

THE LOST
LEGENDS
of NEW JERSEY

Frederick Reiken

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Prologue

THE DAY MY MOTHER left Livingston, New Jersey, she threw rocks through most of Claudia Berkowitz's windows. When I think about it now, of course, it's nothing. I've heard of people who go crazy and buy guns. Take that woman from Parsippany, the one who ambushed her husband with his girlfriend. She found them in her bed and shot them each once in the leg. Holding the gun to her husband's head, she made him slap his girlfriend Rita in the face until she cried. She made him call Rita a slut, then fired a bullet through Rita's temple. So, when you think about it, throwing rocks is not too big a deal.

Of course, it was strange being down there playing Ping-Pong with Jay Berkowitz. I remember saying, "Jay, I think there's someone throwing rocks through all your windows." We went upstairs and saw my mother. It was a sunny day in August. The sun was going down over the house across the street. My mother's hand was filled with stones from the rock garden by the driveway. I watched her hurl one and a window smashed right near me.

I could hear my father yelling from the upstairs window. "I'm here to pick up Anthony," he was saying.

My mother kept throwing rocks until her arm got tired. Then she crumpled to the lawn and I could see she was hysterical. I could see that she was blocking out the world the way she sat there and cried and as she cried I just kept staring through a hole in the Berkowitzes' window.

I ask my mother where the beach is.

"About a mile from here," she says. "Although it's probably going to rain."

"I like your pond," I say. "Anyway, it's too late for the beach."

I'm tired from the flight and now I'm sitting on the couch with her two cats.

She says, "I just want to make a dinner. Something nice, where we can talk."

I say, "That's fine."

"I'd like to hear about things."

"Fine."

"Maybe we'll make some sort of plan. We'll take a trip—down to the Keys."

"I like it here," I say.

My mother steps into the kitchen. She pulls a pan out from the cabinet. The cats think it's dinner so they run into the kitchen. Through a glass door across the room, I watch the sky over western Florida. Soon my mother is talking softly to her cats.

When she cried on the Berkowitzes' lawn she was somehow beautiful. She fell down onto her knees and never covered up her face. She had her hands pressed to the ground where she was kneeling, barely moving. She kept on crying and I told Jay Berkowitz not to watch.

He asked me whether my father was in the house and I said, "Jesus, Jay, you heard him just yelling." He asked if his mother was there too and I said, "What are you, Jay, an idiot? You think my mother throws rocks through people's windows for the hell of it?"

My mother cried and the tears kept coming. Her lips were trembling but her hands still did not move. She didn't punch the ground, slap, or tear out pieces of her hair. I watched her face through the glass and hated her, and loved her, both at once.

There was glass all over the Berkowitzes' hallway. I could hear my father yelling, saying, "Jess, please just go home!"

She just kept weeping with both hands at her sides, motionless, unclenched. She wept until her face

was wet, but still she didn't raise her hands to wipe her cheeks.

I can hear her chopping onions.

"Mom," I say, "do you want me to set the table?"

"Yes," she says, "set it."

I brush by her in the kitchen and I pull out two plates and a pair of carved wooden animal napkin holders. There are lions, leopards, hippos, gazelles, rhinoceroses, zebras.

"I'm giving you the leopard," I say. "I'm taking a rhinoceros."

"How's your book, the one you're reading?"

"It's very good," I say.

"It's gonna rain in about ten seconds."

"So?"

"Just telling you."

I don't answer.

"Sometimes it scares me," she says. "The lightning. Though it's beautiful from in here."

I look outside and I can see the palm trees blowing. The pond is rippling and soon the sky is darker than the earth. It starts to rain and the drops seem thick. They smack the roof and pound against the cobblestones. Tiny brown lizards run around my mother's patio, and there are toads, enormous toads the size of softballs.

I think I wanted to hear her scream, to see her thrash around or move like some crazed animal, but she just sat there. She sat there quietly with tears running down her face. Like it was her lawn, her life—What did it matter that her kid was right inside there playing Ping-Pong? What did it matter that her husband was up there screaming out the window? At least she never had sick thoughts—unlike that woman in Parsippany. That sick, crazed woman bought a handgun and she practiced on a range. She left her husband wounded and bleeding, his girlfriend Rita dead beside him. Two hours later police discovered the woman's car at a nearby Pizza Hut. They went inside but couldn't find her. When the detective arrived they found the woman sleeping in her car.

"Anthony," she says, "the silverware."

"I'm watching the rain," I say. "Give me a second, please."

"It's rain," she says, and then I hear her running to her bedroom, looking for the cats, making sure that they're inside.

"Please let's sit down," she says. "It's nothing. We get these storms here every day."

I hear my mother coming toward me. The rain makes splashes on the patio. The drops are the size of marbles.

"Why are you standing there?" she asks.

I say, "Because, I like rain."

"Please," she says, "the fish..."

"Give me a second."

"Why?"

"I want to feel the rain."

I slide the glass door back and then the water pelts my chest I step outside and cross the patio. Water is dripping down from palm leaves. The grass is soft, mushy, slimy on my feet. When I look back I see my mother trembling.

"Anthony!" she yells. "Please, you're sopping wet now!"

"A second," I say, and watch the lightning.

She drove across the Berkowitzes' lawn. She made circles until the yard looked like a racetrack, and the treads were deep, ruts. The ground was soft because Claudia was obsessed with watering her lawns.

After she left, she drove straight down to western Florida. And it made sense, her being by the water. My mother was very comfortable around water. She loved the Jersey Shore, where we spent four summers. She loved the jetties. She could walk over the slick rocks and never fall. She liked to talk to the scraggly fishermen. She would go out there in the evenings, sometimes wearing the fancy clothes she'd worn to dinner. Then she'd come home with her skirt looking like Saran Wrap. Her blouse would cling to her breasts like film. My father had to make a choice then: Be confused or let it go. Most of the time he let it go. He'd take her hand, lead her upstairs. We'd hear them showering and talking in the bathroom.

"I just want us to have a pleasant dinner."

"The fish is good," I say.

"Tell me what's happening with you."

"There's not too much," I say. "Not a whole lot more than what I've told you in our phone calls."

"I'm your mother," she says. "There are things you can tell your mother, such as—do you like school, do you have a girlfriend?"

"School's okay," I say. "No, I don't have a girlfriend now."

"How is your knee?"

I say, "It's good."

She looks down at her plate, and for a second she seems weak, as if her face is about to drop into her fish. She cuts into the sole, then she looks up and says, "I'm sorry."

I say, "There's nothing to be sorry for."

"I'm sorry," she says. "Anthony, I'm so sorry."

My mother stares down at her plate. She puts her fork down. When she looks up her eyes seem frozen, like she's lost. It's been three years since she left New Jersey. I always wish I had some sort of newsreel of my life. Because I want to show her *everything*. I want to go back in time. To find some doorway back to all the things I don't know how to tell her. I watch a tear slip down her cheek and I say, "Mom," but then she's running from the table.

When I watched her drive away I hoped that she'd explode. I hoped she'd go drive off a bridge and disappear. Or that she'd move some where else and just become another person. I wished I could say that no, she never did these things, she's part of the PTA.

I told my friends that my mother just went crazy once with rocks. It's hard to know what really happened. I sometimes think I should have walked out from the Berkowitzes' house. I should have done a lot of things, but I just stood there in the hallway. I stared at my own mother through a small hole in the window, and as I watched her drive away I could feel part of us both dying.

"Anthony," she says.

I turn around. I'm on the porch, watching the sky now that the rain has stopped.

"Anthony," she says. "Hey. We have to try to work this out."

I say, "It's hard. I've really missed you. But then I sometimes have no feelings."

She says, "I know how you are, remember?"

"I think I get it all from you."

My mother nods, purses her lips. She says, "So what do you want to do about this visit? I really wa

looking forward to this week.”

“Me too,” I say. “I think it would have helped if Dani came.”

“Her summer’s different now that she’s in college.”

“What was it like when she came last summer?”

“It went fine.”

My mother closes the screen door and stands in front of me. I start to feel it again—the feeling that I want to go back in time.

“I’ll take you snorkeling,” she says.

“Where?”

She says, “Key Largo. I have a friend who has a cottage there.”

“I’ve never snorkeled.”

“It’s pretty easy.”

I look outside and watch the pond.

“Mom?” I say.

“What?”

“There is a lot I want to tell you.”

“We have all week,” she says, with her voice calm, the way it gets when she’s not afraid of things. I watch two ducks land on the water. I see a cloud that looks like someone’s ear. “It’s good you’re here,” my mother says, her voice too quiet now to tell what she is thinking. She takes a seat on the chair next to me, and suddenly there is no need to talk.

PART ONE

Constellations

Summer 1979

ONE SUMMER many years ago, the Rubins and the Berkowitzes were out on the porch of the house they rented on the Jersey Shore in Allenhurst. It was a moonless night and stars were rising out from beyond the fold of the horizon. Two constellations kept on growing, almost like trees.

Anthony Rubin watched the ocean. Each time another star popped over the horizon, he readjusted his idea of just what the shapes resembled.

First he saw something that looked like a big panther. Then the shape turned into a box kite.

Claudia Berkowitz lit a cigarette. She turned to Anthony's father and said, "Michael, you were a Boy Scout. Shouldn't you know the constellations?"

"He was too busy chasing Girl Scouts," said Jess Rubin, Anthony's mother.

Michael stood up and said, "Well, I can at least tell you what I learned from my great-uncle. He sold scrap metal. We used to visit him in Binghamton."

"Michael, you're drunk," said Jess. "Sit down."

Claudia smiled and said, "Wait, I want to hear this."

"These are the Yiddish constellations," Michael continued.

"Somebody stop him," said Claudia's husband, Douglas, but no one did.

Anthony's father raised his hand. He pointed up to a bright zigzag of four stars. "Right there," he said. "We can see the shiny belt of the Yenta, Miriam." He pointed lower, to a cluster of stars that looked like a falling teapot "And below Miriam, down on the horizon. That's Ira Nusbaum, the Swindler. Good thing that bandit's 40,000 light-years away."

He moved his hand across the sky and then picked out another random cluster.

He said, "And here, to the north, we can see Maury, the Disappointment. This constellation was named after my third cousin, Maury Rosenthal. You'll always find it near the luminous Sophie Schatzberg, also known as the Great Kvetch."

He paused and Claudia chimed in, "Wait I think I'm seeing Howie Grossman, the Great Schlemiel"

"That's very good," Michael said. "Do we all know the myth of Howie?"

"Michael, enough," said Jess.

Anthony saw that his mother's eyes were incandescing with silent anger. He wondered whether she was offended. She'd been raised Orthodox and had gone to a yeshiva as a girl. But she'd stopped going after sixth grade. She had renounced all that yeshiva had tried to teach her, not to mention her parents' orthodoxy. When asked, his mother always claimed to be an atheist and so he could not fathom why the Yiddish constellations made her angry.

"Poor Howie dropped the Torah during his own bar mitzvah," Michael continued.

"Such a schlemiel," Claudia said, and raised her cigarette to her lips.

"To keep him out of temple on High Holidays, God gave Howie his own place in the night sky."

Jess yelled out "Stop!"

She glared at Claudia and rose. She crossed the porch and descended the wooden stairs, down to the sand. Anthony's father followed after her. When he caught up with her they stood talking on the beach for a few seconds. Then Jess walked off and headed down the shoreline.

Anthony knew where she was going. In recent weeks she'd spent half of her time out on the jetty. She sat alone, watching the ocean. She sometimes sat so far out that she got drenched by the spray of waves. Anthony saw that his father was returning, a web of stars hanging directly above his head as he walked back. When he stepped onto the porch, he said, "She's fine. She's just going to the jetty." He

grabbed his drink and went inside to wait for her in their room.

Later that night, Anthony and Jay Berkowitz were out wandering the Asbury Park boardwalk. It was just one beach away from Allenhurst, and the boys often went there several times a day. They were with their closest down-the-shore friends, Bradley Kalish and Andy Sullivan. They all played Skee-Ball for a while, then walked the boards, acting like jerks, as they often did.

Andy Sullivan was a stud—long white-blond hair and blue eyes. Having him with them seemed to give the foursome license to talk to any pretty girls they saw. Not that they knew what to do when girls would actually respond. They were all thirteen, except Jay, who was eleven.

At some point they returned to Allenhurst, went down to the beach, and midget-wrestled. They had seen tag-team midget-wrestling on television. Now they had given themselves names. Jay was Wizard Eyes. Bradley was Laughing Man. Anthony was Puckhead and Andy was Dr. Death. They'd be announcers while they wrestled and always staged impossible situations. They would announce things such as, "Wizard Eyes, in a brilliant move, has ripped Dr. Death's arm off." Andy would then have to wrestle with one arm behind his back.

That night while wrestling, Anthony saw his mother. She'd just come off the nearest jetty and was walking back toward the house. He saw the stars in the sky above her. In some strange way his mother seemed like a constellation. He was about to run off after her, ask her why she got upset about the myth of Howie Grossman. Then Andy decked him. Jay jumped on top. He yelled, "And Puckhead is now crushed by a double dogpile!" Bradley dove in and yelled, "But Laughing Man ... now mutilates Dr. Death and Wizard Eyes!" Anthony squirmed out from the pileup, rolled, and looked again for his mother. He tried to find her in the darkness, but she was gone.

During that summer they all became junior lifeguards. They got paid five dollars an hour. It was Andy's idea. His older brother, Shane, was the Allenhurst Beach lifeguard. Shane started out as a junior lifeguard—at least, he claimed to have. Anthony couldn't remember there ever having been such a thing as the junior lifeguards in the past.

As junior lifeguards they didn't do much lifeguarding. From time to time, Shane would take one of them up on watch. Mostly he took Anthony's sister, Dani, who was fifteen and just starting to fill out her bikini. She got more lifeguarding instruction from Shane than anyone, though she wasn't an official junior lifeguard. She wouldn't take part in the main junior lifeguard duty—cleaning the beach.

It was their job to get up at seven every morning and sweep the beach for whatever garbage the tide had brought in the night before. They'd get old sneakers, plastic bags, strange cans, occasionally a T-shirt. They also found lots of non junk—pieces of coral, dead starfish, shells, and that amazing ocean phenomenon known as sea glass. They would find rounded, opaque glass in colors ranging from dark brown to green to lavender. Anthony always thought it miraculous that broken glass could be transformed into these gems that lined the shore of Allenhurst Beach each morning.

One day they woke up and found tar balls. It seemed another amazing ocean phenomenon, but not something they really wanted to keep. The balls were sticky and gross, though they looked hard, almost like marbles, when they washed up in the tide line. All through that week Anthony, Jay, Bradley, and Andy collected the balls with shovels. They gathered hundreds of balls each day, while never knowing what they were or where they came from.

In July they woke one morning to find the beach covered with syringes. It made the news—hundreds of plastic little syringes without needles. Apparently, they'd been illegally dumped at sea. The syringes were reported from Sandy Hook all the way to Manasquan.

People were frightened of the syringes, which came in heavy for a week or so. Each day the junior lifeguards collected them by the bagful, all of which were turned over to the Environmental Police. For Anthony it became a kind of mission. From seven to eight each morning, he gathered them up as

his life depended on it. Despite the fear most people had, he knew the empty syringes were quite harmless. He always trusted the magic of the ocean to make things safe.

There was a night during the Syringe Tide, as they called it, when the four boys were all out playing Skee-Ball at the arcade on the Asbury Park boardwalk. To his own stupefaction and even mild discomfort, Anthony found that he couldn't miss. He barely tried, it seemed, yet almost every ball he rolled up the ramp jumped gently and arced right into the small bull's-eye, worth fifty points.

During one game he scored a rare, perfect four hundred. The machine spit out a very long strip of win tickets. He turned uneasily to Bradley, who was playing in the lane next to him.

"Hey, check this out," Anthony said. "A perfect game."

Bradley rolled his ball and got a thirty. He said, "No way," and turned to Anthony. He eyed the win tickets, which hung all the way to the floor. He said, "Hey Andy, check this out. Rubin just scored a perfect game."

Anthony glanced around for Jay. The last he'd looked, Jay was playing three lanes away.

He said, "Where's Jay?"

"Beats me," said Bradley. "Maybe the wizard boy went to do some math."

Andy said, "Jesus, check out all those tickets"

Anthony grabbed them and stuffed the tickets into his pocket. He turned to Bradley and said, "I'll be right back."

He started searching the arcade. He traversed three rows of Skee-Ball lanes and wove his way through all the rake-a-prize machines. He walked around the corner by the fun house, looked across the room toward the squirt-gun balloon clown game. He had the inexplicable sense that he'd find something, and he did.

He saw his father standing next to Claudia. She was leaning over the railing, her big butt staring Anthony in the face. His father's hand was resting on her back. She held a squirt-gun and was squirting at the mouth of a plastic clown. A red balloon was inflating out of the clown's head.

One balloon popped. It wasn't Claudia's. A little freckly-faced boy on the end had beaten her. Anthony sprinted out of the arcade before they turned.

He found Jay wandering by the railing. He ran up wildly and said, "I saw them."

Jay said, "Me too."

"It wasn't anything," said Anthony. "They're in there playing that stupid clown game."

Jay nodded. Anthony could not tell whether Jay was denying or confirming the assessment. Jay said, "Let's go down to the beach before they see us."

They weren't Asbury Park junior lifeguards, but it was bright from all the boardwalk lights and easy to find syringes. They gathered them out of habit, dropping them into an empty popcorn box they pulled out of a trash can. When they hit Allenhurst Beach they kept on walking. They passed their house and barely looked. They got as far as the next town, Deal, then something happened. As if some magical wind were blowing, the ocean sky grew clear and dark, and filled with stars.

"Holy shit," Jay said. "They're even brighter than that night your father did the Yiddish constellations."

"There's Sophie, the Kvetch," said Anthony, and pointed.

Jay said, "That's actually part of Cepheus, the King."

"How do you know that?" Anthony asked.

"I bought a star chart. I've been learning."

"You bought a star chart?"

Jay said, "Yeah. They have them on sale at the Shop Rite. My mother bought them for my brother and me. You should get one, or else you could steal Stuart's. He'd never notice."

It turned out Stuart, who was eight, had already lost his star chart. The next day Anthony bought a

star chart of his own. For a few weeks he and Jay walked the beach at night and learned whatever summer constellations they could find. Sometimes they couldn't match a cluster to the chart but Jay explained that there were many more stars than people would ever name. Jay said he'd read long ago in *Ranger Rick* that there were more stars in the universe than grains of sand on the whole earth. When Anthony thought of deserts, this seemed impossible. Most nights in Allenhurst they were lucky if five constellations were visible.

Late one sultry July night when Anthony got up to use the bathroom, he could see part of a constellation out the window. Framed by the windowpane, it looked just like a map. He moved closer to see it all, and quickly realized it was Scorpio. As he picked out the constellation's brightest star, Antares, he noticed the sound of breathing from below.

When he looked down he saw his father and his mother. Out on the porch his dad was kissing her neck and unbuttoning her baggy flannel shirt. He kept on watching, thinking maybe he was dreaming. It almost didn't make sense that his parents would be kissing. Anthony kneeled and let his chin rest on the windowsill. There was a glow from the other porch lights, and an ocean wind that carried their breaths and sighs up to the window.

He saw his mother push his father's head back. He saw her slide the flannel shirt off of her shoulders and then draw his face into her bosom. Her assertiveness amazed him. He kept wondering if somehow it were Claudia in disguise. But she was too tall and too agile, too lithe and sprightly in her movements to be Claudia. He saw his father kissing her breasts while his mother laughed and caressed his head. They both seemed happy, or else they were both drunk.

The next morning, she seemed calmer than she had for all that summer. She didn't go out to the jetty. She read and listened to the radio on the porch. At noon she asked Anthony and Dani if they wanted to go for burgers at the Windmill, their favorite restaurant. They all piled into her blue Honda and drove to Long Branch.

It was Dani who finally asked the question. They were eating on the top deck of the converted windmill, the lowest blade of the wooden rotor angling off to the right of Dani's head.

She said, "So Mom, what's going on?"

Their mother looked up from her burger.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"She means you've been kind of a nervous wreck all summer," Anthony said.

She put her burger down and said, "I had a scare. There was a chance that I had cancer of the cervix."

"And you found out it isn't anything?" Anthony asked her.

Their mother nodded. She said, "Last night."

"Everything's fine then?"

She said, "Everything is fine for the time being."

"You must have been so scared," said Anthony.

"It would have been okay to tell us," Dani said.

"I didn't think so," she said, and took a sip of her Diet Coke. "I always knew it wasn't cancer. Still, I was trying to get ready, just in case."

During the second week of August, the fecal coliform count got so high that all the beaches closed. Apparently, there was some sort of flesh-eating bacteria in the water. Shane Sullivan claimed that the bacteria came from raw sewage that had been dumped into the ocean. He also claimed that it caused human skin to molt and come off like a crab shell.

The beaches stayed closed for sue days. Anthony, Jay, Bradley, and Andy midget-wrestled and became denizens of the Asbury Park arcade. One rainy afternoon the four boys stood around the prize

counter. They discussed prize options and what they planned to cash in all their win tickets for come Labor Day. Andy and Bradley both wanted the Muhammad Ali boxing gloves. Jay, who had barely any tickets, said he would probably go for the plastic back scratcher. After much deliberation, Anthony found that the only thing he liked besides the boxing gloves was a ceramic winged horse that was actually a coin bank. When he pointed the horse out, Jay said, "That's Pegasus, from mythology, just like the constellation." They had seen Pegasus several times while star-watching that summer. Somehow this incidental correlation settled things. Anthony nodded and said, "Yeah, that's what I'm going for."

That was also the week Bradley started them listening to Bruce Springsteen. He had just purchased a small boom box. He had four Bruce tapes and swore that his oldest sister had once sat right next to Bruce at a bar in Sea Bright. He started toting the boom box everywhere, playing all songs as loud as possible. One day while blasting the album *Born To Run*, Bradley suddenly stopped walking. He turned the volume down and looked at his friends dramatically. Then he said, "We are walking through Bruce's songs."

Jay and Anthony immediately got their parents to buy them *Born To Run* on cassette. They started listening to it religiously, and soon they knew every cryptic word of "Jungleland." Anthony found that *Born To Run* evoked a sadness, that certain songs were almost cinematic. Each time they listened to "Thunder Road," all of the lyrics would unfold again inside him. He'd always see a screen door slam. Then he would picture some wondrous girl named Mary, her dress waving as she danced across the floor of their house in Allenhurst.

Toward the end of that week of the closed beaches, they even had one Bruce-related miracle. They met two Teaneck girls, Denise and Jackie. The girls approached while Bradley was blasting "Rosalita" on his boom box. They started singing along and saying things like, "Totally awesome song!" Both went for Andy, of course, but he played soccer. Just a day after they met the girls, Andy left the shore in order to go to soccer camp in Maryland. This made things easier and soon they were all hanging out together on the boards.

Denise and Jackie were best friends. Jackie was fragile and quiet. She had short light brown hair and a gaze that always caused Anthony to wonder what she was thinking. Meanwhile Denise seemed the quintessential Jersey girl. She had thick black hair and plump breasts and would call out "Jinx!" whenever she and another person spoke the same word at the same time. Then she would punch the person's arm until the person named five movie stars or beer brands or whatever Denise asked for. Likewise Anthony always had to say "safety" if he burped, otherwise Denise would say "slugs" and then start punching. She had three brothers, which explained her sort of tomboy roughhouse nature. She even liked to midget-wrestle. Both she and Jackie got their own names, the Big Babe and Psycho Kitty.

There was an afternoon when Anthony wound up alone with Jackie on the boardwalk. He had a crush on her by then. Jackie was eating cotton candy. They were both leaning against a railing, talking and watching small children ride the Asbury Park carousel. He got his guts up and placed his hand on hers.

She didn't move her hand away, but also did not respond to his bold gesture. They continued chatting as Jackie ate her cotton candy, her captured hand still clasping the metal railing. Finally Jackie pulled her hand back. She held out the purple cotton candy and said, "Want some?" He took a bite.

She said, "You're Jewish, right?"

He nodded.

"Then why the heck is your name Anthony? I've never met a Jew named Anthony in my life."

"I had this cousin," he said. "Anthony Spignatelli. He was half Jewish, half Italian. He died two

months before I was born. Until then my parents planned to name me Eric, or else Jill.”

“How did he die?”

“It was a mystery.”

“They have to know.”

“They say they didn’t.”

He took her hand again. For a few seconds Jackie stared as if assessing the situation. Anthony smiled, clasped her hand tighter. “I barely know you,” she said, and pulled her hand away.

Allenhurst Beach reopened on a Sunday in mid-August. By then Anthony, Jay, and Bradley were getting bored with being junior lifeguards. They’d make one garbage pass in the morning, then they would run off to find Denise and Jackie. The girls belonged to The Breakwater Club in Elberon. They had a freshwater pool and a snack bar, unlike Allenhurst. They had a shuffleboard court, and Anthony loved shuffleboard.

Because of Denise, they would always do laps in the swimming pool. Denise was big on self-improvement and was always pointing out the benefits of their various activities. Swimming laps helped both your muscle strength and cardiovascular capacity. She applied this logic to other things. For instance, midget-wrestling was good for learning how to defend yourself. Having to say “safety” after you burped taught you to think fast, or not burp. Playing shuffleboard honed your hand-eye coordination. Weaving through people while jogging on the boardwalk was good for quickness. Anthony found this way of thinking to be contagious, though Jay did not. Once while star-watching, Anthony said, “It’s teaching us to see better.” Jay said, “You think I really care how well I see?”

One afternoon they were all getting ice-cream cones and milkshakes. The nicest thing about. The Breakwater was the charge account Denise and Jackie charged everything to their parents. When Jackie’s younger sister, Lizzy, got her cone, she took one lick and the ice cream fell. Anthony happened to be standing right beside her. Without thinking, he reached out with his left hand and caught the ice cream. Denise said, “Wow, you’re like Mr. Lightningfast Reflex.” He placed the scoop back on Lizzy’s cone.

An hour later they went body-surfing in the ocean, having conveniently forgotten that one week before the water was filled with flesh-eating bacteria. Anthony tended to get cold fast. After five minutes he was shivering uncontrollably. He caught a wave and missed the crest, so he got crashed, and they always put it. The wave’s force slammed him against the sand, twisted him here and there, and then pulled back. He rose and trudged out of the water. He could feel sand inside his bathing suit. So he walked over to the tidal pool by the jetty, and there he crouched in the shallow water to get the sand out.

He saw a blue-claw crab move past his feet and tried to catch it. He saw the starfish that always magically appeared in the tidal pools. He felt a tap on his left shoulder, turned around, and there was Jackie.

She said, “I followed you.”

Anthony said, “I see that.”

She stared in that sexy way that always made him want to know what she was thinking. So then he said it. He said, “Jackie, what are you thinking?”

She said, “Guess.”

He said, “You want to look for crabs?”

Jackie said, “No.”

She stepped into the tidal pool, sending a crab scuttling in Anthony’s direction. It disappeared and then Jackie was beside him.

“I want to kiss you,” she said. “That was so cool when you saved my sister’s ice cream.”

“You want to kiss me because I saved an ice cream?”

She never answered. They started kissing as they stood in the tidal pool. He'd never kissed anyone though clearly Jackie had. Her touch was practiced, tender and delicate. She kept on pressing the tip of her tongue to his, then pulling back and saying, "You taste good."

They kissed in the tidal pool for about five minutes before Bradley, Jay, and Denise ambushed them. They didn't see their three friends until they were running at them through the shallow water. "Break it up!" Denise yelled. She jumped on Jackie. Soon they were all tag-team midget-wrestling. Jackie and Anthony teamed up and went for Denise. They pinned her down and made her name five Democratic presidents. That day they also invented a new move they called "the starfish." To do the move required a tidal pool and abundant starfish. During a pin, the winner quickly grabbed a starfish and rammed it into the loser's face.

Just before Labor Day weekend, Anthony's mother got arrested. It was a weekday. Anthony's father and Douglas Berkowitz were each at home that night in Livingston, which was an hour's drive from Allenhurst without traffic. Sometimes they stayed there on weekday nights instead of braving the Parkway after work.

Both Jess and Claudia got tanked at a bar called Tides, which was in Belmar. On the way home, Jess was pulled over in Asbury. She was arrested for drunk driving and locked up in an Asbury Park jail cell. All four children were there when Claudia returned in a kind of frenzy. She said the officers acted like rough jerks and had left her standing on the roadside. Clearly as plastered as Jess Rubin, she had walked back because she figured she'd get pulled over if she drove.

Michael arrived an hour later, after receiving his wife's phone call from the jailhouse. He explained the situation to his children. Then he and Claudia went out. Anthony didn't know what to feel. He kept on thinking that his mother was somehow part of a Bruce Springsteen song. She was behind bars in the Asbury Park jailhouse. She'd had a cancer scare and wouldn't laugh at Yiddish constellations. Maybe it wasn't as mythical as "Jungleland," but it still seemed too confusing to be reality. He also knew that his mother would freak out when she got home.

The children sat around the shore house all that evening. They watched *The Sound of Music* on TV. They played Monopoly, the beach way—using sea glass in place of the plastic houses and hotels. They had lost most of the parts long ago, one night in Livingston when Dani got mad and threw the whole game at her brother's head.

Three hours later, Anthony's father returned with Claudia. He said that bail would not be posted until the morning. Anthony asked if this meant his mom would spend the whole night in a jail cell. His father said, "Unfortunately, yes."

Claudia told them not to worry. Dani yelled, "Why! It's your fault that she's in there!"

"It's no one's fault," said their father, and made Dani apologize to Claudia.

Still there was something completely off about the way Claudia was acting. Anthony sensed that she was secretly quite thrilled with his mother's fate. He couldn't read his dad as easily, but he seemed calmer than he should have been. They left the room, sat in the kitchen, and drank vodka.

Later that evening, Anthony saw them leaving. He was out on the porch with Jay. They had their star charts. It was the first starry sky he'd had in weeks. He watched them skip down the stairs and onto the sand below him. Before he thought very hard, he called out, "Going to see the Yiddish constellations?"

His father stopped and looked up. He said, "Anthony?"

He said, "Hi. I'm out here watching stare with Jay."

"I'm taking a little walk with Claudia," said his father. "Just down the beach, to calm our nerves. Then we have to go get the other car."

He said, "Okay," and understood for the first time that they were guilty. He watched them go and

turned to Jay.

He said, "Our parents are definitely screwing."

Jay said, "I know," and shined a flashlight on his star chart. He turned it off and then looked up at the sky. "It took you this long to figure it all out?"

"My mom's in jail," Anthony said. "It's like she's locked up while they do this."

Jay said, "She is locked up," and shined his flashlight on the chart again. He shut the light off and then pointed. "Right there's Pegasus," he said. "Do you still plan to get that bank?"

Anthony fell asleep that night before his father returned with Claudia. He tried to slough the whole thing off as a bad dream. At about six he heard a car pull up. He heard the front door opening and closing. Soon he could hear his parents' voices. When he went down, they were sitting in the kitchen. His mother's elbows rested on the table and her forehead was pressed into her hands.

She looked up and said, "Honey?"

Anthony stepped into the kitchen and said, "Hi. Are you okay?"

"Fine," she said. "It was a very comfortable jail cell."

"We're talking," said his father.

He said, "I have to clean the beach."

He went upstairs to get dressed. He woke up Jay and they went out to do their Allenhurst junior lifeguard beach sweep. That morning Bradley didn't show up. For a few minutes they waited by the lifeguard chair. Then Jay suggested they get to it before a garbage tide floated in.

They found the usual plastic bags and beer cans. They stamped down seafoam in the places where looked gross. They found a tennis ball in the tidal pool by the jetty. Anthony picked it up and noticed dozens of starfish lying placidly beneath the shallow water. He said, "Hey, look. They're making a constellation."

Jay said, "It's Miriam, the Kvetch."

"You mean Sophie."

He said, "Whatever."

Jay reached down into the water and grabbed a starfish.

"Don't even think it," Anthony said.

Jay said, "Think what?" and was all over him in a second.

They midget-wrestled. Jay kicked wildly. Anthony got hold of his arms and pinned him easily. He grabbed a starfish and pressed it to Jay's face.

Jay yelled, "Okay! I think I'm lying on twenty starfish! I might kill them!"

He pushed Jay's face under the water. For one strange instant he truly felt like drowning him. Somehow Jay managed to kick him in the groin.

Jay squirmed away, brought his head up, and screamed, "You psycho!"

"What's your problem?" said Anthony. "I just dunked you."

Jay coughed up water, looked up, and yelled, "You psycho! Someone should throw you in jail just like your mother!"

"I'll fucking kill you!" Anthony yelled, and lunged at him.

Jay rolled away in the shallow water. He grabbed his garbage bag, got up, and darted out of the tidal pool. He yelled, "You'll never fucking catch me, you psycho idiot!"

"I'm sorry!" Anthony yelled, suddenly realizing he was a psycho idiot.

Jay yelled, "I don't accept your apology!"

He turned and ran down the beach with the green garbage bag. With his free hand he gave Anthony the finger. He held it up over his shoulder while he ran.

Around nine, when Anthony got back, he learned his family would be leaving the Jersey Shore that afternoon. His father had already begun packing. He talked to Dani, who said Mom had a nervous

breakdown while making pancakes. She was now sitting out on the jetty. Anthony went outside and found his father cleaning out the car.

He said, "It's Labor Day. We can't stay here three more days?"

His father turned and said, "You know how your mother gets."

"But I can't go," Anthony said. "I met ... a girlfriend. I also haven't cashed in my Skee-Ball win tickets."

"You have the day," his father said. "We leave for Livingston at five."

Even though Jackie wasn't really his girlfriend, Anthony searched for her, maniacally. In the course of just that morning, he jogged up to The Breakwater Club three times. He felt a panic but reminded himself of how he was improving his heart and lungs. After the third time he ran home and called Bradley, who said that Jackie must have gone yachting with her family. He yelled, "Since when does she have a yacht!" Bradley said, "Hey, take it easy. I'm just joking."

He packed his suitcase and made a final trip up to The Breakwater. He left a note with one of the club's cabana boys. The note explained that he unexpectedly had to leave, but that he hoped they would talk soon. He gave his phone number and home address in Livingston. He signed his name and at the bottom wrote: *Please call!*

In his last hour at the Jersey Shore, Anthony went alone to the Asbury Park boardwalk. He'd counted out all of his win tickets and had tied them with rubber bands. Had he not tried to drown Jay that same morning, he knew Jay might have lent him the forty-seven tickets he still needed. But by then Jay had disappeared with his mom and brother. They'd gone to Long Branch to see a movie called *The Champ*.

At the arcade, he told the man he had four hundred fifty-three tickets. He asked for the winged-horse bank, which cost five hundred. The man suggested he take a frog bank, which cost less.

He said, "It's ugly. Can't you just give me the winged horse?"

The man said, "No."

"But I've been saving for it all summer."

"We're not a Burger King," the man said. "You can't always have it your way."

In the end, he wound up handing all his tickets to a long-haired boy who passed by on the boardwalk. He looked to be eight or nine and held a hockey stick, which was why Anthony had noticed him in the first place. He jogged right up to the boy and said, "Do you play Skee-Ball?"

The boy nodded.

"Then take these," Anthony said. "I don't have time to cash them in."

The boy said, "How come you don't just keep them for next summer?"

He said, "Just take them," and handed him the bag.

The boy said, "Thanks."

He said, "For forty-seven more tickets, you can get the winged-horse bank which is Pegasus, from mythology. He even has a constellation. You'd need a star chart."

The boy just nodded, then Anthony took off.

He could see Loch Arbor and then Allenhurst Beach ahead of him. He smelled the tangy smell of ocean, which made him sad. He jogged with high steps, for no reason—the way he sometimes did with Jay when they were imitating football. Two girls made fun of him as he passed, but he didn't care that he looked ridiculous. He knew that running this way improved his balance. He also knew that he would never be coming back.

October 1979

CLAUDIA BERKOWITZ was feeling a bit wicked, so she looked Michael Rubin in the eye.

“Vodka?” she said.

Michael stood in the doorway to her kitchen. He had just come to pick up Anthony after making his evening rounds at the hospital. She hadn't seen him since late summer, when the Rubins had abruptly left the shore house.

“I told Jess I'd be back by nine,” he said.

Claudia glanced at her watch. She said, “It's not even eight-thirty. You have time.”

Michael seemed nervous, but he sat down. She took the vodka from the cabinet.

“So where is Douglas?” he asked.

“He's in Chicago until Monday.”

She poured vodka for them both and lit a cigarette.

“It's so annoying with the whole world quitting smoking,” Claudia said. “Lately I feel like the last smoker left on Earth.”

He said, “It suits you.”

She said, “Maybe.”

She ran her hand along his arm.

She said, “I'm sorry again about the Asbury Park fiasco.”

He said, “You're not sorry. I'd rather not discuss it.”

“Okay, what's new then?” she said. “We haven't talked in five weeks.”

He said, “Not much. I'm having trouble with my interns. The/re all too slow.”

She placed her cigarette in the ashtray.

“And how is Jess?” she asked.

“The same as ever.”

She slipped her hand under the table. She rubbed his leg for a few seconds and thought of tall, aloof and unpredictable Jess Rubin. They'd met eight years before at an awful barbecue, when Jess insulted one of Douglas's friends by pointing out that his tie was garish and ridiculous. Claudia stood beside Jess and had agreed that the tie was hideous. They were both twenty-eight-year-old parents with young children. She'd offered Jess, who still smoked back then, a cigarette. Later that evening they'd gotten stoned in the host's bathroom.

She said, “I'll check on the kids. Stay. I'll be right back.”

Michael nodded. She brushed her hand through his hair and rose.

She went upstairs and found Stuart playing with his Action Jackson doll and his stuffed animals.

He'd wedged a fox inside his Action Jackson jungle fortress. An armadillo was balanced on the roof.

“What's going on?” Claudia said.

Stuart said, “Foxy is talking to Action Jackson. Amy's just waiting for the Platzmans.”

“Who are the Platzmans?”

Stuart said, “Action Jackson's friends.”

“You silly boy,” Claudia said.

She smiled and left him playing on the carpet. She went into her own bedroom, where Jay and Anthony were sprawled out on the bed and watching *The Six Million Dollar Man*.

She said, “Your father is here, Anthony.”

Both boys were lying so their faces were ten inches from the television. She sometimes yelled at

Jay for this. Anthony turned and said, "Could you tell him that we're halfway through the program?"

"Alright," Claudia said. ~~"But please come down when the show is over."~~

Claudia stepped into her bathroom, rinsed off her face, and combed her hair. She slipped her diaphragm in mechanically. She thought of Jess Rubin being frisked by police and handcuffed. Jess started weeping the second they latched the handcuffs on her wrists.

I am a sadist, Claudia thought, as she left the bathroom. The thought of Jess being handcuffed was arousing, to say the least. Not to mention the sight of the leering cop sizing Jess up as he administered the Breathalyzer. He must have walked into the Asbury Park station and yelled, "Jackpot!" It wasn't every day he got to book a pouty, attractive, well-proportioned mommy from the suburbs.

"No other shows," she called out, and continued past the transfixed boys.

She went downstairs and found Michael. He'd crushed the cigarette out and had pushed the ceramic ashtray across the table. She stepped behind him and swiveled his chair around so that he faced her.

"What are you doing?" Michael asked.

She said, "I'm going to fuck you in my kitchen."

That same night Claudia dreamed of Joey Malinowski, her high school sweetheart. It was a strong dream in its feeling, although abstract in its plot. She was young. Joey was built like a bear. She jumped into his arms. They were together in the past, yet her awareness in the dream had remained grounded in her present life in Livingston. She knew her husband and kids were near. She had not left them. She felt her life as it was now, and yet she knew that in some real way, she and Joey had never been apart.

She dreamed of Joey with regularity. When the dreams came just before she woke up in the morning, it sometimes took half the day to shake. She'd recall Christmases and Catholic school and all the other things she'd hated. She'd feel her blue-collar past as a crass Polish girl. She would feel Joey and think it wasn't all that bad.

This proved to be the case that Sunday. She found herself watching boxing and then bowling on TV. Inside her head, she saw the sycamores and maples that lined the streets of Elizabeth, New Jersey. She saw her mother in the driveway, carrying groceries—Polish foods like kielbasa and pierogi, which she despised.

That night she called up Michael before going out to the Shop Rite. She wasn't sure why she was calling. Maybe to break the spell of Joey or perhaps just to be destructive. She called at home, on the special phone line for his patients. When he picked up after three rings, she said, "It's me."

"Is something wrong?" Michael asked. "You shouldn't call me here."

"If Jess walks into the room, prescribe me Valium. I'm feeling pretty wound up anyway."

"Are things okay?" he asked again.

She said, "I need some eggs and milk."

"What do you want then?"

She said, "I want you to meet me at Shop Rite in ten minutes."

"It's almost nine."

She said, "Just go there. Tell Jess you're going out to get some milk."

"I bought milk yesterday," Michael said.

"Maybe you'll have to spill it down the drain."

When she arrived, Michael was waiting outside the Shop Rite. She was aware of the clothes that she was wearing. A brick-red turtleneck under a loose cardigan. Tight jeans with a braided belt. It occurred to her that all she had really needed was to be seen by him. Dreams of Joey had the peculiar effect of making her feel invisible. But Michael's gaze seemed to restore her. If nothing else, he made Claudia feel powerful and alive.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Do you need to talk about last night?”

“Talk about what?” she said. “Having extremely quiet sex on a vinyl kitchen chair?”

He said, “I thought that maybe something had happened. One of your kids found out.”

She laughed.

“I just wanted you with me while I shopped,” Claudia told him. “I need some things and I’d like you to be my helper. Grab a cart.”

He found a cart outside the door and followed Claudia with obvious discomfiture. “Kiss me,” she said, as Michael turned into the produce aisle. She rubbed up against his side and said, “Or else I might explode.”

He kissed her cheek and said, “We’re in a supermarket.”

“But you’re still thinking about ripping all my clothes off, right?”

He said, “I’m always thinking about ripping off your clothes.”

She said, “So what do you do at home? Do you think of me when you’re touching Jess?”

“I never touch Jess now,” he said. “Even before things got this bad, she mostly hated to be touched.”

“And why is that?” Claudia asked. “Sounds like some pervert might have nailed her as an eight-year-old.”

He said, “I think it’s a lot simpler.”

“How is it simple?”

“For a long time Jess hasn’t liked me, or her life.”

Claudia placed a bag of apples in the cart.

She said, “Delicious.”

Michael said nothing.

“It’s a joke,” she said. “They’re called Delicious apples.”

“Where are we going after this?”

“Maybe we’ll drive to Northland Park.”

“Anthony knows,” he said.

“How?”

“I can just tell that he knows what’s going on.”

“Well,” Claudia said. “It’s not as if he won’t need years of therapy already.”

“We have to be more careful.”

“About what?”

Michael said, “Everything. We need to watch the things we do.”

“Don’t delude yourself. We’re reckless.”

She grabbed a butternut squash and placed it in the cart.

“Please,” Michael said.

“What?”

“Can you agree to be more careful?”

“Why?” Claudia said. “You just told me that the cat’s out of the bag. You should enjoy this while it lasts, because it’s probably going to end soon.”

“And just how soon?” Michael asked.

“I guess we’ll see.”

When she woke up again the next morning, Joey was there, all around her for a moment. They’d been together in that place she knew existed, though she never could fathom how she arrived or left.

Inside her head she always thought of it as Joeyland. It was a place she could escape from, though never went away. She didn’t feel it every moment but it was chronic, and it kept growing. The more the year went by, the wider and more expansive this place became.

That afternoon she was in her car, a new Mercedes. Claudia smiled to herself when she realized that the passenger seat was still adjusted back as far as it could go. She moved it forward again with the automatic seat control. She looked around for other evidence of Michael. She was driving to Newark Airport to get her husband, but she was early. His plane from Chicago was not landing until four.

She drove along Route 24 past Millburn. She passed the Parkway and soon came upon the exit for Elizabeth. She had an hour to kill, so she pulled off. Soon she was cruising her old streets. Now it was mostly black and Latino. When she was growing up it was all Polish Catholics and Jews. She passed the three-story house she'd lived in. She saw a cat sitting out on the front steps. She made a pass by the apartment Joey had rented with his brother. When she was waitressing in Newark, she'd slept there more than she slept at home.

He had a poster of a boxer above his bed, and it was gross. The boxer's face and hair were coated with rheumy slime and sweat and blood. His mouth was open and she could see a plastic mouthguard which for some reason was the grossest thing of all. One Sunday morning, before church, Joey had played some loud song about a boxer on his stereo. He'd put his boxing gloves on and danced around the room. After a while he faced the poster. He started acting like he was boxing with the boxer. She sat and watched him, cheered him on, yelled things like "Knock his goddamn head off!" And for the one time in her life that she could remember, Claudia knew that she was wildly in love.

One afternoon when they were lying around naked in his bedroom, Joey picked her up and carried her to the kitchen. He put her down on the kitchen counter and then fed her purple grapes. He placed each grape in her mouth with colossal tenderness. He slid his fingers around her lips while she was chewing, sometimes pressing them just hard enough to hurt. She spit the pits into his hand. Joey kept saying she looked sexy when she spit. He fed her grape after grape, and she felt safe there, in Joeyland. She felt as if this was a place that she belonged to.

They'd been engaged for three months when she met Douglas at the restaurant. He'd started coming in to eat alone and always asked for her. One night he left her a folded note with his standard 50-percent tip. Claudia stashed the note in her tip jar. Four hours later, when the restaurant closed, she read it. The note said: *You, Claudia Nowicki, are the most beautiful woman I will ever lay my eyes on. I can't stop thinking of you at home or at work. I love you. Will you marry me?* Inside the note, Douglas had left his business card.

She knew with Joey she'd have six kids and always drive a big blue station wagon. She'd drink canned beer and spend Sundays watching football. Joey would own her and love her and beat her up if she deserved it. By fifty-five there would be so many grandkids she'd have trouble remembering their names.

The next night at the restaurant, she saw Douglas. She didn't mention the note. She tried to act as if she'd never seen it. He asked her questions about the specials. He said he'd had a very long day at his office. Later when Douglas was paying for his dinner, Claudia watched him open up his wallet. She never saw what he had inside but made her choice right at that instant. She cleared his table and thought Fine. Now I am going to be rich.

On her own twenty-second birthday, she told Joey it was over. He kept on screaming things like, "Baby, it makes no sense!" By his reaction, she knew she might as well have shot him. She knew he probably wasn't smart enough to ever fully recover.

As she was leaving his apartment he yelled, "You're crazy!" She didn't turn. "We're like two angels who are made of the same air!" Joey screamed. This was the most beautiful sentence she'd ever heard from a human mouth. "We're like two angels!" he screamed again, or almost shrieked it as she walked out. She didn't know where he'd found those words. He was a young, dumb boy who liked to box. She lay in bed that night weeping, hearing his words over and over. But the next morning she felt resolved. She picked the phone up and called Douglas at his office.

Claudia drove around for longer than she meant to. She found it strange to know these streets so well, yet feel like she was lost. ~~Most of the stores were gone. The people were gone. There wasn't anyone around who'd ever heard of Joey Malinowski.~~

She could see spots where they'd walked and kissed. She noticed places where they'd had fights. Once they had stood right out on Center Street, screaming insanely for half an hour. She was concerned that Joey had a thing for her blond-haired cousin, Lucy Kowalczyk. "Tell me you don't want to fuck that little bitch!" she kept on screaming. Finally Joey literally tackled her and carried her back home.

Just before Claudia headed back to the highway, she happened upon a spot where they'd once put maple fruits on their noses. Claudia recognized the giant maple. She stopped the car and killed the engine. She saw brown bunches of its winged fruits hanging off the naked branches. The tiny fruits also littered the cracked sidewalk. When she stepped out, she had the sense that she could be anywhere.

They're called samaras, she remembered. She'd learned this word from her own children. So she and Joey had put samaras on their noses. They had walked with their samaras, until the fruits slipped off and helicoptered down to whatever landing spots they found.

She crouched and saw that many wrinkly, brown samaras lined the sidewalk groove. She picked one up and tried to put it on her nose. It was too dry, of course. Claudia found that she couldn't even peel it open. A car rushed past and she felt self-conscious. She let the samara fall to the cement. Then she felt dizzy and strange, yet oddly lucid in her thoughts. She tried to promise herself that, somehow, she had not wasted her life.

In and Out of Moonlight

May 1980

DANI WAS PACKING in her room. In the morning she would be leaving for a summer in Barcelona. Anthony stood beside the sliding door, stared out through the glass, and dreaded Dani's absence. Lately their mother had gone into a withdrawn phase, and sometimes Dani was the only one who knew how to deal with her strange moods.

One afternoon the month before, he had come home and found her crying in the kitchen. "Tell me a joke," she had said. He wound up telling her the interrupting cow joke. She smiled and thanked him, though she didn't seem to laugh. Dani walked in, took one look at her, and said, "We have to get out the house." That was a Friday, and Dani had convinced her to take them bowling. They bowled three games and by the time they were done, her mood seemed calm and less distracted. While they were driving back a song she used to love came on the radio. It was called "Groovin'," by a group called the Young Rascals, from the sixties. She sang along and each time the song came back to the word "Groovin'," she held her hand out like a microphone for Anthony and Dani to join in.

Now his mother was upstairs reading her bulky textbook for psychology. It was past six and his father was still working at the hospital. Dani was nervous, Anthony knew. He assumed it was because she hated flying. Outside a full moon was rising in the daylight. The sky was blue and the moon seemed to be balanced on the top of a nearby house.

He called, "Hey Mom?"

She called back, "What?"

He said, "Come down and see the moon."

"What?" she said. He heard her rising. She came halfway down the stairs, holding her textbook. She had her hair up in a clip, but was still wearing the kick-pleat skirt and Oxford shirt she'd worn to class that afternoon.

He said, "I thought you'd like to see the moon."

She walked down into the den, where he was standing.

She said, "Your sister wants to go out to the Claremont Diner for dinner. She wants to see that weird glass in the new atrium."

"What weird glass?" Anthony said.

She said, "It's green. And now they're suing. Because the glass makes people's faces look disgusting."

"Did Dad get home?" Anthony asked.

She shook her head. She put her textbook down on a speaker and mussed his hair up. As happened sometimes, he was surprised by her affection. She had a way of doing that—suddenly zooming in with a powerful, gentle warmth.

"Will he be home soon?" he asked.

She said, "I doubt it. We'll go without him."

"So look at the moon."

She looked.

He said, "It's sitting right on top of the Kaufmans' roof."

"*Hal'vanah kehpanim halohatot b'togah,*" she said.

"What's that?"

His mother laughed and said, "It's Hebrew. Something your aunt Leah made up. In yeshiva, when we couldn't speak in English, she used to make up all this poetry in Hebrew. I always think of that or"

line when a full moon's out."

"What does it mean?" Anthony asked.

She said, "The moon is like a face that glows with sadness."

To Anthony's amazement, the Claremont Diner atrium's new green windows really did give everyone the complexion of a ghoul. Besides the pallor, all blemishes and pimples were accentuated. He could see wrinkles he never knew his mother had. Dani was thrilled by the green glass and kept calling it "the world's most colossal fuck-up." Meanwhile Anthony was more entranced by the full moon, which he could see through the green windows as they waited. He started thinking of lines of poetry himself, though not in Hebrew. One was *The moon is like an eye over the Claremont*. He didn't say it but kept chuckling when he thought it.

They were seated at a table near a window looking out over Bloomfield Avenue. A busboy brought them out a pickle plate, along with the diner's trademark Claremont salad. A tangy variant of coleslaw, it consisted of cabbage, carrots, cucumbers, onions, and red vinegar. Anthony hated it and always wondered why the Claremont salad was so famous. People would say things like, "The genius is the onions." His mother sometimes bought containers of Claremont salad to bring home.

"No, thank you," he said, as Dani passed the Claremont salad. Instead he took a pickle from the pickle plate. He placed it down with the plastic tongs and felt his mother like wild nettles inside his gut. Years ago, they'd had a fight at the kitchen table. He'd started crying because he wasn't hungry. She had dumped half a container of Claremont salad on his head. Sometimes she blew like that—just lost it. There was no way of predicting when she would blow. Last time it happened was in Allenhurst the morning after she'd been arrested. He'd been out cleaning the beach and hadn't seen it, but Dani told him she'd gone berserk.

Dani and Anthony ordered hamburgers and milkshakes. Their mother ordered a club sandwich. Then she smiled to herself, or else the menu, and said, "I'll also have one of your egg creams."

"What's an egg cream?" Anthony asked, when the waitress left them.

She said, "It's basically chocolate soda."

"Is there an egg in it?"

She said, "No."

"Abbey Roth's father sometimes makes them at their house," Dani said.

"I've always liked them," said their mother. "We used to get them after games when I was a cheerleader."

It was a strange thought, always, to imagine his mother as a cheer-leader. She didn't seem like the type who'd have school spirit. She barely ever talked about her high school years. But Anthony had seen dozens of pictures. She had filled up several albums that sat out in the hallway bookshelf. One was all sports clippings and team photos and black-and-whites of every cheerleader. He had seen shots of his mother waving pom-poms, mouth wide open as she yelled some defiant cheer. Shots of her doing kicks in midair, her long legs taut and toned with muscle. There were shots of his mother twirling, one funny shot of two boys crawling under her skirt. He assumed that Grandpa Ira and Grandma Hannah, who were both dead now, had never laid eyes on those pictures.

He had once asked his father about Mom's cheerleading. His father told him something frightening—that when Mom became a cheerleader, her parents threatened to rip their clothes, cover their mirrors, and act like she was dead. Why rip their clothes and cover mirrors? His father said these were the Orthodox rules for mourning a family member who had died. Anthony knew his grandparents did funny religious things, such as using Kleenex in the bathroom on the Sabbath, so they wouldn't have to tear the toilet paper from the roll. On the Sabbath they also wouldn't answer phones. They had the lights set up with electric timers and they would yell if you ever flipped the light switch. All that was

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