. "Yo," the boy mouthed, and gave him a thumbs-up. Nathan barely managed to wait until they had passed by, were in the restrooms or mingling by the candy machines. He opened his door, leaned out, and was sick on the littered asphalt, the force of it making him gasp and close his eyes. As soon as he was able he drove off, fast, trying not to gun the engine. In the rearview he saw himself, eyes rimmed gray, deadened, staring back.

He hadn't been to his parents' apartment in Queens since his mother's funeral a year ago. He remembered the limousine could barely negotiate the small circular drive, his father thin-lipped, silent, far over at one end of the seat, Daniel, stoned, trying maybe to hide it behind dark glasses, up front with the immobile driver.

When he pulled up, the doorman told him his father was not at home and Nathan said he would wait. The entryway, lavish and arty—mirrored walls, a two-foot gilded giraffe, a framed close-up of Picasso—was overwarm, and the only seats, a row of thin-cushioned benches on a slightly raised floor, were remarkably uncomfortable.

He took the farthest one, dropped his bag at his feet, and got the letter from his pocket.

There was this girl—I don't think you knew her, two years behind me, in ninth grade. New girl, pretty, very thin, Corey Petaluma. Not Petaluma, of course, but that's what I remember. Corey Petaluma. New, pretty—you know how that is, everyone checking her out, jesus, high school—remember? Everybody noticing everything, everybody measured every minute. Who's in, who's out, who's dating, who's got acne or halitosis or tits, who seems to be getting laid. Who seems ready to blow at every seam. Why invent hell when you've got high school.

So Corey Petaluma, she's beautiful. Not knock you out, in

your face, Who are you kidding you'll never get a taste of this beautiful, but quiet, a slow song. Cool green eyes, pale skin, delicate energy, sylph-like in the way she moved, airy and still, like she was aware of herself. Not vain, not like that, more watchful, you know? Measured. Like she knew something and the rest of us hadn't got a fucking clue.

Corey Petaluma, and me heartbroken, sore in love. (I was with Rita Daeger then, remember Rita? All sex all the time. They called her RotoRita, remember?) So I sidle over and talk to her in lunch line one day, lameass stuff like How's the new school, watch out for Moskowitz, he holds grudges. Me, big shot, student council, growing my hair, hippie socialist swishdick. Couldn't stop looking at her eyes, her hands, beyond pale, floating up to move her hair, brushing my arm a minute to reach over and grab a milk. Couldn't take my eyes off her. Only spoke to her two, three times. What I wanted was to dazzle her, make elaborate proclamations, I mean it, describe our future together. Shy out of the blue, didn't say a word to her. Nada. Nada fucking word.

Later, a month, maybe more. I've stopped talking to her, having embarrassed even myself—tongue-tied by a freshman. Maybe you heard about this. Typical crap lunch, macaroni-cheese compost, I'm sitting with Tobin and Lewis and we're about to go to the synagogue stairs and get high when there's this commotion on the other side of the room. Somebody screams and drops a tray, we get up and see girls standing with hands over their mouths, teachers running. Weiss, our dandy/fascist assistant principal, shouting into the phone. I make my way through the crowd and there's Corey Petaluma on her back, legs under the table, one shoe off. A teacher's got a towel from the kitchen up against her face and I can see red and I'm thinking, Some fuck knocked her down. Then she coughs, and I see where the blood's coming from. She rolls

over and spits into a dish. I move closer till I can see her eyes and they amaze me. Not scared, sweet jesus—fucking patient. *Unsurprised. I hear myself wishing it was me. Don't believe that, do you? I did. They get a stretcher from somewhere and carry her out. She looks in my direction and I do something with my hand, who knows, peace, hang in there. But she doesn't see anything and they carry her to the elevator.*

How's the doctoring trade, Brother Nathan? I do sorely, time to time, wish you were here. Some brotherly ministration might be just the thing.

Out this window you can't see the bay, not really, but the sensation, the way light changes over the far buildings, the way space opens up. Can't see it but you know it's there.

I looked it up, I still remember. Emia, of the blood, leuko, like lux, from light. Light in the blood. You believe it? How's that for comedy? You don't die from light in the blood at fifteen years old, it's too fucking ridiculous.

Gotta go, some things can be put off no longer. Hang in there, save some lives. Remember Santayana: Beauty is a pledge of the possible.

The doorman was talking with a man in overalls and a watch cap. They stood between the inner and outer entry doors, backs to Nathan, outlined in glare off the glass. Something the man in overalls said made the doorman laugh.

Nathan, too, knew the synagogue stairs, had lost everything but his virginity there, after school, between classes, he and Elise Davis exchanging a coded glance and meeting by the door to the rooftop, she with her breasts in her hands when he reached her, breathless, on the fourth floor.

Another memory, sophomore year, 1970. Nathan was shy, not situationally like Daniel, but all the time, especially in a new school, younger brother of a celebrity, founder of Students Against

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Another memory, sophomore year, 1970. Nathan was shy, not situationally like Daniel, but all the time, especially in a new school, younger brother of a celebrity, founder of Students Against

the War. It was spring, Nixon was bombing Cambodia, there were rallies at the bandshell in Central Park, music, speeches, petitions circulating in the crowd. Daniel was up there with the organizers, laughing, raising his fist, speaking into the megaphones. "Mr. Dick doesn't get it," Nathan remembered him saying. "This is *our* world he's fucking with."

He had invited Nathan up once but Nathan had declined. He stood toward the back, near the trees, watching the people, the pretty, wild-looking women in long skirts and headbands, feeling young and awkward and emotionally adrift, debating whether to accept any of the joints being passed through the crowd. He decided he would, if any of the women talked to him. None did.

One day he's in study hall, sitting in the library trying to read about the Peloponnesian Wars. This girl he doesn't know runs in and tells him to come quick. Out in the hall they hear voices, lots of them, they run downstairs to the front entrance. The doddering security guard has his nightstick drawn, the trembly secretary is chasing someone toward the door. "Animal!" she's shouting. "Leave this instant!" Just before he hits the street Nathan sees his brother, down from Columbia, hair across his back, barefoot, the black cowboy hat with the leather tassels. He's almost laughing too hard to move but he lets the secretary chase him through the hallway and out the door.

The girl, a freshman, just looks at Nathan—everybody knows who his brother is—with amazement. Nathan shrugs, smiles a little, and heads back to study hall while the security guard helps the secretary onto a chair and someone brings her water. Spray-painted on the glass front doors are two peace symbols, hugely white, still dripping. Nathan climbs the steps to the library, feeling many things, worry he'll be blamed by association, envy at his brother running barefoot through New York on a school morning, vague annoyance at Daniel's unceasing, attention-demanding performance, and, under the rest, small and warm, delight, prideful affection.

Nathan looked back at the letter, folded it and put it in his bag before leaning against the wall to sleep. Corey Petaluma. Was there ever even such a person? Fucking Daniel, he thought. Fucking Daniel Chaim Mirsky, reaching out from the grave to make him laugh and remember and flood with regret.

They moved through the rooms like strangers, unsure what to do. But not quite like strangers, Nathan thought. Strangers can make small talk, or ignore each other. So much was unspoken between them it weighted, like an awkward pause in an unbearable conversation. After a few minutes his father insisted he would make tea, put together some sandwiches, and though he wasn't hungry, Nathan offered to help. His father told him he didn't need any help. "Sit," he said, reaching into the bread drawer, not looking at his son. "Relax. You must be tired."

While his father busied himself in the kitchen, Nathan walked through the apartment, surprised yet pleased to find it not in total disarray. It was different, no doubt, since his mother's death, a man's dwelling now. There were newspapers and magazines on the couch and floor, which she never would have allowed, and the plants she patiently cared for were either desiccated in their pots or wildly overgrown, as if Sol had decided only a few were worth the bother. There was a small pile of shoes by the front door, and the bathrooms, while not spotless, were serviceable, obviously tended. Wedged under the sink was the plastic Key Food bag Sol had carried with him when he came from the pool, the dank clothes inside giving off an odor of warm chlorine and sweat. Nathan smiled. Freda had always bought Sol new trunks for his birthday, insisted he carry his clothes in a gym bag. Now Sol made his own choices.

He had been concerned he'd find the place a wreck, his father's life in tatters, one more worry to add to his pile. A foolish concern,

he now realized. If Sol was anything in his life, at home or in the factory, he was a manager. Managing was what he did best.

The bed was unmade, which Nathan found strangely comforting, a mess of Band-Aids and gauze on the turned-back quilt. The old man was clumsy, constantly nicking himself at home or the pool. Her bedside table was still cluttered with tissues and eyedrops and a stack of paperbacks. A bottle of lotion, her reading glasses in their case.

After they had returned from his mother's grave site, it had been the three of them together—the last time, Nathan now realized. Daniel and Nathan sat on the small wooden stools the synagogue provided, Sol sat at the end of the couch. No ritual for him. He hadn't been inside a synagogue in decades, considered it a concession that he let Freda take the boys a few times a year. When the rabbi, a ruefully pleased little man who was his best at deaths and sickbeds, approached Sol with a knife to cut the lapel of his jacket, Nathan had thought he might strike him. Daniel stepped in, offering the collar of his own shirt instead. The rabbi, a professional consoler, smiled in understanding. They sat, no one saying a word. Soon the ladies were coming out of the kitchen with plates of food for the table, cups and saucers for coffee, and the men, cars parked, were filling the chairs around them. Daniel had gone into the bathroom and locked the door.

It didn't trouble Nathan to look at the items on Freda's nightstand, the clothes in the open closet. They were there even with her gone. He could not imagine anything in their place, and he thought he understood his father's reasoning. You don't fill an absence by taking more away.

For a moment Nathan sat on her side of the bed, the mattress hard and unyielding (Sol's back needed a firm support), thinking of Freda lying here, reading her Mickey Spillane and Ellery Queen paperbacks, waking to the oddly truncated reflections in the parallel mirrors over their dresser, outside the pale sky over Forest Hills and

the old tennis stadium. How many days, right here? Thousands, he figured. An unexpected gripping sensation in his stomach, tightness behind the eyes. Janet, in bed last night, pretending to sleep. Nathan, the anger long gone, awake and also unmoving beside her, desolate, shamed, hating himself most of all for needing her to forgive him.

In the living room, Freda's needlepoints lining the walls, along with Israeli batiks, the framed enlarged photograph of Sol and Freda Mirsky on the square before the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. The boys had had it made up for their fiftieth. It was slightly blurred, a flaw not readily apparent in the original three-by-five snapshot. Daniel was furious with the people at the photography store, who had not mentioned the imperfection and charged them full price. Nathan, too, had been annoyed. But now, like the sight of his mother's belongings in their place, the picture seemed right, the two of them on the white plaza with the famous stones behind them: Sol, squinting through the glare, large and untidy in a floppy Gilligan hat, Freda, smaller and more stylish in sunglasses and a white visor, both slightly out of focus, as if the camera had been jostled at the last moment, or they had started to move.

On the round side table the dense thicket of family photographs in every conceivable style of frame, fluted chipped wood to silver to transparent plastic. Stiff, posed wedding shots from the Old Country, wan-faced brides and grooms in local Jewish costume, Hasids in striped coats and flowing beards, city folk in long woolen coats and thick brocade. Sol and Freda's wedding picture, the two of them impossibly young; Daniel holding a baseball bat; Nathan imitating a Pete Maravich poster he had in his room, looking in one direction while holding the ball in the other; graduation shots from Columbia and Stanford—the American dream arrayed before him. On the wall above, more relatives—an uncle, at three or four, on a carved wooden horse that had fascinated Nathan as a child; a trim, ascetic-looking young man in pince-nez; a woman in a photograph so washed out it had turned yellow and parts of her dress and face had

disappeared; two children, a boy and a girl, grimly posing before a photographer's backdrop of a mountain scene, lakes, waterfalls, a picturesque castle in ruins. Along with most from the table below, they had not survived the war. They held Nathan, they always had—strangers whose names he didn't even know.

As the kettle began whistling and his father called him to the kitchen, Nathan glanced into Sol's study at the rear of the apartment. It was at once fastidious and disheveled, much, Nathan thought, like Sol himself. The desk meticulously clean, pencils and pens in separate holders, stapler and box of clips and tape dispenser aligned by the blotter. On shelves, built into the walls on three sides, were masses of albums and boxes, rolled-up sheaths of maps, and the marbled green file holders Sol bought by the case, labeled and numbered according to an obscure system of his own design. Here Sol would be working every night, compiling data, writing letters, organizing notes. This was his sanctum. If you came in, you did so in silence; if Freda sent you here for being impossible, you sat in the one extra chair, doing nothing. Sol's immobile, wordless concentration was rebuke and punishment enough. But sometimes, unable to sleep, Nathan would drag in a blanket, certain to find Sol working under the heavy desk lamp he'd brought home from the factory. Even Sol's imperviousness was company of a sort. Nathan would climb onto the springless, worn easy chair and listen to his father breathing, the scratch of pencils and scissors on paper, and soon he would close his eyes.

Sol had made a salad, cucumber and tomato and green pepper in tiny cubes, oil and strong vinegar. He had bagels and cream cheese and a strip or two of lox, which he insisted Nathan take. The coffee was black and so strong it tasted like cinder. Nathan went to the refrigerator for milk, which his father watched him pour with an impassive interest. Nathan found he was hungrier than he had realized.

"The hospital?" Sol asked.

"Fine," Nathan said. "Busy."

"They still have you rotating?"

"Yes, still doing my rotations. I'm in the ER now."

"No," Sol said flatly. "You're not." He shook his head, annoyed. Nathan reached for the second piece of lox and for several minutes they ate in silence.

"I saw Sylvia Grossman downstairs," Nathan said. A neighbor, a lively woman in her sixties. She and her husband had been friendly with Sol and Freda. Nathan wondered occasionally if Sol and Sylvia, now a widow, might not somehow drift together.

"Good," Sol said. "Was she walking?"

"Yes," Nathan said. "She looked good."

"Last summer she fell. They thought she broke a hip."

"She looked okay to me."

"Lucky. For an old woman, breaking a hip can be the end."

"Dad." Nathan laughed. "She's probably ten years younger than you are." Sol glanced up, not smiling.

"So, if I'm old that makes her young?"

He waited, as if to let the logic of this descend on his son, then went to the stove for more coffee. Nathan accepted half a cup, feeling the caffeine race through his veins, accelerating the weariness that had settled into his eyes, his neck and shoulders. Janet would be home by now, he realized, looking at the wall clock and seeing it was after five. When they had finished eating, his father began clearing the table. Nathan stood to help.

"The doctors," Sol said from the refrigerator. "They let you leave?"

"I got someone to cover for me," Nathan answered, preferring this lie, however inadequate, to anything he might say closer to the truth. "It happens all the time."

Sol stacked plates and ran the water, spooned the remainder of the salad into an empty cottage cheese container. He was shaking his head again, his entrepreneurial sensibility offended—how could

these doctors expect to run a business this way? Nathan came up behind him with the coffee cups and Sol turned too quickly at his approach. Sol gasped, put both hands on the lip of the sink.

"What?" Nathan said. "What is it?"

Sol took the cups from him, put them under the water. "Nothing," he said. "You don't sneak up on people."

When he had opened his eyes in the lobby downstairs his father had been standing there, grimy cap askew, mildewy shopping bag in his hand. He was looking at Nathan with resignation, as if his being in New York confirmed something Sol neither desired nor resisted, but whose arrival confounded him nonetheless. It had taken Nathan a moment to be able to speak. Now he felt that way again, a familiar if unnameable rebuff in his father's stiff-backed slouch. He left the kitchen and the remainder of the dishes to his father, went to the couch in the living room, and closed his eyes.

For the third time that day, Nathan was unsure where he was. He had been dreaming of the busload of children. Now he was the teacher, leading the first girl by the hand toward the bathrooms, but he couldn't remember where they were. They walked up and down the rest stop, searching, the children treading obediently behind him in their chain, as Nathan led them toward the trees.

The light outside the windows had thinned, casting shadows about the room. It was evening now. Nathan couldn't tell if he had been asleep a few minutes or over an hour. The desire to close his eyes again, stretch out full on the couch and sleep, was nearly overpowering. Then he heard the water.

He dragged himself upright and into the kitchen. His father was as he had left him, at the sink, water streaming from the tap. Even in the dimmed light Nathan could make out the steam rising.

Something in Sol's posture alarmed Nathan. He moved quickly

toward his father. Was he alright? Was he crying? Unkindly, perhaps, Nathan hoped he was. It would make things easier, somehow, if he was crying. Something this day had to be easy.

But Sol was not crying, just standing by the sink with his hands in the water, as if that was all he intended to do for the time being. His fingers, motionless in the steamy flow, were raw, painfully red. Nathan looked into his father's face a moment, then reached across him to shut off the faucet. He found a towel and offered it to his father, who did not take it and did not turn from the wall over the sink.

"Dad?" Nathan said, his voice loud in his ears after the sound of the water. "Dad, come sit down."

The old man ignored him. Nathan looked at him again for a clue, but all he saw was Sol's habitual expression, stolid, impenetrable. Anything could be happening behind it, or nothing at all.

"Dad," he said again.

"He was weak," Sol said, nearly whispering, causing Nathan to lean closer to hear. "Weak. Irresponsible."

"Dad," Nathan said quietly. "We don't know . . ."

"Burned up, a pile of ashes. I hope he meets his mother and has to explain."

"Dad, please. He was sick. You know he was having problems."

"Problems," Sol said. He turned toward his son now. "You don't die from problems. Problems you look in the face."

"I know, Dad." Nathan put a hand briefly on his arm. His father winced. "I'm sorry," Nathan said. "Please. Let's go in and sit down."

Sol was looking away again, at the sink filled with brimming soiled cups and plates, a piece of bread, a few bits of vegetable floating in the water. His father wouldn't move, and Nathan backed off a step.

"He was in pain," Nathan said. "I think about that. What I might have done." He leaned against the wall. He thought he might collapse from exhaustion. He had to call Janet before he fell asleep, and what would he say?

His father looked at him. Something in his eyes fastened on Nathan, as if he were far off and had just come into view. Nathan fought the urge to look away.

"You think forgiveness is that easy?" his father asked. A new tone, deliberate, ugly, had come into his voice. "Is that the world you live in?"

Nathan knew his father was proud he was becoming a doctor. He knew this from the money Sol sent when asked, from the expressive if gruff approval that slipped through their brief, interrogatory conversations. And Nathan himself was proud, thought he might have found, finally, what he needed to do. But now it didn't matter to Sol, who wouldn't even let Nathan help him to the couch. "You're right," Nathan said. "I don't know." Before either of them could say anything more, he left his father in the kitchen again.