

Chapter 1

Ron was riding shotgun in the pink Cadillac. It was dark and he was trying to see in back of him. Quimpy was driving. It was the beginning of July. Quimpy was calculating how long it would take to empty his apartment and wipe down every piece so that he was sure there were no cockroaches. In the back seat, Angel was almost asleep, and Celeste was sitting still and hoping that meant that Angel would sleep through the night.

Ron cast a sidelong glance at Quimpy, who was on cruise control and heading for the end of the night. Ron wanted to look into Celeste's eyes. He wanted to see her baby's eyes again. He was confused. Maybe he should have just gone home at the end of the day. He was helping Quimpy to move one antique piece of furniture at a time from one end of Paterson to the other in a pink Cadillac convertible. It occurred to Ron that if he ever had to live out of a car, a Cadillac would be an excellent choice. He wanted to see her face. He wanted her to look at him. He wanted the baby to open her eyes and gaze into his soul again.

The Caddy rolled to a stop in front of Celeste's home. She gathered Angel into her arms. Ron wanted her to turn around. He told himself that if she was interested, she would look back at him. He watched the roll of her hips disappear as she walked up the stairs and into the small, brick Cape Cod. The baby was asleep and Celeste did not look back.

Quimpy said, "Too bad about her, isn't it?"

"I don't know," said Ron.

"That big guinea family, married twice, already popped out a kid. It's over," said Quimpy.

Ron was silent. He wondered if that was why she hadn't turned around.

The next day Ron was back at Quimpy's place. The move was in its second week. They took two or three wooden pieces at a time. They made at least three trips a day. There was a lot more to go. Quimpy was a collector and he liked spindly-legged oak. Ron's summer checks were coming in. He was working out on

the track. Quimpy was an old friend and Ron didn't mind doing him a favor. Besides, Quimpy was giving him excellent pot.

Celeste startled them both when she appeared. Ron stood but seemed paralyzed. She kissed Quimpy on the cheek and moved towards Ron.

"You were talking about going on vacation last night," she said.

Ron was confused. "I was?"

"I think that you should consider Arcosanti. It's a great place to think about." She extended her right hand and presented a stapled collection of copied library research pages to him.

Ron looked over at Quimpy and then into her eyes. "I'm not sure that I know what you mean."

Celeste said, "If you have any questions about this or anything else, I put my phone number right here." She pointed to the hand written number at the top of one of the photocopied pages. Ron looked down at it. He was pretty sure that his mouth had dropped open, but then she was turning and leaving.

She had been wearing jeans and a white cotton top. Ron was stunned. Quimpy wasn't saying anything. She didn't make eye contact with Quimpy on the way out. Quimpy felt strangely dismissed.

"Do you think she just gave me her phone number?"

"Looks that way," said Quimpy.

Ron said, "I don't know what to do about that."

"Give her a call," said Quimpy.

Remembering Celeste, Ron agonized. They had spent a day together in Quimpy's old converted garage. Then she was living in the City and drove a red Italian sports car. Ron felt lucky that he had transportation. She was tan and beautiful and the way she laughed made him feel warm and excited at the same time. But she was talking about clubbing in New York and making that scene or a different scene. Ron knew that he did not have anything that interested her but his smile. He smiled for her as much as he could and the next thing he heard, she was gone and married.

A few weeks ago, Quimpy had brought her up again. She was now twice divorced and living back home with a baby. "Imagine your life just being over and settled that way," said Quimpy.

Ron had felt a pang of sadness when Quimpy had said that. "So are you gonna start seeing her again?" he'd asked.

"Too many guineas and with that kid they will be all over her. But if she wants to drop over and get laid it will be ok."

Ron replayed that conversation in his head. He wondered if that was why she had come to see Quimpy. He tried to read the stuff she had given him about Arcosanti, but he couldn't understand why she thought he would have been at all interested in it.

As they packed Quimpy's huge collection of clothing into the back of the Caddy, Ron wondered if they should check those things for roaches too. Maybe roaches didn't like clothing. "So you're sure that it's ok if I call her?" he said to Quimpy.

"Sure," said Quimpy smiling. "Why would you want to call her?"

"She gave me her phone number," said Ron.

"You know she's a crazy bitch, right?"

"I don't know. I remember liking her a lot when I spent that day with her in your garage."

Quimpy was scratching his beard. He wasn't really paying attention to Ron. He didn't know why Celeste had done the stupid thing with the phone number, but he was pretty sure that he didn't care.

Quimpy's old place was going into foreclosure. The landlord was in jail and his wife had not been able to afford to heat it last winter. He wasn't spending another winter with his balls clinking together like ice cubes. When he had bought her a tank of oil, she had turned the heat way up and used it all as fast as she could. Quimpy didn't like moving. It was a project that required help and took time and threw him out of his routines. Ron was alright, but Quimpy didn't like seeing anyone every day. His new place was an ethnic mixture of Blacks, Arabs,

and Hispanics. It was actually closer to his school. It was an easier shot to the bowling alley. The move was going to be a good thing. Then he saw Ron's lips moving and realized that Ron had been talking to him. He tuned back in.

"You're sure you don't mind if I call her?" Ron was asking again.

"I'm sure," said Quimpy, telegraphing his exasperation. "I just mind that you keep asking me about it."

That Sunday morning Ron stayed in bed and read the newspaper. Then he drove over to the track and ran. He started calling Celeste about three o'clock in the afternoon. There was no answer. He played his guitar. He called again. Still no answer. He went for a walk. He called again. He considered ditching the whole idea. He smoked a joint and played his guitar again. He listened to some music. He took a shower. He watched the Yankees lose to the Angels and go into the All Star break two games under .500. He went out and brought home some Chinese food. By ten o'clock, he was sure that this was just a stupid idea, but he had called so many times that day and he couldn't let it go.

When she picked up the phone and said "hello" he began to sweat. He looked down to see that he his body had jerked in the bed at the sound of her voice and brown sauce from his order of hot spiced shredded beef was leaking onto his sheets. He pulled back the corner of the sheet and covered it so that he didn't have to look at it or get distracted.

"Hi, it's Ron Tuck."

"Oh, hi," she said brightly.

Ron felt himself smiling. She was happy to hear from him. "I was just calling to tell you that I finished that article about Arcosanti."

"Yes," she said. "What did you think of it?"

"I think I need to talk to you about it some."

"Why don't you come over now," she said.

Chapter 2

Ron tugged the splattered sheet from the bed ...balled it and through it into the corner of his closet. Then he slipped on a pair of fresh jeans and a dark blue, button down shirt. He combed his hair looking in the mirror. He brushed his teeth. Then he was out the door and into his car.

The summer night was warm and the breeze from the open windows of the moving car cooled him down. He felt his hands sweating and rubbed them on his jeans. Jesus, he was acting like a school boy. The drive was smooth. On Sunday nights most of the world was home, or headed there, and thinking about Monday morning work. Ron smiled and thought about how much he loved having the summers off. The parkway lights glowed yellowish, soft, and hazy. Ron glanced down at his hastily written directions. He couldn't see them. He paid the toll and pulled the car off to the side of the road. He tried to read his scribble and cursed his handwriting. He couldn't make it out. She'd never understand if he didn't get there. He thought this was the right exit. He'd pulled off the parkway and looked for a phone booth. It was then that he realized that he hadn't taken her number with him. Ron said, "I'm too stupid to live."

He did have the address and so he decided that he would let his instincts take over. He drove towards his school. She did say that it was close to there in Fair Lawn, the next town over. He stopped at a light on Paramus Road and made a left. It felt right. The streets were dark. The road was wide and silent and winding

The he came to another light. Instinct told him to turn left. And there was something that he recognized. He knew where he was! Ron looked up at the twinkle of stars and smiled to them. They seemed to be giggling. He felt himself concentrating. He turned the Ford to the right, the springs squeaked. He hated that the springs squeaked so much. It felt like people could tell that he was coming and would refer to him as Squeaky. Ron saw the circle and knew it was her house. He felt his body begin to relax. At least he had gotten here. When he got out, he looked up and thanked the giggling stars.

Celeste came out of the door just as he moved towards her house. She looked gorgeous. She was wearing a long, flowing ankle length skirt and a white cotton top. Her brown hair was below her shoulders and bounced as she walked. She took

his hand quickly and turned him around. "Let's go for a drink," she said. "It will be easier to talk."

They got into Ron's car and he winced each time the springs squeaked. She didn't seem to notice. He had the sense that he could feel her smiling next to him as they drove to the bar.

When the waitress came over to their booth, Ron really didn't know what to order. Other than having naked women gyrating in front of him, his time in bars had been negligible. He always blamed it on the dives that his dad had taken him to when he was a kid, when his dad was fixing juke boxes and pinball machines and pool tables in Newark. A thought that the business for which his dad worked must have been connected to organized crime struck him, and for a second he fixated on it and then he pushed it away and grinned his best dimpled grin for her. She returned the smile.

"I don't think that I'm much of an Arcosanti type," said Ron.

"I really didn't think that you were either," said Celeste with a mischievous grin.

"Really, the reason that I was calling was that I wanted to see you and talk with you and the Arcosanti thing gave me an excuse."

"Let's forget about Arcosanti," she said. "It was a pretty thin reason for giving you my phone number but it was all that I had."

Ron felt his heart begin to pound. "You wanted to see me too?"

"Yes," said Celeste. "I don't know why but it feels like I know you."

"We did meet a long time ago," said Ron. "I mean, really a long time ago."

Celeste said, "Quimpy told me that we had, but I must have had you mixed up with someone else. I thought you had thick glasses and blondish, curly hair."

Ron was confused. She didn't remember him. She was describing his friend Hank. Would she have been happier if it had been Hank who showed up?

"That was an old friend of mine. His name is Hank. I'm not sure what he's doing these days, but I think Quimpy told me that he is a golf pro."

Two glasses of wine appeared at their table and Ron reached into his pants and pulled out a wad of bills. He never had his money neatly arranged. He felt his cheeks redden as he fished for something other than a single. He wondered if all the singles would let on to her that he went to go-go bars and wondered if she would be disgusted by that and just want him to take her home. Then he sighed visibly with relief and saw a ten dollar bill and slipped it onto the waitress's tray.

"But we did spend an afternoon talking at Quimpy's garage," he said.

She turned her eyes towards him and shifted her body so that it was angled to face him. He felt her foot touch his leg and then move away. "What did we do?" she asked lightly. She was still smiling. She had a great smile that spread from her mouth up to her eyes. They were large and brown and searching his face in the most delightfully teasing way.

Ron swallowed. "Um, we got high. We talked about politics. You told me that you were working on the Underground Railroad and helping guys to get to Canada. You told me that you were also writing to guys who were in Viet Nam because you didn't think that it was their fault that they were there, and that you hoped that it helped that they had someone to write to."

Celeste felt a jolt race through her body. He wasn't fooling. He did remember her and he remembered details. That was such a long time ago. How could he possibly remember that?

"That must have been me," she said.

Ron grinned to himself. He loved his memory. He could just picture things and bring back those pictures and his mind would move like a camera through the recollections and he could see himself and he could hear what people were saying to him. It didn't happen all the time, but it happened often enough. He had decided a while back that he remembered the things that were important to him, even if he didn't know why they had been important. It was like his memory was his guardian angel.

"You drove a red sports car," Ron continued. "And you were working at this food company."

“Nabisco,” she said. She wondered if she should feel uneasy, but she didn’t. She felt complimented. “How do you remember all that?”

Ron grinned again and put his head down. “I don’t know. Sometimes things just stick in my head.”

She smiled. “And I stuck in your head?”

“I guess so,” said Ron. He paused thoughtfully. “Well you did and then you didn’t. I’ve been thinking about you since we saw each other last and I guess that’s when I remembered those things.”

Celeste sipped at her wine. “Maybe Quimpy helped you fill in the details.”

Ron laughed. “Not exactly. He just got tired of me asking if it was ok for me to call you.”

Her eyebrows gathered. “Why did you ask?”

Ron was silent. He wasn’t sure how he should say this. How did he explain that in the code she still belonged to Quimpy? “I just felt like I should,” he said.

“Quimpy knows that I’m not going to go out with him under any circumstances. I made that clear from the start,” said Celeste.

“Your daughter is beautiful,” said Ron. “She looks at you and you know that she understands everything that is happening around her.”

Celeste offered another of those smiles that made him want to gaze into her eyes and bask in their light. “Of course I think she’s very special but I’m prejudiced.”

“Does she see her father much?”

“He’s allowed to visit in our living room. He stays a while and then he loses interest and wants to talk with me or my family, but no one is really interested in talking to him.”

“Was he abusive to you?”

“Not physically, but emotionally he was. He called me every day and asked me to have an abortion and then he had his father call and ask me to have an abortion and I wasn’t doing that again.” Celeste stared into Ron’s green eyes and

wondered if she had said too much. She was more of a private person than this, but the way that he made her feel just put her at ease and caused her to want to open herself and answer honestly. She wanted him to know what he was getting into. Celeste was sure that this was going to be a summer fling, but from the time that he walked into her parents' house with Quimpy, she had known that she wanted to sleep with him. It was really the first time she'd felt a strong sexual urge in a long time, and she knew that she didn't deserve this but she wanted it. She knew that was not part of the deal that she made with her parents when she left Peter and came back home then found out that she was pregnant. They had been very clear. It was time for her to stop running around and start thinking of this child before herself. She had her fun, now it was time to settle into becoming a good mother. They would accept the humiliation of her dissolving another marriage but this was it. This was the end.

Ron let her words sink in. He waited for the alarm to go off in his head. It didn't ring. He waited to feel the urge to get away. It didn't come. He said, "We all say things that we don't mean. I'm sure that he's happy now. Is there any chance of reconciliation?"

Celeste's face hardened. "No, not even a slight chance."

Her mind flashed on her wedding day. Her cousin Janine was saying, "We can just walk out the back door and get into the car. You don't have to go through with this." If there had been a time when she should have rebelled that was it. Of all the times to pick to be the good girl and do what was expected of her, she picked that one.

She tried to see what was going on in back of his eyes. When she looked into them, it was as if she could see his mind working.

"Well, she's a beautiful girl and you should be very proud of her."

"I am. We all are. My whole family is. She is our princess."

Ron smiled but he was sure that he didn't know what she was talking about.

"So tell me about you," she said.

"Not much to tell," said Ron. He folded his hands on the table in front of his wine glass. "I live alone in a small apartment in Bloomfield. I'm off this summer.

This school that I teach at now gives us 26 pay checks year round and so I'm not really looking for work. Quimpy was agonizing about how he was ever going to get this move done, so I offered to help him. He's done a lot in the past to help me. This fall, I start my second year as a football coach. I'm not very political any more. There just doesn't seem to be anything to be political about. I'm pretty certain that there isn't anything that I can do to change anything anymore. But I can work with kids and try to help them to see the value of literature and being about to write and speak their minds in an articulate way. I'm thirty-two but it feels like I should be younger."

As she listened, she thought that he sounded very free of entanglements. It frightened her that they would have this glass of wine and that he would promise to call and that she would never hear from him again. She knew that she could not bring herself to really chase after him.

"Do you enjoy your teaching?" she asked.

"More than I ever thought that I would. I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left college. I wanted to be a poet." He looked at her with a reflection of that grin in his eyes. "It didn't take long to find out that there isn't much work for poets."

They both laughed. They both sipped from their wine. She slid a little closer to him and he found that he had reached for her hand and now they were holding hands. He hadn't thought about doing it. How did that happen?

She said, "I'm not sure that I get poetry. I think it sounds beautiful but I'm never sure what it's supposed to mean."

Ron blushed. "I used to try to tell people what my poems meant. I even corrected them if the poem meant something different to them. How stupid was that?"

Celeste smiled. He felt himself melting. "It probably didn't go over really well with them and they probably didn't want to talk with you about your poetry after that."

Ron grinned broadly. "You are a mind reader."

They finished the wine and were back in his car. Ron didn't wince at the squeaks. They didn't say anything. The night seemed soft. Ron thought about John Keats calling the night "tender" and he felt that he knew what the poet meant.

They pulled up in front of her house. Ron said, "I'm really not ready for this conversation to be over but I understand if you're tired."

Celeste said, "Would you like to see my basement."

The ceiling was low, the walls were paneled. The floor was carpeted. They embraced as soon as they entered the room. The kiss was a marathon of lips and tongues. Their sense of time disappeared. The tactile exchange became their language and they communicated longing and passion and although their minds could not quite fathom it, their bodies were in love.

They did not have sex or undress. They did not touch each other's genitals. They hardly breathed. It was a slow, undulating dance and they felt revealed to each other. After endless kisses, they went outside and sat on her porch, so that they could talk again. The visibility to the community allowed them to keep their hands off of each other. It was about 4am when Ron said, "Do you think that we should get married?"

Celeste felt her head began to spin. The tightness in her belly threatened to double her over. She could see his eyes though the darkness and they were like searchlights that had found her in the night and would not release her. She was too frightened to speak. Then she said, "Don't say that."

"I think we should," said Ron. He knew it with certainty that allowed for no doubts.

Celeste hoped that he couldn't see her hands shaking.

Chapter 3

Ron was walking back from Branch Brook Park. It was cold. The sky was dark. Along Broadway, a steady line of car lights headed in both directions. The streetlights illuminated the side walk. He was trying to keep his jacket closed, but he was sweating underneath and the urge to pull it open was strong. His cheeks were flushed red. There was a friendly ache in his shoulders. It had been a great game, probably the last one of the season. They had worn the grass away and the ground was hard dirt. He could still see the play in back of his eyes.

Joey Pena had the ball curled into the crook of his left arm and when Ron put his shoulder into him, Joey left his feet and the ball bounced with the crazy agitation that only a football had. Ron rolled and was up and he had it in his hands and he was running. All around him the shadows of kids were changing direction and running after him. He smiled now, reliving the way that they had bounced off of him as he charged towards the goal line. He had been unstoppable. He pulled open his jacket and breathed deeply. The cold air dried the sweat on his body but he felt too good to shiver.

He turned into his alley way and smelled the aromas of cooking meat that filtered through the open kitchen windows. They always kept the apartments very warm. He burst into their basement apartment and Marjorie was sitting at the kitchenette table that was part of their living room, bedroom combination. When she saw him, she said, "You'd better not get sick."

"I feel fine, Mom. I'm just going to go and clean up."

While he was in the bathroom washing his face and trying to clean the cut on his elbow, he heard voices in the other room. He recognized Rocky's voice but there were two others. He turned off the water and held some toilet tissue to his elbow. He watched it begin to turn crimson as he listened to what the voices were saying. It was then that he heard his mother begin to sob.

"Rocky, don't do this to me. Don't do this to us."

"Marjorie, there is no more us and I'm doing this so that you know it and have no doubts or think that there is any chance that I will come back to you."

His mother cried harder. "But I love you. You have your clothes here. We made plans. We have the bank that we were using to save for vacation."

Donna said, "Can't you see that he doesn't want you anymore?"

Donna's mother Clara said to Rocky, "This little run down hole in the ground is where you spent the last ten years? You'd better not think that my daughter will be willing to live like this."

Marjorie looked up and said, "Did you know that he was here last weekend, and that we went away and that we made love."

Rocky said, "Margi, don't lie like that. No one is going to believe you."

Ron bit into his finger. But his mother was telling the truth. They had all been together last weekend. He heard his mother cry harder.

"Well," said Donna, "there really isn't much more to say is there?"

"There is one more thing," said Clara. "Tell her that you don't love her and that you don't want her to call you anymore and that you don't want to ever see her. Tell her that you will have someone pick up your things."

Ron heard Rocky say the unthinkable. "I don't love you Margi. I haven't loved you for a long time. I have my divorce now and I'm going to marry Donna."

His mother's voice was small and pathetic. "I know that you still love me," she said. "And I want you to know that I love you and that I always will love you."

Ron's eyes were filled with tears. They had lived with Rocky since he was two years old. Next to his father, Rocky was the man that he admired most in his life. Rocky's family had told him that he was one of them and that they loved him. They told him that he was family.

"I'm not staying to hear anymore of this nonsense," said Clara.

Donna added, "Tell her that you don't want to see her anymore."

Rocky said, "We had some good times Marjorie, but I don't want to see you anymore and I don't want to hear from you."

Marjorie cried very hard. She sounded like a wounded animal. Rocky turned to Donna, "Are you satisfied now?"

Donna smirked, "Yes."

Rocky turned to Clara, "Are you satisfied?"

"For now I am," said Clara.

Ron burst out of the bathroom and into the room. His eyes were streaming tears.

"Ronald," wailed his mother. "I forgot that you were back there."

Ron glared at Rocky, hot hatred mixing with confused love. "Tell me you don't love me anymore."

Rocky's mouth dropped open at the sight of him. "Go on!" screamed Ron. "Tell me, I want to hear you say it."

"This is no place for children," said Clara.

Ron wheeled on her. "Shut up lady, or I will smack you. Shut up!" he screamed. His voice was deafening and shook the room.

Rocky took Donna by the arm and turned to leave. Ron ran up in back of him and pushed him as hard as he could. Rocky stumbled against the wall and whirled in surprise. Ron snarled, "She may love you, but not me. I'll hate you forever. I want you to die."

Then we went to his mother and stood there holding her as she sat bent over in the chair. "Get out," he screamed. "Get out. Your clothes will be in the garbage, pick them out of the cans."

"Ronald, you don't understand this," said Rocky.

Ron started to cry at the sound of Rocky speaking his name. "You're nothing. Get out!"

As they went through the door, he yelled, "I was there last weekend too, wasn't I, Rocky?"

No one said anything else and he held his mother as she cried for a very long time.

Chapter 4

When school was out, Ron walked along Summer Avenue to Grafton and then down Grafton to Broadway. He avoided friends and took streets where he knew no one he knew would be. The American Legion Hospital was at the corner of Grafton and Broadway. Her room was in the front, and if she was sitting up, she would wave to him. They said that she needed rest. He wasn't allowed to visit her there. He stood at the chain link fence and smiled and waved. Sometimes he called out, but they didn't like him doing that, and a nurse had come to the window and put her finger to her lips to quiet him. Ron saw the street sign that read, "Quiet, Hospital Zone" and put his head down. He stood with his fingers curled into the chain link fence that surrounded the very small hospital. He always waited a few minutes if she wasn't at the window. Then he walked to his aunt's house where he was staying until she got home.

Rocky's friend Ray owned the Esso station that he passed, but Ray never seemed to be looking at the street when Ron walked passed, but he slammed his heels down on the pavement and balled his fists as he went by anyway.

Sometimes he went to their apartment and let himself in. It seemed lonely and happy to see him. It was as if the place knew something was wrong. Ron felt badly that his home had been called a hole in the ground. He would sit at the table for a few minutes and be very quiet. He didn't want anyone knowing that he was there. He didn't know how to answer questions from the neighbors about what he was doing there. Giving his aunt's phone number to the school had been bad enough.

When he got to Aunt Dottie's building, he always felt better. She always greeted him with a smile and a plate of cookies and some milk from one the tin cups that he liked because they kept the milk so cold.

"When do you think she's coming home?" said Ron.

"Maybe next week, Ronald," said his Aunt. Some women wore Rhinestones in the upper part of the frames of their glasses. His Aunt had real diamond chips embedded in hers and they sparkled in the light in a real and classy way.

"Do you think that she's going to be ok?"

“Of course she is. She gets nervous and we both know that she’s a big baby, Ronald.”

“I hate him. I want to find him and do something really bad to him, Aunt Dot.”

“I know that you do. People will tell you that it’s wrong to feel that way. That it’s better to let go of bad feelings. I say don’t let go of them. Use them to make sure that you don’t ever get suckered again.”

Ron met her eyes. “You’re right.”

“That’s between us, Ronald. Don’t tell anyone that I told you that. They’ll just think that I’m being a bitter old woman, but the way this world is, whenever you let your guard down, you are one step closer to being a fool. Keep your private thoughts to yourself. Sometimes that’s the best way to be.”

When Marjorie came home, things were rough. She cried all the time and went to a bar every night. She played sad songs on the hi-fi and never laughed or smiled. They had no money and she was not able to work. There was only the \$20 that came from his father each week.

Ron rang the doorbell to the landlady’s apartment. Mrs. Cody was a short, squat woman who wore her glasses on a chain around her neck. “Hello, Ronald.”

“Mrs. Cody, I’m here with the rent.”

“All of it, this time?”

“No Ma’am. We only have \$50, but I’ll be back with the other \$15 on Sunday, after I see my father.”

She reached for the envelope. “Alright, Ronnie. Please tell your mother that I hope that she’s feeling better.”

“Mrs. Cody, is there anything that I could do around here to earn some of that money?”

“I’m afraid that we aren’t allowed to do that with tenants, Ronnie, but if you get here very early when it snows, I’m sure that Mr. Cody could pay you to help shovel and...” The woman thought for a moment and then called over her

shoulder, back into the apartment, "Could you use any help tying up newspapers and getting the garbage cans out, Dennis?"

"Who wants to know?" called a gruff voice that coughed after it spoke.

"Ronnie Tuck, Marjorie's kid."

"They ain't got the rent again, huh?"

"Could you use the help?"

"Not really."

Mrs. Cody turned back to Ronald. "Come and see me when it snows," she said and shut the door.

Ron trailed his fingers along the rough plaster wall as he went back to their apartment, but instead of turning right to go in, he turned left and went to the washing machine room. He knew a trick, and sometimes it was worth thirty-five cents.

Chapter 5

As the pink Cadillac made its way across Paterson carrying a load of books, magazines and vinyl records, Ron told Quimpy that he was in love. Quimpy laughed at the impulsivity of his fucked-up friend. "Are you paying attention to yourself at all?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you know how stupid you sound, right?"

"Why?"

Quimpy's sardonic grin stayed on his face as he formed his phrasing. "Let's see, you know nothing about her. She has a kid. You're barely able to take care of yourself. You're a pothead. You're thinking with your cock and you really don't know how she feels. That's just for starters."

"It's how I feel," said Ron. "I'm not thinking with my cock. I'm thinking with my heart."

“That might even be worse than thinking with your cock!” Quimpy laughed.

Inwardly, Ron smiled as Quimpy’s ridicule slid off of him like water on glass. Was this what it felt like when someone was jealous of you? Maybe Quimpy wasn’t jealous. He’d had his chance with Celeste. Ron had asked him enough times if it was ok if he called her. Maybe Quimpy thought he was looking out for him and that he was being a good friend. Ron didn’t care. What Quimpy thought about this was no longer a concern.

“When are you going to see her again?” said Quimpy.

“As soon as we’re done for the day.”

“I’m not saying that she isn’t ok, but I’m saying that you better think about the baggage that comes along with her.”

“Quimpy, we all have baggage.”

“Not her kind,” said Quimpy definitively.

Celeste Was conflicted. She wanted to tell someone about Ron but she wasn’t sure who she could trust to keep her secret. It was definitely too soon to say anything at home. Last night had been magical but like many magic things, maybe it was an illusion. There was risk involved. Her sister was out of the question. Number one, she wouldn’t approve. Sure she paid lip service to wanting to see Celeste happy, but Celeste really believed that she gloried in the status quo where she was the good daughter, the one who had a husband who was a truck driver and worked at the same plant as her father. She had a son and she didn’t need any help raising him. Secondly, it would take her about ten minutes to find some excuse to put their mother on to Celeste’s latest folly. She definitely wasn’t ready for that war.

She did have friends that she could talk to. There was Barbara from across the street and Jane from around the other side of the circle, but they weren’t family. When it all came down to it, she had been raised to be closest to her family. They were the ones who accepted you. They were the ones who you should be able to tell anything, except of course her mother and her sister. Really there were two choices: Cynthia and Janine.

Cynthia had been divorced and had gone through the added humiliation of everyone finding out that her husband liked to wear women's clothes and probably was gay. Janine, had kept her marriage a secret for months. It was true that she was older and had two great kids, both of whom loved Angel, but she was also enough of a screwball so that Celeste felt comfortable talking with her. It was Janine that suggested that she slip out the back door a few minutes before she married her second husband. She dialed the phone.

"Hello," said a low hard edged voice that paradoxically also sounded warm

Celeste responded in her Jersey Twang, "Janine."

"What's the matter?"

"He's gorgeous."

"He called?"

"Last night. We went for a drink after the baby was asleep and then we talked till five this morning."

"You're shittin' me."

"No, it might one of the best conversations that I ever had with a guy and when we kissed it was, you know, Janine it was great."

"Did you?"

"No."

"Good."

"I wanted to."

"In your mother's basement?"

They both laughed. "It wouldn't be the first time," said Celeste, feeling better and thinking that she'd made the right choice by calling Janine.

"Janine, I don't know. I don't think he wants a fling."

"What's wrong with him?" said Janine.

"I don't know, but what we talked about was serious."

“Serious how?” Janine was starting to sound frightened.

“Scary serious.”

There was a silence on the other end. Celeste could hear Janine lighting a cigarette. As she exhaled she said, “You know that you’re out of your fucking mind right?”

“There’s a way that I feel around him. I haven’t felt that way since Matt.”

Janine blew out smoke hard into the receiver. “Look you got a right to get laid and god knows you need to get laid, but please don’t go off the deep end.”

“I know what you mean, but suppose it’s the right guy. The one that I was sure was never gonna come along?”

“Do you want to come over and I’ll read your cards? Bring the baby. Stay for dinner.”

“I can’t, said Celeste. “I’m waiting for him to call.”

“Holy shit,” said Janine.

Chapter 6

A few months later Marjorie borrowed money from her Aunt Dottie and bought a car. She learned that Rocky had sold the ’56 Chevy that they had bought together in favor of a newer model and she tracked down the person that bought the car and overpaid to get it back. She was back to work now, waitressing across the street from their apartment. Her customers remembered her and welcomed her back with \$.50 tips and sometimes an entire dollar. Life was developing a new pattern and Ron began to feel settled in.

One summer night when he got home from stickball under the parking lot lights of the Davis Pharmaceutical Company, Marjorie said, “Come on, we’re going for a ride.” They put the top down on the convertible and drove down up to Newark City Stadium and then across Roseville Avenue. Ron stiffened in the seat next to her when he realized where they were heading.

“Why are we going to the Catanzaro house?” he asked.

“Don’t you miss seeing Sally and Honey and Anthony?”

“I don’t know,” said Ron. “Why haven’t they called us?”

“They are in a tough spot. Rocky is their family.”

“Yeah,” said Ron. “They used to say that about us too.”

“When they see you, that’s exactly how they will feel,” said Marjorie.

She didn’t tell him that she had been speaking to Honey Chapel and that she promised to be there when she and Ron arrived. There was a bond between Honey and Marjorie, and though she loved her Uncle Rocky with an undying loyalty and worship, it had been Marjorie who had gone to bat for her when she had gotten pregnant and her father Anthony wanted to ship her off somewhere, so that the problem could be taken care of. Then he would visit Vincent Chapel with his brothers and teach the young prick some manners.

Marjorie had stood up to Anthony in his own house. Honey’s mother wasn’t able to do anything but cry and say that her husband knew best. Marjorie had gone there night after night and reasoned and begged and had the audacity to say that it didn’t matter that Vincent was only half Italian, and that she knew that they were in love and that he would make her a good husband. Marjorie had even outflanked him by bringing Rocky’s mother into it by telling her that her granddaughter wanted to get married, and that someone needed to talk sense into Anthony. What was done was done and there was no reason to make a mistake into a tragedy.

Rocky had quietly endured being told that he should tell his girlfriend to shut her big mouth and stop meddling in things that she didn’t understand. But Marjorie had prevailed and Honey was now married and her husband was back from the Marines and had a good job as an electrician. Honey promised that she never would forget what Marjorie had done for her. She’d just turned seventeen when it all happened and that was five years ago and something that had been rewritten in Catanzaro family history by everyone except Honey.

Sally Catanzaro’s face registered shock when she saw Marjorie and Ron at her back door. The back door was for family and no one ever rang that bell. They just knocked as they walked in. Sally forced a smile at them. She had been Ron’s

favorite, and he felt the rush of good feeling when he saw her smooth face and wanted to feel her warm hands hugging him the way that they always had. He advanced towards her for his hug, but she took a step back and put out her hand to ward him off. Ron stood there with his arms open and wondered if she had a cold that she was afraid to pass along to him. It was awkward. Marjorie and Sally's eyes met and then Sally looked over her shoulder almost fearfully and then at Ron. Confusion was spreading across his face like the stain of a drink that had been spilled on a dinner's tablecloth. Finally, she hugged him stiffly and Ron felt the stiffness and pulled back. She did not meet his eyes either.

"Marjorie, we didn't expect you."

Honey came into the room and hugged Marjorie warmly. Sally retreated further back against her stove. Marjorie and Honey laughed and Marjorie said that Honey looked so good when she was pregnant.

"Vincent feels that way too," laughed Honey.

Ron saw Sally flush with embarrassment and he understood that something was very wrong here. He wanted to leave but they hadn't even really gotten into the house.

Anthony's heavy footsteps plodded into the kitchen. He was still wearing his uniform shirt and pants from Mechanic's Overall, where he was a route rider, and now had his brother-in-law Rocky for a supervisor. His eyes met Marjorie and he stopped in his tracks, unsure of what to do. He was on his way for a beer but the outsiders were standing in front of the refrigerator. Without greeting them, he said to his daughter. "Get me a Miller" and turned to go back to the TV.

Marjorie stood there stunned. Ron said, "Hello Anthony, don't you see me?"

"I see you kid. You look ok," he said, over his shoulder.

Ron was ill at ease and very confused. He saw Cookie by her dog bed and went to her. The dog wagged her tail and licked Ron's face. He got down on the floor and nuzzled her. The women stood there watching him.

"I guess this wasn't such a good idea," said Marjorie.

Sally said, "Don't feel that way. You know how Anthony is. He doesn't like surprises. You should call first and maybe it would be better if you came during the day when he was at work. You know, just until he gets used to the idea."

Ron wanted to ask if Connie, their younger daughter on whom he had a crush was in her favorite spot in the basement, but maybe that wasn't such a good idea either.

Chapter 7

Celeste, Ron and Angel rode in the squeak mobile. They were on the way to the park so Angel could feed the ducks. In the last days, the three of them had been together every night, and though she had not yet said Ron's name, she loved to hold his hand and ride on his shoulders. Before Ron, she had been afraid of the ducks because they were almost as big as she was and their beaks and their feet and the noises that they made frightened her. But from the safety of his shoulders, with his arms wrapped around her knees, she was taller than everyone.

Her tiny fingers stroked the sides of his face and rested on top of his head and outlined the curve of his ears. She weighed almost nothing. He held her by her ankles. Euphoria swept over them both. Ducks quacked and scuttled at his feet. Celeste watched, feeling her heart carried along with them. Sometimes a pang of how hard it would be on her if this came to an abrupt end made her shiver, but there were lots of people in Angel's life. Ron was a newcomer. She didn't even really talk to him yet. They just did things together and Celeste knew that Angel thought of him as a big, flexible toy. At least, she did so far.

Celeste was quickly considering him something else. After that first night there had been the second night and then, right away, a third night. That was when they slept together. He was gentle with her, until the passion drove them both into a worked up froth. Then the gentleness returned and the ache between her legs felt warm and good and she wanted him back there again, thrusting himself in and out of her until he was poking at her cervix and the sweet hurt caused eruption after eruption inside of her.

Back in the red Ford they went for ice cream and Ron asked Angel what she wanted.

She grinned and her huge brown eyes lit up his face when she said, "Strawberry."

"Everything is strawberry right now," said Celeste, who had taken Angel to meet Strawberry Shortcake at a breakfast the week before she and Ron had met.

Ron smiled, "Strawberry is the best," he said.

Back in the car, face sticky, hands wiped clean but also almost like Velcro with everything that she touched Angel said, "Ron, the water tower," and pointed.

Ron pulled the car to the side of the road and turned to face the two of them. Angel was pointing out the window to the water tower that announced the name "Fairlawn" in faded block letters.

His face was ecstatic and he reached back and lightly stroked her chubby calf. "That's our water tower," he said.

Celeste saw the pure joy on his face and knew that it was because she had finally said his name. When he dropped them off at their house, Celeste unstrapped Angel from the car seat and handed her to Ron so that she could take the chair out and bring it back inside. Angel threw her arms around Ron's neck and hugged him as tightly as she could.

"I'll call you when I get home," said Ron.

Celeste carried Angel into her house and Ron squeaked around the corner and disappeared. They both watched him go and then the porch light came on and Barbara was coming out the door.

Barbara was Celeste's cousin. She had been Celeste's dance teacher and she loved Angel with the pure devotion of a spinster who saw her role as giving all that she had to this newest member of the family. "Where were you, young lady?"

Angel smiled and tilted her head to the side in a dreamy gaze. "With Ron. We had ice cream."

Barb took the baby from Celeste's arms and laughing in pure delight, repeated, "With Ron? And you had ice cream?"

"We fed the ducks," Angel giggled.

"You are a sticky girl who needs a bath is what I think."

And she carried her back inside with Celeste trailing behind. Celeste's mother and Barb's mother, Vivian were at the table drinking coffee. Celeste's father was stretched out on the floor watching a blaring TV. All three shouted "There's the princess," not quite in unison.

"We're very sticky," said Barb and we'll be right back after we have a bath. No one really said hello to Celeste but she didn't mind. They were such a help to her. They had saved her life and she knew what the priorities were.

Celeste put down the ever present baby bag that she had learned to carry with here everywhere. "Do you want to undress her while I run the water?" she asked Barb.

After her bath, after they had passed her naked body around the table and took turns kissing her baby soft bottom, after Barb had gotten her dressed for bed and she had gone to lie on her Papa's stomach and watch TV, Celeste's mother said, "I suppose it's time we met this Ron, before this little girl gets her heart broken." Her mother was neither smiling nor happy.

Before Celeste answered, the phone rang and she felt herself jumping at it. "Hi," she cooed into the receiver. "Give me a second to get downstairs."

Vivian and her sister shook their heads as she disappeared into the basement and then called up, "Please hang up the phone."

Barb went to the wall phone and clicked it off.

Chapter 8

Walking back towards the school after lunch, Ron felt the thick hard blade of the butcher knife that against his chest. He wasn't sure if he was gonna need it, but he was sure that if it came down to anything, he wanted to have the biggest

knife. His nervousness caused sweat to trickle down his back with an unamusing tickle. His friend were waiting in a loose circle at the corner.

“You got anything?” said Kenny Bonet.

“Yeah,” said Ron.

He slid the blade out from under his jacket and showed it to the other guys. There were the Zarro brothers, Jimmy Lucas, Kenny Bonet and him. They stared hard down Grafton Avenue, and waited for the kids from Broadway Junior High who had been there before lunch making dirty comments to some of the girls that Ron and his friends went to school with. There had been words and a stare down, but when they saw Mr. Boyden coming into the playground, the Broadway guys said, “After lunch, jerkoffs. We’ll see you then and make you eat shit.” They’d see about who was gonna be eating shit now. The Zarro’s each had a pocket knife. Kenny Bonet had an actual switch blade that he could snap open in one quick motion. Ron felt important.

Broadway showed just like they said. They were black. They walked with a hop in their steps. They fanned out as they approached. Ron stood in the center next to Kenny. “You mother-fuckers got some sweet little pussy in this school. Too good for your little dicks. They told us they want to see what it’s like when they meet somebody who can make them want to get on their backs and spread their legs.”

“Yeah nigger,” said Kenny. “Show us what you got and we’ll cut it right off, and then you’ll learn that you should be leaving white girls alone. Stay with you own frizzy headed, dirty pigs.”

Fists clenched, eyes darkened Ron opened his jacket and pulled out the butcher knife. The eyes of the boy glaring a few yards away from him got saucer big. Ron held it down low, blade pointed out. He prepared to rush in swinging it and slashing at anybody that came close to him. But in a moment one of the Black kids pointed over Ron’s shoulder, and the rest of the Broadway group froze and then turned and ran. Ron was too focused and he surely wasn’t gonna fall for the ‘look who’s in back of you’ trick. Then he heard Kenny say, “Cops.”

The boys scattered and ran through the playground as the two cars raced down the street and pulled up in front of the gate. Ron ran through the

playground and out the other side. There was a chain link fence that was lined with high bushes just on the other side of it. He stopped, stooped down and slid the knife through an opening in the fence until he couldn't see it anymore. The kids had scattered. He couldn't see any of his friends now. He was panting and sweating. He heard the bell ring. He could go right in through this side door. No one had seen him. He was safe.

The afternoon in Mrs. Kennedy's 6A class got off to a slow start. Ron looked around. Jimmy Lucas was in his seat but he had his head down and didn't turn around to look at Ron, who only glanced at the back of Jimmy's head and then looked away. The Zarro brothers were in another class but he didn't see Kenny anywhere. His empty seat glared like an accusation. Ron was worried but he knew that Kenny was a tough kid who played hooky a lot. It wouldn't be unusual if Kenny just took off and didn't come back to school that day. It was probably the smart thing to do. It was what Ron should have done. He looked over at Valerie Scaretti and she smiled at him. Ron smiled back. Valerie knew what was going on. She had been one of the insulted girls. She was one of the girls that Ron was defending. The least she could do was smile for him.

There was a knock at Mrs. Kennedy's door. She turned, looked down the aisle, nodded her head and made eye contact with Ron as she nodded her head. Ron felt his body go tighter. He had an urge to clasp his hand, against the edge of his desk like he was taught to do when he was being punished. He fought the urge. Nothing had happened. He hadn't done anything. He tried to look innocent. Then he saw Mrs. Kennedy point to him and crook her index finger. Motioning him to come to the front of the room. He got up slowly.

"Ronald, you're wanted in the main office," said Mrs. Kennedy. There was a worried look on her face. She was Ron's favorite teacher since 3rd grade. She wanted to skip him a half year because of his reading ability and his vocabulary. She had helped to get the "Y" on his library card that allowed him to borrow books from the adult library, as long as certain books were off limits. She told him that she couldn't skip him because his asthma caused him to miss too many days. She didn't know that some of the asthma days were times when his mother kept him home to help her go downtown and look for better jobs than waitressing.

Ron walked down the two flights of stairs to the main office. He would just play dumb. He didn't know anything about anything. He had gone home for lunch and the come back to school like always. He was pretty sure that he could get away with it.

"Ronald," said the principal's secretary, "there's a call for you from home. It's a little unusual but I'm going to let you take it but I have to listen in on this line."

"Sure," said Ron. He picked up the phone.

Marjorie Tuck said, "Ronald, did you take a knife from the kitchen drawer at lunchtime?"

Ron closed his eyes. Busted by his own mother. How could she possibly have figured that out so fast? "Yes, Mom, I did."

Marjorie's voice was choked. "Why?" she managed to say.

"For protection," said Ron, almost defiantly.

Then the door to the principal's office opened and Ron saw the two policemen sitting there. They were listening too. Kenny Bonet was in the corner of the principal's office. He looked like he was crying. The secretary took the phone away from Ron's ear. Ralph Lattimere's deep voice said "Come in here, Ronald."

Ron felt himself moving towards the door at the same time that he wanted to turn and run. He could get passed the secretary. He could be unstoppable. The cops were smiling.

"Where's the knife now Ron?" said principal Lattimere.

"I hid it," said Ron.

One of the detectives stood up. "I'll go with you," he said. "Show me where it is."

Kenny was looking at the wall. Ron thought that he looked like a little boy who wasn't so tough after all.

Ron took the cop to the spot in the chain link fence and pointed. "In there," he said.

"Get it for me," said the cop.

Ron crouched down and worked it out from between the links of the fence, thinking that they never would have found it. They never would have known to look there. Why did his mother have to call?

He handed the knife over and the detective whistled as he saw it. "You know that you're in big trouble, right?"

"I didn't do anything," protested Ron.

"Let me show you something kid. "The law says that anything with a blade more than four fingers long is illegal to carry." He laid four fingers at the base of the blade. It extended out at least six more fingers beyond the detective's hand. Ron stared at it. "Still think that you didn't do anything wrong?"

Ron shook his head.

"Do you know where Jamesburg is, kid?"

Ron shook his head again.

"Who else was with you?"

Ron didn't answer.

"Did anyone have brass knuckles?"

Ron thought that he knew what brass knuckles were but he wasn't sure. He shook his head.

"You really think that your mother needs this aggravation from you?" said the detective in a gruff, harsh whisper.

It was then that Ron began to cry.

Back at their apartment, Marjorie said little to Ron. She was terrified. The cops had been non-committal about whether or not there was a way that he could avoid charges. One thing was for certain; something had to be done. He couldn't just walk away from this. Denny Galveston was a cop that Marjorie knew. He was a good guy. When he got free coffee, he left her a tip. "Some of your son's friends are on a bad path, Margi. We're gonna slam them before this gets any worse. Your boy hasn't been in trouble before, but Jesus, he had a butcher knife."

Marjorie winced and then she cried. "Isn't there something that we can do? I need him Denny. He's all that I have."

"Maybe it would be better to straighten him out now. Six months in Jamesburg, and he would think twice about ever doing something like this again."

Marjorie looked into his eyes with her own large hazel eyes. "Six months in there and he might never be the same. He's a good boy. Can't we do something?"

"No promises but I'll see what I can do. I'll stop by the diner tomorrow or the next day, as soon as I know something."

Marjorie made two phone calls. The first was to Ron's father. The second was to Mechanics Overall. She was convinced that what Ron needed was a man to talk to him. It was about time that she brought her ex-husband into this, and Rocky was someone that she always went to when she didn't know what to do.

"I can stop over after work," said Rocky, "but do you really think that Ron will listen to anything that I say?"

"I'll try anything," said Marjorie. "Rocky, they are talking about sending him away. I can't bear the thought of him being in a place like that. It will kill me."

She had difficulty contacting Harry. He was on the road and his boss said that he would get a message to him to call as soon as he called in. Marjorie explained that it was about Ron and that it wasn't good news.

Ron was sitting at the kitchenette table in the living room looking down at the pattern on the table top when Rocky arrived. He didn't look up.

"Ron, it looks like you gotten yourself in a bit of a scrape." Ron didn't answer. Rocky and Marjorie exchanged a look.

"You know enough to answer when someone is talking to you Ronald," said Marjorie. "Rocky is here to try to help you."

"I thought he promised never to see us again," said Ron, looking only at his mother.

"Ron, sometimes adults say things because they have to say them. It doesn't mean that they believe them," said Rocky.

“So basically you’re just a liar, right?” said Ron.

There was a silence and then Marjorie said, “I’m going across the street to talk with John Pappas, maybe he can do something.” John Pappas was her boss and he liked Ron. He sometimes paid him a dollar to kill flies in the back section of the diner. Ron watched her leave and then he watched Rocky move over to the table and sit down. He sat in the chair that he usually sat in when they all had dinner together and Ron felt the hatred rise in him and blot of his fear.

“What were you thinking?” said Rocky.

Silence.

“Do you know what you were thinking?”

“Yeah, I was thinking that the Negro kid looked a little Italian and that if I couldn’t stab you, maybe I could stab him.” He watched Rocky’s face turn red with anger. He noted with satisfaction that it took Rocky a minute to compose himself.

“So you’re just going to make smart assed comments to me and make yourself feel better that way. Is that your plan? What about your mother?”

Ron felt the tears immediate rise to his eyes and threaten to fall. He bit off his words hard. “You got no right to talk to me about hurting her. You didn’t care what happened to her or what happened to me. Don’t be here now trying to make up for it, because I hate you. You want to know what my plan is? My plan is to hate you until you die. My plan is to hate your daughter, to hate your sisters, and to hate your whole lying family.” Ron stared at him. The tears were running out of his eyes now and he wiped them with his sleeve.

“I can’t talk to you,” said Rocky.

“That’s right, you can’t,” spit Ron.

Quietly, Rocky left and Ron looked up to the windows that were at ground level and watched him walk across the street.

Ron’s dad wanted to speak with him alone. Harry was careful not to show any sense of pride about what Ron had done, but the fact that he was standing up to the niggers was pleasing to him. He loaded Ron into his car and they went for a

ride. It was where they had their best talks because Harry had an excuse for not making eye contact. Ron never seemed to notice, and the passing scenery seemed to allow Harry to open up more easily.

“Ronald, it was stupid of you to get caught. If you are gonna get caught doing these things, you’re better off not to do them, and since you seem to get caught as often as you get away with anything, maybe you are better off not doing them.”

“Dad, I didn’t get caught. I stashed the knife. They never would have found it. Mom came home and saw that it was missing from the kitchen drawer and called the school.”

Harry shook his head back and forth. “And you believe that’s what happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you believe that you mother came home and for some strange reason immediately checked the kitchen drawer and saw that the knife was missing?”

Ron stared straight out the window. He felt stupid because what his father had just said sounded stupid, and he felt more stupid because he didn’t know what the real answer was.

“Your friend Kenny ratted you out,” said Harry. “He gave your name to the police and they called your mother and she pretended to call the school.” Harry glanced at Ron and saw that his son was sitting there with his mouth hanging open. Harry knew that this whole thing was a tough lesson, and that it might even get tougher still but he believed that his son would learn. “Any time that you trust somebody, Ron, you leave yourself open. You need to learn to leave yourself open less often.”

“How do I do that, dad?”

“You keep your mouth shut and keep things to yourself. You don’t ever brag about anything. Bragging leaves you open. You let the other guy brag and you listen and size up where he is weak from his bragging.”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“I know that you don’t,” said Harry. “That’s why I’m telling you that you aren’t cut out to do the kind of things that you’re doing. Even now, you don’t know what to do, do you?”

“No,” said Ron quietly.

Harry debated telling his son that the next thing to do was to kick the shit out of Kenny and decided that it wasn’t a good idea. “When we get back to your apartment, tell your mother that I told you that you were too smart to be wasting your time with knives and gangs and that you have a better future than that.”

“Ok,” said Ron.

“Don’t tell her about the rest of what we talked about. It will only upset her.”

“Ok.”

“Ron, it isn’t a lie. You are too smart to be doing these things.”

“I don’t feel very smart at all, dad.”

When they got back home, Marjorie was smiling. “They’re not pressing any charges,” she said. “Ronald, you are going to Catholic school.”

Chapter 9

Angel sat waiting by the bay window to the side of the front door. Her mother was in the bathroom combing her hair and her grandmother was on the telephone in the kitchen. When she smelled her mom’s perfume, she decided that Ron must be on his way over, and she listened and watched for his car. It had been two weeks since they had met. Angel didn’t know that it was that long, but she did know that he liked to play with her and she liked to make him smile. In her play room, she had her tea party set all assembled. She heard his car come around the corner just as her mom went down into the basement to change her clothes.

She took Ron by the hand and used it to steady her walking as she brought him into the playroom. She was very quiet and Ron hadn’t said anything. She had been worried about how she would open the door but when he saw her on the other side of the screen door, standing there, smiling, he had opened it for her.

When they got back into the playroom, she used her weight and both hands to shut the door. Now she had him all to herself.

Ron sat cross-legged on the floor and drank imaginary tea from a plastic cup. Then she served imaginary cakes. Her dark eyes were very serious, and Ron watched with a glowing warmth that spread through him like he was high. Angel was just over three feet tall and would be two years old next week.

“Would you like more tea?” she said in a perfectly enunciated sentence.

“Yes, please,” said Ron. He hadn’t really been around that many children in his life. He didn’t realize how extraordinary it was that she had gone from saying single words to speaking in complete sentences before her second birthday, but when she looked into his eyes with her huge brown windows, he felt himself absorbed.

After about fifteen minutes, the door opened. Angel frowned and Celeste came into the room smiling. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“I was kidnapped,” said Ron shrugging his shoulders.

Angel got to her feet turned to her mother and pressed both hands on her thighs and tried to push her back out of the room. “No,” she said.

At dinner, Celeste’s mother Anna, a stout woman with short mixed red and grey hair, said, “Angel has become very attached to you in a very short period of time.” She sat hunched over her plate when she said it and raised her eyes up and turned her head only slightly to make eye contact with Ron.

“She’s just wonderful,” said Ron.

“I know that she is,” said Anna. “Do you really think that it is a good idea that you spend so much time together?”

Ron looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure that it’s good for Angel to become so attached to you,” said Anna.

“Can we talk about this later?” said Celeste.

Celeste's father Mario said nothing as he ate. He had always opened his home for his daughters' friends and tried to make them feel comfortable, but he could see that his wife was on a mission and decided to stay out of it.

Ron's eyes moved from Celeste to Angel and then back to Anna. He was no stranger to dinner time confrontations, but he believed that if he could hold his own with Marjorie, he could hold his own with anyone.

"I think that we should talk about it now before Trudy and Angela come over."

Ron met Celeste's eyes and there was an imperceptible nod between them. He said, "I want Angel to become attached to me because I want to marry your daughter."

Both Mario and Anna stopped eating. They turned to look at their elder daughter in unison. Celeste felt like she was going to swallow her tongue.

Anna's voice was low and menacing. "And just when did the two of you decide that?"

"We've known it since the first night that we were together," said Ron happily.

Anna felt like she was going to vomit. Mario looked at his wife. Images of the last two weddings and the last two divorces flooded his brain. Of course his daughter was still young, but she was a mother and he wanted his granddaughter with him. He didn't want upheaval. He didn't like this guy with his light brown hair and green eyes and his squeaky wreck of a car. What kind of life was this going to be for Angel? She was happy here. Things were settled. There was no reason for this. He glared at Ron but Ron seemed oblivious. He was smiling at Anna, but Anna wasn't smiling back.

Anna turned to her daughter. "And this is how you are going to take responsibility for your life and the life of your child now? You plan to rip her away from the only home that she has ever known. A home where she is happy and well cared for and run off with this." At that she raised her fork from which hung a stray strand of dangling spaghetti, and pointed it at Ron.

Ron found himself staring at the saucy fork. "I think it's going to be great for everyone, especially Angel," he said.

He waited but no one answered him. Finally, Celeste said, "We're going over to the park to feed the ducks. We'll be back later."

She dreaded what later was going to be, but she was going to have to address it eventually.

Chapter 10

"Mom, I met a girl and I think that I'm going to marry her."

Marjorie Bombasco looked up from her coffee with a dazed expression.

"Ronald, I just woke up."

Ron continued, "I'm in love with her and I love her daughter too."

"Her daughter? She has a daughter?"

"Yes, she was married before."

"Why do you want a girl who was married before? You were never married before?" Marjorie could feel her stomach beginning to churn. She could tell that this wasn't going to make her happy and the way that he was just springing it on her meant that there must be more.

"Technically, no, I wasn't," said Ron. Then he continued with his reasoning, "But I lived with Robin, I lived with Zoe."

"Are you telling me that you would have wanted to marry the mouse?"

"I really wish that you'd stop calling her that. She wasn't a mouse."

"She squinted like a mouse."

"OK, mom, there's not need to argue about Zoe. That isn't the question."

"And how long have you been seeing this new love of your life and why is this the first time that you are telling me about it?"

"I've seen her almost every day for the last two weeks."

"Two entire weeks," said Marjorie. "Well then I'm sure that you know what you are doing."

“You’re right mom, I do know exactly what I’m doing. And I’d like you to meet her.”

“Before you marry her? That’s very thoughtful of you, Ronald.”

“Is this how you’re going to be, sarcastic and unsupportive?”

“Just what is it that you would like me to support Ronald? You’ve met a girl. That’s wonderful. Of course it’s not a girl that I introduced you to or a girl that I even know, but that would be asking too much wouldn’t it?”

Ron said nothing. He stared into her eyes with resolve. She knew the look. He got it from his father. It meant that his mind was made up and Marjorie felt the room begin to spin. She put her hands flat on the table. “And just where did you meet this girl?”

“She used to be Quimpy’s girlfriend,” said Ron.

“So, you couldn’t even find a girl of your own. You had to steal your friend’s girlfriend that he didn’t want anymore. After she had gone off and gotten married and had a child. How old is this girl?”

“We’re the same age,” said Ron. He felt himself bristling from the Quimpy remark.

“And how old is her kid?”

“Angel is going to be two next week.”

Marjorie’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of a name is Angel?”

“They’re Italian,” said Ron. His eyes met his mother’s eyes. Their gazes held each other for a long time.

Marjorie felt her chin begin to quiver. “I thought you said that you didn’t want anything to do with an Italian girl? You’ve never even really dated an Italian girl.”

“I know, it’s funny isn’t it.”

A tear ran out of her left eye. “No Ronald, I would not say that it’s funny.”

Chapter 11

“Ronald, this is George’s Mother and his grandmother and his Uncle John. This is his sister Linda and her husband Robert and their children Roberta and Robert Junior.”

Ron tried to smile a hello to everyone and put his hands in his pockets and stood there looking at his shoes. His mother had married George Bombasco two months earlier but they had kept their marriage a secret, until George could find a way to break the news to his family. He had started spending some nights at their apartment and though Ron had kind of liked him initially, when George started telling Ron what to do, difficulties began.

“You can sit there until it’s time for dinner, Ronald,” said George’s mother.

Ron sat and watched women work at the table in the basement of the house. Uncle John had the newspaper spread open on one section of the table and he was looking at the ads from the food circulars. “Look here,” said John, “carrots for 12 cents for two pounds at Pathmark and bacon for 67 cents a pound at the Acme. We can go out and get both of those things tomorrow.”

“I saw a box of Cheerios for 24 cents at the A&P,” said George’s mother. “Isn’t that good?”

Ron listened and tried to find something about the conversation that was interesting.

George’s mother said more emphatically, “Isn’t that good?” She was looking at George. Her chins wobbled. She scrunched her glasses back up against her face with a questioning grimace.

“I think so,” said George, “but I’ll have the Foodtown circular tomorrow and you can see if it’s better there.”

Ron stared out the back window at the garden. He saw the plump tomatoes bulging the vines, and the white strips of cloth that were used to tie them to the

wooden stakes fluttering in the late summer breeze. He closed his eyes and inhaled the smell of the tomato sauce and felt a little sick to his stomach.

When he stood up, it seemed to signal everyone to stop and stare at him. "I'm going to go outside for a little while."

"Stay close," said Uncle John. "The shines are out on their porches down on Broad Street."

Ron looked at him with a quizzical expression. "I just wanted to see the garden."

John shifted, a little uncomfortable with this information. His thin grey hair sprouted out to the sides over the top of the black rims of his glasses. "Be careful not to touch anything," he said.

Linda came out of the back of the basement holding Junior in her arms. Roberta followed her with her hand holding her mother's skirt like it was a reassuring tether. Ron did not make eye contact with any of them as he went out the door.

Ron had never seen a vegetable garden before, and he looked at it with some reverence. Then he found a spot in the shade back by the garage and squatted back against the wall. The garden was split in the center and had distinct rows on each side. It was very green. Ron saw the tomatoes and the peppers on the vine. He thought that they looked like magical apparitions. He had seen pictures on the early morning show, *The Modern Farmer*, but this was so much more real and alive. At least he had found one thing that he liked.

Chapter 12

Jake Clifford smiled broadly when he saw Celeste and Angel getting out of Ron's squeak mobile. He walked towards them with an athletic glide in his step. "So this is the lucky guy that has you smiling," said Jake. He extended his hand to Ron and they shook.

“How’s everything, Jake?” said Celeste.

“Things are great. I heard from Spalding and I think that they are going to buy it.” Jake grinned and put his head down and shuffled his feet back and forth a little.

Celeste turned to Ron with an excited grin on her face. “Jake has an invention that he’s about to become famous for,” she said.

“Why don’t you and Ron come over later? We can toot some lines.” He sized Ron up and asked, “Do you play ping pong?”

When school was over Ron was out the door like a sprinter. His book bag was slung over his shoulder and he was running south on Summer Avenue towards Bloomfield Avenue. He veered left at Elwood and then picked up speed when he got to Lincoln. He ran the length of Lincoln Avenue and right up the stairs and into the Boys Club.

Off to the back of the huge room, under a hanging cloud of smoke, the old men were playing chess. Ron’s book bag dangled from his shoulder as he walked over trying to look inconspicuous. He really wasn’t supposed to be there yet. On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, the Club was taken over by the Retired Men’s Club and they played chess and pool and cards until 3 in the afternoon. The chess players were allowed to stay longer though. They were out of the way and brought their own pieces and plastic chess mats.

Ron was always very quiet and careful not to move around. The men were cranky and usually his presence was more tolerated than accepted, but he loved to smell their pipe smoke and watch the way that they manipulated the pieces and sometimes, if there was no one else to play, he was allowed to sit in for a game.

Some of the men were happy to teach him and it didn't take Ron long to become a regular at the end of these Tuesday and Thursday gatherings. Ron thought that they played the game with an elegant flair and though he knew none of their names, he did have his favorites.

He was just settled into his second game of watching when he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Ron, can I speak to you for a moment?"

It was Danny McCarthy, a short red faced man in his thirties who always wore a lanyard and whistle around his neck.

"Sure," said Ron. He got up and walked past the pool table and towards the windows where there were six ping pong tables set up next to each other.

They sat on the low window ledge in back of the table and in front of the windows. Danny looked very serious. "Ron, you know that there is no gambling here, don't you?"

Feeling the heat rise to his face, Ron tried to control his reaction. "Sure, I know."

"Is it true that you beat Joey Baltiari for so much money playing ping pong that he gave you his bankbook?"

"I didn't take any of his money," said Ron.

"How much did you beat him for Ron?"

"I don't know. I kept saying that I wanted to quit and he kept wanting to do double or nothing and he couldn't beat me."

"But you know that there is no gambling here. You told me that you knew."

"I took \$4 in cash and he owes me another \$125," said Ron. The guilt had overtaken him and he wanted to be rid of it.

"Ron, this is wrong. You know that it's wrong. You knew it was wrong when you did it."

"I gave him a spot," said Ron defensively.

"But you knew that he couldn't beat you, didn't you?"

Ron nodded and hung his head.

“And now the boy is so upset that he got sick and wasn’t able to go to school today and finally he told his mother what you had done to him and she called me.”

Ron stared out the window. Then he looked over at the smoky cloud of chess players. He waited for what was going to happen next.

“I want you to return his bankbook, Ron and promise me that you’ll never do anything like this again.”

Ron reached down into his book bag where he’d kept the bankbook hidden. He fished it out and gave it to Danny without saying anything.

The Director took the book and opened it to look at the balance. He was interested to see how much Joey had, and he wanted to check to see that Ron hadn’t been able to make any withdrawals. “Ron, I want you to tell your parents what happened and I’m going to take your membership card until one of them comes it with you to get it back.”

Ron’s mind went blank. The words “Oh shit” formed in his brain. This was going to be bad. This was going to be really bad.

He didn’t eat much of his dinner. He sat across from George and Marjorie in their third floor apartment toying with his food. They didn’t seem to notice that he wasn’t eating and George was shoveling the food in at a rate that did not allow for conversation.

“Something happened today,” started Ron.

George stopped eating and Marjorie lit a cigarette. “What happened?” she said.

“Sometimes at the Boys Club we play ping pong for a dime or a quarter a game,” said Ron trying to ease into it. George and Marjorie exchanged a look that was a mixture of anger and fear.

“How much did you lose?” said George.

“I didn’t lose,” said Ron. “I beat this kid for all his money and he went home and told his mother that he had to give me his bankbook and she called the Boys

Club, and now they won't let me back in unless you go down there with me to pick up my membership card."

"You're just becoming a hoodlum, aren't you?" said Marjorie. "Is this the way that I raised you?"

"Look, I didn't try to take all his money. He kept wanting to play double or nothing and I kept winning."

"Why didn't you just say no and give the boy his money back?" said Marjorie. She began to cry. "Is this what I've raised you to be? Your grandmother would be spinning in her grave."

George looked at Ron and gave him a disgusted grimace and before Ron knew what he did he said, "Well at least I won."

George's face got very red. Ron knew that they were still paying off George's gambling debts. He knew that George had to work a second job just to keep up on the payments.

"You're a bastard," cried Marjorie.

"What you need is a good beating," said George.

Ron had gone too far to quit now and he said, "Look my dad taught me how to gamble. It's not my fault that I did it right."

"Let your father go and get your card back," said Marjorie. "I'm sure that he'll be very proud of you."

Chapter 13

Anna spent her mornings on the telephone. She sat in the kitchen with her Chesterfields and her coffee. She lived a sedentary life, but seemed to come very alive when she was on the telephone. It would not be unusual for her morning telephone marathons to go on for several hours.

There was a list of people with whom she spoke daily. These included her sisters, several cousins, and her daughter. The fact that she would see many of these people on a daily basis did not change the need for the morning calls.

Today's theme was her outrage at the ungrateful Celeste, who never seemed to pass up the chance to find a new way to screw up her life. She began with Vivian.

"Can you believe the shit that she is trying to pull now?" said Anna in a rhetorical opening.

"What's wrong with her?" said Vivian. "She has a nice home and a safe place for her daughter. There's no pressure on her and she wants to throw all that away."

"Stars in her eyes over another loser," said Anna. "It wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for Angel. That baby is happy here."

"Wouldn't you think that she would have learned to start putting her child first? She's not twenty-one anymore. The party is over."

Vivian had been a hard worker in her youth and it was true that Celeste had never been afraid of work either. But in their eyes she had thrown away nursing school, then married a photographer who considered himself too much of an artist to open a shop and take graduation and wedding pictures. She'd left him and hooked up with Angel's father who they both knew was a humorless jerk the first time that they met him. At least he worked. She left him and found out she was pregnant and had run back home. Everyone in the family had pitched in to help her. Janine's husband had redone what had been the girls' shared room upstairs and turned it into a beautiful nursery. Tina's husband had helped her refinish the basement. Mario had kept quiet about her being back home. Everything had been perfect, but now Celeste had dragged home this stray dog and his squeaky junk of a car.

They reviewed this litany together and Anna was sure that Vivian was on her side. "I swear that when I see my precious Angel strapped into a seat in the back of that deathtrap that my heart is in my mouth."

"If you don't think that his car is safe, you shouldn't let her go," said Vivian.

"How am I supposed to stop her?"

"Raise a stink," said Vivian.

Anna laughed bitterly but thought that an event like that might drive Ron off.

Her conversation with Janine didn't go as well.

"Is he cute," Janine made the mistake of asking.

"I don't know," said Anna. "I can't bring myself to stand to look at him. Besides, what difference does that make to me?"

"I'm not disagreeing, Anna, but if Celeste sees a future with him, shouldn't you try to make the best of it?"

"No," said Anna resolutely.

The she added, "Can Jimmy find out about this guy?"

Janine's husband Jimmy was Angel's godfather. He had a good job working in a school and he coached and knew other coaches.

"Find out what?" said Janine.

"If it turns out that this guy is a loser, like her other losers, maybe she would listen to Jimmy and not want to screw things up again."

"I'll ask him but you know how Jimmy is."

Anna laughed, "Ask him after he's just had a ride on that Napoli ass of yours." Napoli was Anna's maiden name and the power of their posteriors had been a running family joke among the women for a long time.

Janine and Anna giggled.

Chapter 14

Sister Wilma Dolores inspected the boy that the rectory had called about. She had been directed to accept him into the school, but she insisted that she wanted to meet him first. The idea of a non-Catholic boy in her school angered her and made her queasy at the same time. This one would be going into 7th grade, an age when things could get out of hand if the school wasn't careful.

Ron sat in the hard wooden chair with his hands folded. He was nervous. He had never spoken with a nun before and their costumes made them look other worldly.

“What brings you to us, Ronald?”

“I’m not sure, Sister,” said Ron. He’d been told that he should call of them that. It was respectful and it saved having to remember their names.

“Why aren’t you sure, Ronald? This is no place for the undecided.”

“To be honest, Sister, it was decided for me,” said Ron, quite honestly. Then he hurried to add, “But I like to read and I think that I can be a good student.”

“You know that you’ll be expected to study Religion, just as all of the students here do and that you’ll be expected to take part in daily prayers and attend Mass.”

“I know, Sister.”

“Of course you won’t be allowed Communion and you’ll be expected to be able to recite the necessary prayers, which you will learn as soon as possible.”

“I think that I already know most of them,” said Ron.

“Oh?” Wilma Dolores raised an eyebrow. She was wearing summer whites, but the tightly fitting, starched habit gave her face a puffiness in the heat. It fitted across the forehead and over her ears and under her chin. A round white heavily starched bib projected from under her neck and the black nylon strings that held her crucifix lay across it.

“I remember things easily,” said Ron.

“They aren’t just words to us, Ronald. They have a sacred meaning.”

“I can recite scripture too,” said Ron, trying hard to be cooperative.

This last piece of information was troubling to the school principal. She doubted if any of the students in the school had read the Bible. They read their catechism, lives of the saints, and the children’s book of New Testament bible stories. “That might be something that you should keep to yourself, Ronald. No one likes a showoff.”

“Yes, Sister.”

“Now, I know that you’ve been in trouble and that kind of behavior will not be tolerated here. You will be on a short leash Mr. Tuck and any whiff of incorrigibility and you will find yourself on the outside looking in.”

Ron thought that there wouldn’t be anything new about that, but it was the first time that he remembered anyone ever calling him Mr. Tuck. He kind of liked it.

Chapter 15

Dorothy Thomas told her nephew that she had something for him. She walked back through her kitchen and into her bedroom, the room furthest away from the place where her third and final husband slept. Even though it was midday and sunny, she needed to switch on the light to see. Ron had never remembered the drapes to his aunt’s bedroom being open. They were heavy drapes and contained multiple layers that both kept out light and muffled sound. They also blotted out the fact that this was a basement apartment that was given to the superintendent and family rent free.

Her bed roomset was pure and polished mahogany. It glistened under the overhead light, which she switched on as she opened her closet door. Ron’s eyes followed. There were two minks, one a full length coat and the other a jacket. Next to them hung a heavy black lamb’s wool coat. Dorothy pushed them to the side and revealed a stack of shoeboxes. The shoes, though not new, were in their original boxes and were still wrapped and rewrapped after each wearing into their tissue paper. Inside one of the boxes there was a velvet pouch tucked next black high heels. Ron’s eyes widened. It looked like treasure.

She opened the pouch and removed a set of black beads. It was a rosary. She slipped it into Ron’s hand and said, “Don’t tell anyone that I gave this to you. Your mother would have a fit.”

Ron’s family had always been staunchly anti-Catholic. When his great grandmother had been told that she had the “map of Ireland” on her face, she took it as a great insult. Dorothy was actually his great aunt. Marjorie had always

suspected that she was actually her mother, but that family history had been so mangled over time, that there was no way to discover the truth. Dorothy certainly wasn't going to tell anyone.

Ron fingered the beads. "Why do you have these?"

"When I was younger Ronald, I used to sneak into Catholic churches. I got these so that I wouldn't look out of place."

Ron was astonished. He stared down at the crucifix. She had kept them all these years. She was a woman of endless secrets. "Why did you go there, Aunt Dot?"

"Because they were beautiful and I loved the stained glass windows and all the gold. Our church was drab. I loved the smell of incense. I liked the pageantry. It was like going to a show and I didn't have to buy a ticket."

Ron smiled. He wanted to ask if it had anything to do with the religion but he didn't. He didn't want to spoil her secret by cluttering it up with facts. He slipped the beads into his pocket. She hadn't given him the pouch, which she placed back into the box and then restacked with her other boxes. Ron wondered if more strangely wonderful things were concealed in them, but she was closing the closet door and turning out the light and then they were back in her kitchen and she wanted him to stay for dinner. Marjorie was working and she liked having him around.

"Sure," said Ron.

"Go and say hello to your Uncle John," she said.

Ron walked passed the birdcage and glanced down at the ceramic boxer that she kept on the floor guarding the entrance to her parlor. It was a long narrow corridor that led back to his Uncle's room.

John Thomas was watching the Mets. They were an awful team and his love had been the Dodgers, but like his first wife, they had gone and he was stuck with this.

He didn't mind the boy but when he stayed overnight John was forced into the twin bed in Dorothy's bedroom, which only further reminded him of what he didn't have.

"Hi, Uncle John."

"Hello, Ronald."

John was sitting in a Danish rocker and smoking his pipe. Ron slid down to the floor in front of the couch. He hated the Mets. He was a Yankee through and through. John disliked the Yankees and had tried to explain to Ron that they bought their success. Ron didn't understand what that meant and rested his argument on his two favorite players, Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford.

Chapter 16

Ron was invited to Sunday dinner with Celeste's family. The men were in the backyard and the women were in the kitchen. Celeste came out to greet him when she heard his nearby squeaks. They kissed and he squeezed her ass. She grinned and said, "Not here," smiling and looking around to see if anyone had seen. Then she said, "My father and Joey are in the backyard."

"OK," said Ron. He knew the drill but strangely he didn't mind. "Do you want me to go into the kitchen and say hello first?" Then his face brightened. "Where's Angel?"

"Barb came and got her this morning. She took her on an adventure. And yes, you better say hello first. They'll say something to me if you don't."

Celeste led him around to the front door. Ron stared at the twitch of her hips as she walked. She didn't wiggle or roll her hips. They seemed to snap from side to side, like a metronome. He gloried in the way that they moved.

The house was cool and the hum of the air conditioner was loud. Anna sat smoking her Chesterfields in her chair at the table. Tina was getting things out of the refrigerator and there was a pot of water being brought to a boil on the electric cooktop. The woman all hated the electric cooktop and longed for the

days of fire. They complained that you just couldn't regulate it properly, but they would work with what they had.

Celeste led him through the dining room and back into the kitchen. Anna looked up, saw Ron with her elder daughter, and reached for her cigarettes.

"Hello, Mrs. Brago," said Ron.

Tina turned at the sound of his voice. She sized him up. She had been in love with Celeste's first husband, David. She was still a girl then and David was dashing and exciting and funny. He'd taken Celeste to Europe and Tina had almost died with envy. Everyone in the family had loved David. They had hated her second husband, Norman, just as much. Tina had already decided that she wasn't giving this one a chance.

Anna said, "I suppose that you'd better call me Anna. Mrs. Brago just sounds stupid."

Ron took it as an act of conciliation, not noticing that Anna had avoided saying hello to him or using his name. Ron grinned his best dimpled grin. Tina turned away and rolled her eyes. "Anna" said Ron.

Anna looked at Celeste and said, "Janine and Jimmy are coming for coffee after dinner."

Ron saw Tina's back turned to him, inwardly shrugged and opened the back door to the yard.

Mario was stretched back in his hammock watching Joey play with his grandson, Little Joey in the above ground pool. Ron moved toward the Hammock and stretched out his hand to Mario. He wanted to avoid the name thing again and so he said, "How's it going?"

Mario grasped Ron's hand and they shook. He had large beefy hands. He was a big man with a barrel chest. Joey was the son that he never had and the kid had learned to drive a trailer truck in no time. Mario hated them and pretended that he couldn't learn so that they would keep him with straight jobs.

Ron turned to the pool and repeated, "How's it going?" in the direction of Joey, whose wet hands were holding his son. To his surprise, Joey curled young Joey under his left arm and extended his right hand towards Ron.

Ron said, "I think there's a game on." He hoped that they weren't Mets fans.

"I don't like sports," said Mario.

"Me either," said Joey.

It was gonna be a long afternoon.

Chapter 17

The classroom was arranged with boys on one side and girls on the other. The students were seated in the order of last year's final grades. The best performing girls and boys were seated next to each other, the top rows. The arrangement was meant to be a constant reminder of performance and sent the subliminal message that only those who had proven that they could handle distraction would be allowed proximity to the opposite sex. Ron was assigned the last seat of the row furthest away from the center.

Sister Mary Salvatore was their teacher. She had been informed about Ron's special circumstances. Ron had been staring at the girls' heads on the other side of the room. He wanted to see more of them. Then, to his utter disbelief, the nun said, "Ronald Tuck, would you please stand up."

Ron felt heat on his face as he stood. He had been thinking about the girls and he had an erection. It was tenting out the front of his pants and she was making him stand there. Everyone's head turned to look at him. He had stashed Aunt Dottie's rosary in his pants pocket. He put it there because it reminded him of his Aunt. Ron prayed that no one would notice how he was sticking out. He heard some of the girls giggle. Now he was blushing furiously. He cursed his penis and how often it became hard without him really realizing it.

"Ronald is a new student here," said Mary Salvatore. "And it is important that we all help him to learn to be at home. Ronald isn't a Catholic boy and so a

lot of what we do will seem very strange to him. I am sure that none of you will hesitate to give him all the help that he requires.”

Ron prayed to be allowed to sit down. He wondered if he could get away with adjusting his pants, moving it to the side so that it didn't stick out so obviously, but then he would be sticking the crucifix on the rosary with his penis. He wondered if that was a sin.

“Do you have anything that you would like to add, Ronald?”

Maybe it was going to be over and she would let him sink back down into the oblivion of the last seat in the last row. “No, Sister.”

“Do any of you have any questions for Ronald?” said the nun. She seemed to want to prolong this and continue the torment. No one asked anything and mercifully, Ron sat.

Chapter 18

Ron wandered around the Brago backyard. He couldn't remember having been in a place quite like this one. Their Cape Cod house was situated on a circle and from one back yard you could see into all the other back yards next to yours and those from the other side of the circle.

Sometimes they would cook the food on a grill that was linked to the house's natural gas supply. Ron had never seen one that didn't have to be refilled.

Mario was cooking at the grill and Joey was inside changing little Joey. Ron lit a cigarette and walked around the yard. In one corner was a large tree with a tire suspended from a rope. Ron looked at the makeshift swing and thought it had a friendly feel to it. Along the back of the chain link fence was an old grape vine. It was in bloom and Ron could see the deep purple luster of the fruit. He reached out and touched one of the grapes, thought about plucking it off to taste it, and decided it wasn't a good idea. Along the other side of the yard was a vegetable garden. For a second, Ron was flooded with memories. They made him

uncomfortable and he wondered if he knew what he was doing, but then Celeste was walking towards him and his doubts vanished.

She was wearing a sleeveless yellow top that tied in back of her neck. Her breasts jiggled as she moved. Her dark hair was tied back in a ponytail. Her tan skin radiated. She was carrying a clam on a half shell and held it out to Ron. He took it and slurped it down. The hot sauce had a sweet burn in his throat. They grinned at each other.

“You don’t fool around with the hot sauce, do you?” said Ron.

She shook her head from side to side with a wide grin. Then she said, “Do you like the garden?”

“I like gardens,” said Ron. He wanted to tell her what he had been thinking, but decided it wasn’t a good time. He didn’t understand this urge to just tell her everything. Could he really tell her everything? He wasn’t sure that he could ever tell anyone everything. If they knew what ran through his head, they would think him too fucked up for words. He had learned that from the few times, that he had taken a chance and revealed some of what he was thinking. People grew silent and sometimes horrified, or laughed uncontrollably and told him that he was crazy. Quimpy had referred to him as a “crazy fucked up kid” from the time that he was sixteen years old. Chris thought he was nuts. Robin, his first love, had said that he wasn’t real. Why did he feel this freedom with Celeste? His answer came in a flash. If I don’t tell her, I will never be able to really open up to her, and what kind of a marriage would we have then? If I do tell her, and it drives her away, maybe she would have left anyway and it would better if she found out before they were married. He resolved to tell her later, when they were alone and he could gaze into her face and see her reactions. He wondered if everyone who was planning to get married went through this kind of doubting about how much of themselves they should be revealing. He thought that they should. It also struck him that it seemed women wanted to know these things, but that didn’t mean that they were necessarily revealing the same kinds of things about themselves.

Celeste watched Ron’s eyes go a little dreamy and for a second he was lost in thought. She wondered if this family thing was just going to be too much for him, but wasn’t sure that she should ask. He’d told her that he wanted her to tell him everything, but guys just say that. What she believed was that they wanted you to

tell them everything that they wanted to hear. Then she said, "We'd better go inside for dinner."

"Aren't we eating out here?"

"No," said Celeste. "My mother doesn't like to eat outside."

This was very true. Anna was overweight and didn't like to sweat. She had allergies and hated being around plants. And then there were the flies. Anna hated flies with a passion that bordered on obsession. Next to a telephone, a cigarette, or a cup of coffee in her hand, the thing that you were most apt to see there was a fly swatter. If one got into the house, she would hunt it to distraction, cursing it each time that she swung and the fly escaped. Anna did not move quickly and had to use stealth in order to be successful. Mario had bought her the fly swatter soon after they were married and he found her banging her shoe against the wall and crying. That had been many fly swatters ago.

Ron got to the door and held it open for Celeste.

"Don't let the flies in," hollered Anna. Ron didn't understand and waited for Celeste to climb the three stone steps to the back door. Anna glared. Celeste hurried and shut the door in back of her. Just as Barb came through the front door with Angel. The house went into immediate celebration and the flies were forgotten.

Angel exuded the radiance of discovery. The world was always new, and then some parts were always the same. Her Grandmother's face, soft and warm and sweet and waiting for her. Her Papa's chuckle at whatever she decided to do. Her mother, her mother, her mother. And there was Ron standing in back of Aunt Tina, his hand on the door. He looked so happy to see her. He missed her being there. This was home. This was the warm place after adventures.

Chapter 19

Ron knew exactly one kid at Our Lady of the Forlorn, but luckily it was a good friend. Rich D'Orio and Ron played stickball or football or some kind of sport most days. Ron was often invited to the D'Orio house for dinner. The D'Orios were happy when they heard that Ron was going to Our Lady of the Forlorn. Richie

hadn't told them about the incident with the knife. He knew that would not go over well. Richie was popular in school and he introduced Ron to all of his friends. There was a tentative acceptance. Some of the girls even said hello to him now

Ron spent hours doing homework each night. As much as he didn't care what his teachers at Elliott Street School thought, he found that he had this instinctual desire to please the nuns. He wondered if it was because they frightened him. Or if it was because of their strange costumes, or if maybe it was because of some dedication. But to what?

One afternoon during his second week there, Richie said, "The guys are going to the park to play football this afternoon. I told them that you were good, and they want you to play."

Since George and Marjorie had gotten married and moved to an apartment over two miles away, Ron hadn't been able to play with Richie in the afternoons. In order to get to the park in time, he would have to run home, change quickly and then make it double time up to the park. The rest of the guys would take their bikes. Ron didn't know how to ride a bike. He didn't want the other guys to know. He didn't realize that Richie had already told them.

He was sweating when he got to the park. Dave Spenelli watched him arrive and laughed. "Long walk?" The other guys laughed and Ron, glared at Richie. Anger flashed through him like electricity. They chose up sides. Ron was picked somewhere in the middle of the pack, mostly because of what Richie had said and his size. He was tall, muscular and lean.

It was a tough game. They had no equipment. They wore sneakers, jeans and sweatshirts. There were always bumps and bruises and cuts after the game, but they were badges of honor.

Richie was faster than Ron but he was smaller. Baseball was really his game and he could pick it at shortstop. During football season, he played end and liked to catch the passes, fake like he was going to the inside and then dart along the sidelines. Ron knew the move. Richie had burned him with it enough times. When Ron saw the play developing, he sprinted from the middle of the field to the sideline. Richie caught it with his back to the defender and used his fake. The kid

bit on it, and Richie pivoted to the outside and rammed face first into Ron's thrusting shoulder. He left his feet and the ball flew into the air and rolled out of bounds. Richie lay on the ground, his hands covering the blood that spurted from his broken nose. At first Ron was sorry when he saw him there crying in front of his friends, bleeding and covering his face with his hands. Then he thought that his father would be proud. The game ended on the hit. Somebody had to take Richie home. He was bleeding too much to ride his bike. Ron didn't volunteer to walk with him.

As they were walking away, Ron heard Dave Spenelli say, "That was some hit!"

He swelled with pride but didn't turn over his shoulder when a faceless voice said, "I don't want to get hit like that."

Richie didn't come to school for the rest of the week. Ron was ashamed and noticed that fewer kids were talking to him. He didn't realize that they were frightened.

Word had gotten out. Ron was the kid who brought a butcher knife to school and threatened people with it. Maybe he was better left alone.

Chapter 20

Ron expected the meal to be noisy and it was. The air conditioner was a wall unit in the dining room and when they sat around the long table, it caused them to raise their already elevated voices. Ron was seated next to Celeste who had Angel, in her high chair, on her other side. Angel was not happy with this arrangement and started to cry.

Mario bellowed, "What's the matter, Princess?"

Angel cried louder.

“Don’t let this baby cry,” hollered Mario. He was looking at Celeste. “Do something to help her.”

Celeste unstrapped her from the high chair and took Angel into her arms. She scrambled across her mother’s lap and held her arms up to Ron. Anna’s mouth dropped open. Tina grimaced. Mario grew quiet.

Barb said, “Oh she wants to be next to him,” and got up and moved the high chair so that it was between Celeste and Ron. Angel stopped crying immediately. Ron lifted her up and strapped her into the chair.

“Check those straps and make sure that they are secure,” Anna said to Celeste.

The hum of the air conditioner was now the only sound. Little Joey pointed at Angel and said, “Crying.”

Angel ignored him. Tina took Joey’s arm and said gently, “Don’t point at your cousin.”

After dinner, the men went into the living room to lay down and wait to be called back for coffee and dessert and for the arrival of the after dinner guests. Ron started to help clear the table. He had been taught that it was what he should do and the lesson had stayed with him. It made the women nervous. They were not used to him to begin with and now he was in their kitchen and doing things, like a woman.

Tina called Celeste into the dining room and whispered, “Tell him to go into the living room with Joey and Daddy.”

“Did you even bother to say hello to him?” said Celeste.

Tina turned and walked away. Celeste motioned for Ron, but he didn’t see her. “Ron, could you come here a minute?”

Ron put the plates on the counter and Tina quickly lifted them up and brought them to the sink.

Celeste said, “Do you want to go downstairs and have a cigarette?”

“Sure,” said Ron.

“Go ahead, I’ll be right there.”

This was going to be an afternoon of juggling, thought Celeste as she went back into the kitchen.

Anna was sitting at the kitchen table smoking and watching her kitchen be cleaned. "If he breaks that baby's heart, I'll beat him with a shoe."

Chapter 21

It was a Monday night and Ron was stretched out on the floor watching TV and reading Damien the Leper for his English class. Then he saw President Kennedy's face come on the screen. He began talking about missiles in Cuba and saying that the United States was placing a naval blockade around the island. Then he said that any attack on the United States by Cuba would be considered an attack by the Soviet Union and that we would respond by attacking the Soviet Union. Ron stared. Was the world going to end? Would he never get to grow up?

George was out working his second job as a bartender. Marjorie wasn't home. Ron lay there listening to the President who didn't smile once. Ron loved watching his press conferences because of the way that he joked with everyone, but he wasn't in any mood to be joking tonight. He wondered if we could beat the Russians. He felt his anger begin to rise. He was too young to fight. He wondered if they would make an exception because of his size. He had broken Richie D'Orio's nose. Would that make a difference?

After the president was done speaking, a commentator showed a map of Cuba and showed the places that the missiles could reach. New Jersey wasn't on the map. Did that make a difference? Maybe New Jersey wasn't important enough to be on a map of the United States when they showed it on TV. New York was there. So was Washington. Miami was there. Ron pushed thoughts of Miami out of his head. He had gone there with Marjorie and Rocky a long time ago and Rocky had taken him fishing. Ron felt something burning in his throat and then he vomited.

The next morning the world looked very different. There were lines outside of the church when he went to school. They said special prayers in the classroom and then Mary Salvatore said that they would be going over to the church to attend a special mass and pray for peace and for God to give President Kennedy

the wisdom to do what was best. Ron stared up at the picture of Kennedy that was on the wall and wondered if the picture would be there if he was not a Catholic.

The church was warm and crowded. As the students were marched down the aisle, Ron thought that he heard someone gasp at the sight of them and then begin to cry. Then he saw that many of the women were holding tissues to their eyes. The nuns looked serene. Ron wondered if they were anticipating heaven.

The priest, Monsignor Gerard, was in the pulpit. Before the mass began, he said, "I'm sure that Our Heavenly Father is pleased to see so many of you in His house today. I'm sure that he wished that his house was this full when people were not frightened, but in His wisdom, he knows that we are weak." Then he turned his back on them and began to celebrate mass. Ron thought, that sure will make folks feel better.

The days wore on and the tension built. After the first rushes of panic, a sameness set in about it, almost a grim acceptance. There was a spike in the construction of fallout shelters. In school they practiced what to do in the case of an attack. The nuns assured frightened children that the best place in the world to be was in the church. And then when things seemed to be inevitable, it was over.

The United States had prevailed. Kennedy had backed down the Russians. Ron got a copy of Profiles in Courage from the library and read it. Then he read Why England Slept, although he didn't understand much of it. Then he read The Making of the President.

When report cards came out, Ron was moved from the last seat in the last row to the last seat in the middle row. He was seated across from Barbara Infante. She smiled at him. Sometimes when they exchanged papers, they graded each other's papers. Her penmanship was beautiful and she wrote with a light touch. Ron's handwriting was sloppy and he wrote hard.

Marjorie was thrilled with his grades. Of the 16 graded areas, Ron had earned an "E" in nine of them. "E" stood for excellent. Mary Salvatore gave him a "G" in religion. The nun knew that Ron had earned an "E" but she just could not bring herself to give it to him. He was a smart boy and she liked him, but she certainly wasn't going to make the mistake of trusting him. Everything else was either a "G"

for good or an “S” for satisfactory. Richie was in the first seat of Ron’s row. He had gotten straight E’s.

Things were different after Ron broke his nose. Richie was angry and embarrassed, and he was sure that Ron had done it on purpose. They never talked about it and Ron would have told him that it was just a play and that he didn’t mean anything by it.

After the Cuban thing and his impressive report card, Ron’s popularity began to rise again. He learned that while he hid his love of reading in public school because he didn’t want to appear to be brainy, in Catholic school, brainy was good.

Chapter 22

Janine and Jimmy arrived for coffee and the after dinner stupor seemed broken. Ron was still in the basement and Celeste was just finishing setting the table for coffee. Jimmy kissed Celeste on the cheek and said, “So where is he? You keep him chained to your bed downstairs?”

Celeste blushed. Janine came over and said, “Better to keep him chained than to have him chaining you.”

Mario and Joey came into the dining room and sat back down. Mario shook Jimmy’s hand and said, “Mr. Lattimore.”

Jimmy grinned, “So I hear that you are going to have a new son-in-law.”

Joey added, “Again.”

Anna tensed and put her head down. Mario just nodded. Janine said, “Well, three is a charm.”

Celeste knew that Anna had passed this information along during her morning phone calls and she was sure that it wasn’t accompanied by an endorsement.

The door to the downstairs basement opened and Ron tried to slide into the room unnoticed. That wasn’t going to happen.

“We need another chair,” said Anna.

Ron moved to get it and Anna thought in spite of herself that at least he tried to help. Celeste introduced Ron to Jimmy and Janine.

Jimmy smiled and stick out a large hard hand. It engulfed Ron’s hand but he tried his best for a manly shake.

“Good to meet you,” said Ron figuring a smile at Janine would cover his response to go along with the handshake.

“So,” said Jimmy, “you’re a football coach.”

“I’m just an assistant, said Ron. “This will be my second year.”

“Good money?” said Jimmy laughing.

Ron flushed. The money was awful. He calculated it last year to work out to be about fifty cents an hour. Ron laughed. “Not so much for the money. But it’s good to work with the kids that way.”

Jimmy didn’t answer. It had been a joke and Ron had given his a straight answer. Jimmy hoped that Ron had a sense of humor. He was going to need it in this house.

Neither Mario nor Joey understood why someone would work when the money wasn’t any good and the hours were long. But he was a teacher and they both had a mistrust of teachers. It was true that Jimmy was a teacher, but he taught drivers education and gym. That was different and Jimmy was family. He liked to work with his hands.

The last thing in the world that Ron wanted was a hot cup of coffee. He didn’t drink coffee after dinner. They had consumed too much food. He wished that he could go for a long walk and maybe even a run, but that was out of the question. Angel took his hand and Ron lifted her up onto his knee after he sat.

Chapter 23

Ron was invited to his first party. It was at Barbara Infante’s house. He took a very long and hot shower. He combed his hair about six times. He used some of

George's aftershave. He made sure that there was copious amounts of deodorant under his arms. He selected a white on white high roll and used gold colored cuff links with it. He slid on a pair of black mohair and silk slacks that had a knife sharp crease. His socks were thin and almost see through except for the black ribs that Ron made sure were very straight as they slid up over his ankles. He tied his feather-tipped shoes tightly and made sure that their shine was high gloss. Then he slipped on his three quarter length black leather jacket from Cooper leather, where his mother had taken him when he said that he needed to have one.

He wanted to slip on his sunglasses but it was night and George said that he was trying to look like a wise guy when he wore them. Marjorie said, "You look very nice," when he came out of his room. Ron had the sunglasses safely tucked away in his inside pocket. "Do you have money?" she asked.

"I have a few dollars," said Ron. "I don't think that I'll need any."

"Where is this party?" she asked.

"I don't know," he lied.

"How can you be going to a party and not know where it is?" said Marjorie.

Ron lied again. "I'm meeting Richie and some of the other guys up at the school. They know where she lives."

It had been a pointless lie and Ron knew that it probably was, but the thought of her driving over there if he was late, or calling her house if she felt like it, was reason enough to keep her in the dark.

"Stay out of trouble," said George.

"He isn't going to get into any trouble!" snapped Marjorie. "He's going to a party." Then a thought hit her. "What is this girl's name?"

"Barbara."

"Does she have a last name?"

"Infante."

"I know a Tony Infante from 4th Street," said George.

Ron thought, who cares?

“Are her parents going to be at home?” said Marjorie.

“I don’t know,” said Ron. “I’m sure that they will be.” And then he was moving towards the door. He needed to get out of there. He slid on his shades as he bounced down the stairs. The evening air felt like freedom.

Chapter 24

Later that night Ron and Celeste lay in bed talking. They had mastered the art of having quiet sex and Angel was two floors away in her bedroom. Celeste had an intercom set up so that she could respond if Angel woke up.

They were facing each other and searching each other’s faces as they spoke.

“Life is going to change a lot in a couple of weeks,” said Ron.

Celeste felt a quiver in her stomach. “Because of work?”

“Yes, and coaching and then tutoring. I get very busy and we have to plan for it.”

“Will I ever see you?”

“Every day,” Ron blurted. “As long as we can find a way.”

“At least we’ll be able to talk on the phone, won’t we?”

“Every night,” said Ron. “I know this is going to sound screwy, but I don’t think that I could manage to get to sleep if I hadn’t spoken to you.”

Celeste felt her heart swell. She decided that she needed a job and maybe needed to go back to school. She was going to have to do something to work towards their goals and keep from sitting by the phone or listening for his squeaks.

Ron drove home at about two am. He was smiling and at the same time he was worried. Her family didn’t like him. His family wasn’t ready for her. Did they have any chance that things would work out for them? What about Angel? This wasn’t like having a girlfriend or even someone with whom he lived. This was like acquiring an instant family, most of which didn’t like him. It confused him.

When he got home, the phone was ringing. It was Celeste calling to say good night. Ron was tempted to tell her about the doubts that he was having but decided that it was a conversation that was better had in person.

Chapter 25

The party bored Ron and he wondered if there was someplace else that he wanted to be. The girls were pretty and were wearing makeup. Some had their hair teased up. Ron danced with Barbara Infante. It was a slow dance and he could feel the buds of her breasts pressing against him and the motion of her hips pressing against him and he knew it was going to happen and it did. He was sticking out against her. He was sure that she could feel it. He blushed with embarrassment.

When the dance ended he gulped down a paper cup's worth of fruit punch. It reminded him of the "bug juice" that they served on his one disastrous trip to camp. They had been on a hike and his asthma had kicked in and he had to be taken to the infirmary and the kids nicknamed him "wheezer" because of the sounds that came out of him when he tried to breathe. Marjorie and Rocky had come for him the next day, and he was able to sneak into his cabin while the other kids were at the lake. He was able to pack his things and slip out and never see any of them again.

It wasn't like that here. If you made a fool of yourself, it followed you forever. He was pretty sure that his erection had gone unnoticed. Barbara Infante was whispering to her friend Carol that she had felt his thing get hard while they were dancing. Ron heard the girls giggle and his entire body stiffened.

He and Richie and Phillip and Dennis walked together after the party. They were talking about how boring it was and how they hated having adults watch them like they were swimming in a fishbowl.

Ron blurted, "Do you think Barbara likes me?"

When he heard the laughter from his friends he knew that he had done one of those stupid things that just wasn't going to go away.

"So, you're in love with Barbara Infante," said Richie.

“No,” said Ron.

“Why did you ask that?” said Phillip.

Ron stammered. He was glad that it was dark and they couldn't see the way that he was blushing. “I don't know.”

They laughed again. This was just getting worse.

“Want me to ask her if she likes you?” said Dennis.

“Maybe we should all ask her,” said Richie.

When Ron got home, his mother said, “Ronald you are eleven years old.”

“I know,” said Ron.

“Ten-thirty is far too late to be coming home for an eleven year old boy.”

“It's because I have to walk so much further than the other kids do,” said Ron.

“Then plan ahead,” said George. He had been drinking. Ron could tell from the red bloat of his face and the smell of beer. His father told him that fools got drunk. Ron thought, right again Dad.

Ron didn't answer. He wasn't going to give George the satisfaction of answering him.

“Did you have a good time?” said Marjorie.

“Up until now,” snapped Ron before he thought about it.

“What this kid needs is a good beating,” said George.

Ron snapped again. It was like his mouth was no longer attached to his brain. “Not from you.”

George got up. Marjorie screamed, “George don't.”

“Go ahead,” said Ron. “I'll tell my father.”

“You think I'm afraid of Harry Tuck?”

“Say it to his face,” said Ron.

Marjorie began to cry.

Chapter 26

Before Ron had known Robin and before he had known Zoe, he'd been with Julie. She had long straight dark hair. She loved Marjorie. They had a bond. When Ron left her, Marjorie had cried but then she had written and over the years she learned that Julie had won an award for being a reporter in Texas. She'd gotten a promotion to a station in Windsor Canada that broadcasted into Detroit.

Marjorie wrote, "Ronald is making a terrible mistake and I think that you are the only one who can save him. I know that he loves you and that you have never wanted anything but what was best for the both of you. I want you to come here. I've always wanted to embrace you like my daughter."

When Julie got the message, she stared at it for a long time. Did Marjorie know that she had a daughter now? What was she asking her to do? She looked over at her sleeping child and felt a pang. She had dreamed more than once that it was Ron's child, but she knew that it wasn't. In the final analysis, he just hadn't wanted her.

Maybe he would now? Maybe the years and the experiences had changed him. Maybe he was ready. If he was, she was too. She felt a fire inside of her when she thought about him. He was unabashed. She felt that tingle between her legs and cursed her pussy. Except that her vagina had produced her daughter. It wasn't all bad. And if he saw her daughter and met her, he would be captivated. That was how he was and she knew it. But why was Marjorie so insistent and what was this mistake? It could only be another woman who was not Robin. Marjorie wouldn't have written if it was Robin. She'd sent her into that battle before and hugged her after she was bruised and cut from previous skirmishes. Most of all, Marjorie knew that Julie couldn't win. She wouldn't do that to her again. She picked up the phone and dialed Marjorie's number.

"Marge, it's Julie."

"I'm so glad that you called."

"What's wrong?"

"He wants to get married."

“To who?”

“Some Italian girl that he hardly knows.”

“Why?”

“I think that he feels like time is passing him by, and he wants to start a real life.”

“I think that we all get that way sometimes,” said Julie.

“Do you still love him?”

“Yes.”

“After all this time and everything that he’s done?”

“I know I sound stupid Marjorie, but yes.”

“Then you’d better get out here.”

“How can I do that? I have no reason.”

“It’s going to be George’s birthday and you’re invited.”

“This is the last time that I’m going to do anything like this,” said Julie.

“It should be,” said Marjorie.

It was easy for Julie to schedule a flight. Her Dad was a pilot and she had a card that allowed her to fly for the price of the tax. Newark Airport was a hub. She thought about how she met Ron and the roller coaster that had been their relationship. She had been taking a summer course at the local community college when they met. By the time the fall began, they were an item and spent each weekend together. One weekend he would drive up to her college and spend the nights in her dorm room and the other she would drive down to his house and stay in his room. That was when she grew close with Marjorie. They played with each other’s hair. They shared secrets. Marjorie told Ron that as long as he was on the couch when she woke up in the morning that she wouldn’t give him a hard time. She stopped walking into Ron’s room without knocking on the door. He introduced Julie to Chris and Lauren and the four of them went places together. She gave him a guitar and he played it horribly. She smiled and grimaced at the same time thinking about the way that he abused that poor

guitar. Then she remembered the feel of his hands and the incredibly long eye lashes that he had. She pictured the broadness of his shoulders and smiled. Warren Lashly had been the death of them. Maybe that was unfair but she had grown to hate Warren and his interrogations. She hated the way that Ron looked up to him and let Lashly's words and ideas become his guiding principles.

Then she met Jeff. He went to her school and she began sleeping with him during the week. He knew about Ron but didn't care. He managed the radio station and there were plenty of girls that he could have. If she wanted her shift to be regular, she knew what he expected. She brought Ron to the radio station and instantly the two young men took a dislike to each other. Ron had gone with her into Manhattan when she was getting her 3rd class broadcaster's license. He quizzed her on the train ride in and then decided to take the test as well. It had amazed her that he passed and she let him talk on the air during her show.

Then they drifted. Every weekend became every other weekend and then it was one weekend a month and then he was gone. It had been tearful but she was relieved. She felt it was coming.

Years later he came to see her while she was doing news updates on the AM dial. She was lonely and he felt so good. He was working in a jail trying to teach kids to read and write, and she had just been named woman broadcaster of the year for a ten part series that she'd done on women in Texas. When he left, she cried and decided that their timing was just so bad that it just wasn't going to work. Now they were in their 30's and she knew that she looked good. It was time. She had a failed marriage and a daughter and he had been ripped apart by a relationship with a woman who enjoyed watching him suffer. She could see where that could become addictive.

Chapter 27

What actually happened was Phillip confided to Carol that Ron wanted to know if Barbara liked him.

Carol scrunched up her face and said, "I don't think so but I'll ask her."

Among the girls it was known that Barbara really liked Richie, but that wasn't something that she would share with a boy. It would be a betrayal that would make Barbara her enemy forever.

When she told Barbara, the girl let out one of her patented, "Eww's"

Carol giggled. "Well you did say that his thing got all excited."

"Exactly," said Barbara.

The girls giggled again. Then a thought struck Barbara. "He sits right next to me. How am I going to look at him?"

"And not get his thing excited?" teased Carol.

"I'm serious, Carol. How am I supposed to look at him now and read his sloppy papers?"

"How bad are they?"

"The answers are mostly right and he studies but he writes like he is using some kind of tool and needs to cut the words into the paper."

"In other words, he's rough and careless?"

"Yes."

"Maybe he's just nervous," said Carol. "Being the new kid and those rumors about him and then he broke Richie's nose."

"Did you know that he doesn't know how to ride a bike?"

"You're kidding!" said Carol.

"Nope, Richie told me that the guys all made fun about him because of it."

Carol felt sorry for Ron but she could understand why Barbara didn't want to be linked to him.

During the next day of classes, Barbara was careful not to look at him. He seemed oblivious. That angered her. She wanted him to look at her so that she could ignore him, but he didn't seem to care. She thought of passing him a note

that read, I don't like you. Leave me alone. But he was leaving her alone and the note would look stupid.

All Ron was able to think about was how much he hated George. His mother had punished him for his outburst and he hadn't been allowed to go out of the house the next day. He just stayed in his room and read. He came out for dinner and ate without saying anything. He helped to clean up and then he was back in his room.

Ron was wallowing in his reverie of hostility when he heard his name. He looked up to see the faces of the kids in the class turned in his direction. Mary Salvatore was coming down the aisle in his direction.

"So nice of you to join us, Mr. Tuck. May I see what you have been so absorbed with that you didn't hear me call on you twice?" She picked up the book that was on his desk. It was the same book that they were all reading from and there wasn't anything hidden in it but he was two pages behind. She stared hard at him. "So you've been daydreaming. Would you like to share what you were daydreaming about with everyone?"

"No, Sister."

"Do you find what we are doing here so boring that you are unable to concentrate?"

"No, Sister."

"That's good. Then you'll be happy to stand up and read for us."

Carol wrote a quick note and passed it to Phillip. "Maybe he's thinking about Barbara." They both grinned.

Ron stood and read flawlessly. It was written in children's language. It retold the story of the Prodigal Son. Ron almost stopped and asked if would be ok if he read it from an actual bible, but he knew that he was being reprimanded for not paying attention. It was time for him to learn how to make things easier on himself. Hadn't his mother done that when she married George? At least, wasn't that what she thought that she doing?

That night at dinner Ron announced, "I want to convert to being a Catholic."

Marjorie looked stunned. George didn't react. He was born Catholic. He was staying that way. That's what you were supposed to do. You looked at your plate saw what was there and ate it without complaining.

"And just when did you decide this?"

"While I was walking home," said Ron.

"Your grand-mother would turn over in her grave."

"You're the one who made me go to that school. It's not my fault."

"You know very well why you were sent to that school, Ronald. Would you have rathered that I let them send you to a reformatory?"

"Well, now I want to be a Catholic."

"Do we have to have these conversations at dinner?" said George.

Marjorie took the opportunity to turn on him. "When would suggest that we have them? Whenever anyone starts talking about anything that has any importance, you get up and walk away. Maybe he figures that as long as there is food, at least you'll stay and listen." Then she turned back to Ron. "You're not becoming a Catholic. You were born a Protestant. You were raised a Protestant and that's how it's going to stay."

"No it isn't, Mom. We have freedom of religion in this country."

"I don't know what's happening to you," she said staring into his eyes. "You used to be such a nice boy."

"Look where that got me."

"Why are you doing this to me? Why do you need to hurt me?"

"You said that I should think for myself and that's what I'm doing."

Marjorie hated it when he gave her that look and sounded like his father.

Chapter 28

Ron tried to be cheerful as he drove Celeste and Angel down to meet Marjorie and George for the first time, but he had a sense that it might be tense. Celeste was nervous about it. They had waited a while, but things were moving quickly now. It was hard to realize that she had only been with him for a little over two weeks. It seemed so much longer.

The plan was for dinner in the backyard and the weather was cooperating. It was a mild evening with a light breeze. Maybe that was an omen that everything was going to be ok, thought Ron.

Marjorie had cooked and the kitchen was very warm. She was sweating and she blamed it on Ron and this girl, whoever she was. He still had his key to the house, but it didn't seem right to use it on this occasion. He walked up to the front door with Angel in his left arm. Her hands were around his neck as he rang the doorbell. George came to the door. Dandy barked. Angel tensed. Celeste said, "I didn't know your mom had a dog"

George opened to the door and said, "You forget your key?"

Ron shrugged. "George, this is Celeste and this is Angel."

"Nice to meet you," said George smiling.

They walked down the hall next to the flight of stairs that led up to the second floor apartment. In the dark blocking the side door that was never used, Ron glanced down at his Aunt's old record player. He missed her and sure could have used her help tonight.

"They're here," announced George as they walked into the dining room that had once been their bedroom when Ron still lived there. Marjorie came out of the kitchen and smiled politely.

"Mom, this is Celeste and this is Angel."

The sight of the little girl in his arms made Marjorie want to cry. "Well, it's nice to finally meet you, Celeste." Marjorie tried not to look at Angel who was waiting to be greeted and made a fuss over.

“I’m happy to meet you too,” said Celeste, noticing that neither one of them had said anything to Angel, who did not want Ron to put her down.

“We should go out into the yard. It’s too hot in this kitchen,” said Marjorie. She picked up her cigarettes and led them out the back door.

Celeste glanced around. It was a large kitchen, the kind that she loved. She could see immediately that a lot of time was spent there. They walked out into a backyard that was good sized, long and more narrow than hers was. Marjorie sat down at redwood table and lit a cigarette. Then she said, “Ron, would you go into the kitchen and get my Crystal Lite?”

“Sure.” Ron handed Angel to Celeste.

“Would you like something to drink, Angel?” said Marjorie.

Angel felt shy and a little frightened of the white dog who was energetically wagging his tail and wanting to play. She didn’t answer for a moment and then said, “No, thank you.”

“Oh you do know how to talk?” said Marjorie smiling. Celeste wasn’t sure that’s he liked the comment, but knew that Marjorie would find out soon enough how well-spoken Angel was.

“That’s a great tree,” said Celeste, looking at the massive oak that shaded the entire yard.

“It’s been here longer than we have,” said Marjorie.

Ron came back with his mother’s glass of ice tea in one hand and a pitcher of the stuff in his other. He set them down and said to Angel, “Watch this.”

He picked up a beach ball that was lying on the grass and Dandy barked and wagged his fluffy tail furiously. Ron tossed the ball to Dandy who perfectly head butted it back up into Ron’s hands. Angel giggled and said, “Make him do it again.”

Ron happily obliged as they all watched and Marjorie smoked. He was showing off for them. It was cute but she hated it.

“Would you like some Crystal Lite before dinner?” said Marjorie, looking at Celeste.

“Thank you.” Celeste put Angel down and reached for the pitcher but Angel clung hard to her back and Celeste dropped the glass. It spread across the tablecloth that Marjorie had laid out. George got up and hurried into the house for some paper towels. “I’m sorry,” said Celeste. “I guess she’s a little nervous.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” said Marjorie in a tone that implied that there was. The Crystal Lite had almost reached the stack of paper plates, when George came out with a roll of paper towels. “Hurry up! We don’t want it to ruin them too.” George caught it in time. Ron dropped the ball and came over to the table. Angel clung to Celeste. Dandy followed him eagerly. Ron picked up the stack of plates as George wiped the table.

“You’ll have to wipe it down with a sponge,” said Marjorie. “Otherwise it will be a sticky mess.”

“I’ll get it,” said Ron.

Celeste wondered if they could just leave and come back again like this never happened. She said, “What a way to make an impression.”

Marjorie said, “Well, let’s eat.”

It took several trips in and out the backdoor to carry out the bowls and platter. George and Ron and Marjorie made the trips. Celeste sat there wanting to help but Angel was back in her arms. She wasn’t used to not helping.

“I made one of your favorites,” said Marjorie.

Ron smiled at the platter of pork chops mixed with sauerkraut and potatoes. “Did you use Aunt Dottie’s pot?”

“Of course I did. It won’t be as good as hers was though.”

Chapter 29

Ron stayed after school the next day and asked Sister Mary Salvatore what he should do if he was interested in converting. She looked very surprised and pleased.

“This is an important decision Ronald. Are you sure that it is what you want?”

“I’m pretty sure.”

“Why is it what you want?”

That was a good question and Ron wasn’t sure how to answer. He thought for a moment. Suppose he said the wrong thing and they wouldn’t let him. “This Church goes back to the time of Jesus,” said Ron. “It’s the religion that he wanted.”

“Well that’s a good reason. Is it your only reason?”

Ron decided that he would tell this nun the truth. “No, but it’s my best one.”

“What are your other reasons?”

“The Church I used to go to closed. I really don’t feel like I have a church now and I don’t think that’s good for me.”

“You don’t go to church at all anymore?” The nun looked concerned. No wonder he had gotten into trouble.

“At Christmas time and at Easter. That’s pretty much it.”

“Is there any other reason?” the nun probed.

Ron sighed. “I want to fit in.”

“That’s the first reason that you’ve mentioned that isn’t a good one. But you knew that already, didn’t you?”

“Yes, Sister.”

“Have you spoken to your mother about this and your father?”

“I told my mother.”

“Does she support your choice?”

“She’ll get used to it.”

“Have you told your father?”

“Not yet.”

“May I ask why?”

“I don’t see him very much anymore. He plays golf now, and sometimes he forgets to come and pick me up.”

“Don’t you think that you should tell him?”

“To be honest Sister, I don’t think he’ll care. He’s not a religious man. He’ll say that I should do what I think I should do.”

“I’ll set up an appointment at the rectory for you Ronald.”

Chapter 30

After the dinner during which Angel pissed Marjorie off by being clingy with both Ron and Celeste, Marjorie caught Ron in the kitchen and said, “This girl isn’t for you.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Didn’t you learn from happened to me?” she said flatly.

“I learned,” said Ron. “I learned not to believe people’s promises. Is that how you want me to go through life, not trusting anyone?”

“I’m just saying that I know you better than anyone, and I telling you that you can do better than this.”

“It isn’t a contest, Mom.”

“Don’t pretend that you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“I love her and that’s what matters to me. She loves me as well.”

“She’s desperate and you’re her way out.”

“That’s unfair.”

“I might as well tell you now then. I’ve invited Julie to come to George’s birthday party.”

Ron was stunned. He hadn’t spoken to Julie in years. He didn’t even know where she was and he surely didn’t know that his mother was in touch with her. “That’s great Mom. I’m bringing Celeste.”

“Julie is a nice girl who cares about you.”

“Just stop it, OK?”

“Sure, I’ll just sit by and watch my only son ruin his life.”

Ron went out the back door and found Celeste sitting with Angel in her arms. She looked nervous and Angel looked sleepy.

His mother followed him out the door and Ron said, “I think we are going to get going. Angel needs to have a bath and she’s getting sleepy.”

“Do what you want,” said Marjorie. “You will anyway.”

George said, “It was nice to meet you, Celeste. I hope that I see you at my birthday party.”

Marjorie looked at George like she wanted to spit on him. Ron decided that a quick exit was in order. Celeste thanked Marjorie for having her and Angel to dinner.

“I’m sure we’ll get to know each other sooner or later,” said Marjorie.

Chapter 31

The next day Ron was sent out of class and told to report to the principal's office. This was never a good sign but Ron was pretty sure that he hadn't done anything wrong. Sister Wilma Delores smiled broadly when she saw him.

"Ronald, Father Joyce is waiting to see you over at the rectory. Don't be nervous and just tell him what you told Sister Mary Salvatore."

Ron rang the bell and waited outside of the rectory. It was a long wait and he was unsure if the bell had rung or if he should ring it again. If he rang it again they might think that he was pushy and lacked patience. If he didn't ring it again, he might just be standing here while the priest was inside waiting for him to appear. He rang it again. He could see motion through the small window in the center of the door.

Father Richard Joyce was disappointed by Ron's age and size. Ron was almost as tall as he was and the priest did not get that powerful rush that he felt when he looked down at smaller, younger boys. A convert was a convert though.

"It's my understanding that you have an interest in Catholicism," said Father Joyce.

"Yes, I do Father,"

"And how did this interest arise?"

"I attend the grammar school."

"What is your current religion?"

"I'm Protestant."

"Which denomination?"

"Well I was Presbyterian, but my church closed and so I attended a Reformed Lutheran church for a while because it was the only one that I could get to."

"Your parents didn't attend with you?"

"No, Father."

"And why was that?"

“My parents are divorced, Father.” Ron hated the endless repetition of this litany. He hated the way that people looked at him with baleful eyes after he said it. Joyce’s eyes and face showed no expression, except for a hint of disapproval.

“And how did you come to attend Our Lady of the Forlorn’s grammar school?” Joyce of course knew the answer to this question but he wanted to make the boy describe it.

“My mother got me admitted,” said Ron. He didn’t want to go through it again and was taking the chance that it was just one of the questions on the list and that Joyce really didn’t care about his answers.

“Why did your mother, a non-practicing Protestant, want you in a religious school?”

Anger flashed through Ron. He’s going to make me say it, he thought.

“I got into some trouble, Father and the police thought that it would be best if I didn’t attend Broadway Junior High.”

“Were you arrested?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You don’t know?”

“No one said that I was under arrest.”

“What had you done?”

“I brought a knife to school.”

“Did you hurt anyone?”

“No Father.”

“Well, everyone makes mistakes Ronald.”

That was the first really kind thing that he’d said to him. Maybe the worst was over.

“Thank you, Father.”

“A boy your age would have already been confirmed and would have studied his religion extensively.”

“I have studied religion a lot.”

“The Catholic faith, Ronald.”

For a moment Ron’s pride was stung. Part of him wanted to say, go ahead ask me things. That wouldn’t be a good idea. Ron didn’t answer.

“You’ve read the bible haven’t you, Ronald?”

“Yes.”

“Knowing scripture isn’t a bad thing, but it really has very little to do with being a good Catholic.”

“First of all you have to convince me that you are sincere. Then we can do the study together.”

“How do I convince you of that?”

“First of all by being patient.”

“Yes Father.”

“Secondly you will come here this Saturday and each Saturday after that until I feel that you are ready to be baptized.”

“What time?”

Chapter 32

Ron left Celeste’s house early that evening. He didn’t rush his departure, but there was something he needed to do. He parked the car in front of his mother’s house. Again, for maybe the one thousandth time, he wished that his Aunt Dottie was still alive.

You only get so many guardian angels. She had been his. They had blood between them and there was an acceptance and a soul to their connection.

Ron opened the door with his key. Dandy barked. Marjorie and George were in the living room watching TV. His entrance startled her.

George was half in the bag.

“Ronald, I didn’t expect you.”

“Would another time be better?”

“She got up and said, “Come into the kitchen.”

The settled in their customary chairs. They gazed into each other’s eyes and there was that love, that honey sweet flow of love that a mother and child share, if only sometimes.

Ron spoke softly. “I want you to know that this thing with Celeste is serious. She’s going to become my wife. She’s the woman that I’ve chosen.”

“What about Robin?”

Ron was shocked that she said her name. “It didn’t work. We tried. She tried more than you know.”

“What about the mouse?”

Ron could not help a grin. She refused to stop calling Zoe that. “Too crazy,” said Ron. He thought a moment. “Maybe she just scared me.”

“Sometimes it’s right to be scared.”

“I’m not scared of Celeste or Angel.”

“You should be.”

“I’m going to do this. Please don’t make me fight you for it tooth and nail.”

“What about Julie?”

Ron said, “Why did you do that?”

“She’s a nice girl.”

“I know.”

“She loves you.”

“I know.”

Ron looked deep into her eyes. “You know the feeling that you had with Rocky, before it went bad?”

“Of course I do.”

“Robin was like my Harry Tuck.” Ron smiled. “We should have had a kid but we didn’t want one. We thought that the world was full and that we needed to learn to take care of those who were already here. It still wouldn’t have worked and there would be a child who needed protection and raising.”

“You’re breaking my heart,” said Marjorie.

“This little girl needs protection and care too. The bonus for me is that I’m in love with her mother.”

“She has a family. Why don’t you want a family of your own?”

“The way that I feel about her is very special. I’ve been in love.” Ron tried his best to speak as earnestly as he could. “This feels more real and stronger than anything I have ever felt.”

“You’re making a mistake,” said Marjorie. “Please listen to me. I know that you’re sincere. And I know that you are making a huge mistake.”

“How do you know?”

“I feel it”

“I don’t trust your feelings about this. I’m going to marry her.”

End of Part 1

Chapter 33

The heat baked the asphalt so hot that Ron could feel it radiating up through his sneakers. He walked across the parking lot and into the back door of the school. It was the team entrance and opened into a low slightly darkened narrow hallway. To his left was the door to the boys' locker room. Ron entered and walked through the empty room that soon enough would carry the sounds and the yearlong smell of perspiration soaked equipment and clothing of teen aged boys.

Steve Ferry was a bull of a man who did not seem to fit in the desk chair. He stood about six feet and three inches. He had a huge back and head that was covered with a baseball cap out of which stuck the ends of greyish white hair. He looked like he could pull a plow.

Laying on the worn couch that many people suspected was his only bed, Artie Harris looked up and opened his eyes at the sound of Ron's entrance. "Hey Crazy Ron is here. Now things will get lively."

Ron smiled. "Hiya, Artie. How was your summer?"

It was still the end of August but it was pretty much acknowledged that summer was over when practices began. There wouldn't be any more quiet mornings. No more endless days that could be filled any way that a person wanted to fill them.

Steve turned from the clipboard that had multiple sheets of paper with templates for designing football plays attached to it. "Ron, it's good to see you."

"Good to see you too Steve. How was your summer?"

"They get shorter all the time," said Steve.

Ron didn't really understand that and just nodded. "Where are we going to meet?"

Air conditioned rooms were at a premium on this side of the building, but Artie knew where they all were and Ron was pretty sure that he had scouted out a room and turned the air on so that it would be cool.

Artie said, "They put air in the teacher's room over the summer. That's a good spot."

Steve shook his head back and forth. "No chalkboard in there. We'll need one."

Artie looked crestfallen. There were no classrooms with air conditioners. Ron said, "We could bring in one or two of the rolling boards."

"Fine with me," said Steve, flicking his eyes over at the rotund and now happier Artie and then winking at Ron.

Ron and Steve were classroom teachers. They were not unaccustomed to oppressive heat. It didn't really bother them as much as it did people like Artie who roamed the halls searching for any place to cool off on a day like this. Classroom teachers had to be models for their students or else the complaining and moaning would never allow them to finish or start the school year. No one was really sure what Artie did. He worked around the school. That was it. He coached Hockey. He got up and waddled out to find the rolling chalkboards and bring them to the magnificently cooled teachers' lounge.

Larry Voila arrived just as Artie was leaving. They just nodded as they passed one another in the hall. Larry thought that Artie was bad to have around kids. Artie felt the same way about Larry.

Greetings exchanged. Ron was happy not to be working with Larry this year. Larry had gone to Steve complaining that Ron had undermined his authority last year. The truth was that Larry had never played the game and they all knew it. When he denied the freshman team water after a poor showing at a scrimmage, Ron had instinctively blown his whistle and called for a water break. It happened ten minutes after Larry said, "No, they've got to get tougher." Larry had stomped off the field like an angry child who had his toy taken away. He was even more humiliated when Steve moved Ron up to the varsity staff. Steve was always politely condescending to Larry, who never realized it.

When Paul Pamerteri arrived, they were ready to start. It was a meagre staff for the one hundred players that would be in the program. They settled in the teacher's lounge and drank cans of soda that Artie had pilfered from one of the soda machines for which he had a secret key.

Steve stood and passed out play books. "We need to go through it all," said Steve. "I made a lot of changes over the summer." Steve was a physics teacher and a farm boy. To him, football was purely a matter of leverage, angle, strength, speed and desire, but he did like to scheme. They would begin with the offense. This afternoon he would lecture on the defense. Tomorrow he would continue with the same pattern. The next day, his players would arrive and he would begin to see what he actually had.

Young men's bodies changed quickly. A boy could go away for the summer standing five foot seven and come back a few months later at having grown inches and thinned out considerably and be in need of bulking up. You had to actually see them before you truly knew what you had. That kind of change might necessitate the need for changes in the scheme. His team was going to be white and slow. He didn't expect a good year, but in his thirty-fifth year of coaching, his second after retiring from public school, taking a pension and coming to teach and coach here. It was just what he did. Besides, you could always be surprised.

Chapter 34

Ron knelt at the altar rail, opened his mouth and extended his tongue. His mouth was dry and the Communion wafer was dry. It felt a moment of panic as he walked back to his pew with his hands clasped and his eyes down. The wafer had stuck to the roof of his mouth. What was he supposed to do now? He couldn't reach in and scrape it off. He wasn't supposed to let his teeth touch it. He rubbed against it with his tongue and hoped that it would dislodge.

He wanted that magical feeling of having Jesus inside of him. When he had Communion in his former church they drank grape juice. It was made clear that this was a commemoration of what Christ had done. Ron knew about transubstantiation. This was really God that Ron had inside of him. His tongue couldn't get the wafer to move. His mind said, *Oh Fuck*. Then he panicked. He had sinned while the host was in his mouth. There might be a special place in hell for people who did that. Maybe he was the only one who had ever done it. Maybe God didn't realize. Another lightening thought hit him. He had just sinned again! God was supposed to know everything and here he was doubting Jesus who had bled every drop of his precious blood for him.

After Mass, Ron ran across the street to the candy store and bought a bottle of coke. He washed his Savior down with a long relished swallow. What a way to begin! Some first Communion he screamed at himself as he walked home alone.

George was spreading a dirty white rug across the living room floor of their apartment. Marjorie was watching him with a sick look on her face. It covered the hard wood floor that she loved with an ugly combination of white and stain. George contended that it would muffle the sound and that it was important to be considerate of the people downstairs.

Ron and Marjorie just stared at each other when he said it. They had lived in apartments all their lives. This was George's first experience.

"Where did you get this thing?" said Ron.

"This used to belong to Wobbles," said George proudly.

"Who's that?" said Ron.

George smirked at Ron's ignorance. "He's a friend of George's," said Marjorie glumly trying to be patient.

"He's probably the most important man in Newark and one of the most important men in the state," George explained.

"Never heard of him."

"You wouldn't," said George.

Marjorie stayed silent and Ron could see that she hated the thing. He said, "Why is he giving away his dirty rugs?"

"Maybe we can cover some of the stains with furniture," said Marjorie.

George looked up, exasperated. Each stain felt like a thorn stuck up his ass and these two were going to mention each and every one. "Do you know how expensive this rug was?"

"You bought this thing?" said Ron.

George turned redder. "I mean originally."

Chapter 35

Ron drove from the school to Celeste's house. Anna heard his squeaking approach and saw the delight that spread across Angel's face. Celeste got up and ran downstairs to change like a love sick school girl. What was happening to her house? He came and went like some storm that you could hear approaching and then had to clean up after.

Angel was running towards the picture window to look out. Anna waited in her chair at the kitchen table. She lifted her fly swatter and smacked it down at some imaginary bug. If only she could eliminate him the same way.

Before the doorbell rang Angel was pulling the door open. Ron scooped her up into his arms and kissed her. She squealed with delight.

Anna said, "Can't you do something about that squeaking?"

"I tried. They told me that old Fords get that way but that there was nothing wrong with the car. It isn't dangerous," he tried to reassure her.

Anna didn't answer. Danger wasn't the only consideration. It was embarrassing to have the neighbors hear the squeaks and say, "Oh, Ron's on his way." She wouldn't give him that satisfaction of saying that to him, but she had said it to Celeste.

Celeste hadn't cared. She opened the door to the basement and came into the dining room. She embraced Ron. They kissed softly. Anna scowled. They did that right in front of the baby. Who knew what else they had done in front of her.

"Would you like to go for ice cream and to feed the ducks after dinner," said Ron.

"Yes!" squealed Angel.

"You shouldn't tell her that before dinner," objected Anna. "Now she won't eat anything."

“If you want ice cream, you have to be a member of the clean plate club,” said Celeste.

“Ron already said that we could.”

“Well if Ron said,” Anna repeated bitterly staring at Celeste.

“Let’s go into the yard, “said Celeste.

Chapter 36

George took Ron to the Arrow Bar that afternoon. It was a place that he worked on the weekends and Ron hadn’t ever been there before. It was a long dark narrow place with a mahogany bar and some round tables set off opposite it. There was a group of men sitting around one of the tables and George lit up when he saw them. He left Ron standing at the bar. Ron’s eyes instinctively searched for the juke box or the pinball machine but he couldn’t find either. What kind of a joint was this?

The bartender was an old guy who wore an apron that swelled out over a large stomach. His beefy arms were partially covered by a long sleeve shirt that was turned up at the cuffs. “Ain’t nothing for you in here, kid.”

Ron didn’t answer. He gestured over at George who had his back to him and said, “I’m with him.”

“You’re with Father George?”

“Who?”

“George Bombasco. Around here everyone calls him Father George.”

“Why?”

“Just a nickname.”

“What’s it mean?”

“You better ask him.”

Ron had no intentions of asking George anything that he didn't have to ask him and decided to just let it go. The bartender saw an opportunity for a little fun.

"Hey, Father George, kid here wants to know how you got your nickname."

GimmeTwo laughed, "Because he was always preaching to everybody about how bad gambling was while he's making bets."

George flushed. It wasn't information that he wanted Ron to have. He knew that the kid would throw it up at him.

GimmeTwo waved Ron over. 'Come on over kid, let's get a look at you.'

Ron walked over hesitantly. There were four men at the table and George was standing facing them. He half turned as Ron walked over. "Everybody, this is my son, Ronald."

The shock of the words hit Ron like ice water being thrown into his face. They immobilized him. He had never once thought of himself as George's son and George had never said those words before. Then it hit him. It was for show. But if it was for show, did that mean that he was proud of him? He never acted in the least bit proud.

George said, "Ronald this is GimmeTwo," he stopped and looked confused, "I mean this is Mr. Rossi." Everyone at the table chuckled and George laughed with them.

Babootz said, "I want to see you remember my name."

Everyone laughed again.

George said, "Lemme think."

Babootz said, "Call me Babootz, Ronnie. These guys won't know who you are talking about if you call me Mr. Bontafacio."

"OK, Mr. Bontafacio," said Ron.

George said, "I never would have remembered it."

Ron thought that Babootz made him sound like some kind of monkey and wondered if his hairy body was the reason that he got the name. That wasn't a good question to ask.

Jimmy the Gigolo said, "Nice to meet you Ronnie. So, you're George's son?"

Ron felt trapped. If he said no it would seem like he was contradicting George and instinctively he knew that contradiction was either ball busting or an insult. Now the table was staring at him, waiting for him to respond. Saying yes would be betraying his dad. For the first time in his life he said, "I'm his stepson." He felt nausea sweep over him when he said it.

George said, "This is Jimmy the Gigolo." He was smiling. Ron hadn't let him down or said anything smart-assed.

"Good to meet you, Mr. Gigolo."

The table burst out in raucous laughter. Ron didn't know why.

"Just Jimmy will be fine, Ronnie."

Now Ron was confused again. He had been taught that it was impolite to address adults by their first name. "OK." It wasn't like he was ever going to be seeing very much of these men.

Now they were all having fun with this little game. A man with diamond rings on each of his pinkies said, "My name is easy. I'm just Whitey."

Ron smiled. "Like Whitey Ford."

The table exploded again. Whitey had earned his name by betting a bundle against Ford twice during the 1955 World Series. He'd lost both times.

"Yeah," said Whitey, shaking his head with a self-deprecating grin, "just like him."

"You want a soda, Ronnie?"

George spoke up and said, "Nah, we got to go. His mother will be worried."

"She afraid that you're taking him to the track, Father George?"

Ron could have used the soda but he was happy that they were leaving.

Chapter 37

Ferry lectured endlessly and Ron could tell that that Artie was having a hard time staying awake. He drank soda after soda and kept wiping his face with his hands. Larry pretended to understand and took lots of notes so that he could parrot back Steve Ferry's words and sound like he knew what he was talking about. Paul did understand. He's been a quarterback who was fast and smart. He's just been too short and slow to play college ball.

It was the second afternoon and Ferry was talking defense. He was really talking about reads. His belief was that you could only coach the first couple of steps of a play on defense. It was read and react. He didn't have the talent for an attack defense, at least he didn't think he did. Ferry was talking about the strong side safety in a four/four alignment. The middle defensive back would always shade to the opponent's tight end side. "This man has an excellent view of the field and can see how the play is starting to develop. He watches the strong side guard and if he pulls to the right," Steve stopped and positioned himself in front of them with his knees bent and his hands in front of him elbows crooked. He moved his left foot forward and gave his body a quarter turn. "This is his first step. Now, if he sees the wide receiver release towards the middle of the field, he squares up and plays football from here. If that receiver tries to come towards him, he needs to be ready to cover or deflect a block, but he can't lose sight of what's happening in the backfield. This man is our last line of defense and no one is to get in back of him."

Ron thought you could draw things up this way, but when you were on the field, you had to let your instincts take over. Sometimes you just knew what was going to happen. You couldn't stop and think about all these things. You'd be standing there when the play flew by you.

Ferry looked at Ron's face like he was reading his mind. "We have to train his instincts by doing it over and over in practice so that he no longer thinks about it."

Ron and Paul nodded. Larry wrote down *...train his instincts*. Artie yawned and said, "I gotta take a leak."

Ron stood up. He wanted a cigarette. Steve said, "I think we're about done. Tomorrow, Ron, you take shoulder pads,"

Ron nodded.

"Artie, you handle girdles."

"Paul, you and I will do helmets."

"You got it," said Paul.

Steve said, "I want you to lay aside about ten of the new ones. I don't want the bench riders who are seniors to gobble them up. When we're all done we'll see what we have left and swap out some of the better helmets to the younger kids who will be on the field."

All of the coaches nodded. They were interested again. This endless lecture was actually coming to an end.

"Larry, you handle pants and practice jerseys. Make sure they fit tight. Nothing looks worse than a football player with a saggy ass."

Larry beamed. He didn't realize that Ferry had given him the one area that did not include any real equipment. It had the least to do with football aside from the entertainment factor when the new players sometimes put in their thigh pads upside down. Everyone was sure that Larry had learned the correct way to insert a thigh-pad by now.

Out in the parking lot, Ron talked with Paul Pamenteri. "How's married life?" said Ron.

Paul beamed. "Paula is pregnant. It's a boy."

"How do you know?"

"There's this test."

Ron grinned. He liked Paul and the rep among the students was that Mr. Pamenteri was ok. He didn't rat kids out unnecessarily like it was a search and destroy mission, but he was smart enough to define boundaries. Ron was in the process of doing that but this was just his second year.

Perpetual Hope was a strange school in an affluent area of a wealthy county that was a combination bedroom community for New York City and wealthy people who had made small fortunes in New Jersey. If they were Catholic, they enjoyed the status of sending their sons to private school. It would be necessary that the level of education at the private school be above average. There had to be some success with sports. The tuition was not a factor, unless expectations weren't met.

Paul was from Paterson. Now he lived in Totowa. He was a history teacher who Ron had been told took it seriously and tried to get his students to see concepts in history, not just dates and names.

Ron said, "They gave me an honors class."

"Hey Ron?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I tell you something without you saying anything before the announcement?"

"Sure."

"They're expanding the Guidance Department, and I'm in."

"Is that what you wanted?"

"Yeah, I'm taking classes at William Paterson and getting my guidance certificate and now I'll have the credentials and the experience to move over to a public school."

"That's what you want?"

"Ron, I got a wife and a kid on the way. I can't work for peanuts anymore."

"That makes sense," said Ron. His brain was grasping at it. "So how many games do you think we win this year?"

Paul laughed. "Maybe three."

Chapter 38

The apartment building where George, Marjorie and Ron lived was shaped like a U with a center court entrance. There were shrubs that grew on a dirt island and along the inner sides of the building. There was a backyard but it was dingy and littered with broken glass and very little grew there. But next door was a vacant lot where someone had planted grass at one time.

Then a Baptist Church bought it and mowed the grass. Now it was a perfect football field. Ron played with guys that he met from the Boys Club. It was before he had ever experienced an injury and the game showed him at his best. He played with abandon and fury. They would have games until it was too dark to see and then they would wander home tired, spent and dirty.

Tina Poleski used to watch them from the window in her room and when she saw that the game was breaking up, she would comb her hair out and run downstairs to be sitting on the steps when Ron came home.

“Hi, Ronnie.”

“Hi, Tina.”

“Was it a good game?”

“Yeah.”

“Ronnie, would you do me a favor?”

“Sure, if I can.”

“There’s a place in the backyard that frightens me. Would you take me there?”

“Why?”

“So I won’t be frightened of it anymore.”

They got up and walked around the side of the building and then opened the low chain link fence that led into the backyard. Tina reached out for Ron’s hand and he took it. As they were walking along the concrete pathway, a window opened.

“Tina Poleski, I told you that the next time that I caught you back here with a boy after dark that I was telling your mother. And that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Tina whispered, “Oh shit” to Ron and then called up. “Mrs. Kresge, we weren’t doing anything. We were just going in the back way.”

“Don’t give me that nonsense. Tina you’re a little liar. Does that boy even live in this building?”

“Hello, Mrs. Kresge. It’s Ronald Tuck.”

“Ronald, your mother is going to hear about this!”

“Hear about what? Tina asked me if I would show her something.”

“I’ll bet she did.”

Tina whispered, “I’d love to see it.”

Ron blushed. “We’re leaving Mrs. Kresge. Nothing to worry about.”

They both heard the window slam down.

“Would you show it to me, sometime, Ronnie?” Ron blushed again. “I’ll bet it gets really hard and big.”

“We’d better go inside,” said Ron.

That night Ron lay in bed masturbating to Tina’s words over and over again. He would hear them in his head like a record that was stuck in a groove saying, “I’ll bet it gets really hard and big.” It was the first time a girl had ever said anything like that to him before.

Chapter 39

The first day of real practice was a scorcher. They baked in the sun and Ferry ended the practice session early when he saw that some of his players were starting to wobble on their feet. There would be a two hour break before they

would start again. Ferry reminded them that they had to shower, they had to drink a lot of fluids but they should try not to gulp mass quantities down.

When they got into the coaches' office, Artie peeled off his outer shirt revealing a Mizuna that was made of a rubberized material that didn't breathe. He lifted it and several ounces of gathered perspiration splashed down onto the floor.

"That's disgusting Artie," said Paul.

Artie laughed.

Ferry gave him a disapproving look and said, "Either do that outside or in the shower room. Artie pulled the shirt up over his head and several more ounces of sweat splashed down onto the floor. Ferry raised his tone. "I'm not fucking around Artie. Do that again and I won't allow you back in here."

Artie Ferris slunk away.

Larry said, "Someone should tell Brother Ward about how disgusting that man is."

The room grew silent. Larry Viola was actually saying that he was going to do it and they all understood that immediately.

Steve Ferry said, "It won't be you. I'll speak to Artie. Housebreak him a little better but coaches don't squeal on each other Larry. There's a code. And nobody works better with the grunts up front than he does."

Paul added, "Artie's alright. He just doesn't have any manners."

"He lives in a cave," said Larry.

Steve said, "Ron, this afternoon, I want you to take the d-backs under those trees at the other end of the field and work the reaction to ball drill when we break off into groups."

"Shorts and helmets?" said Ron.

"Yeah, I think so. It's just too damn hot. Paul, how's the wing?"

"It's fine, said Paul. He rotated his arm up over his head and stretched it until he could touch the center of his back.

“Do some throwing with the qb’s and the ends. We’re going to be running a lot of crossing patterns and they have to learn how to lead the receiver and not telegraph where the ball is going.”

Paul nodded but he knew that it was probably beyond the quarterbacks that they had to be doing this kind of work this soon.

“I want you to set up the slap drill, Larry. Wait. We can’t run that one in shorts and helmets. Nevermind. Let me think about it and we’ll save that for tomorrow.”

“Whatever you want, coach.”

“I’m going to have the team report at 8 am. Maybe we should scrap the afternoon practice and try to do one long session that starts before it gets so miserable out.”

The coaches grinned.

Steve Ferry could do whatever he wanted to do with their schedules, but this sounded like an unexpected afternoon off in the precious dwindling days before classes started. Artie was waddling back into the offices naked. “Put something on,” shouted Ferry. “Anyone can come down here.”

Chapter 40

Ron drove home late. He was too tired to eat. He just wanted to peel off his clothes and crawl into bed in his tiny air conditioned bedroom that had a folding door to separate it from the living room and a sheet that was tacked over the entry to the living room to keep the cool air consolidated.

He’d wanted to run and tried to tell himself that he would gain energy from a run, but his body had whimpered back its response. He needed to call it a day. He stripped and climbed into bed and brought the phone with him for company. He dialed her number and closed his eyes.

“Hello?”

“Hi.”

They felt the mutual smile through the connection. “Did you have dinner?” said Celeste.

“I’ll have breakfast,” said Ron. He felt her wanting to feed him through the phone. “I was surprised. Ferry said we were going to send the kids home today after one session, then he sprung on us that we needed this marathon film session.”

“Are you exhausted?”

“Yeah. Listen I want to talk to you about something.”

“OK.”

“We’re going to need more money to live than we have.”

“I need to go to work,” said Celeste.

“What about Angel?”

“If I could get something part-time, there’s a day care center at the Community College.”

“How is that news going to be received?”

“Things are going to change,” said Celeste.

“That’s an understatement,” said Ron.

They giggled a mutual laugh that was more of a coo. Ron felt himself relax into the feel of her. The silence was warm as the night air.

He added. “After football, I’m going to take on a Forensics Team and between that and tutoring, I’ll make more.”

“We’ll have enough,” said Celeste. “We don’t need that much.”

Ron wasn’t sure that he liked the sound of that completely. He hadn’t given a lot of thought to money since he had worked at Our Lady of the Forlorn that first year and that summer had to live on Swiss cheese and pasta. He’d drunk tap water because he couldn’t afford coffee. He’d even tried flavoring it with

condiments that he'd picked up at his mother's house. He hadn't liked feeling poor. It brought back hot memories that he needed to push away.

"I wish that I was there with you," he said.

There was silence.

Celeste answered, "If you spent the night here, you'd be closer to work in the morning.

Energy that he didn't know that he had, surged in him. "You think it would be ok?"

"I'll make it ok," said Celeste.

Chapter 41

Marjorie was tight lipped when she and George told Ron that there was going to be a baby. She tried to smile but Ron could see that her heart wasn't in it. George didn't know that though. He was worried about money. His gambling debts had worsened since he had the added expenses that came with not living at home. It was true that Marjorie earned a good salary for a woman. But each Thursday, George forked over half of his paycheck from the printing company to the two guys that showed up and were friendly enough but wanted to be paid.

"Who are these guys?" said Ron.

"They're friends of George's."

"They don't look like friends."

"You're better off not knowing some things Ronald."

Ron felt stung. "Since when?"

Marjorie was at her wits end. She had already taken out two finance company loans. She couldn't get a third. He had promised her twice that he was done gambling. Each time he had lied. Each time he'd promised that it would be

the last time. Ron had listened to these late night confessions while they thought that he was sleep.

“I don’t know what to do, Margie. I just can’t seem to stop.”

“Don’t you care about anybody but yourself?”

“That’s not it.”

“It must be the case. Otherwise you wouldn’t do this to me.”

George said, “What about the other bankbook?”

Marjorie looked at him in shocked disbelief. “You can’t be serious. I’ve never touched that. Not even when we didn’t have the rent. It’s not my money.”

Ron knew what they were talking about now. When he was in second grade, they had begun a bank savings program in his school. Whenever he was given any money for birthdays or holidays, at least half of it went into the bank. His mother kept it for him. He didn’t know how much was there.

“We could use it to get out from under this,” said George.

“George, the two of you don’t get along. How can I ask him for this?”

“You don’t ask him, you tell him.”

“You don’t understand. You don’t know what it used to be like between him and me. I can’t just tell him.”

“If I miss a payment, you know what will happen.”

“They aren’t going to damage someone who pays George. That wouldn’t be good business. You know these guys most of your life.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said George morosely.

Two days later, Marjorie told Ron what she needed to do. She had gone to see Vinnie Caputo, the shy. He tallied up George’s number for her. In addition to the one thousand dollar loan that they had at each of the finance companies, George was into Vinnie for fifteen hundred more. Ron’s bankbook could wipe that out. The vig was ten percent of the balance each week. That meant that on the fifteen hundred dollars, George was paying one hundred and fifty dollar a week in

interest. It had to stop. The numbers would never allow them to climb out from under and George would keep dreaming for that big hit that would make everything even.

“If I pay it off, will you promise not to loan him anymore money?”

“I really can’t do that, Marjorie. George is a friend.”

The irony of this would not allow her to hold her tongue. “Is this what a friend does? What kind of a person ruins his friend’s life?”

Vinnie the Shy was a short squat man with salt and pepper hair. They were Caruso’s Ristorante. As a silent partner, Vinnie owned half of the place. It gave him a declarable income and a spot to do business. Marjorie sat in front of her cold cup of coffee thinking that none of these places knew how to make a good cup of coffee. She stared up at Vinnie the Shy. “If you loan him anymore money, I’ll leave him.”

“That’s none of my business,” said Vinnie.

For two days Marjorie agonized about what to do. She was sick in the mornings now. It was an effort to get herself to work each day, but George said that it would pass and that she would feel better soon.

“Ronald, I need a favor.”

“Sure.” He knew it was coming. He had heard the conversation. He could read the resolute look on her face.

“George and I need to borrow the money in your bankbook.” She said it flatly. She had forced the words out. She hadn’t wanted to say them but here it was and now she had said it. “I’ll make sure that you get it back,” she added.

Ron felt the anger rise up in him that George wasn’t even there. He’d left this shitty job to his mother. “Just take it,” said Ron.

“Ronald, I’m sorry.”

“It isn’t you. I know that.”

“Yes, it is. It’s me here asking you.”

“It’s your money Mom. There wouldn’t be a me without you.”

“Would you like to go and visit Aunt Dottie? See if any of your old friends are around?”

“Sure. When?”

“Let’s go now.”

From the appearance of the way that her life was now, a person who didn’t know would not think that Dorothy Thomas had any important friends. Sure she dolled up in her minks and diamonds on Saturday nights when they went to the corner bar, but that didn’t mean anything really. Dorothy had once been married to the president of the teamsters in Newark. She was on a first name basis with Newark’s mayor. She had been friends with Peter Rodino was a member of the House of Representatives.

Marjorie explained what had happened. Dorothy’s scowl was deep.

“What are you doing with this loser?”

“He’s a hard worker.”

“He’s dumb. He thinks being a hard worker entitles him to be stupid.”

“Will you make a phone call?”

“And say what?”

“Get them to stop loaning him money.”

“I’d rather get them to break his legs.”

“Don’t say that. Aunt Dottie, I’m pregnant.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake. Why did you do that?”

“It just happened.”

“It never just happens. Does Ron know?”

“Yes.” Marjorie paused. This last part was going to be more difficult. “He said that I could take his bankbook to pay off the Shy.”

Dorothy’s gaze felt like a razor blade. “You really should be ashamed of yourself.”

Marjorie wanted with all her heart to remind her aunt that she had been a little girl in a rooming house with her grandmother, Dorothy's mother, when they were too poor to ride the bus and Dorothy was spending weekends on yachts.

Dorothy shook her head. "I'll make the call, but Margi if a man is hungry to gamble, he'll find a way to get the money."

Chapter 42

"When's Ron coming over?" said Angel.

"Not until much later. He's working," said Celeste.

"I don't like it when he works. Why does he have to do that?"

"That's what adults have to do."

"Are you an adult?"

Barbara and Anna grinned at the precocious question.

"Yes," said Celeste, ignoring the smirks.

"Why can't you work? Ron can stay here and play with me."

Part of Celeste had dreaded springing this information on her mother and cousin, but the time was right. "I am going to start working," said Celeste.

Anna and Barb froze. What was she talking about? What kind of shit did she think she was going to pull now?

Angel wandered away to play with her tea set. She had wanted to play tea party with Ron. She didn't understand the implications for her and Celeste had decided that she would explain all of that to her later. Right now, she had dropped a bomb and was waiting for the explosion.

Anna began slowly. "What do you mean that you are going to work?"

Celeste's income consisted of her support checks from Angel's father and her welfare checks. She hated taking public assistance, but Anna and Mario had

assured her that was what it was there for. Mario had never been proud about taking handouts and this wasn't even in his name.

"I'm taking a part time job at a doctor's office."

"You have a baby!" said Anna. Barb nodded in a very quiet and supportive way that told Celeste that she had no ally in this situation. "I'm sorry Celeste. I'm just not able to take care of her. She's too much."

"I know that Mom. I'm going to enroll her in daycare."

"At her age? Are you crazy?"

Barb spoke up for the first time. "Horrible things happen at those places, Cele. It's a bad idea."

"I won't allow it," said Anna.

"It's not your decision, Mom."

"What kind of a mother are you?" said Anna.

"You always worked," said Celeste.

"I had no choice," glared Anna. "And you were never left with strangers. You were always with family."

"It's a good day care center. It's right at the Community College. It will only be for four hours a day."

"Four hours a day!" screamed Anna. In her younger days, Anna would have taken off her shoe and thrown it at Celeste. Now the pain in her back made the bending too difficult for it to be her response.

Celeste got up and left the room to check on Angel.

Barb said, "She won't really do it."

"Yes, she will," said Anna. "She wants this guy and she is willing to anything that she has to do in order to have him."

"Foolish girl. She has a beautiful baby. That should be enough," said Barb.

"Nothing has ever been enough for her," said Anna.

Chapter 43

Marjorie sat George down. Ron was with Harry. She'd called him and said that golf or no golf that he needed to see his son, and Harry had agreed. He'd stopped taking Ron to work with him on a regular basis. That had stopped a while ago. Harry was learning a new game. He'd gotten too old for softball. Bowling held limited interest. Then he discovered golf. He knew that he'd gone overboard. His new wife didn't know how to complain as long as food was on the table and her bills were paid and her daughter provided for. Now she was pregnant with another one. But Marjorie was right. He'd neglected his son.

"George, I went to the doctor's yesterday."

"What did he say?" George's tone and the expectation of the question telegraphed the need to hear that everything was alright. He wanted a rubber stamp. He expected it.

"George, there are problems. The doctor says that I've got to slow down and take it easy."

"What does he mean?"

"He thinks that I should work less and spend more time in bed. He thinks that I shouldn't be lifting things or scrubbing floors."

"I'll mop the floors," said George. "I don't think that we can afford to have you cut back at work."

Marjorie agreed. She might lose her job.

Harry Tuck snapped a quick throw at Ron. He snagged it and whipped it back. Harry smiled. The throw stung his hand. His son had a decent arm. He bloomed a toss. He watched Ron hold the glove up. He saw him squint, but he caught it and a grin spread from his face through his body as it winged it back.

“George, I’m not sure that I can do it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m tired. I’m trying. I don’t feel right.”

“You’ll feel better soon,” said George.

Chapter 44

The miscarriage hit the day before Ron’s birthday. It happened in the kitchen. Marjorie was on her knees with the pain. The blood was flowing out of her along with pieces of something else. She screamed but it wouldn’t stop and she couldn’t move and even though she was home, she was alone.

Marjorie clawed at the linoleum floor. George walked into the house and stood there horrified at the sight of her. He called an ambulance. He rode with her to the hospital.

It was officially determined that she’d had a miscarriage and needed what was known as a D&C. Marjorie, who was now more than half crazed, said no. It was her son’s birthday and she had to be there for him. She needed to see him. If he wasn’t there, she was alone in the world.

Against the objections of doctors, nurses and two hospital administrators, Marjorie signed herself out. They had her in an adult diaper because she was still leaking blood.

Ron was at home watching TV. It was late on a Saturday afternoon in June and he had been out all day. After dinner he wanted to go out again. These were the long days when summer had almost started. He could play ball until it was almost nine o’clock.

He looked up when they came in. Something was very wrong. His mother was walking very slowly and painfully. She was pale. George was holding her arm. Something was very wrong.

Ron was on his feet. “What happened?”

“They took me to the hospital,” wailed Marjorie.

Ron ran to her and then stopped. Would it hurt if he held her? “What’s wrong?”

“I lost the baby,” said Marjorie with a tint of shame.

“You’re hurt,” said Ron.

“They want me to have an operation.”

“Why?”

“Because I lost the baby.” Marjorie made it sound like it was a punishment.

George watched as a different kind of look overcame Ron. He became very composed. He straightened. His eyes were dark green when they flicked to George. “Why isn’t she still in the hospital?”

Marjorie seemed to shrink a little. George said, “She signed herself out.”

“You let her?”

“What was I supposed to do?”

The look of disdain that crossed Ron’s face reminded Marjorie of Harry and she felt, for that instant, safer. “You’re right,” said Ron. He turned to his mother. “We have to go back there right now.”

“Can’t we wait until after your birthday?”

Ron’s face softened when he gazed into her eyes. “No, we can’t.”

George was stunned when she just turned around and let them take her back through the door. She would have never done that for him.

Chapter 45

After baking in the sun for the last several days and spending most of the summer in shorts and t-shirts, Ron fidgeted uncomfortably in his jacket and tie. He had traded his over the shoulder, green canvas bag for a book salesman’s sample bag. It looked like a medium sized piece of luggage, but Ron found that if

it stood it on his desk that it was the perfect height for a podium. It might weigh as much as thirty pounds at different times of the year, but it was durable and had room for everything that he needed.

He didn't have his own classroom at Perpetual Help. There was no place to hang his Lincoln and he missed having it in the classroom. There were no pictures on the walls and no decorations of any kind expected or allowed and Ron was also pleased with this.

He undid the top shirt button and ran his finger around the inside of his collar as he watched the students for his American Literature class file in. They were not required to wear uniforms of any kind. They were expected to be presentable at all times.

There was little freedom in his curriculum and the finals were departmental so the pacing of what was covered when was also of some importance. He hadn't chafed against these restrictions in his first year. He'd just been trying to make a good impression. He knew that this was considered one of the most academically challenging private high schools in the northern part of the state. If he didn't cut it, they would cut him in an eye blink.

His class sizes were larger. The total number of students that he had in his five classes had climbed to a staggering one hundred and fifty students. It was almost twice as many as he had at his previous school and Ron had learned that a series of frequent vocab quizzes were essential.

Some of his students knew him as Coach Tuck and others just called him Mr. Tuck. Ron noted with some pleasure that their faces had the same eager looks that all the students he'd ever taught had.

"Good morning. My name is Mr. Tuck and this is American Literature Honors. Check your schedules and make sure that you're in the right place." He paused a moment as the students stared at the computer generated printouts of schedules that they received in the mail. "Some people believe that American Literature starts off slowly. That for the longest time, it was just a parody of English Literature. Early American settlers didn't have much time or use for books and reading." Ron heard a soft cheer go up from two guys sitting in the back of the room. He smiled up at them and made eye contact. "Oh, so you both like

that philosophy?" They grinned and nodded. "I see. You and I may have an area of disagreement there. Here is how we are going to resolve it. You will embrace literature like it was a pretty sixteen year old girl in a bikini." The class laughed.

"What is your name please?" said Ron. He pointed. "You, cheerleader on the left." The class laughed again.

"Mark Simon."

"Would you like to embrace a pretty sixteen year old who was wearing a bikini?"

Mark nodded enthusiastically.

"Then you must learn to use the language properly and have some sophistication about what you read. Do you know why?"

Mark shook his head back and forth.

"In frontier times, you might need a good plow, a good horse, maybe a cow if you were lucky. Have you ever milked a cow, Mr. Simon?"

"No," said Mark blushing and laughing at the same time.

"Neither have I. Now we have machines that milk them. Do you understand what that means?"

Ron let Mark Simon off the hook. He swiveled his head. "Cheerleader on the right. What is your name?"

"Paul Panini."

"Do you know what that means?"

"You're saying that the world has changed."

"Very good Paul. The world has changed and now, in order to get the little passionate girl in the bikini, it's better to be smart than brawny. Using the language helps you to get smarter." Now Ron could borrow from some other openings that he'd used when he taught all girls. His class was grinning and interested. He had them. They had been easy.

Ron circled back to his book bag. "Literature book," he held it up for them to see. "Vocabulary book," he held up the thin, narrow paperback. "You are to have a notebook with you each and every day. I'll tell you when we will be using the grammar books." Ron paused and stared at them. "I would like to have to use the grammar books as little as possible, but that will depend on your essays. I'll want a writing sample as soon as possible and so for tonight you will begin with this.

Ron read a poem that he'd found in a book of Native American Poetry. It was called, *We The First People*. Then he passed out a copy to each of them.

"I know that not all of you have your books yet, so we will start with them at the next class. For now, I would like a short five paragraph essay on your responses to this poem. That's right guys, you are to write it tonight."

Chapter 46

During the middle of his eighth grade year, students began talking about where they were going to go to high school. In Ron's part of Newark, if you weren't going to Barringer, you had to compete for entrance into a school.

"I don't understand why he can't go to public school," said George.

"I don't want him there."

"How are we going to pay for it?"

"We'll find a way."

Ron listened to them talking and his face showed his utter contempt for George. George caught the look and said, "I'm just saying Ronald."

"Saying what?"

"That Barringer is a good school."

"It's not as good as the private schools and they don't put up with any nonsense," said Marjorie.

George felt defeated. They never listened to him. He couldn't even tell them that he'd won \$50 in a card game because she would be crazy about him gambling.

The entrance exams were on Saturdays. They staggered them so that guys would have a chance to apply to the big three, which were Seton Hall, St. Benedicts and New Jersey Catholic. St. Peters was an even better school but it was in Jersey City and that thought frightened Marjorie.

The tests were long. At St. Benedicts, it was a three hour exam. Seton Hall and NJ Catholic were both two hours long. Each came with a \$20 application fee.

For girls, the choices were more limited. Of course the nuns encouraged them to attend Our lady of the Forlorn, and there was East Orange Catholic but that was about it unless someone wanted the trek across the Passaic River to a co-ed high school called Queen of Peace.

His friends talked of little else. It caused a gender separation because none of them wanted to consider Queen of Peace.

Richie announced, "I'm going to Seton Hall."

Dave Spenelli said, "I think I'm going to Jersey. My parents think it's a good school and it's the closest."

Ron didn't say anything. He'd been accepted into all three schools, but wasn't sure if there was enough money for any of them. He would have liked to go to The Hall with Richie, but he didn't want to get his hopes up.

"Ronald, I'm really proud that you did so well on the entrance exams."

"Thanks Mom."

"George is proud too," said Marjorie. She was trying to cue George to say something. George nodded and grunted.

"New Jersey Catholic is a good school," said Marjorie.

Ron nodded.

"The tuition isn't a lot more than where you are now."

“It’ll be fine,” said Ron. He was trying really hard to hide his disappointment. He was relieved that it wasn’t going to be Barringer.

He went into his room and tore up the acceptance letters to Seton Hall and Benedicts. Through the door he heard George’s muffled voice say, “I don’t know how we’re going to do it.” Ron punched his mattress as hard as he was able. He felt stupid. Why should he care if they sent him to Barringer or Seton Hall or New Jersey Catholic? Things still wouldn’t feel right. Right now the best thing about George that Ron could conceive was that he belonged to a club that had a rotation of paperback porn.

He found that certain lines excited him. He didn’t know why. He would just feel this rush after he’d read them and want to read them again and again, and then it would happen. At the same time that he loved his time alone with those books, they caused his disdain for George to even grow deeper.

He hid them, buried in the dirty clothes of the laundry basket in the bathroom. Ron would take them out and bring them back into his room and then return them. He knew that it was his mother who emptied the laundry. He wondered what she did with the books when she found them.

Chapter 47

Ron read and was impressed.

Paul Panini wrote: *Not all Indian cultures were peaceful. Some were as brutal as the Europeans.*

Mark Simon wrote: *I liked the first part. How do you find a people?*

Ron smiled. These two were smart and the classroom had been a catalyst. He thought, maybe a classroom has less to do with being a physical place than I thought it did. Maybe a classroom is only special for that time and those moments when it’s functioning.

His mind flashed to classrooms that he’s been in. The first one that he remembered was Mrs. Francis kindergarten class. It was a huge room with wooden floors that creaked and lots to do. He loved it. Things got darker. He saw

himself in 4th grade hurling his books when he was told that he had detention for something that he didn't do.

Ron glanced back at the papers. Edward Lang had written: *Civilization comes at a price, but it's good*. Ron smiled and relaxed into his papers and forgot the time or where he was expected to be.

Celeste came into the basement quietly. Ron was sprawled on the bed and there were stacks of papers everywhere. His incredibly large and clumsy book bag was open. She smiled. She approached. He didn't know she was in the room until a blur caught the corner of his eye. Now she was standing there naked. Ron scrambled to put the papers away. He knew that his boys would understand.

Celeste slept quietly and Ron put on the desk lamp. He finished reading William Bradford for the second time and tried not to hate it. Then he smiled. They would read it and hate it too. Maybe he could teach them to find a new perspective on the things that they seemed to hate but were forced to accept.

"This is what we have in our literature book as the first piece of reading. Let's look at it. A hard crossing. Illness. Only a fragment left of what had come. This is our fragment. Our piece of what has survived. That's why I wanted you to read it," said Ron.

Paul Panini said, "Don't we have to read it?"

"That too," said Ron. "I tried for a while to find some way to come here and tell you why I think that you should read this. It's not great writing. It's not even good. Why then? How can I stand here and expect you to trust me when I have to choose from a selected group of material? Answer is that I'm trying to work that out and giving it my best shot. Let's see how it goes. I have an idea."

Ron picked up their literature book. It was his copy. The pages were dog-eared. There were foreign objects slid between the pages. "I've taken a hard look at this and decided that it would benefit you to know what is in here."

Ron looked out into the room. There were the two in the back, Panini and Simon, but there were two more. Sal Taleno could catch, He'd always been able to catch. He could run and he wasn't afraid to take a hit, but he also was under some pressure to read. It was parentally induced. Ron understood that. But Sal

was now in his class. Even though they had little contact on the field, they were on the team. There was a tentative bond. Sal looked up and met his eyes.

Sal grinned. "Tell us what it is."

"This book isn't what's important here. It's our minds meeting and exploring. There is some really good stuff in here. I'll cut out the crap as best as I am able. This is what I want. You gotta read what I tell you to read."

They were quiet. They weren't sure what he was telling them to do. What was the assignment?

"I want you to read it until you understand it. When I assign too much, tell me. That's what I want from each assignment." Ron looked the football player in the eyes. "Can you do that Taleno?"

"Yes, Coach."

Chapter 48

On the day that Ron graduated from Our Lady of the Forlorn's Grammar School, his father and his mother and his Aunt Dottie embraced him with a warm feel of approval that was genuine.

His Aunt took him aside. "People seem to be pinning their hopes on you."

"I know. What happens if I let them all down? Will my mother get sick again?"

She looked into his eyes. "Ron, it's your life, not theirs."

"What do you mean?"

"Their expectations don't have to be your expectations."

"Aunt Dot, I'm still not sure what that means."

"That's ok," she said grinning.

They took photographs of him standing with each of them. There was always an arm around his shoulder. He was supposed to smile, but he was scared. What was he supposed to be?

Students who were accepted into Jersey Catholic were required to do summer reading. Ron smiled to himself as he scanned the list. He'd read four of the six. There was just these books called Lord of the Flies and another called Animal Farm.

Ron Tuck was an avid reader. He'd plowed his way through book after book that was supposed to be over his head and gleaned whatever he could and hoped that somehow, osmotically, enough would filter into him. He opened Animal Farm and began to read.

Neither book was long. He felt that they were his introduction to the high school. These books would tell him what the school expected of him. He grinned as he listened to Major. He wondered if pigs were that smart and told himself that he would look that up the next time that he was in the library.

When Boxer collapsed Ron's heart sunk. He knew that horse was hurt and he believed so deeply in the farm and in the rights of the other animals to govern themselves.

Boxer had worked himself too hard. He needed to take more breaks and to relax once in a while. He wanted for the other animals to take care of their hero. His hands gripped the book tightly when he realized what was happening to the horse. Then he saw and felt his tears. They were rolling down his face and plopping onto the pages. He forced himself to keep reading. He couldn't hear or see anything but the book which was now blurry.

His mind screamed for Boxer to break out of the cart that was taking him to the glue factory and to stomp those worthless, traitor pigs with his powerful hooves. It didn't happen, and then they lied about what had become of Boxer. Some of the other animals knew but were too frightened to say anything. They had screamed for Boxer to break out of the cart.

The unfairness of it all seared into his brain as something that he couldn't accept. He wanted to get it out of his head but it was stuck there and he was crying like a baby laying in his bed.

When he finished the book, his reaction continued. He couldn't look at the cover without seeing Boxer too weak to break out of his confinement. His mind hadn't processed Orwell's ideas, but it felt the pain. Ron slid the book under a stack of others so that he wouldn't have to look at it, but he still knew it was there. He fished it out of the pile and put it under the clothes in the bottom drawer of his dresser. Maybe he should toss it into the hamper with George's porn. He pictured George as one of the pigs. His mind saw him sitting at their kitchen table shoveling food into his face. He did grunt a lot. Ron walked into their living room and stared down at one of the stains on the white rug. It was further evidence.

George looked up from his TV program and saw Ron standing there. His face was tear streaked and there was a sick look on his face. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," said Ron. He didn't want to talk to the pig.

Chapter 49

The season opener was against Ridgefield. Larry volunteered to organize a pregame rally. Ferry looked at him with disdain. "You're a coach, not a cheerleader."

Larry Viola walked away, shoulders slumped. He stood next to Ron's locker and mumbled, "He made it sound like an insult that I wanted to organize a rally."

Ron pulled on his brand new coach's game day jersey. It was gold with black lettering. His cap was black with an interlocking PH in the center of the front. When he and Larry had scouted together last year, Ron had been puzzled when Viola had said that he couldn't wait for halftime because Bergenfield had one of the best bands that he'd ever seen.

None of the other teams scouting the game had coaches who watched the halftime. They stood in a circle eating hotdogs and talking about what they had seen in the first half. They tried to pick up on tendencies that the others had seen and maybe they had missed. It was friendly but competitive and no one ever showed anyone else what they had drawn on their play pads.

Ron stood towards the side of the circle of men who were wearing their team hats so that everyone knew who they were. He saw Larry up in the stands clapping loudly as the band finished a number. He was a good guy, thought Ron. He just wasn't a football coach.

Ron was happy that he wouldn't have to go to those games with Larry anymore. He'd been embarrassed to be seen with him. Now he felt sorry for Larry. He'd wanted to do it to make things fun for the kids and for him.

Ron would be in the booth wearing a headset that was connected to Steve Ferry. He was to tell him what the defense was doing and to make any suggestions that he thought would be useful. This would be one of the first times Ron got to see the varsity play live. Last year he was always out scouting with Larry.

Paul Pamerteri pulled Ron aside in the hallway. "Remember that I'm on the system too."

"What do you want me to look for?"

"We can't see the line splits from field level as good as you can see them from up top."

"Got it."

"Ronnie, listen sometimes during the game, Steve loses it. He gets disgusted by mistakes. He's bitter about being overmatched. He forgets and starts calling plays that he hasn't put into the playbook."

"What do you mean?"

"Old plays from teams that he's had in the past."

"What do we do then?"

"I talked to him about it. This year, I'm going to send the plays that he calls in. I need you to be ready with something if he starts to lose it."

"Ok."

Paul looked at Ron seriously. "No one else knows. Not Artie and certainly not Larry. You can't let Steve know that I told you."

The game was evenly matched. In the first quarter, Ridgefield almost scored on a long pass play that was wide open but the pass wasn't any good.

"What happened there?" growled Ferry.

"We bit on the short pass fake. It was wide open," said Ron.

"God damn it! Why do we practice these things?"

Paul voice was composed. "Coach, we need a play."

"Run the damn dive to the left. Maybe we can do that without screwing up."

The blare of the loud speaker drowned out everyone's voice. The play went for six yards. Ron said, "Paul, run it to the other side."

Ferry said, "Ok, let's see if we can educate them and get them to pack it in tight."

The play ran for six more yards and they had a first down.

"Run that baby again," said a gleeful Ferry.

This time the inside linebacker for Ridgefield anticipated the play and stuffed the hole for just a two yard gain.

"Linebacker cheated up," said Ron.

"We saw it," said Paul.

The quarter ended scoreless. Ferry said, "Now we fake the dive and run a toss to the same side. Go to the left, Paul."

Ridgefield came out in an odd man front. Both guards were covered and when the onside guard pulled out to lead the sweep, the inside linebacker crashed the hole and blew the play up. The ball bounced crazily in the center of the field and then they were on it.

"Where the fuck did that come from?" screamed Ferry. "Ron didn't you say that when you scouted the game scrimmage that they only ran an even front?"

"I wasn't there, Coach. That was Larry."

“Call a defense, Steve,” said Paul.

“Artie, set them in a 4/4.”

Ridgefield scored and then scored again. Perpetual Hope’s defensive back bit on the short pass fake again and this time the pass was true. It was 13-0 at the half because Artie had put in a play that defeated their second extra point attempt. It was an illegal play but Artie was betting that he could get away with it once a game. The defensive man over the center pulled his man forward just as he was snapping the ball. Things happened in the interior of the line. One ref was watching to see that the kick was good. The other was looking for an offside. They couldn’t see it.

At halftime, Ron came down to the locker room. The players ate oranges. There were no real injuries. The coaches gathered in the office. This had to be quick. They had maybe ten minutes and then they had to talk to the players.

Ferry said, “Well, we look as confused as a three legged cat on ice trying to take a shit.”

“We haven’t practiced against an odd man front all week,” said Artie. “Can’t blame the kids for being confused.”

“Can we protect?” said Ferry.

“Can’t run those sprint passes without exposing the backside and they have some speed. Now that the linebacker has a sniff of it, he’ll be up our asses every time,” said Artie.

“How do the flats look, Ron?”

“They’re packed in. If we can get it out there, there’s space.”

“Paul, two things. Get that fucking numbnuts who bit on that fake twice off the field. Sit him down. We’ll work with him this week.”

Paul nodded.

“Instead of carrying through with the fake on the dive, I want Scutero to teach that crashing linebacker a little lesson. Ring his bell.”

Artie laughed. This was his kind of football.

At the start of the second half Sal Taleno caught three passes in a row and when the defender fell on the third one, Sal scored. There was jubilation on the sideline. Ron pumped his fist from on top of the announcer's box.

Ridgefield couldn't move the ball. They went back to the wider splits of their even front. Scutero had rung number 51's bell good. He was on the sidelines.

"Run the dive," crowed Ferry.

"Stick it right down their throats," screamed Artie. He had run over and yelled in Ferry's ear. It was loud enough for Ron to hear. He looked down to see an animated Artie waving his arms and snorting as he stomped around in a circle.

On the third play of this drive, Perpetual Help fumbled again. This time they got it back but lost fourteen yards on the play. Ridgefield finally closed up the line splits and continued to sprinkle in the off man front. They were content to sit on their lead. The game ended 13-7.

Larry Viola walked into the coach's room excited. "That was a great game. We almost had them."

Ferry was in no mood. "It ain't fucking horseshoes, Larry."

Larry slumped again. Sure he could understand that losing wasn't what they were after, but it was a sunny day. The stands were filled. Both bands sounded good. Didn't you have to enjoy that?

Ferry picked up Larry Viola's scouting report. "Didn't you tell us that they exclusively ran an even front?"

"Yeah," said Larry.

"Were you surprised today?" said Ferry with a note of menace in his voice.

Looking back on it, Ferry realized that he just should have said yes, but he didn't. He was still stung about Ferry's attitude about the rally. He blurted, "I didn't notice."

"That's just great, Larry." Ferry was already thinking about beer.

Ron needed Celeste and Angel. He didn't shower or change. He drove to their house. Everyone was in the backyard. Ron walked around the side and up the driveway. Celeste loved the squeak mobile. It always alerted her. It was her friend.

Joey watched young Joey in the pool with Angel. She had water-wings. She was splashing. Joey cuddled his son and splashed back. He was getting soaked but didn't care. Anna and Mario were watching. The garden was in full early September bloom. Tomatoes needed to be picked. There were peppers and zucchini. Tina was in the kitchen. The sauce was simmering. She added some fresh basil.

Celeste and Ron embraced. She felt ripe and warm and good. It stirred him. He wanted to take her into the basement and lay her face down and pump himself into her. The urge was strong. He resisted it.

Angel's face lit up when she caught sight of him. She tried to climb out of the pool. Joey let his son flat in his tube and helped her. Then Ron was there and he swept her up into his arms and held her drippingly wet and her happy body clung to him.

"I'm so happy to see you," he whispered.

She grinned with the feel of him. Lost herself for a moment in the embrace. Then she said, "I missed you."

"I was working."

She hugged him with her entire body. "Don't work anymore."

Ron's heart was flipping in his chest. He lifted her back into the air and carried her to the pool. He plunked her squirmy little body back into the water and continued the embrace.

"I need some help to put dinner in the table," called Tina.

Celeste went inside. No one asked if they won or lost. Ron didn't care.

Chapter 50

Ron was nervous as he walked to school. It was the day after Labor Day and it was hot. Ron wondered why the weather always seemed to get hotter after school started. There would be those sometimes cool and rainy days of August and then he'd go back to school and SPLAT. Summer would seem to come back with a vengeance.

His blazer was gray wool and had the emblem of the school on its breast pocket. His slacks were black and his tie felt tight. After one block, he was sweating.

His books had been expensive and they were heavy. He thought that it was probably a mistake to try to cram them all into his book bag on the first day, but he wanted to make a good impression.

Although Jersey Catholic was one of the newer parochial schools in Newark, it was the largest. There were 2000 students and all of them were male. Students came from as far away as Cedar Grove and Verona to attend. Their bus ride was an hour long. Ron had a three block walk.

The school was housed in a huge stone building on Broadway that used to belong to an insurance company. Now it was run by the Christian Brothers. It was ten stories high and covered an entire city block.

The sight of it intimidated Ron. It was him feel small and weak. What was even more intimidating was the throng on young men who were gathered on the side steps waiting for the doors to be opened. They were packed in and all were wearing the same blazers. Ron tried to tell himself that he was one of them but it was a hard sell.

The way that the building was organized allowed for a floor for each year of students. Students were assigned a classroom and that's where they stayed. Their teachers came to them. It had the unintended effect of making it difficult to get to know very many students outside of the ones that were in your class.

Freshman were assigned to the fifth floor. There were twenty-five freshman classes and each held thirty-five students. Ron looked at his schedule. Algebra was his first class, then French, then Latin, then History, Religion and

English and Physical Education. Students were not allowed out of their rooms between classes. They were only allowed to visit their lockers before and after lunch. They were not permitted to use the elevators.

The room was hot and Ron tried to forget about the heat. Brother O'Shea was a short blonde man with a reddish tinge to his skin. Ron wondered if he was sun burned. He rocked back and forth on his heels as he spoke to the class.

"Take off your jackets men." There was a wave of relief and activity as the guys removed their blazers and draped them over the backs of their desks. "After class make sure that you put them back on. It is the prerogative of each teacher to allow or not allow you this privilege." He rocked back and forth on his heels. "My rules are simple. One chapter a week and a quiz each Friday. The only times that we will not have a Friday quiz is when we will be having a unit test. Your tests will be returned on Monday and then we will begin the cycle again."

Rob thought that it seemed simple enough, but Algebra intimidated him. He'd never been great with numbers. He hadn't really liked fractions and when Richie had tried to explain the concept of equations to him, his mind just went blank and wandered.

"Let's begin," said Brother O'Shea. "Take out your books."

Now Ron was happy that he'd carried the heavy bag to school. He looked around. Not everyone had their books, and the kids that didn't had this kind of frozen look on their faces and their bodies seem to have gone a little rigid.

O'Shea looked around and then he smiled. "Not all of you are prepared. What did you boys think we were going to do today? Did you think we were going to play *Let's Get to Know Each Other*? We aren't here to get to know each other. We're here to get to know Algebra. You men without books, put your jackets back on." Ron heard a groan from in back of him. He turned to see a slender kid with red hair in back of him putting his jacket back on. "Bookless boys, stand up!" said O'Shea. Move into the aisle and take a step either forwards or backwards and stand next to one of your classmates who did know enough to come prepared. You can follow along."

O'Shea ran his hands underneath the broad waistband that cinched his brown habit. "A quick review on the multiplication and division of fractions he said."

Ron looked down. That was Chapter 1. His mind said, how do you review something that you never really learned the first time? Maybe he would get it this time. O'Shea spoke quickly but not loudly. He had the habit of sometimes speaking to the chalkboard instead of the classroom and this made him both difficult to hear and to understand. Ron did understand a lot of it. Maybe he would be ok. What O'Shea basically did for the rest of the class was say exactly what was in the book, using the exact words from the book, and writing the exact some examples that were in the book on the chalk board. He finished talking just before the bell rang. Then he quickly packed up and left.

They were alone. The guys looked around and grinned at each other. Somebody said, "Let's get our jackets on."

Two minutes later Brother Alvin appeared at the doorway. "Bonjour." He said. The class silenced. He was a very tall man and he carried just his French textbook in his hands. "Bonjour, is the French form of greeting. Loosely translated, it means hello. It is expected that when someone says Bonjour, that you respond in kind." He paused dramatically. "Bonjour!" There was a smattering of mumbled responses. He walked to the teacher's desk in the front of the room and slammed the textbook down onto it. The sound was like the explosion of a gunshot and the boys jumped. They sat up straighter. "Bonjour!" he said loudly.

"Bonjour," said the frightened students.

Brother Alvin did not mention their jackets and the temperature had risen. The students were sweating. The class seemed to go on forever. When it ended and Brother Alvin left...the students took off their blazers and fanned themselves with their books.

Ron barely tolerated Latin. There would be declensions and conjugations. His mind screamed, what the fuck for? Brother Delban was wirey. There was grit in his voice. He expected cooperation. The lack of it would result in punishment.

Ron's mind ached. Was that the message? He was one of the animals on the farm. He'd be penned and instructed. His mind howled. It was time for lunch.

Chapter 51

Ron smiled as he saw his students enter. Their disheveled youth amused him. He felt kindly towards them. "So, good morning. I hope the weekend was good but good or not it's over and time to go back to work." He paused. He stared at them. They gazed back, proud and young and waiting to be filled. "Your responses were good. Some of you have learned how to write. That was satisfying to see. The others of you who do not, catch up. This is an honors English class. If you don't know how to write, I'll help you to find a more suitable placement. Otherwise, get to work."

He passed on their essays complete with comments. He said, "Take a moment. If you have trouble with my handwriting let me see it. I didn't take time writing those comments because I wish them disregarded. Your grades will be a reflection of how you perform on tests. But your learning will be a conversation between the two of us. Please read my responses to your papers."

He waited and watched. They read. His heart missed his girls and their shyness coupled with their sometimes brazen approach. These guys deserved his best. He didn't intend to short change them. One by one, their heads raised and let him know that they had read what he'd written. He surveyed them. "Questions?"

Mark Simon said, "What does suspend disbelief mean?"

"It means that literature requires imagination and that if you keep what you think weighted down by the hard facts of life that you will find it much harder to dream."

He let that sink in.

Paul Panini said, "I don't think that too much of that is any good."

Ron tried to absorb that. It was an unexpected comment. He liked that it surprised and challenged him His mind reached back. Something that Lashly had

taught him. "Balance is everything, Paul. But one person's balance is another's tipping point." The look on Paul's face told Ron that he didn't understand, but Ron did.

Edward Lang said, I didn't find William Bradford boring. I thought that the poem was boring." The poem that Ron read that first class went:

We The First People

**I'm proud to belong to one of the original clans
Whose Ancestors occupied all of these lands
Before we were "found" by some wandering seaman
Who knew just where he was and we became "Indian"**

**Talk to me of our victories, and I will listen
Tell me about our history, a tear will glisten
Stories of how life use to be, bring a rueful smile
Drums and flutes will find me dreaming all the while**

**In order to "save" us, they killed us
Our peaceful cultures were "dangerous"
And they thought they could just ravage us
But by fighting back, we became "savages"**

**Call us lazy indeed - we're not driven by their greed
To gather "materials" about them
But my question is
How did we exist
For hundreds of centuries without them?**

-- Unknown

Ron picked up the book and read it again. He knew now that poems were like songs. The more that you heard them, the deeper their effect would be. "Why does this bore you, Ed?"

"When you read it, it didn't. When I read it, it did."

Ron thought hard about that. He had the sense that the information was important, but he wasn't sure what to do with it. When the class ended, he walked down to the teachers' lounge with it still on his mind.

His department chairman was Sam Felice. Sam was hunched over a book and eating an egg salad sandwich at 10:30 in the morning. Ron slid in across from him.

“Hi, Sam.”

Sam looked up and wiped his mouth. He had dark hair and glasses that had slipped down his nose. He pushed them back. “How’re things Ron?”

“Kid just stopped me with a question.”

Sam laughed. “You’re letting them ask questions already?”

Ron grinned. They’d had many conversations about teaching. Sam was serious about it and Ron respected him. “Yeah well, it’s my honors class. You get them next year. I figured that I’d get all their questions out.”

They shared a chuckle and Sam said, “What did he say?”

“He said the poem wasn’t boring when I read it but that it was when he did.”

Sam smiled. “Did you tell him that it was because he didn’t know how to read?”

That comment hit Ron hard. They knew words but they weren’t sure how to hear them. He nodded. “Thanks Sam.”

Ron drank coffee while Sam finished his sandwich. “How’s the football team?”

“We lost on Saturday.”

“I know,” said Sam. “But how does it look?”

“Like we are 0-1,” said Ron.

Chapter 51

There were two lunches at Jersey Catholic. The cafeteria was vast and crammed full of long lunch tables that were set in identical rows spanning both

the length and width of the room. Once you were down, getting up was a navigation. Ron sat with Phillip from Our Lady of the Forlorn.

Phillip said, "Seniors are allowed to smoke at their table."

"Really?" said Ron. "Where'd you hear that?"

"I forget," said Phillip. "But if one of us gets caught at their table we're in big trouble."

"I got no reason to be over there," said Ron.

"No, but good to know, isn't it? I mean suppose one of them invited us over there just to laugh at us when we get in trouble?"

Phillip was right. Anything that they could figure out about the way that things really were could be helpful. It would be like that until they had things figured out.

To some extent, seniors were allowed to pick on the freshman. It was considered a rite of passage. The younger kids stayed away from them and the seniors were always on the lookout for some easy fun during lunch. They had gone through it. Now it was their turn to be in charge. They'd looked forward to this for three years.

"You going to play football, Phillip?"

"I'm gonna try. Tryouts are tomorrow."

Phillip and Ron were about the same size. They had been the best two players when their friends lined up. They were never allowed on the same team and now they would be. "We'll both make it," said Ron.

"I don't know. I heard there are a hundred guys who want to play and the team only carries forty."

That rumor was true, but it was hard to tell what was true from what was just a story. They ate quickly. Looking around at the noisy throng of guys and in the distance seeing the cloud of smoke that hung over the senior table in the low ceilinged room. From the corner of his eye, Ron watched one of the seniors walk passed. His mouth dropped open. The guy looked like he shaved every day. Ron

had never shaved but he wanted to. Phillip shaved about once every two weeks. Ron wondered if that meant that he was less of a man.

Ron got his books from his locker with a feeling that he had gotten through the first morning and could see the pattern. It was simple. Shut up, stay put and do your work. That message was loud and clear.

History was taught by the first lay teacher that Ron had seen. He was a slight man with thin hair and a redeeming hairline. He appeared to be in good shape. He smiled at them and said, "My name is Mr. Connor. This is World History." He paused for a moment and looked over the class. "There sure are a lot of you. Take your jackets off fellas, it's too hot for this." He stopped and removed his own jacket across the back of his chair. His students did the same thing.

Connor peered out into the class. "Are any of my runners here?"

Everyone looked around. Ron hadn't known that Connor was a coach. Two hands went into the air. One was the red haired kid who sat in back of Ron. He'd been one the kids who had to stand during Algebra. Ron thought I guess that's how it goes. You can be a jerkoff in the morning and distinguished in the afternoon.

Connor spent the rest of the class talking to them about why he felt history as worth knowing. "The President's knowledge of history probably saved us from annihilation during this Cuban thing. He knew that the Bear had more growl than bite." Ron wasn't sure who the Bear was but he did like the easy way that Connor seemed to be running his class. They didn't take out their books until the end when he provided them with an assignment. It was five pages of reading. Ron flipped through the pages. There were more words to a page on these books than there had been in the books that they used in grammar school. He took that to mean that he was growing up. He flipped through the pages delighted when he saw pictures that took up large parts of the page.

There were two of his classmates standing at the door waiting for a teacher to arrive to start the next class. Brother Cecil looked down at them from the doorway.

Tim DeFalco said, "Brother, can I use the bathroom?"

Cecil had arrived early and some of the students still had their jackets off. Brother Cecil had a baritone voice that spread out from his mouth like a rumble. “What a wonderful greeting. I walk into the room and the first thing that is said to me is ‘can I urinate.’ He eyed DeFalco. “I surely hope that you have the capacity to urinate. What is your name?”

Tim face was now fire engine red. “Tim DeFalco, Brother.”

“Do you think that you can urinate, Mr. DeFalco?”

“I don’t know, Brother, but I need to.”

“The proper way to express yourself is to ask ‘may I use the rest room?’ Saying can I use it implies that perhaps you don’t know how. I assume that you know how, or am I incorrect?”

“No Brother.”

The class had gotten back into their jackets as they watched DeFalco suffer. Ron could see that his hand kept starting to reach for his penis to squeeze it and try to hold it back, but he kept checking himself and stopping. Brother Cecil saw it too. “Hurry up, DeFalco, but I’m not waiting for you.” Brother Cecil turned to the class and said, “Welcome to our study of Christianity.”

Ron couldn’t help it and began to laugh out loud. Brother Cecil shot him a harsh look and Ron attempted to stifle his laughter. But the sight of Tim resisting the urge to try to squeeze his penis shut combined with the enjoyment that Cecil took in the exchange had him laughing and he couldn’t stop. He bit his lip hard. Cecil was walking towards him. “May I ask exactly what was so funny?”

Ron couldn’t help it. “Sure you can,” he said and the giggles erupted again.

Brother Cecil rocked back on his heels and slapped Ron hard across his face. His giggles vanished into shock. Ron’s eyes widened as they looked up at him. “I hope that I’ve been able to help you,” said Brother Cecil.

Ron couldn’t resist the urge to bring his hands to his face. It wasn’t fury or fear that raged in him. His reaction was mixed. He’d stopped laughing. His face hurt. The rest of the class faded back in his mind. He floated for that instant. “Thank you, Brother,” he said and lowered his eyes.

Cecil smiled. "What is your name?"

"Ron Tuck."

"Where are you from?"

"I live about three blocks from here."

"Not the first time that you've had your face slapped then?"

"No Brother."

"Let's make it the last time that I have to do that."

Brother Cecil continued with his introduction.

Chapter 52

After the JV game on Monday, the coaches gathered to watch the game film of the varsity's loss. If The varsity played at home, the JV played away. Some players participated in both games. It was a lot to ask, but Ferry wanted to give them a taste of victory and although it wasn't really a second chance, it could be something. Paul Pamerenti was the head JV coach. Artie was his assistant. Artie also had the advantage of being able to do fast and good tapings and acted as their trainer. Ron broke down the film with Ferry and the starters who were beyond playing in a JV game.

Ron had expected Steve to rail, but the coach silently let the film run through most of the first quarter. Then he stopped it. "Watch here," he clicked it forward again. "See this? We run the hell out of this dive to both sides. Let's make it even better." He let the film run. The players were viewing it intently. They either liked or hated seeing themselves but it was never a neutral reaction. Ferry stopped it again for the pass plays to the flat. Ron felt a rush of pride. Those were plays that he'd suggested. Well almost. Ferry had asked him about the flats and he's been correct.

“Those are the things that we can build on men. We can run and we have a quarterback who can play catch with a wide receiver. We also have a pretty tough defense.”

Ron thought Steve Ferry was masterful and his respect for him deepened. It had been the first game of the year. They had been outflanked by a new defense. Maybe it was new. For now, Steve was giving that the benefit of the doubt. Ron tried to absorb that.

“Let’s stretch and jog a couple of easy laps and call it a day, boys.”

They sat in the coaches’ room with two pizza boxes in front of them and watched the game film for the second time. This time Ferry stopped it after each play and dissected what he saw. Ron watched as he ran it forwards and then backwards...in slow motion. Each play was dissected. Ron took notes. So did Paul. Artie tried to stay awake and ate one entire pizza by himself.

“We did pretty well up front,” said Ferry. “But we aren’t all coming off the ball at the same time. Artie, see how the left side is just a half step behind?”

“I see it,” said Artie.

“Time for more sled work,” said Ferry.

Artie grinned. He loved to ride the seven man sled. And you could feel the slightest variation when the players didn’t fire out together and put a shoulder into it.

“Paul, watch the quarterback’s feet.”

Ferry ran the play again. They all watched the quarterback. “He’s taking extra steps. It’s slowing the play down and the running back has to hesitate before he gets the ball.”

“I didn’t see it on the field,” said Paul. “I see it now.”

“I didn’t see it on the field either.”

Larry Viola did not join them for this film work. He sat in Brother Howard's office explaining his idea. "I think that pre-game rallies would help our attendance. It would get people to the games earlier and the concessions would sell more. Our students would feel like they were more part of the team."

Brother Howard puffed on his after dinner cigar and listened. He could see the benefits. "What about your scouting?"

"I can still get to the games and three of the teams that we play have their games on Friday nights, so that won't be a problem."

Brother Howard rubbed the ash off into his ashtray. "What did Steve say?"

"He said that I wasn't a cheerleader. But I am Brother. I'm a cheerleader for this school and you know that."

"I do," said Brother Howard. "I'll speak to Steve. Our next home game isn't until a week from Saturday, so you'll have time to put something together."

Larry Viola preened. This was going to be fun. He thought about whether it was a good time to bring Artie up and decided that it wasn't.

"If this works out the way that you think it will, there will be a little something extra

for you Larry."

Viola smiled. "Thank you Brother, but you know that's not why I'm doing it, don't you?"

"Everybody has to live, Larry."

Chapter 53

The day seemed to stretch on forever. Mr. Wisnewski was their English teacher. He was tall, slender and had dark brown hair. What was striking about his appearance was that he taught in a long black, cap and gown style robe that was zippered up tight and revealed only the knot of his tie and the white, starched collar of his shirt. He spoke in clipped tones. He did not allow them to remove their jackets

The clock did not seem to be moving. Ron's mind wandered. Wisnewski did not seem to ever look at his students. He kept his eyes fixed at a point on the rear wall up over their heads. He didn't smile or ask for questions. When it was finally over, Ron felt like cheering.

Out as his locker, he noticed that several of the guys were hanging their blazers in the locker. That seemed like a good idea. At least he wouldn't have to wear the thing to and from school.

Ron went home that night, ate dinner with Marjorie and George. They asked the obligatory questions about how his first day was. He didn't tell them that he had been slapped in the mouth. He wanted to forget that it had happened. Besides, he wasn't a baby. He could take it.

After dinner, he read. He was lying on his bed with a transistor radio playing Surfer Girl. His door was closed to blot out the sound of the TV and their voices. His eyes felt heavy. Then he was asleep with his book still open and still dressed.

The next day felt like a copy of the first. It was just as hot. It was just as interminably long. Gym at the end of the day felt like freedom. His mind was focused on the tryouts. He wouldn't even have to change and he would be right there.

The freshman coaches lined them up on the track which was in back of the school and had once been a parking lot. The Brothers had dug up the asphalt and planted grass. The lot was surrounded by a pointy tipped, ten foot high, iron fence.

Ron's belly felt like it was fluttering. He wanted this so badly. The coaches showed them how to stretch out their legs and arms. There were five coaches watching. They were going to run sprints, four across. Two coaches were at the starting line and three were at the finish. When it was Ron's turn, he was placed in the lane closest to the school. He looked at the other three guys who also looked nervous. Coach Jensen said, "Ready," He paused and then said in a louder, more urgent voice, "Go!"

Ron ran. He tried to run faster than he had ever run before. People were watching. He felt himself pulling ahead. When he crossed the finish line, Coach Peters said, "Good job."

A few minutes later they had him lined up with another group. At “Go!” he felt himself flying. His arms pumped. The heat of the boring day in a jacket was behind him and he was putting as much distance as he could between it and him. This time it was a tighter finish, but he was still first. He felt Coach Peters’ eyes on him and then Peters turned to the other two coaches. Peters pointed at Ron and called him over. “Can you go again?”

Ron almost shouted his reply. “Yes, Coach.” He trotted back to the starting point. Peters signaled to Jensen to put him right on the track. Ron ran as hard as he could. This time he was second, just behind a lanky kid who really could fly.

Coach Peters called Ron over. “What’s your name, son?”

“Ron Tuck, Sir.”

“Ron, you’ve got some size and speed and endurance.”

Ron blushed.

“Do you love football, son?”

“Yes Sir.”

“Do you know how to use those shoulders?” Ron was confused and didn’t know how to answer. The coach waited for a reply. Were they going to cut him already? He won the first two races. Did you have to win three to make the team?

“I’m asking if you know how to block and tackle Ron.”

A light lit up Ron’s face. He smiled. “Yes Sir.”

“Wait over there.” Connors pointed to a spot on the grass on the field. Ron trotted over and sat down. Soon there were three other boys sitting with him. They watched the rest of the sprints. Then the other boys were taken into a group with Coach Jensen and Connors walked over to them with Coach Timlin.

“Well boys, got a little surprise for you. The sophomore team is a little light this year and we’re moving you three up. Go with coach Timlin and we’ll get you suited up.”

Ron’s heart sang an aria. He watched as Coach Jensen sent some of the other boys home and then started a second round of sprints.

The locker room that the football team used smelled of sweat and sweat soaked clothes and equipment. The Varsity had already been practicing for a week. Ron was fitted with a helmet. Coach Timlin picked up from a pile of neatly stacked helmets. It was a hard plastic and had a facemask with two bars running horizontally from ear to ear and two short, vertical bars that connected them. It was much heavier than the helmets that he had tried on in sporting goods stores.

Timlin said, "How's that feel?"

Ron was almost giddy. "Heavy."

Timlin grinned. "You'll get used to it."

Next they moved to shoulder pads. Timlin fitted him like a tailor. When the pads were on, he raised both of his fists and slapped them down hard on Ron's shoulders. Except for the pressure of the contact, Ron hadn't felt a thing. They shared a grin. Hip pads, thigh pads, knee pads, pants and a jersey went quickly.

"Get dressed and let's have a look at you," said Timlin and walked off to start with the next kid.

Ron stood in front of the mirror and looked at himself. He loved what he saw. He was still standing there when Peters walked into the locker room with a fourth kid. Now he had a team.

Phillip and Ron went to their lockers together. "I don't know why they picked me out," said Ron.

"You're big and you're fast," said Phillip.

"I wish they picked you too," said Ron.

"I'm glad they didn't pick me, Ronnie."

"Why?"

"They guys they picked you to play with are older and bigger and faster, and they're gonna make you pay."

"I figured that," said Ron.

Chapter 54

Mr. Tuck picked up the literature book and skimmed passed Bradford.

“So now we know what it was like to get here,” he said. “And what they found after they arrived. For the most part they had nothing to go back to and so no choice.” Ron thought about his girls at Our Lady of the Forlorn. They would have understood exactly what he was saying. But they had also moved on with their lives and he had done that too. He felt a pang.

“Ben Franklin is something else. He may very well have been the most accomplished man in the world by the time that he died. People don’t talk about him the way that they talk about De Vinci, but they should. He had a wider sphere of influence.”

He had their attention. He walked to the window side of the room and sat on the combination heater and counter that spanned the length of the room. “Let’s start with this,” Ron read, “Observe all men, thyself most.” He repeated it and looked out to them. “Five words, easy enough. What do you think?”

The class looked down and read it again. They looked up. Mr. Tuck was waiting. Teachers normally hated silence in their classrooms. It gave them the uneasy feeling that nothing was happening. Usually they could wait a teacher out.

Ron was silent. Then he read it again. “What do you think?”

“Ok,” said Mark Simon. “I get it. Be aware of the people around you and what they do, but pay closer attention to what you do.”

Ron smiled. “Why?”

Chris Fortuna said, “What you do is more important.”

Mr. Tuck smiled at Chris. “Because?”

“Because you do it,” said Chris.

“Seems simple right? But is it? Is Franklin hinting that we need to both be aware of our environment and how we interact within it, but that personal growth increases from self-knowledge? Did that idea also lead him to take part in the Revolution?” It was a simple concept but he wanted them to see it. Who you

were and what you did should be the results of self-awareness. “Now,” said Ron. He picked up the book and read, “Fish and visitors stink after three days.”

The class laughed and Ron laughed with them. He knew that if he repeated this line that they would just laugh again. “What do you think this means?”

Bobby Taylor raised his hand. “Well I know that my mom won’t even cook fish in the house. Either she buys it already cooked or they cook it outside.”

Ron thought about that. He wondered why. “And what does that have to do with visitors?”

The class was quiet. Ron paced back and forth rolling chalk between his palms. It clicked against his ring.

Chris said, “After a few days, you get tired of having them around.”

Ron nodded. Now back in the 18th century, it had more practical meanings as well. No refrigeration and so it was important to eat things fresh. They also didn’t know a lot about hygiene, and so visitors would probably not have bathed. That is one of the things that made Franklin uniquely American and popular. There was both wisdom and practicality in what he said and wrote.”

Back in the teachers’ room Ron huddled with Sam. “I want to skip over some of this stuff and go more in depth with other pieces,” said Ron.

“It’s your class,” said Sam.

“Yeah, I’m just concerned about the finals. But I figure that I did a couple of Native American things I’ll do Jonathan Edwards Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, doing Franklin now, I’ll mix in some of Jefferson and Thomas Paine, but then I want to skip right to Poe and do a bunch of his things.”

Sam’s eyes got a little wider. “That’s a big skip, but I know why.”

“Yeah,” said Ron. “The writing sucked and I’ll lose them.”

Father Tom Orecchio was sitting there listening to their conversation while he puffed his cigarette. There was something about Ron’s mannerisms and his patterns of speech that he found familiar. “Where you from, Ron?”

Ron looked up, surprised by the question and lit a cigarette. "Newark," he said exhaling.

Orecchio smiled. "Whereabouts?"

"Broadway, Lincoln Avenue." Then it dawned on him. "You from there?"

"First Ward," said Orecchio nodding.

Sam said, "So I guess the message here is to never let either of you get really pissed off at me."

Tom Orecchio and Ron Tuck shared a grin. That was always the reaction from people who didn't grow up there unless they grew up in Paterson or Jersey City. Father Orecchio said, "It's not that we're that tough, just that vicious."

"Where'd you go to school Tom?" There was a slight pause. Ron had never called him Tom before, neither had anyone else.

"St. Rose's grammar school, then Jersey Catholic." He noticed a tension in Ron's face.

Then Tuck said, "I went to Jersey Catholic too." He added, "For a while."

Chapter 55

The next day's practice was hard. After classes, they changed into their uniforms, carried their cleats and walked the mile up to Branch Brook Park. It was a huge park, more than 360 acres big, and it skirted the border of Newark. Ron felt that the park was designed to keep Newark caged in. He walked up 2nd Avenue with the other players. The sophomores didn't talk to the freshman that had been added to their team. They were embarrassed to have them there.

The team stretched and Ron smelled the freshly cut grass. When he lay on his back and did leg lifts, he stared up at the sky and felt like his helmet was a cocoon. He felt relaxed and yet tense at the same time.

Coach Connors said, "OK men listen up. You all know we have some new players. They didn't ask to be here. We picked them because we thought they

could help us. They are on the team and I expect them to be treated like everybody else.”

A large red headed kid named Allen muttered out of the side of his mouth, “Yeah, like shit.”

Connors heard the comment but didn’t respond. Ron tried not to laugh. “Well, let’s see what we’ve got.” Connors explained the drill. He lined the team up facing each other about ten yards apart. There were twenty-six of them. Thirteen on a side. “On my whistle, squad on my left runs like they have the ball. Squad on my right, you tackle them. The idea is to run straight ahead guys. Ron was on the left. He could do this. He felt determined. In front of him was Allen, who was bigger than Ron. For a second Ron felt fear. Then he tugged on his face mask and thought, fuck it.

He ran straight at Allen. The impact was not like anything that he’d ever felt before. He felt that he’d run into a car and then he left his feet and came down on his back with a thud that made his head spin. He closed his eyes and opened them again. It was still spinning. He heard Coach Connor’s whistle and his voice say, “Ok, pop up.”

Ron wasn’t sure that he could move but then he found himself on his feet wondering how he’d gotten there. Now it was his turn to deliver a blow and he couldn’t wait to wipe the smirk that he saw on Allen’s face right off. The whistle blew. Allen ran with a galloping churn of his legs. Ron tried to aim himself at Allen’s waist but it was covered with his churning legs. He reacted by going low. He cracked into his knees and wrapped his arms around and hung on tight. He thought this is what it feels like to tackle a moose. Allen went down hard. Ron didn’t feel dizzy this time. He felt completely alive.

Coach Connors walked over to them. “That was two good hits men.” He looked right at Ron. “Do you know why you got creamed?”

Ron shook his head.

“You gave him too big a target. You let him get into you where you were soft. You need to run low and pump your knees higher.”

Ron nodded. He wasn't sure that he could change the way that he ran, but he would try. At the whistle, he ran hunched and pumped his knees high. It felt like it slowed him down. He felt Allen grab at his ankles and he pumped harder and then fell flat on his face. There was grass sticking out of his facemask when he got up. He didn't care. He wanted to smack into the moose again.

As they walked back to the school, every part of him ached. He was smiling. He stripped off his jersey and shoulder pads and sat in front of his locker. Allen and two of the other sophomores came over to four freshman and said, "You take your showers when we're done."

They waited together. One of the four had stripped naked and sat with a towel draped over his thighs. Ron felt the ache spread through him like ease. It took the edges away. He could relax. He didn't mind waiting.

By the time they'd finished showering there were position assignments on the bulletin board. Ron was listed at linebacker and guard. He understood. He wouldn't get to run with the ball anymore.

Having the ball in your hands or even touching it was so much more special in football than in any other sport. You held the ball. You squeezed it tight. You didn't let go like your life depended on it. Ron walked the three blocks to his house. He'd have to be able to steal the ball.

Marjorie was waiting for him. She smiled when he came through the door. She didn't tell him how hard it had been for her to get home from work and that Harry Tuck had detoured in order to make sure that she got there ok. She was working downtown in a clothing store now. She saw a chance at some advancement. She could sell. But the manager wanted her to learn credit and she saw him more than once leering at the fullness of her breasts and her behind. She didn't mind.

She saw her son and the slight bruise on her chin and the way that he seemed to glow. "How was your day?"

Ron grinned. "I don't know. I got knocked down a lot but I got up and I loved it."

Marjorie said, "What about school?"

“I didn’t get into trouble,” said Ron.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s different there.”

“Why?”

Part of Ron wanted to tell her that they made you afraid to do anything but what they wanted you to do. He fought the urge to tell her. “I’m one of the little kids again,” said Ron.

Marjorie smiled and stroked her fingers lightly over the bruise. She rarely touched him. She preferred to look at him. She felt him pull back, like his father. She took her hand away.

“Do you want to go for a ride?” she said.

“I’m supposed to read.”

“You can read later,” she said.

They drove north back to Broadway. She stopped the car in front of their old basement apartment in the five story building. Ron tried to look into the windows and see who lived there now. He wondered if those people were anything like he was.

Marjorie turned the corner and headed the car up Montclair Avenue. They parked in front of number 89. It was his Aunt Dottie’s building. She gave them iced tea that was fresh brewed. That told Ron that she had been expecting them. The ache was almost gone. He missed it. He realized that he was hungry when he saw the plate of homemade corned beef hash on his plate. He launched into it with gusto. The women ate more slowly and smiled as they watched him devour the food.

After dinner, they sat in the living room. Ron sat on the floor and tried not to touch anything. Dorothy sat in her fan backed chair. Marjorie sat on a couch with an enormous, white, goose-down cushion that would take an hour to re-fluff. The evening light hardly filtered in through the drapes and they turned on a lamp that had a Chinese design. He gazed at the centerpiece which was also

Chinese and depicted a lone fisherman waiting for a fish that he would never catch, but eternally hopeful.

Dorothy said, "A man that works hard is an asset. It hurts when you can't talk to him."

"I know," said Marjorie. "Sometimes when I talk to him, I wish that I hadn't."

Ron was silent and listened. He stared at the fisherman and felt wisdom in his gaze.

"Has he hit you?"

"No, but he's punched things to avoid it."

"That shows that he knows how to hold back," said Dorothy.

"I don't love him."

"So what? You think I love the old fart that I'm married to?"

Aunt Dottie met Ron's eyes and let him know that he wasn't allowed to laugh. He'd wanted to and she knew it. But he couldn't and her look was communicating that in the sternest terms. Ron held it in and it passed. Marjorie hadn't seen it. She was absorbed in the thoughts of a loveless marriage.

"I have an idea," said Marjorie.

Dorothy listened.

"I want to put him into so much debt that he can't even think about gambling again."

Dorothy was genuinely surprised. "How?"

"I want to buy a house and get out of Newark."

Ron's heart was beating very fast as he listened. He wanted to be on the island with that Chinese fisherman, and the dwarf tree and the moss and the water. He might as well be there as out of Newark.

Marjorie continued. "There's trouble coming here. This isn't going to be a good place to live anymore. I want to take you with me."

At first Dorothy bristled and then she smiled. “We’re getting too old for keeping up with this.” She spread her arms upward to indicate the 22 apartments over her head.

He knew that something had happened and that his life was changing in some unexpected way, but he didn’t understand it. The light was soft but the air was heavy. He breathed in the scent of her carpet. Ron looked up and she was gazing back at him. How he loved her and everything that she was. If they could all live together, he could be happy.

Dorothy said, “That could be a long way off. A lot could happen between now and then.”

Marjorie nodded. “But that’s my goal.”

Ron’s eyes lifted to his mother. He could see determination and fear.

Chapter 56

The meeting between the Bombascos and The Bragos happened at Marjorie’s house. Harry Tuck was also invited. They sat around the table in the dining room. They were there to discuss numbers. Ron and Celeste were nervous. It was his first wedding and her third. Her parents had been here before and were embarrassed at the prospect of being here again. Marjorie had waited to be sitting at a table like this forever. But not with them.

George served drinks. Mario and Anna took Scotch on the rocks. George was shocked when Marjorie said that she would have some wine. Ron had what Marjorie did. Harry took Scotch straight up. Celeste had the wine. George fixed himself a Manhattan and sat down.

Marjorie tried to smile. She clasped her hands together on the table and said, “So they want to get married.”

There was nervous laughter around the table. Mario said, “God only knows why.”

Marjorie frowned. They should feel grateful at the chance of having her son who was making the biggest mistake of his life. "Yes, I've wondered why as well."

Eyes were on Ron and Celeste now. They sat there looking down at the table and then Celeste spoke. "I didn't expect to have your son come into my life. I'd lost hope that he was out there. But he's here now and I can't help but love him and want to spend the rest of my life with him."

Anna just closed her eyes. How had she raised such a fool to believe in true love at her age? "We don't have a lot and we'd like to keep this small for obvious reasons."

"What are they?" said Marjorie.

The two women eyed each other and just when Ron wished for it, he thought he saw his Aunt Dottie come into the room. He blinked and squinted and she was gone. She would have known how to handle this. But she was dead and wasn't coming in the door anymore.

"Celeste has been married before, twice."

Marjorie's face was grim. "My son hasn't. Why should he have to pay for your daughter's mistakes?"

"We've all paid for Celeste's mistakes," said Anna.

Celeste wished that she could shrink down to nothing and just disappear.

"We're straying from the point," said Harry. "Marjorie was married once before. I was married once before. We know that not all marriages work out. No one needs to pay. I thought we were here to discuss this wedding."

Celeste smiled at Harry. Marjorie capitulated. Anna sulked but did not respond. In the back of her mind, she hoped that if she started a big enough fight that Ron and Celeste would call the whole thing off. Marjorie has been a willing participant and things would have escalated. But this Harry guy had thrown a pail of cold water on that and now she was stuck, but only for a moment. "I understand that you had the privilege of meeting my grand-daughter. Isn't she beautiful?" said Anna.

"She's cute," said George.

Marjorie's head snapped towards him. He never opened his mouth at the right time and he never, never said the right thing. "She alright," said Marjorie.

Anna and Mario recoiled like they had been slapped in the face. Their Angel was being called 'alright.'

"I think that she's a very special little girl and so very smart," said Ron.

Anna nodded. He'd better say that or she was getting up and walking right out of here this instant.

"We'd like to get married at the end of March," said Ron. "I'll have Easter vacation and so I won't need to miss any time from work."

Marjorie said, "Are you both really sure that this is what you want to do? I mean there is more involved here than just the two of you. There is a child to think about. And all the expenses that come along with her." She turned to her son. "Where are you going to get the money to support a wife and child? A few years ago, you were taking cans out of our pantry so that you could eat in the summertime."

Now it was Ron's turn to want to disappear as he saw Anna and Mario exchange a look and both shake their heads.

Celeste started to say that she was going to get a job, but Harry spoke up first. "We were poor when we got married," he said to Marjorie.

"That was different," she said. "Everybody was poor then."

That had been true of Mario and Anna too but they weren't about to wash those dirty clothes in front of these people.

Marjorie stared at Harry and then said in a defeated voice, "I think we can give them \$5000."

Harry said, "I can do that too."

Mario and Anna had decided on \$2000 but Anna said, "We'll help all we can, but we don't have that kind of money. Maybe we can go \$3000."

Mario spoke before thinking. "I thought that we decided on \$2000."

Anna wanted to kick him in his shins until he bled. She hated that he never minded looking cheap.

George said, "I can also get all of the printing of invitations done for nothing."

Marjorie smiled. He finally said something useful. She would make their wedding favors at her ceramics shop, but she wasn't going to say that just then.

Ron and Celeste smiled at each other. They had a budget and an uneasy truce, but they had make progress.

Chapter 57

The sophomore team's first game was against East Orange. They had no game uniforms and were told the night before to take their pants and jerseys home and have their mothers clean them. Ron was in a quandary. His mother hated doing laundry. There was no laundry room in this building. He sat on the edge of the tub that he'd filled with hot water and detergent and bleach and soaked his filthy uniform. He took a scrub brush to the harder stains. When he was pretty sure that he's gotten everything acceptably clean, he hung them up to dry.

George got home before Marjorie. When he saw the uniform dripping into the now filthy tub, he said, "What are you doing?"

George had an idea. He got a plastic garbage bag and loaded the wet uniform in it. He could not fault Ron's desire to look clean. He would help him with that. Secretly, he's told all the guys at work that his son was playing football on the JV as just a freshman. His chest had swelled when they congratulated him and said that maybe this would keep Ron out of trouble.

When Marjorie came home, George said, "Let's have dinner at my mother's house. She has a washer and a dryer. Ronald has a game tomorrow and this fabric will never be dry like this.

Ron felt touched. For George it was a win win. He'd get to eat dinner with his family, and he'd done something for Ronald that he could use when he and Marjorie argued about Ron's lack of respect. Marjorie was glum but agreed. She was hot and tired and the last thing that she wanted to do was have a noisy dinner at her mother in law's house where the women didn't trust that she knew how to do anything in the kitchen.

They ate escarole and beans. George was in heaven. It was accompanied by a tomato salad from the garden and the tomatoes were plump and juicy and ripe and swimming in olive oil with some onion.

Ron picked at his food and was grateful to George for helping him out. After dinner and while the dryer was running, George snuck down to the Arrow where he placed a \$20 to win bet on Touchdown, a colt who was running in a qualifier down at Monmouth.

The next day's classes went smoothly. Ron had been prepared both times that he was called on. He'd taken his Friday Algebra quiz. He wasn't sure about that. He barely passed the first two and they were review.

In English, his black frocked teacher had asked the class to explain the difference between an adverb and an adjective. Ron had been tentative but correct and concise.

He hadn't been hit and so it was a good day, but he'd watched other get slapped. In Religion, Brother Cecil had rapped his knuckles down on the top of Anthony Malone's head for speaking out without raising his hand. The sound had echoed and Anthony held a hand on top of his head for several minutes afterwards.

Brother Alvin had pinched his fingers into Malone's neck earlier that day. He said that he was helping him with his accent. The class bonded. They were all going to take a beating once in a while but that was the way that it was.

Ron lined up on the receiving team for the kickoff. He was on the front line. Just before the whistle blew he felt his gaze pulled up and saw his father standing alongside his car. His body froze and his mind went blank. The ball was kicked to his left and his team mate covered it. Ron stood there in shock at the thought that his father was watching him play as a large black boy from East

Orange slammed his body down on top of the Jersey Catholic player who lay on the ground with the ball curled into his belly.

Ron felt a surge rush through him and felt like a river in his ears. He was on offense. The same kid was lined up across from him. Ron's assignment was to drive on him and he fired off with low slanted speed and the need for collision. It came. His shoulder bucked into the kid like a kick. He heard the grunt and the play ran for eleven yards. He looked for his dad. He was still there, standing and watching.

When he heard the same play called in the huddle, he grinned. He was gonna get to do it again. He fired out but this time the boy tried to circle him. Ron changed his trajectory and lunged and hit and kid went down on his back. Helmet to helmet, Ron looked into his face. He saw fear. He liked what he saw. Jersey Catholic didn't score but they drove and when they punted the ball was deep in East Orange territory.

Ron was second string on defense. At least he thought he was. When he got to sidelines, Coach Connors put his hands on his shoulder pads and slapped his ass. "Linebacker on the left," he said. He gave Ron a shove and sent him back out to play.

The perspective was different when you weren't down in a stance. Ron bent his knees and coiled his torso. The play went the other way, but he sprinted and got there just as it ended. Coach Peters turned to assistant and smiled, "Ronnie likes to play football."

The game continued and Ron flew all over the field. He loved to tackle. He was unstoppable. His dad was watching. His team was up by one score. Then Allen Watkins fumbled in back of the line of scrimmage. There was a pile and Ron was in it. The ball was wedged under him. A hand punched him in the stomach. A knee came up into his groin. Ron was clutching for the ball, but other hands were clutching for it too. They heard whistles but no one was letting go or stopping. And then it was gone. He'd lost his tentative grip on it. When he got up, the fat Black kid was smiling. He held out the ball. "Lose something?" he said with a smirk.

Ron was about to go for him when he heard another whistle and a ref was between them and a yellow flag was fluttering in the air. "Unsportsman like conduct," said the ref.

East Orange was backed up. Ron felt a fury rushing through him like the sound of a train whistle in his ears. He wanted to hit. He saw the play coming right at him. It was a sweep to his side. He moved towards it and felt a sharp pain in his back knock him off balance and send him sprawling onto his face. He jumped to his feet with fury in his eyes and a throbbing pain at the middle of his back. He saw another yellow flag.

The East Orange player who was called for clipping said, "Oh fuck these white refs and this white boy Jesus school."

The field erupted and players were grabbing at each other. Whistles blew loudly. The coaches were instructed to get their players to the sidelines. They met with the refs in the middle of the field. They stood there talking and the coaches were gesticulating at each other. The whistle blew again and the ref raised his hands in the air and waved them. He picked up the ball trotted over to the East Orange sideline tossed them their ball and then the two refs, still completely dressed headed for their cars.

Coach Peters' face was very red when he got back to his sideline. "Gather up our stuff men. We're going home. Game's over."

The players looked shocked. They didn't realize what was happening. "Fellas, I want you to stay together on the way back to the school."

No one said anything until Allen asked, "Did we win?"

"I'll tell you when we get back to the school," said Peters.

Ron looked for his father's car but it was gone.

Coach Peters circled around the team with his car. His assistant walked back with the team. Everyone was eerily quiet. Back in the locker room Connors explained that because they had a lead and that they hadn't instigated the trouble, they were declared the winners. The guys cheered and smiled. Connors said, "It's a lesson in self-control boys. We had it, they didn't. Anyone bloodied up or have an injury to report?"

Two hands went up into the air almost ashamed. Each of the coaches went to one of the boys. Ron stripped out his jersey and shoulder pads. He sat in front of his locker waiting.

Allen walked over and said, "Come on Tuck, you need a shower."

Chapter 58

The next time that the Bombascos and the Bragos met was at Angel's birthday party. Celeste had planned a lavish meal and everyone, including Angel's father and his family, was invited. It was scheduled for a Sunday and Ron was relieved that there would be no pressure for him to be anywhere else.

Joey and Mario worked all morning to set up the backyard with tables and tablecloths and chairs that they borrowed from neighbors. Anna sat in her kitchen holding her fly swatter. With all the ins and outs through the back door, she was sure that her house was now infested. Celeste was at the stove. She had four burners going and she felt tense and happy. Her daughter was two years old.

Anna said, "Any chance that Ron is intending to lend a hand?"

"He's working, Mom."

"On a Sunday morning? And you believe that?"

"He does his papers and prepares for the week on Sundays."

"Jimmy never had to work on Sundays."

Celeste unsuccessfully tried to hide the sarcasm in her voice, "Jimmy's a gym teacher."

"Oh," said Anna. "So now this Ronnie-come-lately is more important than your cousin?"

"I didn't say that or mean that."

"Who knows what you are talking about half the time."

Exasperated, Celeste reached for the pot of boiling water without a pot holder or a mitten. The hot metal pot burned into her hands. She dropped it and screamed.

“Oh, for God sakes.” Anna got up with difficulty. “Go into the bathroom so I can take care of you.”

Before Celeste had become a nurse and before Tina had become a nurse, Anna had nursed during World War 2. She’d seen burns. She dressed her daughter’s hands efficiently. Celeste watched as her sedentary mother’s hands worked with agility. The burns were minor. It wouldn’t be a problem. Anna gazed into her daughter’s eyes and saw her dreams and felt a pang of jealousy. It wasn’t jealousy without love. Maybe it was envy.

Anna had settled on a life. Mario had hardly been her first and only choice, but he was sensible and romantic. Most of all, he made her feel safe. He didn’t play an instrument anymore, but he’d serenaded her outside of her window when he courted her. The difference was that Mario no longer had ambition. The war had taken that away. Being a paratrooper as part of the preparation for D-day had taken that away. The people that he’d had to shoot had left him incapable of wanting more. Being peeled out of the night ice at the Battle of the Bulge had convinced him that he wanted a warm and easy life, with easy comforts. They had two children. They made a life. Anna looked into her daughter’s eyes. She had given her a grandchild who was beautiful and who Anna could tell embodied her spirit. She felt that Celeste’s choices in men had been astoundingly abysmal. They were either both entertaining and good for nothing or cold fish.

“How does it feel?”

“I’ll be ok,” said Celeste.

“He should have been here.”

“You don’t know him the way that I do. He’s kind and good and he’s really smart. He loves the baby.”

“I still don’t think that this is a good idea,” said Anna. “I don’t think that you know what you are getting yourself into.”

“Why?”

“I want to read his cards,” said Anna.

People began arriving for the party and there was still no sign of Ron. Celeste slipped off to dial his number and when there was no answer, she felt a twinge. She came upstairs and broke into a grin as she heard him squeaking around the corner. Barb was dressing Angel, who insisted that she wanted Aunt Barb to do it because she knew how to make her look the prettiest. Barb had beamed.

Tina arrived with little Joey and hollered, “Where’s the birthday girl?”

Mario had come in the back door. He smiled and picked up his grandson. “She’s upstairs making herself bea-ut-ti-ful.” He enunciated each syllable and drew them out so that the word had a feel of cacophony.

Celeste kissed little Joey and opened the front door just as Ron was coming up the stairs. He immediately saw the bandage on her hand and said, “What happened?”

“A little accident,” said Celeste. “It’s nothing.”

Anna was back in her chair, she reached for her cigarettes and found that Mario had slipped the clear plastic off and turned it around so that it covered the open pack. She frowned and tore it off. “You know Mario, it’s doesn’t do anything but annoy me.”

Mario didn’t answer.

Ron said, “Tell me what happened.”

“I burned my hand reaching for a pot and forgetting that it was hot. It was my own fault.”

Anna waited for her to add that her mother had bandaged it, but she didn’t. She looked at her grandson in Mario’s arms and smiled. He was a big boy and very happy. He slept through the night. He entertained himself in front of the TV. In short he was ten times less demanding than Angel was. Publically, she credited Tina with this. Privately she knew that Angel was just more of a problem

child. It was good to keep Celeste in her place though. Then she frowned with the thought that all of that would be changing now. She grimaced at Ron.

Barb and Angel came downstairs. Angel was wearing a pink dress with white hearts on it. Her hair had a pink ribbon and hung down passed her shoulders with delightfully bouncing twirling curls. "Here's the Princess," announced Barb.

Angel took hold of the hem of her dress and did a little half curtsy, just the way that she and Barb had practice upstairs. Anna smiled until she laughed. Mario repeated, "You look bea-ut-i-ful," elongating the word even more than the first time.

Ron crouched down as Angel ran to him. "Do I look pretty?" she said.

"You're the prettiest two year old in the entire world," said Ron.

Then Angel ran to her grandmother, who leaned over and hugged her and whispered into her ear. "You are a knockout."

Angel wasn't sure what that meant, but she grinned with the faith that her grandmother always said nice things to her.

Tina smiled. "Hello gorgeous girl and Happy Birthday!"

There were about fifty people in the backyard, when the Bombascos arrived. Ron grimaced when he saw that Lois was with Marjorie and George. He hoped that he didn't have to explain that. There was a polite reception for them and introductions were made. Marjorie went up to Angel and said, "Happy Birthday" and handed her an elegantly wrapped gift.

Angel took it and ran over to the stack of presents that was taller than she was and twice as wide. Marjorie waited to be thanked. Celeste came over and kissed Marjorie on the cheek and said, "Thank you very much and please enjoy yourself."

Marjorie's eyes were fixed on the huge pile of presents. She watched Angel toss it onto the pile and saw it disappear. Well so much for the time that she had spent wrapping that.

Ron said, "Come over here. Let's sit in the shade."

Andrew Canigliaro arrived with his mother and father. There was a clear awkwardness. There were exchanged looks among the guests. He had a lot of nerve coming here after the way that he'd acted. They all knew that while Celeste was pregnant that he had called her repeatedly and begged her to have an abortion. Then his father had called her and told her that she should have an abortion. The general consensus was that he should hang his head in shame for the rest of his life.

The sight of the child and feel of the tension was just too much for Andrew's father. Donald Canigliaro clutched at his chest and collapsed. Rose Canigliaro screamed. Tina and Celeste ran. Angel had not seen what happened and discreetly Barb took her inside so that she would not be frightened. The sisters acted quickly. Tina loosened his shirt. Celeste took his pulse. Their eyes met and exchanged a troubled glance.

Donald was unconscious and he wasn't breathing. Celeste did CPR. Tina ran to call for an ambulance. Anna's belief in god was reaffirmed. Marjorie thought, what kind of a party was this? George watched the efficiency with which Celeste worked and admired it. Ron tried to stay out of the way. He was caught between wanting to go to Angel and wanting to help Celeste and knowing that he needed to stay close to his mother so that she didn't lose it.

It seemed that everything was moving in slow motion and then the siren could be heard. A stretcher was rolled up the along the side of the house. Celeste backed away when she saw the EMT's there. She had done all that she could. She hoped that it was enough.

As quickly as they had arrived, the Canigliaros left.

Mario said, "Is he OK?"

Celeste answered, "I think he's having a heart attack."

Anna patted Celeste's hand. "You and Tina did very well and Barb got Angel inside so that she didn't get scared."

Ron sat there watching and then turned to Marjorie. "Celeste may have saved his life."

“Don’t be so dramatic,” said Marjorie. “It may just have been the heat. She isn’t a doctor.”

“You’re incredible,” said Ron. He got up and walked away.

Chapter 59

Harry Tuck was drinking coffee with Marjorie and George when Ron got home. Ron lit up at the sight of his mother and father together. He blocked out the existence of George Bombasco, or shoved him far enough away in his mind to make him irrelevant. It was the three of them. It was the way that it always should have been, without a Rocky and certainly without a Bombasco.

“How was the game?” said Marjorie.

Ron grinned and the two of his parents smiled at the way that his face dimpled. “Dad was there,” said Ron.

“I saw the way that those Coons tried to bully you,” said Harry.

Ron nodded. “But we won.”

“And they hate you all the more for it and will say that it was stolen from them.”

“They stopped the game because they were afraid,” said Ron. “We weren’t afraid. The kids on the field weren’t afraid.”

“I don’t know what they even play against a nigger school,” said George.

Ron ignored George. “I was excited to see you there Dad, thank you.”

Marjorie smiled. He’d always known what his father needed to hear and said it to him naturally. When would Harry realize that Ron only said the things that he knew that Harry wanted to hear because he was afraid of not seeing him anymore? Marjorie waited for Harry to say that he was proud of the way that his son played, but in her heart she knew that he wouldn’t say it. He just couldn’t.

Harry got up to leave. A look of disappointment spread over Ron's face and then Marjorie watched him try to hide it. She hadn't been wrong to leave Harry Tuck. She told herself that again. She was sure that it was what she had to do and it didn't matter now anyway.

She both hated and loved Harry for the cool ease with which he slid out. She looked at George and closed her eyes. "Well, we better have dinner."

Ron could feel that his teachers knew what had happened in the game yesterday. Each of the Brothers smiled at him. Nobody put him on the spot. Even Brother Cecil gave him a pass. Ron was doing his reading. His mind was not willing to submit to Latin or French. He did the assignments, but he just couldn't commit the words to memory. They didn't make sense to him. He had words. He was squeaking by in Algebra, but some of his classmates weren't.

Brother O'Shea said, "Mr. Dalton, you got a 59 on the quiz didn't you?"

Stan Dalton had been called up to the front of the room to receive his quiz. "Yes Brother."

O'Shea rocked back on his heels. "And that isn't good enough is it?"

"No Brother." Stan Dalton's left eye began to twitch.

"Would you prefer them on your palms or your backside?"

"I don't understand Brother."

Brother O'Shea removed a strap from his belt that looked like the one that Joe the Barber used to sharpen his razor when he was about to shave the back of Ron's neck after a haircut. "Hold out your hands," Mr. Dalton.

Stan Dalton extended his palms. They were shaking. The strap was a blur when it cracked down on the boys open palms. He yelped and pulled his palms back.

"One more," said O'Shea. "You decide, which hand?"

Stan Dalton hesitantly extended his left hand, the one that he didn't have to write with. The fingers were curled and O'Shea used the strap gently to straighten them. Then he raised it over his head and cracked it down on the trembling flesh. Dalton yelped and then whimpered. His shoulders slumped.

“You may take your seat, Mr. Dalton”

The class watched Stan Dalton meekly return to his desk. He was rubbing his hands on his thighs.

“Now,” said O’Shea, confident that he had their attention. “Let’s talk about Algebraic equations.”

Chapter 60

When it was time for Angel to open her presents, Celeste set up a lawn chair in front of the huge pile of gifts and placed her daughter between her thighs on the chair. Angel squirmed until she was comfy and then Celeste handed her the first gift. It was from her grandmother and grandfather and was a pink snow suit with a hood that had a fluffy white fringe on the top. Celeste smiled at her parents. It was just what she had asked them to buy. “Look,” she said, “It matches your dress.”

Angel couldn’t remember snow and didn’t know what the heavy garments were for but she said, “Thank you Papa. Thank you Nanna.”

There were smiles and a few “ohhs” from the party goers. Angel was on to the next gift. Celeste tried to fold the suit back up and get it into the box, but Angel was excitedly ripping into the wrapping paper of her next present. Barb came to help Celeste and took the snowsuit and box so she could re-box it and let Celeste concentrate on Angel. It was a summer dress. It was blue and had a huge pink heart on the chest with a picture of a kitten inside the heart. Celeste read the card to Angel. It was from Aunt Barb, one of the eleven presents that Barb had bought her for the day.

Ten presents into the process, Angel was bored. Everyone had gotten her clothes and they were nice but she felt hot and confined with her mother in the chair and wanted to run around. When Celeste handed her Marjorie and George’s gift, she said, “No more now,” and squirmed free.

Ron could feel the tension emanating from his mother. Marjorie turned to Lois and said, “They just let that child do whatever she wants to do.”

Lois nodded. "She spoiled and she's too young for this kind of thing."

Marjorie rolled her eyes and looked at Ron but directed her statement to Lois. "Oh no, she's a prodigy. The smartest girl the earth has ever seen. Just ask my son."

Ron's green eyes flashed dark. "She's two years old."

"Then she should be treated like she's two years old."

"That's enough now," said George. His fear of embarrassment was one of his strongest emotions and Marjorie knew that he hadn't wanted to be here in the first place.

Celeste realized her mistake. It had already been a long day for Angel and she had missed her nap. Celeste had let the party and the preparations and the tension of having the Canigliaros and the Bombascos there, along with her desire to just have the day run smoothly to cause her to forget the nap. Angel was cranky. She wanted Ron. She saw him sitting off to the side and ran over to him. She literally dove into his lap and Marjorie recoiled.

She turned to George and said, "You're right, it's more than enough."

She turned to Ronald who was tossing Angel gently into the air and catching her and said. "We're going to be going."

"Just a second," said Ron. "I'll walk you to the car."

"I think you should stay with what's important to you, Ronald," said his mother.

She and Lois walked away. George said, "You know how she is. Let her get over it."

"Get over what?"

Angel no longer tossed and giggling ran off to find someone else to play with her. She was on overdrive and headed for a crash.

"You know how she is," repeated George.

Janine had heard everything. At Anna's request, she had positioned herself where she could hear what Marjorie and George were saying without interacting with them. It was going to be an interesting phone call tomorrow morning.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening. Just about everyone had left. Celeste brought Ron out of the basement where he'd been reviewing for the next day's classes.

The dining room table had been cleared off except for the coffee that was in front of Anna along with her deck of Tarot Cards. Janine and Anna had taken classes together to learn how to read them and Anna was uncannily good with them. Janine's mother Hannah was the best in the family, but her skills came from an old tradition of divining that was mysterious and involved pressing her thumb into the forehead of the person she was working with and sometimes stroking the tips of that person's ears.

Ron sat down across from Anna. He didn't tell her that he also had a Tarot deck and that he'd done readings and astrology charts in the past.

"Would you mind if I read your cards, Ron?"

"Not at all," said Ron smiling.

She spread the cards on the table, face up. "Pick the card that you think best represents you," she said.

Ron gave her his dimpled grin. "Well, let's go with popular opinion," he said. He selected The Fool. Janine giggled and Celeste smiled. Anna's face was expressionless, except for the feel of a tired sadness.

She handed Ron the deck. "You shuffle them."

Celeste and Janine watched along with Anna as Ron shuffled the cards again and again. Janine stared at his hands. They weren't as big as Jimmy's hands. She'd ask Celeste about his equipment the next time that they were alone.

Ron finished shuffling and laid the deck down in front of him. He waited.

"Cut them," said Anna. Her short red hair was mixed with grey and white. Ron tried to read her face as she shuffled. He couldn't.

Ron cut the cards and handed them back to Anna.

“Place them on the table,” said Anna.

“Do you know your question?” said Anna.

“Yes,” said Ron.

“Don’t tell me,” she said.

Ron obeyed and watched. Anna turned the deck towards her and picked it up. Slowly she laid the first card down, “This is in back of you.” The ten of Wands appeared. Ron stared at it. A man with his back turned was carrying a load of 10 wands or staffs. Out of the top of each one small green flowers were visible. In the distance was a house.

Anna turned the next card. “This covers you.” The ten of Cups came up reversed. Ron saw the cups in a semi-circle in the air. Underneath them a man and a woman were dancing. In the left corner of the card was the sun and in the other corner was the moon. Anna turned the next card saying, “This is in front of you.” Ron hoped that by doing this that maybe they would be closer together. Maybe she would give him a chance. The two of Swords was revealed. This depicted a blindfolded woman sitting on a rock with her arms crossed at her chest and a long sword projecting from each of her hands. She turned the next card. “This card indicates the emotional factors that are influencing you.” A Woman and a child were seated in a boat. A man standing behind them was using a staff to propel the boat and six Swords were lining the sides of the rowboat. Anna stared up at Ron’s face. She thought that she saw fear and that he was about to ask something. “Just wait until I’m finished” she said. Then you can ask questions. The fear seemed to vanish from Ron’s face and he nodded.

“This next card indicates the outside influences on you. The Queen of Swords came up reversed. A woman wearing a crown was seated on a throne and held up a single sword. “This card indicates your hopes and fears,” said Anna. She turned the card and The Hanged man appeared. A man with his hands behind his back was suspended upside down from a cross by one foot. His other foot was bent at the knee and in back of him. There was a halo around his head. “This last card indicates the outcome to the situation about which you have a question.” The Hierophant appeared. She looked like a priestess of a queen seated on a

throne. Two monks were kneeling before her. In her left hand she held a scepter and right hand was raised in a symbol of peace.

Ron stared at the pictures. His emotional mind flicked from one to the other. He knew that The Fool meant hope. It was why he had chosen it. He wondered if there was any attempt to reach out to Anna that would meet with a measure of success. He tried again to reach into her.

“So what do you see?”

“A confused situation with a troubled past and influences that are stacked against things working out. Although, there is hope in these cards.”

Ron was drawn to the boat and the man standing with a staff, rowing a woman and child. He’d learned to trust what he saw in the cards as much as he trusted the written explanations of what was there.

Ho looked at Celeste. He saw that she didn’t see anything in the cards but was hopeful that maybe there was a place of agreement of peace. He felt the warmth of her there with him. Agreement and peace and a chance to make it work. That’s what they were asking for. Why was it so difficult to achieve?

Janine’s eyes flicked behind her tinted glasses from one card to the other. She knew what she saw. She didn’t need to be told, but it was Anna’s reading.

“The answer to your question is that there is a difficult path in front of you and no guarantee of success. You are haunted by a past that you could not control. You’re impetuous to believe that you can control your future. You’re wrong and you know it. But you want a fighting chance. You feel like you deserve it. That’s also wrong. You may get it but it won’t be because you deserve it.”

Janine felt her eyes widen. Anna truly was uncanny.

Chapter 61

It was a warm Saturday evening late in October. Ron was taking a walk up to Elwood Park to see if any of his friends were around. He was amazed at the reactions that people had to him playing on the upper level team. They seemed to

look at him differently. He basked in the glow of it but not as much as he loved to play. He was as happy as he could remember being in a so long. He hadn't been slapped since the football season had started. His grades had improved. He was evening passing French and Latin and Algebra, although the last was much in need of improvement and he hoped that somehow it would just begin to click for him.

The days were shorter now and it was dark early, but the streetlights that ringed the park created a twilight that allowed you to see. There was a large group of guys and they were playing football. Ron knew that he wasn't allowed in these kinds of games anymore. It was against the team rules, but he wanted to play. He wanted be unstoppable and with these guys, he could still run with the ball.

He was invited into the game and quickly said yes. He'd dressed in jeans and a sweat shirt. If he had been honest with himself, he would have admitted that this was why he had come here. It was a seven on seven game. Ron was playing his position on defense, he was a linebacker. When his team had the ball, he was in the backfield.

On the sixth play of the game, he caught a short pass and pivoted the way that he had learned from Richie. The fake worked and he raced up the sidelines and scored. The elation sent waves of euphoria racing through him.

Instead of kicking the ball to the other team, these kids threw it. Ron was lined up on the left. The ball spiraled down the middle of the field. When it got higher than the lights, it couldn't be seen. Ron raced to where he thought it would land and then it was coming down and bouncing and Larry Bonet picked it and ran up the middle of the field. Ron cut in towards him and lunged. As he lunged he planted his foot, the way that he did when he was wearing cleats. But he was wearing sneakers and they slipped and the lunge came up short and he felt his arm curl to grab Larry's hip, but there was no force behind it.

Ron bounced off harmlessly and hit the ground hard. The pop that he heard was followed by electric jolts of pain. He'd never felt a pop in his body before. He tried to jump up and run after they play. He got to his feet, the adrenalin rushing through him, and ran. On the second step, her heard the pop again and went down hard, rolling and clutching at his left knee.

He tried to get to his feet but he was having trouble straightening his leg. It seemed to be bent like a dog's leg and he couldn't manage to straighten it out. He tried to take a step, but his leg wouldn't move. He stood there with a helpless look of pain and embarrassment. "I don't think that I can play anymore tonight," he said.

His immediate problem was how to move. He couldn't just stand there in the middle of the field. He needed to get home and look at his knee, but he couldn't take a step.

Larry Bonet and Phillip Rolandelli, helped him to a car that was parked alongside of the park. He felt some relief when he leaned against it. Maybe if he just stood there until the throbbing went away, everything would be alright.

Ron felt his knee swelling. He looked down and to his horror it was pressing out against his jeans. They seemed trapped by the swollen knee. Ron leaned over and tried to pull the jeans down. Another wave of electric shocked rushed through him. This was bad. This was really bad. He watched the guys play a while longer and then the game broke up and the kids started home.

Ron found that if he pressed down on his toes when he tried to hobble that he could propel himself forward. Maybe if he had a stick, something to lean on when he stepped he could make it.

The six blocks he needed to cover to get to their apartment took over an hour. Once he sat down to rest on a porch, but the effort that it took to get back onto his feet convinced him that he shouldn't do that anymore. He was sweating profusely. The pain just wouldn't stop. When he reached the apartment he was shaking with the effort that it took to take a single step.

His mind went into shock when he looked at the steps. How the fuck was he supposed to manage them? He had an idea. He placed both hands on the railing and hopped on his good leg. The jolt squeezed tears out of his eyes. He had another idea. He sat on the steps, bent his arms and used them to raise his body to the next step. On his ass, he managed the two flights of stairs. The hallway of the apartment was dark. Ron could see the glow of the television coming from the living room. He hobbled slowly to his room.

Marjorie heard the noise and said, "Is that you Ronald?"

Ron tried to make his voice sound normal. "Yeah Mom."

"Come in here a moment."

"I can't,"

"What do you mean, you can't?"

"I fell. I'm having trouble walking. I think I did something to my leg."

"Well, take your time. I want to talk to you."

Marjorie had seen Ron come home bruised before. He always tried to hide his bumps and bruises so that Marjorie wouldn't get angry with him. She waited.

Ron tried to take a couple of steps, but he had used all of his energy to get home and then to get up the stairs.

Marjorie heard it in his voice when he half cried, "I can't."

Marjorie and George left their TV program and the light went on in the hallway. Ron stood there hunched over. He was leaning against the wall and his left legs wasn't touching the ground.

Marjorie gasped when she got closer. He was drenched in sweat. His hair was matted to his head. He had been crying. George moved towards him and Ron felt his supporting bulk. George said, "Just lean on me." Ron could smell the beer on George's breath as he half carried him into the living room. They laid him on the couch.

Marjorie said, "What did you do to yourself?"

"I don't know. I tripped in the park."

She suspected immediately. "Were you playing football?"

Ron shrugged.

"Don't you get enough of football all week long? Now look at what you've done."

Ron felt guilty, but angry too. Other kids' mothers felt sorry for them when they got hurt. His mother took it as something that he had done to himself to hurt her.

George showed him how to use a kitchen chair to lean on when he tried to move. He would lean against the back of it and then slide it forward across the wooden floor, but it didn't work on the stained, shaggy white rug. "I'm going to bed," said Ron.

"Well I hope it's better in the morning," said Marjorie.

Ron slid his chair down the hallway and made it to his bedroom. When he finally got his jeans off, he saw that his left knee was twice the size of his right knee and it was hot to the touch.

Ron had trouble sleeping. Each time he turned in his sleep, the pain woke him up. In the middle of the night he sat up and rubbed his palms up and down the sides of his knee. It seemed ever larger and hotter. Ron knew that he was in trouble. He'd never been hurt like this before. The closest thing was when he fell from the top of a chain link fence and his right ankle had bounced up from the ground and been impaled on one of the twisted bottom ends of the fence. He'd hidden that one from his mother and still had a deep scar.

Why had he done it? How could he have been this stupid? Now he might have ruined everything.

The next morning was no better. They set him in the living room with his knee propped up on his chair and George covered it with an ice bag. Ron felt helpless. The least little thing that he tried to do was an ordeal. Trying to stand on one leg and urinate was impossible. He felt humiliated when he sat on the bowl to pee. He assured Marjorie and George that he was fine and they were to George's mother's house for dinner, promising to bring him a plate home for him. At least he'd gotten out of that.

Ron tried to do homework, but his mind would not allow him to concentrate. What was going to happen to him? What was wrong with his knee? How much trouble was he in? The questions tormented him as much as the pain.

After two ice bags, the swelling went down a bit and Ron was elated. Maybe it was going to be ok. He'd heard about sprained knees. Maybe that was what he had done. But in his ears, he could still hear that sickening pop.

On Sunday night, Marjorie said, "I don't think that you can go to school tomorrow. I'm going to have to find some way to get you to the doctor. Of course I don't know how I'm going to do that and I might lose my job, but I'm glad that you had fun playing football." She spit the word football out like she hated it.

Ron kept the ice on his knee all night long. He listened to the radio, hiding it under his pillow and pressing his ear down to the music. Puff the Magic Dragon and You Don't Have to be a Baby to Cry filtered up into him. He heard Louie Louie at least four times and still didn't understand what the words meant. Every two hours, he used the chair and limped down the hall as quietly as he could and refilled the ice bag.

Marjorie thought she heard him each time but was too angry at him for getting hurt to get out of bed. He wasn't supposed to get hurt and now she'd seen him hurt over and over. Was that the joy of being a mother?

By morning Ron said and showed that he could walk without the chair. He limped and he was tentative, but he was improved. "Mom, just let me stay home today, no doctor, you go to work. George was right. The ice is working."

George had long since left for work. What Ron was offering made the day simple. It was routine. "Ok, but I need to call your father."

Ron was watching a rerun of The People's Choice when the phone rang. He liked that Cleo the dog talked. He wanted to see the mayor's daughter without her clothes. Absently, he was stroking his penis when the phone rang.

"Ronald?"

His erection dissipated in an eye blink. "Hi Dad."

"Tell me what happened."

Ron closed his eyes. Now he needed to pee. "I was stupid. I got hurt because I was stupid again."

"That's how you learn," said Harry. "How bad is it?"

"I've been putting ice on it. I can almost walk now. It hurts but it's going to be ok."

"I'll call you later. Try not to be stupid again."

Ron flushed at the admonishment. "OK."

The receiver clicked. Ron looked back up at the screen to see the Mayor's daughter walk away with her hips wiggling. He began to stroke it again.

Chapter 62

"Edger Allen Poe was way ahead of his time. So far ahead and so sophisticated that it took his country decades to really catch up to what he was doing. In France, he was loved and respected. Not here. He suffered from what he believed were certain demons inside of him and his stories always seem like an attempt at expiation."

Ron turned to the chalkboard and wrote *to expiate* in block letters on the board. "What does this word mean?"

Mark Simon carried a pocket dictionary with his books. He fished it out of his bag and thumbed through pages. Ron saw him and waited. Other students tuned to a dictionary that was in the back of their literature books, but Ron doubted that they would find it there. Mark said, "To atone for as in atoning for one's crimes."

Ron smiled. "That's right. Now after you read tonight's story, I want you to give me a paragraph that discusses the connection between The Black Cat and expiation." Ron knew that they had probably read the story before. He had been surprised to see it included in the book. It was something that was usually taught in middle school or perhaps ninth grade. It was a warm up to The Fall of The House of Usher. He gave them the writing assignment to assure that they would read and not try to rely on their younger memories of the story

Ron waited outside of Brother Todd O'Malley's office. It was his prep and he had been given something shockingly disturbing in one of his freshman classes. A student, a rather strange, short and stocky kid named Carl Flack had signed his

name in blood on his quiz. Then he'd announced it to the class as he walked his paper up and handed it in. Ron looked at the paper. The penmanship was good and perfectly in red was his name, written in blood. He had pricked his finger and managed to squeeze up a bubble of blood that he dipped his pen into as he worked the letters.

Brother O'Malley was a giant of a man. He stood six feet and six inches tall and weighed over three hundred pounds. He was in charge of discipline. His size, his demeanor, and his baritone voice made him feel imposing.

"How can I help you, Mr. Tuck?"

Brother O'Malley sat in back of his desk. He did not invite Ron to sit. Ron sat anyway and opened his large book bag. He extracted the quiz carefully. He had placed it between two blank sheets of paper. "A student, a freshman named Carl Flack, handed in this quiz and announced to the class that he had signed it in blood." Ron extended the paper.

O'Malley's eyes darkened as he took it. "I don't believe that I've ever seen anything quite like this before," said O'Malley.

"I haven't either," said Ron.

"Are you sure that it's blood?"

"Either it is or this kid has one heck of an imagination, Brother."

Brother Todd O'Malley said flatly, "A diseased imagination."

Ron's mind flashed on Poe, but he wasn't teaching Poe in this class.

"Let's take a walk," said Brother O'Malley. He stood heavily, and together they walked to the main office where he looked up the location of Carl Flack's locker. Ron stashed his book bag in back of the counter and quietly followed O'Malley who was carrying a large ring of keys and his clipboard.

When O'Malley opened Flack's locker, the disgusted look on his face caused its lines to deepen and become a menacing scowl. Hanging in Flack's locker, on the hooks that were designed for coats or sweaters, were three strings. From each dangled a freshly amputated rabbit's foot. He opened the door wider for Ron to see.

The color drained from Ron's face when he looked. There was something seriously wrong with this kid. O'Malley shut the door without disturbing anything. He'd expected to find some kind of substance, but not this. He felt the anger rising in his massive body. Ron followed him to Flack's class.

O'Malley opened the door without knocking, stood in the doorway silently. He'd looked at a picture of Flack when he found the location of the locker. Slowly his eyes panned the room. Students fidgeted and put their heads down. The teacher stopped speaking and stood frozen in the center of the class, half turned to the chalkboard. O'Malley's eyes found Flack. He walked towards him, his long black habit swaying like the motion of a moving battleship. He towered over Flack's desk. "What have you done?" rumbled the baritone voice.

Carl Flack tried to escape but he tripped and fell to the floor. Calmly O'Malley reached down, grabbed his heel and dragged him out of the classroom, holding his leg in the air.

Ron stood with his mouth open as O'Malley silently dragged the boy, still sprawled on his back, down the hallway to his office. He wasn't invited to follow.

Chapter 63

On Monday night, Ron told Marjorie that his leg felt better and that he wanted to go to school. "Did you talk to your father?"

"He called. He told me to try not to be so stupid."

"That sounds like him," said Marjorie. She always pumped Ron for information about his conversations with his father. He always resisted, but she knew how to wear him down. Harry didn't have the ability to express emotions like most people. He was uncomfortable with intimacy. He'd built walls around what was important to him for a very long time. Marjorie had been fool enough to think that she was inside those walls and that he trusted her. Now she knew that Harry wasn't capable of trusting anyone. He had a good heart but he was short on trust and set in his ways. "No football practice."

“I have to show up, but I’ll tell them that I’m hurt.”

“Will they know how you got hurt?”

“No.”

“Will you tell them?”

Instinctively Ron sensed the danger in the question. It invited conspiratorial confidence, but Ron didn’t trust it. There were always consequences. “Yes,” he lied.

Ron stood in front of Coach Peters in the coaches’ office.

“How did you hurt your leg?”

Ron had stripped off his shoes and pants but left his underwear and shirt on when he went to see the coach. He knew that Peters would want to see the knee. The day’s walking and the lack of ice had caused it to swell noticeably and it was warm to the touch.

“I fell.”

“What were you doing when you fell?”

“I was in the park running sprints, coach.”

“Were you alone?”

Coach Peters suspected that the answer wasn’t true but he wanted to know if any of his other players were involved. “No coach, I was with some friends.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“No, coach.”

“Looks to me like it should be looked at. I can’t have you practice on that leg, Ronnie.”

Ron felt the ease of relief flow through him. Coach Peters would never have called him Ronnie if he was pissed.

Chapter 64

Reading the paragraphs that his students had written about Poe, Ron was surprised that they seemed incapable of separating the actions of the author from the actions of the main character. They write about Poe's cruelty to animals and about how guilt had driven Poe to write the story as a confession.

Ron was feeling pretty guilty himself. The sight of Carl Flack being dragged down the hallway and then the notice in his mailbox to remove him from the class lists and determine a grade for the work that he'd done so far, left Ron feeling that he had done the wrong thing. At Our Lady of the Forlorn, Ron would have talked to the student. He would have had input into what happened. But his girls would never have acted this way.

Mark Simon had written, "Poe is trying to expiate his thoughts by revealing them and turning them into something better than they were." Ron smiled. Well at least he'd gotten the difference between author and character.

When the phone rang, Ron expected it to be Celeste, but Elena, one of his former and best students said, "Hello, Mr. Tuck, it's Elena Rodriguez."

Ron felt his face break into an immediate smile.

"I hope that I haven't reached you at a bad time, have I?"

"Not at all Elena. I'm just reading essays. I could use a break."

"Are they as good as our essays used to be?"

Ron laughed. There was no reason to tell her that these boys had been better prepared than her classmates had been. That was surely true but she didn't need to hear it. What was also true was that they were nowhere near as sensitive as his girls were. "I don't think that anything will quite touch me the way that you girls did," said Ron. It was an honest response and it avoided hurting her feelings.

"Mr. Tuck, I need advice."

Ron's mind flashed on when she had called him from a bathroom with a boyfriend waiting in the next room and wanting to have sex with her and her

asking him what she should do. Ron laughed in his best teasing way. "I think that you're old enough to make that decision for yourself now, Elena."

He could feel the girl blush right through the phone. She laughed. "Not about that, Mr. Tuck. I have that figured out. I can't believe that I did that and that I was actually able to look you in the eyes for the rest of the year."

"It was fine Elena. How can I help you?"

"I hate it here, Mr. Tuck. I never knew what racism really was until I got to Princeton."

Ron face grew troubled. His mind flashed on his old friend Sister Bernadette who had accused Ron of setting his students up for failure because he wanted to be special by making them be more special. "Tell me what's going on Elena."

"They look down on the scholarship students. They keep us in our own dorm. They treat us like we are charity cases who need to remember how lucky we are to be here. One of my classmates actually said that her tuition was so high because she was also paying off my tuition."

"How are your grades?"

"My grades are fine. It's the people who suck. It's Americans who suck."

"Come on Elena. I'm American and so are you."

"I'm Puerto Rican, Mr. Tuck, and the more I learn about what was done to my country the more I hate being American."

"Maria, if you lower yourself to that, they win."

"They already won and they want to make sure that I know it and never forget it."

"So what do you want to do?"

"I don't know. That's why I called you."

"Elena you are succeeding academically. You are too tough to let prejudice stop you at this point in your life."

“You don’t know what it’s like here. They look at you like you are a lower life form, someone who should be waiting on them in a restaurant if you are lucky enough to have a job. They don’t care how smart you are. They want you to know that you will never be as good as they are.”

“Elena, do you have friends?”

“Sure I do. I have the other scholarship students who live with me and eat with me and who go to classes with me and also get treated like shit.”

Ron hesitated. He wasn’t sure what to say to her. He didn’t doubt her voracity but he didn’t want her to be weak. “Elena?”

“Yes?”

“Stop whining.” He knew that she must feel like he’d slapped her in the face. “You’re there to get an education and maybe this is part of your education. Did you think that it was going to be easy to change the world?”

Her voice seemed to shrink. “No.”

“You’re letting it get to you.”

Her voice got stronger again. “Of course I am. I’m human and I’m sensitive and I don’t want to be treated this way.”

“You’re Puerto Rican and you’re from Newark. You’ve seen more of life than they have. You haven’t been sheltered.”

“Believe it or not I was sheltered from this until now.”

“So you want to give up. You want to have come all this way just to give up?”

“No, I don’t want to give up.”

“Then stop whining and get on with it.”

They talked for a few more minutes, but he could tell that she wanted to hang up the phone now. She didn’t ask any questions about his life and so he never told her that he was getting married. It was harder to get back to his papers after the phone call. Was it possible that Bernadette had been right?

Chapter 65

The doctor's office was in an old home that had a fireplace that had been stoned shut. There was a perimeter of chairs that had varying degrees of comfort. Marjorie was thumbing a magazine. Ron was staring at each aspect of the room and rubbing his hands along his jean covered thighs. Most of the people were old and sat patiently. It seemed incongruous when someone was there alone. Everybody went to the doctor's office with someone.

The wait seemed to go on forever. People judged how many others were in front of them by surveying who was seated in the room when they arrived. There were pocket doors that led into Dr. Polino's office. His desk was visible each time they opened. There was a second door through which patients left. The examining room was off to his right and just had an open arch between it and the front, conference room. The office smelled of antiseptic alcohol.

Dr. Polino treated Ron when he had asthma attacks. Ron used to go to a doctor who had been one of Rocky's family. He liked Doctor Merck, but that was just something else that changed when Rocky left them. "So what seems to be the problem Ronald?"

"I hurt my knee."

"How did that happen?"

"I was playing football. I landed wrong."

"Let's take a look at it."

Ron pulled down his pants while Marjorie waited in the conference room. She didn't want to see his swollen knee again. It made her start to cry.

The doctor probed and bent and twisted Ron's leg. He could feel it starting to swell again. The doctor was making it worse. Ron winced and when he couldn't help it, he yelped. His eyes were involuntarily fixed on the distant figure of Marjorie and he watched her, after each yelp had passed, recovering from it.

“You have what we call a hot knee, Ronald. It’s swollen and there is fluid that has built up inside of it. Sometimes, with rest and elevation, it can heal itself. Other times the fluid needs to be drawn out.”

“Ok,” said Ron.

“You can get dressed now.” Dr. Polino walked to his desk, sat down and took out his prescription pad. He was pretty certain that the knee was going to need to be drained, but there was a chance of reabsorption because he was so young.

When Ron was dressed, Marjorie came out of the corner of the conference room and sat in one of the chairs facing Dr. Polino’s desk. Ron limped over and sat in the other chair. His knee had felt so much better before he came here. “This will help the swelling to go down. I need to see him again in two weeks. Until then I want Ron,” Polino turned from Marjorie and directed his words to Ron. “Until then, no strenuous activity, no sports and you are to sleep with a pillow under your knee. Avoid stairs whenever you can. Do not take gym.”

Ron felt like each statement was a punch in his stomach. “What about school?” said Marjorie.

“Keep him home for the next few days. That knee really needs to stay elevated if it had any chance of draining. Ronald, use ice whenever it feels hot.”

For the next three days, Ron felt like he was living in a cocoon that brought him back to a time when he was happy. There was no homework. There was no time to go to bed or to wake up. There were morning TV programs that he’d almost forgotten had existed. As the swelling went down and his range of motion improved, his hopes soared. Football players had injuries, but they got better. Even the great Frank Gifford had been knocked out of commission for a season. Maybe everything was going to be ok.

Chapter 66

It was a seven on seven drill, something that was done for the linemen to improve the crispness of their timing and to learn to move like a unit. Ron was running the drill with Artie Harris but he felt that the holes were opening too slowly. Finally he handed the center a ball and said, "Oh my count, snap it back to me." The players looked confused. Artie looked confused. "I'm going to run through the holes, don't tackle me," said Ron.

He stood in a shotgun position that would roughly mimic how far behind the line the running back would be. He would wait a beat to simulate the handoff, and then he would run through the hole. He felt the rush of adrenaline rush through him as he ran and planted and cut up into the hole. The play got crisper. He did it again and again. Bodies were flying around him, he loved it! He'd forgotten what this felt like. He had been sure that he would never feel it again.

When the drill ended, the coaches gave the team a water break. Artie came over and said out of the side of his mouth, "You're fucking crazy."

Ron nodded and grinned. "So they tell me."

"God-damned craziest, animal, English teacher I ever met."

Ron laughed and felt his chest swell.

In the coaches' room, Artie said to Paul Pamenteri, gesturing at Ron, "This maniac was taking the ball up through the holes in a seven on seven."

Paul looked up at Ron in disbelief, "What for?"

"I think that it improves our timing," said Ron.

"I can't afford to have you getting hurt," said Steve Ferry.

Ron nodded. He had almost felt unstoppable, but maybe they were right. He couldn't afford him getting hurt either.

Ron showered and changed back into his street clothes and walked down to the teachers' room where he'd left his book bag. Larry Viola was there and he was working some scissors on a piece of cloth.

“Hi Larry.”

“Hey Ron, what do you think?”

Larry draped what Ron now saw was a sheet over his head. He had been cutting out eyeholes.

“What’s that for?”

Larry beamed excitedly. “I convinced Brother Howard to let me try my pre-game rally idea. This is going to be for when we play East Side.”

Ron eyes got larger. “What do you mean?”

“They’re known as the Ghosts, so when their bus pulls in, I’m going to be there with a group that I get together to help me and we’ll be wearing these.”

“You can’t do that,” hollered Ron.

“Brother said I could try it out. I have his permission.”

“Larry, do something else.”

“Why?”

“Paterson East Side is basically an all-Black and Hispanic school.”

“So?”

“Are you fucking crazy? They are going to come to an all-White suburban school and be met by a group of people with sheets over their heads?”

“They won’t take it that way.”

“They sure the fuck will and they’ll never get off the bus and they’ll go to the newspapers and you will be so screwed that you won’t even know what hit you.”

“Well, I’m doing it. It’s all in good fun. They’re the Ghosts.”

“And you’re a moron.”

“Fuck you. I don’t need your approval.”

Ron was in a quandary. When he had gone to Brother O'Malley before, the results had been brutal. If he went to Brother Howard about this, Larry Vila could be in serious trouble. Why were these things finding him? He'd just wanted to change and go to see Celeste and Angel but now here he was stuck with this mess. Larry couldn't be that naïve to think that he could do something like that, could he? He was a history teacher for Christ's sake.

Ron saw Brother Howard walking back to his office puffing his after dinner cigar. He sighed and put the book bag down. Damn that thing was heavy. "Brother can I have a moment?"

Brother Howard smiled and said, "Sure Ron, come on in."

Ron sat in the office as Brother Howard turned the lights on and slide down in back of his desk. "How was practice?"

"We're getting better."

"Are your classes going well?"

"Yes, Brother. I'm enjoying them."

Brother Howard looked perplexed. Classes were going well. Practice had been good. He hoped that Ron wasn't going to need time off or worse still have found a new job and need to leave them. "How can I help you Mr. Tuck?"

"Brother, I know about the pep rallies that you gave Larry Viola permission to organize."

"Alright." He puffed his cigar and scaped the ash into the ashtray. This wasn't going to be some foolish thing about coaches being above all of this was it? No, Tuck didn't seem like the type.

"Brother he's planning to have kids wear sheets over their heads when we play East Side."

Brother Howard's laugh was more like a guffaw. "You're joking right?"

"I wish that I was. He's in the faculty room now, cutting eyeholes into sheets."

Howard guffawed again. "Well, he can't do that."

“I tried to tell him Brother but I honestly don’t think that he believes that it is a problem.”

“Why don’t you just go on home now, and I’ll casually wander in to see what’s going on. We’ll keep this conversation to ourselves.”

Ron felt relief. “Thank you Brother.”

It was about eight o’clock in the evening when Celeste carried Angel, straight from her bath, down into the basement. She still wore a diaper at night, and she was wearing a lilac nightgown. She crawled into his arms with her brown eyes filled with wonder and wrapped her very small and fragile arms around Ron’s neck. Celeste slid in next to them and entwined her feet with Ron’s feet.

A surge of the need to provide and protect rushed through Ron’s body with one of the most delightful jolts that he’d ever felt. Angel purred like a cat and put her small hands up against each of his ears and leaned in to kiss him. Ron felt his spirit soar. She was magical at this moment.

Celeste watched the love affair with a warm and heartfelt smile. She wished with everything had she had inside of her that this had been his baby, and would be his child.

Angel nestled between them and wiggled her body from one to the other and then drifted off to a contented sleep. Celeste and Ron gazed into each other’s eyes and smiled.

Chapter 67

Ron was standing in the main office, on the first floor of Jersey Catholic. He’d never been here before. The female clerk said, “What is it?” Her tone wasn’t hostile, just businesslike.

“I need an elevator pass,” said Ron. He offered up the note from the doctor’s prescription pad.

She read it. Ron watched her hands and then her face. "One moment." Her tone was clipped and she turned away from the counter to prepare the pass. Elevators were reserved for faculty and those students who had incurred some form of injury that would grant them a temporary privilege. Anyone requiring that privilege on a continual basis was not considered for admission.

Brother Kelly was the school principal. He made it a point of delivering each elevator pass personally. The elevators were old and elegant and Kelly wished to keep their usage to a minimum. "What seems to be the problem with you, Ronald Tuck?" Kelly glanced down at the card to be sure of the name as he spoke it.

"I hurt my knee. The doctor says that I shouldn't climb stairs."

"And how did you hurt your knee?"

"I'm on the football team," said Ron.

Kelly handed Ron the signed pass. "Let's hope your recovery is speedy, Ronald Tuck."

The elevators had steel grates that slid closed and Ron stood towards the back trying not to be conspicuous as he rode up to his floor. Teachers got on and then got off. Some of them eyed him suspiciously. Ron fought the urge to hold up his pass each time one of them looked at him.

In the class, he found that the position into which one piece desk molded him was uncomfortable. He could bend it far enough to put his foot on the floor but after a few minutes it began to throb. He tried sliding down and extending his legs until they straightened. Then that became uncomfortable and he tried sitting up again. It was this progression of positions that filled his next few hours.

Because he had missed three days of school, he was behind with everything. As his assignments mounted, so did his sense of panic. By lunchtime, he was depressed and anxious. He got into the elevator while some students walked quickly passed him. He could hear their feet going down the stairs quickly, the way that he used to be able to go down the stairs. In the lunchroom, he tried to avoid being jostled. Dr. Polino had wrapped his knee in an ace bandage, but when he'd tried to do it, it had creases. All of the sliding down and straightening

had made the creases worse and now they dug into the back of his knee. They made it sore and impossible for him to think about anything other than his knee.

When Brother Delban asked him to conjugate the verb *to carry*, Ron explained that he had been absent. Delban walked over to him and rapped his knuckles down on top of Ron's head. He recited the first three variations of the verb, accenting each part of the recitation with a rap on the top of Ron's head with his knuckle. Ron closed his eyes and waited for Delban to finish. Now there was a throb on the top of his head, and he fought the urge to rub it. He stared at the clock, wishing that by some miracle it would move more quickly, but it didn't.

By the time he climbed the stairs to his apartment, his leg was throbbing and the knee had swollen up again and was hot. With some effort, he got his shoes off and pulled his pants down and unwrapped the badly creased ace bandage. His leg felt better after he took the bandage off, like it could breathe. Why did everything that the doctor told him to do make his knee hurt worse?

Ron tried to think of something to look forward to, but he couldn't. The tension of this was building inside of him and he had no way to get it out. He lay on his bed and turned on the radio. The End of the World was playing. He closed his eyes as Blue Velvet played and then he was asleep.

Chapter 68

Celeste and Ron were talking on the telephone. "We should start looking for places to have the reception," she said.

"Isn't it too soon for that?"

"Some people book these things a year in advance," said Celeste.

"Why?"

"They just do. There's a lot to consider. Ron, I have something to tell you."

"OK."

"I'm going to have my marriage annulled."

“How can you do that? I thought you could only do that if you hadn’t had sex.”

“In the Catholic Church you can do it if one of the people tries to avoid having children.” Andrew Canigliaro had surely qualified for that. The problem was that there was now a baby and he had accepted the responsibility to contribute to her support. But Celeste was willing to trade. She would allow him unsupervised visitation if he agreed to the annulment.

“Are we just going to have like a cookie cutter wedding?” said Ron.

“I hope not. I think that we can do better than that.”

“I do too. I think it’s why I have always hated weddings.”

“We’ll make ours special and memorable,” said Celeste.

“I think so too.” Ron thought and felt and spoke. “I don’t blame anyone for having doubts about us.” He stopped and smiled and then laughed. “That’s not really true.” He heard The Rolling Stones in his head and Mick Jagger singing those words. Ron said, “I said that and then I heard that Rolling Stones song that begins *I’m a leaping screaming monkey. All my friends are junkies, but that’s not really true.* Do you remember that song?”

“I remember it. Why did you think about that?”

“Just because of the words I guess. I’m not sure. Things pop in and out of my head all the time.”

“I don’t blame them for doubting, but I wish they could be more kind about it.”

“My dad’s been ok,” said Ron hopefully. “The only thing is that I’m not sure if it’s just because he doesn’t care enough about what happens.”

Celeste heard that and it caused a ripple to pass through her. She knew that her parents cared, didn’t she? She felt herself drawn to his voice when he spoke again.

“Part of me is like him. I used to think that part was cool and strong.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you can put yourself in a place where nobody can get to you.”

“I never wanted to be in that kind of place,” said Celeste. Another ripple. Was that as honest as she could be? “Maybe I did, a little, but I like people.”

“So, my mom wants to have the ceremony at her church.”

“Ron, there has to be a priest. There just does.”

“I thought about that. There’s a guy that I teach with. He’s from my old neighborhood. Maybe he would do it. He’s Italian. They could do it together, Protestant and Catholic.”

“I need to get the annulment for him to be able to do that.”

“I’ll talk to him tomorrow,” said Ron.

They listened to each other breathe for a while. It was comforting.

Chapter 69

It was a twist to the right that caused the pop to happen again. He pressed his foot down when he felt it and thought that maybe it had popped back into place. Somehow he had told himself that his knee was just out of place and could pop back at any time. He smiled as he felt the jolt. He’d seen things like that on TV where an arm or leg could just be popped back into place. Maybe that was what was happening. He wished very hard for that to be what was happening.

His first step felt spongy. But at least he felt stable. Maybe that was it. A few moments later he felt it starting to swell and reached down and felt the heat coming from it.

It went on like that for several weeks. Ron was now being given a hard time about the elevator pass and told that he would have to renew it every week and that he would have to produce a new note from the doctor each time that it had to be renewed. Life had changed dramatically. There were few days that went by without him getting slapped for one thing or the other.

He told Coach Peters that he was going to have to leave the team.

“That knee hasn’t gotten any better?”

“No Coach, it seems to be getting worse.”

“Tuck, you know you have to want it to get better.” The coach eyed him with an unsympathetic gaze. Injury was weakness and when a player couldn’t respond, Peters never lost the feeling that it was at least in part due to a lack of desire, a lack of toughness.

“I do want it to get better, Coach. Football was the best thing about my life and now it’s gone.”

“Clear out your locker then, Tuck.”

Ron felt slapped again. That was it? Just clear out your locker?

“Make sure that you’ve turned everything in. We have records of everything that we issued to you.”

That was so not how anyone who was on the team was spoken to. Ron felt the distance. The team had moved on. The coach had moved on. He was no longer a part of it. He sat in front of his locker and tried to sort everything out. When it was empty, a locker room felt like a deserted hovel. There were only a few things there that belonged to him. He didn’t want them anymore and threw them into the garbage.

The limp home was now something that he was used to. It was weird how the pain became more manageable as he became accustomed to it. He replayed the scene in his mind. He felt like the discarded soda bottle that he saw lying in an alley. Then an anger rose up in him and he thought to himself that he really didn’t need the team or football or anything.

His knee was tapped for the first time in late November. It was a Friday. He was being taken to his Aunt Dottie’s house. The rules were absolutely no stairs, no walking, he was to keep his knee elevated and stay off it completely. The doctor gave him a set of crutches. Somehow they felt comforting. They were proof of his injury. They would tell everyone that he hadn’t been faking or had wanted to not get better. There would be another few days away from school.

The trip home took him passed Jersey Catholic and Ron was shocked to see that the school was being dismissed. Marjorie was driving the Chevy that reminded her of Rocky. Ron slid down in the seat as they passed the school. He didn't want anyone to see him.

"I wonder why school is being let out?"

Marjorie didn't answer. The doctor's visit had been expensive. She felt shaken by the size of the needles that the doctor had inserted into his leg. She knew that he must be in pain, although Dr. Polino said that he'd given him a cortisone shot and that in a few days that his knee should feel a lot better and that the swelling would go down for good.

When they were a safe distance from the school, Ron reached out and turned on the radio. Instead of music he heard the announcer say, "At this point there is no way to know how badly the President has been injured. There are reports that he was hit in his head. To repeat, shots were fired at President John Kennedy's motorcade in Dallas about forty five minutes ago. There are reports of multiple injuries. The President is believed to be among those who have been injured. Texas Governor John Connally is also believed to be among the injured. The President and Governor Connally have been taken to Parkland Hospital. Defense Forces have been placed on alert."

Ron turned to his mother but she didn't seem to be reacting. "Do you think that he'll be alright?"

"I'm sure that he will," said Marjorie. "Those people are trained to take care of him." Marjorie was only half listening. She was worried about the bill and what George was going to say.

Dorothy had the back room all prepared for him. The crutches were of no use in her house and so Ron left them in the kitchen and limped slowly back down the long hall to his Uncle's room. Dorothy had pulled out the sofa bed and added extra pillows for his knee.

"I'm going to fix you a plate of cookies and get you some milk," said his aunt.

Ron tried to smile. The feel of her apartment was comforting and no one was going to holler at him or slap him here. Dorothy turned on the TV as she left to get the cookies and milk.

Ron saw Walter Cronkite in his shirt sleeves. There were people moving around in back of him. Everyone looked tense and nervous and busy. The scene shifted to a larger room and in back of a scene of milling and crying people, Ron heard that there were unconfirmed reports that the President was dead. He sat up bolt straight in the bed. His knee didn't seem to mind. He blotted out everything else in the room and stared hard at the TV. The camera shifted back to Cronkite who reported that President Kennedy was receiving blood transfusions in the emergency room. That must mean that he was still alive! Ron hoped with all his might that everything was going to be ok. Then a voice from off camera said that there was a rumor that was circulating that the President was dead. Ron felt his mind go numb and waited to hear what Cronkite said. Until Walter Cronkite said it, it wasn't true and rumors were just rumors. Then there was another report from the hospital itself that said one of the doctors was now reporting that President Kennedy was dead. Ron felt his eyes welling up with tears. Then Cronkite said that Father Hubert had been called into the operating room to administer the sacrament of last rites to the President. Then Cronkite said that there was a twenty five year old man who had been taken into custody at the scene, he interrupted himself to say that correspondent Dan Rather was now confirming reports that the President was dead. Tears were streaming down Ron's face as his aunt walked back into the room with the cookies and milk. She placed them on the table and sat down with Ron to watch.

The TV showed pictures of the ball room where President Kennedy was scheduled to speak. People were praying. Cronkite said that Vice President Lyndon Johnson had not been seen at Parkland but that there were unconfirmed reports that he had been wounded slightly in his arm. Ron thought, why couldn't they have killed him instead? His aunt was sitting hunched forward with her hands clasped. Marjorie had gone back to work as soon as she dropped Ron off. He was worried about her because her face had that tense look that it seemed to always have now. Then Ron realized that his Aunt Dottie was praying. He had never seen her pray before. Cronkite reported that some four hundred police officers in Dallas had been called in on their day off because there had been

reports that there might be trouble in Dallas. Instantly, Ron hated Texas and everyone who was from there. Cronkite reported that it had only been in late October when United Nations Ambassador Stevenson had been assaulted in Dallas. Ron thought, why does anyone go there? Why don't we just stay the fuck out of Texas altogether? Then Cronkite said it. It was official. The President had died thirty-eight minutes earlier. Cronkite took off his glasses took a deep breath and appeared to be crying. Ron cried too. His Aunt Dottie cried. They sat staring at the TV in disbelief, tears rolling down their faces. Cronkite gathered himself and said, Lyndon Johnson would be sworn in as the thirty-sixth President of the United States shortly.

Ron watched the TV endlessly. He couldn't stop. A man who had been there with his son and was waving to the President and the President was waving back and then he was shot and the man saw the expression on his face and then he was shot again and he was gone down into the limousine. Ron cried again. Four years ago, before Rocky left, before George intruded, they had taken him to a rally at the Newark Mosque to see JFK. Kennedy was late. They waited endlessly. Just when Marjorie was saying that she had to go to work at seven am, he was there. He was tan, he was filled with a light that seemed to shine from him. Ron was transfixed. Understanding what he said seemed less important than being able to have been there. Now he was dead. People were talking about watching him die. There were pictures of his wife and then a photo was released inside of an airplane. Johnson looked flabby and old and grisly. Jacqueline Kennedy looked like she didn't really know where she was or what was happening.

Dorothy had switched the channel over to NBC. Robert Abernathy was reporting on the return of the President's body, along with the garish presence of the new man who thought that he was the president. There were a couple thousand people waiting. Many were members of Congress. Ron watched the mostly dark screen that showed the blinking lights of the plane's arrival. Somehow those lights seemed sacred and important. Then the plane was visible and the words The United States of America could be seen lettered along the side of it. A row of small windows were visible underneath the words but nothing could be seen from them. Diplomats and Cabinet officers waited for the arrival. Ron believed with all his heart that they waited to be in the presence of that

person who had been John Kennedy. Lyndon Johnson, in his mind, was merely a passenger. It was so very dark as the honor guard walked up to the plane. Ron was alone now. It was late. Everyone else had gone to bed. Then he heard a shuffling and Dorothy came in. She sat down without saying anything.

“I just can’t sleep, Aunt Dot.”

“Me either,” she said.

They moved a special piece of apparatus out to accommodate the coffin. The men struggled to remove the casket. Each jostle felt almost like a slap. The dark brown casket glistened in the dark and Ron felt that it must be that light that he had seen, the light in back of the words that had listened to and read. They reported that it was a bronze casket.

“This is so bad,”

“It almost reminds me of the war,” said Dorothy.

A Navy ambulance arrived to transport the casket. JFK had always been Navy. It was fitting. No one knew exactly where the body would be taken. One report said that it would be flown directly by helicopter to the White House. Another said that it was going to Bethesda Naval Hospital.

“How many times have you seen this now?” said Dorothy.

“I don’t know, a few. It just seems wrong to stop watching.”

And then Robert was there and he was holding her hand and helping her down. Ron watched it for the third time. It wasn’t going to be any different but it right to be here right now. She got into the ambulance with the casket. One man in a military navy hat was opening the door. People were milling around.

“She’s lucky to be alive,” said Dorothy.

“I bet she doesn’t feel lucky,” said Ron.

Dorothy felt a twinge and stared at him. At this moment he seemed much older than he was.

People moved in formation as the ambulance drove away. Then they showed Lyndon Johnson and his wife who was called Lady Bird. They looked like

vultures to Ron as they walked out from the plane. People were shaking his hand. Ron felt anger. The congressman and cabinet members advanced. They were there to greet him. They hadn't come to see if anything was left of the light that he had seen and knew was still there. Only his wife and brother still saw it. But Ron had seen it. His Aunt Dottie has seen it too. Then Johnson came to a group of microphones to speak. Ron didn't want to hear what he had to say. Ron closed his eyes and didn't want to listen.

When he opened them, a man with short brown hair and a bruise over his left eye requested assistance. He said that he hadn't been charged with any crime and that he was requesting legal representation. He said that he'd been hit by a policeman. Ron lay there and watched. His knee was an afterthought.

It was reported that a rifle with a telescopic site had been found in the Texas School Book Depository. There were there spent cartridges and one shell left in the chamber.

Oswald was just wearing a t-shirt now and he said, "I'm a patsy."

Ron didn't know what that meant but he hated the sight of Oswald.

Chapter 70

"What is it about death that is so intriguing?" Ron Tuck looked out at his class. "That was one of the themes that Poe wrote about almost endlessly. In last night's story, he used the word 'House' in several different ways. For instance. There is an actual crack in the physical structure of the house. The word house here can also be used to represent the word family. It was once considered that a family could be identified by the word house which actually referred to its bloodlines and the branches of its family. On top of that, the house in this story seems to have the attributes of a character in the story. The way that Poe explores all of this and wraps it into a story is the use of an extended metaphor." He turned and wrote that on the board. His students took notes. "What is an extended metaphor?"

He watched while his students turned to the back of the book and looked up the meaning. Mark Simon, who was always the first to raise his hand when

Ron asked questions like this, shot his hand into the air. Ron waited. Slowly two more hand raised and then a fourth hand went into the air. Ron smiled. Patience and silence were two of the things that he had learned could serve a teacher very well in the classroom. It was learning to trust the power of the room. Then it hit him. The house and the classroom shared a power.

“When you read this story again tonight,” he paused and waited for their reaction, the groan was audible. “I want you to pay particular attention to Poe’s description of the house and compare it with his description of Roderick Usher. However, in Usher you will see evidence of the *House* of Usher, meaning the entirety of his family line. I want you to find examples of this and to also find five vocabulary words that you think will be of use to you.” The class wrote down the assignment. Ron was pleased with them and he showed it. “From what I see in this classroom, college level work is not going to be a problem. I see smart and capable students who are ready to do their study.”

Back in the teacher’s room, Father Tom Orecchio was smoking a cigarette. Ron slid in across from him and said, “Tom, I’m getting married.”

Orecchio exhaled and said, “Congratulations.”

“I was wondering if you are allowed to do an ecumenical service?”

Because he was not affiliated with a parish, Tom didn’t get a lot of call to do weddings and baptisms. They were easy money and most always went to the parish priests. Sometimes, a family member would ask, but they would expect that it would be done for nothing, or at the family discount as they called it. “Sure, I can pretty, much do any fucking thing that I want,” said father Tom. He was fond of cursing and enjoyed the reactions that people had to hearing the word fuck come from a man in a collar.

“Well, here’s the thing. I was a convert and really I’m not the best Catholic in the world.”

Orecchio laughed. “No, really? You’ve got to be shitting me,” His receding red hair and freckles led the students to believe that he had a diabolical side to him. He had come to the priesthood late. He was almost forty years old when he was ordained. But he had been stupid and gone on a diet of grapefruit in order to lose weight for his big day. Something had gone wrong and now his kidneys had

stopped working. Every third day he went for dialysis and the sessions left him worn old, cold inside, and cranky. He'd had dialysis that morning and was in no mood for bullshit.

"Celeste is Italian and it would mean a lot to her family to have a priest there."

"Sure, why not."

"Where's the wedding going to be?"

Ron swallowed. He knew this part wasn't going to go over well. "The Glen Ridge Congregational Church."

"You're fucking kidding."

"That's where my family moved to when we left the old neighborhood."

"You must have fit in really well there, Ronnie."

It never ceased to surprise Ron that people from Newark always slipped into calling him Ronnie. He hated the name Ronnie and when he went to college he made sure that people knew him as Ron. "Not so well, no."

Chapter 71

Cronkite reported that Evangelist Billy Graham had a premonition that something awful was going to happen to Kennedy in Dallas and had tried to reach him and warn him not to go. It did not occur to Ron how convenient that was to say afterwards. He had been taken to see Billy Graham in Madison Square Garden with Rocky and Marjorie. His mother had urged him to go forward and declare himself as saved, but he didn't. Now he wished that he had.

Then Cronkite said that a small blonde boy followed by two pretty girls had plucked hibiscus blossoms and laid them in the doorway to a home where Kennedy used when he was in Florida. Things like that were happening all over the country. Ron felt bitter that he had to stay here, but did admit that his leg was feeling better today, and it was cold out and raining anyway.

The TV scene shifted to Washington DC, where a reporter named Herman said that while the Secret Service knew, and President Kennedy knew, that it was impossible to protect him in a motorcade through a large city with thousands of windows, that if it had been raining in Dallas, if the rain had lasted just one more hour, that the president would have been underneath the large, plastic protective bubble that would have saved his life. They said that the Secret Service had always urged the President to use the bubble but that it liked to be seen by the people. Ron felt another wave of anguish wash over him. Maybe if he had listened, none of this would happen. Why would anyone want to be seen by the people in Texas? The reporters discussed the love that Kennedy had for going beyond rope lines to shake hands and let the people of America feel as close to him as possible and how his predecessor, President Eisenhower did not share that view and more often than not acceded to the wishes of the military. Ron felt anger mixed with his grief. Were they trying to say that the President had brought this on himself?"

Then Cronkite was back. Ron wondered how long it had been since Walter Cronkite had slept. He reported that people were gathered in front of the White House and were silently standing and watching dignitaries file in to pay their last respects to the President, who was now lying in state in the East Room. A man said that he was trying to picture JFK as the way that he was, a hero and an inspiration to people and that he just couldn't see him anymore. He was a tough looking man with a hard face and yet it was creasing and tears were running out of his eyes as he spoke. Ron had never seen so many men cry in his life. It made him feel better that he couldn't control his tears. Then a Black man who was smartly dressed and wearing a tight brimmed hat like Ron saw his father sometimes wearing said that he had no words to describe his feelings and that the White House now seemed empty and that no one could fill it the way that JFK had. Ron felt himself nodding. Certainly it couldn't be filled by a guy from Texas of all places. It was then that the thought occurred to him that maybe Texas had wanted their guy to be President and that maybe Texas had put Oswald up to it. Reporters were saying that the downpour of rain had driven most of the people standing across the street from the White House away but that large numbers of people had stood there all night just staring at the floodlit north portico.

Almost on cue the scene shifted to Texas. Police Chief Jessie Curry was surrounded by a group of reporters in the hallway. He was asked a lot of questions about how he knew that Oswald was the man and how Oswald had been apprehended and about whether Oswald had a lawyer. Ron didn't quite understand the answers and he could care less if Oswald had a lawyer. The scene shifted to Cronkite who said that Oswald's mother had stated that her son was a good boy and that she was willing to pay for a lawyer. Cronkite added that Lee Harvey Oswald had been the youngest of three sons that Mrs. Oswald had raised on her own after the death of her husband. He died shortly after Oswald was born. Ron thought that they were saying that somehow the birth of Oswald had caused his father's death. The grim thought that hit him next was that they were saying that it was because Oswald had been raised without a father's influence, that this was one of the causes for what he had done. Why did they always make everything about broken homes? Did that mean that somehow he would grow up to do something awful because his parents had been divorced? Isn't that what the cops had implied when he was caught with the knife? That he was damaged goods. He looked down at his knee. Well, they were right about one thing. That was for sure.

Cronkite then shifted the scene back to Dallas and Captain Glen King of the Dallas Police force said that a man who had been an associate of Lee Harvey Oswald had his house searched and that he had been invited in to be interrogated by police and that the interrogation was happening at that moment. He then said that the Dallas Police Force was asking that anyone who had been in the vicinity of the assassination and had taken pictures of it to please turn all of those pictures into the Dallas police department at the request of the FBI. King refused to identify the man who was being interrogated. Then a bombshell. Oswald had been interrogated by the FBI two weeks prior to the assassination. Ron wanted to scream. They had him and then they let him go?

Cronkite then reported that John Kennedy's body was now lying in state in the East Room of the White House and that the casket was resting on the same structure that had been used to hold Abraham Lincoln's casket after he had been assassinated. He then said that Jaqueline Kennedy had informed reporters that she had told her children, Caroline, age six, and John, age three, that their father had died.

Chapter 72

Celeste said, "I have a friend named Ricky, but everyone calls him Bottles. He's a bartender and he could get us the alcohol for the reception at wholesale and he knows somebody who can tend bar."

"That sounds great," said Ron.

"There's a catch," said Celeste. "He's my first husband's best friend."

Ron grinned into the pillow. He'd told her some about Robin and now he wanted to hear about Alex. "Tell me more about Alex."

Celeste hesitated. Ron was surely one of the stranger people that she'd ever met. He wanted to know everything. She'd expected him to ask her to handle it, and he'd surprised her again. "Alex was exciting. Life was one long, large party and he changed the games often enough so that I was always interested."

"What do you mean?" she could hear in Ron's voice that he was grinning into the pillow.

"In our first apartment, we had a large room. It was in Kearny and we had this great apartment and instead of a living room we had these board games set up everywhere. Friends were always there and we moved from one board game to the other and then and then we'd go out and play softball and go to one or two or three of the bars and come back and play the games until Alex passed out."

"Didn't that get boring?"

Celeste hesitated. Should she really tell him the truth? Did she know what the truth was? "No it didn't get boring because he kept changing things and he was so talented and big time people recognized his talent, but he couldn't help submarining himself." Celeste found that she was breathing easily into the phone as she told him these things. She knew that whatever she said, he would not think any less of her. What a strange feeling that was. It was almost disconcerting and she understood why women were attracted to Ron and then ran away from him. She understood in that instant that he would never stop. There would always be a

probing and a searching and a next question and maybe more questions than she was ready for.

“I think that you loved him,” said Ron.

“I’m sure that I did.”

“Did he love you?”

Now that was a question that she hadn’t expected. She felt her heart beat a little faster. “I think that he thought that he did.”

“Robin said that about me. What does it mean?”

Danger signs blinked in back of her eyes. What was he searching for now? “It means that love has got to be more than just in your head and in your imagination.”

Ron felt a jolt. He let it pass through him and then he whispered, “I know.” There was a silence and while it wasn’t comfortable, it was necessary. The quiet electric hum of the phone lines between them, and the intimacy that it created, flowed. “I think that we can really love each other.” He said finally.

The words washed through her stronger than a blow of cocaine, which she loved.

Chapter 73

On the evening of the second day, it occurred to Ron that Jesus had been crucified on a Friday. He felt like he was observing John Kennedy’s descent into hell. Some miniscule insanely-faithed part of him, dreamed of resurrection.

From Dallas, Captain Will Fritz, chief of detectives, announced that they had the case cinched but would not go into details. Brook Benton reported that Lee Harvey Oswald’s wife and mother had been up in the jail to see him. Ron wondered if they called him Lee Harvey. Had he really gone through life being called Lee Harvey? The route that Oswald would be soon taken from an upper

floor to the garage on the ground floor in order to be transferred to the county jail was broadcast.

The scene shifted back to a view of the White House and Cronkite's voice said that John Kennedy's son, who the President referred to as John John, and who would be three on Monday the day of his father's funeral, was reportedly walking through the halls of the White House saying, "I don't have anyone to play with." Cronkite said that he was reported to have said that his father had been killed by a bad man. Then it was back to Brook Benton and Captain Will Fritz was described as one of the most astute law enforcement officials in the south west. He wore glasses and a white cowboy hat. He said that he felt very confident that he had his man in both the killings of the president and the killing of Officer Tippet. Ron hated the look of him and hated that he equated the killing of John Kennedy with the killing of some Texas cop.

Cronkite finally signed off saying that tonight there would be a memorial concert in honor of the president that was being performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra. He also announced that coverage of these events would continue nonstop through the President's funeral on Monday.

When Ron woke up on Sunday morning his leg felt much better. He walked to the bathroom without a limp for the first time that he could remember he was actually able to urinate while standing up. Ron wasn't surprised that he hadn't seen his mother since Friday afternoon. She tended to stay away from him when he was sick. He didn't take this as a lack of love on her part, rather he felt that she was letting him heal and didn't like seeing him injured. He would tell his aunt to call her today and say that he wasn't limping anymore.

Back at the TV, Ron heard Harry Reasoner say that they were shifting away from the coverage in Washington to go to Dallas, where Lee Harvey Oswald was being moved to the county jail. Turmoil was breaking loose and the report was that Oswald had been shot. An ambulance pulled into the garage, Oswald was wheeled out on a stretcher. The reporter said that he was ashen and unconscious and not moving. They had to wait while the armored truck that was supposed to transport Oswald was moved out of the way. People climbed into the back of the ambulance with Oswald. There was shouting and the newsmen were being cordoned off away from the actual place where the ambulance sat idling.

Then the scene shifted back to New York and Reasoner said, "We have re-racked that video tape that shows that whole scene of confusion. We will now roll it and you can see it as it happened." It was dark and a bit confused and two men led Oswald out when suddenly a man who was described as wearing a black hat and a brown coat rushed forward and shot Oswald in the stomach. Ron stared in numb horror. What was happening? Was the world completely crazy? He felt frightened. Ron heard the reporter say over and over again, "Oswald has been shot, Oswald has been shot!" Then Reasoner was there again and said they were going back to Dallas for live coverage. The reporter asked a man in a police uniform how many shots had been fired. The man said, "One shot." The reporter asked if the man was known to him and he said, "Yes, he is." The reporter said that he knew that the officer could not divulge the name but would he tell them what business the man was in. The policeman answered, "I'd rather not say."

Abruptly, the scene shifted back to Washington and Jacqueline Kennedy was standing dressed in black with a black veil over her face. Her daughter Caroline was on her left and her son John was on her right. The casket was being loaded onto a caisson. They carried it out as band music played a mournful brass song that seemed to blare and echo in the halls of the building as the honor guard carried out the body of President Kennedy. Dorothy came into the room and sat down next to Ron.

"Someone shot Oswald."

"I knew they would. They were never letting him out of Dallas alive."

"It's just crazy. I don't know how I feel. I'm glad that he'd dead but Texas is just a bad place. They're all crazy."

"His wife looks beautiful," said Dorothy. She was holding a cup of coffee in her hands and staring at the TV. She put her coffee down and lit a cigarette.

Jacqueline Kennedy walked to the casket and kneeled and kissed it while Caroline held the hem of the flag that was draping it. John wasn't with them. The reporter said that she was saying her last goodbye for today.

"Why are they putting her through this?" Aunt Dot. "With everybody watching this way?"

“They don’t know any better,” she answered.

“I don’t understand. I don’t understand any of it.”

“She’s numb. She isn’t feeling anything right now. Her grief will really come later. I was her age when your Uncle Charlie died. He just went out one morning and then his brother called me and told me that he was dead.”

“How did he die?”

Dorothy drew in on her cigarette and said as she exhaled, “He had a cerebral hemorrhage?” This of course wasn’t true but she had, over the years, made it true by repeating it and not varying from it. If she ever told anyone the truth it would probably be Ronald, but he was still too young and if she told him now, he would tell his mother and she would start in again with questions and wanting to know what had happened to her father.

Then they were showing the footage of Oswald being shot and Dorothy thought that they led him right into it like he was an animal that was about to be slaughtered, but that was how it was down there.

“Will you tell my mom that my knee feels better?”

Dorothy looked at him and laughed in spite of the situation. “You mean tell her that it’s safe to come out now?”

Ron laughed too, then he felt bad for laughing while people were being shot and kissing caskets and losing their father. “She just gets upset when anything bad happens to me.”

“I’ll fix you some lunch,” said Dorothy. “Do you want to try to come to the table and eat it?”

“Yes.”

When Ron got back to the TV, it was two thirty in the afternoon. Cronkite was back. Ron wondered if he hadn’t been there on Sunday morning because he went to church. Church seemed very far away right now. Walter Cronkite reported that Lee Harvey Oswald was dead and that he had died in a room that was just ten feet from the room where President Kennedy had died. Cronkite said that he was taken down but a single bullet. Cronkite said that the man who shot

Oswald had been identified as Jack Rubenstein who was known in Dallas as Jack Ruby. He had moved to Dallas from Chicago and ran two nightclubs there. He was fifty-two years old and was balding with black hair. Dallas police were reporting that they would charge him with the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald.

The scene shifted back to Washington and a reporter said in a subdued voice that just as Walter Cronkite had just reported that word was coming through to people in the Capital Plaza, many of whom had transistor radios and that a cheer had gone up from the far right hand side of the plaza. Ron didn't feel like cheering but wondered if he should.

Then they were back in the studio and Dan Rather was showing a picture of Jack Ruby who had moved to Dallas from Chicago in 1948, and left his real name behind. He said that they were going to run a film that had been taken by George Phoenix who was a camera man. Rather directed the audience to pay particular attention to a man on the right, in the lower right hand corner who was wearing a black hat. Ron wondered why all the policemen down there wore white cowboy hats.

Rather narrated the scene as they showed it slow motion. Ron felt sick to his stomach. Then Cronkite was back saying that here was an associated press still photograph of Oswald just a split second before he was shot. Ruby's hat looked gray with a black headband, Ron thought. He guessed that things just got confused in the heat of the moment.

Chapter 74

Practice was going smoothly. Ron was standing next to Artie Harris when James Fitzpatrick knocked Kirk Hammerfield off balance and he staggered and crashed into the back of Ron's legs. Ron never saw it coming or even heard it. He was concentrating on a chart that Steve Ferry had given them on new line splits for the upcoming game with the Ghosts.

Ron heard the pop before he hit the ground. His face was in the grass. Electric shocks were shooting up his leg. His mind screamed, "Not again! Not again!" Everyone crowded around Coach Tuck who lay on the ground and tried not to cry or scream or move. It was his right knee. The one on which he had the second surgery. How could this be happening again?

Steve Ferry blew his whistle and hurried over to see what had happened. He looked at Artie. "Was he doing something stupid?"

Artie shook his head. "No, it was an accident. We were just standing here."

"Can you stand up, Ron?" said Ferry.

"I'm not sure," said Ron. His entire leg was throbbing with that all too familiar pain. Ron wanted to pound his head into the grass. He felt Artie and Steve left him up between them. The two brawny men accomplished this with ease. Ron weighed 175 pounds but he was a solid 175 and it wasn't that easy to just lift him that way.

When they got him into the coaches' room, Artie said "I've got something here that will help you." He produced an immobilizer and fitted it to Ron's leg outside of his pants. "This will keep you from aggravating it further until you can get to a doctor."

"Maybe I won't need a doctor."

Artie looked into his eyes. "I heard it, Ronnie. I was standing right there."

Chapter 75

"This is Walter Cronkite back in our CBS newsroom in New York. Lee Harvey Oswald the twenty-four year old, Marxist, pro-Castroite, which the Dallas police said they had a cinched case against, accused assassin of President Kennedy, was himself shot to death in Dallas an hour and a half ago."

Ron saw the photograph in his mind. The still picture taken just before it all happened. One policeman, wearing a white hat and on his right, had his arm held open. The other policeman was gripping his left arm. The gun got stuck right into his ribs. He was confused. It looked so brutal.

Ron's attention drifted back to the TV. Cronkite was saying that Rubenstein or Ruby as he was known in Dallas had no expressed political affiliations. Cronkite shifted to an interview that Dan Rather was conducting with a comedian who had been employed by Jack Ruby. The comedian said that he was a good guy who had always done right by him. Rather asked what kind of place the Carousel club was and the Comedian said that it was a nightclub that employed five or six exotic dancers. For a moment, involuntarily, Ron tried to picture exotic dancers. Then the comedian said that he had seen Lee Oswald in the Carousel Club's audience about eight or nine days ago. The Comedian, who was also an MC, was doing a memory exercise and he asked for audience participation. He remembered Oswald because he had participated. Rather asked if Oswald had been seen talking to Jack Ruby and the Comedian said that was fairly certain that Jack never knew that he was in the club. The Comedian said that he was sure that Jack Ruby carried a gun in a bag that he carried with him, regularly. He'd seen it once. It was small and short-nosed. Bill Demar said, "He carried it with him because he had the money."

Rather asked, "Do you ever recall seeing any unsavory characters around the club?"

"No," the man who was now described as an Entertainer and MC for Jack Ruby.

The scene shifted to Washington and the large crowd of people who had been waiting were allowed to file passed the coffin, two abreast. One of the soldiers who stood guard was wearing a green beret and the significance of his headpiece was described. The paintings that hung from the walls were described as being done by an aide to General Washington. They depicted four events that led up to the formation of the federal government. Ron felt his chest swell with pride. His country. His history. The line of people was endless. It was reported that for the next six to eight hours that the people would have a chance to say good-bye to their president by following this path. It was an endlessly mournful

progression. People's hearts brought them there and they just kept coming. It felt like the outpouring of a sea. They had to change the plans to close the doors to the Capitol Rotunda and the White House announced that the doors would remain open as long as there were people waiting to say goodbye. A flag draped the coffin. The honor guard could not help but stand at attention, even though they were allowed to stand at ease. The crowd advanced slowly like small people with large hearts. Together, everything about them was large. It was reported that President Eisenhower had worn a black armband yesterday in honor of his successor.

Then Cronkite sent the coverage back to Dallas and Dan Rather reported that there was yet a different angle to show the shooting of Oswald and ran that tape. It was like they couldn't get enough of seeing him shot over and over and Ron wondered if there was some solace in seeing him killed again and again. Rather reported that more and more comments were coming in from friends of Jack Rubenstein and that they were all shocked by the event and that Jack Ruby had been able to shoot anyone. It was also reported that Rubenstein was known to many on the Dallas police force. Rather said that the truth seemed to be that Ruby was so well known to the Dallas police that no one thought anything of him being there. Ruby had been around the police station each day for the last several days offering to give reporters free drinks if they came to one of his clubs. Then Cronkite reported that Captain Will Fritz of the Dallas Police Department was now saying that with the death of Oswald the case of the assassination of President Kennedy was now closed. Cronkite reported that the death of Oswald came almost exactly forty-eight hours after Kennedy's assassination and that it happened while eulogies were being said over the casket of the late President as it lay in state in the Capitol rotunda.

The scene shifted back and showed that the endless line of mourners was continuing to wait for their chance to pay last respects to Kennedy and that the line was flanked by blue uniformed policeman who stood at parade rest. So many people thought Ron and they all loved him. He could not grasp how so much love could be mixed with such a violent act. He felt the sadness and grief welling up inside of him again and tried to force it back. Ron wondered if they were mourning the TV images that had led them to believe that they knew this man or if they were mourning the loss of hope that he seemed to embody. Cronkite was

now reporting that numerous threats against various officials in Dallas were coming in from all over the country. Most notably there had been anonymous threats sent to the mayor of Dallas and to members of the Dallas police force who had been shown on TV and to a lawyer who had defended Jack Ruby at a time before the killings. He had said on TV that if asked, he would defend Jack Rubenstein.

Chapter 76

Ron was having difficulty driving. He stretched his encased leg out across the hump in the middle of the floor of the squeak-mobile. He tried to work the pedals for the gas and break with his left leg but he was unaccustomed to using his left leg and it caused his body to be at an angle that had him staring almost out the driver's side window rather than through the windshield. His leg was throbbing and the squeaking of the car seemed to announce him as damaged goods. He definitely could not drive on the highway like this and decided that he had no option other than to go to Celeste's house.

Then he pictured Angel being frightened by the way that he looked and Anna holding it against him and taking it out on Celeste. He pulled his car over to the side of the road and unstrapped the Velcro that was holding the immobilizer in place. He reseated himself and drove home, painfully. He reattached the immobilizer and found that the stairs that had so difficult when he had previously hurt his knee, were now manageable, one step at a time.

He lay on his bed and took off the immobilizer and his pants. The sight of his knee caused a grimace to wash over him. It was swollen to the point of looking distorted. He limped into the kitchen for some ice and then dialed Celeste.

"Where are you?" she said.

"I'm home."

Her voice sounded hurt. "I thought that you were coming for dinner. Angel has been sitting by the window waiting and listening for you."

“I know. I didn’t want to frighten her.”

“What do you mean?”

“I got hurt at practice. There was an accident and I hurt my leg.”

Ron expected this to be greeted by anger. It wasn’t that he thought that Celeste was anything like his mother, but it was what he was used to.

“How badly are you hurt?”

“I don’t know. I’ll give a day or so and see what happens with the swelling.”

“I’m coming down there,” said Celeste.

“It’s late,” said Ron. “What about Angel?”

“There are plenty of people here to take care of Angel. You didn’t eat dinner did you?”

“No.”

“I’ll bring you some food. Stay off of it until I get there.”

Ron felt himself smiling for the first time since the injury occurred. She wanted to take care of him. Ron rolled a joint and smoked it while he waited for her. He did not think about calling his mother’s house. He would have to take off from work tomorrow. His book bag was still in the car and he needed to prepare assignments that he could leave for his students. His mind whirled. He didn’t need the book bag. He could tell them what he wanted them to do. It would be simple. He’d assign a vocabulary lesson to each of his freshman classes. It would require them to write something that they had to turn in at the end of the class and so it would be easy for the substitute. He had Sam’s home phone number.

It took Celeste about an hour to gather the things that she needed and a plate of food. Anna’s mother said, “What happened to him?”

“He had an accident at football practice. He’s had two knee surgeries already Mom. This could be bad.”

Anna was different in an emergency than she was in everyday things. Her nursing training kicked in and that part of her brain worked quickly and logically. “Make sure you bring him something for the pain. Call me when you get there.”

Celeste smiled and kissed her mother's fleshy cheek. She looked more worn than she usually did.

She knew it was bad the minute she saw the knee. The swelling was much more pronounced above the knee than it was below the knee but she could feel the heat there too and the softness of the flesh told her that there was fluid buildup below the knee cap as well.

Ron didn't own a bed. What he did have was a mattress and box spring that were on the floor. It made getting up much more difficult. The high that he felt from the joint along with Celeste rubbing and squeezing his thigh caused him to have an erection. They both laughed when they saw it sticking up. She took it out of his underwear and said, "You just lie back and relax. It will make you feel better." Ron obeyed and closed his eyes as she stroked him.

Chapter 77

Dan Rather was reporting that there was going to be a news conference conducted by the Dallas County District Attorney that would provide every shred of evidence that they had gathered in their case against Lee Oswald. Ron was thankful that Rather at least left the Harvey out. He couldn't help but picture Jimmy Stewart talking to his imaginary friend Harvey who was a gigantic rabbit in a movie that he half remembered.

"This evidence was gathered largely by the Dallas police department which has done an excellent job on this with the help of some of the federal agencies. I'm going to go through the evidence piece by piece for you. Number one some of this you will already know and some you won't, I don't think. As all of you know there are a number of witnesses who saw the person on the sixth floor of the book store building. Then there is the window from which he was looking out. Inside this window there were a number of bookcases and packages piled up, hiding someone who was at the window from people on the same floor looking in. There were some boxes in back of the bookcases where the person was apparently sitting because he was seen from that window. On this box that the defendant was sitting on, a palm print was found and was identified as his. The

three ejected shells were found right by the box. The shells were of an odd caliber and found to fit the gun that was lying on the floor. The gun was hidden on this same floor behind some boxes and bookcases. As you know the gun was found to have been purchased through a mail order house under an assumed name, Hidell, and mailed to a post office box here in Dallas. On his person was a pocketbook and in that pocketbook was found identification with the same name on it. Pictures were found. Pictures were found of the defendant with this gun and a pistol on his holster. Oswald was brought to Dallas from Irving by a neighbor. Usually on Monday but this time he came home a day early and returned the next day and said that Oswald was carrying a package under his arm. He told his neighbor that it was window shades. The wife said that he had the gun the night before and that it was missing that morning after he left.”

Ron felt his face harden. He had the gun. They had pictures of him with the gun. He brought the gun to work. Ron was glad that he was dead. He was glad that the police had him killed by their friend. The District Attorney went on to say that immediately after the assassination, a police officer had tried to arrest him but that the manager had said that he was alright, that he worked in the building. The District Attorney continued saying that after all of the other employees had been identified, a description of Oswald, who was no longer in the building, went out. Then Oswald was seen on a bus, laughing very loudly and saying that the president had been shot. He then got off the bus and caught a taxi. He went to his home in Oak Cliff, changed his clothes hurriedly and left. As he left, three witnesses said they saw a police officer, Officer Tippet, motion to him and say something to him. He walked up to the car and the police officer got out of the car and Oswald shot him three times and killed him.

He was just a madman, thought Ron. He half expected to hear that drool had been running out of his mouth after he killed the cop. He was then seen walking across a vacant lot and reloading his pistol. One of the witnesses reported seeing him go into the Texas Theatre. He was approached the movie theater and one of the arresting officers reported that he put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger but that the gun hadn't been reloaded properly and that the shell didn't come out. Ron almost smiled. He had been too stupid to load the gun right. The District Attorney then corrected himself and said that Oswald had placed the gun to Officer Mac Donald's head when it jammed. There was some confusion

about whether the gun had misfired or whether the officer had prevented him from pulling the trigger. Henry Wade, the District Attorney, had then given the press all of the information that they had collected in their case against Oswald. Then Dan Rather showed the film of Oswald being shot again. Ron wanted him shot over and over. He wanted him to suffer the way that he was suffering and the rest of the country was suffering over this thing, this horrible thing that he'd done. Rather concluded, "It's been that kind of day in grim, shamed Dallas."

Ron slept on the sofa-bed. The light from the TV illuminated the room. Marjorie hadn't come there but she'd called and said that she would be there sometime on Monday. It was a national day of mourning. Everything was closed. Dorothy sat in her parlor smoking. She couldn't bring herself to sleep in the same room as her third husband for one more night.

There had been times when she had thought about asking Marjorie to just let Ronald live with her, but she wasn't sure that she had the energy for him. And Marjorie would never have agreed. There were few things that she couldn't impose upon Marjorie. One was to stop asking questions about who her father had been and what had happened to him. The other would be to ask her to give up Ronald.

Dorothy's first husband had been Mickey Fairmount. He was a boxer and she was twenty and wanting to escape the drudgery of caring for the young brothers and sisters that he father and weak mother were imposing upon her. She wanted out and she wanted better.

Mickey took her travelling with him. She met Jack Dempsey and George Bellows and Sugar Ray Robinson, who had the audacity to stare at the shimmy of her hips and lick his lips. Mickey was a lightweight and he took a lot of punches before he was able to use his hammer of a right hand to end a fight. Dorothy was excited by the sheer power of his masculinity and then she saw it decline and he started losing his eyesight. He only hit her once and it was out of frustration, but his blow had broken two of her ribs and sent her to a hospital. She had kept her mouth shut and sent herself flowers and when she was released, she left him. The cigarette smoke wafted over to encase the Chinese man who was sitting by the pond with his ever hopeful fishing rod extended. She'd used nail polish to coat his

fishing line in gold. It was just the right shade, a dulled burnish that fit with the muted surroundings.

Frank Hess had been another story altogether. She loved her second husband with a passion that caused her to accept whatever it took just to be close to him. Then the egotistical son-of-a-bitch had gotten himself killed. She lit another cigarette. This Kennedy thing had gotten to her in an unexpected way. Sure, she understood politics, but she understood it in a way that she could work it to her advantage. Frank had taught her that. He always told her that it was just a game about power and that power meant currency. That was his word, currency. She'd asked Frank if he didn't just mean money. "There's lots of kinds of money, Dot," had been his answer. Frank was a gangster. She knew that. He had girlfriends and she knew that. The life that he showed her was an answer to her dreams and she knew that as well.

The procession came out of a gate that went passed Lafayette Park where a crowd had been waiting for several hours. Some of them had waited all night to file passed the President's coffin and then they came here. The lonely procession carrying Jacqueline Kennedy, and Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Senator Ted Kennedy who stepped out of the black limousine. She wore a veil of heavy mourning and they wore formal mourning coats. She knelt. They stood. None of them tarried there.

A military guard brought the casket out to the east front. Behind the flag bearers walked two priests. The band played Hail to the Chief as the casket emerged. Ron felt his heart fill. That song was followed by a mournful version of Let Freedom Ring. The brothers and widow returned to their car. Robert was holding her hand. Ted walked a pace behind them. The sound of the hooves of the seven horse drawn caisson dominated. It was followed by a rider-less black horse. Then there were just muted drums. The procession made its way down Pennsylvania Avenue, which Ron heard called the Avenue of the Presidents for the first time. Then he could hear the drums and the hooves. The picture never changed. The casket was draped in an American flag. The caisson rolled smoothly. The pace was excruciating and Ron wanted to turn away but couldn't. Then there were the sounds of coordinated boots marching. It blended with the hooves and the drums and the bells that now intoned with mournful remark. Then there were

commands and a snap to of swords and guns was heard moving crisply from one position to the next. The bagpipes of the Black Watch drowned it all out in an eerie song of death.

The brothers and widow followed along behind on foot. They were followed by other members of the family and then President Johnson. Ron wanted to gag when he heard him called that. Dignitaries followed in no particular order. These were heads of state who had come to pay respect from their countries. Queen Fredrica of Greece was the only other woman who was scheduled to walk in the procession.

Chapter 78

Dr. Wilson Fulack was the first person that Celeste thought might be a good idea. After a night of ice, Ron made it downstairs with the immobilizer on his leg and then unstrapped it when he got into his red Ford. The ride up wasn't horrible although pressing on the break caused him to wince and the position required of his leg caused it to throb by the time he got onto the parkway. At least there wouldn't be any braking for a while. It was smooth shot to Bergen County.

Ron reapplied the immobilizer in front of Celeste's house. She'd heard squeak and was out the door before he got himself out of the car. She walked over and said, "Can we take your car?"

"Sure." Ron had never sat in the passenger seat before and it felt strange. The squeaks seemed louder. The ride seemed bumpier. It was a short ride to Fulack's office.

The doctor removed the immobilizer and asked, "Where did you get this?"

"I'm a football coach," said Ron. "We have a couple of them in case of emergencies."

"This is an old style and the wrong size, but I have something that will help you."

Ron knew what was coming and he wasn't disappointed. Fulack pressed and twisted and bent his knee and Ron could not help but cry out.

"When did you have this open knee?"

Ron stared at the zipper on his right leg. The memories that it brought back were brutal. "When I was nineteen, that's fourteen years ago."

"And the other leg?"

"The year before when I was eighteen."

"Things have changed quite a bit since then. We rarely cut into knees like this anymore, unless it's a torn ligament or a reconstruction. Were they meniscus tears in both knees?"

"Yes," said Ron, "but they also found bone chips and a benign tumor in my left knee."

"Alright," said Fulack. "I want to do an arthrogram of your knee. There is quite a bit of swelling so it will be necessary to do an aspiration first. Then we will inject the knee with a dye and use a fluoroscope to get a good look at it."

Ron wanted to scream. He knew what an aspiration was. He had been subjected to more than twenty of them before surgery was done on his left leg. They were excruciating. He must have gone pale because Celeste said, "Will you be numbing his knee first?"

Dr. Fulack chuckled. "Of course. Why would anyone aspirate a knee without numbing it first?"

Ron stayed silent and Celeste spoke. "His was done repeatedly without anesthetic."

"Well, surely we don't do that anymore."

Ron felt a sense of relief. Fulack walked to his phone and buzzed his nurse. The procedure was scheduled for the next day.

"Were you hurt on the job, Ron?"

"We were at football practice."

“Are you a paid coach?”

“Yes, I get a stipend.”

“You’ll want to file a workman’s comp case then.”

“What does that mean?”

Celeste and Fulack exchanged a look. “If you are hurt at work you are entitled to compensation. Make sure that you have filed an accident report. It will all be paid for by your employer Ron.”

Ron felt fear. Suppose they fired him for getting hurt? Suppose they took away his honors class? “I’m not sure I want to do that.”

“Your employer carries insurance, Ron. They’ll expect it.”

Chapter 79

Luigi Vena sang Ave Maria in the church and underneath it the gritty voice of Cardinal Cushing could be heard praying in Latin. A group of priests with white lace tops covering their cassocks assisted. When it came time to read the gospel, a commentator in hushed tones, who was not Cronkite, told the people watching that this was the most solemn part of the mass and that all would stand in respect for the word of God. Ron wondered why he said that. The consecration was the most important part of the Mass. Ron felt Catholic.

The commentator translated. “As we offer our fruits and praise to God, we pray to God for John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the servant of God, that he may be given everlasting rest.”

The Communion precession began with his widow and brothers and then other moved up and opened their mouths and extended their tongues to receive the sacrament. They read passages from scripture that Kennedy loved and then the procession continued out of the church to Arlington National Cemetery, but first the Cardinal sprinkled holy water over the coffin and kissed the flag that draped it. Ron burst into tears when Kennedy’s three year old son saluted the casket of his father. It was explained that the children were deemed too young to attend the burial and that this is where they would say goodbye to their father.

The tears were hot on his face and he didn't try to wipe them away. He mouthed the words to the song that the band played. "Praise him all creatures here below. Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost." St Mathews Cathedral was bathed in sunlight that contrasted with the black bunting that was draped over the door.

Then the tolling of bells and the distinct command to "Present arms." The muffled drums began again as the caisson began to slowly roll. They moved down Rhode Island Avenue. People in overcoats lined the streets on both sides. Most of the women wore hats. Many of the men, in the fashion change popularized by Kennedy, did not. The funeral dirge moaned. The white gravestones of the cemetery stood in endless rows. The camera pulled back to show its proximity to the Lincoln Memorial and the Potomac River.

When the caisson was pulled to a stop, a band played, "Hail to the Chief." Ron could almost feel the chill in the air as the brass notes rang out over the graves. Was there such a thing as another world? Was there an awareness? Ron wondered if this wasn't what people did because, like him, they didn't know what else to do. That song was followed by the Star Spangled Banner. Ron thought that it sounded proudly defiant. Everyone was standing still although Jacqueline seemed to be wavering just a bit. Ron wondered how much she was expected to take.

The bagpipes of the United States Air Force Bagpipe Contingent moaned and wailed as the men marched over the hill. They accompanied the casket as it was removed from the caisson. They carried it what seemed like a long way. Ron admired their strength and endurance and it caused him to look at his knee. Through his pants, it seemed just like the other. Jets in multiple combinations of threes flew over the grave. There were places for just a few people to sit while others stood in back of them. More jets flew overhead drowning out the voice of the commentator. The voice of Cardinal Cushing, in its rasping tone, invoked a blessing upon the grave. The flag had been stretched taut over the casket during the blessing and now it was folded and music played again. The folds were precise and practiced. The flag changed hands many times and each time it was saluted before it was accepted. The music rose in a crescendo and Ron felt like he was watching a spectacle. It was a live and real spectacle, but that was what it was. Jacqueline, holding the folded flag under her arm, lit the flame. Holding her hand,

Robert Kennedy led her away. The commentator's simple statement was, "Now the president belongs to the ages."

End of Part 2

Part 3

Chapter 80

Hank, Ron, and Robin sat in a circle on the floor around a coffee table smoking a joint in their apartment. It was very good pot, the kind with a golden tinge and a deep resin, which blackened the sides of the white Zig-zag in which it was rolled. They were listening to a new album from The Eagles. Hank bought it from the music store where he worked.

Robin stopped smoking halfway through the joint and sipped white wine from a delicately shaped pink glass that was shaped like a large V. She held it in both hands and grinned as she stared at their faces and listened to the music.

Ron rolled another joint as soon as they had finished the first. Hank said, "I can't, man. I have to go to work."

Robin smiled to herself and wished that they could get rid of him. It had been Ron's idea to have him live with them. It allowed them to afford a much nicer apartment, but she didn't like Hank and she hated the loss of privacy.

Ron lit the second joint and Hank walked on his toes to his room where he put on his shoes and walked down the stairs from their second floor apartment, got into his tan VW and was gone.

This was their third apartment together. The first had been when they decided to live together and spent a summer in Rahway, staying in Warren Lashly's room while he was in Greece. Then they moved to Elizabeth and had a place that Robin loved in Bayway, but Ron hated it and found this place and convinced her to have Hank live with them. It was a nice apartment. Robin loved living with Hank's two cats, Leni and Bob. She was going to school in New York City and working full time in Westfield. Her days were long and busy and she liked it that way. It made the weekends seem like so much more of a pleasure.

Ron was working an insurance scam that paid him \$5000 a year, and was going to school at a State College. As he smoked the joint, he stroked the side of her face with the backs of the fingers of his left hand. Then he dipped his finger into her glass and coated her lips with the sweet, dry wine. He put down the joint and kissed her.

Robin moved into his lap and curled her arms around his neck. He felt the press of her breasts against his chest. The kiss was long. She gazed into his green eyes and saw them tinged with the red that came from the smoke. Then she stood up and slid her panties down as he watched her. She was wearing a light cotton summer dress that was loose and covered in small flowers. She straddled his lap, undid his belt, pulled down his zipper, found him hard and slid him into her. His hands squeezed her cheeks as she bobbed up and down like a happy cork on the ocean.

Then they heard the door open and heard footsteps on the stairs. Abruptly, she pulled off of him, picked up her panties and hurried into their bedroom while Ron fumbled with his pants. Hank didn't come back into the living room but went to his room, picked up the check that he had forgotten and left the apartment again without a word.

Ron found her sitting on the bed.

"This isn't working, Ron."

"I know."

“This is what you wanted. This is what you created. Fix it.”

“How do you want me to fix it?”

She fixed him with a hard stare. “Get rid of him or help me find my own place.”

Ron’s face looked hurt. His long brown hair was covering his right eye and he lifted it back over his ear. “You would want to live somewhere without me?”

Robin thought, how could he be so smart and at the same time so dense? She enunciated very clearly and spoke slowly in a very small voice. “No, Ron but I’m unhappy. You promised that if I was unhappy that I wouldn’t have to stick with it. When you were unhappy in Elizabeth, we moved, didn’t we?”

“He’s been my friend for a long time. I can’t just kick him out.”

“Do you love me?”

“You know I love you.”

“Do you like seeing me unhappy?”

“I didn’t know that you were unhappy.”

“Then you haven’t been paying attention.”

Robin knew that last thing would stick in his head. He hated the idea that he might be missing something. She watched his eyes flicker and saw his brain working.

“Can we wait until after the semester is over?”

“Maybe you can. I can’t.”

Ron reached out for her, but she pulled away and got off the bed. “I’m really not in the mood right now, Ron.” She grinned to herself. Leaving him flustered like this was fun and he never saw her doing it until it was too late. “I’m taking a ride down to see my mother.”

Ron nodded. She knew that he wouldn’t want to go with her there. Let him think about what she had said a little bit.

Robin still wasn't back when Hank came home from work. Ron had two rolled joints waiting. Hank made himself a cup of coffee. He didn't ask where Robin was. He didn't realize that he had almost walked in on them.

Halfway through the first joint, Ron said, "Hank, we gotta move."

"Where do you want to go?" said Hank.

"It's not where exactly. Robin and I need to be alone. This just isn't working anymore. It isn't natural. It isn't fair to her."

Hank stopped smoking the joint and lit a cigarette. Ron lit one too. "So it's her idea?"

Ron tried to look him in the eye. He said, "No, it's our idea."

They heard the front door open and shut and heard Robin on the stairs. The cats ran to greet her, tails up straight. They heard her talking to the cats on the stairs.

"Robin, can you come in here a minute?"

She came into the room, smelled the pot and said, "Give me a few minutes."

Ron said, "I was just telling Hank that we needed to live alone."

Ron and Hank looked at each other as they waited. Their friendship had been long and strong. Hank was not doing well. He'd stopped confiding his feelings to Ron after he realized that Ron shared everything that he said with Robin. Hank understood that she wanted him gone. They'd lived together almost a year. They had both tried, but there was no place for them to connect other than Ron and she wanted him for herself. Ron's face showed Hank that he just wanted to get this over with.

Robin put on the light flowered dress and took her panties off. Ron was going to go to sleep a happy boy tonight. He'd listened to her.

Hank said, "It'll take me a while to find a new place."

Robin slid down next to Ron and parted her thighs slightly. She touched his arm. "How long do you think it will take, Hank?" She tried to say it gently. She

knew she was being impatient and that she had let it go on too long and that now what was becoming haste had really been pent up frustration.

“I don’t know yet. I’ll look around. I’ll keep to myself until then.”

Ron felt a pang but Robin squeezed his arm ever so promisingly.

Hank got up and put his cigarettes into the breast pocket of his button down shirt. “Goodnight.”

Ron and Robin exchanged a grin when he was gone. She said, “I didn’t think that you’d do it that fast.”

Ron put his head down. “You said that you’d live somewhere else.”

Chapter 81

The radio was playing Goodbye Yellow Brick Road. Elton John sang, “Maybe you’ll get a replacement. There’s plenty like me to be found. Mongrels who ain’t got a penny, sniffing for tidbits like you...”

The music escalated and his voice rose. Ron thought about his class. He’d been reading Keats. He’d typed out a verse from Ode to a Nightingale and taped it over his desk on the wall. He wondered what Keats would have thought of the song. He wouldn’t have known about the Wizard of Oz.

Now the radio was playing Desperado and Ron rode along on the sound of the vocal and its simple words. He wasn’t getting any younger either. He was almost twenty-four and still didn’t have a degree.

Like it always was, the parking lot was packed. Ron searched up and down the long rows of cars and finally would up rolling slowly along next to a student who was on the way back to her car. The walk to the class was a long one and Ron slung his book bag over his shoulder and walked quickly. He liked to move at a good pace and especially liked blowing passed people who were meandering.

The class was on the top floor of a large square brick building. He settled into his desk and waited. The professor was a short, heavy-set man with very

curly hair. His name was Grant Pritchard and his reputation for being a good history teacher was accurate. The class waited while he set up the projector.

“Abraham Zapruder purchased a Bell and Howell Zoomatic camera in November of 1962. The camera was relatively new and he didn’t use it much. This was the original cartridge that came with the film. The first twenty five feet of the film are family shots that were taken on his patio.”

Ron thought about the sheet that Rocky used to hang in their basement apartment so that they could watch the videos that he took with his camera. Then he shoved those memories away, like he always did.

“He told his family that he was bringing his camera to work that day so that he could film the president’s motorcade. It was quite by chance that he was there and the record that he made was a coincidence that has provided the most valid argument to date about the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. We’re going to watch that film, which until recently has not been available to the public.”

Ron had seen the Zapruder film a few years ago in Quimpy’s garage apartment. It was Quimpy who had first told him about an author named Mark Lane. Quimpy had told him about Harold Weisberg’s *Whitewash* and Josiah Thompson’s *Six Seconds in Dallas*. Ron read all three books and knew where Grant Pritchard was going.

“At the time of the assassination, Zapruder screamed to his secretary, ‘They killed him. They killed him.’ Later he was heard saying, ‘I know he’s dead. I saw his head explode like a firecracker. It’s the worst thing that I have ever seen.’”

Ron remembered the part of the film where Kennedy’s head exploded and a flash could be seen coming from the front of his brain when the bullet struck. He wasn’t sure that he ever wanted to see it again.

Pritchard stopped speaking and ran the film. The classroom was dark and silent. When the bullet hit Kennedy, he heard gasps coming from his classmates. Pritchard stopped the film and then ran it back to the seconds after Kennedy’s car emerged from in back of a sign. He painstakingly went through each frame, showing Kennedy grabbing both hands to his throat. Jacqueline was reaching for him. He slumped against her shoulder and then the shot blew his brains all over

the back seat of the car and her. She tried to crawl out of the back of the limousine and a Secret Service agent climbed on the trunk of the car. The flowers that she had been carrying flew into the air. She fell onto the backseat floor of the car, which was now speeding off.

“This is what truly happened to our President,” said Pritchard. “Seeing this film makes it impossible to believe that the President was shot from the rear, where Oswald is said to have been. The question is why the government of the United States has kept these frames of the film a secret for the last ten years and why they covered up the assassination of the President of The United States.”

When the class was over, Ron stayed behind to talk with Pritchard. He told the professor about the books that he had read and that how his friend had been researching the assassination for more than eight years now.

“Would you be interested in doing some work for the Assassination Information Bureau?”

Ron thought about that. He was pursuing a degree in English. This wasn't going to have anything to do with that. He was going to have to think about supplementing his income now that he and Robin were getting rid of Hank. That was also going to take some time, but Ron found himself nodding and saying, “Yeah, I'd like that a lot. The more people that know the better our chances of knowing what happened are going to be.”

“There's a lot more information out there now than there was back in the '60's,” said Pritchard. I'd like you to familiarize yourself with some of it. There will be a meeting of those who are going to work with the Bureau this Saturday night at my house.”

Ron looked at the list of books that Pritchard had given to him. There was one by Sylvan Fox. There was a book by Jessie Curry whose name and face Ron would never forget. It was entitled His Personal JFK File. The Assassination of JFK, the Reasons Why was a book written by Albert Newman. A Citizens Dissent: Mark Lane Responds to Defenders of the Warren Commission. Ron's eyes scanned the list. He didn't have time to read all of these. He wondered if he should just forget this idea and go back to his literature and poetry and the things that he had decided to do with his life.

Chapter 82

Paulo DeFreio sat his class in a circle. They were reading Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. It was a strange story. Hans Castorp had gone to visit his cousin in a sanatorium that was designed for people who had tuberculosis. They had found symptoms of the disease on his lungs and he'd been invited to stay for the cure. He was falling in love with a Russian girl.

Ron's mind whirled. He was in love with a Russian girl. Robin Ravelka was unmistakably Russian. Ron felt like Hans. Kennedy faded away. Herman Greenfield Horvack sat in the circle too. So did Anthony Fiangelo. And Victor Strauss. They read and they understood. Herman was in charge of the school's literary magazine. Paulo DeFreio was the advisor. Ron's finger followed along as he read.

His other classes included a seminar in the American Presidency and a Creative Writing class and a study of Western Drama. His Creative Writing teacher had recently published an article in *Playboy*. Ron thought that he was a lucky, self-centered, consumptive prick. The prick liked the way that Ron wrote and thought. Paulo DeFreio did as well, but he was experienced enough to dangle his approval and then withhold it.

DeFreio conducted close examination of the text, in some instances going line by line to point out nuances and help his students to see the way that the writer created a portrait. Ron was having trouble concentrating on *The Magic Mountain*. It was indeed a Mountain of a book with many long reveries that happened when Castorp lay bundled under blankets on his outdoor balcony, inhaling the cold, crisp mountain air that led him to dream. Ron's mind kept wandering back to Grant Pritchard's class and the Zapruder film and then it took a shift.

He'd been home with his mother and was watching an episode of *Firing Line*. It had been six or so years ago. Ron's fascination with William F. Buckley Jr. had been something that he kept secret. His college friends would dismiss Buckley as a tight assed right winger who had defended racist points of view during the

Civil Rights Movement, supported the unjust war in Viet Nam and literally looked down his nose at most people. Ron never mentioned his like of Buckley to his high school friends, who already thought that he was an alien that they had to tolerate. His pool hall buddies would not have had the slightest idea who Buckley was nor would they have cared, but Ron did like him. It was the only TV program that he ever watched with an open dictionary sitting next to him on the floor.

Buckley was interviewing Mark Lane who had written *Rush to Judgment*. Lane and he had jostled over the larger questions of trust and Lane had thanked Buckley for a favorable review of his book in Buckley's magazine *The National Review*. He remembered two things that Buckley had said. The first was that the Right wished that Oswald had been a Communist agent sent by Moscow and that the Left wanted Oswald to be a southern racist. The second thing was that he cared much less about who killed Kennedy than the fact that Kennedy was dead. Wasn't there a place where Ron believed that also? Then he remembered that Buckley also had supported the release of the autopsy photographs. He came back from his reverie to find the class staring at him.

"Ron," said DeFreio, "you seem to be lost in thought."

Ron blushed. "I am. I'm sorry. I apologize."

DeFreio bristled quietly. He'd told Ron what he'd thought of him as a special student. He'd smoked pot with Ron at his house in Montclair. Paulo expected him to try to contribute to the class or at least to give it his attention.

DeFreio asked patiently, "What do you think Mann means by the tempo of experience?"

"I think that he means that our minds control the speed at which we experience time. I think that he means that some experiences repeat on us, like indigestion and that others are treasured and enhanced by the way that we feel about them and remember them."

"And how do you see that portrayed in the novel?"

"I think that love makes him stupid and is ruining his life. He treasures an x-ray of her lungs as a token of her love for him."

"Did it occur to you that Mann might be using a form of satire?"

Ron laughed. "I don't find a nook that's more than 700 pages long to be particularly funny."

The class chuckled and DeFreio laughed along with them. He said in his best European accented voice, "Not everything is meant to be gulped down and chugged like beer. Some books are meant to be sniffed, sipped, and rolled around in the mouth before swallowing. You might think of it as a glass of brandy that is meant to last all night."

"Ok," said Ron. "I'll try not to chug it."

After the class ended a small group of them went for coffee. DeFreio went along with them and they sat around a table in the student center.

Herman Horvack was an emaciated blonde with a prematurely receding hairline. He had a love of decadence which he touted as the savior of the culture. "The magazine is almost ready to be proofed," he said.

"Bring it by my office and I'll take a last look at it when you have it ready," said DeFreio. "Ron, can I bum a cigarette?"

It amused Ron that DeFreio refused to buy his own pack but always bummed smokes. He handed it to him and as DeFreio lit one, he said, "So what has your mind wandering?"

Another Fiangelo quipped, "Either drugs or some girl would be my bet."

Herman looked at Ron, "You've got to stop smoking that crap. It clouds your brain."

"It helps me to write," said Ron. "I can block everything else out when I smoke."

"You only think that it helps you. If you stopped doing it, you would remember your dreams better and they are a more fertile reservoir." Horvack's newest form of decadence was denial of any intoxicants of any kind. He talked about it before. Ron thought that it sounded boring. He justified his thinking by telling himself that Horvack had no girlfriend.

"Actually I was thinking about the Kennedy Assassination."

“I truly believe that there is no more trite a subject upon which to waste your reveries,” said Herman.

Fiangelo said, “It’s all a crock of shit.” Fiangelo had been scrambled in Viet Nam. There was an undercurrent of violence in much of what he said and his typical line of dismissal was that the topic was a crock.

Victor Strauss looked over at Ron. “Why were you thinking about that?”

Ron shrugged. “I don’t know. Grant Pritchard showed the Zapruder film in his class and I’m thinking about doing some work with the Assassination Information Bureau.”

“A crock of shit,” said Fiangelo.

“Did you think that about the Pentagon Papers too?” said Ron.

“What I thought about them was that not fucking one of my friends was any less dead by knowing that we were fucked in the ass for having to go there. It didn’t get one person home safely. So yeah, it was a crock of shit too.”

Victor Strauss said, “But the assassination might make for a good science fiction story.”

Ron had no desire to write science fiction or prose of any kind. He hated writing essays. He was a poet. “So Herm,” Ron called Horvack Herm because he knew that it pissed him off. “Did any of my stuff make the magazine?”

DeFreio and Horvack exchanged a grin. “You know that I’m not supposed to tell you that.”

“Careful Herman,” said Fiangelo. “He’ll let Robin bite you again.”

That brought laughter from everyone. Robin found Herman Greenfield Horvack incredibly pretentious. During one of his one way lectures on the aesthetics of decadence, she has casually taken his hand and sunk her teeth into it while he was in mid-sentence. Herman had recoiled and now referred to Robin as “the little savage.”

Chapter 83

Robin let Ron sleep in. The night before, she had urged him to pound into her and met his need with the hot, frenzied thrusts of her hips. She'd slept on the wet spot that they'd created. She woke him with kisses between his shoulder blades. She brought him breakfast. "Do you know what you're going to read?"

Ron felt his sleepy haze slowly disappear. "Yeah, I have about fifteen things." He paused and watched her bite into a fig. Her teeth were sharp and fingers caressed the skin as she chewed in small bites. "Is there something special that you want to hear me read?"

"Leni's poem."

Ron smiled. "Ok, I'll read that first."

Ron was scheduled to do three sets. There was a rock band a comedian and him. He was paid twenty-five dollars. He stared out at the audience. There were more than sixty people. "This is a poem that I wrote about a cat who comes and goes as she pleases. The problem is that she is a black cat and causes people to have odd reactions." Ron smiled. "We spend quiet time together, sometimes." He glanced at Robin. "Sometimes" was their favorite word. It meant that sometimes I want to sleep with you. Sometimes I want you to leave me alone. Sometimes you make me angry. Sometimes I want to hurt you. She smiled up at him from her chair. He wasn't sure what they had communicated, only what he felt.

He read Leni's poem.

"A piece of cheese, very small, turned up on its end and stuck to the floor

Attracted a black cat with licked white paws."

Ron smiled and paused to let the image sink in. "Raw chopped meat excited her more. She made sounds that I was attracted to."

Ron blinked and heard Leni purr. "It sounded friendly, and I wanted to stay, so I gave her some more cheese."

He pictured the kitchen where this had happened. He was barefoot, standing at the sink with a paring knife and a cutting board. "She licked it. She

liked it.” His eyes searched for Robin and she was grinning for him. “More than the first piece she had seen.”

Ron stared out at his audience and tried to gather them all in. “I was ecstatic. I had made a friend that I could keep and tell her so, out loud. She would agree and nod her head and make such friendly sounds.” He had them. It was the erotic and playful nature of his words.

Ron took a breath, searched for Robin’s eyes and said, “I dropped some bread, and she gave it a clout, raised her head, licked her chin, turned around and walked out.” Ron quietly shuffled the pages to let them know that the poem was over and then he heard applause.

It was a long night. Ron had to read some things twice. He read stories a prose poem and ad-libbed an ending so that he had something new to read. But he saved one for the last set.

“This is a poem that I wrote in honor of the films of Federico Fellini. I don’t know why I have called him Felinea in the poem except that the syllables sounded right coming out of my mouth.” Ron read.

“Felinea wake, come close and hear. Your mind’s been rented for another year. To beat your breast and dance around with the confetti streamers of a priestly clown.” Ron saw the dance. He felt the dance. He breathed. “Life is a child that sucks and leaves life grown older, depleted and meek. Life in days worn cold and thin. Felinea see? I’ve come home again.”

Ron had read this poem for the first time in a class he took at the New School for Social Research. His instructor, Adam Fitzgerald, was about to have poems published in *The New Yorker*. He smiled condescendingly and told Ron that his poem had a lot of life in it.

Ron felt an afterglow of excitement as he and Robin drove home. “So what did you think?”

“I thought you were great except I thought that they made you read too long. You read for almost two hours.”

Ron laughed. “I know. Kind of strange to be on the bill with a rock band and a comedian.”

Robin took his hand. "I think it was kind of a tribute to you that you were able to hold your own." She slid his hand under her long suede skirt and between her legs. She knew that he enjoyed playing with her as he drove, and tonight she was proud of him and wanted to make him very happy.

Ron was feeling on top of the world. Maybe he had really, finally found his place in the world again. He hadn't felt this good since he played football. Then Robin moved his hand away and reached down and lowered his zipper. He popped right out and she giggled. She liked looking at it. Every once in a while she stroked it just once. She liked it when he got this hard. He would do anything that she told him to do.

Chapter 84

Ron went back to school with yet another doctor's note for an elevator pass. Brother Kelly said, "What seems to be the difficulty this time Tuck?"

"I had my knee drained, Brother. The doctor is hoping that this will be the end of the problems with it."

Brother Kelly was not smiling when he said, "We are all hoping that will be the case Mr. Tuck. I see that you have been missing lots of school. You are probably way behind in all of your subjects."

"Yes, Brother."

"Keep your head down and your mouth shut and do your work, Mr. Tuck."

Things were decidedly different at the school. The Brothers were based in Ireland and they were in a foul mood. The students had been cooped up in their houses for days. It just didn't seem right to allow them to go outside and play while the country was in mourning, but now it was time to get back to work and get on with life, such as it was.

Brother O'Shea greeted Ron by showing him the last quiz that he had taken. Ron stared at the 59 that was written and red and circled at the top of the page. "You didn't expect that I had forgotten about this, did you Mr. Tuck?"

Ron blurted, "I forgot about it, Brother."

“Let’s see if I can help you remember then. Hands or cheeks?”

Ron looked at him with a confused expression that turned his face into a question mark. O’Shea pulled the strap from inside the cord that bound his cassock at the waist.. He closed his eyes when he heard the hiss. The smack of the belt turned his left hand white hot and then cold and numb. He teetered back and forth on his feet and watched this time as the strap came down on the palm of his right hand. He yelped when it struck. His palms were sweating profusely as he tried to rub feeling back into them on the sides of his pants.

“You’ll be ready to take the quiz that you missed tomorrow,” said O’Shea.

“Brother, I’m not prepared.”

O’Shea looked down at the red circled 59 on the quiz until he was sure that the boy saw him looking at it and was now looking at it too. “You’ve already demonstrated that, haven’t you Mr. Tuck?”

“Yes, Brother.”

Ron was having trouble gripping his pencil and he could feel the blood rushing in his ears which also felt hot and red. To make things worse, he didn’t understand any of what O’Shea was talking about. He was saying that if you did the same thing to either side of the equation that the equation remained the same and that by manipulating both sides that you could solve the equation.

Between classes Bob Foster said, “We’re all screwed now.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re pissed off about Kennedy.”

The motorcade and the drums and the bagpipes and the endless repetitions of Oswald being shot seemed to have happened in another world, a place where he felt loved and safe and ate cookies. In Latin, Brother Delban ran through endless declensions on nouns. They were boring and his mind wandered. He was lost in a reverie about being able to run and feeling unstoppable when he heard his name being said like it was being repeated. It startled him and the class laughed.

Brother Delban said, “Well, not only are you not here very often Mr. Tuck. It seems that when you are here do don’t feel the need to grace us with your attention. Delban rapped his knuckles down on the top of Ron’s head and said, “Pay” the knuckles raised and came down again, “attention” there were two more raps. His hands had just stopped hurting and know there was a throbbing pain at the top of his head. He rubbed it with his palm and tried to concentrate better.

Chapter 85

Ron awoke from the anesthetic with an immobilizer on his leg and it made him want to scream. He’d thought that somehow, because it was this new kind of surgery, that his leg would finally be free and that he would be able to walk. The hospital bed’s side rails had been pulled up and he needed to urinate. He pressed the buzzer. Celeste walked into the room. She looked radiant.

Ron said, “I need to get out of this bed.”

Celeste just nodded and lowered the side rail. She helped him to stand. He tried not to put too much weight on her as he hobbled. The immobilizer actually helped with his balance. Celeste said, “I’ll give you some privacy,”

Celeste convinced the doctor that he could go back to her house after he’d urinated.

The ride to Celeste’s house was slow and a bit painful. Ron felt every bump in the road shoot through his leg like a knife. Celeste tried to drive carefully as they squeaked back to her house.

Ron was quiet and stared out the window. It had been a never ending battle and he seemed to lose each one. Each time they went into one of his knees, he felt like he lost a little more. He could feel the dark cloud of it around him. Three surgeries were too many intrusions.

Celeste debated how to tell him what Dr. Fulack had said privately to her. She knew some of his history with knees bit this was the first time that she was experiencing it with him. She got him downstairs and brought him a plastic container that he could use to urinate. The look of sheer disgust that crossed his

face when she showed it to him, told her that something deeper was going on with him. She gave him a pain pill. Ron grimaced at the sight of it.

“It doesn’t hurt right now.”

“And you want to keep it that way. The best thing to do is to stay ahead of the pain.”

“I’ll put up with the pain if I can get well faster,” said Ron.

“One thing has nothing to do with the other, Ron.”

“What do you mean?”

Ron shrugged. “They told me that the sooner I got off of the pain meds, the sooner I could get out of the hospital the last two times.”

Now it was Celeste’s turn to feel disgusted. The level of medical care that he had been given was slightly and she meant only slightly better than he would have gotten as a side of beef in a butcher shop. “That just isn’t true and they shouldn’t have told you that. I can’t believe that a doctor really said that to you.”

“A lot of things that I have been told about my knees are hard to believe. Did I ever tell you that I don’t think that I really needed the second surgery?”

Celeste looked a little shocked. “Why do you think that?”

“Well, I hurt it playing football up in Glen Ridge when I was a senior in high school. Up until then my right knee had been my good knee. The same doctor who did the left one, examined it and just scheduled the surgery. He never tried anything else. There were no x-rays. Nothing. Cutting it was his first option.”

“That’s what surgeons do, Ron. They solve problems by cutting and repairing. At least some of them do.”

“Is Fulack like that?”

Now was the time to tell him. “Ron, he told me that when you heal, he’s going to talk to you about having a total knee reconstruction.”

Ron felt his world spinning like he was on some fiendish amusement park ride. “Doesn’t that mean that they cut my knee out?”

“That’s over simplified, but essentially yes, that’s what it means.”

“I’m not doing it.” His voice was cold and the tone final. “I’ve had enough.”

“The doctor said that the deterioration of your knee is pretty bad. You are bone on bone and there is a lot of arthritis.”

“I’m thirty-three years old,” said Ron. “Arthritis?”

“It’s the repeated insults to your knees,” she said. She was speaking clinically now and Ron noted the change in her voice. It sounded professional. He didn’t like it.

“These fucking surgeries have taken something away from me each time that I’ve had one. I don’t trust them. I don’t trust doctors. I think they do it more for the money than they do to really help anyone.”

“They aren’t all like that.” She tried to sound sympathetic but she could see that it didn’t penetrate.

“I know this is your profession but they’re my knees.” Ron paused. “Can I tell you how I really feel?”

“Of course.” She saw that his eyes had grown darker. The brooding look on his face made him sound angry, like he was spitting out the words. His face looked hard and almost cruel.

“Doctors are no different from mechanics or carpenters. You hire them to do a job, but they work for you. You tell them what you want, not the other way around.”

Celeste almost felt slapped. Then she saw that what he said came from pain and bad experiences. She wanted to reach out and stroke his face, but something told her that touching him wouldn’t be a good idea right now.

Chapter 86

Ron’s first experience with detention, Jersey Catholic style, came when he forgot his Latin book. Brother Delban wrote out the jug slip like he was handing Ron a piece of candy.

At the end of the day Ron reported to jug. The boys were lined up facing away from the desk in the empty room. They were positioned in front of a clock. They were told to stand with their arms folded across their chests, their backs straight, and their heels at forty-five degree angles. It wasn't uncomfortable for the first five minutes, but then Ron felt his left knee begin to stiffen and throb.

Brother Conrad was in charge of jug. The students called him the silver fox because his hair was silver and grey and he seemed to have the ability to sneak around silently and be just where you didn't want him to be. The rumor was that he used to be a Marine.

About fifteen minutes into the one hour detention, Brother Conrad silently glided down the aisle between the punished students and found a boy who had been cradling a book between his folded arms. The room had been silent except for the ticking clock and Conrad had heard the turning of a page. There was a smirk on his face when he found the culprit. "What have we here?" he said in a deep booming voice that seemed to shatter the endless ticking in the quiet room.

Jimmy Rollins shrunk. Conrad's hand slapped him on the back of his head and his hair stood up comically after the blow. Ron felt himself starting to giggle at the sight of the exaggerated cowlick that now stood up like an accusation. Conrad moved it front of the boy and peered into his face. "Did you really expect to be allowed to cheat my clock, Rollins?"

"No Brother."

"And now you are lying to me. Do you think that I am some ass of a fool, Rollins?"

"No Brother."

"Of course you do Rollins. You think that you are cleverer than I am. Let me show you where your cleverness has gotten you." Brother Conrad extended both of Rollins arms out straight. He placed the history book on his left palm and then walked quickly back to his desk and retrieved another heavy book and placed it on Rollins right palm. "Each time you drop a book Rollins, you get the reward of another day of jug. Of course if you are strong enough to stand like this for the next forty minutes, you will have proven that you are indeed more clever than I am, but I sincerely doubt that."

Now the boys could not help but stand there and stare at stare at Rollins. In a very short time, his arms started to shake and the double thud of the books hitting the floor could be heard. This time Conrad did not bother to get up from in back of his desk. "Two more days Rollins. Resume your position."

A moment later the books dropped again. This Conrad came down the aisle again. "Now you owe me four days."

Jimmy Rollins was shaking and he was fighting to hold back his tears. "I can't do it, Brother."

"Don't feel so clever now, do you Rollins?"

"No Brother."

"And not particularly strong are you?"

"No Brother."

"Well Rollins, if you are neither clever nor strong what does that make you?"

"I don't know, Brother."

"Neither do I Rollins, neither do I."

Conrad walked away without saying anything. Rollins was in a quandary. What was he supposed to do now? He timidly lay the books at his feet and resumed his original position.

The hour ticked passed. Ron was given his signed jug slip that proved that he had lived up to his obligation. His walk home felt triumphant.

Chapter 87

Robin and Ron walked up to the corner to buy a Christmas tree. The holidays had drained their pockets and they weren't sure that they would have enough. Ron had a surprise. He had an extra twenty that he hadn't mentioned to

her. When they got to the tree stand, he picked out a perfect tree and said, "What about this one?"

He could see the sparkles in her eyes and then the doubt that crept along her face. "I don't think that we can afford this one."

Ron reached into his pocket and took out the twenty. "Yes, we can."

"Where did you get that?"

"I was saving it."

She reached into his pocket with her small hands and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. "That's very romantic, Ron."

The tree was wrapped and Ron hoisted the trunk on his shoulder. She followed along, holding up the top of the tree. They had no decorations, and so they made them out of costume jewelry, cuff links, popcorn, and greeting cards. They admired their creation sitting with a glass of wine and smoking a joint.

The apartment was theirs now, although they were seldom in it except to sleep and on some weekends. During the week, she worked and then went into New York City for her acting classes. When Ron was finished with school and his part time job delivering drugs for a local pharmacy, he took a train into Manhattan to meet her. After her classes, they had coffee at one of the village bars and then drove home together.

Ron loved the pattern and spent lots of evenings walking the streets of the village while he waited for her. But now they were both on Christmas break and the apartment was warm and bright.

"Do you think that we'll always be together?" said Ron.

"I don't know. Do you think that you could ever pry yourself out of New Jersey?"

"It depends. I'd like to. Where do you want to go?"

Robin grinned. "Someplace warm."

She cradled her glass of wine and feel the warmth of it mixing with the pot. "Do you know this song?" She began to sing in a soft voice that got louder. Robin

sang, "I would die, I would die, I would strangle myself with my tie. If ever you said goodbye, then I'd die."

She stopped and they both laughed. "Maybe that should be our song," said Ron.

"You hate ties."

Ron laughed, "That's why I'd die."

He got up to refill her glass. As she watched him she said, "You know you have a really nice ass."

Ron felt himself blush but stood there with his back to her so that she could see it.

"Two of the gay guys at school were talking to me about it. They asked me if you were bisexual."

Now Ron could feel his ears turning red. "What did you say?"

Robin grinned mischievously. "I told them that I hadn't found a kind of sex that you didn't like."

"Why did you say that?"

"Because it's true. You'd fuck me five times a day if I let you."

Now it was Ron's turn to grin. "Why don't you?"

"Because I get sore."

"Is that the only reason?"

"No."

"Tell me why?"

Robin laughed. "We'd never get anything done. What fun would that be?"

"I know, but eventually I'd weaken and we could do things."

Her grin had a wicked tinge. "What kind of things?"

Her words flicked his switch. He knew what she was asking. They smiled as he paused before invoking their code words. "Other things."

He watched her tremble at the sound of it. She had two glasses of wine in her and had smoked a joint with him. They decorated a Christmas tree with things that were unusual and what they had. Other things meant sex. Robin smiled an impish grin. "I love adventure."

Chapter 88

Two days after the surgery, Ron showed up at the coaches' office. "I'm back."

Artie Harris and Steve Ferry looked at him with a startled faces. "You just had your knee cut."

Ron said, "They don't cut it anymore. Now they puncture it and suck things out. Then they pump things in. It's like a lube job and an oil change."

Artie Harris burst out laughing. "You're out of your fucking mind."

Steve Ferry grinned but then his face got serious. He'd learned that Ron was considered a serious teacher of English. Steve believed in education as much as he believed in football. Besides, Ron's girlfriend had a great ass. "Ron, you don't have to prove anything to me. It's a long year. You really want to do this?"

The smile that spread across Ron's face was contagious. Ferry realized that it must be the expression that he used in his classroom. "I want to do this because it's what we do. I want to be able to do what we do and I think I can."

Paul Pamenteri said, "You taking drugs?"

Ron lied. "Just aspirin."

Steve assigned Artie to watch Ron during practice. Ron was holding a clipboard now, and limping back out of the range of contact. Artie looked at his face. When Ron walked, Artie could see that he had pain. Then he watched him roll his neck and flex his shoulders and breathe. Ron called the next play.

After practice Paul Pamenteri asked Ron how he felt. Ron smiled. "I'm great. I'm getting married."

Paul smiled. "When?"

"Late March," said Ron.

"Might be nice to be able to walk down the aisle," said Paul.

Ron laughed and made eye contact until Paul laughed as well. "I'll be fine."

After practice Ron changed his clothes back to his classroom apparel before he went over to Celeste's house. He saw Angel's face looking out from behind a curtain. He saw her smile light up her mouth and then her cheeks and her eyes. He saw her mouth form an O and then the curtain closed and she ran to the door.

Ron watched her expression change as he bobbled over with his immobilizer on his right leg. He sat down on the porch and she tentatively kissed his cheek and sat next to him. "I have to wear this because I got hurt."

"Why did you get hurt?" Her tone had a glimmer of petulance in it. Ron felt its admonishment.

"It was an accident."

"Why?"

"There isn't a why about accidents. They just happen."

"Why did it happen to you?"

Ron was totally flabbergasted. He was talking to a two year old child and felt outflanked. He didn't realize that children her age weren't supposed to make complete sentences and now she was refusing to look at his face and just staring at the thing on his leg. He unstrapped the Velcro and took it off. He placed it under them on the steps. "Does that make you feel better?"

The searchlight eyes lifted to his face. "Are you still hurt?"

Ron smiled his best dimpled grin. "Not right now." He eyes looked at her hair, her curly light brown tangle of hair, and then her face. "I love you," he said.

"I miss you here," she said.

“I have to work.”

“Why?”

“We need money, but I’m a teacher and my students miss me.”

He was astonished as he saw two tears roll down her cheeks. “I miss you too.”

“Adults have to work.”

“Are you one?”

Ron felt a jolt strike him. “I think I have to be.”

“Why?”

Ron smiled and knew he had her. “Because of you.”

He expected her to grin and she did. Then she stretched her arms up and held his neck. Ron completely ignored the pain in his knee as she pressed on it.

Chapter 89

Ron could not pinpoint what he had done wrong. He was just walking home and his foot came down on a place where the sidewalk was lifted and split and his knee twisted and he felt it again. He tried to walk it off. It had just been a small twist. Maybe it would be fine in just a few minutes. It wasn’t.

Ron felt the weight of his leg as he limped up the stairs with his book bag slung over his shoulder. He got into the house and George said, “Would you run down to the corner and get some bread?”

“I can’t run anywhere,” he answered bitterly.

“What’s wrong now?”

“Same shit that’s always wrong,” said Ron.

George galloped from out of the kitchen with a menacing look on his face. “I don’t want you using that kind of language around here.”

“Nah, it’s only ok when you say shit huh?”

George backhanded Ron across the face. The rage boiled over in him and he forgot about his knee and lunged after him. He felt the pain shoot up his leg and he fell. This time what snapped was not in his leg. It was deeper inside and he found himself lying on the floor shaking uncontrollably.

George stood there looking stunned. Ron couldn’t really see and felt his lips trembling and a rushing in his ears that blotted out everything else. He was admitted to the hospital that evening.

He liked the hospital. The nurses smiled at him. He roamed the halls and talked to other patients. There was no one hitting him. There was no school. He thought that maybe he could just stay here until he was old enough to be somewhere else.

An upper GI series revealed that he had the beginning of an ulcer. His chart showed that his blood pressure was vacillating. He was easily set into a depth of not speaking or doing anything except staring at the wall and hoping to go back to sleep. When the nurses’ notations showed that he was often asleep during the day, eating little and talking less, it was decided that Ron should see a psychiatrist.

The man came to his bedside, and drew the curtains as Ron watched. “I’m Dr. Reed, Ronald. Would you prefer that I call you Ronnie or Ron?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Reed made a notation and Ron watched his silver pen flash as he wrote on his pad. He wondered if he had said something wrong already.

“Do you know why I am here, Ronnie?”

“No.”

“No one told you that I was going to be stopping by?”

“No.”

“You’ve been sick, Ronnie.”

Ron let his eyes roam the curtains. He was in a hospital. What kind of an observation was that? Was this guy a moron? Ron didn’t answer.

“Dr. Polino thinks that your ulcer may be the result of emotional distress. Do you think that is a possibility, Ronnie?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you been upset recently?”

“I guess.”

“Do you know what is upsetting you?”

“No.”

“You can talk to me in confidence, Ronnie. Anything that you say to me will be between us.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why don’t you believe me?” said Reed.

“Everybody lies to kids. I think it’s part of the adult code.” Ron bit his lip. He hadn’t wanted to say anything and then he just blurted that out.

“Who’s been lying to you Ronnie?”

“No one.”

“If you aren’t willing to work with me Ronald, I’ll simply tell Dr. Polino that I don’t think that I can help you and he’ll send home and you can go back to school”

Ron felt defeated. “What do you want to know?”

“Do you know what’s upsetting you?”

“I hate my life. I hate that my knee is hurt. I hate my step-father. I hate my school. I hate that I don’t see my father anymore. I hate that I’m too young to do anything about anything.”

“Everyone has those feelings sometimes, Ronnie.”

“Then I guess that I’m fine and just don’t know it.”

“There’s no reason for sarcasm, Ronald.”

“There isn’t?”

“It isn’t helpful.”

“It’s not?”

“Do you find that you are sarcastic often?”

“I honestly don’t know.”

“Do you think that you might be?”

“What I think is that people don’t really want to hear what I think. They want to hear what they think that I should be thinking.”

“You’re a smart boy.”

“Nothing that I say to you is going to make any difference.”

“Suppose I told you that I could arrange to have you stay home and rest for a couple of weeks after you got out of here.”

Ron’s ears perked up. Maybe this guy could help.

Chapter 90

Robin and Ron listened to the news intently. It was a Saturday night. It was still warm. Richard Nixon ordered the Attorney General of the United States to fire the special prosecutor who’d been hired to investigate the Watergate break-in. The Attorney General refused and resigned in protest. Nixon ordered his Assistant Attorney General to fire the Special Prosecutor. He refused and also resigned. Finally, Robert Bork, who was then the Solicitor General, agreed to fire Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor who been hired to investigate Watergate.

They held hands. She said, “Can we get some ice cream?”

“I think that it’s all coming apart and years ago I wanted that. I thought it had to come apart. Now, it’s scary as hell.”

Robin kissed his fingertips. “Do you want strawberry? Are you listening?”

“I heard every word that you said. They’re proving that they are as crazy as we always thought they were.”

“I know.”

“Are you frightened to be right?”

“I have to think about that.” The cascade of thoughts that flowed through his brain suggested that she might be correct. Hadn’t it been a lie since he was old enough to figure out what a lie was? Hadn’t Viet Nam been even a blacker and darker lie than he ever imagined it to be? Kennedy had whipped Nixon’s ass, well almost. But Kennedy was dead and Nixon was president. Johnson and then Nixon were like the nightmare monsters that were sent to make someone afraid of dreaming. “Yeah, I’m frightened that I’m right about this?”

She smiled and kissed his fingertips again. “Let’s get some ice cream. We can listen in the car.”

The radio news said that we were headed for a constitutional crisis. Ron looked over at her face as she licked her cone. He watched the relish that she took as her tongue swirled over the strawberry ice cream scoop.

Then the radio was reporting that agents of the FBI had sealed the offices of all three men. Cox’s staff was told that they would only be allowed to remove their personal papers from the offices. Richardson and Ruckelshaus, the former Attorney General and Assistant Attorney General, were not allowed to take anything with them.

“Do you think that he’ll try to destroy all of the evidence against him?” said Robin.

Ron thought about the Kennedy assassination again. Something inside of him clicked. “I’m not sure that he can. I mean, wouldn’t someone have to go over there and do it for him? The President can’t exactly go over there and do it himself? Besides, we never get to see the actual evidence. It all gets covered up and bleached or locked away so that the people will never know.”

“You think about things too deeply,” she said. “Sometimes it causes you to miss the simple things.”

She ran her foot along his thigh as he watched the TV. She wondered how long it would take him to realize that she wanted to get laid. Robin thought to herself. For someone who likes sex as much as he does, he is terrible at picking up on signals. It's like he never learned that language.

"I don't think I miss the simple things," said Ron.

Robin laughed. "No Ron, you're always right on top of things."

Ron said, "I've been thinking about the Kennedy thing."

Robin burst out laughing so hard that she snorted wine up her nose. "Of course you have."

"There's nothing funny about that," said Ron indignantly.

She laughed again and Ron started to get angry. She spread her legs on the couch and lifted the hem of her dress up to expose herself up to her waist. "Is it clear enough now what simple signal that you might be missing?"

Ron grinned the dimpled smile that she loved. "Oh."

Chapter 91

Dr. Reed's office was a standard shrink's room. There was no couch but there were big easy chairs. The doctor sat in back of his desk and secretly taped all of his sessions for later analysis and to have a complete record of what was actually said. The silver pen with which he took notes was only meant to give him prompts and actually he sometimes simply recorded the exact time that something was said so that he could access it later.

Ron didn't tell him that this was far from the first psychiatrist's office that he had been in. That would mean telling him about Marjorie and her agoraphobia and her emotional fragility. Ron was definitely not going to do that. But he could not help but compare this place to the other offices. This one was much more lavish than the clinic at Presbyterian Hospital had been. That one had wooden chairs and overhead lights. Here the lighting was indirect and soft. Ron wondered why their offices were not bright and cheerful. They always had a somber look and he always felt sleepy after having to be in them.

“Have you had any episodes this week?”

“Not really,” said Ron. He didn’t tell Reed about the two that he faked. He found that if he said that he felt like he was losing control, they left him alone and got worried looks on their faces. At least he had some control now.

“Are you ready to go back to school?”

“No.”

“You have to go back to school at some point Ron and I’m concerned that you are falling further behind. And that will only increase your stress.”

“When I go back to school, they’ll be angry that I was gone so long. Then they’ll hit me.”

“Maybe you should go to a different school.”

All of a sudden Ron felt very nervous and scared. “That would make everybody really mad at me.”

“Do they know that you are hit at school?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you tell them?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because my father taught me that if I got in trouble in school and came home and said anything that I would be in trouble there too.”

“Do you think that is a good lesson?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I don’t know.” Ron knew why. It was a good lesson because it came from his father and, secretly, he cherished everything that came from his father.

“Ronnie, it’s important that you value your therapy.”

“I don’t understand what that means.”

“Your mother says that she is only able to pay ten dollars an hour for your sessions.”

Ron shifted in his chair and didn’t understand and then it occurred to him. His father had taught him what a shakedown was. He didn’t say anything. There was a long moment of silence. Ron stared into Dr. Reed’s eyes and they were blinking like the ticking of a clock.

“I think that it would be good for you to contribute to your therapy.”

“Really? Don’t you think I might be better off in a clinic? You know, where they help you for free.”

“Well that would be a choice for your mother and for you.”

“Ya know, I really don’t like you very much.”

“Why is that Ronald?”

“You’re greedy.”

“I place a value on what we accomplish here and I want you to feel that sense of value.”

“Yeah.”

“I think it’s time for you to go back to school Ronald.”

“Sure.”

Chapter 92

Ron was able to walk without the immobilizer by the end of that week. Their game was against Passaic. They had a running back who was destined for at least Division 1, if not the NFL. Their coach kept it simple. There were ten plays to the right and the same ten plays to the left. A stop us if you can philosophy. Steve wanted Ron on the sidelines, and sent Paul upstairs. They ran the right plays but the guard, Vinny Farbritsio, came to Ron and said, “Coach, I

pulled out and ran hard and I hit him as hard as I could and he just didn't go down."

Vinny weighed 165. The player that he was blocking weighed 220. They were both agile. Ron looked over at Artie. "We just can't block it."

Artie rubbed his face and said, "Tell him to go lower."

Vinny should have been reporting back directly to Artie, but Ron was his English teacher and his coach. He just gravitated to him and Artie was OK with it. Ron was a maniac and Artie could respect that.

Ron said, "Let's run the trap again," into his headset, where Paul and Steve could hear it.

"They stuff it," said Paul.

"We're going low," said Ron.

Steve growled, "Run it. Let's see if we can do anything right."

Artie held Vinny by the facemask before he sent him back in with the play. "Go low, he's bigger, but you can get low on him."

Vinny nodded bravely.

The block on Caesar McElroy flipped him into the air and play ran for six yards. Vinny's nose was bleeding but he was smiling. Steve faked the dive and the sideline pass was open and there was connection. Rufus McElroy slammed hard into the pass receiver and the ball popped out.

Players dove. The ball squirmed like a hot worm. The coaches held their breath. Caesar McElroy's large hand were on it as Vinny rammed his helmet into McElroy's balls. The ball squirted into the air again. Ron could almost touch it, as it rolled out of bounds.

They lost 14-7. The coaches had never been more proud of their outmanned team. Everyone was drained and, while not happy, they had avoided embarrassment.

Steve said, "Well, boys, that was like watching a man playing against children."

“I’ve never seen anyone that big and that fast at the same time,” said Paul.

“He’s a specimen,” said Steve.

“Looks like he came straight from the jungle,” said Artie.

Ferry growled, “I don’t want to hear that kind of shit in my locker room, Artie. Can it.”

With that Ferry walked off naked for his shower. Artie gave him the finger behind his back. Ron said, “It did sound racist, Artie.”

“I don’t really care what it sounded like. Don’t you start on me too, Pegleg.”

Artie had taken to calling Ron that when he wore the immobilizer. Ron grimaced and Artie, now jovial again, laughed.

Chapter 93

Ron met with Grant Pritchard in his office after class. It was a small room that had floor to ceiling bookshelves that were stuffed with an array of books and folders and mementoes from his teaching career. Grant dropped his satchel on the floor and slid in back of his desk. He ran his hands through his curly hair and said, “So, tell me again what you want to do.”

“I know that the version of the tapes that was released was redacted but what they show reveals the true quality of the man that we twice elected president. My girlfriend and I have some stage training and I’d like to make a recording of some of a reading of some of the conversations on the tapes.”

Pritchard nodded. “I can see some value to that. Which conversations do you want to record?”

“Well, March 21st I think is essential.”

“Obviously,” said Pritchard. “But I’d like what you do to reflect more than just the break-in. Some of the other shit that is on those tapes is far worse than that.”

“The March 13 tape goes into some of that,” said Ron. He’d devoured the book when it was rushed into print.

“Refresh my memory of what they talk about in that conversation,” said Pritchard.

“Dean talks about the infiltration of Peace groups and says that a story is out there about how CREEP had paid a minor to do that and that the kid had bragged about it at school. Dean told him that he had access to the IRS and that they could use it to apply pressure in the right places. He spoke with disdain about Hugh Sloan’s need to cleanse his conscience. They talked about the mistake that Liddy had made in using a third person to cash his checks from CREEP. He talked about the tail that had been placed on Edward Kennedy and how they had data that they had collected in their two years of following him. And he told Nixon that Haldeman knew about Donald Segretti and his pranks before they happened.”

“That’s all good stuff. Anything about the Pentagon papers?”

“I don’t think so. Not in that conversation.”

“Do you know what that one was?” said Pritchard.

“I think it was between Nixon and Mitchell, but I’ll have to look.”

There was a pause and the each sipped some coffee. “Do you think that this is more important than JFK assassination right now?” said Ron.

“Right now it is because Nixon is still the President. Historically though, what happened JFK was one of the largest events in the history of the country.”

“I remember William Buckley saying that he didn’t care who killed Kennedy as much as the fact that Kennedy was dead.”

“That’s because Buckley is an asshole,” said Pritchard.

Ron decided that it was best not to tell Pritchard that he still watched Firing Line and that he actually liked Buckley. “It just seems like we will never know what happened in Dallas,” said Ron.

“That’s probably accurate.”

“Isn’t it like beating your head against a stone wall and expecting the stone to break before your head does?”

“You can’t think that way.”

Ron didn’t like being told how he could or couldn’t think. He felt the same way about the war in Viet Nam now. He had tried. He had tried for years and it didn’t make any difference. Some people would never believe the truth even if it was right in front of them, and when you showed them things that were so clear that they couldn’t be avoided their response was that they were all a bunch of crooks anyway. That was short for saying that they wanted the conversation to be over.

That night Ron and Robin sat on the floor together. Now that Hank was gone, Robin walked around the house in her panties constantly and Ron found it incredibly distracting. He’d find himself staring at her ass and unable to take his eyes off of it. She sat cross-legged on the floor and now he was staring between her legs. He pretended to be looking down at the paperback book that had the transcripts of the Watergate tapes in it.

“You should be John Dean,” she said.

“What are we going to do about the stuff that is blanked out?” he said.

Robin smiled. “I think that I should just pause for a beat and then say clearly in my own voice, expletive deleted.”

“Let’s try it and see how it works.”

They read through the transcript with a cassette player between them. They read well together. They understood the cadences of each other’s voices and when to wait and when to move faster.

It occurred to Ron that they missed the stage and had been at their best performing with each other. When he told her that he wanted to write instead of act, she said, “You’re better at acting.”

It was true and he knew it. When he just relaxed and let it flow through him, he could feel and act like anyone, any character. He found it dangerous and exciting, but he also felt like an instrument and he yearned to be the composer. But a composer needed vision and where was his vision? What did he have to say that anyone would find worth reading? Ron stared between her legs again. Nothing felt as good as when he was inside of her there. That wasn’t true. When

he was there, he felt the need to perform and satisfy. When they dreamed together, he felt free and light. He thought about that and then looked up at her face. She had seen him staring. It excited her to act with him. There was an energy that sparked between them. It occurred to her for the first time that it wasn't real. She didn't really like the way that they fucked. He seemed to enjoy thrusting in so hard and then needing to turn her over and take her from behind in order to achieve orgasm. She didn't understand why he didn't want to look into her face when he came. It made her feel alone. She wanted to study the sparkle in his eyes and she couldn't see them lying on her stomach.

Chapter 94

Returning to school, Ron found that he was helplessly behind in every subject. He was also isolated. It was a funny thing about guys in the school. If a person was away for a while, they became forgotten. People moved on without them. Ron didn't have any friends in his class and was considered weird because he had been out of school so much.

Brother Alvin stood in front of his desk looking down at Ron as he stumbled through the pronunciation of some French. "You really are rather hopeless aren't you, Tuck?"

Ron didn't answer.

"Did you hear my question, Mr. Tuck? I said that you really are rather hopeless, aren't you?"

"Not as hopeless as a man wearing a dress who is named after a singing chipmunk, Brother." Ron braced himself for the slap, the kick or the punch that he knew was coming. He heard the class laughing hard. He saw the darkness in Brother Alvin's eyes.

"Wait in the hallway, Tuck. You don't deserve to sit in my classroom."

"Yes, Brother Alvin," said Ron, accenting the Alvin in a way that caused the class to laugh harder.

Ron stood against the lockers in the long, clean, empty hallway. Why had he done it? Why couldn't he have just said nothing? He didn't know. He didn't care. Maybe what Alvin would do to him would land him back in the hospital. The Brothers at Jersey Catholic did not believe in calling home. They did not believe in suspensions. This was something that gratified the parents of the students there.

Ron saw Brother Kelly turn the corner and see him in the hallway. When he saw Ron standing there a frown passed over his face and he moved towards him. Ron knew that this was going to be bad.

"What are you doing out here, Mr. Tuck?"

"Brother Alvin told me to wait out here."

"And why would Brother Alvin need to remove you from his class after you have missed so much time already?"

"I don't know."

"Let's find out, shall we?"

Brother Kelly opened the door to the classroom and Ron heard it go silent inside. Then Brothers Alvin and Kelly were standing in the doorway talking very quietly. They both came over and stood in front of Ron.

"Why don't you repeat for Brother Kelly the foul things that you just said to me," said Brother Alvin.

"I don't remember," said Ron.

Kelly backhanded him across the face and his head snapped back and bounced off of the metal locker with a loud clang. "Does that improve your memory, Tuck?"

Ron felt a hot trickle of blood run down from his lip and splash on his white shirt. He didn't answer. The punch to his stomach that followed doubled him over. "Still experiencing memory problems, Tuck?"

Ron clutched at his stomach and tried to catch his breath. "We'll give you thirty seconds to compose yourself, Tuck. You are wasting my time and Brother Alvin's time and the time of your classmates. I do not wish to have my time wasted, Mr. Tuck.

“I got angry because he said that I was hopeless, Brother.”

“You do appear to be hopeless, don’t you Tuck?” taunted Brother Kelly.

“I guess so.”

Ron felt Kelly’s hand grip him like a vise between his neck and shoulder. He walked him down the hall holding him that way. Ron’s hands raised to try to move Kelly’s hand away and then he thought better of it and just winced a long, painful, silent gasp of pain.

They got into the elevator and rode down to the main floor. Ron knew that there were thousands of people in the building, but it seemed to have swallowed them and everything was very quiet.

Ron was not allowed to sit in Brother Kelly’s office. “Perhaps Jersey Catholic is not a good fit for you, Tuck.”

Ron felt hot tears in his eyes. He tasted his blood on his lips.

“Why have you missed so much school?”

“I was in the hospital,” said Ron.

“What was wrong with you this time?”

“I have an ulcer.”

“A boy your age with an ulcer? That’s ridiculous. Do you have a weak stomach?”

“I don’t know.”

“Were you disrespectful to Brother Alvin?”

“Yes, Brother.”

“Why would you ever fail to show respect to someone who was teaching you?”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry that you got caught.”

Ron looked into Brother Kelly's eyes with real confusion. How could he have failed to get caught? "I don't understand, Brother."

"That much is clear, Mr. Tuck."

Chapter 95

It was a Sunday and that meant that Celeste was able to come to Ron's apartment. They almost had a routine now. First, they had sex like horny rabbits, then they luxuriated in each other over Chinese food.

"Where do you want to live?" said Ron.

"Where do you want to live?" said Celeste.

"My mother is willing to ask her tenants to leave and the amount of money that she wants for the apartment is ridiculously low."

"Do you think that we can do that?"

"I don't know but I do know that Glen Ridge has a great school system and that Angel would get a great education."

"That's a couple years away, Ron. Sometimes I think that you forget how young she is."

"We don't have to live there, but it's safe and we would have support."

He kissed her bare nipples and she shivered. Lips on lips they were fantastic kissers. Ron slid his hand down her back and she felt a spreading warmth. He was letting her know that he would be ready again soon.

He was asking a lot and he didn't understand the ways that women dealt with each other. It was Marjorie's house and if Celeste had learned anything it was that Marjorie didn't get up what she thought was hers without a struggle.

"We played against a really good team yesterday," said Ron.

Celeste asked, "How are your classes?"

"I made a mistake," said Ron.

"A bad one?"

"Yeah," Ron shook his head back and forth. "I told them that Walt Whitman was homosexual and now that's all they think about and see."

"Why did you tell them that?"

"It's the truth. That's the deal that I make with them. I always tell them as much of the truth as I can."

"What will you do now?"

"I'm going to downplay it and try one more time with Crossing Brooklyn Ferry. It's a great poem."

Celeste stroked his eyebrows. "Then what?"

"Depends on how it goes. If they can't get passed it, I have to move on."

"To what?"

"I'm not sure. I should do Emily Dickinson but I never seem to arouse much enthusiasm for her."

"Why do you think they don't like her?"

"I'm really not sure but what I have come to learn is that if I'm not enthusiastic about a writer, my students never like the writer. And I think my lack of enthusiasm for her shows through."

"So, if you like the writer and communicate that to them, they like the writer?"

Ron laughed and cracked open a fortune cookie. "I wish it was that easy. I've been teaching for years that The Odyssey is a great poem that is the foundation for almost everything that came after it. It and The Iliad. It's hit and miss. Some years the students love it and other years they don't care for it at all and find it boring."

"Maybe they aren't ready for it," said Celeste.

Ron asked, "Did you like it?"

Celeste blushed. "I never read the whole thing."

"Why?"

"I didn't like it," she said laughing.

Ron read his cookie to her. "Nothing good ever comes easy." He looked into her deep brown eyes. "Do believe that?"

Celeste thought for a long moment and they each chewed half of the cookie. "I think that it's true for some people and not true for others. Did you ever see the movie, *The Way We Were*?"

"I don't think so. Who's in it?"

"Robert Redford and Barbra Streisand."

"I like both of them."

"You'd like the movie too. I'll look to see if it ever comes on TV. Anyway, for him things came easy and for her nothing came easy. I think it depends on what kind of person you are."

Ron laughed, "We are definitely the kind that things don't come easy for. Let's play a game."

Celeste grinned that smile that just melted him because of the way that it spread across her face and showed her enthusiasm. She snuggled down against his chest. His skin was very smooth and his muscles hard. She listened to his heart beating.

Ron said, "Ok, you have to answer fast, without thinking about it."

"I'll try."

"Favorite author?"

"James Michener."

"Favorite song writer?"

"John Lennon."

They each felt the pang. It was still fresh for both of them. “Yeah,” said Ron. “I can understand that.”

“Why Michener?”

“He takes me places that I have never been. I can go back to those places each time I read the same book. I must have read Hawaii six or seven times and now it’s like an old friend.”

“I never read anything of his. He’s never taught in the schools and he never was on any syllabus for any of the college courses that I took.” In Ron’s mind that meant that he wasn’t good enough to be on those lists, but he didn’t tell her that just then.

Celeste said, “My turn. Favorite author?”

Ron laughed, “I don’t know.”

Celeste mock pouted. “You made me just say the first thing that I thought.”

“You’re right. F. Scott Fitzgerald.”

“Songwriter?”

“Bob Dylan.”

“Favorite movie?”

“I think that I’d have to say The Godfather but it used to be The Hustler and when I was younger it was The Young Philadelphians.”

“I don’t know that one,” said Celeste.

“Paul Newman,” said Ron.

“He’s in The Hustler too isn’t he?”

“Yes, he plays Fast Eddie Felson.”

“So, he’s your favorite actor?”

Ron laughed again. She could hear the laugh rumble inside of him and it echoed in her ear. “Maybe, but I really like Humphrey Bogart.”

The game went on until it grew dark. They talked about food, clothes, flavors, times of the year, holidays, and heroes. They did not mention sports.

“Do you have a favorite way to make love?” said Ron.

Celeste reached down and squeezed him in her hand. “With you.”

Chapter 96

“Do you think it’s possible to know what someone else is thinking?”

Robin answered, “If you really want to, yes.”

Ron said, “I don’t understand.”

“If you really want to know my thoughts, they come with a price tag.”

“How much?”

“I don’t know. It depends on the situation. It depends on what I want you to know.”

Ron shifted in the bed. They were dressed. She was sipping wine and reading a play called Ring Around the Moon. “Suppose it’s something that you don’t want me to know?”

“Then either you won’t find out or the price will be higher.”

“Why do you want me to pay?”

Robin looked at him with the same eggshell blue eyes that he’d seen when he looked at his father. She smiled and said, “Because you fell in love with me.”

Ron tried to digest that. He loved her, did he? She held back from him. He mistrusted that. She wanted to exact a price for his trust. He didn’t understand but he should have.

“I think the recording sounds smooth and good. I like what you did with the mumbled words and the expletive deleted parts.”

Robin grinned. “You sounded just like a lawyer.”

Robin came to class the night that Grant Pritchard played their tape. She was wearing a white wool sweater that had small pearly buttons that she left open halfway down. She wore boots and jeans.

Ron was wearing yesterday's clothing. He'd listened to the tape at least a dozen times. He wished that they had another shot at it but Robin told him to leave it alone.

The class listened very quietly. Ron and Robin looked at each other as the tape played.

When it ended, Grant Pritchard said, "I want you to notice some things before we listen to this again. Now remember, Nixon knew that he was on tape and he's a skillful lawyer. Dean did not know that he was on tape and thought that he was speaking with attorney-client privilege. Nixon asks how much money they would need to pay off their blackmailers and Dean tells him a million dollars. Nixon very carefully says that it could be gotten, that he knows how to get it. Someone might leave that conversation and think that had been told to pursue that avenue, but Nixon never actually says that is what he wants Dean to do. He retains deniability."

A student asked, "Wasn't he just exploring options?"

Pritchard nodded. "That is exactly what he makes it sound like he is doing. Now in an earlier part of the conversation Dean talks about the things that the Plumbers have done. They mention the burglary of Daniel Ellsberg's doctor's office. The attempt here was to discredit the Pentagon papers, but it was only one of the things that they had done. They used prostitutes, buggings, and infiltration of the opposition's organization. It is clear that they also infiltrated antiwar groups. In other words there was a wide spread attempt to compromise the opposition and dissent."

Ron said, "So when we thought we were being followed and had people join us who were there to make trouble, we weren't mistaken."

Pritchard laughed. "No you aren't paranoid if they are truly after you."

The class laughed and Ron felt old. He'd been in college longer than most of the people in the room and many of them had been in high school when he was

involved in the Moratoriums. He didn't find it funny that he and others had tried to stop mass killing and had been characterized as anti- American. It made him angry. Watergate might be the biggest I told you so that he could have imagined but his classmates seemed to think of it more as a game.

Pritchard turned their tape on again and Ron and Robin found each other's eyes. She had been tense during the laughter because she could see what he was thinking written on his face and she knew that he wasn't above admonishing them and that was always counterproductive.

After class, Pritchard said, "Ron, you did a great job with that tape and Robin thank you so much for donating your time to the effort." They both beamed the way that they did when they got applause.

On the way home in the car, Robin said, "That was a lot of fun."

Ron smiled. "You were worried I was going to say something, weren't you?"

"I'm always worried that you are going to say something. Accepting compliments isn't exactly your strong suit. For someone who craves approval as much as you do, it amazes me that you respond so poorly to it."

Ron grinned. "I'm better than I used to be."

She shook her head and laughed again. "Yes, it wasn't as bad as the drama festival when they gave us an award and you got up and told them that we flubbed the lines and jig sawed the scene back together."

Ron blushed. "That was really stupid. You're never going to let me forget that, are you?"

"Only if you promise to never do it again," said Robin.

Chapter 97

Ron trudged home after his ninth consecutive day of jug. He only had one more day left. His mother and George were sitting at the kitchen table. She was smiling and he looked worried.

Marjorie said, "Ronald we're moving."

Ron's mouth dropped open. "Where?"

"A beautiful little town called Glen Ridge."

"Where's that?"

"It's right off of Bloomfield Avenue. Wait until you see it. You're going to love it."

Ron stared at them in disbelief. "We're leaving Newark? We're leaving all my friends?"

"You'll make new friends," said Marjorie.

"I don't want new friends."

George said, "I just don't see how we are going to afford it. What happens if one of us gets sick? How are you going to get to work in the morning?"

Marjorie's face was resolute. "George, this is what I want. You promised that if we found the right house that we could do it. There is a tenant and that will help a lot with the mortgage."

"You can't count on that."

"We have to count on it."

That night, after a dinner that consisted of a green salad and steak, the drove down Summer Avenue, passed George's family's home and turned right onto Bloomfield Avenue. The Avenue ran like an artery through Essex County. It began in the north end of Newark and wiggled an almost straight line up to West Caldwell where it intersected with one of the highways that was constructed during the Depression, US route 46. There were farm stands out at the end of the Avenue and people lived very differently than they did at its base.

Marjorie had taken Ron to a pumpkin farm in Verona where they had swiped a Halloween pumpkin that they'd carved and lighted. Ron remembered the squishy feel of the pumpkin seeds and the long stringy tendrils that enveloped them. The further away from Newark they drove, the more the memory of the tendrils on his hands made him sick to his stomach.

The he saw a Woolworth's to his right and a bank like the one that was down in Newark where Bloomfield Avenue began.

The road climbed and there were lots of oak trees. The Avenue broadened into a wide sweep and the air seemed cooler and fresher. They made a right hand turn by a small row of stores, a police station, two gas stations and a tiny A&P. It was a one block one way street.

A little more than halfway down the block, they stopped in front of a grey house. "Here it is!" said Marjorie.

It rose up slightly from the street. The top of the roof came to a peak. There were green bushes and no broken glass. Ron's eyes absorbed. What had this place to do with him? How could he ever be more than a visitor to a place like this? Ron thought for maybe the first time that George might be right. They didn't belong here.

When Ron went back to school, he felt strange. The time that he still had to go there had seemed endless and now he was unsure of how long he had left. Brother Alvin no longer spoke to him or looked at him. When he checked homework, he didn't even pause at Ron's desk. He just walked by like Ron was invisible. Ron didn't know what to do and so he did nothing.

Brother O'Shea was still handing out the weekly smacks for failing grades, but Ron had managed to catch up to the point that he was barely passing each Algebra quiz.

Brother Cecil, who Ron had managed to impress with his knowledge of the life of Jesus, told Ron that he knew more religion than the other kids in his class and that Brother Cecil wanted him to stay quiet when he asked questions or when they had discussions in the room.

English and History continued to go well, but Ron was finding that he had to force himself to read the pages and was always looking ahead and hoping that large portions of the pages would be taken up by pictures. He seemed to forget what he read as soon as he was finished reading it. Sometimes it would come back to him and sometimes it was just gone.

In Latin, he was totally lost and stopped even opening the book. The days were very long and very quiet. The quieter they grew the more withdrawn Ron became. He stopped seeing the psychiatrist. Marjorie told him that they needed to save every penny they could now.

Between teacher arrivals, Billy Mitchell said, "I got indefinite fucking jug."

"What did you do?"

"Didn't go to school so that I could get laid."

Ron was impressed. Billy grew in respect in his eyes. Ron had never gotten laid and he wondered if he would ever get laid.

"We're moving," said Ron. He knew that Billy took the bus down from Verona every day and thought maybe he would be able to tell him something about Glen Ridge.

"Where to?"

"Glen Ridge."

Billy Jenkins laughed and said, "You're fucked."

Ron felt slapped. "Why?"

"Rah-rah heaven."

"What do you mean?"

"That's the land of madras shirts and penny loafers."

Chapter 98

When the literary magazine came out, Ron was impressed by its size and cover. The cover was a high gloss explosion of fruits, flowers and birds that were arranged in the middle of a wooded scene with a hint of blue and white sky in the background. The yellows and blues and purples and reds sprang out at the reader.

Ron thumbed through it quickly to see which of his four submissions were in the magazine. When he saw his name in print a rush of adrenalin surged in him. It was his poem *Leopards in the Temple*. He'd written it about Franz Kafka and

borrowed the title from one of Kafka's Parables and Paradoxes. His eyes moved quickly over the lines. He liked what he saw. His was the only poem on the page. He winced when he saw the parenthesis that he'd grown too fond of using. He realized again that they added nothing to the piece. He wanted to erase them, but there they were in print. He heard Warren Lashly's admonishment in his head about being foolish for letting things go before they were ready. He could hear his Southern drawl saying, "Your impatience causes your poems to be flawed. Well, it's one of the things that causes them to be flawed." Ron felt his ears burn.

He leafed through the pages and there was another of his poems. The title of this one was a line of French that he'd copied out of *The Magic Mountain*. When he wrote the poem, he pictured Robin and himself as figures in a painting. She was looking out at the world and he was staring only at her. But there were the stupid parenthesis again. Ron glared at them. Warren had been right. And now the way that he had placed the words on the page, the lines that he felt looked so elegant when he had written them with a quill pen on parchment paper now appeared to just be confusing.

Ron wondered if any of his other pieces had made it to the magazine. When he got to pages 54 and 55, his eyes grew larger. Herman Horvack had taken his other two poems and combined them into one very long poem. He'd changed the title of his poem. A look of horror twisted Ron's face. He heard Melanie's voice singing, "Look what they done to my song, ma." He felt a rush of rage. He had an urge to find Herman and confront him about it. Then a voice in his head said that he should also remember that they had published every word that he had submitted to the magazine.

Later that night Robin read the magazine and said, "You turned your poems into a choo-choo train."

"What do you mean?" It sounded almost childish but with insight.

"Your poems are strung together like railroad cars. Why did you do that?"

"I didn't."

"They changed your poems?"

“I don’t know if it was an accident or on purpose.” Ron knew. The title had been changed. He didn’t want to tell her.

The next day Herman said, “I saw a connection between the two poems and thought they would look great as a single piece.”

Ron’s anger had dissipated some. “I wish that you would have talked to me about it first. I see your point but I would have made it a part one and part two, not run them together.”

“Here’s the exciting news. The magazine is being considered for a national award.”

“Really?”

“The combination of artwork and poetry and prose and photography is getting a great reception,” said Herman. “Your poems look great.”

“So do yours, but one in English, one in French, and one in German without translations. Are you trying to be Thomas Mann?”

Herman laughed at Ron’s reference to the thirty pages of untranslated French that was in the middle of the Magic Mountain.

Chapter 99

Ron was tired. He went straight home from practice and stopped at his local deli and bought two rolls and some turkey breast and Swiss cheese and added some mayo. That was dinner. He just didn’t want to face papers tonight and he was enough on top of it so that he could let it go for a day.

Ron was watching this new show called Cheers that took place in a bar in Boston. He thought the blonde was hot and loved the way that she stood up so straight with her legs together. It gave her ass the cutest little wiggle when she moved her arms as she spoke. He turned the sound down when the phone rang.

Celeste's voice made him smile. They talked briefly about their day and she told him that her friend the bartender was arranging for the alcohol for the wedding and that she had found a place called the Englehard Women's Club.

"Wow, that's a long way from Glen Ridge, isn't it?"

"I just couldn't find anything else on short notice."

Ron didn't understand how several months could be short notice but he trusted her that it was. He laughed, "You know more about these things than I do."

"It's going to start moving very fast now, Ron. It will be here before you know it."

"I know."

"Do you have the TV on?" she said.

"Did you see the special on the Kennedy Assassination?"

"No," said Ron. "Why are they doing something about the assassination?"

"The anniversary of it is coming up."

Ron grimaced. He hated the way they dredged it up every year now. He hated what it had done to the country. "I used to be really involved with looking at the conspiracy theories around it. But after the Church hearings, I just gave up. I knew that we were never going to know the truth and that it was so long ago that it didn't matter anymore."

"I don't know why but every time I see something on TV or see an article in a magazine, I read it. I just can't help myself. I feel like I am being loyal to his memory somehow."

"I know what you mean, but it's like banging your head on the wall. Walls don't bleed but your head does."

"Do you remember where you were when it happened?"

"I remember everything about it. That's why I can't watch those specials. It just dredges up all that pain and anger."

"I know it does but it reminds me of a time before I knew that there was anything wrong in the country."

"You knew it during the Civil Rights Movement," said Ron.

"Yes, but it was getting better and JFK and Bobby and Martin Luther King were changing things. It felt so filled with energy and hope."

"I know it did. Then we grew up."

"Do you think that they three of them are connected?"

"I don't know," said Ron. "I would have said that we would never know the truth about anything until Watergate. I was pretty sure that we weren't going to know the truth about that either, but then Nixon and his tapes."

Ron lay his head back on the pillow. He closed his eyes and listened to her voice and heard his voice. Their telephone calls had a soft intimacy that had nothing to do with the topic but everything to do with the way that each of them sounded to the other.

"Did I tell you that I worked for the Underground Railroad?"

Ron's grinned widened. "No you just told me that you worked for Harry Chapin and World Hunger Year. What did you do?"

"I drove guys from New Jersey up into New York State."

"Then they met somebody else?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever learn what happened to any of them?"

"No, we didn't even know their names."

"Did you talk to them much?"

"We weren't supposed to. The less we knew the better."

"How long did you do that for?"

"A year."

Ron smiled into the phone. "Pretty risky stuff."

“It didn’t seem that way then. Looking back on it, yeah. What do you really think about the assassinations?” said Celeste.

“I think it’s all really connected by Watergate and what it reveals,” said Ron.

Celeste felt stunned. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Here is what I believe. Six months before he died, JFK said that he wanted American troops out of Viet Nam by the end of the year. That was 1963. There was ten more years of war to be waged. Profits to be made. Weapons to be tested.”

Celeste feel shivers as she heard his whispers. “What about Bobby?”

“That’s a tough one,” said Ron. “Here’s the common denominator. Bobby became a peace candidate. He was going to win. It had only been five years. Camelot was a dream that was not so far away. That’s how people were responding. Remember it was only 1968. We had five more years of war at stake.”

“Sirhan killed him,” said Celeste. “It might be the one time that it really was a lone assassin.”

“I don’t know or think that I will ever be able to know any of that. We got Nixon. He could never have beaten Kennedy. The Kennedys were his nightmare. They would have brought out the worst in him very early in in 1968.”

“What you’re saying is scary,” said Celeste.

“Fairly buried in Watergate is what Nixon did to the Peace Movement. They discredited it. They sabotaged it the way that Nixon sabotaged for his whole career. The Pentagon Papers,” said Ron. “They were a key. It showed that we knew how fucked up what we were doing was and didn’t care. It was a kick in the balls to every person who had supported the war. But you know what?”

Almost automatically, she said, “What?”

“They didn’t want to read it or know it. Then they shifted the focus to those gallant man who served their country. Private Benjamin and Officer and a Gentleman. They got away from Apocalypse Now. It was back to You’re in the Army Now.”

“I don’t understand what you mean,” said Celeste.

“After I read 1984 and Brave New World, I knew about how propaganda worked. It was all about manipulation. Everything that is designed to affect our desires for a better world is manipulated but what we know and what we don’t know.”

“That’s very dark,” said Celeste.

“I’m sorry. Do you want me to stop?”

“No,” she said quickly like there was a scary movie in her ear and she wanted to hear where it was going.

“I think Howard Hughes had it right. Make movies that support what you want.” Ron laughed. “See Nixon is a key to it all. He was either there or a representative of what controlled him from the start.” Ron laughed. “But he’s fucked up. Or, they set him up because while he was useful, he wasn’t likable. His greatest nightmare, to be reviled.”

“You’re all over the place,” said Celeste.

“I know that it sounds that way. I really do. Here’s what I learned from Watergate. Follow the money. Translated that means follow the power.”

“That’s thinking the game is rigged,” said Celeste.

“I’m thinking that we don’t know what the game is.”

“You sound like Quimpy.”

“Quimpy is a very smart man.”

Celeste said, “He sure is but he’s also great evidence for brains not being everything.”

Ron said, “He and I go way back. I think I was sixteen when I met him.”

“At the bowling alley?”

“Yes.”

“That seems like such an odd place for you to hang out.”

“I was different then.”

“Do you mean you’re older now?”

Ron thought hard. “Maybe I do. Maybe it took me a long time to figure out what getting older really means.”

Celeste said, “I know what you mean, but I didn’t really learn it until I gave birth to Angel. It just changed everything. Do you understand?”

Ron murmured, “No.” He thought about telling her. He’d never told anyone about that conversation and how it made him feel. The he just found himself saying, “Robin and I never wanted children. I think, for me, I was just too young to understand. For her, it was something deeper and I don’t know what it was or is. Zoe wanted children and begged me to impregnate her.” Ron laughed as he remembered. “Can you believe that we had sex multiple times each day and used no birth control except for withdrawal and she didn’t get pregnant?”

“It depends on a lot of things,” said Celeste. He had caused her nursing brain to activate and give her multiple options of symptoms such as age and eating disorders to consider.

“Anyway,” said Ron. “I had this friend named Paula. She used to come over to see me before my apartment got burned out and when I lived in Elizabeth. We were friends and we liked sex. That’s how it was for me. Looking back, that was a stupid way to feel. I was staying in Rahway a couple days after the fire and she called me there. She told me that she’d been pregnant but had an abortion. She said it had been my child.”

Celeste winced. What had she told him that? The answer came swiftly. She’d loved him and he hadn’t recognized it and so she punished him with both the abortion and the call. Celeste conjured his face in her mind. Why did his lovers feel the need to punish him? Was it something that he was doing? She’d not felt that way. Did he pick women who liked doing that? No, that wasn’t it. What was it? “We all do crazy things sometimes,” said Celeste.

“Why?” His word was a plea to understand.

“I don’t know. There’s lots of evidence for it though.”

They laughed sweet and warm smiles into the phones.

“I think it’s because we live in the instant but then our brains keep recreating that instant over and over.”

Celeste’s voice was gentle and filled with understanding. “Not everyone’s brain needs to do that, Ron.”

Chapter 100

Looking at his grades, Ron felt his head begin to spin. He had never failed a subject in his life and there they were, two failures staring up at him. French and Latin had both turned out to be a mess.

Marjorie said, “How did this happen?”

“I just didn’t do well.”

“But you’re so smart. I never had to help you with homework. You never needed help before.”

“I know.”

“What happened this time?”

“I don’t know. Those subjects were hard and I missed so much time.”

“That’s a terrible excuse.”

Ron felt his ears begin to hum. She was right. He had given up on both of those subjects and he hadn’t liked the teachers very much. “I’m sorry. I know that you’re right. I just gave up on those classes.”

“You gave up?” Her face showed genuine surprise. “How could you give up?”

“I didn’t like them.”

“Do you think that I like all the things that I have to do, Ronald? What would happen if I gave up?”

Ron didn’t answer. If he answered he would have gotten into deeper trouble because the truth was that he had seen her give up and give into her fears all the time. So she was allowed to give up and he wasn’t?

“Well, you’ll do better in your new school.”

Ron looked shocked. “What new school?”

“There’s no reason to pay to send you back down to Newark to a school where you are failing when the public schools where we will be living have a great reputation.”

Ron felt confusion. Newark was all that he had ever known and now everything was going to be taken away. He knew the rules on the streets but this new place that he had only seen once and was now going to be his home was different. He didn’t know the rules and he would have no friends and he wasn’t sure that he would ever be able to play football again. “I guess not,” said Ron.

“I have something to tell you,” said Marjorie.

Ron listened.

“When I got your report card, I went to Jersey Catholic and met with Brother Kelly.”

Ron felt a flush of embarrassment. Why did she do things like that?

“I asked him why you had done so poorly and he told me that it was your attitude.”

Ron felt the buzzing in his ears again.

“He said that you had been insulting to your teachers and had missed a lot of time and showed no desire to be successful.”

Ron put his head down. He’d never told her that he was hit at school. He never told her any of what had happened to him there. She wouldn’t have understood and would have only made it worse.

“He did say that it was not unusual for a boy to have a rough transition from grammar school. I told him that you were a convert and he seemed surprised by that.”

Ron knew that his face must be very red now. He could feel the heat. His palms were beginning to sweat.

“I told him that it had been your dream to go to Jersey Catholic and would you like to know what he said to me?”

Ron didn’t want to know but said, “Yes.”

“He said that you were like an untrained animal that had no discipline.”

Now Ron felt his anger beginning to rise. He saw the hurt on her face. He knew how much she must have hated hearing that.

“I felt humiliated, Ronald.”

“I’m sorry, Mom. You shouldn’t have gone there.”

“I’m trying to figure out what’s happened to you, Ronald. You’ve changed. Something is going terribly wrong with you and I don’t know what it is.”

“It’s just been a hard year.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Sure,” said Ron. “It was going great until I got hurt. Then everything changed. I started worrying that I would never be able to play football again.”

“Football is just a game, Ronald.”

“I know, but I’m good at it. I was anyway. There aren’t that many things that I am good at.”

“That’s nonsense. You’re very smart.”

“Being smart and being good are two different things.”

“So this is all about football?”

“No,” said Ron. He wanted to tell her how much he missed his father but knew that if he did that she would call his dad and yell at him. Then his father would be angry with him. “I’m frightened about moving.”

Marjorie said, “Moving is going to be a very good thing. Newark is changing. There is trouble coming.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure, but it’s something that I feel.”

“Like what?”

“Tension and bad feelings,” said Marjorie. “George is carrying a baseball bat in the car. He doesn’t play baseball.”

In his mind’s eyes, Ron saw the image of his dad. His father could pick it at third base and had an elegant swing. The thought of George carrying a baseball bat was obscene to him. “Why does he have the bat?”

“He says that it’s for protection.”

“What does he need to be protected from?”

Marjorie looked into her son’s eyes. “I don’t know.” Then her voice got soft. “Every man I have ever known has lied to me.”

Ron winced and knew that included him. He said, “I miss Dad and since he started really playing golf, he never come to see me anymore. I know he’s busy but...” His voice trailed off.

Marjorie looked at him and felt sympathy. More than any other man, Harry Tuck had lied to her the most and, sadly, loved her the most. She thought about Rocky. She couldn’t help it. Was a lie different from a betrayal? Was every rejection a betrayal or maybe an acknowledgment of a person’s failings? “Your father had a hard life.” She wondered how much of Harry had seeped into her son.

“I just miss him,” said Ron.

Marjorie wanted to cry for him the same way that she had cried for Harry, but in some ways his connection was stronger than hers. He had Harry’s blood in him. He couldn’t help but have it. She wanted to kiss him but they rarely touched and it would have been awkward. “Well, you aren’t going back to Jersey Catholic. That’s over now.”

Chapter 101

“So where is this bar?” said Ron

Celeste said, “It’s right on Washington Avenue.”

It was a bar like that the hundred that Ron had been in with his father when Harry used to take him to work. It was long and dark with some filtered light that gave it a sullen feel. Ron wondered if bars did that on purpose like having no clocks in a casino caused you to forget about how much time you had spent there. Was the bar designed to make you feel sullen so that you drank more?

Bottles was a stocky guy with black curly hair and dark framed glasses. He saw Ron and came over to shake his hand. “Let’s go in the other room for a few minutes,” he said. Bottles motioned to the other bartender and jerked his thumb and then led Ron around a wall. There was another full bar there but it was very dark and almost empty. Sitting at the bar alone was Gregory Lumus, Celeste’s first husband and Bottles best friend.

Ron felt a moment of discomfort and scanned for exits. There were none other than the one that he had just walked through. OK, so here he was in this fairly isolated place with two men who might wish to do him harm. He felt his body tense a little. Bottles walked in back of the bar and refilled Greg’s glass with bourbon. “Can I get you anything, Ronnie?”

Ron felt back in Newark. “Just some water.” He didn’t want to tell them that he didn’t really drink. Gregory hadn’t looked up from his glass.

Bottles said, “Greg, this is Ronnie Tuck. He’s going to marry Celeste.”

Without looking at him, Lumus said, “Good fucking luck with that.” Then he laughed to himself and turned to face Ron. “So, you’re going to marry her now, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Ron.

“What’s that make you, number three?”

Ron ignored the barb. “She’s told me a lot about you.”

“Yeah,” said Gregory. “What did she say?”

“That you were exciting and talented. That you went to Europe together.”

“She tell you that she walked out on me without a word? Without any explanation?”

“Yeah,” said Ron. “She did.” Ron didn’t tell him that she left him because of his refusal to get a job, his endless drunken nights passed on the floor, and the generally chaotic life that he wanted to live.

Gregory went back to his drink and stared into the smoky mirror in back of the bar. All three men lit a cigarette. Bottles looked a little uneasy but then said, “So you want me to just order what would be standard for a wedding, or did you have something else that you needed?”

“I’d better leave that up to you.”

“Celeste said that you knew a guy who we could hire to tend bar?”

Greg Lumus reached for the bottle of bourbon and poured another two fingers worth into his glass. Ron still wasn’t taking his eyes off of him but was watching with peripheral vision so as not to appear to be staring.

“Yeah,” said Bottles with a gravelly voice. “I got somebody.”

Lumus said, “She’s not getting you to do it, huh?”

Bottles laughed, “I’m a guest.”

Lumus downed the bourbon. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

He walked away without saying anything to Ron.

Bottles looked relieved. He said, “Greg is alright.”

“Yeah,” said Ron. “He seems really nice.”

They both laughed.

When he got home, Ron called Celeste. “So I saw Bottles and we got the alcohol thing straightened out.”

“That’s good,” said Celeste.

“I also met Gregory Lumus.”

Celeste began to choke. She had been drinking a cup of coffee and was mid swallow when he said it. She could feel it coming out of her nose now. Ron was laughing.

Then he said, “Are you Ok?”

It took her another minute to stop choking. “Yes,” she managed to squeak as she fought for air. “What happened?”

“He wished me luck,” said Ron.

“He did?” Celeste sounded incredulous.

“Sort of,” said Ron. “What he actually said was good fucking luck with that.”

“That sounds more like him. Was he drunk?”

“On his way,” said Ron.

“Sure, Friday night. Let’s see he’ll get fairly plastered, sleep for a couple of hours, and then do some serious drinking.”

“Every Friday?”

“You can set your watch by it,” said Celeste.

“He asked if I knew that you left him without a word.”

“What did you say?”

“I said yeah.”

“It sounds like it was tense.”

“More it was just awkward after I figured out that they weren’t going to jack me up.”

“Were you worried about that?”

“It crossed my mind. That was just me. There wasn’t anything like that.”

Celeste smiled.

Ron said, "George had the invitations printed for us."

"How do they look?"

"I haven't seen them yet. I'll stop by their house and pick them up on the way up to see you. I'll get the list from my mom."

"Ok, want to do them tonight?"

"Sure," said Ron.

Marjorie was waiting for him. She showed him the invitations. Ron smiled up at George and said, "Thank you. They're really beautiful." They were printed in a script that Celeste and Ron liked and they were on a creamily white, fine paper that would accent her wedding dress. Ron looked at them again and smiled. "They're really great George, thank you."

George said, "I printed up enough thank you notes to last forever."

The genuine kindness of the act touched Ron in a place that he never believed that he could ever be touched by George. Marjorie handed him the list. "It's larger than what we expected."

"We agreed on 100 people," said Ron.

"This will only bring it to about 125 and these people are important."

"Why?" said Ron.

George got up and left the table. He went into the living room and turned on the TV.

"I want to invite Rocky," said Marjorie.

The cold gaze that came over Ron was almost frightening. "No."

He knew that his mother still talked to Rocky on the telephone. For all he knew they may have met again. He hadn't expected her to ask for this and his reaction was visceral.

"He was important in your life."

"Pretty much the way that the bubonic plague was important to Shakespeare."

“Don’t be a bastard, Ronald.”

“Mom, I can’t. I still hate him and I don’t want anyone that I hate there that day.”

“What about your father’s boss?”

“He was always good to me. If he wants to come, I want him there.”

“George’s family wants to be there.”

Ron felt a little stunned. He looked down at the invitations. “That would be nice.”

“What about your Uncle Mike’s family?”

Ron thought about his Aunt Dottie and her sister Anita who had married Uncle Mike. He wasn’t sure why they would want to be there. His uncle had died. “OK,” he said. He loved the Yankees because of his Uncle Mike. He’d ignored his uncle. Ron had the feeling that this would be a rerun of his life. He had very few vetoes and he’d already used the biggest one.

Chapter 102

They moved to Glen Ridge in early summer. Richie helped them with the move. The sense of space was shocking. There was a backyard without gravel and glass and in back of it was a football field that was ringed by a track. When they shook hands Ron said, “I not losing touch with Newark.”

Richie shook his friend’s hand warmly. “You will. Everybody who moves away does.”

“Not me,” said Ron. “I know where I come from.”

“You still want to play football?”

“Yes,” said Ron.

“Is your knee better?”

“Sometimes, but I can’t run the way that I used to.”

“I could always beat you in a race,” said Richie.

“You always did,” said Ron.

It was goodbye to Newark and Ron’s friends and everything that he understood. He wouldn’t miss Jersey Catholic, but right now he missed Newark very much.

His first walks were explorations that were filled with wonder. What struck him first was that there were no smells. You didn’t get that whiff of diesel when a bus rumbled its engine. The aroma of what your neighbors were cooking didn’t waft out to you as you passed their windows. The houses were set too far back from the street for any of that. The lawns were manicured and the wonder of flowers was everywhere. Ron had only seen flowers in a vase or when he visited Rocky’s sister who had rose bushes. These flowers bloomed everywhere and instead of diesel and cooking aromas he sniffed their scent.

Some streets were wide and some were narrow but they were all quiet. A dog’s bark rang out like a siren but without its implications. Instead of streetlights, there were gaslights that glowed but did not really illuminate.

When Ron realized that he could walk to his father’s house, he felt his heart beginning to race. It was a couple of miles but he could do it and wanted more than anything to be able to walk over and see him.

Newark was a bus ride away and when he took it back there everything felt strange. He could feel it on his skin and he wondered if it had always been there.

When Harry Tuck found out that Ron had been in the hospital he was shocked. It came in a phone call from Marjorie.

“I thought that you might want to know what is going on in your son’s life, since you seem to take no interest at all in it.”

“Don’t start with me, Margie. What’s going on with him?”

“He’s been in the hospital, not that you would care.”

“Why was he in the hospital?”

Marjorie's voice was anguished. "Harry, he lost control and was shaking and twitching and the doctor wanted to send him to a psychologist and said that he has an ulcer from stress."

"Jesus Christ! Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because he said that he didn't want you to worry about him and that when you weren't so busy that you would call. So I waited and you didn't."

Harry wiped his hand over his face. "How is he now?"

"He seems better. I don't know. I know that he misses you and would rather die than bother you."

"I'll stop by tonight."

"We don't live there anymore."

"What do you mean?"

The surprise in Harry's voice caused a broad grin on her face.

"We have a house in Glen Ridge," she said with a swelling pride.

End of Part 3

Chapter 103

The day before the wedding Ron picked up the boxes of alcohol from Bottles and drove them up to the Women's Club. He was met by the caretaker, an older Black man, tall with gray hair. His name was Roy Miller and Ron called him Mr. Miller.

"There had to be some changes," said Mr. Miller.

"What kind of changes?"

"Your guest list grew. We had to put in more tables and take away the dance floor."

“Oh that’s not so good,” said Ron. “Is there anything that we can do about that?”

“Well,” said Mr. Miller, “if I move the bridal table to the other side of the room and we open the curtains and put it on the stage, there should be enough room.”

“Then let’s do that.”

“Just move the bridal table to the stage and leave everything else the same?”

“Sure,” said Ron, “that will be the easiest way.”

Roy Miller smiled his fake, fuck you smile. “Whatever way you’d like to do it.”

If Celeste and Ron had hired him to co-ordinate the event, as had been suggested, he would be looking out for their interests. But they had turned him down and said that they had it under control, so now he was just there to tend to the Club.

Ron loaded in the liquor while Mr. Miller watched. He liked the feel of the club and the room. He thought Marjorie would be happy with it too. “Is there anything else that I should know, Mr. Miller?”

Roy Miller smiled. “Not that I can think of right now.”

“Great,” said Ron nervously.

Ron drove to Roger and Rita’s restaurant. Roger was a former English teacher that both Ron and Celeste knew through Quimpy. He had left the profession, which Ron thought was the best move that he could have made and opened a place with his wife. It was a small storefront that served French style food. Rita was a trained chef and did all the cooking. Roger ordered the food and acted as a host. They put out a great meal and when Ron and Celeste had gone to them with the idea that they cater the wedding, they’d were excited. It would be their first catering job and a nice way to expand the business.

Roger smiled and shook Ron's hand. He looked so much happier and relaxed now that he didn't have to face the pile of papers that had begun giving him hives by the end of his career teaching.

Ron said, "Are you all ready?"

"We've got it under control," said Roger. "It's going to be great."

Ron smiled. "Is Rita back there?"

"Yeah," said Roger. "Go say hello."

Rita was a short, Scottish woman with black curly hair and a winning smile that always put Ron at ease. She grinned up from a pot of a white wine cream sauce. "Are you nervous?"

Ron grinned his best dimpled grin. "About everything but the food."

Rita handed him a cream puff. Ron smiled and it was gone in two bites.

"I know that you're busy," said Ron. "I'm just trying to make sure that we have everything in place."

"You've done all the planning. Now you just have to sit back, let everyone do their job, and marry Celeste."

Ron broke into a wide automatic grin at the sound of her name.

"Will Angel be there?"

"Yes, we hired her favorite teacher to be her companion for the day."

"That was a good idea. Do you have music?"

"We have a piano player."

"That's great. I hate this new thing of using a DJ. Live music is the best."

Ron and Celeste had painstakingly created a set list for Pipes, a friend the next door neighbor, Jake Clifford had found for them. Jake told them that Pipes looked a little strange but that he played great piano and his nickname was earned by his really strong voice. When Ron asked what was strange about the way that he looked, Jake had told them that Pipes was a dwarf. Celeste and Ron thought that was both funny and appropriate.

“See you tomorrow,” said Ron.

Rita kissed his cheek and Ron felt the dampness that came from working in the hot kitchen. “You just relax and enjoy.”

Ron shook hands with Roger again. Rita put him at ease but Roger didn't.

When Ron asked Chris Calvin to be his best man, he felt good about the choice. It was true that he knew Quimpy longer, but Quimpy had been more of an early teacher and always looked at Ron as a crazy fucked up kid that he enjoyed helping. Quimpy had also been one of Celeste's boyfriends. That would have been too weird. But things between Ron and Chris weren't the same. Chris was married now. He owned a house in the same town as his parents. His wife was obviously pregnant. Ron had the sense that both of their lives had changed immeasurably.

Ron drove back to his apartment. He'd stopped staying there. He spent each night with Celeste, in her basement room. The basement touched something primitive inside of him. He felt it from the first time that he'd seen it. In spite of all the objections of Celeste's family, Angel was thriving in day care. She accepted the way that things were organized and her pathway to approval was so easy. Ron filled the pitcher at his kitchen sink. He walked around the debris that had come down from the ceiling, through his bedroom and into the place where he kept his desk and had bay windows and music and his plants. He stroked the leaves as he watered them.

He felt that he communicated with his plants through music and emotion, thought and touch. His fingers strokes the asparagus fern that he encouraged to grow and touch the other potted plants and who had rewarded him with white flowers that were beautiful and delicate. His olive tree looked healthy and was coming through the winter chill and lack of light in good shape. The jade plant was plump although there were small wrinkles in the plump leaves that called for light. The spider plant was prodigious.

Ron sat in the fan back chair and lit a joint. The room felt happy to see him. There had been so many hours in this room. For almost all of them he'd been alone. He'd learned to be fully alone here. When he moved in, Chris said, “I think you're going to stay here for a long time and it's going to be good.”

Chris had been right. He had stayed a long time and it had been good for him. It occurred to Ron that whenever he lived alone, he'd been forced out of the apartment eventually, like something was moving him. In Elizabeth, it had been a fire. Here it was a collapsing ceiling in his kitchen. Ron sucked on the joint and laughed. That wasn't true. Now there was Celeste and Angel. That's why he was no longer here.

He finished the joint, resisted the temptation to light another and turn on his music, laid out his tux, locked the door and drove down to spend the night with Chris.

Ron turned down the barely paved one block, dead end, one house street. The house was small but surrounded by an enormous amount of property. The light inside the screened in porch was on and Chris was sitting in a chair on the side of the round, iron table. The window to the screened in porch was open. Chris was wearing a light jacket. The lights were lit on the second floor. Music filtered out from the adjoining living room.

Chris poured Ron a glass of red wine. "I think that she's really great."

"I do too," said Ron. "It's just not something that you get to fuck up and say oh well, and then move on."

Chris grinned. "Don't think about fucking it up. It's going to be great."

Ron said, "I invited Laureen and April. They never responded."

"That surprises you?"

"I suppose that it shouldn't."

Chris sipped at the wine and smiled his contagious grin. "Celeste responded though, right?"

Ron lit a cigarette and laughed softly to himself. "Yes, she did."

"That's all you need." Chris shifted his position and said, "Look, you're getting married. After that, it's just a party, right?"

Ron felt that confident warmth that Chris always inspired and said, "You're right."

Chapter 104

The morning was cold like winter. Ron cradled a mug of coffee in his palms on the screened porch of Chris Calvin's house. The light was just coming up and birds were singing. Ron thought that he has never lived in a place where birds singing was the dominant music of an early morning. The coffee felt warm. He was getting married. His mind was pulled like a magnet, not to his mother but to his Aunt Dottie.

Last Christmas eve, he and Celeste had eaten at her family's house. It was the first time in his life that he'd done that. Marjorie was almost too wounded to speak. She accepted that he would be there on Christmas Day.

Ron sipped the coffee and felt the bite of the air. It was going to be cold today. That night Celeste heard that her Aunt Minn had no place to be. It was the first time that Ron had seen her stand up to her mother and father. It was a sight to behold. She gave in about everything except the things that truly mattered to her.

A transformation took place when those things were somehow insulted or disqualified or ignored. That metamorphosis exuded a certain power.

Celeste said, "I'm going to bring Aunt Minn here. I won't eat here without here."

Tina objected. "No, it's supposed to be just us."

Celeste moved in closely. She was taller than her younger sister. It wasn't a growl, but it was tending in that direction. "I'm bringing our Aunt Minn to dinner."

Tina frowned but the look in Celeste's eyes withered her mother and her sister. Mario was annoyed and proud.

They got into the car and Celeste drove. She said, "My Aunt Minn loved me like no one else has ever cared for me. She was just always on my side and she's old and I don't know how much longer she has."

Ron loved her more deeply in that instant than he had ever loved a woman. "Let's get her."

Ron cradled the cup in his palms and held it to his mouth. Aunt Minn had white hair and smooth powdered cheeks when he first saw her. She was wearing a shawl over a soft print dress. She kissed Celeste and stroked her face and Ron watched Celeste beam and know that she had felt a kind of warmth that he was yet to experience.

Aunt Minn lit up the table when they brought her back. Anna basked in the glow of the older sister who had really been more of a mother to her. Tina felt the warmth of her loving eyes. Mario gazed at her and thought about Tony, her late husband who had been so strong and so important and so rich.

Ron sipped his morning coffee and closed his eyes. Then he opened them and looked down at his left pinky. The ring that Aunt Minn gave him was there. It was copper. She told him that he had kind eyes. She told him that the ring would protect him. She'd smiled at Celeste after she said that. It was a blessing.

Ron stretched his legs out and felt the cold of the day again. It was the end of March what about the out like a lamb nonsense.

Chapter 105

Celeste and Anna got dressed to go to the beauty parlor where Janine worked. She had done Celeste's hair for each of the her other weddings but teasing Celeste about it in front of Anna only elicited a stony gaze that said she was in no mood to laugh. Being at your daughter's first wedding was an honor. Having to attend the third was an embarrassment. She communicated to Celeste with her facial expressions and body language that she just wanted this to go smoothly and be over.

Janine waited until Anna was safely ensconced under the hair dryer to talk with her cousin. "She is in one hell of a snit."

“I know,” said Celeste, “but there’s nothing that I can do about it.”

“She thinks that you are taking Angel away from her.”

“I’m not. Angel will still be there every day.”

“I know that and you know that.”

They both looked at Anna who sat plump and sullen, her chin tucked down against her chest and her eyes in a magazine that she wasn’t really reading.

“Do you think that I should try to explain that again today?”

They both laughed. Anna could not hear because of the dryer over her head but she sensed the laugh and looked over at them. The no nonsense gaze caused them both to act like naughty school girls who had been caught doing something wrong.

“She can’t hear us, can she?” said Celeste.

“No, but she has radar. She knows.”

They tried to stifle their giggles.

“Are you excited?”

“I’m ready to jump out of my skin.”

“Where did he spend last night?”

“At his best friend’s house.”

“He’s the best man?”

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t he have a brother?”

“A half-brother, but they aren’t that close.”

“You’re going to look beautiful.”

“I just hope that he thinks so.”

“He’d be an idiot not to,” said Janine.

Chapter 106

Early in the afternoon, Ron drove back to his apartment to get changed. He was wearing a grey morning coat, dark grey slacks, a light grey vest, a carnation and a cravat. He pulled on the short silk grey gloves that matched the vest. His stomach was quivering as he looked at himself in the mirror. He felt like he was ready for the wedding and hoped that he was ready for marriage. If he wasn't ready now, when would he ever be?

He met Chris at the church. The day had just grown colder and was overcast. Ron was chain smoking. Somewhere in his mind he worried if she would show up. Father Tom Orecchio was smoking with him and smiling and telling him that it was going to be alright. Chris Calvin laid a hand on his shoulder and said, "The Church is filling up."

Ron lit another cigarette. The minister, Peter Fiesley, smiled at Ron from in back of his steel framed glasses. "I've practiced the poem that you selected, but I'm sure that I don't read it as well as you."

Ron smiled and said "You'll do fine."

Fiesley grinned back at him, "So will you." He walked off to check on the bride's arrival.

The Church was lit by candles that were on long thin poles down the center aisle. Ron and Celeste had been careful to order non drip candles at the request of Fiesley, but the wax was running down the sides and onto the red carpet.

Fiesley came back to them with a smile and clapped his hands together. "I think we're all ready."

Ron blurted, "She's here?"

They all chuckled at him. Father Tom Orecchio said, "Yeah Ronnie, she wouldn't take my advice. She showed up."

This was Orecchio's first ecumenical ceremony. He and Fiesley had worked through who would say what. They were both professionals. With Orecchio's

help, Celeste had gotten the annulment of her second marriage. Since Ron never mentioned the first one, which hadn't taken place in a church anyway, he was free to bless the ceremony.

Ron went out with Chris and stood on the altar. He smiled his best dimpled grin and looked out at the gathering. Music from the pipe organ began. Angel truly looked like an angel as she walked down the aisle with her Aunt Tina. There were ahhs and ohhs from the bride's side of the church. The first chords of "Here Comes the Bride" brought the people to their feet. Tina held Angel's hand and looked a bit intimidated by the music and all the people.

When Ron saw her, he felt humbled. Her smile was huge. Her hair hung perfectly curled down passed her shoulders. Mario looked debonair in his tux. But Ron never really made eye contact with him. His eyes were wide open. She carried a bouquet of white red and pink roses. There was a sparkle in her eyes and a beautiful cameo at her throat. She wore white open toes shoes with a thin strap at the ankle. She seemed to glide down the aisle.

When she reached Ron and they took each other's hands, they felt lost and locked in their gaze. It was just then that Marjorie began to wail. These were not the soft tears of joy that someone hears at a wedding. They were more the piteous howls of grief that a person hears at the funeral of someone unexpectedly deceased.

As Fiesley began to speak the wailing grew louder. He raised his voice so that he could be heard. Celeste could hear it. She knew what it was. She knew who was doing it. She knew that each wail represented trouble in her future, but she could not turn away from his face and was pretty sure that he couldn't hear anything.

Ron stood there mesmerized at the sight of her and the realization that she was going to be his wife. She was smiling back at him, confident and sure and frightened. Ron silently vowed to make her fears disappear.

Fiesley began to read, "Let me not admit impediments," he paused and began again, "To the marriage of true minds, let me not admit impediments..."

The minister slaughtered the sonnet, but Ron didn't hear it. He felt enveloped in the cocoon of warmth that shone out of her eyes.

The ceremony continued, as did the wailing. Anna heard it and while a part of her was offended by its implications, she respected its strength and simplicity. Tina heard it. She loved her older sister but hated being a maid of honor and now she was doing it for the third time. The first time she'd dreamed that Greg was hers. The second time, she understood what her sister was doing and accepted it. Now, she was more than skeptical. How many chances did you get? How many times could you put your family through this? Ron Tuck was not a factor in her thinking. She'd allowed herself to feel nothing from him.

George struggled with the urge to take Marjorie outside. He somehow knew that would make it worse. Harry Tuck heard her crying. He'd heard her crying like this just twice before. The first time was when she lost their first child. The next time was when she learned that he had been sleeping with one of her friends. Harry looked at his son and saw the blend of Marjorie and himself. It was still there. The distance mixed with the warmth. The brain mixed with the physical desire. If this was who he wanted, this was who Harry wanted for him. It was as simple as that.

Janine thought the wailing curious. She wondered what it meant and where it came from. She gazed at the solid figure of her husband and then over to her son and daughter and felt secure and safe.

Chis was fighting the urge to giggle. The enduring quality of the wailing was admirable. He could see that Ron didn't hear it and thought that was a bit of a miracle.

Quimpy felt a pang in his chest. Celeste should have been his and now Ron had stolen her.

Fiesley said, "Ron, do you have words for Celeste?"

Ron looked into her eyes and grasped her cold hands. For the first time, he realized how nervous she was. He tried to exude the warmth that he felt in his heart through his hands and his eyes and then his words. "I promise to love who you are, not who I want you to be. I promise to be there for you no matter what happens. I promise to trust you and not doubt your love or your actions. I promise that I will never leave you. I promise to protect you and to protect Angel." He saw

her eyes open a little wider. Angel had not been in the original version of the vows that they created. "I promise to make our lives as full and rich as they can be." They were simple promises and Ron knew that each and every word was a vow. He wasn't sure that he'd ever understood a vow before, but now that he was taking one, he knew beyond doubt that he would live up to it or die trying. It had been a very long time since he felt unstoppable, but he felt that way now.

Fiesley turned to Celeste. "Do you have words for Ronald?"

Celeste said, "I love who you are won't try to change you. I love with my whole heart that you want me and know that I want you just as much. I know that some people may think that we are crazy, and we are, and I know for the first time in my life that it doesn't matter as long as we continue to love and support each other."

People say lots of things at weddings. Sometimes they say them to sound good. Sometimes they say what other people have told them to say. Sometimes they just say what the priest and minister want them to say. Ron and Celeste's vows were not identical, but they were the same.

Harry didn't listen to the words that closely. Words were ok, but they didn't really mean that much. Marjorie felt like the words stuck into her like knives. Her wailing had reduced to whimpers. The words were beautiful but in her heart she still thought that they were being said to the wrong person. It should have been Julie. She could have loved and embraced Julie. It could have been worse. He could be up there saying them with Robin, but she would have learned to accept Robin, eventually. The mouse would have been easy. No, he never would have accepted a girl that she introduced him to. But why did it have to be this one who already had a child?

The pictures went on endlessly. Ron had never posed for so many photos in his life and his face hurt from smiling. He was sure that he had closed his eyes for at least half of the photographs. It had always been an effort for him not to blink and he could do it some of the time, but not for all of this.

There were pictures with Celeste. Pictures with his father. Pictures with his mother. Pictures with Anna who never looked at him once. Then there were the

group pictures. Every combination of people imaginable. The photographer and the camera seemed insatiable.

Celeste had to stand for even more pictures than he did. Ron thought, she better at this than I am. She's better at a lot of things than I am. But she's mine now. It felt so strange to have someone say that they wanted you and would love who you were, not who you could be or who that person wanted you to be.

Chris drove Ron, Celeste and Tina to the reception. It was cold and everyone except Chris wanted a cigarette. Ron and Celeste sat in the back seat holding hands. They grinned at each other. "The hard part is over now," said Ron. "Now it's just the party."

He had just said that when Tina set fire to the car. She dropped a lit match onto some papers on the front seat and the started smoking and then a shot of flame flickered. Ron remembered the apartment that had caught fire while he was asleep and thought that the fire had come to his wedding. The candles had dripped when they weren't supposed to and now this. Chris pulled the car to the side of the parkway. Tina opened the door and jumped out before her dress got singed. Chris came around and stomped and then got rid of the smoking papers.

Back in the car, Chris said, "Well that was exciting."

Tina said, "I'm really sorry."

"Did it get anything important?" said Ron.

"What could be that important?" said Chris.

Tina turned around to Celeste. "I'm really sorry."

"You didn't mean it," said Celeste.

Chris said, "Are you sure that we are supposed to make a left here?"

"No, it's a right," said Ron.

"Directions say left," said Chris.

Ron looked at Celeste. Celeste winced. One of the things that she hadn't gotten around to telling Ron was that she didn't have the best sense of direction

when it came to writing them down. She could get there but sometimes left and right got mixed up in her head. They found their way to the Women's club.

People who had chosen to skip the church were more successful than those who tried to follow the directions. The people from Bergen County had a basic idea of where it was. Ron's Essex County people were totally lost, except for Harry who had driven the route yesterday and seen the mistake. He hadn't bothered mentioning it to anyone else.

When they went inside the club they saw about 30 people sitting in a cold room huddled in their coats. They did not smile at the bride and groom. Ron went looking for Mr. Miller and found him in his overcoat.

"Mr. Miller, the room is freezing."

Roy Miller smiled at the groom who had not hired him to coordinate the reception. "Some people likes it warm and some people likes it cooler."

"They're freezing in there. Could you please turn the heat on?"

"Are you sure that you wouldn't rather do that yourself?" said Miller.

It was then that Ron understood. "No, I'd prefer that you did it. I'm really supposed to be greetings people and such."

"Alright, I'll make it warmer." Miller went to the thermostat and turned it up to 85 degrees.

When Ron came back downstairs, he saw Celeste looking troubled and worried. "What's wrong?"

"Everything," said Clare.

"What do you mean?"

"Let's see, everyone is lost. The room is freezing and the bartender just left."

"What do you mean he left?"

"He got beeped and told Bottles that he was sorry and that he had to go."

Ron sighed and said, "Ok, what do we do now?"

“Bottles said that he would tend bar.”

It wasn't what either of them wanted. Bottles was a good friend to Celeste and they had wanted him there as a guest, not an employee. “That's really nice of him.”

“There's something else.”

“Roger said that two of the waiters they hired didn't show up and that they will have to serve buffet style.”

“That's not so bad,” said Ron.

“Rita said that the kitchen is not what she thought it was going to be and that it's going to take a lot longer than she thought.”

Ron felt the tension starting to build inside of him. “Ok, tell Bottles to make the drinks strong. If they can't eat, let's get them warm and drunk.”

It was then that Ron saw Marjorie and George come through the door. Marjorie looked at him like she wanted to spit. “How could you do this to me?”

“Do what?” said Ron.

“It took us an hour and a half to find this place and it's freezing in here. Look at those people shivering in their coats!”

“The heat's on now.”

“Well isn't that nice. Usually you turn the heat on before the people arrive.”

“Mom, it's my wedding,” said Ron.

“If that's what you want to call it. I call it a disaster.”

Ron felt slapped. “I'll do the best that I can.”

“Yeah,” said Marjorie with a disgusted grimace.

Ron looked over at the long line at the bar and saw Bottles working feverishly. Part of him wanted to go over and help, but he wouldn't have known what he was doing and that kind of a move might actually drive Marjorie over the edge.

The room seemed to be getting warmer. Except for the older women who still sat in their coats and appeared to be shivering, other people had taken off their coats and were moving around in relative comfort.

It was then that Ron saw Anna and Mario come through the door carrying Angel. Anna was moving more quickly than Ron had seen her move before. She marched up to Celeste and gesticulated and said something that made Celeste shrink. Ron watched from a distance.

When Anna saw where she was seated, she turned and glared at the bridal table from the other side of the room. Marjorie hadn't made her way to her table yet and didn't realize. When Ron had moved the bridal table, he'd neglected to rearrange any of the other tables. As a result, both his family and Celeste's family were seated in the rear of the room and the friends that were supposed to be there were now up front.

It was just then that Pipes waddled out carrying a milk box that would help him to reach the keys on the piano. When Ron walked over to shake hands with Pipes, he realized that his fingers were webbed. He wanted to ask how he managed to play the piano but he guessed that he would soon see.

Ron and Celeste found themselves explaining to the guests that there was a mistake in the directions for the next hour. Those of them that knew Celeste, looked at Ron and said, "You let her do the directions?"

Ron felt her blushing next to him and realized that he felt more badly for her than he did for the guests. When he saw Harry, he said, "Did you have any trouble getting here, Dad?"

Harry Tuck smiled his impish grin. "Not a bit."

Celeste physically relaxed next to him. He could almost feel the tension go out of her body. Harry added, "I made the drive yesterday, figured it out."

That was his dad. He was never going to get caught being lost. If he did get lost it would be on his own so that no one would ever know.

Marjorie said, "Why are we sitting way back here?"

"That's my fault," said Ron.

Marjorie frowned. "Well I guess that shows how important I am in your life."

"It wasn't like that. Because of the extra guests they had to remove the dance floor. Originally the curtain were supposed to be closed and we were supposed to be at this end of the room. When I told them to put us on the stage, I didn't tell them to rearrange the tables."

"What a mess," said Marjorie and walked off.

At ninety minutes into the reception, no food had yet been served but the room was now very warm and people had all been drinking. Roger and Rita, served the wedding table first but neither Ron nor Celeste felt much like eating. They had made their way around the room for the first time and people had begun to give them envelopes of money.

Quimpy took Ron off to the side and handed a bag stuffed with two ounces of the finest golden pot he'd ever seen. "Congratulations,"

Ron stuffed the bag into the inside pocket of his jacket. It bulged too much. He tried his pants pocket. It still stuck out. He walked back into the room where Celeste had hung her white fur coat and found that if he wrapped inside of the coat that it couldn't really be seen. He just had to remember to tell her that it was there.

Pipes came over and said, "When do you want me to start playing?"

Ron said, "Now would be good."

Ron and Celeste began to dance as the dwarf played Imagine. In the background they could hear the waiter saying, "Table Five, we're ready to have you eat now."

Pipes belted out, "Imagine no religion..." and Ron found himself drawn to look at the priest and minister who didn't seem to notice. Ron held Celeste close and they swayed slowly to the song. It was the first time that they had danced together and she moved so smoothly while he felt himself to be awkward and tentative.

To Ron's surprise there was applause when the song ended. Maybe everything was going to be ok. Most of the people had food now. The room was warm, maybe too hot, but Ron wasn't going to encounter Mr. Miller again if he could avoid it.

Quimpy was looking around and seeing if anyone had noticed that he had slipped away. He had his eye on an antique chair that he saw in the vestibule. Quietly, he dragged the chair closer to the door. He took another surreptitious look around the room and quickly picked the chair up and was out the door. He loaded it into the backseat of his pink Cadillac and returned to the party. He made sure to lock the door because he didn't really trust the neighborhood.

It was about two and a half hours into the party that the people who ate the undercooked chicken began to get sick. Mostly it was women and they blamed it on too much alcohol and not enough food at first. Then someone said that her chicken had been bloody inside. Ron closed his eyes and just wanted to disappear with Celeste.

He looked over at her with a stupid grin and said, "How long do we have to stay?"

Celeste's eyes widened and she giggled. "They'd kill us if we left."

"They're going to kill us anyway," said Ron.

Warren Lashly made his way over to Ron and Celeste. "Do you mind if I borrow your bride for a moment?" he drawled.

"Sure," said Ron.

"Let's go for a little walk," said Warren.

"I'll just get my coat," said Celeste. When she found the pot tucked inside of it, she called Chris over and said, "Can you hold on to this for me?"

Chris grinned. "Absolutely, but I don't think we should smoke it here."

Celeste smiled and stroked his cheek. "I'm sure that Ron wouldn't mind if you smoked one."

"Marjorie might," said Chris.

It was very cold outside when she and Warren got out the door. "You aren't anything like I thought you'd be," said Warren.

"What did you think I'd be?" said Celeste.

"Shorter and cold," said Warren. "But you're warm and friendly."

Celeste felt his arm slide around her waist. "Thank you." She realized that he was a little drunk.

"You know Ron and I were very close."

"I know that he admires you."

"We share everything," said Warren.

He drew Celeste to him and kissed her. When he tried to make the kiss passionate and opened his mouth, Celeste pushed against his chest and said, "I'd better get back inside." She turned and walked away. She wasn't sure if she should tell Ron or not.

He was over at the table with Paula DeFreio and Herman Horvack and Anthony Fiangelo. Ron grimaced when he looked at their plates and saw that Horvack and DeFreio had chicken that was leaking blood. He took a deep breath.

"I'm really happy that you guys could make it."

"I couldn't resist meeting the beautiful woman who tamed your spirit," said DeFreio.

Celeste and Lashly came up next to them. "And here she is," said Fiangelo.

"I don't want to tame him," said Celeste.

"She just wants him all to herself," said Lashly.

Ron made introductions. Lashly and DeFreio seemed to size each other up from a distance. Ron had told each about the other and he somehow thought that their mutual interest in him would create a bond. It did not. There was some slightly awkward chit chat and then Ron took Celeste's elbow and led her off.

Ron whispered in her ear. "That was weird. I thought they'd like each other."

“They just don’t know each other,” said Celeste.

Ron thought about that. In his naiveté he’d expected them all to hit it off. He liked them and somehow he thought that would translate into them liking each other. It hadn’t.

The people came up to them with gifts. Envelope after envelope was delivered as they sat at the bridal table in front of the meal that they hadn’t touched.

Ron embraced his great aunt Anita. Tears were in his eyes as he could see his Aunt Dottie, his Uncle Mike, his great grandmother Mina who taught him how to read and recite from the bible. He held Anita’s hands. “You gave me a lot by just staying alive to be here.”

She looked up from her white face and silver hair. “I love you. I have always loved you. Your Uncle Mike loved you. I’m sorry that I’m not your Aunt Dottie.” Celeste heard this exchange and wanted to cry for them both. It must be so hard to be the last of your generation and to be forgotten.

Jimmy and Janine came over and slipped Celeste an envelope. Janine whispered into her ear. “I hope that he’s an animal with you.” Celeste felt heat on her cheeks.

Jimmy shook Ron’s hand and said, “Good luck coach.”

Ron looked into eyes that had seen more football than he ever would. The game had taken its toll on Jimmy and left him proud but bitter. Ron wondered why he wasn’t bitter about it. Was it because it ended so early? What was the dream like when you almost made it to the highest level? Was there anything more that you could draw from the game after that? Ron wanted to know Jimmy better.

Paulo DeFreio was well manicured, formal and warm. He grasped Celeste’s hands and said, “Thank you for inviting me. I think that he will be a good man for you.”

Herman Horvack was more cautious with Ron’s women after Robin had bitten him. He was polite but did not touch her and hid his hands. Herman smiled at Ron. “Where to now?”

“Jamaica,” said Ron.

Herman was teaching as well. He’d stopped writing. He did translations only now.

Ron looked over at Angel and felt the need to hold her. She meant so much and had only a small part in the day. She was in pajamas now. Ron walked from the stage and gathered her up into his arms. He whispered, “Are you sleepy?”

Angel wrapped her arms around his neck and said, “No, I’m lonely.”

“You know that your mom and I are going away for a few days?”

“They told me.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“Why can’t I come?”

“We’ll be back soon.”

Angel didn’t respond. She just held him. In that instant Ron wanted all of this to be over and for them to be back in their basement and for her to be fresh from her bath. He gave her back to the teacher who they’d hired to be her companion for the day.

Celeste felt herself beginning to breathe again. It was almost over.

As the reception drew to a close, Ron and Celeste thanked everyone for coming. They tried to do it individually but some people left before they could get to them.

Mr. Roy Miller approached them as they were about to leave. “I wish you many happy years.”

Celeste said, “Thank you.”

Mr. Miller said, “There’s just one thing. It seems that something is missing.”

Ron looked confused and said, “What?”

“A chair that one of your guests was observed loading into the back of his pink Cadillac.”

Ron and Celeste felt a simultaneous wave of embarrassment. "I'll make sure that it's returned and I'm sorry. We should have hired you. We made a mistake."

"People need to learn from their mistakes," said Mr. Miller.

Chapter 107

They sat in the plane together and Celeste held his hand. Ron gripped hers tightly as the plane took off. It was only the second time in his life that he'd been on an airplane and the first time as an adult that he'd been on vacation. Celeste was an experienced traveler and assured him that everything would go fine.

Celeste had taken any money that she had and paid for this honeymoon. It was insurance money that she'd gotten from being injured in a car accident when she was run off the road and broke her collarbone. She knew that they would never have much money and she knew that Ron's life was about to change in ways that he could not possibly imagine. At least they would have this.

Montego Bay was hot. Ron began to sweat almost instantly when they got off the plane. The resort was beautiful and Ron felt that glowing lightness inside of him that caused him to smile continuously.

The air conditioner in their room had been turned on and as soon as they put down their bags, they made love and then they made love again. After their third round of lovemaking Ron fell asleep.

Celeste quietly unpacked their clothes and put them away. She watched him as he slept and thought that he looked like a little boy. She ordered five pina colodas from room service and when they arrived she gently woke him up. They sat on their screened in porch and sipped them and played gin rummy while a steel drum band walked along the courtyard playing When the Saints Come Marching In. Then they had dinner under the stars and they felt like they were in a temporary heaven.

It was at the front desk that Ron heard the desk clerk say, “How can I help you, Mrs. Tuck?”

The words hit him like a jolt. This beautiful woman was his and it was his responsibility to care for her and make her happy for the rest of his life. Ron grinned.

The breeze was a teasing and delicate stimulation. They’d come farther than they realized with absolutely no idea how long the road really was. His palm was pressed to the small of her back. Almost involuntarily, it caused her hips to roll. Her skin was scented with jasmine. Her hair hung down naturally soft. The breeze didn’t lift it, but Ron’s fingers did. He held her hair to his face and inhaled. The smile was deep and satisfied.

Celeste and Ron didn’t speak of their wedding day very much at all. They journeyed into the mountains of Jamaica. Their smiles were so genuine and open and enthusiastic that they brought out the best in the people that they met. Except for at the hotel’s outdoor café.

They watched in horror as an American tourist called an old man boy and castigated him for a mistake that the tourist had made and would not own. Their bodies tensed. They felt the old man’s humiliation. Celeste went to him and hugged him and gave him some money. Ron glared at the Texan tourist. His fists balled. And then Celeste was at his side again and he said, “How do people live without respect?”

“That’s a great question,” said Celeste, “and I don’t know the answer.”

“I don’t like disrespect. I used to. I think I was foolish.”

She gazed at him in wonder of the cynicism and innocence that he displayed. She’d never seen the two mix quite this way. It intoxicated her. It provided her with something that she hadn’t known that she needed. She wanted to make love with him and took his hand.