



Repetition Patterns

Ben Tanzer

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Repetition Patterns

A story cycle by Ben Tanzer

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To all the journals and zines that first showed interest – *Midnight Mind*, *Rated Rookie*, *Clamor*, *Punk Planet*, *20dissidents*, *THE2NDHAND*, *The Truth Magazine* – and all my early editors – the H-Man, the Adam's, Tanzer and Lawrence, the Eric's, Boime and Lock, mom and Debbie – the latter two of which can hopefully expect their own dedications some time soon.

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For more about Ben Tanzer, please visit: bentanzer.blogspot.com

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Contents

Repetition Patterns
The Babysitter
The Gift
What We Thought We Knew
Change of Plans
Pac-Man Fever
Life As He Had Known It
Shooting Stick

Chapter 1

Repetition Patterns

I do not like P. from the start – his neat little beard, his sweater vest, his loosened tie. His body language is too aggressive, too voluble and terribly off-putting. His facial expressions speak volumes more than he realizes, fluctuating between amusement and disdain at anything I say. He is too smug by half, all-knowing, and condescending. He sits there in judgment of me, a touch of anger always lurking on the periphery of his comments. And then there is his office, cold, uninviting, and minimalist; a couple of chairs, a desk, and miles of unused space.

I feel this way after the first session. I ignore it though. I don't trust my reaction. I don't trust myself. I am not good at doing so. I tell myself that it is the fear speaking, and that I am anxious about re-entering therapy. The thing is, I know this type, and I know what they are and are not capable of. I have always been drawn to people like P.

– x –

You are a liar, P. says. He had asked me whether I thought my father had been a good man. I knew what he was expecting me to say. I even kind of knew what I wanted to say, but I stammered instead, and paused, and then said *yes, yes, he was a good man*. P. clearly does not agree. *He was not good to your mother*, he says. And I can't disagree with him, not really.

Tell me again why you're here, he says. *What did you call it – a tune-up?*

Yes, I say. *With my dad having just died, and my wife and I talking about having our first child, I thought it was a good time to get back into therapy. You know.* I pause. *A check-up, I guess.*

Right, P. says, shifting impatiently in his chair. *You realize, your dad and the baby, that's not why you are here.*

No?

No. You're here because you have always been in pain.

We are both silent. The afternoon light is slowly fading, and dusk is just beginning to cover the streets below. I start to cry. He is right. I

know this and it hurts. He called me a liar, though, and that doesn't feel right, or good, and I am angry about it.

One week later I am back and sitting in his waiting room. NPR is on the radio and I am shivering. I am going to tell P. that his comment upset me. I am not looking forward to doing so. And then he appears. He's ready for me and I go in. We stare at each other. He gives me a look, his head thrust forward, his lips pursed, his face somewhat clenched. It's a shrug, really, and it's saying, *You go first, what's on your mind.* And so I go first.

Why did you call me a liar? No response. *I mean, is that necessary? It's very upsetting.* He listens, he doesn't speak, he ponders, and then he says that he is sorry. Silence falls between us again. *I didn't like you from the start, I say. There's an arrogance in you I find off-putting. I think I need to tell you that.*

I'm glad you did, P. says. *We can explore that in here.* But we don't, not right then, not so much, and certainly not beyond some discussion about my ambivalence concerning being there in the first place.

— x —

I cannot tell P. that my wife Debbie and I have decided to start trying to get pregnant. It is too scary, I am too intimidated, and I don't know how he will react or what he will say. And I don't really want to know. It is clear to me that I still have some concerns about having a baby, but I do not want him to point this out to me. I also don't want to know how he will go about pointing it out to me. So instead I tell him that I have decided to go on an eight-day backpacking trip through Italy. With everything that's been going on, I say, *it's something I need to do.* I'm leaving on Sunday.

The trip is escapist, P. tells me. *Your need to travel is a form of thrill-seeking behavior. You always talk about your desire to feel more excitement. This is how you hope to find it.* He tells me to describe some of the people I consider happy, so I do. *Do you consider yourself happy?* he asks.

I'm not sure, I say.

Sure you are, he responds, in that false jovial manner of his that drives me crazy.

I'm really not sure. Well, I don't know. Maybe I am. I could be depressed. I guess. I say this real low. He smiles and nods. I feel queasy. *I've never thought of myself as depressed,* I say.

Of course you haven't, P. says. *You're depressed.* Another one of his condescending little smiles crosses his face.

Some months later Debbie and I find out we are going to have a baby. I tell P. about it during a session. He is very happy for us, but says he is surprised to learn that we have been trying. *I didn't tell you we were going to start trying?* I say.

No.

I thought I did. As I sit there, I try and convince myself that I had, but it's no good. *Actually, I never really told you, I say, but remember when I said I was going to Italy? And that I needed to go? That's when we first decided to try.*

That's why you went? he says.

Yeah. Remember how you said it was thrill-seeking behavior and all that?

Sure, he says. I wouldn't have said that, though, if I knew you were trying to get pregnant. That was a good reason to go.

— x —

I tell P. I am thinking that I might want to wind down my therapy as the year itself winds down, and that maybe we can work towards termination and closure. P. asks me if I think I am ready to move on. I say that I don't know, that I don't even know how I would know. I will always have some fear about leaving therapy, because leaving anything for me can be very difficult. *Of course, if I'm being totally honest, I say, I've also learned that my insurance coverage is coming to an end, and that's causing me a lot of anxiety. I mean, what would your fee be if I just paid it out-of-pocket?*

130 dollars an hour, he says.

I recoil. *That feels somewhat prohibitive to me, I say. Is that negotiable?*

How about we take a minute to discuss your expenses, he says. For example, what do you pay in rent? We run through a number of questions like this. *I did tell you what my rate was when you first came to me, didn't I?*

No, I say. *You never told me.*

Really. He stares off into space for a moment. *Well, I always try to. Hmm. Tell me, then, what do you think is reasonable?*

I know most anything is going to feel prohibitive to me at this point, but I say a hundred dollars because I believe he will be offended by anything less.

How about 115? he says, smiling.

105? I reply.

Let's say 110, then.

Okay, I say, head spinning.

Good. 110 it is. And I assume that you won't be taking any vacations from this point on, either.

Pardon me? I say.

Vacations. If you feel you can afford one, then I'll expect you to pay my regular fee.

Doesn't that... I'm stunned. Doesn't that seem extreme to you?

Of course not, he says, looking confused. This is about your priorities. I'm willing to take less because you say it's a hardship for you, and so you have to be willing to give up things as well. Do you know what people are willing to give up to come and see me?

I don't know, actually, nor does he answer the question. The session ends and I leave. I decide that it is time for me to find a new therapist.

– x –

I walk in. I immediately get the smile. I tell P. that I would like to start by asking him a question.

No, he replies. We will start with me asking the first question.

Why do we need to go in that order? I ask.

Because I am the therapist, P. says, and the therapist asks the questions. I sigh and lean back in my chair, as he continues. How did you feel when you left your session last week?

Upset, I say. Angry. Confused. And how did you feel? I irritably add.

Angry as well, he says, matter-of-factly.

I thought so. That's why I wanted to ask the first question. Why were you so angry?

Because I felt you had manipulated me, he says. You wanted to negotiate my rate and I did and I felt angry about it.

It feels daunting to me, I say. I have anxieties about money and you know this.

Let's talk about those anxieties for a moment, shall we?

No. No. I want to keep talking about this.

Do you feel that everything is negotiable?

I guess. My experience has been that people are always willing to negotiate. That they even expect to. It's business, and since this is a business I was hoping you would feel the same way.

And that's why I feel manipulated, P. says.

And yet you engaged in a negotiation with me, I say. You asked me what I felt I could pay and then you countered what I suggested.

That's true, he says, adding nothing else.

I expect my therapist to set his personal issues aside during a session, I say. You didn't do that.

Well, then I guess you don't think I'm a very good therapist.

Well, I guess I... don't. And I don't plan to see you anymore.

There is a long pause, then he says, *I guess there isn't much else to say then.*

It's just... I stare at the ceiling. *It was important to me that I tell you in person.*

Are you sure you want to leave therapy? he says. *Are you ready for that?*

I'm not leaving therapy, I say. *I just don't plan to continue with you.*

He is silent for a moment. This conversation is the first time I have ever seen him taken aback. *You know,* he says, *you're not the first patient to have a problem with my personal style. A number of people have had to work through issues like this with me. But if they're able to do that, they really can get a lot accomplished.*

That's okay, I say. *I really have decided to move on. I need to move on.*

And then comes the most uncomfortable silence of the entire session; there is ten minutes left and nothing left to say. We sit there for a moment, and then another, and I think to myself that I ought to just stand up, just walk out the door and leave, but I'm not sure how to do so or what I should say. I feel anxious, and P. is staring at me, both of us just waiting for something to happen.

I fixate on the new chair he has bought himself, something I had noted a few sessions back. It's big and green. Plush. It looks terribly comfortable. I had told him that I had always wanted such a chair and we had laughed about it. *I'm going to leave,* I say, and then in a bout of something, the need to break the tension, I guess, I try to make a joke. *I mean, I could stay and all, but since you have the more comfortable of the two chairs, maybe I'll just get going.*

P. continues staring at me, still silent. His eyes narrow and fixate on me. He furrows his eyebrows. There is no smile. He says, *You really need to figure out why you have so much anger.* And then he stands up and opens the door of his office. And I leave. And we are done.

– x –

A couple of months after I stop seeing P., I go to see J. He's wearing a tweed jacket, his hair is somewhat unruly, and his tie is tight around his neck. His office is small and cozy, one entire wall of shelves covered in books – Kafka, McCarthy, Roth. J. makes no jokes, he is not provocative, and I wonder if I can even work with such a person. I feel good here, though. Safe.

Where would you like to start? J. says.

I should probably start with my most recent experience in therapy, I say.

Ok, J. says, *what do you want me to know?*

P. was an asshole, I say, and he was unnecessarily provocative, confusing his anger towards me with an actual approach to therapy.

So, he didn't help you at all? J. says.

I pause for a moment. Did P. help me? Did I need P. to be the way he was?

I would rather talk about what a jerk he was, I say.

Fine, J. says, but first let me tell you about repetition patterns.

Chapter 2

The Babysitter

Tracey was our babysitter. She was five years older than me, and I hated her. She had ratty dark red hair, way too many freckles, and no ass at all. Her mom had moved out when she was a kid, and her dad had been raising her ever since. She smoked cigarettes in the breezeway and invited her dumb friends over to tease my younger brother Timmy. There was Amy, with the boobs, and Liz, who always looked like she was on the verge of crying.

Timmy had a lisp – nothing too bad, and he was working on it – but Tracey would not give him a break, especially when Amy and Liz were over. *Okay, Timmy,* Tracey would say. *Say 'Canada.'* *C'mon, cutie.*

Sure, Tracey, Timmy would reply. *Cananada. I mean Candada. I mean... I can't do it.*

And Tracey would laugh and laugh.

– x –

Amy was the first girl in the neighborhood to get breasts, and she wasn't bad-looking either – she had olive-colored skin, this kinky sort of sun-bleached blonde corkscrew hair, and great dark eyebrows. But it was definitely her boobs that drew your attention. They were soft and round and large, like Nerf basketballs, and completely awesome. We all wanted to see them, of course, but no one wanted to see them more than my friend Billy. He talked about them all the time. *Hey, man,* he'd say. *Did you see Amy today?*

Yeah, I'd say. Why?

Did you see what she was wearing?

Yeah. I think they call them t-shirts.

Right, but that's a pretty tight t-shirt, isn't it? Did you see her boobs?

Yes, I did, and they're very nice, just like when you asked about them yesterday.

Dude, I've got to see them. I'm dying here.

And to give Billy credit, he didn't just walk around the neighborhood talking to us about them – he talked to Amy about them too. *So, he'd say. You going to let me see your boobs or what?*

How many times do I have to say no? Amy would say.

A lot, Billy would say. *A lot.*

And one day, Amy finally said, *Fine, let's get this over with,* and took him back behind his house. They weren't gone long, but Billy didn't stop smiling for a week.

– x –

Billy's dad was named Larry. He was tall with wavy dark hair, handsome like a television doctor but a little more scrawny. Larry had played Triple-A ball for the Pirates, but then blew out his arm before he made it to the big show. That didn't matter to the other dads in the neighborhood, though. They loved him for getting so close, and they were happy to let Larry hold court in front of his house on Saturday afternoons, as he sucked down beer after beer and spewed forth his endless stream of crap.

Reagan's a great man, Larry would say. *A leader. A real fucking leader. You can see it in his eyes, and you can see it in the way he talks to the camera. He's speaking to you, not at you. He gets you, you know? I'm not embarrassed to say I love that man.* All the dads would nod in agreement, their golf shirts a bit too tight around the waists, their sunburned noses now peeling and turning ugly.

They didn't know, of course, that Larry had fucked half of their wives, and was now eyeing their daughters too. Billy knew, though. He would follow his dad around and watch him through the windows of the car. He didn't know how to feel about it.

– x –

Tracey's other friend Liz cried a lot, like I said, and she liked to wear black. She would cut herself, too, but she had to do something; she had a secret that she couldn't tell anyone about. And no, it wasn't how she had slept with Billy's dad Larry one time after babysitting for Billy's younger brother (though she had), or how she had slept with Tracey's boyfriend Frank too (though she had done that as well), one night following a party where Tracey had made fun of the (very slight) twitch in her eye she sometimes got when she was nervous.

No, it was something else entirely, something that was dark and wrong, and not to be repeated. Liz once had a baby sister named Tabitha, who she regularly watched because her parents were never around much at night. Liz didn't mind watching her, though, and in fact

had developed a game for her and Tabitha to play before bedtime. Liz would hold a pillow over Tabitha's face and muffle her breathing for just a moment before pulling it off and yelling, *Peek-a-boo!* Tabitha would always cough for a moment as her little lungs gasped for air and then laugh hysterically. It was great fun.

Liz soon realized that if she held the pillow on Tabitha's face just a little longer each time, Tabitha would not only cough more, but laugh more as well. One night when Liz lifted the pillow, though, Tabitha didn't cough, or laugh, or do anything at all. Tabitha wasn't breathing and wouldn't start breathing no matter what Liz tried to do. She gave her mouth-to-mouth, she picked her up and walked around the room, she begged her to breathe. *C'mon, Tabitha, she whispered. Quit fooling around. C'mon, baby, please breathe, please.* But nothing worked.

After awhile Liz put Tabitha back into her crib, and crawled into bed not knowing what to do or who to call. She awoke the next morning to birds chirping and her mom screaming. When asked about the night before, Liz said she put Tabitha down as she always did (which was kind of true), had then gone to bed (which was also pretty much true), and hadn't heard a sound all night, which was definitely true. The coroner said it was probably SIDS; nothing else made sense. *Sometimes it just happens,* he explained to a co-worker. *It's a tragedy, but sometimes there's simply no reason or sense to it at all.*

— x —

One afternoon I am over at Billy's playing Pong, when Tracey, Amy, Liz, and Tracey's boyfriend Frank come by. Frank has long, stringy, dirty blonde hair and wire-framed glasses that turn to black when exposed to the light. He likes Pink Floyd. And he's lugging a case of cheap beer.

What's up, Frank says to Billy when he answers the door. *We were hoping we could drink some beer here, man. What do you say?*

Sure, Billy says, shrugging, as the four of them come in and make themselves comfortable on the living-room floor. Frank immediately slams a beer and then another. Tracey matches him beer for beer, and within ten minutes they're making out.

Hey, she says to Billy. *Is there a room we can use?*

I guess, Billy says. *My room is at the top of the stairs.*

They leave and the rest of us sip our beers and stare at each other. No one has much to say.

Liz, the one who cries a lot, says, *Hey, you want to play spin the bottle?* to no one in particular. Amy, with the boobs, sighs and asks why the hell not. Liz spins an empty beer bottle and it points to Billy. They start to

kiss. *Let's go upstairs*, Liz says. And they do. Amy looks at me, shakes her head in disgust, and spins the bottle. It points off into space after finally coming to a halt.

You can kiss me, she says. *but that's it. No touching, grabbing, pawing, or petting. Got it?*

Yeah, I say, *I got it.*

I've never kissed anyone before. I sometimes wondered if I ever would. I lean forward, mouth slightly open, and then Amy does too. Her lips are soft, like ripe melon. She lingers for a moment, and then her tongue lightly darts around the edges of my mouth. I lean in some more and run my hands along her lower back. She pulls away abruptly and looks at me as if she has just awoken from a light sleep.

Jesus, she says. *I just made out with a little kid.* She looks around, a little panicked. *This is our little secret, right?*

Yeah, I say.

– x –

One day Tracey comes over to babysit with Amy and Liz in tow, and of course starts right in on Timmy. *Okay, baby*, she says. *Can you say 'Spaghetti' for me?*

Sure, Tracey. Saghetti. Saspetti. Spa...

Why don't you leave him alone? Amy suddenly says, her voice shrill.

Why don't you and your boobs shut up? Tracey immediately replies, her eyes narrowing.

Everybody is silent and unmoving, unsure of what comes next. And then there's a scream. *Oh, sick*, Liz says, pointing. *A mouse just ran across the room.* Tracey calls her boyfriend Frank and begs him to come over. He says sure and shows up a little while later, his BB gun with him and another case of beer. We sit awaiting the mouse's return. It does not return.

Somewhere along the way, as more and more beers get shotgunned, Amy starts touching Frank, but without Tracey noticing; subtly at first, a hand on the shoulder, a brief brush of his leg, and then more brazen, running her fingers through his hair and squeezing his inner thigh. There is eye contact, low breathy murmurs, and whispers; Tracey is still oblivious because of being half-trashed herself. Frank suddenly says he has to leave, and Amy asks if she can get a ride home from him. Tracey sits on the couch by the front window, peering through the curtains and watching the two of them walk to Frank's car, expecting to watch the usual puff of blue smoke coming out of Frank's tailpipe as he revs it up. What she sees instead is Amy and Frank making out. In a fit of rage, Tracey steals one of my mom's rings.

My mom confronts her the next day and Tracey denies stealing the ring, but my mom fires her anyway. Tracey starts babysitting for Billy's younger brother soon after; and to get back at her now ex-boyfriend Frank for his indiscretion with slutty big-boobed Amy, she sleeps with Billy's baseball-playing dad Larry one night after he offers to drive her home. Turns out, though, that Frank could care less about Tracey and Larry. He has fallen in love with Amy and her awesome breasts, and not necessarily in that order.

Larry accidentally gets Tracey pregnant, and she is sent away in secrecy to have the baby. Tracey refuses to tell anyone who the father is; but Larry's son Billy knows, because Billy was watching through the car window like normal. After this, Billy is no longer so obsessed with Amy's breasts. All he cares about now is avoiding Larry, and hurting himself whenever possible. He begins to take risks, sprinting across the freeway at night, cars missing him by a hair, jumping blindfolded off the old water-tower up on South Mountain into the bushes below, even drinking nail polish on a dare. Billy doesn't care about anything anymore, and why should he? The world is crazy and there's no making any sense of it.

One night at a party, Billy announces to no one in particular that he is going to do a cannonball into the empty pool in the backyard. Liz the crier grabs him by the arm and asks him to stop. Even though he doesn't know her that well, her dyed hair and goth clothing suits his mood; plus he's too drunk to resist, frankly. They sit by the edge of the pool and talk. *I hurt myself too*, she says to him. *I cut myself. Little pricks across my arms, little slices across my thighs.*

Why? Billy says. *Why would you do that?*

It's the only thing that helps. It's just such a release from all the shit, you know?

I do know. He stares at her. He has fallen in love.

I've done a terrible thing, Liz says, *and I've never told anyone, and it's killing me.*

I have a secret too, Billy says, *and I just want to run from it, and keep running, you know?*

I do, Liz says. *So why not go, then, you and me? What do you say?*

And so they go. They leave that night and promise each other they will never come back. They can't, they claim – the neighborhood holds too many shadows for them.

– x –

People start whispering about Larry. *Did he or didn't he?* No one knows for sure, but they wonder. The wives stop sleeping with him, mumbling excuses about things "blowing over." With Tracey gone and having her baby, Amy with the boobs starts babysitting for Billy's little brother. Larry becomes transfixed with her, and decides he must have her. Amy is resistant, though; she's with Tracey's ex Frank now, is in love in fact, and besides has heard the whispers concerning Tracey's sudden "vacation" and Larry's possible involvement. Larry pushes and pushes the issue, though, asking again and again each time she babysits if he can make love to her at the end of the evening, never taking her protests seriously for even a moment. *C'mon, baby, he'd plead. It'll be great. The best lay you ever had. Aren't you sick of those boys you've been sleeping with? Don't you want to know what it's like to be with a real man?* Amy can only resist so much. Eventually it becomes easier to just give in.

When her boyfriend Frank stops by her bedroom later that night, Amy is crying and won't tell him what happened. The next morning she is still crying, and Amy's parents ask her what's wrong as well. At first she is hesitant to say anything to them, but then says she will tell them what happened if they agree to leave the neighborhood. They do, and she does, and they leave the neighborhood soon thereafter. Amy tells Frank that she can't tell him what's gone on and can't look him in the face anymore either. She hopes that he not hate her too much, and asks that he think of her always.

Frank of course can't think of anything else. He loves Amy and he wants answers. One night he goes by Larry's house with a case of beer and, as the night goes on, gets him to admit what happened. *Why don't you just tell me?* Frank says, after putting away eight or nine cans. *I know something happened, but she's gone now, you know? I mean, do you think I really fucking care at this point?*

All right, Larry blearily says, as drunk that moment as Frank is. I fucked her. I'm sorry. I did. But she wanted me, you know? What am I supposed to do? These women, these women out here, they just get their motors running, and suddenly there's nothing that can be done to stop them. Cracking open another beer, Larry proceeds to tell Frank all about Tracey and Liz and the dozens of other moms and daughters in the neighborhood he's slept with over the years. *It's beautiful in a way, actually, Larry says, pensively staring into the darkness beyond the porch. All that joy I've spread.*

Frank records the entire conversation, and after duping copies of the tape and slipping them into all the neighbors' mailboxes, heads out into the night in search of Amy, wherever she might now be. Larry's wife

leaves him and takes their remaining son with her. The neighborhood dads stop coming around. Larry loses his swagger. He is alone now and without purpose. After awhile, he stops leaving the house and no one even seems to notice. The days, the months, and then even the years start to pass. One day with the mail piling up and the lawn overgrown, the police kick in Larry's door. They find him dead on the living-room floor, surrounded by garbage, piles of old newspapers, and Pirates memorabilia.

– x –

And me, I never leave the neighborhood. I don't see any reason to. It's quiet and I like it that way. I stay long enough, in fact, to watch everyone eventually move back. First it is Amy and Frank; turns out he actually managed to track her down, and one thing led to another, and Frank never really wanted to leave in the first place, which is why they came back here. Billy and Liz then drifted in sometime after that; they've been all around the country, they say, but never found what they thought they were looking for, never found the inner peace they thought that distance would bring them. Even Tracey comes back – she is alone, childless and with no explanation of what happened, but she seems happy and who are we to doubt her? Once in awhile we all get together at someone's house and barbecue some steaks. We have a couple of beers, we laugh, and we shoot the shit. It's nice.

Chapter 3

The Gift

Fern liked motorcycle boots, black and scuffed, and she liked to wear them with long flowing skirts. She liked her brown hair short, with a slight part to the side, a few spare tendrils sneaking out behind her ears. She rarely wore makeup, but liked to pluck her eyebrows, the better for raising them Belushi-style when feigning surprise, awe, or self-mockery. She liked Hello Kitty. And the band Cake. She liked the movie *Mermaids* so much she saw it seven times. She never drank or smoked, but she liked nothing more than shooting pool in dark, musty bars. She hated George Bush, people who neglected to screw the top back on tubes of toothpaste, and the fact that she failed to put her sunglasses in the same place every time she removed them. She favored tank-tops and long leather jackets, but always wore a formal gown when watching the Oscars. She abhorred violence and injustice of all kinds, but especially against women. She was a leader in the student protests against admitting men to Mills College, and once traveled across Nicaragua on a rusty bike. She liked folktales and storytelling and had once created a video installation of three couples tickling each other – the sounds of their breath, their skin-on-skin contact, and their laughter reverberating across the abandoned warehouse where the work was first shown. Mostly, though, Fern liked sound, all kinds of sound, and her inability to block out the sounds that surrounded her, a trait she was sure was a gift bestowed on her from some higher power.

As a child, Fern would spend all afternoon sitting in front of the washing machines at the neighborhood laundromat listening to the *shwap, shwap, shwap* of the water sloshing about, the blades spinning, the socks and underwear crashing into one another. She would lay in the endless fields behind the neighborhood church and listen to the landscaping crew for hours, the tinny whine of the lawnmower motor and the occasional ping of a rock getting caught underneath it, bringing her great pleasure and solace. The plucky chirps of birds were forever entertaining

to her...as were barking dogs, the beeps and whistles of trucks backing into driveways, the rain slapping a staccato beat against the windows of her classrooms at school, and the *swack, swack, swack* of the baseball cards the boys next door attached to the wheels of their bikes.

In comparison, home was no place to be. It was noiseless and unbearable. No one spoke at meals. And no one asked about one another's day, much less about how they might be feeling. Worse though, there was no place in her home to hide or go that was far enough away to escape the crushing quiet, the fears that accompanied it, or the long nights Fern spent staring at the tiles on her bedroom ceiling, ten rows across, fifteen rows down, 150 total, 75 white, 75 black, 25 of which were cracked.

But the sounds that engulfed her outside of her home, these she could hide in, and revel in, creating a world that was hers and hers alone. Sound made sense; it provided her with both an anchor and a lifeline. Sound could be classified, explained, and organized, whereas regular life could not. It was too messy and unpredictable. People came and went, emotions changed from one moment to the next, relationships were unmanageable, and Fern wanted nothing to do with this. She wanted to feel something, and be excited by something, and discovering new sounds provided her with this. With sound came purpose, and with purpose the world finally made sense.

While Fern was all about collecting sound, however, she never did so in a systematic way; she simply left the house and went somewhere, and she savored what awaited her. This changed, though, when she moved to the city. There were all sorts of new sounds to discover here – the rattling of the Seven train as it emerged into the light of Long Island City, the whoosh the steam produced as it mysteriously arose from the sidewalk grates, the reverberations the escalators made as you descended into Penn Station on the Madison Square Garden side of the building. It was a whole new world and Fern embraced it lovingly, and ferociously.

It was around this time that Fern decided to start recording the sounds she loved so much. She bought little tape recorders that she attached to her feet so she could capture the resulting *crunch, crunch, crunch* as she walked through the day-old snow in Central Park; and then later slipped them into her pockets while on the Three train, so she could record random snippets of conversation as she came home from her job as an administrative assistant, to a realtor off of Broadway and West 35th:

So you slept with her?

Yeah.

**Are you going to tell your wife?
No. I don't want to hurt her.
That's very generous of you.
I think so.**

I met Fern at the Dive Bar up on Amsterdam. I was simply looking to shoot some darts and drink some beer; but there she was, sitting by herself in the back, nursing some seltzer water, a little smile on her face. I wouldn't normally approach someone like that, someone so clearly happy to be by themselves; but that smile, it was different, enigmatic. I had to know what was behind it.

Anyone sitting here? I asked.

No, she said, then held up a finger. *One minute*. She reached under the table and produced a tape recorder that she promptly turned off. She jotted some commentary into a little notebook and then turned her attention to me.

What are you doing? I said.

Capturing bar sounds, she said. *You know – bottles crashing into one another, pool balls ricocheting from one to the next, small talk, people washing dirty glasses.*

Why? I said, now smiling myself.

Because it makes me happy, she said.

We got pizza at La Famiglia at the corner of 96th, bought some beers at the bodega around the corner, and went back to her place, a little studio apartment in a building down by the West End Highway. The room was dominated by two things – a futon bed, and shelf after shelf of tapes divided into bizarre, random-sounding sections, all of them labeled with yellowing masking tape:

Dogs (big)
Dogs (small)
Bus announcements
Horses (hansom cabs)

At some point while we were listening, I drifted off, and when I awoke the next morning I was surrounded by open tape boxes and Fern was making us pancakes.

After that I joined her in her work. I was expected to come up with ideas, note locations where I heard especially anomalous sounds, and help Fern with her equipment and set-up when she was ready to record.

At times she produced detailed schedules and maps about our plans for the day, and at other times we just wandered, knowing we would eventually stumble onto something we were both captivated by. We captured the roar of the fans at Yankee Stadium; the din created by the big machines at Staten Island construction sites; the whir of the mammogram she took after she found a lump one morning in the shower. We were on a grand adventure, a search for sound in all of its forms, colors, tastes, and smells. We talked about building some kind of archive on the internet and writing little stories to accompany our efforts.

Can you feel it? Fern would say again and again.

What? I would always reply.

We're doing something great here, she would say.

We are? I would reply.

Of course we are, she would say. *We're creating something bigger than ourselves, something that will outlive us.*

Why do you even care about that? I would reply. *You're 25 years old.*

It's never too soon to think about your legacy, she would say. *Don't you want to leave some kind of mark that you were here?*

I guess, I would reply. *But what about children? Won't they be your legacy?*

I'm not having children, she would say. *There's too much pain in the world.*

How can you of all people say that? I would reply. *Look at this amazing thing you're doing. Look at how much pleasure it brings you.*

Yes, but there's no guarantee that my kids would find something they love, to fill whatever hole they find themselves in, she would say. *And I don't want the responsibility for having to worry about that. Now enough of this. What should we tackle today?*

One day she had this idea that she would ride her bike to work, her tape recorders capturing the sounds of the trip – the people rushing to the office, the car horns and vendors, the dogs barking, the police blowing their whistles, the flapping of her long skirt as the wind washed across her legs, a grown-up version of the baseball cards from the neighbors' bikes of her childhood. I called her at work later that morning, hoping to find out what she had recorded, wondering when I might be able to hear the results. She wasn't at work, though; she had never come in, actually, and she had never called. Nor was she at home. No one knew where she was. I went to her apartment at the end of the day and saw Fern's landlord by her door.

Did you know her? the landlord asked me. He was a bald guy in a wife-beater and blue Dickies.

Yes, I said. *Why?*

She was run over by a bus on her way to work today, he said. Got her skirt caught in the chain of her bike. It's a shame. She was funny. An unusual kid.

There was a memorial service for Fern and then her family took her home to be buried. And now I think of her every single time it rains here in the city, every single time some car slams on its brakes. But I also think about her when nothing is happening at all – no movement, no sound, just silence, profound and sublime silence. She wouldn't have understood it, but she would have appreciated it, I think, finding something in nothing, something wonderful to immerse yourself in when pain is the only other option. She knew how important that kind of thing could be.

Chapter 4

What We Thought We Knew

These were the facts about Lacey Chalmers as we understood them. She had short blonde hair, long skinny legs, green eyes, and shoulders that were perpetually slumped forward because she was embarrassed about her height. She had non-existent breasts, was a solid but unremarkable member of the varsity volleyball team, and had a smile that would sometimes come out of nowhere and suddenly light up a room. She wasn't cute per se, and she wasn't not cute either; she was what she was, and I guess for the most part we just didn't really ever think about her that way.

Lacey's birth had not been planned, and her parents were not young. Her father Frank was in his sixties when she was born, and her mother Annie was in her forties. They had not intended to have children, and really didn't even sleep together any more, except for the occasional birthday or anniversary celebration. Frank, however, had been regularly banging his youngish overtall blonde secretary Mary, and had gotten her pregnant. Mary did not want to keep the baby, but Annie talked Frank into talking Mary into having it. *I want to raise it as our own*, she said to Frank, in a way that made it clear that he had no right at this point to argue.

Lacey was in the Key Club and a member of the honor society. She had her heart set on attending Williams College and had no second choice in mind. Lacey and Frank played golf together on the public course twice a month when the weather was good, and Lacey and Annie watched the movie *Mermaids* together over and over again. While Frank may have had moments when he resented having Lacey around as a reminder of the things he wished he had not done, and while Annie may have kind of wanted to raise Lacey for just that very reason, it was still a happy, quiet house, where people went about their business undisturbed.

Lacey would have dated more, but people didn't really ask her. She did have her admirers though. There was Ted, for example – he of the perpetually bad skin, bad hair, and Harvard ambitions. Ted didn't get out much, and while it was clear that this was due in part to his study habits, as well as his penchant for Dungeons and Dragons, the fact was his family was unusually close and his father Jonathan liked to have Ted and his brothers in the house doing family things when he wasn't at work. This seemed odd to the rest of us – no one's family spent that much time together – but Jonathan was from Australia and none of us knew how they operated down there.

When we were eight, and long before I had begun to truly worry about being cool, much less being around those I perceived to be cool, Ted invited me to sleep over at his house. We didn't spend that much time together, but the fact that he had just received a copy of the new Asteroids cartridge for his Atari trumped everything else, and we played until our thumbs were swollen and our eyes were blurry. At some point Jonathan told us it was time to go to bed, and after Ted kissed Jonathan on the cheek I started to follow him upstairs. Jonathan – who had pale blotchy skin and thin wispy hair that hung across his face – looked at me, looked at Ted, and then smiled and said, *No one goes to bed in this house without first giving me a kiss goodnight.*

If I paused, it was brief. Of course the request seemed odd to me, because it was Ted's dad asking for a kiss and not, say, Ted's mom, who you never saw much of anyway. But at that age, I would never have seriously questioned an adult's overtures of any kind; it would never even have occurred to me to do so. I quickly kissed Jonathan on the cheek, and the oddness passed. The next morning, when my dad came to pick me up and asked me how the sleepover had gone, I didn't say anything to him about kissing Jonathan goodnight. I didn't say anything at all really, but it didn't matter, because he was already thinking about other things.

I like a family that spends time together, he said, *and I like seeing a father who seems to value that.* I didn't respond to that either; our family didn't spend that much time together, and it was safe to say that wasn't going to change any time soon. Then again, what did I know about parents? Nothing. They lived in a different world than we did. I never slept at Ted's again, though, but then again never planned it on purpose either. At some point I think he just stopped inviting people to stay over, and if that is true it didn't matter to any of us anyway, not really. Ted wasn't that cool, and we were finally old enough that that mattered.

What we also knew was that Ted was in love with Lacey, and while she tried to keep her distance, he knew that after he convinced her to go to the prom with him she would love him as well. In fact, Ted was so sure they would end up together, he had already memorized the directions between Harvard and Williams because he also knew that he was going to be making that drive quite often. The way Ted envisioned it, if he could find a good-enough route, he'd be able to make it to Lacey's campus late on Friday afternoons, right before rush-hour started, and if she had a class he could just wait for her at the student union and do his schoolwork. When she was ready they would go have an early dinner before heading back to her room, where they would spend the rest of the weekend together lying in bed, reading, writing long romantic letters to each other and making love.

Ted knew these things would happen, because he knew that nobody understood Lacey like he did. Certainly no one had studied her quite like he had, but that made sense because no one else felt about her quite like he did either. For example, did anyone else know that she was obsessed with Barry Manilow and that she drew his picture over and over again when she was upset about something? Probably not, but they probably hadn't watched her during study-hall quite as intensely as he had. Did anyone else know the route she took to get home from school, the exact route, including the walls she walked along, the backyards she cut through, and the bushes she jumped over? Definitely not, but who else had repeatedly followed her home, from a safe distance of course? No one, that's who, nor did anyone else know that late at night, when everyone else was asleep, she violently danced to the Ramones in front of her bedroom window. But how could they? How many of them had actually witnessed it?

Ted had never even kissed Lacey, but he knew he would, because while Ted had never discussed the prom with her, he knew it was just a matter of time before he did. And once he did, he knew Lacey would go with him, they were meant to be together, and that he knew without a doubt.

One night there was a party at Johanna Levy's house. Johanna's parents were never home on the weekends; it was something you could count on like clockwork. You also knew you could always count on someone's older brother or sister buying you beer; and that at some point the combination of the party and the alcohol would provide you

with the chance to hook up with someone. There might only prove to be a small window of opportunity to do so, but there would definitely be one at some point, something we knew to be true, regardless of how successful we actually were.

Oddly enough, Lacey was at Johanna's that night. They were not friends, but they were neighbors, all the way back from being kids, and nothing particularly negative had ever occurred between them. Like Ted and I, Johanna and Lacey had gone off in different directions at some point; you weren't sure why, but you knew that Lacey was Lacey, that she wasn't that cool, so you knew it had something to do with that even if you didn't exactly want to admit to it.

When I first saw Lacey she was at the keg. We were not that friendly, but we weren't unfriendly, and she always had a smile for me. *Hey, she said a little unsteadily. It's going to be my birthday at midnight.*

No shit, I said. Great. Happy birthday.

Yeah, she said, nodding to the music and looking down at her cup. So, you know, maybe you'll give me a kiss at midnight?

Um, sure, I said, taken aback for a moment. Anything you want.

Cool, cool, she said, still nodding, suddenly walking away without saying anything else.

She was joking, of course, had to be, or else was so wasted she would never actually remember the conversation by the time midnight rolled around; I didn't even consider actually kissing her later. But I would, I definitely would if she wanted to, if she asked me in a way that was real, that she would remember.

At midnight I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Lacey. *You didn't think I was joking, did you?*

Kind of. We barely ever speak.

And who's fault is that? she said. We remained silent for a moment, then she said, *Are you going to kiss me?*

I leaned in towards her and she responded in kind. Her lips were warm, electric, like fresh fruit. We started to kiss, slowly, softly, then faster, and harder. I pushed into her and she moved with me. I buried my hands in her hair and she grabbed my neck, pulling me closer to her, and then closer still. I paused, panicked by the intensity. I pulled back. She smiled.

Thank you, she said, walking away.

And that was the moment I became a lifelong admirer of Lacey, though always from afar, too scared to know what to do about it.

Lacey had one other admirer as well – Mr. Elmo, the music teacher who was youngish and desperate to be hip, with his longish prog-rock hair and tasteful little beard. He was married to an even younger woman of indeterminate Asian descent, who never left their little house and was rumored to hand-stitch his mainly hemp clothes. It was said that they spent their weekends getting together with faculty couples from the local college, getting high, watching porn, and swapping wives. But no one could confirm this. What we could confirm was that Mr. Elmo's slightly pudgy frame sweated a lot, and we knew this because each and every time we had music class, we would have to watch his hand-stitched hemp clothes become saturated over the course of an hour.

We also knew, or thought we knew, that he seemed to like young girls. And it wasn't because he clearly smiled more when they raised their hands, or that he liked to rub their shoulders during class, or even how he was forever offering the girls rides home from school in his beat-up VW Karmann Ghia, because he just happened to be going that way. No, it was the way he looked at them when they didn't know it, like a pan-handler staring through the window of a restaurant at a hot, open-faced turkey sandwich. There was a raw hunger in his eyes when he thought no one was looking; a desperate, churning desire to devour the girls in one big cartoonish bite.

And we knew, at least heard anyway, that Mr. Elmo had been asked to leave other schools for exactly this kind of stuff, and that his wife was in fact a former student of his, a woman who had gone on to be a student-teacher and then found her first husband in bed with another man. Everyone knew this, it was the word around school; and if the information wasn't entirely accurate, there was certainly no one around who could dispute it either.

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Of course, that was what we thought we knew. What we didn't know is that Lacey had slept with Mr. Elmo. It had happened on a class trip to Quebec that Mr. Elmo had chaperoned. Mr. Elmo had plied her with her raspberry wine coolers one night and told her how beautiful she was, had told her that he was lonely and that his wife didn't understand him or his dreams of being a full-time musician, his dreams of getting out of this endless rut of teaching a bunch of sullen spoiled teens who don't give a shit about art or beauty or truth.

Lacey was impressed, and admitted that her parents didn't understand her either, slurring as she related their latest argument. *'Why do you need to go all the way to Williams?'* they say. *'Why not stay with us? We love you.'*

Aren't we all happy here? Why ruin that?' But that's exactly why I want to go away. I feel smothered.

I know, I know, Mr. Elmo said. Like, just loving someone isn't enough. They need to understand your dreams as well, and support those dreams. Without that, how can you even call it love?

Yeah, totally, Lacey said. You really get me, don't you?

I do, Mr. Elmo said, opening another two wine coolers. I really do.

Moments after they were done having sex, Mr. Elmo said, You better leave my room now.

Don't you want me here?

Sure I do. But I'm a chaperone and you're a student. He ran his fingers down her cheek. You don't want me to get in trouble, do you? And she didn't, and so she left.

The next day, when Lacey tried to walk with Mr. Elmo through the Local History Of Labor Museum, he kept finding various ways to ensure that the two were never left alone. It remained this way for the rest of the trip, and when returning home the incident was never spoken about again.

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While we did not know that Lacey had slept with Mr. Elmo, what we also didn't know was that Ted had gone on the trip to Quebec to be near Lacey, that he had followed Lacey to Mr. Elmo's room, listening to all that had gone down. Nor did we know how much rage Ted felt about life in general those days – that he cut himself regularly, tortured small animals, wrote stories of mutilation and violence that he feverishly hid away in a box under his bed. If we had known this, we might not have been so surprised when eventually learning that Ted burned down Mr. Elmo's house. But we didn't know these things, just like we didn't know why Ted's Australian father was so gung-ho on being inside the house with his sons all the time. We didn't know that he had been sexually abusing them for years. We didn't know such things even happened. Not really, anyway.

And the fact that Ted was essentially let off on juvenile probation; the fact that Mr. Elmo and his wife quietly moved away a few weeks later; the fact that Ted's father permanently left the country the year after that; the fact that Lacey did not get into Williams after all; none of that seemed to mean all that much when everything was said and done. What we thought we knew wasn't very important, because the fact was that we didn't know shit, and you never do.

Chapter 5

Change of Plans

I'm home for the summer, so my uncle finagles me a job with the pipeline maintenance crew at Susquehanna Gas, four full-timers with little to do and even less supervision. There's Ethan, an older guy, who has a second career as a sustenance farmer at his home, just playing out another four years on the city payroll until his pension kicks in; he's the first one to unbutton his pants after lunch, the first to suggest we take it easy instead of doing work. Then there's Wyatt – he's wiry, lives on black coffee, and talks endlessly about whatever pops into his head, regardless of whether its accurate or not...

I don't think that you boys quite appreciate the benefits of a high caffeine level in the bloodstream.

Is that right, Wyatt. Well, why don't you illuminate us.

First off, if you drink coffee all day, it keeps you sharp, so you don't need as much sleep, and you can get more done. Second, it dehydrates you, so while you don't have to waste as much time taking a piss, it still ensures regular bowel movements. And finally, it fills you up and you don't feel like snacking as much. The result? No wasted calories.

Jesus Christ, Wyatt. Will you please shut the fuck up.

There's also Boone; a handsome guy, in his early thirties I think, who has a house he's constantly working on, and a former-cheerleader wife who all the other guys call a surprisingly nice piece of ass when he isn't around; and then finally there's Jones, stringy-haired and odd, who will go huge periods of time saying nothing and then suddenly pipe up with something outrageously inappropriate.

The guys all like to joke around, and they all like to talk a lot of shit:

Ethan: The wife's losing interest in me, you know. She's got grandchildren now; what the hell does she need me for? I may just need to move on.

Wyatt: *Maybe you could trade her in for a new one, like you did with that old tractor of yours.*

Boone: [Laughter] *Maybe you could find yourself a little something on the side, like a farmer's daughter.*

Jones: *Maybe you could fuck one of your goats.*

[Silence.]

Ethan: *What the fuck is wrong with you, Jones?*

Most days that summer follow the same pattern: we start by all rolling in around 9:30 or so, and spending the morning lazily idling around the concrete garage the crew calls home, drinking coffee and reading the paper and shooting the shit. Then around 10:30, 11, we'll finally get out and work for an hour or two – cleaning brush, surveying a new sewer line. A two-hour break for lunch; then back to the garage for a game of cards and more chit-chat; then another hour or two of work in the afternoon; and then it's back home usually around 4:30.

One day near the end of work, Boone asks if I can head back to his place with him for a little bit, help him out with a two-man project in return for some beer and steaks. I say sure and we go and grab one of the dump-trucks from the parking lot. We head to the quarry, where Boone picks up a load of rocks. *I'm building a patio in my backyard*, he says, *and I want to lay down some rocks before I pour the concrete.* After leaving the quarry we head to Boone's house, out on the edge of nowhere like so much of Susquehanna is, where he proceeds to dump the rocks in a big pile in his backyard. We start shoveling and raking, shoveling and raking.

A couple of minutes in, Boone wipes his brow and yells out, *Hon? Could you grab us a couple of beers?* I hear a faint *Sure*, and a moment later, his wife Kristy comes out. She's wearing cutoff jeans and a t-shirt with a country-music star on it, and I can see why the other guys on the crew say the things they do when Boone isn't around.

Thanks, baby, Boone says, taking the bottles from her and handing one to me. *This is the summer guy down at work I was telling you about.*

Kristy stares into my eyes and smiles. Her pupils are an impossibly light green, like sparkling emeralds that hypnotize you with their shininess. *Nice to meet you*, she says.

I... nice... it's, I stumble. *It's nice to meet you too.*

She turns back to Boone. *When you going to be done with all this, you think?*

Well, I gotta get the truck back tonight, then I'll probably stop off at Thirsty's for a bit. He shrugs. Late evening?

Not too late. I want to talk to you about something.

All right, all right, he says, smooching her on the cheek as she walks back into the house. Nice to meet you, she calls out again over her shoulder before disappearing.

Boone silently watches her go in, then sighs. A little advice, he says, still looking back at the house. Don't marry the first girl willing to give you a blowjob and swallow. Then he chuckles, so I do too, and we take drinks from our beers, and then he mutters, She wants to talk to me about something. Are you fucking kidding me. He puts his bottle down, shaking his head, and we get back to work.

After bringing the truck back to the maintenance compound, we indeed stop by Thirsty's for a couple of pitchers. It's a dark, damp place, murkily lit by a series of neon beer ads scattered throughout, half-filled on any given night with grizzled locals. Soon Boone is adding tequila shots to the affair, and then he's buying shots for a couple of the women who are there alone on a Thursday night, and then one of them is suddenly at the table with us, Cindy Who Likes The Bills which is about the only thing that permeates my drunken, fuzzy brain. And then the next thing I know, Boone's saying something about how he's going to catch a ride with her instead, and leaving yet another twenty for me to stay and enjoy myself. And I'm suddenly sitting with yet another beer in front of me, looking at a poster on the wall and thinking how there's something seriously wrong with the concept of talking lizards selling alcohol.

And then suddenly Kristy's there beside me, shaking my shoulder and saying, Hello? I said, have you seen Boone? She's changed outfits, now with teased-out hair and a low-cut v-neck t-shirt.

Oh, I say, my eyes focusing. Sorry. Sorry. Boone. Um. Yeah. He was. Um. Here.

She looks at me silently, nodding imperceptibly and with her lips pursed. I see, she says. And then he left. It's more of a statement than a question.

Um, yeah. And then he left.

She looks around the room, sighs, then looks back at me. Well, she says, why don't I give you a ride home at least? You don't look like you're in much of a position to drive.

Sure, I say, getting up and wobbling just a bit less than I was expecting to. Sure.

We drive up Pennsylvania Avenue, veering off onto Morgan Road, past Ross Park Zoo, before continuing on until we reach Mill Hill, a stretch of empty road just a few turns away from where I live. Kristy pulls over and kills the lights. It's dark up here and desolate; no housing, no cars, no streetlights or trees, just the top of a hill, and a whole lot of nothing. *Can I ask you a question?* she says.

Yes.

Today. At the house. Was your stammering because of me? I look down at my lap and laugh, embarrassed. She smiles. *Do you have a girlfriend back at school?*

No, ma'am.

She winces. *Please. It's Kristy.*

Um. No. Kristy.

Have you ever thought about. She pauses. *Being with someone older than you?*

The air inside the car is getting stuffy and oppressive, the windows starting to steam. *I've thought about it,* I say. *Yeah, sure, I've thought about it.*

And what did you think? She leans in just a little closer to me.

I pause for a long time, looking at the ceiling of the car's cabin and trying to figure out what to say; but before I can respond, she's already started smiling and saying, *Actually, okay, you just told me.* She bends over to dig through her purse, pulls out one of those thin chick cigarettes and lights it. She leans back, takes a long drag and exhales, looking at me silently for a moment, then finally turns back to the wheel. *Well,* she says, starting up the engine again. *Let's get you home, huh?*

The next day at work I try to avoid Boone, but it's hard when it's just a five-man crew and you spend most of your day together in a little concrete garage. Over a round of Hearts and a fresh pot of coffee that afternoon, he says, *So I guess Kristy and you ran into each other last night.*

Um, yeah, I say, staring at my cards. *That's right.*

He nods, looking at his cards as well. *Appreciate you not blabbing about me buying all those drinks for Cindy. I hate it when a man steps into another man's business like that.*

I shrug. *I barely remember. I was wasted.*

Yep, yep. He lays down a card, starting a new round. *One thing I can't stand, it's guys getting into other guys' business. Don't you agree, Ethan?* Boone's still staring at his cards, not looking at any of us. *Don't you agree, for example, a man deserves to be punished for fucking around with another man's wife?*

Hmm? Ethan looks up from his own cards, confused. Oh, I don't care. Maybe I'd be grateful to get my wife off my hands at this point.

Jones slaps down the Queen of Spades. Or you could just kill her, he says, then leave the body in that giant compost heap of yours until it turns into mulch.

They all stop and look in his direction. Squinting his eyes, Boone says, Jones, what the fuck is wrong with you?

And then that's it; suddenly the summer is over, and I'm heading back to school, a few thousand dollars richer and with a newfound appreciation for black coffee. And, you know, I never did get to see how that patio ended up turning out.

Chapter 6

Pac-Man Fever

I met George in school. He was always a little pasty, all the way through childhood, and had a habit of wearing the same pants for sometimes three or four days in a row, usually a series of interchangeable brown and blue and gray corduroys. George had a look of defeat about him from the first day I met him, like a guy who had hit the game-winning triple only to get tagged out because he failed to touch second base. His mom Kim had been a school lunch monitor when we were kids. She was partial to polyester pantsuits and big hair, but she was funny, and "earthy" as my mom liked to say, and she never failed to have any number of young guys around her when she and her friends went out to Thirsty's for drinks.

If this bothered George's dad Starnsey, he never said. Nor did he say anything much when Kim left home with Ray, the manager of the garage down the street. One day she was there, and the next day she wasn't. But Starnsey never said a word about it, and so neither did George. George wondered why Kim might want to leave, but it seemed pointless to ask Starnsey about it; he just wasn't that type. And so they went about their business, like all was normal, like there was nothing odd about one day your mom being there and one day not.

Kim and Starnsey had met when she came into the little convenience store he owned, to buy a pack of cigarettes. It had been a whirlwind romance – a weeklong courtship, an impromptu wedding before the justice of the peace, a two-day honeymoon in Niagara Falls, and George's birth nine months to the day of the wedding. It had started off well enough, but it was fast, and what Kim couldn't have known of course was that Starnsey was prone to dark stretches of incapacitating depression, times when he could do little more than sit behind the counter of the store if he could in fact get out of bed at all.

At first Kim tried to make it all work – caring for Starnsey, caring for George, getting a job at the school, running the store at night as needed.

And for a year or two this was okay, and even year three wasn't terrible, but when year four rolled around and George became yet more demanding, Kim began to wonder where her youth had gone and why she had let go of it so readily. Soon there were drinks after work and minor flirtations. And then there were drinks followed by furtive sexual encounters in her car, outside the Pine Lounge and in the alley behind Thirsty's.

And then there was Ray. With his bushy mustache and bowlegged gait, he was handsome in an urban-cowboy kind of way. He was also young and in love, and only too happy to be told what to do. When he promised Kim a better life, she saw an out and she took it. They headed to Florida and then Houston, going wherever there was steady work and a steady supply of alcohol. At first, George heard from Kim every once in awhile, and then not at all; it was just George and Starnsey now, and that wasn't much.

With Kim gone, Starnsey became even more reclusive – her loss had aged him, and without her to care for him, his bouts with depression became longer and more tortured. Starnsey would become unable to leave his bed for days, if not weeks, at a time. He couldn't cook for either himself or George, or even make himself get up to bathe more than once a week or so. George became Starnsey's full-time caretaker, and by the time we reached the ninth grade George had stopped attending school. He tended to Starnsey, tended to the store and made time for little else.

And so it went until something amazing happened – Pudgie's Pizza opened up down the street from Starnsey's store. Where once there was nowhere to go when school and homework and sports were done, we now had a destination, a place of our own away from adults and rules. You could get two plain slices of pizza and a small soda for 99 cents, a dozen chicken wings for two dollars, and an order of deep-fried mushrooms with Russian dressing on the side for a buck twenty-five. You could also play this bizarre new videogame called Pac-Man, a game that was such a departure from the simplistic, war-based, one-dimensional, black-and-white games we had been used to up to that point.

The game cost a quarter. It had multiple colors and a soundtrack. The game was comprised of a maze filled with white dots. The goal was for the Pac-Man – a little yellow circle with a notch cut for a mouth – to consume the dots while being chased by four ghosts, gremlin-like creatures that were either red, blue, yellow, or green, and that roamed the maze all obsessed like Dirty Harry with one mission and one mission only – catch and kill the Pac-Man. The dots were each worth points and in each corner of the maze were larger dots that when consumed allowed the

Pac-Man for a short time period to consume the ghosts, the hunted briefly allowed to become the hunter.

You controlled the Pac-Man's direction by a knob on the machine, and for the most part you yanked it around and mindlessly cruised the maze as long as you could, tempting death, hoping for inspiration, and trying to avoid capture. When all the dots on the screen were consumed, you moved on to the next level, where the ghosts became even faster, and if you could get through that level, another one awaited, that was faster still, and on and on you went until all your Pac-Men were dead. You were on your own in there, but as far as we knew the game was endless, and as long as you could stay alive the levels would continue on into infinity. Or at least, we could never imagine anyone getting a score high enough to actually "break" the machine's scoring system.

We played endlessly, spending our allowance and lawnmowing money while it lasted, and then our lunch money, and then our old birthday money we had been saving, and finally the money we would filch from our fathers' pants pockets and mothers' pocketbooks as they slept. The top-ten scores list changed constantly as we all tried to master the game, and we all had those moments where nothing went wrong, where the Pac-Man was always a little faster than the ghosts and our vision transcended our more earthbound constraints. No one played more or worked harder than George, though, and no one could compete with him.

It wasn't just that he could play during the day while we were at school, or that he didn't have a curfew, or even that he had an unlimited supply of quarters from the store, though these things all helped; it was just that George simply wanted it more than we did. Unlike his home life, which was confusing and messy, Pac-Man had clear boundaries and rules. You followed a defined path, and though you were being chased the whole time, if you were smart, and played within yourself, you could achieve liberation and greatness. It was black and white and George craved that; it spoke to him and he embraced it like a lover to his beloved, after returning home from a long journey.

George was something to watch too. He was like a rockstar up there, a cigarette in one hand, the knob in the other, surrounded by the neon signs advertising Bud Light, breathlessly eluding the ghosts, eating dots, and marching through one board after another. George had a swagger at the machine that he possessed in no other facet of his life. George was the king and not only did he have little intention of abdicating his throne, he knew he would never have to. We were all competing for

second place, and we accepted that. We were in the presence of greatness.

At first George was merely a phenom, a freak – a player gifted with quick wrists, concentration, vision, and fearlessness. Soon, though, he made an important discovery; the game was less random than we all thought. The ghosts did not merely follow the Pac-Man around the board, but were programmed to follow certain paths in certain ways; and while they responded to your decisions about where the Pac-Man should go next, if you studied their reactions it soon became obvious how they would respond, and which direction they would go.

Armed with such insights a person could set the pace, go on the offensive, and ultimately conquer the game. When George realized this, his focus on the game moved from obsession to compulsion. He began to study every move and its subsequent ramifications. He started to show up when Pudgie's opened its doors and stay until closing, only breaking long enough to run home and care for Starnsey or manage the store during the rare busy stretches of the day. Otherwise, it was all about the game – learning it, living it, making it his own.

We watched and watched as George became the master of this small slice of the universe. Once there, it didn't matter that his mom had left or that his father was often in a catatonic state; he was a magician weaving a spell that we all found ourselves captivated by. Soon the question was not whether George *could* conquer the machine, but when he *would*, and what it would look like and what would happen afterwards. This was before the internet, remember; although there had been a series of urban rumors whispered in the arcades about this kid or another reaching a fabled "final level," of unlocking an entire sequence of new animations once beating that final board, none of us among the "Pudgie's crowd" had ever actually seen such a miracle for ourselves.

But one night, though, we finally found out. Like usual, none of us even paid attention to the first 50 screens or so, George passing through them with the contempt that befits a champion destroying a lesser opponent. It was like Bird playing a game against the Clippers; showing up is required, but there's no real reason to break a sweat. George kept going and going, though, and we all took notice. Screen after screen disappeared before us, as George seemed to drift further and further away; he was in the zone, oblivious to anything but the game.

Thirty minutes passed and George was still going. Then 45 minutes. And then an hour. George was soon up to level 200, down to his last Pac-Man, with still no end in sight and no one quite sure how much longer

the game would last. He took a bite of pizza, a sip of coke, and pushed on, a cigarette always burning in his left hand. And then suddenly it was level 256, and although the game itself was behaving the same as always, the entire right-half of the maze was now filled with random garbage, computing gobblety-gook, which of course made it almost impossible to play, because you couldn't see what you were doing or where the ghosts were or how many dots were left or anything. And sure enough, George's last Pac-Man died a quick and ignoble death, and then there was nothing; no special lights or bells, no bikini-clad models pouring champagne or giving George a kiss, just a return to the top-ten list, and George's score of 3,300,100, and a prompt for his initials.

So George added his usual gaming nom-de-plume, VHX ("Van Halen Rox"), calmly walked away from the machine, sat down at a booth and finished his cold pizza. He drank some more soda and had another cigarette. He looked lost and worn out, and not at all triumphant as one might have hoped.

So is that all there is? he tiredly asked me.

Yeah, I guess.

I'm not sure what to do now.

Savor it, motherfucker. I shrugged. Enjoy it. Do it again.

He sighed. *Sure, okay,* he said, getting up. *I gotta go check on my pops. See you later.*

The next morning I woke up to the dog barking like crazy in the backyard. I walked out there half-convinced that I'd find George hanging from a tree, pale and not moving, his hair damp from the morning dew, his lips a ghostly blue. But George wasn't out there, just some baby birds hopping around and squawking, waiting for their mother to return home with their breakfast.

I didn't see much of George after that; he never really came back to Pudgie's, and in fact never left Starnsey's much at all. I think he's still there, but I haven't checked to find out. It's too sad a story for me – a god falls to earth, and all he has to show for it are three initials on a video-game screen.

Life As He Had Known It

It had been moving so fast, Matt thought. It had been time to have a baby; both he and Sheila had agreed on that. But then suddenly she was pregnant. They had known it might take awhile and Matt was okay with that, but it hadn't – two months, boom, she felt different, she peed on a stick, and there they were. Soon a month had passed, then two; one trimester begat a second. There were names to be picked, and strollers, classes on breastfeeding and infant CPR.

Bob, the guy who taught the infant CPR class, was a hulk – his enormous shoulders straining the sleeves of his polo shirt, his thick thighs packed into his khakis like sausages, his hands the biggest Matt had ever seen, like pink fleshy waffle irons. *Let me just tell you folks something right off the bat, Bob said. You will probably never need to use a single technique I am going to teach you today. The fact that you're here shows you care enough to pay attention to your child.*

And Matt hoped that was true, because ten minutes after the class ended Matt couldn't remember a thing. Then again, he couldn't remember much of anything these days; life was just flying by, all of it, all of it was a blur. And then suddenly it wasn't. They started getting things done and life began to move at half-speed. The crib was ordered and the baby's windows were sealed. Names were chosen – Fiona if it was a girl and Jones if it was a boy. Blood kits obtained. Bags packed, including a pair of shorts for Matt, who was reminded by a nurse that he was not allowed to lounge around the hospital without pants on, as some new fathers were wont to do.

There was nothing left to work on, and so Matt caught his breath and focused on things he had not been able to get to before. He filed some papers that had been piling up on his desk – bank notices and pay stubs, health insurance updates and reports on the status of his 401k. He caught up on the back issues of *The New Yorker* that had been piling up. He

handed off what he could at work and watched the complete first season of *The Sopranos* on DVD.

The due date approached, but there was nothing – no dilation, no Braxton-Hicks. The baby did not drop and so they waited, Sheila now sleeping on her side and struggling to get out of chairs. It was a gift of sorts. There was a little time to relax, and bank some sleep, not that it would make a difference, people said. It also allowed for a false sense of security. Matt began to feel ready. Things were organized and neat. There wasn't a sense that the baby was going to interfere with life as he had known it, because he was caught up and things were quiet. There was no unfinished business now, just Matt and Sheila and their unborn baby waiting to come out.

Matt went to work at the law firm and Sheila made it to her consulting job. She did something with benefits, though what exactly Matt could never say for sure. And why not go to work? There was no need to waste their limited maternity leave, no need to sit home and stew. And nothing happened; nothing until the call, that is.

When are you getting home? Sheila asked.

I don't know, Matt said. *Six o'clock, maybe. I have some things to finish up here.*

Well, why don't you come home now? I feel... I don't know. I feel different today.

Matt went home immediately, but it wasn't like the movies, and he and Sheila were unsure when to leave for the hospital. It was impossible to figure out just how much time had elapsed between the contractions, or even what exactly a contraction was supposed to feel like. On top of that, Sheila's water never broke. When they finally went in to the hospital, the nurse said Sheila was not dilated enough, and needed to walk around for an hour before they would send her upstairs to give birth. They made it five minutes before Sheila couldn't walk at all.

The delivery room didn't seem much like the ones in the movies either. There were very few people present – just Sheila, Matt, the OB-GYN, and a nurse – and no one was running around yelling *Stat!*, which was calming, but disappointing in a way as well. A guy with hairy arms came by to do the epidural, but he didn't linger very long.

Sheila was asked to push, and then asked to push and breathe and push some more. Soon there was some hair that began to poke out with each push, only to disappear again when Sheila stopped. And then there was a head, a malformed head, though not as malformed as Matt first thought; the baby was just coming out facedown. And then there was a

final push, and suddenly a baby, a perfect little boy with spiky hair, ten little fingers, and ten little toes.

And now there were five people in the room, though only one of them was screaming. And then when the doctor and nurse left the room only three – Matt, Sheila, and baby Jones. Jones was lovely, dark, lean and theirs. He wouldn't eat, though, or couldn't eat, it wasn't clear to them which; but that's okay, they thought. He's new; he'll figure it out. Anything was possible at this point, anything. There was a whole world out there for Jones to learn about.

When he still wouldn't eat, though, they asked the nurse what she thought. *He just doesn't seem to be taking to my breast*, Sheila said.

Yes, and... ? the nurse said.

Well, we're just not sure what to do.

What do you think you should do?

I'm sorry. I don't understand.

You're the parents, the nurse said. *It's up to you.*

And yes, that was true – they had been parents for 24 hours now. But they didn't know anything, did they? Well, they must have, because the next day the hospital sent them home, just like that. *Unbelievable*, Matt and Sheila said to each other at the time. *They just let you leave with one of these. How is that possible? How can they trust us to take care of this baby?* No one seemed to care, though, and no one seemed all that worried. *Amazing*, they said again and again. *Fucking amazing.*

They couldn't get the car seat fastened for the cab ride home. They had practiced this back in their apartment, but the straps weren't loosening up like they had on the couch. It was cold. They were tired. Jones was wailing. They held the car seat in place with their hands and prayed to any deity who might have been listening to spare them this one indiscretion.

They made it home safely, and quickly realized that they could make up all the rules they wanted concerning having a baby, but that they would still break them all by the end of the first week, if not the first day. Being good parents is great and all, Matt and Sheila thought, but the main goal is simple survival – both the baby's and yours.

And for the most part, they got by at first. They treated poor Jones' diaper rash, tended to poor Jones' circumcised penis, and swabbed the alien matter left behind after poor Jones' umbilical cord had been cut. They even got him to eat, just a little at first, and then with Jones finding his way, a lot. He was ravenous and making up for lost time.

A week passed, and there was hope. And then suddenly there wasn't. Jones started to scream, from the moment he woke in the morning to the moment he finally drifted off at night. While Jones would sleep in the evening for several hours after endless cooing, singing and rocking, and even go back to bed for an hour or two after a feeding, he might not sleep for the other seventeen hours of the day, choosing instead (assuming there was a choice) to scream shrill, bird-like, inhuman wails. He would hold his breath until he turned purple. He would sweat and ball up his beautiful little fists. But he could not be consoled, would not be consoled.

Jones' pediatrician, a warm and calming presence, was happy to speculate on what might be going on. *Could be acid reflux*, she said. It wasn't. *Maybe a lactose intolerance, then*. No. *It's possible that he just wasn't ready to come out*. Whatever that meant. *It's colic*, she finally said. *We don't know what causes it, though it may be due to an immature digestive system. It will pass*.

Is there anything we can do? Matt and Sheila said.

Consider letting him sleep on his stomach. It may cause him less duress.

But they could not bring themselves to let Jones sleep on his stomach, because of all the reports they had seen on television concerning SIDS, and because they could not do so they tried everything else. The bouncy seat. The vacuum cleaner. The swing with the uterine swoosh. But nothing worked, and the screaming continued, unabated.

One late night, as Jones lay there on the ottoman in front of Matt, post-bottle, the screams since renewed for more than an hour, Matt stared at him through his blurred vision and stinging eyes and suddenly found himself with the urge to pick Jones up by his little baby shoulders and shake him as one might an adult, beseeching him to just tell Matt what he needed. *We will do anything for you*, Matt yelled inside his head. *Anything*. Matt had not moved an inch towards Jones, but pulled himself away from the still-screaming baby anyway, wondering all the while what had become of him, what had become of them. Is this what Sheila and he had signed up for? Hadn't they been happy before this? Matt questioned if this was truly meant to be, or whether he had merely convinced himself that fatherhood was something he had wanted. He hated Jones, he hated Sheila and he hated himself most of all.

Matt decided to lay little Jones down on his belly. He needed some relief, and what else was there to do? He had not wanted to wake Sheila when Jones had started screaming, which was probably a mistake, and wondered whether he should do so now before making this decision. He

decided not to. He felt alone and locked into this path. It was his decision to make, and his alone. He lay Jones face down in his bassinet. He wriggled for a moment, moving his face from side to side, looking for the right spot. And then he stopped. Stopped moving, stopped screaming, just stopped. His back began to rise and fall with his each breath, and he slept. No muss. No struggle. No furrowed brow.

Every five minutes for the next hour, Matt checked to make sure Jones was still breathing; and then once he accepted that he was, wondered if he would continue to do so for the next five minutes. Matt was relieved, but anxious, and in the deepest recess of his brain wondered if maybe, just maybe, he had embraced the doctor's recommendation because of the small chance that Jones might not make it through the night. This was possible, wasn't it? Of course it was. Matt also presumed, at least in part, that this was why he had not woken Sheila when he put Jones down. He didn't want her to talk him out of it, nor did he want her to share in the burden of the decision. Matt wanted to think about all this further; but sleep overtook him, and he soon found himself unconscious on the floor next to the crib.

He awoke around two hours later to Jones' screams, as he had each day prior to this. Jones had not died in his sleep and Matt was happy for that, but the screams had not gone away, and Matt had no idea how much longer this could possibly continue. They changed and fed him, but it didn't stop him from screaming, and there was of course nothing they could do about it. They decided to take him for a walk; they recognized that this would not likely bring Jones any respite, but at least the screaming wouldn't sound so loud outside.

They headed down Pennsylvania Avenue, past the old Giant supermarket that had stood empty for years now, and the '80s tanning salon that no one ever went to anymore. They rolled by Bill's (the muffler place) that had once been Pudgies (the pizza parlor), where they could get two slices and a Coke for only 99 cents when they were kids, and the Hess station that never ran out of frozen burritos or wild-eyed clerks. They headed onto the off-ramp that took them towards downtown. It was crisp outside, with a slight breeze and the smell of burning leaves in the air, though no one appeared to be burning anything.

They hadn't been out much, something they hadn't realized until they actually left the house. It was easier to stay inside, isolated and alone, hiding from a world that couldn't help them and didn't want to deal with them. No one could possibly understand what they were going

through. It was Matt and Sheila against the world, and there was no escape. Jones was their problem – their problem to fix or die trying.

Being outside felt different, though. They felt lighter and freer out there, hopeful even. There were no walls closing them in, just a world of possibilities, and for a couple of minutes they really let themselves believe this. Jones, however, wasn't feeling lighter or freer, though he could not articulate the reasons why in any particular way they could follow. There were no words for it because Jones of course had no words. All he could do was cry and scream, tortured by a world he did not yet understand, but which he already knew had little to offer him in terms of comfort.

Jones began to turn purple from all the crying, and while Matt and Sheila felt overwhelmed by some combination of anger, empathy, and powerlessness, there was nothing they could do but continue to walk along the overpass in silence, passing the old carwash and the closed bridge. Shortly they came upon the Park Diner, and decide to stop in. There may be no escape for them, from Jones' endless distress, they thought, but at least they could have a cup of coffee and Jones could be free from the restraints of his stroller.

After they ordered, Matt got up to use the bathroom, and as he passed the front entrance he began to feel shaky. Pausing for a moment, he closed his eyes, and little blips of light went off in his head. He looked back across the restaurant at Sheila, as she pulled Jones from the stroller to soothe him. She looked harried and tired. *We are in hell*, Matt said to himself.

Matt wondered what it would be like to walk out the door and just keep walking, not stopping until he had reached some other city where he could start over, liberated and re-vitalized and with a new identity and a new life. Then he wondered why he was being so dramatic about it. Couldn't he just leave Sheila and Jones and move to the other side of town? He could still support them, but why did he have to stay? People left their families all the time, didn't they? Why wasn't it okay for him to say he couldn't hack it, that he had to move on? Matt wasn't sure how to answer these questions; but then he looked back at Sheila again, holding Jones, loving him, doing anything she could to bring him comfort, and he knew that it didn't matter. None of it mattered. They were in this together, and it was going to be all right. It had to be.

Matt walked back over to Sheila and Jones. *I'm so fucking tired*, he said.

I know, Sheila said. *But we should go. Jones is getting agitated.*

Sure. Let's get out of here.

And then suddenly, one day the screaming stopped just as randomly as it had started. Granted, Jones would never end up being much for sleeping, no matter how old he eventually got, and would always remain a little obstinate as well; but in general he would turn out to be a pretty great kid, and a pretty great grown-up too. A couple of years later Matt and Sheila would also go on to have a daughter named Molly, who was nothing like Jones had been. No screaming. No fussing. They would jokingly refer to her as "The Perfect Baby," the object of jealous parents at every fidgety school play and spring concert. And sometimes, Matt would think back on the days when Jones was a baby, think about those days when the crying wouldn't stop. It seemed now sometimes like it had happened to a completely different person. And who knows; maybe it had.

Shooting Stick

His once graceful fingers stroke his stubbly chin. He could have been a surgeon, people say; he could do anything with those fingers. But he hasn't, not besides shooting stick and wrapping them around a bottle of liquor, anyway. He looks off into the distance, at what I don't know. Does he? I doubt it; then again, I never knew what he was thinking, and I still don't. He never cared for me or taught me anything. He never gave me a home or a hug. He never came to one of my little-league games or took me to see a car show. He never helped me earn a merit badge or study long division. He never told me about sex or gave me any advice. He didn't read me bedtime stories or come to my room when I was scared late at night. He never said I love you or made the hurt go away. I guess when he decided it was all right to leave us that first time, something died in him. When I see old pictures of my father and my mother, when they were young and in love and before I came into the world, I see a glimmer of light dancing in his eyes, a glimmer that speaks volumes about love and dreams and hope. Now those very same eyes are dull and lifeless, prone to staring off into space, no longer searching for that thing that is now long lost.

I used to wait for my dad to visit. I'd sit there by the window late at night, searching for him like a cop's wife must do. Every shadow might be him, I thought; but no, it never was. *He's off on a business trip*, my mom would say. *He'll be home soon*. But I knew better. I knew that he was a spy, like James Bond, traveling the world on secret missions, saving us from evil, slowing down just long enough to have drinks and gamble with some babe with a name like Pussy Galore. Or perhaps he was a cowboy off on some ranch somewhere; or maybe an astronaut just a few weeks away from his ticker-tape parade. I would search at night, looking for his spaceship, and with every shooting star I'd think, *That's my old man, right there, on his way home*.

Once I was older, I'd spy him downtown every so often, usually in the window of some bar, and once in awhile he would come by the house to visit, always wearing a suit but the suit always ruffled and dirty, him always thinner, withering away layer by layer, his looks and youth fading like an old coat of paint. When he came to visit he would ask for a little pocket change, just something to tide him over, and I would run to get my piggybank, only too eager to help out.

This is the last time I do this, Matt, I swear, he'd say to me. Now mind your mom and do your schoolwork.

Sure, dad, I'd say, giving him a little wave as he made his way to the bus stop.

One time when he came by he asked if I wanted to shoot some pool with him. He said he had a couple of extra dollars, and what did I think? *Yes, yes, absolutely, I said, a little too quickly.* We went down to the arcade by the high school. It was real smoky, the windows covered with dark stick-on shades, and there were games everywhere – Centipede and Pole Position, Asteroids and Pac-Man. Lights were flashing and bells were ringing, and the room was filled with surly, long-haired teenagers, sporting wispy mustaches and wearing soiled three-quarter-length jerseys emblazoned with logos of metal bands. I felt like we had invaded some sort of hidden teenage sanctum, and it was all a bit scary to me, actually. In fact, I would have been just as happy to leave, but I certainly wasn't going to say anything to my dad. Meanwhile, he seemed right at home there, and I knew there was no turning back when he placed two quarters on the railing of the pool table.

We stood there until the game being played was over, me still fidgety and nervous, my dad still completely relaxed. The winners looked over at us and my dad walked over to the table, inserting our quarters and racking the balls. I missed every shot, needless to say; but the thing is that my dad was just awesome. He was using English and adding all sorts of spins, hitting shots from every possible angle, and never talking, just cruising around the table silently pointing at pockets with the tip of his stick. Soon enough the game was over, and we had won, and just like that the table was suddenly under *our* control.

The next set of teenagers approached the table, and now they had to rack, and we got to break, and I still didn't hit a thing, but it didn't matter, because there was my dad once again walking around the table in that ratty old suit of his, stalking those balls, not missing a shot. He was a god out there, and just like that we won again. At this point the whole place is watching – and they had to, of course, I mean, who were we to

come into their space and take over like that? And who was this guy running every shot with some loser kid as his partner? No one could answer those questions, and no one immediately emerged to play us for the table either. Instead the teenagers quietly conferred amongst themselves, and then decided to send their best two players forward to challenge us.

It was two girls, both wearing tight Jordache jeans and feathered hairdos, and they could really play. I mean, they weren't better than my dad, but then he was also carrying me. Soon they're matching my dad shot for shot, and the place is just totally silent, everyone watching, the four of us in our own little world. The tension mounts, and then there is just the eight-ball remaining, and the one girl misses it, leaving it just sitting there hanging on the lip of the pocket, just waiting for someone to tap it in. That someone is me, and it's a lot of green because she's also managed to leave the cue ball on the exact opposite end of the table. The girls start getting ready for their next shot, simply assuming I'm going to miss; it's a straight-enough shot, though, and my dad is coaching me. *Use the lights, Matt. Relax. Breathe. You can do it. You're cool as a cucumber.* And so I line up the shot, and I close my eyes, and I strike the cue ball, and the eight-ball drops; and we are triumphant, and they are dejected, and we leave as the undefeated champions.

Unfortunately I started to see him less and less after that summer, and then he finally stopped coming by to visit at all. At first, the less I saw him, the more I dreamt about him. I'd open the door to my room and a skeleton in a cheap suit would be standing there, smiling, arms outstretched, looking for a hug. I'd burrow deeper and deeper into my covers until he went away, all the while crying silent tears because tough guys didn't cry. But even the dreams stopped coming at some point, and as I grew older I stopped waiting by the window, stopped staring into the sky and mistaking shooting stars for his ship. Finally, my dad became just another one of the shadows I conducted small talk with down at happy hour at Tom and Marty's on a Friday afternoon; and while we never had much to say to one another, he would always bring up the day of the pool game, the day his boy, all calm and cool and collected, had hit the shot that had beat the best players in the arcade.

Then he fell ill, or maybe he just fell, and now he spends most of his time staring out a window, and now it's me that sees his face brighten when he spies me coming up the front walk. The other day I took him down to the old arcade; it's dingy and uncared for now, empty of videogames because no one plays videogames at arcades anymore. The pool

table is still there, though, and there's no one using it when we arrive, so we chalk up our cues and rack the balls.

We don't last very long, three games maybe, and the shooting is poor. *If you want to know the truth, I say laughing, I feel kind of bad taking advantage of a chemo patient.*

A chemo patient who can still kick your ass, he says, laughing back. He gets a faraway look in his eyes when I line up my next shot. Hey, remember the time you beat the girls? he asks.

Sure, I say, watching him lean forward just a little too much, watching him catch himself on the table's edge when he thinks no one is looking. Luckiest shot I've ever made.

That wasn't luck, he says. You were master of the universe that day.

I laugh again. Just shoot, asshole.

And then we're done almost as soon as we've started. And I take him home, and I help him up the stairs and into his apartment. And then I make sure he's comfortable and that he has a warm dinner that's ready to eat, before I leave him once again staring out the window. And as I walk away I realize that I have lied about something. I said that he never taught me anything, but that's not true. He taught me how easy it can be not to give a shit. And in this, he really has left me something I legitimately treasure.

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Ben Tanzer

is the author of the novels *Lucky Man* (Manx Media, 2007) and *Most Likely You Go Your Way and I'll Go Mine* (Orange Alert Press, 2008). Ben also compulsively blogs at *This Blog Will Change Your Life*, the center of his vast (albeit faux) media empire, and oversees *This Zine Will Change Your Life*, which he thinks you should read, link with and totally submit to. Cool?

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