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AUTUMN GARDEN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English & Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Les Brady

May 2010

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Les Brady

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

AUTUMN GARDEN

by

Les Brady

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
&
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2010

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ABSTRACT

AUTUMN GARDEN

by Les Brady

Autumn Garden is a novel using a semi-omniscient third-person narrator who conveys the perspectives of ten-year-old Nick Lucera, his mother, Mary, and father, Tony. The story challenges conventional beliefs of mortality as Nick confronts the greatest loss of his young life, his mother's impending death. The novel is set in 1970's coastal California.

Two characters influence how Nick processes events in his life: seventeen-year-old neighbor, Brian, an evangelical Christian, and Sal Amato, an acquaintance of Nick's parents, whose insights range from the curious to the fantastic. Brian's friendship is a refuge for Nick, who suffers regularly from the bullying inflicted upon him by schoolmates. While finding sanctuary in his relationship with Brian, Nick also feels fear at the apocalyptical beliefs that Brian espouses.

The story is a work of realism in the tradition of Chekhov, with a subtle element of fantasy, drawing on such works as Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The character Sal appears to possess abilities that defy conventional understanding as perceived by the other characters. Sal seems to influence those around him nonverbally, and he displays this ability by compelling all three main characters in ways that change their views of reality.

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Thesis Preface

In his *The Art of Fiction* John Gardner asserts, "All great writing is in a sense imitation of great writing." (Gardner 11) *Autumn Garden* is a coming-of-age story based on a Central California coastal family and the events that shape their lives over the course of one year. The novel is a work of realism that incorporates elements of the fantastic into its narrative. In this light I will preface how *Autumn Garden* garners influence both from authors of realistic, character-driven fiction as well as those adept at the weaving of fantastic elements into otherwise realistic narratives.

For this discussion we will define "fantastic" as not only a conscious authorial break from reality, but "the logical extension of reality;" simply put, when we take away all boundaries of reason, all frameworks of constraint, what *might* occur that would not otherwise with those boundaries in place, and what end would such occurrence elucidate? Nikolai Gogol employs elements of the fantastic in his work for very specific aesthetic purposes. In Gogol's "The Nose" we see elements of the fantastic used to comment on both the absurdity of society as a whole and how the individual struggles against this absurdity to create meaning in a life that could be spent in utter obscurity.

Gogol's "The Nose" employs elements of the fantastic to expose the ridiculously stratified society that renders the individual unable to cope. Major Kovalyov awakes to discover a flat place in the middle of his face where his nose once protruded. We soon learn that Kovalyov is somewhat of a second-class collegiate assessor, not one who

attained office through education, but who is merely appointed, implying a lesser level of acumen.

Kovalyov soon witnesses his nose not only bounding out of a breaking carriage but clad in the uniform of a state counselor, three ranks higher than Kovalyov himself. The nose appears not only rushed, but with purpose, to which Kovalyov assumes is the precursor to an important rendezvous. The major is correct, and over the course of most of the remainder of the story he supplicates himself to his own outranking nose, attempts in vain to gain assistance in recouping it. It is worthwhile now to ask, for the purposes of substantiating our definition of "fantastic" as well as why such detail is employed, the simple question, "Why a nose?" The nose is perhaps our most prominent, visible feature, thus a clear metaphor for individuality. Having to bow down to one's own nose is mocking of the system that causes any one individual to need bow down to another.

As Gogol utilizes an animate nose, complete with high civil rank, to expose the ridiculously stratified societal conditions of 19th Century Russian culture, Sal Amato's transformation into Santa Claus in *Autumn Garden* represents a unique archetype to American culture, one that at once conveys the playful innocence of the Santa myth, but also goes beyond mere gift-giving to comment on the nature of existence. To achieve a convincing element of the fantastic in *Autumn Garden* that can be read as a logical extension of reality through Sal, his character needed to be grounded in reality while displaying fantastic traits in a convincing manner. As in "The Nose," only Kovalyov can actually see his lost appendage roaming about town; similarly, only Tony and the guests of the party see Sal as a Santa figure. When a curious neighbor inquires from his front

porch as to the noise he has heard outside late on Christmas Eve, Sal's character is immediately rendered back as the old fisherman: "'Merry Christmas, Angelo!' Sal's familiar voice answered the query. Tony turned and saw not a towering figure but the old fisherman, Santa suit drooping from his frame, fake beard askew."

Quoting again from John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*, "the writer's first job is to convince the reader that the events he recounts really happened, or to persuade the reader that they might have happened (given small changes in the laws of the universe)." (Gardner 22) *Autumn Garden* seeks to build on Gardner's assertion in conveying Sal's character as one whose intuition and transformation require that small universal change. Another of Gardner's observations may be related to works of realistic fiction that rely upon characters that possess fantastic traits: "Dragons, like bankers and candy-store owners, must have firm and predictable characters. A talking tree, a talking refrigerator, a talking clock must speak in a way we learn to recognize, must influence events in ways we can identify as flowing from some definite motivation." (Gardner 21-22) In other words, whether the character is a reincarnated child who has returned grown, as in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the Judge of *Blood Meridian*—a giant man who speaks every language he encounters and makes gunpowder from the raw elements of the desert, or a strange old fisherman who appears to have a near-psychic intuition and transforms into Santa Claus, our characters must be convincing.

Gardner defines this blending of realism with the fantastic as "genre-crossing," a technique that "expands the emotional range of drama." (Gardner 20) This notion works both in Gardner's own *Grendel*, and *Autumn Garden*. Gardner's famed retelling of the

Beowulf story from the monster's point of view utilizes the irony of reversal to level the playing field of the narrative, succeeding in bestowing not only mere storytelling capability to the monster, but ascribing in his character basic human abilities that engender sympathy in the reader: language, and the desire to reason. When commenting on his observations of the drunken, boasting men and their violent tendencies toward one another he observes from a distance, Grendel tells us that "I began to be more amused than revolted by what they threatened…It was slightly ominous because of its strangeness—no wolf was so vicious to other wolves—but I half believed they weren't serious." (Gardner 32) Gardner skillfully allows Grendel's narration not only to comment critically on the men's behavior, but contrasts the behavior with a wolf's—an animal that the men would consider beneath them—whose own behavior transcends the men's morality by not attacking its own kind. Assigning human characteristics to Grendel serves to ground his character rationally for the reader, creating a character we believe in. Similarly, Sal Amato's character, despite possessing uncommon abilities, is also a common fisherman, a staple vocation of the town, and one to which all characters can relate, thus providing the reader with a concrete, reasonable framework for the character.

In Morrison's *Beloved*, the book's namesake literally erupts into the narrative: "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water." (Morrison 50) This is an obviously fantastic element, yet one that Morrison handles deftly with the very simple tone of the sentence; there is no over-the-top description of what would be an unbelievable site. I attempted to render Sal's transformation in a similarly subdued tone, one that crept upon

Tony as he helped the old fisherman don the Santa suit, with Sal's calming reassurance as he encouraged Tony: "Try a little more padding over here," and, This is starting to feel right."

Morrison balances Beloved's fantastic traits by having the other characters offer logical explanations and descriptions of the mysterious young woman's emergence. Beloved has entered the world fully grown but with many aspects of a newborn: "She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands." (Morrison 50) We learn that she has only one name, is confused at first by the mention of a last name, yet this strange detail is excused by Paul D who observes that she must simply be illiterate: "He recognized the careful enunciation of letters by those who could not read but had memorized the letters of their name." (Morrison 52) Sethe explains Beloved's unknown and unspoken origin as the result of memory lapse due to illness: "She didn't…have much of an idea of what she was doing in that part of the country or where she had been. They believed the fever had caused her memory to fail." (Morrison 55). Sal's origin in *Autumn Garden* is similarly obscure, yet when anyone in the town questions why the thoughts seem to melt away.

The success of any narrative, be it realistic or fantastic, rests on Anne Lamott's assertion that "plot grows out of character." (Lamott 54) In *Grendel* and *Beloved* the authors succeeded in creating complex characters that did "not serve as pawns for some plot [the authors] dreamed up." (Lamott 54) In *Autumn Garden* I attempted to create characters whose actions and emotions drove the plot through the development of their

relationships with one another, with Sal's fantastic character helping to advance the complexity of each of these relationships.

Autumn Garden also draws influence from the tradition of Realism. The novel is grounded in a distinct locale, a classic element of Realism; though unnamed, the text is specific regarding history, population and industry, all which typify any number of cities or towns on the central California coast. The situations confronted by the central characters—religion, mortality, the nature of reality—are realistic issues that human beings have faced for millennia. Essential relationships, be they familial or otherwise, reveal realistic interaction and evolution. The novel's realistic aspects draw upon Anton Chekhov's "The Lady with the Little Dog," utilizing reliance on scenic and temporal detail and the relating of authentic human experience to convey the narrative. True to the traditions of Realism, Chekhov grounds the opening of "The Lady with the Little Dog" not only in Yalta, but also with specificity: the Promenade, the Municipal Park, the Square. The first chapter of *Autumn Garden* opens with the description of a specific locale that, though unnamed, represents realistic locations on the Central California coast.

Autumn Garden draw on the influence of John Cheever, whose character Neddy Merrill in "The Swimmer" engages in behavior that is both realistic and absurd—a swim home through the pools of his county. Neddy's narrative perspective evolves from a realistic view of people he encounters and events he recalls on his journey down the "Lucinda River," becoming more and more dreamlike and fantastic. Similarly, the Lucera's outlooks change through their interaction with Sal. But unlike Neddy, whose lapse into the fantastic reveals the dysfunction of his reality, the Lucera's altered

perspective allows them to realize understanding beyond their former beliefs. Cheever grounds many of his narratives in the fictitious Shady Hill, which, like the town of *Autumn Garden*, possesses believable inhabitants, proximity to actual metropolitan areas, and even the reference to peripheral characters who repeat from one story to the next, lending a sense of neighborhood.

As a story grounded in a specific California setting, *Autumn Garden* draws on influence from James D. Houston's fiction, especially the novel *Continental Drift*. Both novels are situated in towns on California's central coast. While establishing the setting of a ranch near the Monterey Bay that straddles the San Andreas Fault and dedicating much descriptive narrative to the physical area, Houston focuses on the relationships between characters and how events color their evolution. Houston utilizes the fault line and notion of "drift" as metaphors to portray the fissures in the Doyle family's relationships as their youngest son returns from the Viet Nam war. Similarly, *Autumn Garden* opens broadly but then focuses on the relationships of father, mother and son and how they evolve due to events in the narrative. Like *Continental Drift, Autumn Garden* utilizes descriptive passages that relate the characters to the physical locale, focusing on the importance of the wharf where Sal's fishing boat is docked, how "fishing" as a metaphor for searching and discovery affect Nick, his mother and father.

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Chapter 1

Brian shunned what any standard-issue American teenager might harangue his millionaire father with—pleas for turbo-charged vehicles, expensive electronics, exotic Spring Breaks. Rather, Brian had, several years before, accepted a more ascetic existence, brought on by his acceptance of Jesus Christ as his, "personal savior." He attended an evangelical church several nights a week, not simply the obligatory Sundays. To familiarize himself with the ways of ministering, he accompanied his pastor on visits to parishioners. He carried a small copy of The New Testament with him at all times, reading from it often throughout the course of any given day. These habits did nothing to endear him to his fellow classmates at Santa Paula High School, but Brian cared little about impressions. It frustrated him that his parents, devout agnostics, thought Brian's proclivities odd but acceptable, likely the reactions of a thoughtful if naïve young man, nearing adulthood, habits that would (hopefully) fade, overtaken by the intrigues and independence of college.

They did not, could not yet fully understand the level of commitment that a sixteen-year old is capable of, particularly when he is acting without the calming context of adulthood, when every fresh, serious thought of his future is colored with the images of network news: mile-long lines at gas stations; streams, rivers and lakes awash in pollutants; the U.S.'s mutually assured destruction with the Soviet Union. Even the killer bees from South America were making their way northward. Teenagers might turn to

distraction, and Brian's distraction was The Lord, the promise of eternal life. It was this aspect of Brian's person that his nonbeliever parents could not understand. And it was this same disaffection and estrangement that Nick Lucera understood perfectly.

Nick really did like Brian, enjoyed the company of an older, more thoughtful boy than those Nick's age in the neighborhood, from whom he would suffer some sort of torment despite their usual affability, at times in the form of an insult—Donny DiAmbrosi's taunt of "Fat Pig!" was standard—at others a chiding challenge to a foot race that Nick had no chance of winning, the promise of selection for a ball team that they had no intent of fulfilling; sometimes they just walked up and punched him in the soft padding of his stomach.

Nick was usually happy to remain in Brian's company, whether raking the bright yellow and red leaves that covered the lawn, watching a Saturday afternoon horror movie on TV, or simply talking—except when Brian spoke of the end of the world.

Weary from raking leaves from the massive yard of Brian's family's renovated Victorian, the boys lowered themselves to sit on the grass and lean their backs against the still-warm stones of the perimeter wall. Nick felt at ease—a condition rarely sustained in his body or mind for long—until Brian breached the solitude with a simple question: "What will you say?"

Nick gazed into the expanse of the yard so that he could not see the pale eyes and thin, red beard that covered Brian's white, freckled face in sparse patches. "Do you know what you'll say when He asks you?"

Nick mumbled something unintelligible and shrugged, tried to lower his gaze but could not escape the smile—the knowing grin that glared from the middle of the weak red hair. Instead of responding he sat in silence, fearful of giving a wrong answer. *What do you say to God?* His stomach churned.

"I know what I'm going to say." Brian continued, but Nick no longer saw his neighbor but only the beard that glared with fire and the blinding gleam of the teeth as the mouth moved.

"I'll say, 'Lord, I know I don't deserve to be here, in your presence. I just ask you to forgive me and accept me in the name of..."

The remaining words faded from Nick's ears though he fought to hear them, could only see flashes of fire and light emerge from his friend's lips, forming the strange shapes of foreign sounds, an ancient, dead language. Nick thought to raise his hands, stand and flee, but suddenly the fire subsided and Brian sat there again looking very much at ease.

"So, that's how I know," he confirmed. "You should think about it. And pray about it."

"But—" Nick began, fighting the silence that gripped him "—nothing happens when I pray."

"Well, you have to pray in His name, and have faith."

Nick thought how happy his neighbor looked, how certain.

"You look like the world's coming to an end, Nick." Brian chuckled, his red bangs flopping. "Come on. Help me rake up the rest of these leaves, then we'll go inside and make root beer floats."

They sat on the wall sipping root beer and clumps of ice cream from large frosted mugs, scrutinizing their work, the green grass freed of the amber and auburn leaves now piled in a heap of autumn color. But a late afternoon wind struck and the trees began again to shed the season's dead.

"Nicky!" rang out from across the street, his mother's booming alto rising above the hum of wind. "*Nicolo, andiamo!* Your uncle Frank is here!"

Nick leapt from the ground, tossed a brief, obligatory "'bye!" toward Brian, nearly throwing the half-empty mug at him, and ran, feet landing hard and flat against the pavement, until he arrived at the front porch and stopped, winded, and looked up to see the face of his uncle, small crooked smile framed by a pencil mustache, fisherman's cap tilted slightly toward one ear. Nick never ran anywhere; the neighborhood kids were less likely to bully him if he walked. He always tried to act as inconspicuously as possible, except when his uncle visited, which he did every Saturday afternoon to sit in the sun of the back patio and have cocktails with Nick's parents.

"Hi, Uncle Frank!" Nick huffed between breaths, his face flushed as he climbed the painted cement steps one at a time.

"Hey, there's the old fisherman." Frank smiled at his nephew, and Nick wrapped his arms around his uncle's waist, smelled the salt water and tobacco that permeated the thick woolen shirt. Then he closed his eyes and could see his uncle's tiny boat, half the size of the large commercial vessels of the local fishing fleet, could see himself braced on

the pitching deck, arms straining to help the winch haul in a net. He felt his uncle's hug slacken and opened his eyes.

"Nicky, you're so out of breath," his mother said and looked toward her brother. "The nurse called from school. 'Your son, he's too fat. He's got to lose weight.' Said he can't even run around the playground like the other kids." She spoke sternly and cast a dissatisfied glance, then, catching herself, bent forward and took the boy in her arms and held him tightly. Nick looked at the floor.

"Nicky, what am I gonna do with you, huh?"

"Why don't you let me go fishing with Uncle Frank. I'll lose weight then."

"Hey, why not Mary? He's old enough now. I could show him things. And the company would be nice—"

"Like hell you will. My son's not going near that ratty boat of yours."

"I'd be careful, Mom. And Uncle Frank would be with me."

"No, honey. Maybe when you get bigger."

"But mom—"

"I said *no*."

"But—"

"Don't talk back to me." She raised the back of her hand in the air. Nick flinched and fell silent.

"You be a good boy and some day when you're older you can go out fishing with your uncle. Now you just worry about school." Mary nodded decisively, then turned to her brother.

“Franky, come out to the patio and let me fix you a drink. Tony'll be home pretty soon. He had to go show a house. Sometimes I almost wish he'd go back fishing with you. Least he'd be home weekends.”

“I told him, any time. How's he doing, anyway?”

“Not so bad. They actually come to *him* now, mostly. But, weekends are Open House.”

“That's great. You hear that, Nicky? Your dad's going to be the richest real estate man in town,” Frank said to the boy who had waited patiently beside his uncle’s chair. “What are you going to be when you grow up, huh?”

“I'm going to be a fisherman, like you.” Nick spoke seriously and gazed into his uncle’s near-black eyes.

Frank grinned. “You know, Nick, you can be anything you want to. Not just a fisherman like your old uncle.”

“That's right,” his mother interjected from beyond the kitchen door that opened onto the patio. “You're going to be a doctor or a lawyer. Never mind working all your life and coming home with your face burned and your hands cut so bad you can hardly hold a fork.”

Nick heard the words and looked at his uncle’s hard, ruined hands, then at his own, watched their softness blur and harden until he saw them cut and bleeding, felt his face suddenly hot from the stinging sun. *Maybe I'll be good enough then.*

The living room door creaked open then slammed closed and Nick felt the rumble of his father's footsteps shake through the kitchen floor and out to the patio. He jumped

up and ran to his father who now stood in doorway, the wide silk tie undone around his neck, a thick black briefcase in his right hand.

"Hey, pal." Tony smiled at Nick who hugged his father in return. "Hey, Franky, how you doing?"

"Okay, Tony. You sell any houses today?"

"Just went to show one. Mexican couple from the other side of town. Nice. I drive down to their apartment to pick them up, right? So I get out of the car and I'm walking toward their building. There's these two looking at me and talking in Spanish to each other. I get to the front porch of Ramon's place—he's my client—and I say, 'What are those guys talking about?' He listens, yells something at them, then laughs like hell. 'They thought you were the police!' he says. ''That's the only guys they see around here in suits!'

Tony laughed deeply as he set the briefcase onto the kitchen linoleum.

"Can I take your briefcase to your office, Dad?" Nick looked up at his father.

"Sure, son. Go ahead."

Tony turned toward his wife who offered a tall, frosted glass.

"Thanks, honey. So, anyway," he continued to Frank, "I say to Ramon, 'Why don't you tell them what's going on. He walks over to the sidewalk and yells something to them. They answer, then laugh, too. They end up coming over and having a beer with us."

Mary leered skeptically at Tony, then spoke to Frank. "I don't know why he's got to go all the way down there to do business. Most of those people can't afford a house. And it's dangerous."

"It's not any more dangerous than it is here, Mary," Tony countered.

"That's because you *belong* here. They were worried you were the police, for Christ's sake. Why should they be afraid of the police?"

"I don't know, Mary. Maybe because they don't know the language. So, sometimes they don't know what's going on—"

"Well they should *learn* the language. Our parent's did. They didn't stay in their house hiding all day."

"These people work, honey."

"Yeah, them and the goddamn *mulagnan'* in line every time I drive past the Welfare office when I go see Mom."

"Dad, me and Brian raked the leaves in front of his parents' house today—"

"Don't you interrupt, young man," his mother warned.

"I just wanted—"

Nick felt the hard callused sting of his mother's hand on his cheek, the remaining words knocked from his mouth.

"Don't talk back to me. Now go put your father's briefcase away like you said you would."

Nick lugged the heavy case to the large veneer desk, sliding it against the file cabinet on the right side, exactly where his father liked it, then climbed on top of the

swivel chair so that he could look out the window. His parents' house stood on a high retaining wall above the rest of the houses on their block. He gazed at Brian's yard with the trees twice the height of any other tree in the neighborhood. He didn't know what kind they were, only that their leaves changed, turned color, and fell every September. He stared at the disappearing green of the lawn and in his mind completed the sentence he had lost on the back porch '—to show Dad. Just wanted to see if he thought we did a good job.'

He climbed off the chair and hurried back to the porch so his mother could see him, picking his way carefully between the adults, and sitting on the step next to his uncle.

His mother had paused to light a cigarette. She inhaled quickly to continue a story, but a deep, wheezing cough cut short her voice. Nick looked at his mother's face and saw her wince.

"You okay, honey?" Tony asked.

"Yeah," she said between breaths, and waited until the cough receded. "I'm fine. Just mix me another drink, will you? I'll be right back." She rose from the porch and walked quickly through the kitchen toward the bathroom at the end of the hall.

Nick smiled at his uncle.

"Hey, Nick. I got an idea. You go in the other room and keep quiet and let me talk to your mom. I'll come get you when it's okay."

Nick nodded, jumped from the stairs and hurried to the other side of the house and into the den. He turned on the television but kept the sound very low, straining to hear the conversation in the patio.

The television played almost inaudibly and his uncle and mother's voices floated into the room—a low mumble, punctuated by higher rolling inflections. He could discern no words but felt from the sympathetic rhythm and convincing lilt of his uncle's tone that Frank presented some plea on Nick's behalf. His mother's sounds softened gradually, and then the words stopped. Nick felt the dull rumble of footsteps on the hardwood floor. He raised the volume and pretended to watch the television when his mother walked through the doorway.

"Nicky," she said, calmer now, "how would you like to go help your uncle down on the wharf tomorrow?"

Nick just sat for a moment and turned the question back and forth in his mind, then nodded when he looked at his mother's slight smile, realizing that he had heard correctly.

"What do you say?"

"Yes, please."

Nick felt his mother's arm on his shoulder, and the two walked back to the patio.

"Now, you better be good tomorrow and do exactly what Uncle Frank tells you. Don't get in anybody's way."

"He'll be fine, Mary. We're just going to mend nets."

"Yeah, you better just mend nets, not get near that damn boat of yours." She turned to her son. "You hear me, young man?"

Nick made the most serious face he could and nodded in earnest agreement.

"Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Lucera." They all turned to see Brian's head and hands peeking above the back fence.

"Come on in, Brian." Tony waved from the patio table. "The gate's unlocked."

"*Buona sera*, Brian," Mary said, then to Frank, "Brian's studying Italian in high school."

"Bona sera."

"*Bu-on-a sera*, Brian."

"B*wo*na s*e*ra."

"That's better." They laughed. "You have to come over and practice more often. Too bad you can't talk to Nicky. I tried to teach him, but he just answers back in English."

"Yeah, Nick. You learn Italian so you can talk to the fishermen," Frank said, then to Brian, "You gonna talk to the fishermen, too?"

"Frank, be nice to this boy," Mary scolded. "He goes to church. Not like you when you were young." She turned to Brian. "My brother, he used to sneak back after mass on Sunday and drink the priest's communion wine."

"Yeah," Frank said, "wish we could have gotten our hands on what *they* were drinking."

“You watch your mouth. You're going straight to hell. Brian, talk to my evil brother. Tell him about your church.”

“What do you belong to, one of them holy-roller churches?”

“We call it 'non-denominational.' Brian smiled, not a bit embarrassed by Frank’s chiding. “We just come together to worship the Lord Jesus. That's the only thing we think is important.”

“Oh, my God, you better not let the Pope hear you.”

“Frank, stop being such a smart-ass,” Mary said. Tony laughed to himself. Brian smiled and looked back at Frank.

”You should come down on Saturday night sometime. That's when we play guitars and sing. It's a lot of fun.”

“You hear that? They have fun in church! That must be some church.”

“So how 'bout tonight?” Brian persisted.

“Thank you very much, young man, but no. I don’t want the Pope catching me, either.”

“Well, the offer's open, any time, just let me know.”

“I'll do that.”

Brian turned toward Nick who sat close to his Uncle. “How about you, Nick? Want to come down to church with me tonight, if it's okay with your mom and dad?”

Nick looked to his mother who frowned. “How are you supposed to get up early and help your uncle tomorrow if you’re out tonight?”

“Oh, we'll be home plenty early, Mrs. Lucera.”

"I guess it's okay. So long as it's church. He's got to have dinner first, Brian."

"He can eat with me. My folks left for the weekend and there's stuff already made."

Mary looked sternly at her son. "You be good and mind Brian. I don't want to hear you smarted off or anything, you understand me?"

Nick's eyes widened, and he nodded firmly.

"Don't just nod your head at me, young man."

"Yes, Mom."

"That's better. Okay, you go ahead."

"We'll be home by 8:00, Mrs. Lucera."

"*Arrivaderci,* college boy," Frank waved but gave Brian a skeptical look.

"Good-bye, Brian," Tony said. "Thanks for looking after Nicky."

Brian and Nick waved and left through the back gate. Nick felt relief at the thought of an entire evening away from his parents, though his excitement dampened with a strange sensation that he was being watched, his desire to escape noted.

Chapter 2

Frank looked at Tony. "You know, I never see Nick playing with boys his own age."

"Brian's a good boy. He doesn't smoke, doesn't drink—"

"Yeah, he probably don't screw, either."

"You watch your mouth!" Mary shot at her brother. "Brian's good for Nicky."

"Oh, Mary, relax." Tony said. "All Frank's saying is it would be good if Nick played with boys his own age, especially since he's getting older."

"I don't want my son running with those little animals. You see them all over the place, to the store, to the park. Their parents don't know where the hell they are."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Mary, they're boys. They've got to run around. They couldn't get into anything worse than I did when I was their age."

"Yeah, and look what you did. Mr. popularity, high school football star. Didn't need college, just wanted to work. Thought he was going to have a million dollars by the time he was twenty-five. Well, now you're *forty*-five, and we're barely making it."

"I have a job, in case you forgot. And if you got a problem with how *we're* doing, why don't you go get one yourself instead of puttering around the house and yelling at the kid all day?"

"Who the hell do you think is going to watch him if I don't? My son's going to have things we don't have. He's going to do things we couldn't do, instead of getting stuck in this goddamn town."

Tony started to answer but caught himself, took a deep breath and looked into the street beyond the back wall. Mary stomped up the stairs and disappeared into the house.

Tony's shoulders hung slack. "I don't know, Franky. Every time I say something to her about Nick she gets mad as hell. I mean, she loves him like crazy, more than anything. But she's so afraid he's going to get hurt, or, I don't know. Something…"

"Well, I guess that Brian's a nice kid, but you're right. Nick's got to run with boys his own age."

"Sometimes I say to him, 'Hey, Nicky. There's so-and-so from up the street. Why don't you go see if he wants to throw the football or something?' And he just shrugs his shoulders and looks down at the ground. So, I go out and play catch with him for a while. But soon as I stop he goes back in."

"If I was you, Tony, I'd put my foot down. God bless her, she's my sister, but I wouldn't let her talk to me like that, especially about my own son."

"Oh, that don't bother me, Frank. She yells, I yell back, and she goes in and cools off. Besides, she ain't yelling at me, really. She's just scared, scared for Nicky. She wants the best for him. It's worse lately, though. Every time I come home it seems like she's mad at him for something. I think, 'Christ, what could he have done now?' I get the feeling something's up. Tell you the truth, Franky, I don't think she's been feeling too good. She don't eat, takes a lot of pills, I don't know what for."

"Yeah, I can see it in her face. I don't know what to tell you, Tony."

They sat for a while, each thinking deeply, until stirred by the creak of the kitchen door.

"What's the matter with you two? You look like someone died." Mary stepped from the doorway and walked to Tony, sat next to him on the bench so that their hips touched. She put a hand on his back and rubbed up and down.

"Honey," she said, "do me a favor and fix me another drink."

Tony's lips stretched into a smile and he nodded, moving his legs from under the patio table, and stepped toward the kitchen.

Nick smiled when he entered the large meeting room bathed in the fluorescent light of the New Life Christian Church. Mary allowed Nick to attend these informal, Saturday night prayer groups as long as the boy went to mass with her on Sunday mornings. But Nick felt more at ease in the casual, happy atmosphere of Brian's church than he did in his mother's; there the opaque mystery of incense and candle-smoke drifted gloomily about the immense dark cavity of the sanctuary. While elements of Catholic ceremony attracted him—lighting a candle for whom he prayed, hearing the echo of the priests' strange chanted language—Nick had never felt that God dwelt in his mother's church, even though one could see Jesus himself—life-sized, blood streaming down his hands, feet, and side—agonizing on the cross in front of the first pew. By comparison the people in Brian's church looked sincerely happy, as if they really wanted to be there, not simply to confess a sin, or because it was Sunday. He enjoyed everything

about Brian's church, except when the same happy group began speaking, with equal fervor and delight they'd use to describe any pleasant event, about what they called the "end times."

Nick followed closely behind Brian as he greeted friends, hugging them and calling them "brother" and "sister," many of whom were quite older than Brian himself but greeted him nonetheless as an equal. While Nick thought the salutations strange, he could see in their luminescent expressions that all these people felt genuinely charged by one another's presence, and, when Brian introduced the boy around the room, that the people greeted Nick with the same enthusiasm; they looked past his appearance and, smiling, met his eyes.

The room brimmed with chatter for a while, then, with no announcement, as if by instinct, all the worshippers glided to the center and formed a large circle. They linked hands and, with a languorous patience that irritated Nick, waited until each of their brothers and sisters had finished with whatever conversation they had begun, then bowed their heads and shut their eyes. The group had no official leader, and Nick always felt uncomfortable waiting for someone to begin. But the idea, so he understood, was to be "moved by the spirit" to speak. And whenever that happened seemed fine with everyone present.

Finally, a tall, thin man with pale eyes and a deeply tanned face framed by strands of yellow hair said how happy he was that his car was running again, and he thanked the Lord for "touching his car and healing it." Nick contained a laugh successfully and looked toward Brian to gauge his reaction, but his face remained impassive. Gradually

others thanked the Lord for various things which they felt had blessed their lives in the past week. Nick heard some of the congregates murmur reverently after each of their fellows spoke, but could not understand what they said.

He wished the vigil over, his limbs grown numb from the constant standing and handholding. He looked to different faces in the group until his gaze stopped on the short, round woman whose thin, pink cotton dress bulged in places, holding back her girth. He was about to look away, but saw that her eyes gleamed round and black, completely devoid of iris, and stared straight at Nick, pinning him to his place. He thought to smile for an instant, then fear gripped him, his hands and feet turning cold and his heart pounding.

The room had again fallen silent. When his heart finally calmed, the silence engulfed Nick and pressured his ears until he saw the woman's mouth open slowly, and he watched as she took in a deep breath, then began to shake her head and spit words from behind her misshapen lips. He thought she spoke Spanish, at first. But he had heard Spanish and knew that these sounds, these tones, some shrill and sharp, others low and guttural, that beat their way out of the woman's mouth, sounded nothing like he had ever heard. She grasped the hands of the young man and woman on either side of her and rigidified, her body caught as if by an electrical current. Then she went limp, her mouth relenting, head hanging forward; she would have fallen but the two who continued their grasp.

One of the group's elders, Eric, blonde and bearded, in his late twenties, reacted as if the woman's behavior were routine: "That was a tongue. Does anyone have an interpretation?"

Amazed, Nick gazed at different people in the prayer circle. Most still bowed their heads in silence, eyes shut. One looked up, straight at the ceiling, unblinking, face flushed and moist, and Nick almost did not recognize Brian's voice when he spoke.

"The Lord says, 'The time is growing near when my Father will rain his wrath upon the world. But fear not! For I am on my throne of power and will come this time as a conqueror! Let you believers know that I am your Lord and your God and I will be with you soon!'"

Nick felt the blood rush from his face and his hands and felt his feet grow cold. He jerked away, breaking the prayer circle, stumbling back to stare at the group from a distance. Some appeared startled, like Nick. Still others, genuine happiness glowing on their faces, flocked around Brian, embracing him, or satisfied to merely touch him on the arm or shoulder to extract some invisible measure of piety. Nick stood still on the opposite side of the room and watched those gathered around Brian, some taking out guitars and strumming chords to made-up verses, others smiling and crying, holding one another and rocking back and forth.

The whole scene felt like a bizarre, wrenching play to Nick, but as he studied the faces of the people sitting and playing guitars and praying, he realized this was no fantasy to them; these people believed, as Brian had told him, that the end of the world was near, not in a metaphorical sense, or even in a distant future, but that, in their lifetime, sooner

rather than later, the world as all knew it would cease to exist, that Jesus would come to judge all, to accept those worthy few to his kingdom and condemn the rest to eternal horror and suffering. Nick had asked Brian how this would happen. “Probably nuclear war,” Brian surmised blithely and shrugged. Nick recalled a television news program all about the Communists and Russia, how they were a threat to the existence of the world, possessing a power thousands of times greater than that which had destroyed the great cities of Japan during World War II. Nick had heard of these places; his uncles had fought in the South Pacific and had told him about the Japanese surrender, but he had not fully understood until that night on television, when he watched the footage of the bomb dropping, the high blinding flash, and, in the aftermath, the faint, gray outlines of ash which were once the people who had lived in those cities. The images coalesced in Nick's mind until he knew that, whenever it was that the world would end, these people would be happy about it. Because, as Brian had said, they would be ready.

A chill ran down the entire length of his body. His heart pounded once very hard and for a moment he could not breath and lost the feeling in his legs. Before he fell a hand clamped on his arm.

“Nick, what’s wrong, man? You’re white as a sheet.” Brian knelt in front of him and Nick pulled away at first, then saw the fear in his friend's eyes.

“I don't feel good.”

“Do you want to go home?”

“Yes.”

Nick stood very still and kept his eyes low, away from anyone in the room, and only watched Brian pack his guitar and say quick good-byes to his friends.

Outside, darkness had fallen hard and cold over the horizon. The wind blew, and Nick began to shiver. He felt nauseous, but glad for the sickness that allowed him to ride home in silence.

Chapter 3

Nick opened his eyes and stared into his bedroom's darkness until he heard his mother opening drawers and banging pots, the rush of water from the faucet for coffee—wake-up time.

The morning was his favorite part of the day, the time he relished spending with his mother before the sun had risen and the world's mysterious influence could taint the interaction between them. Mary rose very early, always by 4:30. Nick thought when he was very young that adults did not sleep at all; when he would wake late at night and, half asleep, sneak from his room to study his mother, still staring at the television, or reading by the weak yellow lamp-light, a cigarette poised in her hand, smoke trailing into the living room's small atmosphere, she remained in the same position he'd left her when he'd gone to bed. And in the morning she always sat at the kitchen table, another cigarette alight; he'd never seen her sleep.

"Good morning, young man."

Nick walked into the warm, bright kitchen, the world outside the windows still dark. He rubbed his eyes and looked around his favorite room. The kitchen served as the center for most important family events; it was where they ate, and where they talked, whenever there was anything to talk about. Also, it was where his mother stationed herself most of the day, either seated at the table behind a sewing machine or preparing the meals. She did not allow him to loiter long while she busied herself with dinner. But

the mornings were different, and Nick felt glad that he always woke in time to hear the coffee begin to percolate. It was their unwritten arrangement, the time reserved for them with no disruptions.

Nick watched her pour hot water into a cup with powdered hot chocolate mix and carry it to the table. He reached out his chilled hands and wrapped them both around the cup, the warmth penetrating his fingers.

"You feel better this morning?"

"Uh-huh."

"I thought you were probably just excited, between waiting to help your uncle and the junk you probably ate with Brian last night."

Nick smiled, happy that his fear had not jeopardized the trip to the wharf. He sat sipping at the hot cup and tried to think only of the day ahead, forcing from his mind the previous night's events. He'd decided to tell his mother that he did not want to go to church with Brian anymore, that he would attend Friday vespers with her instead. He hoped this offer would quell suspicion about his reasons for avoiding Brian.

The crackle of eggs and bacon filled the silent house as the world outside the kitchen window brightened with the early morning sun. At 5:30 Nick heard the back gate open and close and looked to see his uncle walking toward the kitchen door, bent slightly, wool cap pulled well over his ears, hands driven into the pockets of his heavy parka. Mary unlocked the knob and opened the door for her brother, who walked in and smiled at Nick.

“’Morning, Nicky. You're going to make a good fisherman, you keep getting up this early.”

“’Morning, Uncle Frank.” The night before seemed now a fading nightmare.

“Sit down and have some breakfast. It's cold out there. Here you go, Franky.” Mary handed a steaming cup of coffee to her brother.

“You're telling me. So, you ready to get some work done, Nick?”

“I can't wait, Uncle Frank.”

“You two just slow down a minute, until you finish your breakfast.” Mary paused to light a cigarette.

“Sounds like Mom's the boss.” Frank winked at Nick, and the two hunkered silently over plates of crisp smoked bacon and eggs scrambled in olive oil.

“Now, you listen to me, young man. You mind everything your uncle tells you today, you understand me”

“I will, Mom. I promise.”

“I'll ask him, and he'll tell me.”

“I'll mind, Mom.”

“And Frank, you remember, don't you let him near that boat.”

“Don't worry, Mary. We'll just be working on the dock.”

Nick looked up at his mother and tried to appear reassuring.

“You finished eating, Nick? You better go get dressed. It's time to get going.”

“Okay, Uncle Frank.”

Nick ran to his room, found the warmest clothes he had and a pair of rubber boots he wore when it rained. From his bedroom he could hear the two talking in the kitchen, and, though he could not understand the words, he knew his mother was explaining to Frank the penalty for allowing Nick to step so much as one foot onto the boat. Nick smiled and pulled on his thick wool socks.

At just after 6:00 a.m. the fog still nestled in the narrow channel where the local commercial fishing fleet docked. When Nick and his uncle walked toward the edge of the wharf the boy could not clearly discern the outline of each craft, only pieces of the whole: a partial name painted in thick, black letters along the bow, the outline of the tiny skiffs that rode piggy-back on every stern. The scene took on an ethereal quality for him, a mystical yet pious air clinging to the silent boats as they undulated with the quiet ripple and splash of the changing tide. The solitude soon broke, however, with a gruff voice that pierced the fog and hit Nick's ears with startling clarity.

"Hey, Franky, *buon giorno*! Who's the little fisherman?"

"Good morning, Sal!" Frank called into the fog but in no particular direction, searching for the source of the voice. "You bring this soup with you?"

"Hey, don't blame me. I was here since four. Looks like it's been here all night."

They ventured further into the fog and Nick could see only the outline of his uncle walking beside him and felt disoriented by the other man's voice, had no idea from which direction it had come. He thought it even stranger that whoever the source of the voice was could know they were there at all. They moved forward into the thick haze and

Frank continued speaking to the voice that seemed at first to recede, then gain strength until Nick could discern the outline of a small man sitting on an old, wooden crate next to the wharf's edge and working with his hands a small corner of a huge, heavily woven net spread wide in front of him. Finally, Nick and his uncle were close enough to see the man's face.

"Sal, I want you to meet my nephew, Nicolo Lucera."

"*Buon giorno, Nicolo*. It's a pleasure to meet you." He stood and extended his hand to Nick. The boy smiled and offered his hand in return. Nick had to squeeze as hard as he had ever squeezed before, the steel-hard, callused grasp tightening over his own soft, smooth skin.

"Nick, this is Mr. Amato. He was fishing here when I was your age."

Nick retrieved his hand from Mr. Amato's crushing grip and looking into his face, could see that he was, indeed, much older than he first appeared. He was at least a foot shorter than Frank, not much taller than Nick himself. He wore a pair of finely creased canvas pants and heavy-soled boots polished a brilliant black. The rim of a gleaming white tee peaked over two padded wool shirts. Nick saw that he was not heavy at all, in fact the layered shirts appeared to be the old man's greatest bulk. His head was crowned by a wool cap, black and oily and pulled over his ears. But his most dramatic features were his hands, which Nick could see more clearly now that the sun had risen higher in the early morning sky and illuminated the fog to a silvery sheen. Mr. Amato stood very straight, and as the old fisherman spoke he folded his hands humbly in front of his body, one over the other. Nick stared at the dark lines where deep, ancient scars had healed, the

thick layers of callous over each knuckle, the nails cut short and scrubbed of grime but yellowed from tobacco smoke. Nick thought they were brutal hands, perhaps hands that had killed, and if not, hands that certainly could. But the old man held them together in such a pious manner it reminded the boy of a picture he had seen of the Pope, his soft, white hands folded gently over the front of his crimson robes.

"Franky, why don't you go in the boat and get a cup of coffee. Do you drink coffee, *Nicolo*?" Mr. Amato looked straight at Nick, who turned to his uncle.

"Your mother would kill me, but why not? It's cold out here, and I don't think Sal keeps any hot chocolate on board."

"No, no," Sal laughed, "but you might want to check the cupboard."

"*Salut', Salvatore.*" Frank smiled.

Nick watched his uncle climb over the railing of the little boat, the smallest one on the wharf, then looked at Sal who had sat down on a wooden crate. He slid another crate over toward Nick and motioned him to sit.

"So, *Nicolo*... Is that what you like to be called?"

"I like Nick better."

"Yes, you're right. That suits you. So tell me, Nick, what brings a young man down here in the cold on Saturday morning when he can be sleeping?"

"I wanted to help my uncle. Well, I really want to go fishing with him. But my mom won't let me. So, I'm just going to help him fix nets."

"Well, let me tell you, Nick, fixing nets is very important. Knowing how to mend them so they can't be easily torn again, that is very precise work. Fishing is good, don't

get me wrong. I've been doing this for… well, for a very, very long time. But after so many years, you go out, you cast your nets, you wait, work on the engine or something else, then you work like crazy to pull the nets in. Over and over... There's much to be said for sitting here on the dock in the quiet morning, mending the nets."

Nick nodded to be polite.

“I know,” the old man continued, “it's hard for a young man to understand. The younger men—not like your uncle, but the ones that inherited their fathers' boats and money and go out with flood lights and take more than is theirs, they poke fun—me sitting here all morning, mending my own nets. They call me an old woman, doing her knitting. But, as you can see, I have the smallest boat here, and, year after year, I have made a living, with no lights, no crew. Once in a while your uncle comes out to help me, but that's mostly because we enjoy each other's company.”

The old man's voice sounded different from the one Nick had heard earlier in the fog, as if he possessed two voices, one for anyone who might pass, and one for someone whom he knew, and Nick felt the smooth, deep lilt of this palpable second voice.

Nick watched his uncle carefully balancing a stainless steel percolator in one hand, three cups in the other. He handed a cup to Nick and one to Sal and poured the steaming, dark liquid into each. Nick liked the smell of coffee much better than the taste, and he held the cup close to his nose, drawing in long, even whiffs. When Frank poured his own cup Nick smelled in the billow of rising steam a different aroma than that which rose from his own.

“To your health, Sal.” Frank spoke reverently and raised his cup.

"And to yours, Franky." The two men let the stained ceramic touch above the black lengths of layered net. Nick held his cup tightly with both hands and continued to inhale the rich bitterness, then glanced up to see the men's eyes turned toward him and he felt a confidence, a belonging the likes of which he'd never felt before. He straightened his back and brought his face level with the two, raised his own cup tentatively and let it touch each of the others', holding it in place long after the small chime had died into the rolling slap of the wave against bow.

"...and to yours, Nick." Sal Amato intoned seriously.

"Yes, to yours," Frank echoed.

The three sat drinking coffee, Sal and Frank taking liberties with the flask retrieved from the boat's small cabin, and with each sip Nick could smell his uncle's breath grow stronger with the pungent sweetness that emanated from his cup.

"Well, Nick, we better get along to the *Franky Boy* and let Sal finish with his mending. We got a lot to do ourselves."

"Frank, listen" Sal said, looking up, "after a while, maybe Nick can come back and I'll show him how I mend my nets." Sal turned to Nick. "Does that sound interesting to you?"

"Is it okay, Uncle Frank?"

"Is it what you want to do?"

"Yes."

"Then it's okay. It's about time you started making up your own mind about some things. I know your mom lays down the law, and that's as it should be. But you're getting to be a young man now. You should start to make some decisions on your own."

Nick looked at his uncle and nodded in tentative agreement.

"Anyway, we'll work for a while and then you come back and help Sal, whenever you want."

"Okay." Nick smiled and looked at the old man who nodded in return.

They walked the long length of the wharf to the *Franky Boy*, his uncle's boat, and Nick watched the fog lift and more men gather on the dock, standing in circles and conversing in Sicilian dialect. He noticed a group, the crew of one of the large tuna purseigners, standing next to a mountain of nets. They stood listening to one man as he told a story, and as his tale wound on others would comment, some in what Nick interpreted as positive tones, some negative, and they all continued in this fashion until eight of them were embattled in a feverish argument, mouths in constant motion and hands flailing. No one man seemed to have the advantage; from what Nick could understand of the conversation, each seemed to completely disagree with the other, but they spoke too rapidly for him to comprehend the heated subject.

"What are those men arguing about?"

"Well, one said how his wife makes the best cioppino of anyone he knows, then one said that the other should taste *his* sauce and he would think differently, and it went on from there."

“How can they fight like that over cioppino?” He watched his uncle smile, shake his head and shrug.

Nick looked over his shoulder at the group, still writhing in anger, each one waving his arms wildly at the next, until a smallish man who had just climbed up the ladder and heaved himself on board pushed to the middle of the crowd and yelled "*Shut-uuuup*!” with such force that the whole group around him, indeed, all shut up in near unison, made dismissive hand motions to each other, turned and walked to their separate stations to begin work.

“Who was *that?”*

“That's their skipper.”

“He's so little. I didn’t think they’d listen to him.”

“They respect him.”

“Is he like Mr. Amato?” Nick noticed his Uncle’s look of surprise.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when I could finally see him, through the fog, I was surprised at how small he was, and I thought he was just a little old man. But then I noticed the way he stood, and how beat up his hands were, and I thought he must be real tough, even if he's old.”

“Sal Amato is the toughest man I know. But he is also the kindest, and the wisest.”

Nick tightened his lips and thought for a moment.

“All the tough guys I know are big and they push me around.”

"That's the difference, Nick. They're just bullies. They have to act like that to make you *think* they're tough. Someone who is really tough doesn't have to prove himself. He doesn't need anybody to be afraid of him to know it."

"Sal doesn't talk loud, like that skipper, does he?"

"He doesn't have to."

"But he said that the other men make fun of him. They must not respect him."

"Is that what he told you?" Frank laughed. "Let me tell you something, Nick. Sal is the most respected man that I know, certainly the most respected on this wharf. Oh, there are a few young men who are new and probably don't know him yet. But they will, sooner or later, or they'll be broke and begging to their parents to lend them part of their retirement money."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Nick, it's like this. You know those saints your mother prays to at church, how certain ones will help you with certain things? Like, you wear a St. Christopher's medal. How come?"

"So he'll protect me wherever I go."

"Right. Now, you ever notice that it doesn't seem to work sometime?"

Nick nodded and recalled the force of the fists pounding his stomach.

"Well, Sal is like the patron saint of our little fleet here. But he's not like the statues of the saints in church. He's real."

The two finally walked to where the *Franky Boy* pitched gently in its slip and began to excavate each heavy black layer of net from the impossibly neat pile, to spread

the net like a fine filigree of lace. They worked in silence for a long time and the sun grew hotter, and Nick watched his uncle's forehead gleam with sweat, saw the beaded rivulets roll down his tanned face and fall onto the dock and disappear, soaked up by the thirsty wood.

"Uncle Frank?"

"Yeah, Nick?"

"I like Mr. Amato."

"I know."

"Do you think he likes me?"

"Nicky, Sal is a very serious man. If he didn't like you he would never have asked you to work with him."

"Is it okay if I go over and help him now?"

"Sure," Frank smiled.

Nick tossed the length of net aside and hurried down the wharf, making sure not to run.

Chapter 4

The wharf teemed with mid-morning activity as fisherman worked on their boats and tourists pointed and took photographs. A group of people had been feeding breadcrumbs to the gulls, and several hundred of the scavengers swarmed cloudlike in the air and on the warming wood of the dock, so many that it was difficult to pass freely without a flurry of screeching competition. Nick made his way to where Sal still sat, patiently working his fingers in an intricate combination of moves in and out of a torn section of net. As the boy drew nearer he thought that the whole scene on the wharf revolved around the old man, as if he were the center of that small universe, lending it form and function.

Nick approached Sal and slowed, prepared a gradual greeting in his mind, not wanting to startle the old man. But Sal, without changing his placid expression, without even looking up, set down his mending needle and lifted his eyes to meet Nick.

"How did you know I was here?"

"I could feel you there."

Nick looked quizzically at the old man, who, in turn, smiled and continued.

"Nick, I've been on this wharf longer than anyone else. I've seen young men, like you, start work on their fathers' boats, watched them grow, get married, own their own boats, prosper in some cases, go broke in others. And I've seen some of these same men die. I've gone to their funerals." He paused for a moment, and Nick saw the gray of the old man's eyes shift to glance at the blackish green of the harbor.

“I've known this place so well for so long that I feel immediately when someone is gone. I feel their void. And I can feel when a new one comes to fill it.”

Nick listened, amazed. Sal smiled.

“So, all I'm saying is that I'm so old that I know when someone is trying to sneak up on me. Welcome back.”

Nick smiled at the reassurance but felt inside that somehow the old man’s sense ran deeper than he had admitted.

“Come here, sit down. I'll show you how I fix one of these things.”

Nick took a seat next to Sal, closely watching the fisherman's scarred hands, which moved with amazing dexterity.

“Here, take the torn part in your hands like this. Now take the needle. Hold it like so…”

Nick paid close attention to every direction. It reminded him of his mother's crochet work, but the thought embarrassed him, recalling the ridicule of which Sal had spoken. Slowly, clumsily, he manipulated the large plastic 'needle,' which looked more like a small dagger, threading the new black cord into the broken pattern of the torn net. His repair at first felt clumsy, but when he watched Sal and tried to mimic his hand motions, Nick saw congruity appear in his own work, felt an odd familiarity, a strange ease, as if he had actually performed his new skill on some long forgotten net.

“I'm impressed. It's a little loose, but you'll learn to tighten the stitches as you practice.”

Nick felt a deep warming pride from the old man's compliment. He continued to work at the net but had to pause often to relieve the stiffness from his hands, and after a while his fingers cramped and he could no longer continue.

“What's the matter?”

"My hands are sore."

“That's enough for today, anyway. Let's go on board. I'll show you the engine and how to make sure it's ready to go.”

Sal pointed out the intricacies of the diesel motor that powered the little boat while Nick looked on. Sometimes he helped his father fix the family car, but that usually consisted of watching his legs sticking out from under the chassis and waiting until he demanded a wrench. But through Sal’s patience the motor, many times the size of an automobile engine, began to make sense to Nick, and he even performed some of the maintenance procedures himself.

“You're pretty handy with those tools, Nick. Do you do a lot of work like this with your father?”

“Sometimes. Mostly I just watch.”

“That's good.”

“It's pretty boring.”

“You can learn a lot from watching. I wish that, when I was a young man, I had spent more time watching my father and less time trying to get away from him. I thought I was the smartest guy in the world. What did an old man like him know? He's just a

fisherman, I thought. You keep watching and listening, Nick. There are too few people in this world who know how to listen."

Nick smiled and nodded, felt confused by the old man's words. No one had ever paid Nick such compliments about things he considered in himself routine, even insignificant. From inside his bedroom he could sometimes hear the echoes of arguments that the neighbor boys had with their parents, heard them yelling back as loudly, swearing at them as if speaking to friends. It terrified Nick to think of confronting his mother in such a way.

Nick worked for a long time on the areas of the engine as Sal had instructed; he tightened and oiled, cleaning as he went. Then he stood and wiped his greasy hands on a rag and stared hard at the machine.

"Looks like you're finished. Let's take a look." Sal leaned to inspect Nick's work, scowling and squinting in the poor light of the engine compartment. He freed the flashlight clamped to the inside of the door and shined it into the deep caverns of hoses and wires. He studied different points of the engine for a long time, then raised himself and looked at Nick, who in turn bowed his head and waited for criticism.

"Nick, how would you like to come down here regularly and help me out? I don't mean every day. I know you have school. But, maybe after, or on weekends, just a couple days a week."

"Did I do okay?"

“No. You did far better than okay. There's much you can learn, but you have a natural gift for working with your hands, but not forgetting to use your head. Think about it. Talk to your parents and see what they say.”

“They want me to get a paper route so I can learn how to handle money.”

“That's a good idea. You tell them I'll double whatever you can make on the paper route. A fool can throw a rolled up newspaper at a porch without breaking the window, Nick. You, my friend, are no fool.”

Nick's heart beat hard with the thought of actually getting paid to spend time on the wharf. “Okay, I'll talk to my parents.”

“You do that. Now, what do you say we take this thing out and hear how good the engine sounds after your work?”

“I can't,” he protested by reflex. ‘I mean, I'm not supposed to. My mom said no way.”

“We wouldn't be gone long. Only to the breakwater and back. We won't even leave the harbor.”

Nick stood silent.

“Would it make you feel better if we asked your uncle?”

“I guess so.”

“All right. Let's go find him.”

The two climbed over the bow railing and onto the dock, Nick jogging every few steps to keep up with Sal's unrelenting pace. The boy felt an unfamiliar combination of joy and fear coalescing inside. The thought of defying his mother had been only that, a

thought; though he had enjoyed the fantasy on many occasions, he had never challenged her, only scrutinized her orders from within. He felt a sickness in his stomach now, and the throbbing of his own pulse echoed so loudly in his head that he could not hear Sal's boots impact the wharf's thick wooden deck. Nick struggled to keep up with the old man who had not slowed his pace, and as the boy ran forward he looked back at the face, saw the resolute frown, the eyes that seemed even brighter now, the expression the old fisherman wore unlike any Nick had ever seen. Sal's face shone with a stern, unwavering power that beamed from the eyes. He saw no emotion in the expression, only pure certainty, and he knew then that the old man possessed a distinct, mysterious force at once fascinating as it was frightening.

They slowed as they approached the *Franky Boy* and Nick looked into Sal's face to see the resolution soften, the mouth and eyes relax from their previous intensity. Nick watched his uncle straighten from the pile of nets on the dock where his boat undulated gently in the cold, black water of the harbor.

"Hey, there's the two finest fishermen in the world!" Frank boomed as the two approached. "How can I help you gentlemen?"

Nick followed Sal to the butt of the stern, keeping a quiet, furtive distance from the old man as they approached.

"Franky, your nephew's a hell of a worker. He helped me out very much today, even got that old engine started. I'd like to take her out, just in the harbor, to hear the motor. I believe Nick would like to come aboard for this short voyage."

Nick felt a hard, warm hand rest on his shoulder, looked up to see the old man's face smiling at him with a rugged look of confidence. The boy then looked toward his uncle who stood, arms crossed, head tilted slightly to one side, looking very proud yet pensive. Nick knew from the expression that the answer would be 'No.' And he did not feel disappointment, but a strange relief—at times, the fear of asking a question far outweighed the remote possibility that his request would be considered, even granted.

"I don't know, Nicky," Frank began, scratching his head. "You know how your mother feels about this. My God, she'd kill me, really, if she caught you out on that boat."

"Frank, how is the boy going to learn to make up his own mind?"

"Sal, when Nick makes up his own mind or when he doesn't is not my business. I'm following his mother's—my sister's—directions."

Nick listened calmly to the debate and felt cast down from his previous status with the men, transformed again into a child.

"I know, Franky, I really do. It's just a shame. He'd learn so much. And he has a real love for it. It just seems that, from the way you talk about it, if his mother keeps sheltering him he'll never see the light of day."

Nick cast his gaze at the gray-green of the harbor as the men bowed their heads gloomily and pondered the situation. He felt, indeed, very sad that he could not ride on the boat, but also strangely satisfied that the decision would remain someone else's. He retreated toward the harbor view and watched the men until he saw his uncle's face brighten gradually with a decisive, determined look that made Nick feel uneasy.

“Sal, you're right. I might catch hell, but I don't care. Nick, you're getting to be a young man now, and it's time you made your own decisions.”

The boy stared blankly at his uncle, unsure of what Frank would say next or, even worse, how to react to it.

“Nick, it's in your hands. If you decide to follow your mother's directions, that's good. But if you decide that, for your own experience, to go out on the boat with Sal, I will not stop you.”

Nick looked gap-mouthed at his uncle, felt desolate and abandoned while Frank and Sal stood next to each other looking pleased. Nick glanced past the two men for a moment and into the water beyond the wharf, saw a boat, similar to his uncle’s, gliding through the calm harbor. A boy not much older than Nick stood at the bow—he wore waders and a heavy, red-plaid shirt, and arranged equipment on the deck. This boat is not going out for a spin, Nick thought; they were equipped for a week, maybe two, on the open sea. He felt a sudden intense jealousy and was blinded by a ray of sun glinting off the small crest of wake trailing the stern. He tried to focus again on his uncle and Sal but could not at first see them, made them out as tiny figures, so far in the distance that he could not discern their identity. He stared hard at the image until the imprint of glare faded from his eyes and the two in front of him grew nearer and came into focus.

“Well, I've got to get back to work,” Sal sighed, breaking Nick's trance. “You decide you want to go out, you come by, okay?”

Nick nodded and felt as if the morning fog still drifted about his mind. He watched Sal retreat down the wharf and blend in with the crowd until he disappeared.

Turning toward the *Franky Boy*, Nick looked in desperation to his uncle who, in turn, gave the boy a quizzical look, then smiled and said, “Hey, hand me that gaff hook, would you, Nicky?”

He handed Frank the medieval looking instrument, remembering the story his uncle enjoyed telling about Sal, when he was once far at sea and a huge shark became entangled in one of his nets. He could not free it, so he had to bring it on board. He could not shoot it for fear of the blood attracting other sharks, so he picked up the gaff hook and, using the blunt end, beat the shark until it lay motionless on the boat’s tiny stern. This ordeal left him so exhausted that he could not unload the nets. He tried to tow them fully cast, which worked until they became snagged and torn, his entire catch eventually lost. Disgusted with himself, he almost dumped the shark overboard, but felt that this would be a gross indignity to the animal. When the boat finally taxied into the harbor it looked so weighed down that it might sink. Fishermen on the dock pointed to the unbelievably large fish across the stern. Sal had had to move every other lose item of weight to the bow to keep the shark from forcing the stern under. When they winched it out of the boat to be measured and weighed, they discovered Sal's catch to be the largest Great White ever brought into harbor on the West Coast by any size boat or crew.

This story coursed through Nick’s mind, and as his uncle reached for the hook the boy became the killer, the executioner, slamming the heavy claw down on the soft side of the shark's head until it no longer thrashed in the deathweb of net, gills no longer pulsated and eyes grew cloudy and still.

Nick sat on the pile of nets and thought. He knew what Brian would say about the choice—something about honoring his mother and what Jesus would have done. He remembered the story about how Jesus had gone away from his parents without telling them and they'd grown frantic. And even though he was doing God's work, the young Christ apologized and never did it again. Nick did not believe this story. It did not make sense that the Son of God would stop his work because his parents were worried about him. But Nick never let anyone, especially Brian, know his secret view. He rarely thought it himself, believed that such thoughts he would disqualify himself from salvation. Some nights, before he fell asleep, Nick thought about the things that he and Brian talked about—what to say to Jesus upon his return, how to ask for and be assured of forgiveness. When they spoke of these things Nick always noticed the confidence, the calm that shone on Brian's face, as if he understood everything, had figured it all out to the last detail, and could not wait for the world to end.

Nick did not feel this conviction, and having to make a decision to disobey his mother, to make it with his own will, without the help of anyone else's influence, shook his confidence to the core. But he could not quell the overwhelming desire to feel the pitching deck beneath his feet; it so overpowered him that disobeying his mother seemed slight in comparison. After all, it did not hurt that bad anymore when she hit him, not like a few years ago when his arms had not yet grown enough to hide his tear-stained face from the back of her hand. In fact, he thought, it did not hurt nearly as bad, hardly at all, actually. And he realized then that it was not the pain that raised his fear, but the *thought* of the pain, the anticipation of it. When he imagined her eyes, black and wide with rage,

he nearly changed his mind, but fought through the image and sprang from the pile of nets and, against his better judgment, ran down the wharf in the direction of Sal's boat, holding his head high to the cool mid-morning breeze that tossed the boats at their moorings.

He arrived as Sal started the engine, which bellowed a dull roar from beneath the thin surface of the deck. He felt unable to pause for fear of losing momentum, the will that brought him here all on his own, and instead leapt onto the damp deck and landed hard on his feet next to a rope coiled meticulously beside the skiff, but the jolt did not startle the mystic old fisherman from his trance-like routine, and Nick watched him until he turned his weathered face and smiled.

"So, looks like you're ready to go out. I didn't think you'd make it."

"What should I do?"

"First thing, you put on this."

Nick watched Sal exhume from a wooden storage box an ancient carcass of only slightly faded orange canvas and canary-yellow straps. The sheer misplaced color overlaid on the dull weathered hues of the boat shone like a beacon.

"But—?"

"No buts. Just put it on. I might catch hell for taking you out but I'll be damned if I'm going to bring you back dead, or not at all."

"But we're just going to the breakwater."

"Believe me, Nick, it is very possible to fall overboard and drown inside the breakwater."

Nick donned the life jacket grudgingly, felt it stiff and cold through the wool of his shirt, tried to hide behind the skiff on the side of the boat that faced the harbor. He rushed to complete Sal's directions before anyone saw him, but heard laughter flourish from a crowd of older boys. Though he could not hear their jumbled conversations well, he made out the Sicilian word for pumpkin. He looked quickly at his own reflection in the glass of the wheel room door, saw his round, soft body encased by the bright orange wrapping, and wanted to fling himself into the oily harbor.

"Okay, we better hurry up if we want to get you back before long."

Nick soon forgot the boys' derision as the boat, dwarfed by its counterparts bobbing up and down, chugged slowly away from the dock toward the middle of the channel. He ran to the stern and leaned over the pile of nets to see the local boats and all the people on the wharf recede until they blurred into the landscape, and realized for the first time how small the fishing fleet really was. He gazed at the harbor, transfixed on an enormous oil tanker docked near the shipyard.

"It's so big out here," Nick called over the roaring wind.

"You think so? You should see how quickly it all disappears when you pass through that door."

He followed Sal's hand to where he pointed, the gap between the lighthouse and the opposite wall of the breakwater which enclosed the harbor, protecting it from the crushing power of the Pacific, and felt immediately tantalized by the lure of the large, rough swells, the gray-green immensity. He felt, also, immediate dissatisfaction with his little harbor boat ride, and wanted badly to see his world disappear as the infinite,

uncontrollable freedom of the ocean grew closer and closer until it engulfed him completely.

But the boat did not continue through that door, instead turned gradually to starboard and came about 180 degrees to begin the short trip back to the wharf. The course change startled Nick, ruptured his fantasy and thrust him back into the reality of the harbor and Sal, of his uncle, his mother. He remained silent on the way back and did not look at the world closing in on him, instead kept his gaze trained on the fading whitecaps beyond the breakwater wall.

As the boat coasted nearer to the wharf Nick rose to prepare for docking. He looked up and saw two figures, could not make out their features yet, only that one was a woman waving her arms in the air, as if outraged. He actually did not take much notice of her, still overwhelmed by the short trip, but the smallest realization then seeped into his consciousness and immediately paralyzed him.

The two taxied the tiny boat to its resting place next to the big tuna purse-seiners. Nick felt certain that Sal saw the argument in full force on the dock but chose not to react to it. Nick did the same, busying himself with docking duties. He listened to the argument continue until the two participants noticed that the boat carrying the young fugitive and old miscreant had arrived. Looking toward Sal, Nick righted himself slowly and, with the old man close behind, climbed stiffly over the boat's railing and trudged forward.

He felt a heavy hand press against his shoulder and slowed as Sal stepped slightly in front in an attempt, Nick thought, to take the first blow. The next few minutes

happened in too much of a blur for Nick to completely comprehend. He only understood half of the Sicilian that riddled his ears. He saw his mother swing hard and fast at Sal, who dodged and took the blow on his right shoulder. She looked furiously confused, Nick thought, as if she intended to kill all three in front her but did not know with whom to start. Frank tried to calm her by placing a hand lightly on her upper arm, which only caused her to explode and nearly sent him flying off the dock. Nick watched her until she looked at him, surprised, as if she had not realized he stood there all along. He then saw a flail of hand motions and tried to listen as the unfamiliar sounds pelted his ears. He began to say something like, 'I don't understand,' but only had time to think the words before he felt the hot, deafening impact hit his head from the left side, then from the right, and suddenly could not remember what it was he had wanted to say.

Chapter 5

Nick sat in the den, trying to watch television, happy that the sun's glare cast through the sliding glass doors and onto the screen had finally retreated for the night and longer battled his sight and rendered the image indiscernible. He hated the sunlight; it taunted him to come outdoors, dared him to run and jump and do the things boys were supposed to do; lured him into swimming trunks that exposed his pale flesh. Once he ripped the seat of a pair of shorts his mother had insisted he wear to school, bending over to pick up his carton of milk that had tumbled off an overloaded cafeteria tray. When he visualized it, over and over, like one might the most frightening scene from a horror film, he still felt his face burning red at the shrieks of laughter, the hard, shocking cold of a paper cup of applesauce flung against the side of his head. He scraped the pureed apple and tears from his eyes and maneuvered his bulk between the cafeteria wall and his screeching classmates until he reached the exit.

He did not hate people. He did not hate his classmates who laughed at him, ran up and punched him in the stomach until he could not breath, sneaked behind him and screamed insults into his ears so that afterward he could barely hear. He only felt the intense loneliness of not belonging to the world, so when thrust into it in broad daylight, fear trumped any chance at interaction, and he remained lost in a strange country, ignorant of language and custom, so inept that his very presence offended. He prayed

hard at night, screaming silently at his bedroom ceiling, pounding his clutched hands on the mattress to punctuate the soundless pleas, that he would wake up the next morning and know what to do, how to act, what to say, that he would wake from the nightmare, step out of the monster suit, let its awfulness fall away and his lithe body would spring from the pile. Sometimes he even convinced himself that he *had* prayed hard enough, had, as Brian said, enough faith. And when he walked to the hall mirror, actually expected to see a different form, one he did not know, one he did not hate.

Now darkness replaced the gray of dusk and the television beamed the only light in Nick's world. He preferred to watch TV at night, with no lights, the curtains drawn tightly to prevent any leakage from encroaching streetlights, the den door shut to the sounds of the house, no clanking pots, no telephone's ring. It was then that he performed the highest level of his art, no longer simply *watching television*, but joining the characters, inhabiting their homes, playing on their lawns. He spoke to them. When the commercials interrupted he buried his head in pillows to block their sound, lest the intrusion supplant his perfect scenario—a different place, a different time, a different world. At his very finest he sat just a few feet away from the large color screen, at the perfect distance so that he saw nothing peripherally, but not so close that only the tiny colored dots that constructed his world remained. His father usually chased him to the couch with a cross word or two. His mother could spoil the entire experience, compel him to turn on the lights, open the door, lower the volume. But she usually did not beat him for watching television.

Tonight, when the darkness finally swallowed every last drop of light in the room, he began to slowly, quietly maneuver from the distant couch to the leather ottoman, keeping his head perfectly still and level, eyes attached to the screen. But just as he settled in, heard the rush and hiss of air escaping from the padded seat, smelling the soft, worn leather, the warmth he associated with the machine, he heard the familiar rumble of footsteps approaching the room. He breathed deeply, hesitated one pained moment, then rose and thrust his body toward the couch, landing skillfully in a prefabricated position of comfort, right ankle resting on left knee, arms spread wide over pillows.

The footsteps stopped at the room's threshold, though, and he knew that there would be no violence for now.

"Hey, buddy. What you watching?"

"Hi, Dad. Not much."

It was true. He had lost his focus and really did not remember the show.

"I think there might be a ballgame on tonight."

His father spoke with child-like enthusiasm. Taking the hint, Nick picked up the remote and flipped through the channels until he came to it. He liked watching baseball with his father, but never watched sports alone. He could never stretch his mind far enough to allow his body to participate.

"Kansas City's really got a team this year." Tony sat on the couch, mirroring the boy's posture. He wore a red plaid bathrobe and leather, fleece-lined slippers. His legs, bare below the knees, were the pale olive of a man who tans almost black, but never feel

the sun's rays. “That George Brett, he's knocking the *cover* off the ball.” He shook his head in awe.

Nick loved when his father spoke of sports because he did it with so much enthusiasm, so much real joy and wonder. He could go on for hours, draw memories of his own high school triumphs as if the play had just finished, the final strike called. But Nick also knew that his dad used the comfortable subject as a form of introduction, a transition to a difficult topic, and braced for what would come next.

“Your mom, she's real upset, son.”

Nick looked at his knees.

“I know it's hard for you, at your age, wanting to be on your own more. She has a tough time with it, though.”

“I didn't mean to make her mad.”

“I know you didn't. And if it was up to me, I'd let you go out fishing. But it's not just me. We're a team, me and your mom.”

Nick frowned and nodded. The two sat for a while, watched seven Royals' batters hit before the third out. Brett tripled.

“You know, Nick, it might be easier if you played out front. You know, threw catch with another boy from the neighborhood, so your mom could see you doing something like that on your own and get used to it. Then maybe a little later, go down and help out your uncle. So there's… You know, like it's from one stage to the next.”

Nick nodded and tried to look convinced, watched his father press his lips together and smile a tight smile, then look to the game. The Royals led the Angels ten to two in the bottom of the eighth.

“Well, looks like this one's over. I'm going to hit it. See you in the morning, buddy.”

“Good night, Dad.”

He watched his father fade down the hall, then turned back toward the TV and glanced at the clock on the VCR—it blinked a flashing "12:00.” His father, in a sincere yet futile attempt to spring the family into the age of technology, had purchased the machine from a cousin of Mary's, thinking that he would record the games he always missed from his late office nights and begin the most complete library of old sporting events ever known. And he followed through on the attempt, trying to record the Super Bowl two years ago. Nick had helped him until they both realized that it was not they who could not make the thing record, but the thing that never did record in the first place, probably even when it sat in the living room of Mary's cousin, when he boasted of its features.

Nick realized that almost everything in their home relative to current history—those items a time traveler would seek out to identify the century in which he’d landed—his parents had purchased not from a department store, nor a specialty store, nor even a mail order catalogue, but from a relative or close friend of the family. The TV also came from the same cousin, washer and dryer from Mary's brother and sister-in-law, ancient stereo from a friend/client of Tony's, microwave from an aunt, even the car had been

purchased through a dealer who was an in-law of a good friend. Nick remembered how many of his parents' arguments concerned nothing more than a "new" appliance which did not even come close to operating as rumored. When his father finally angered enough to say, "Then I'll take the thing back and throw it at the son-of-a-bitch!" his mother always countered, alluding to the utter impossibility of calling a friend or relative a cheat or a liar. So the thing, in whatever condition, stayed where originally laid to rest. If it proved *really* useless, Mary decorated it with a doily and plastic flowers in a vase like a well-intentioned stranger would a neglected grave.

Nick raised the remote and flipped through channels until he found a familiar show and would thus know what time it was, another reason he did not watch sports—the uneven duration of the games made it very difficult to know the time. Finally he found a familiar sit-com winding down its trite resolution. *Almost 9:00*, he thought, then closed his eyes and pressed the OFF button. He sat for what seemed like a long time, his head against the couch, then opened his eyes and watched the dark outlines of the familiar objects in the room. If he stared long and hard enough, not blinking at all, he would see them move, first a little, slowly, then faster and more animated. He knew if he blinked the furniture and clutter of the room would relax into place, but thought still that perhaps all the dead objects in the world really did move, did dance and wave about, and that he was special, the only one who could see the spectacle.

He lifted his bulk from the couch and moved toward the hallway and his bedroom, leaving the happy objects still swaying in the dark.

Nick lay on his back in bed the next morning, arms tucked beneath the large feather pillow, until he heard the familiar rush of the water filling the coffeepot. He had hoped to synchronize his arrival at the kitchen table with his father's, and hurried from bed and toward the bathroom to rush through a shower. Toweling off, however, he heard the squeak of footsteps over the living room's loose floorboards, then the front door creak open and slam shut, and knew he would face his mother alone.

He could see her from the hallway as she sat smoking, a cup of coffee steaming in front of her atop the brightly colored oilcloth that covered the kitchen table. She tilted her head just enough so that she could look through the bottom half of her bifocals, her painted eyebrows and plaintive mouth bent seriously toward the paperback novel she read. He saw that she was well over half way through with it. He would watch her devour the supermarket paperbacks at night mainly, munching on hard candies while they sat on opposite couches in the wood-paneled den, the drone of Nick's TV show not impeding her constant, fast progress through each book. Once while they sat in their respective stations, Nick started as his mother hissed, slammed the book shut and hurled it deftly through the narrowly parted screen which shielded the crackling flames of the fireplace. Surprise at her action made him forget his usual caution and he asked her what was wrong. She half-answered, speaking more to the black, curling pages as the flames licked them, saying that she could not believe how they would let anyone write such things about the Lord, such obscenity, such blasphemy. Nick felt the delicious fear and excitement of reading such a book, wished his mother would go to bed so that he could fish through the ashes for a remnant, a line, a word.

He watched her now at the kitchen table, saw her draw deeply on the cigarette, her cheeks and throat sink in at once, and she held the smoke in and then let it siphon through her nose in the next three succeeding breaths. He thought she looked peaceful in a serious, preoccupied way, at ease but not quite serene. She appeared far less dangerous than the day before, even less so than on any given afternoon, sitting at the table in a white tee shirt and light gray sweat pants, with her book and coffee and cigarette, unaware of anyone but the characters on the page. Nick realized for the first time that she was not the giant of his younger years, was just barely taller than he was and could not possibly weigh as much. He wondered how her anger made her grow, the rage transforming her into a giant. Watching her as she sat, contemplating the plight of her paperback world, made him think that she could never hit him again.

He trudged forward finally, his bare feet stinging against the cold linoleum.

"Well, good morning." Mary spoke without changing her reading expression.

"Good morning, Mom."

"I thought you disappeared."

He half-smiled and looked at the floor.

"Sit down." She rose to get a pot of warm oatmeal on the stove, scooped out three big spoonfuls, poured cream on top and sprinkled granulated sugar. "*Mangiare*," she told him.

He dug the spoon deeply into the bowl, making sure to capture as much sugar as possible. Between bites he looked at his mother's face.

"You should be hungry. You hardly touched your dinner last night."

He nodded.

“Especially after your fishing trip.”

His body stiffened.

“Nicky, you know I didn't mind you helping your uncle, so why did you have to ruin it and go on the boat with that crazy old man?” She did not sound angry now, but sincerely perplexed.

“You can't even swim. Did that old man *make* you go out with him?”

Nick thought of the burning eyes and the unrelenting stride. “No. We just went out to the breakwater. And I wore a life jacket.”

“Nicky. You're growing up. I know that. And some day you'll be big enough that you won't have to listen to your stupid old mother.” She stopped, looked at her cup of coffee. “Son, I'm forty years old. You don't get to be forty years old without knowing something. Listen to what I tell you…”

More words escaped her mouth but flew past Nick's head and fluttered into the house, their sound fading as if there were no sound to begin. He did not remember ever hearing an adult speak of their age; when he was younger they all looked about the same. Even the boys and girls from high school who had taunted him as they walked by his school yard every day at lunch had seemed old to him. He remembered leaning against the hard chain link of the school yard fence, feeling the wound steel pressing into his cheek and watching the older kids striding confidently by, laughing only a few feet from him—oblivious to the little fat boy—all the while thinking that he could never be that

old. But now he was ten, almost eleven, two years away from the middle school, older than he ever thought he would be. And his mother was forty.

He fixed his stare on the lines prominent over his mother's face, watched as she drew deeply on the cigarette, noticed that her expression grew taught with each inhalation of smoke, her mouth and forehead creased with strain. Nick took another bite from the now cold bowl but never removed his gaze from his mother's face.

"Are you listening to me, young man?"

"Yes, Mom."

The patch of skin between her eyes furrowed and her mouth drew down, then she sighed and picked up the pastel-covered book on the table.

The last cold sugary lump ground up in his mouth, Nick could think of nothing to say until the horror of the school Christmas pageant crept into his mind. The thought of standing in a hot auditorium stuffed with parents, teachers, and little brothers and sisters for hours literally made him sick. Last year, just before the chorus broke into a hearty O Come All Ye Faithful, he vomited onto the back of the girl standing on the riser in front of him. But he could no longer keep it out of his head, and his parents had to know sooner or later.

"Next Friday is the Christmas Pageant at school."

"It is? We have to tell Uncle Franky and Aunt Teresa so they can come, too. I hope they have time. Nicky, how come you never say anything about these things until it's almost too late?"

Nick looked at the empty bowl.

“So, you're in the choir again? I'll make sure you don't eat too much for dinner like last year.”

“I'm not in the choir. I'm a wise man in the play.”

“Oh, an actor now. Well, what do you get to say?”

“I don't say anything.”

“What do you mean you don't say anything?”

“I don't have any lines.”

“What do you do then?”

“I walk past the audience with the other two wise men and we go up to the stage and put presents in front of baby Jesus.”

“And then what do you do?”

“We stand there and watch baby Jesus until the end of the play.”

“Did they make you take it because of last year?”

“No, I wanted it. I don't want to say anything.” Nick’s voice strained with fear.

“What do you mean you don't want to say anything?”

Nick shrugged.

“Answer me when I talk to you.”

“I just wanted that part,” he lied. “I just wanted to be a king.”

He watched as Mary shook her head and rose from the table, taking her empty coffee cup and his abandoned bowl and setting them roughly on the kitchen counter.

“Next year you let me know when this play is going on. We'll see what part you want to play.”

Nick felt relieved, the truth of the pageant disclosed, and a whole year to make sure his mother forgot about it again.

"What does your father want you to do today? Do you have to clean the back yard?"

"He didn't say."

"Then you come with me to *Nana's*. Aunt Teresa will probably be home, too. Go get dressed."

To Nick, the short car trip to his grandmother's house was like riding in a time machine. He watched as, block after block, the style of structures transformed from the slick, pastel mini-malls and remarkably similar track homes to small, clapboard houses with large porches, old wooden store fronts and buildings of chipped red brick. This once solidly middle-class section of town now sagged in disrepair and semi-poverty. Mary only drove there because her mother still lived in one of the oldest, and one of the best-kept houses in the area, the same house she'd lived in for sixty-seven years.

"I remember when the trolley car ran up and down this street. You could hear the bell from a mile away." Mary steered the sedan around the corner onto her mother's street, and Nick watched the tracks still resting on the pavement, forgotten for thirty years. He closed his eyes and saw the trolley in front of them, stuffed with riders, the token taker fending off some kids trying to hitch a free ride.

"We'd ride it all the way to downtown and spend the whole day there. My God, I wouldn't go near that place now."

Nick loved when his mother reminisced about the "good old days," as she called them. He felt it the only time she simply talked to him free of mother-son qualifications. Sometimes, when her thoughts lulled, he asked her a question which would take her back to the trolley car days, and he would close his eyes and see her, a young laughing girl in denim rolled up at the cuffs and a tee shirt, taunting the boys on the block to climb the highest limb on the tree like she did, or jump from the roof of the house onto the pile of straw.

"When I was little, your Aunt Teresa's house wasn't there. It was just a lot," she said when they pulled in front of his grandmother's house. Nick had heard this story many times before but was not about to stop her from telling it again.

"Just *Nana's* red brick house and the little bungalow in back where Mike lived. You didn't know your uncle Mike. He died in the war. The rest was just one big lot. We called it our farm." She laughed.

"Some farm. A cow, some chickens, and a half-lame horse named Charley. We had a beautiful garden, though, right where Aunt Teresa and Uncle Franky's house is now. Sometimes we'd try to hide from Ma in the corn. I'd try to sneak your uncle out with me, because he was so little. She wouldn't let him do anything. When we got away we had a great time, but when she'd find us, oh boy, we'd *both* catch hell. Especially me, though, because I was the instigator."

She laughed, then paused, staring forward at the house, and Nick stared with her and could almost see the rows of red and green peppers, the fiery tomatoes, the tall

golden stalks of corn. Charley the horse nibbled through a husk to the ripe yellow kernels.

"Well, we better get in there or we'll never get out." Mary exhaled tiredly. Nick followed his mother up the concrete walk and through the doorway where she knocked and called, "Mom, it's Mary!"

"In the kitchen," came softly from the back of the small, dark house, and they walked toward the muffled words. Nick's grandmother sat at the kitchen table, two plates in front of her—one piled high with a mixture of ground meat and herbs, the other with several dozen golf-ball sized meatballs. The tiny old woman sat looking up at Nick and his mother and continued to roll the little bits of meat in her hands, slowly, carefully.

"What are you doing, Mom?"

"*I'm making meatballs*," the old woman answered in Sicilian and stared perplexed at her daughter. Nick, happy to understand the words, and seeing his grandmother's humor, smiled quietly to himself.

"I can *see* what your doing." Mary answered in English, her voice rising in pitch with her growing anxiety, and Nick knew that this visit would not be a pleasant one.

"Why don't you rest, Mom? You're the one who's always saying you're tired. 'I'm tired, I don't feel good.'"

"I feel good now. So I make meatballs."

Nick watched as Mary stared skeptically at her mother, still slowly rolling the little pasty spheres of meat.

"Well, you just better not let me catch you in that damn garden again. I told you we can hire someone to do that for you."

"I don't want no one in my garden. I take care myself."

"Yeah, with your pacemaker and your cataracts. I'm telling you, I don't want to go out there and find you lying on the ground again."

Nick remembered last year when he and his mother searched the entire house but couldn't find the tiny old woman, though the television droned and the kitchen smelled of cooking. Then he looked through the bedroom window that faced the little garden in back where she lay face down in a freshly weeded furrow of dirt.

"You would have died if I hadn't have found you, Mom, don't you know that?"

"*Yes, Maria, I know that. But I also know that God will take me whenever He wants to take me, and whatever that time is it doesn't make any difference what I'm doing, whether I'm sitting here rolling meatballs, or pulling weeds. We're all going to die, and I'm not going to stop just because of it.*"

Nick continued to listen but could only understand about every other word. His mother then switched from English to agitated Sicilian, and he knew that the conversation had not improved.

"*Why don't you go to the senior citizen center? You know I'll pick you up and take you there. You can talk to people your own age instead of sitting here alone. There's a lot of Italian people who go, too.*"

"*I don't want to go to the goddamn old people's club and sit and listen to them complain.*"

"*Oh, so you think I want to come down here and listen to you complain to me?*"

"*Nobody asks you to come here.*"

"And if I don't, who the hell's going to buy your groceries?"

"Franky will. And he doesn't tell me what to do."

"Franky comes to see you once a month, for Christ's sake. He tells you whatever you want to hear. He doesn't do a goddamn thing for you. Did Franky find you laying in the dirt? Did he call an ambulance and then hold you to try to keep you warm?"

She stopped, faltering a bit but successfully repressing the tears stinging her eyes. Nick watched in fascination as his grandmother stared at her daughter, then back down at the plate of meatballs. He turned to watch the emotion welling in his mother's face, twisting it until it was not a face at all but a sorrowful mask, its shape drawn down as if gravity exerted more force on it than on the rest of the universe. Then the mask transformed instantly into a façade of rage, and Nick unconsciously took two steps backwards until the kitchen counter halted his retreat, and he rested against the cold tile. He jumped when his mother turned suddenly and walked with hard steps out the front door, letting the screen slam into place. He looked from the kitchen through the living room and out the large bay window at the street and saw his mother walk quickly past toward his Aunt Teresa's house. Back at the table, his grandmother rolled meatballs.

"*Come here*, Nicky. I show you how to make the meatballs."

Nick obeyed without a thought and immediately sat in the chair opposite his grandmother. She spoke to him in a singsong blend of English and her native dialect, some of which he understood exactly, some not at all. Most of her directions she

mimicked with hand motions, and Nick understood enough to start on his own plate. Then the phone rang.

He watched the tiny old woman meticulously finish rolling the little globe of meat and place it on the plate with the others, then rise slowly, deliberately grasping the table in front of her and begin the long shuffle into the living room toward the telephone. She picked up the receiver on the eighth ring.

The conversation was brief, and Nick heard the receiver click against the base and his grandmother began the long trip back to the kitchen table.

"Your mamma, she wants you go." She motioned with her hand toward the direction of Aunt Teresa's house. "Here. You take these with you. Your mamma put them in sauce."

"Thank you, Nana."

"Okay. See you later, *figlio belle*."

He leaned forward and planted a light kiss on her cheek, felt the unbelievably soft skin, as if it would bruise with the lightest pressure. The stale smell of an ancient liniment and a trace of garlic pricked his nose, as it always did when he leaned close to the old woman. He picked up the plate of meatballs and headed toward the living room and out the front door.

The hearty frying garlic and bell pepper smells of Aunt Teresa's kitchen embraced his senses even as he stepped from the sidewalk onto the front lawn, and Nick inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. Every year, though school was out and the department stores

gleamed with crimson and emerald garlands in early November, Christmas time never arrived for him until he could smell the season, the subtle cold air laced with the warm smoky scent from a distant chimney, the spicy tomato sauce, tart red wine, and sweet baked warmth of *pannatone* in the oven. He remembered listening to his relatives reminisce, aunts and uncles, non-Italians, who had married into the family, remarking about their first holiday dinner with the Lucera's, about how overwhelmed they were at the fifty immediate relatives, and how odd they thought it was to see a huge bowl of spaghetti in the middle of the table next to the turkey.

It's finally here, he thought, and smiled as he stepped from the front porch into his aunt's cluttered, steamy kitchen.

"Hi, Auntie."

"Hi, honey. What you got on the plate?"

"More of those meatballs Mom's going to kill herself with." Mary spoke more to herself than to her sister-in-law, though loud enough so that she heard.

"Oh, Mary. She likes to sit there and make plates of them. It's all she has to do. Sometimes she makes so many I have to take plates full over here and make sauce just to use them up." Teresa laughed.

"All she has to do? That's all she *will* do. That and weed in that goddamn garden."

"But Mary, she *loves* it. And it's not hurting her."

"It's hurting *me*. Every damn time I come down here all she does is fight with me. I'm just going to stop coming, you watch. Let her sit in there and starve. Then let her scream for Franky to come save her."

"Mary, listen… She's like a little kid now. Why do you take her so seriously? She doesn't even know what she's saying half the time?"

"You don't think she knows what she's saying? Oh, boy, have you got a lot to learn."

"Oh, come on. What's wrong with her just doing what she wants to do? Maybe when we're her age we won't want to sit around with a bunch of other old people and—"

"*Teresa, that old bitch will outlive all of us. She'll piss on my grave*." She spoke in a harsh-toned Sicilian that Nick did not understand. "*You just wait until I'm gone, then you'll be the one. Not Franky, not Tony. They'll do just what they do now. Come down once a month and pump her full of bullshit and then leave you to clean her and straighten her house and do her shopping, and then listen to her tell you that you don't know what the hell you're doing, and who the hell taught you how to cook and clean. And if you save her life, which you will, she won't even say thank-you*."

She waited for a moment, looked out the window at the cold gray street, then turned her sad, penitent face to her sister-in-law. "I know you don't understand now, I don't blame you. I'm sorry if I sound like I do. But you'll see."

They all stood in silence until Teresa looked at Nick and motioned him over.

“Come here, honey, let me put those in the sauce.” She took the plate full of little meaty orbs and pushed them into the simmering pot. Then she turned toward Nick and held him at arms length, looking warmly down into this eyes.

“So, tell me, how's my little prince doing? How's school? Is it interesting?”

“Well, not really. But I'm going to middle school year after next and it should be better there.”

Nick surprised himself with this maneuvering, appearing exited about the next school year, when actually the mere sight of the middle school buildings turned his stomach.

“My God, you’re growing up so soon. Look, you're almost as tall as I am.” She turned to stand next to him, arm around his shoulders like an old friend.

“Nicky,” his mother interjected, “don't forget to tell Aunt Teresa about next Friday.”

“It's the school Christmas play.” Nick tried to disguise a sigh.

“It is? Well I'll be there. You don't sound too excited about it, though.”

“He better be excited about it come next Friday. I don't want to go through what I did last year,” Mary said.

“Oh, Mary, it's natural to be nervous about these things. Remember when we used to do the school plays? We'd get so nervous we couldn't stop laughing even on stage!”

“Well, we had fun. We weren't scared to death of nothing.” She glanced at Nick, then looked away. Nick pretended not to have noticed.

“So, what are you going to be in the play?”

“I'm one of the three kings.”

“That sounds important.”

“It's so important they didn't give him any lines.” Mary shot a glance at her son. He looked at the floor, then up at his mother.

“I didn't want to be a king. I just got picked for it. The only ones who have lines are Mary and Joseph.”

“I thought you wanted to be a king.”

“I didn't want to be in the stupid play at all.” He immediately regretted his elevated tone as the back of his mother's hand landed squarely on the side of his face, and he felt the stinging pressure of each of her fingers drive into his cheek.

“Mary…” Teresa began, then fell silent.

“What the hell is the matter with you!” The words slammed into his ears. "You never want to do anything. You never play with other children. You never have friends over. You don't have any hobbies. And then when something comes up in school that you can be in, you hide it so no one knows about it.”

Nick watched his mother throw more words at him, then stop, looking perplexed. She turned and lit a cigarette and just stared out the window where the streetcar used to stop.

“Nicky,” Aunt Teresa said, “why don't you go out back and do something for me. Go put more seed in the bird feeder. You know where it is?”

“Okay.”

He walked outside past the house and into the back yard, hearing the trailings of his mother's agitated staccato and aunt's supplicating lilt she used when speaking on his behalf. Normally he would hide next to the nearest open window and listen to what they said about him. This time, though, he walked straight to where the birdseed was kept on a low shelf in the dark garage.

Stretching as far as he could on the stepladder, he balanced the heavy bag as the stream of seed filled the empty feeder. Suddenly the voices inside the house leapt out at twice the volume. As he tried to listen, he took his eyes off the seed and lost his balance, dropping the bag and falling hard onto the concrete that bordered the backyard grass. He stood staring at the seed spilled all over the lawn until his mother took hold of his arm and led him to the car.

Chapter 6

The school holiday pageant came and went without a hitch—no flubbed lines, no projectile vomiting. The Luceras watched as their son marched in line with the other two wise men, his royal attire comprised of a large burgundy beach towel draped over his shoulders and clasped at his neck with a gaudy clip-on earring. The other mothers had sewn long into the night to finish their sons' ornate costumes of colorful velvets and shining sheer material, though, to the boys, the costumes made no difference. Only their mothers looked on in pride at how well their children shone next to the little fat boy with the towel, and Mary Lucera heard every comment, felt every stare.

"Next time you remind me so I have time to make a costume ahead of time," she said to her husband.

"All right. I'll remind you."

"You think it's not important."

"Look, they're having fun. It doesn't matter to them."

"It matters to *me*."

She stared hard at the stage.

"It's just good to see him having fun with other kids."

She waited thoughtfully, then said, "Yes, it is. But he's almost eleven years old, Tony. My God, seems like yesterday was his first birthday."

"I know, Mary. It's just that the older he gets, the more we have to let go. Little by little."

"I know. But since I have to let him go I can do some things that we'll remember. You say it's not important to them, like having a costume, but it's not *for* them, it's for us. When we're sitting in front of the TV in ten years wondering what he's doing and why he doesn't come to see us more often. It's for us, our memories. I'm trying to build our memories, Tony."

A loud *shhhhhhh!* erupted a few rows back, and Mary turned her head and shot a dagger-like stare at a fat woman in a huge flowered dress.

"It's okay. Look." Tony nudged closer to his wife as he pointed to the stage. Then they watched without blinking as the third wise man walked regally forward, in perfect time with the music, bent an impassive bow toward Mary and Joseph, his expression totally immersed in the character of the king, finally struck a deft turn and knelt to place a shining priceless gift in front of the small, scrap-wood crib. As Mary Lucera watched her son rise and take his place among the other children she thought that he had never before looked so graceful, so confident, and realized that all the shiny material that the other two children wore did not excuse their awkwardness. She watched as the royal procession turned to leave the stage, the other kings yielding as Nick led them away.

Tony felt a small splash on his hand as it rested on Mary's leg and turned to see tears streaming smoothly down her face. He squeezed her shoulder with his arm as the lights brightened and the room burst into applause.

It felt stale and lonely for Nick to be home most of the time, but Christmas–the last two weeks in December—held magic for him. The scene of his house transformed into room after room of displays: nativity scenes, cotton-covered tables with angels and sleighs, snowmen and Santas, tiny figurines of children bundled in sweaters and caps, sledding and skating. The images offered more comfort to him than the television since they were literally a part of his world.

Christmas in his house began like clockwork. The first Saturday morning of vacation his mother would peak into his room at about 6:00 a.m. and say, “Nicky, want to help me find all the Christmas displays?” It was a ritual they played out every year, for he would wake sometimes hours earlier in anticipation and spring from bed as soon as Mary asked the question. After the requisite shower and breakfast, the two would walk from the kitchen through the length of the house and out into the garage where, on top of a wooden mezzanine Tony had built years before, mixed in with dozens of boxes of various stored items, lay Nick's treasured Christmas displays. He and his mother would climb up the ladder to the large platform stuffed to the ceiling and begin to climb over the boxes, hunting in the dim light until they found boxes marked "Xmas,” and whoever made the discovery would announce their joyful find to the other, then carry each one carefully down the ladder and stack them neatly on the cool garage floor.

And when they captured the last box they carried them in and opened them one by one and began to organize each collection by the room in which it belonged. Mary followed her own strict guidelines as to what went where, though some of the boxes were

labeled 'Nick's Display,' and he could arrange them any way he liked. His favorite one consisted of a large piece of white Styrofoam and dozens of miniature figures—children, snowmen, reindeer, pine trees—all of which were affixed with a sharp point at the bottom, perfect for sticking into the base. He actually remembered exactly how he'd organized the group from the previous year and purposely varied the arrangement each time.

"You be careful with that angel," Mary cautioned, watching as Nick gently picked up the foot-high figurine, clad in white satin. "Your dad gave that to me our first Christmas together."

He nodded and widened his eyes as he did every year after his mother issued the warning, then placed the statuette in its station on the small rosewood end table on top a billowy cloud of cotton laced with a filigree of gold.

Mary adhered to a strict process when decorating the house for Christmas, and she defined Nick's role in the project with precision. He knew this, but always managed to transcend the constraints with more success each year. He remembered years earlier when he was only allowed his display. Gradually, season by season, he graduated to spreading out the "snow," then to organizing the bright metallic balls of red and green, blue and gold, finally allowed to take them from their boxes and affix the extra hooks onto those whose own had disappeared during the eleven month hiatus. The last two years had seen his status elevated to Handler of the Angel.

All morning the two worked in near silence except for the Christmas croons of Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin filling the room from the record player. By early

afternoon a blizzard of cotton had fallen on every table in the house, entire cities of wise men and shepherds, complete with animals, surrounded Mary, Joseph and their newborn. For the big nativity scene, which took up an entire corner in the den next to the fireplace (they had to move the TV and VCR that didn't work), Mary placed real straw.

This scene deserved the coveted spot. It was impressive and immense, standing several feet high and spanning an uneven circumference wider than its height, and offered far more than the usual manger routine. The *papier maché* body displayed a large village of poor rock dwellings with plank roofs. A dirt road ran through the middle of the town and led gradually upward. Caves dotted the hillside, each sheltering some wanderer unfortunate to find no housing in town. A tiny light bulb emanated from a particular cave and cast a yellow luminescence on the hillside. Awed figures gazed toward the light, some already emerging from their own hovels and beginning the climb toward the source where the child savior lay in dirty blankets while a haggard carpenter and his pale, weak wife looked on with the traditional pious gazes.

This unusual display had actually been crafted in Mary's mother's own village in Sicily. Mary saw truth in the portrayal of the three holy figures; she had negated from her confessional for years her belief in the “wise men” who showed up to usher in the new little Lord. This small family stuffed into a hole on a hillside with only the other wretched onlookers as witnesses seemed a much more likely version. (Nick had never ventured so far as to ask his mother why the scene differed so drastically from the other few around the house, but he silently admired the departure.)

The two finished decorating by early afternoon, time enough for Mary to marinate steaks and start a pot of tomato sauce. She reserved one Christmas task for her patient husband, that which Nick yielded gladly. Upon his arrival from work, Tony would change into baggy pants, a sweat shirt and slippers, pour himself a Scotch and soda, and sit down on the floor with a large cardboard box between his legs and begin the annual Untangling of the Tree Lights. After he'd aligned half the contents of the box in neat rows on the living room floor, Mary announced the much needed dinner break.

"How's it going with the lights, Dad?" Nick spoke through a mouthful of steak and spaghetti.

"Okay so far. They're not too tangled this year, but there's a lot missing. I'm going to have to get a box of extra bulbs and replace them all or the whole thing won't light up."

"Can we go get the lights after dinner?"

"Sure, if it's okay with your mom."

Nick looked at his mother who returned a nod of support. She wanted to get the house ready as early as possible this year, her sense of urgency growing with the pain in her body.

"Honey, pour me another glass of wine, will you?" She watched her husband lift the gallon jug from the kitchen floor and pour the blood-red liquid into Mary's empty glass. She folded her napkin loosely and placed it on the table, then rose from her chair and walked into the hallway toward the bathroom.

"You two save me some spaghetti," she called back, attempting a playful tone. In the bathroom she dropped the half-smile she had forced in front of her husband and son and allowed the cold, sickening feeling to emerge on her face. She looked at the woman in the mirror with an agitated, questioning gaze, as if to ask, "*Why don't you know what's wrong*?"

Leaving the woman in the mirror, she opened the medicine cabinet and took out an amber-colored prescription bottle hidden behind the rows of aspirins, decongestants, and antacids, opened the top and poured four white ovals into her palm. She filled a cup with water, stared at the seemingly innocuous tablets for a few moments, then threw them quickly into her mouth, tasting the momentary acrid bitterness before gulping the water to wash them down. Closing the cabinet, she again faced the woman in the mirror who now looked at her with a face of hopeful reassurance. The pain would now subside for a while. Mary retrieved her half-smile and returned to the kitchen table, sat and took a long drink from her glass of wine.

"Here, Mom. I saved you some spaghetti." Nick lifted the bowl and handed it to his mother.

"Thank you, honey. Now you two go get your Christmas lights. I want to see the tree shine tonight."

When Nick and his father walked into the large drug store they stared perplexed at the sheer number of people pressing around them. The lines at the cash register snaked far past checkout counters and displays, reached even further back through the aisles,

terminating at some invisible point in the far reaches of the store. The crowd in the decorations aisle stood three deep.

"You feel like some ice cream?"

"Sure, Dad."

They fought their way over to the counter and stood there gazing at the big, half-empty buckets in the display. Someone finally noticed their conspicuous loitering as they stared into the cold, white freezer; an annoyed, static-filled voice rang over the PA system—"*Service at Ice Cream!*"

Cones in hand, they turned toward the desultory crowd and watched, their spot at the ice cream counter like prime theater seats. Gradually, as the ice cream disappeared into warm, waiting stomachs, the play wound down to its end, and the two deposited the sticky remnants into the trash and began their journey toward the decorations aisle. When they reached their destination only a few weary shoppers still stared at the shelves with gaped mouths. Tony plucked a box of two-dozen spare lights from the near-depleted shelf and turned toward Nick; he held a clear plastic dome filled with liquid in which swam thousands of little snowflakes swirling around Santa and his sleigh.

"You like that?" Tony moved closer to his son.

"Can we get it for Mom?"

"Sure."

They moved quickly through the now-deserted checkout counter, then into the cold night air.

Nick helped his father replace the bad and missing bulbs in the endless strings of lights. When they finished only two spares remained.

"Nicky, go get the flood light and set it up in the corner behind the chair. I'll get started hanging these."

Mary appeared in the kitchen doorway and watched as Tony meticulously laced the complicated net of miniature teardrop bulbs around and around the uneven branches. He looked up to see her staring at the tree.

"Hi, honey."

"I mixed you another drink."

"Thanks."

"The tree's going to look beautiful."

"You think so?"

"Uh-huh."

She sipped from a glass of red wine. She felt better now.

"Comes out a little different every year, doesn't it?" Tony said.

"That's why I like it so much. I love to sit in the kitchen and listen to you going through the boxes and mutter to yourself about what to do with everything." She smiled a real smile. "I love you."

"I love you, too, honey." He grinned, almost shyly, she thought, then looked down at the mess of empty boxes and took a long sip of the cool drink.

Nick emerged from the other room with a large, cardboard box, set it down amid the pile of empties and began to unpack the finishing touch of the decorating cycle. A

star or angel mounted on the top of the tree completed the process for most households, but the Lucera's required a more spectacular finish to their ritual. He lifted from the box a large, floor-mounted flood lamp and concealed it in the corner behind a chair adjacent the tree, then worked carefully to fit a colored wheel onto the frame of the lamp. The wheel's plane was divided pie-like into eight slices of alternating green, red, blue and amber. When powered, the wheel rotated so that the large bulb behind it shined brightly through, throwing the cast of alternating hues onto the tree. The gleam leapt from one illuminated slice to another while the lights twinkled.

The lamp set properly, Nick turned toward his parents: “Okay. It's ready.”

Tony and Mary smiled at each other and hurried out the front door and down the short flight of cement steps. When they reached the sidewalk below they turned to face the large bay window that framed the dark tree. Nick waited a few crucial seconds to heighten the anticipation, then eased the plug into the wall socket and watched as light beamed from the tree in a simultaneous twinkling and gleaming of every possible combination of Christmas colors. He looked beyond the glare toward the sidewalk at his parents, trails of colored light shading their faces as they gazed, then rushed out the door and down the steps to stand in between them, and for a few short moments, as it happened every year, their feelings melded in such an imperceptible yet complete way that they did not speak, did not even turn their heads, but simply watched each other's reflection in the window, framing the picture of their Christmas tree.

Chapter 7

"Hey, the tree looks great."

Nick heard the salutation ring out behind him and turned to see Brian trotting across the lawn.

"So, what are you up to?"

"I'm watering the poinsettias." Nick spoke dryly.

"I can see that, man," Brian smiled. "I mean, how're you doing? You haven't been by since church the other night."

Nick looked at the poinsettias and shrugged.

"Nick, are you mad at me?"

"No."

"Well, looks like you're upset about something."

Nick stared at the cut end of the small rubber garden hose, watched the stream beat a sharp, red petal.

"Hey, Nick, I can understand if you were confused about what happened. I'd be scared too if I didn't understand—"

"I'm not scared."

He listened as Brian took a large breath then looked at Nick's eyes.

"Would you like to meet her?"

"Who?" Nick's heart pounded.

"Our sister who has the gift of tongues."

"No."

"It's nothing to be afraid of—"

"I told you I'm not afraid," Nick snapped. Then the memory he had worked so hard to suppress—the woman with the wild, lost eyes, the strange not-words cutting his ears—filled his mind, and he no longer saw the flowers in the planter box, but only the crowd of the faithful all bowing to worship the bedlam, and as they approached her, she turned to them and the words flew from her mouth into the mouths of the others and as they tried to chew and swallow the words instead choked until they were strangled.

"Nick," he heard from a long way off. "Hey, Nick."

He realized that the woman was not there; the paralyzing fear released him and he returned to the front yard. When he could focus again he saw that the poinsettia plant sagged, its petals almost completely knocked to the mud.

"Nick, are you okay? Do you want to come inside?" Brian laid his hand on Nick's shoulder. The hand felt like a hot iron where it touched him, and the building rage burst out. "Don't touch me!"

"Nick, I—"

"Leave me alone! I'm not like you!"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't *want* the world to end!"

Mary had heard the noise through the kitchen window where she stood washing dishes and at first thought the two were merely joking, but as her son's voice grew louder and clearer she left the kitchen and walked quickly out front.

"Nick, I don't understand—"

"You don't have to understand! Just leave!"

Nick's body trembled as if gripped by a sudden chill and he stood shaking and staring at the wall.

"Look, Nick, tonight we're having a different kind of meeting. It'll be quiet and we can all talk about things and how the Lord is working in our lives. Why don't you come and talk about it to the group. I think you'd feel…"

But Brian's voice faded and Nick again became transfixed with the image of the woman bloated and raging. Again he felt a hand on his shoulder, startling him, and he jerked away, still seeing the woman, but woke when he heard Brian's voice raised in a high pitch. When Nick focused on the front yard he saw his neighbor dancing wildly, trying to avoid the steady stream of cold water streaming onto him from the hose Nick held, fist closed tight around the nozzle, and seeing the rush of water intensify, aiming at Brian's face, following him as he stumbled blindly around the lawn. It seemed like a long time before he felt the blow against the side of his head; a high sharp ringing began in his right ear. He dropped the hose and held his hand to the ear, only to have it knocked away.

"What the hell's the matter with you!"

“No, Mrs. Lucera, it's okay!” Brian attempted when he saw the beating begin.

Mary stared, eyes wide with surprise. “I saw what happened. Don't try to defend him.”

“No, it was my fault. I egged him on. I dared him to.” Brian's stunned face now turned to a false half-smile.

Mary looked hard at Brian, then at Nick who leaned against the wall. Water streamed onto the cement from the hose, forgotten on the sidewalk. She glared at Nick. “Is that true?”

He looked quickly at Brian, who nodded.

“Answer me when I talk to you!”

“Yes, Mom.”

Mary folded her arms skeptically and let out an audible *hmmm*.

“Say you’re sorry to Brian.”

“I'm sorry.”

“It's okay, Nick.”

“Now you get home.”

“I'm really sorry, Mrs. Lucera.” Brian bowed his head and turned.

“And you. Turn that goddamn hose off and put it where it belongs. Then you get a broom and push this water onto the grass so it's not all wasted.”

“Yes, Mom.”

As he swept the water onto the thick green blanket of St. Augustine with the straw broom, Nick felt a sense of both pride and shame. Though he finally acted out the confrontation which he had only fantasized before, he could not stop the sick feeling that he had hurt the one person who accepted him for who he was…

…or does he?

Nick's mind relented to the grotesque image of the woman speaking in the strange not-language, then of Brian's insistence that Nick accept the experience, join Brian's church, pray Brian's way, to Brian's God. And he wondered, *Why isn't it good enough when I pray my way? How can they be so sure they're doing it right?* And he thought, as he had done so many times, about the people in the world who didn't believe in God, or Jesus, or had never even heard of them. When he'd asked Brian about this he assured Nick that, when Jesus returned, everyone would get a chance to hear His message and to accept the Lord.

"But what if they don't want to?" Nick had asked, but Brian had only stared at him in disbelief, as if he had never considered the possibility. Nick listened as Brian explained that this couldn't really happen, once these people were enlightened with the truth, and realized how dark their lives had been, that nobody could consciously choose to live in darkness, in the absence of God.

Last year, when the Christmas tree stood gleaming in the window, the sun from the clear December sky glinting off each ornament, Nick nearly dragged Brian across the street to the base of the porch to show him. And, though he agreed that trees and presents and Santa were nice, he explained to Nick that these images should not detract from the

real meaning of Christmas. But the reality that Nick felt had nothing to do with God, or with Jesus. He found meaning in Christmas when he and his mother searched for lost ornaments, when he sat with his father and helped untangle the lights, when, as the three of them stood outside on the dark sidewalk watching the tree bathe in the revolving light, he could stand in front of his parents and lean into their warmth, see their hands intertwine as they held him closer.

In his mind, he leaned against them now, his eyes shut tight to the reality in front of him, felt the reassuring touch of their three bodies together. But the image faded as the sinking dusk sun pressed against his face, and he opened his eyes and returned, leaning only against the warm brick wall that supported the beaten poinsettia.

He braced himself against the wall for a long time, until the weakening sun had retreated behind the distant houses, until he heard the slow yet resolute sound of boot steps approaching. He had decided to remain rigid and ignore the passerby who interrupted his thoughts, but started when he heard a familiar voice call out to him.

"*Buona sera, Nick,*" the voice said.

Nick turned to see the strong, compact figure of Sal Amato standing next to the front steps. He wore the same gleaming black boots and tan work pants which he had worn at the wharf, but his upper body was clad only in a pristine white tee shirt, a tuft of steel-gray hair peeking over the V collar, short sleeves rolled up almost to his shoulders. He held a large package wrapped in newsprint in both arms, taught coils of deeply tan muscle straining against the load.

"Am I disturbing you?"

"Oh, uh, not at all."

"Is your mother home?"

"She's inside."

"I'd like to speak to her. I'll see you in a while."

Nick thought to say that speaking to his mother was not such a good idea at the moment, but only watched as the old man turned and climbed up the steps of the front porch, skipping every other step until he reached the front door and, balancing his package in one arm, pressed the doorbell.

Nick moved toward the porch to pull in the green garden hose and coil it the way his father liked, against the wall underneath the kitchen window, but stopped halfway to watch his mother's bewildered stare when she answered the door bell.

"*Buona Sera, Signora Lucera…*"

He heard Sal speak these words and then pause, turning his head an almost imperceptible degree toward where Nick stood. The old man then began again to address Mary Lucera's defiant face in a hushed, almost intimate tone, and it was obvious to Nick that the conversation was not meant for his ears. He knew Sal spoke in Sicilian, but Nick, though he could pick up scraps of his mother or grandmother's conversation, recognized not one of the words Sal spoke. He gazed at the confusion in his mother's face, as if she could not understand the words either, but somehow understood the meaning they conveyed. After awhile her features softened and she stood to one side, and Nick watched amazed as she held the door open, and Sal Amato bowed his head and entered her home.

Nick scurried up the stairs and onto the top of the red brick retaining wall and quickly pulled in the hose, pretending to pull in thick, black coils of fishing net, as he always did. After laying the final loop upon the others, he stretched as far as he could toward the open kitchen window and strained to hear the quiet, furtive conversation within. Nick often stood in this manner to listen to his parents "discussions," as they called them, but rarely did their volume diminish below the usual booming bass and deep alto. This time, however, he strained as hard as he could, closing his eyes to magnify his hearing, but could not interpret any piece of the quiet chant of Sal's ancient language lilting out the kitchen window.

Inside the kitchen, Mary sat stunned by the surprise visit from the strange old man, far more than the eavesdropper outside the window. Since she was a little girl, Mary had known Sal Amato, yet it seemed his face had barely changed in nearly forty years. And each time she'd ponder this detail, or was about to remark on it to someone, the thought disappeared, as if gently brushed from her mind. This loss never disturbed her, but left her instead with an almost dream-like calm.

Mary remembered her mother telling stories of Sal Amato from years ago in the tiny village on the southeastern coast of Sicily where they'd been born. The stories usually centered around fishing, about how even in years when the water wore thin and many fisherman went hungry, Sal returned home after each lone voyage out to sea with a hull almost bursting full; sometimes he had to leave his nets cast because there was just no room to lay them on the deck, and the nets would slowly drag behind him and reap

even more from the seemingly dead waters. And, unlike many of the others who would not share their wealth but for a large price, Sal handed his out freely to anyone who came to him in need.

And he always had enough for everyone—no one who called himself Sal Amato's friend ever went hungry. There were, of course, those who mistrusted him, who thought he was a "friend of the friends," the ones whom everyone knew, but would never admit to exist. They took care of their own for a hefty price and blind loyalty. One who betrayed this loyalty was often found washed ashore, strangled in his own nets, the remains of his burned boat smoldering in the harbor. But Sal only associated with the common fisherman in his village. When people spoke of him, it was never as "Sal, so-and-so's cousin," or "Sal, what's-his-names uncle," only Sal Amato; everyone in the village knew who he was, but not one person knew him any better.

So no one could say for sure how Sal came into harbor after every trip with a full boat. When asked, he'd brush it off as good luck, or would say that maybe he knew some tricks the others did not know. Despite his generosity, there were some in the village who spoke openly of his apparent deceit. They told stories of how he did not take the boat out to fish at all, but actually sailed it far across the Mediterranean, all the way to the north coast of Africa, where the "black devils" lived. Some even said that in trade for his soul, they had taught him magic, and that that was how he filled the bowels of his boat. The one's in the village who believed these stories would not accept Sal's fish, would not even venture near his boat. They were the ones who went hungry.

His soft rhythmic chant reminded Mary of the priest's at church whose Latin she understood in her mind but could not repeat, like a book whose words disappear immediately with the turn of each page. After a long time Mary noticed that Sal was leaning back comfortably against the kitchen chair, calmly watching her. She did not know how long ago he had finished his speech.

Suddenly he said in English, “Well, anyway, I just wanted you to know, with all due respect, that the boat trip was my idea, my instigation; I'm an old man and became so excited that the boy looked interested in my boring life that I could not take "no” for an answer.”

“He didn't have to listen to you,” Mary heard herself say. “He knows he doesn't jump off cliffs just because someone says to.”

"Yes, *signora*, you are right. But, still, the boy treated me with respect, the respect *you've* taught him to show foolish old men like me. And I took advantage of that respect. I only ask your forgiveness, and that you not blame Nick or in any way keep him from what he loves before I interfered.”

Mary felt an urge to refute this wisdom, but the feeling soon melted away and in its place grew a strange yet warm glow of acceptance.

“Well, Mr. Amato, I know you wouldn't have come here unless it was very important to you. Thank you for making this effort for my son. I don't want to keep him from doing what he wants to do, either. He's growing up, and he needs to decide things for himself. It's just difficult for me sometimes—”

“As it is for him.”

Mary stared at the old man sitting with his hands folded, pliant, noticed the scars and the calluses, then glanced at the gentle calm of his face. It was this same opposition of feeling which confused her. She felt her pride pull her in one direction, the familiar ground she took with anyone who opposed her, yet there remained the strange sensation she felt to yield to his words, to even allow him to understand why she obsessed over her son so much, worried about his future, the future from which she secretly believed she would be absent. And inside her the cold pain which she had grown accustomed to intensified until her stomach twisted. She excused herself quickly and hurried to the bathroom.

She leaned over the gleaming porcelain of the sink, though her body would not allow itself relief. Finally the pain subsided enough so that she could stand, and she moved to the mirror and looked at the woman whose reflection she had begun not to recognize. The extra foundation and rouge failed to mask the gaunt lines that grew deeper as did the pain. She saw the creases formed in her sinking cheeks, and the corners of her mouth bent downward. She realized that her right hand hurt, and she looked down to examine it. Her knuckles were bruised and swollen. She thought to herself, *Are you crazy? He's a child. You'd might as well let him go now, do what he wants...you'll have to let him go soon anyway, and you don't want him to remember you taking everything away from him...*

She wiped the tears from her face and took as deep a breath as she could to compose herself, then turned to search for her son.

Nick heard his mother's footsteps resonate from the house and hurried away from the kitchen window to sit on the front steps, and pretending to have been waiting there all along, unaware of the conversation within. He heard the footsteps grow closer and then the familiar squeak of the screen door opening.

"Nicky."

"Yes, Mom."

"Come inside. Mr. Amato would like to see you."

Nick felt the usual apprehension accompanied by his mother's invitation, but wondered at her tone, which showed no sign of dominance. He rose from the steps and followed her into the house and then toward the kitchen where he saw Sal opening a large package that lay on the table, peeling back the newsprint and lifting a huge slab of swordfish from within the gray wrapping, the flesh thick and brilliant white, the tough, leathery skin, which only hours before had gleamed a silvery gray, now dull as dirty wool.

"It must weigh twenty pounds," Nick heard his mother say and looked at her wide expression as she stood, hands on hips, staring at the fish on the table.

"Twenty-six, actually." Sal spoke with more than a little pride. "It got caught in my nets and the sharks started to attack it. I don't know how it got so far north. They took a good chunk out near the tail, but I had time to get the net close enough to the boat and get the rest of him on board."

"Did you beat the sharks dead?" Nick asked.

"Did I beat them? You must be listening to your uncle's tales." Sal smiled. "Actually, I shot five with a rifle then got out of there as fast as I could. I was lucky they didn't swarm or I'd have lost the whole load."

"Mr. Amato, I couldn't possibly accept all this," Mary said.

"Please, there's really no arguing about it. I can't sell it because it's been damaged. I'd only get cents on the dollar. And there's nothing at all wrong with it. In fact, it's some of the best swordfish I've ever seen. So, please, just accept it as a gift."

Mary looked at the fish and knew she had to accept it. It was, after all, the best you could buy, the kind they hadn't had in years as she and Tony struggled until his business finally yielded a hint of success, and now would not allow themselves to have, always saving, always afraid. She also knew that twenty-six pounds of swordfish would not last another trip across town wrapped in newspaper in the arms of an old man. She looked at Sal and smiled past her pain.

"*Grazzi, signore*."

"The pleasure is mine. Here, let me cut it into steaks for you." Sal turned and, though he had never entered their house before, opened the drawer second to the right of the stove, and, without searching, pulled out a long, narrow blade.

Nick and his mother watched motionless as Sal deftly carved, trimming away the excess skin, leaving perfect steaks, boneless and white, gleaming on the kitchen counter. Nick watched Sal stop his carving for a moment and turned his head to where the two stood awkwardly next to one another.

“You're almost as tall as your mother.” Sal smiles, and Nick looked toward his mother and found that his eyes almost met hers in an even plane.

“I've got good news for you, Nick” Sal looked toward Mary and added, “with your permission.”

“Yes.” Mary spoke in a soft, penitent tone.

“Fine. Looks like I get my helper back, if he's still interested.”

Nick watched Sal's playful grin widen and at first did not realize what he'd meant. He dared to look straight at his mother with a meek, questioning stare, and she smiled and nodded to confirm what he had refused to believe.

“I can work with Mr. Amato?”

“Yes,” Sal interjected,” but you need to do something else, too.” He spoke but continued to carve the fish. “You see, Nick, it's a compromise. Like an agreement between all of us. You want to work with me, I need the help, and your mother wants you to be safe. So, here's the arrangement: you come to the wharf any time you want. I'll pay you five dollars an hour. I will teach you everything I know. But you will not set foot on my boat until you learn one thing.”

Nick looked with a lost expression at the old man’s stern, pious face.

“What?”

“How to swim.”

“Swim?”

“That's right. After I walked in here and shot my mouth off like a fool, giving out my wise old man opinion like it was the gospel, your mother calmly informed me that you do not know how to swim.”

Mary cast a furtive glance at Sal; she had said no such thing.

“In our village, everyone knew how to swim by the time they were half your age. I had no idea you didn’t, and if I had, you'd have never set foot on my boat the other day.”

“But, what could happen to me in the harbor?”

“Nick, I have seen waves and winds in this harbor that have crushed boats. You must learn more than how to mend a net or maintain an engine if you want to do what I do. You can learn about nets and engines in books. To swim, you have to dive in, literally, and fight with the elements.”

“Will you teach me?”

“Nick, I’m fisherman, not a swimming instructor.”

“But, how do I learn, then?”

Mary realized a thought, a memory she’d no other reason to retain. “I think your father sold a house with a pool to a young couple, and the lady gives swimming lessons. I'm sure she has room for another student.”

Nick stood frozen to one spot in the kitchen linoleum, unable to even grasp what his response should be. The thought of taking swimming lessons terrified him, wrenched him from his ritual routine of school and television. He would be forced to interact with others his own age, the ones who taunted him and called him names, punched his

stomach until he could not breath but only rolled on the ground and gasped for air. At least the bullies who beat him were a familiar enemy, one he had actually grown to respect and admire, much like a hostage who comes to sympathize and even agree with the motives of his captors. His stomach turned as he pondered what awaited him at the swimming pool.

Sal's voice broke into Nick's locked consciousness. “So, do we have a deal?”

“I guess so,” Nick said, trying not to sound despondent.

“Is *that* the way you thank Mr. Amato?” Mary added sharply.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Amato. Thank you very much.”

His mother scrutinized her son with stern approval, yet felt a defeated chill run over her body, a fear that some force, one over which she had no control, exerted itself onto her. She looked at Nick with a tired expression and said, "That's better."

Nick and his mother stood recovering from the previous moment as Sal packed the swordfish steaks neatly into plastic bags, then wrapped them in foil. They looked like gleaming ingots of silver staged for deposit.

“Well, there you are,” he said with a broad, pleasing smile and a deep look of satisfaction. “And now, *signore*, what time can I expect you for work tomorrow?”

“Can I go in the morning, Mom?”

“As long as you finish your chores.”

Sal put on the face of an old Sicilian merchant in the markets of Palermo, as if pondering his new employee's schedule.

“So…shall we say, ten o'clock?”

"*Bene*," Mary said. "And as soon as your father gets home, we're going to arrange for your swimming lessons. As long as you're down there, you're going to at least be learning."

"Yes, Mom." The fear that had briefly hidden itself in the cloud of thoughts about the wharf now leapt from the fog and into the front of his mind.

"All right, then, until tomorrow," Sal concluded, then turned toward Mary. As he did so, his motion seemed to her to slow, his face to transform so much that it startled her. She stared not at the playful old merchant, but at another far more ancient being that held a look of infinite wisdom, at the same time both beneficent and dangerous.

"*Signora*," the ancient one said. "*Grazzi*."

As the words left his mouth he bowed his head solemnly, and Mary could only look at the face and nod in reply.

Chapter 8

Billows of fog floated from the harbor, wispy fingers lacing over homes and trees and hills. Mary sat in her living room and gazed out the bay window, watching the flowing ghost-gray cotton overtake her quiet street. Every late afternoon the fog would arrive, disembarking from the cold ocean voyage beyond the wharf to blanket the town, a prelude to nightfall. Sometimes she wondered how far it had traveled, if it had simply formed from the deep ocean moisture, coalescing above the cold green-black water, or if there existed some purpose to its travel, any reason, or did it simply exist to undulate smoothly along, its only intention to obscure the mundane landscape, to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, to shroud the real.

She only sat in this place when no one was home so that she could gaze at the green hills from which twinkled the wealthy households, their Christmas lights towering. Now the fog began to roll up the flatter slopes, slowing as the climb grew steeper, but only stopping long enough to add reinforcements and mount another charge. Before long the entire hill disappeared, engulfed by giant enveloping arms. When the view vanished Mary sighed; she loved this scene, the fog, the way it transformed her familiar surroundings. After she and Tony had finally scrounged enough to buy their house she anointed this as her favorite spot. Long before her son became more than just a thought, a possibility, a hope, she envisioned a time when she could sit in this chair, with the draped hillside in the background, and laugh while her grandchildren played at her feet.

Lately she had indulged in this vision less and less, grew fearful with the boastful delight, so shameless, so futile.

She willed her mind to remain in the terrible present, as real as the pain that riddled her body. When the daylight failed against the shrouded sky, her sunken reflection in the window grew clearer, and it was then that she knew, actually admitted it to herself, because she could see no other end. Lighting a cigarette, Mary watched her own reflection blur and disappear, obliterated by the haze of smoke she blew toward the window.

Footsteps jumping up the porch startled her, and she looked to see Tony, his face beaming through the glass as he strode to the front door and into the living room.

"Hi, honey," he said smiling. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing."

"You look tired. You want me to fix you a drink?"

"Sure."

It charmed Mary to watch her husband do things around the house, especially things which were out of his routine—washing the dishes, hanging the clothes. He performed these tasks with such childlike curiosity, staring oddly at a dinner plate with caked-on Parmesan cheese as if to ask it, "Why didn't you come off?" She watched and laughed silently now as he fumbled with the frozen ice cube trays, held the glass he'd pulled out of the dishwasher up to the light to see if it was really clean. Finally he found the bottle of orange juice hiding in the top rack of the refrigerator, the fifth of vodka peeking out slyly from behind the cookie jar on top of the counter. Then began the

mixing, the construction phase, and his brow bent in stern concentration as he poured just exactly enough into each ice-filled glass—one part vodka to two parts juice, leaning over and peering counter-level at each vessel, scrutinizing his measurements. When he presented her with the tall, frosted glass, sweating into the cradling cocktail napkin, she smiled and felt better than she had all day.

"Thanks, honey."

"Sure. Now, what's wrong?"

She actually thought of telling him, but then looked at the concern welling in eyes and decided to wait, to go through the motions and let things happen a little more gradually. No use worrying him now. *Look at him with those eyes. I fell in love with you when I saw them, how much hope they held. You need to be needed so bad, to be helpful, to make things better. What are you going to do when you realize that you can't?*

"I'm just tired, really. That's all."

"You sure? You look pale." He placed his hand on her forehead. "And you feel hot. Let me take your temperature."

As much as she wanted to see him do this, she said, "No. It's okay. I just had the heater turned way up high because I was cold."

"You're right. It's hot in here. I'll turn it down." He walked to the thermostat on the wall.

Mary said, "You will never guess who came to visit today."

"Who?"

"*Don Salvatore Amato*."

He looked at her with wide, surprised eyes. “And you didn't kill him?”

“No.” Mary had to laugh at the thought. “We sat in the kitchen and he spoke to me in the most reasonable way, like I've never heard before.”

“You let him in the house? He *must* have been reasonable.”

“Funny, you know, I can't really remember what he said. The words, I mean. I just remember the feeling. Anyway, what he basically meant was that it was all his fault about Nicky going on the boat, that he had been manipulative and selfish, and he asked me to let him go back down to the wharf to work with him, if he promised to watch him like I'd want.”

Tony had reclined onto the couch but now sat bolt upright on the very edge, eyes wide. He waited like that for a long time. “Well, what did you say?”

“I said 'yes.'”

“You said '*yes*'?”

“As long as he doesn't go anywhere near the deck of that boat until he takes swimming lessons.”

“Swimming lessons?”

“Yes, that's what I said,” she answered with a little irritation. “Funny, though, Sal's the one who brought up the swimming lessons. He said it in a way that made it sound like it was my idea. But, the funny thing was I felt like it *had* been my idea all along.”

“I don't believe it.”

“What? Don't you think I know a good idea when I hear one?”

"No, no. I mean, that you agreed to any of it. That you let Sal come in. I've just never seen you so willing to…"

"Compromise?" Mary's expression looked hard, as if to say, 'I could have done it all along.' But she knew this was a lie.

"How does Nicky feel about it?"

"He's thrilled."

"What about the swimming lessons?"

"I don't know. But I told him—no lessons, no fishing."

They spoke for a while longer about the unusual events of the day, of Nick's dousing of Brian with the hose, which Mary had almost forgotten except for the blow she had inflicted on her son.

"Where is he?"

"Where do you think?"

Tony tilted his head, then rose and walked toward the den where Nick sat stone still, bathed in the unreal light of the television screen. For a moment, Tony stood motionless in the doorway and watched his son, the artificial light dancing about the room.

"Hey, son. You're sitting a little close."

Startled, Nick jumped onto the couch from the leather ottoman in one deft move.

"Sorry, Dad." He looked at his father with curious, expectant eyes.

"So, you made a deal to get back to the wharf?"

"Yeah."

“Sounds like a good plan. And you're going to learn to swim?”

“Mom says I have to.”

“Well, that way you can get back on the boat. And your mom won't be mad this time.”

Nick said nothing.

“Aren't you happy about that?”

Nick shrugged and stared at the speckled linoleum of the den floor. He’d sat in the room all afternoon, until the sun had set and darkness swallowed his surroundings except for the television light, but for the first time it offered him no shelter, no respite from the dilemma. He only pondered, trying to decide whether admission onto the boat was worth the ordeal he felt certain awaited him at the swimming pool, an enigma that conjured thoughts of ridicule, of fingers pointing, of secret laughter. He wondered if they'd allow him to wear a tee shirt.

He wanted to answer his father's question, to answer truthfully, but he knew he did not possess the words that might allow his understanding. Still, he might attempt to convey the dread, the fear which to anyone but him would be ridiculous, incomprehensible.

“I'm afraid.”

“What do you mean, you're afraid?”

He continued to stare at the linoleum.

“Look, Nicky, there's nothing to be afraid of. I know the lady, and she's young and nice. She teaches right at her own house, in the backyard pool. I bet you'll have fun,

once you give it a try. Why don't I call her tonight and we can go over there tomorrow, just so you can see?"

The thought of his fear becoming real as early as the next day confounded him, and he looked at his father and gave him the answer he thought he'd want to hear.

"Okay."

Nick sat in the den watching the television characters without comprehending any of the action, and he felt banished from their world. In the adjacent room his father sat at the desk piled with client files, papers and forms. Pencils and pens lay scattered about and stuffed into empty coffee mugs. Nick listened as his father picked up the receiver and dialed, pausing for a moment until the inevitable ringing tones at the other end abruptly ceased.

"Yes, may I speak to Gina, please?... Gina, this is Tony Lucera...Fine thanks, and you?... How's the house shaping up?... Sounds great...Did the man I recommended repair the cracks in the pool?...Good, good...Say, Gina, I called to ask something of you...You see, my son..."

And to Nick's ears the words ceased to be words, then sounds at all, and trailed into a constant buzz with no shape or form, no dynamic or modulation, but sounded to him like a strange, alien language, something sinister and frightful, not of this world. Then the buzzing grew louder and louder and he held his hands tightly over his ears to muffle the sound, shutting his eyes, but he could not squelch the vision of the pool which he saw now before him amidst a background of blackness, the edge of the water not

constant and angular, not even solid, but made of a long, thick snake slithering into different shapes. Inside the snake's border the pool seethed and hissed, not water at all but shards of hot glass floating suspended. Then the blackness around him began to constrict, to contract like the universe reversing its course, until he had no choice but to dive into the sharp, floating shards…

The weak December sun rested easily on Nick's bare, wet shoulders as he climbed into the front seat of his father's old sedan. The swimming lesson which he'd vexed over for days ended up being nowhere near the frightening ordeal he had created in his mind, and he smiled now and looked forward to the next session. There were only two other students: a little girl of about five and a slight, shy boy, a couple years older than Nick. Neither of them went to his school. He had watched as Gina played with the girl in the shallow end, making her hold her breath and dunk her head under water while Gina did the same. They remained submerged for several seconds, then both burst out of the water, laughing. The older boy practiced his backstroke and glided easily from one end to the other, yet staying close to the wall, careful not to disturb the teacher and other student. When he finished with his laps, he sprang out of the deep end and trotted to the bubbling hot tub, hunched over against the chilling breeze, and plunged into the churning water. He glanced at Nick and smiled a shy, friendly smile.

Nick's own lesson had consisted of walking from one side of the shallow to the other, and then "swimming" the same stretch with the help of a floatation ring and Gina standing next to him. It seemed to take an undue amount of time to travel the short

distance, though he kicked his feet violently, the surface erupting in great splashes. He liked how Gina stood next to him in the water the whole way across and used her hand to support him when he sank too low. When he stood chest deep in the warm water listening to her instruction, he noticed how her deeply tanned skin gleamed; droplets of water ran down her shoulders and sent a rivulet of liquid diamond coursing the bare curve of breast peeking over her bathing suit top. In the end, Gina said he'd had a good first lesson, and asked if he'd like to continue.

"Uh-huh," he replied, and felt surprise at his own pleasure. He felt a warm, satisfied feeling, the wet towel wrapped around his back and shoulders and melting into the warm vinyl of the car as they steered toward home.

"So you had a good time, son?"

"Yeah," Nick said, then offered, "Gina's really nice."

"She sure is. And pretty, too, huh?"

Nick's face burned immediately, not only from his father's candor, but even more from his own agreement, though he said nothing. Tony glanced at him and smiled. "So, you all ready for tomorrow night? It's hard to believe it's Christmas Eve already."

Nick nodded, relieved.

"What do you think Santa's going to bring Uncle Franky this year?"

Every year on Christmas Eve, when the entire family gathered at Frank and Teresa's house, someone at some time during the evening would deposit a brightly wrapped present on the front porch. This baffled everyone; the tag would read only, "To

Franky from Santa." The kids wondered how he could have come and gone so silently, and why he always returned later, near midnight, with their own presents. Each year the adults plotted how to catch the secret gift-giver, but their holiday cheer always overtook any plans of hiding in the bushes or peering out the front window.

Nick had realized gradually that Santa Claus was actually an adult in costume, often his father, who did his best to disguise himself though his eyes squinting through the lense-less spectacles betrayed him. Last year, sensing his son's waning belief, Tony had bought a piece of weathered-looking parchment paper from a stationery store, and, using his most disguised calligraphy, wrote a letter to Nick describing the status of his entire wish list— what had been available, what the elves had not quite finished. This he left at the base of the fireplace with ashes scattered all about and smudging the paper, sooty footprints leading the path to the tree and sprinkles of ash atop the wrapped presents (Mary had grudgingly allowed the mess for the sake of authenticity). Nick enjoyed the secret game that extended his father's fun.

"Remember last year, when we opened Uncle Frank's door and found a box the size of a dishwasher out there? That was something, helping unwrap it and finding smaller and smaller boxes inside until we got down to the last one, and it was a little package of golf balls!"

Tony boomed a great hearty laugh, remembering each detail. "Boy, I'm telling you, son, there's just nothing like Christmas Eve at Uncle Franky and Aunt Teresa's . The food and presents are great, you know, but what's really nice is that everybody's there. You know what I mean? All year we see each other downtown, or at the store, or maybe

passing each other out to dinner, but how often do we just go visit Uncle Frank? How often do you get to see your cousins during the year?" Tony punctuated the end of his questions with a look of great sincerity, wanting his son to give the truest answer he could.

"Uh, I don't know. Maybe once, I guess."

"Yes, that's absolutely right. You know, every year the young people, like yourself, change so much. I don't notice it in you so much, because we're together all the time. But look at your cousins. My God, last year when I saw little Sofia, I couldn't believe it. And I know she didn't become a woman over night. I thought to myself, 'How could she grow up so fast?' Then I realized, she didn't grow up fast; I hadn't *seen* her. If I'd have taken time to go visit, even a couple more times a year, I would have realized. Do you see what I mean, Nick? People change. Hell, *everything* changes. It doesn't wait for anyone. So the people you have in your memory now, say from last Christmas Eve, they're different now, though your mind sees them one way, they're not like that anymore. They might look the same to you, if they're older than you, but they're not. Do you see what I mean?"

Tony paused, waiting for Nick's response.

He did not comprehend the older man's sense of urgency, could not grasp the magnitude of his father's feelings. But he looked at him with sober, careful eyes, and said, "Dad, you can visit everyone more often. You know, during the year. I'll go with you."

Tony smiled and nodded his head. “Thank you, Nick. I think that's a very good idea. You understand what I'm saying better than you think.” Tony looked at his son, impressed by the depth of his simple wisdom.

Christ, if he only knew how right he was, Tony thought. *We like to make it so damned complicated. But it's not. It's just doing it.* He pulled the car around the corner of the main avenue that ran a block from their house and slowed to turn into the driveway. In the bay window he saw Mary on hands and knees, her top half thrust underneath the Christmas tree.

“What's Mom doing?” he asked Nick.

“Well, she’s not putting out presents. She'd kill us if we even saw the wrapping paper, let alone be able to see the whole box. Let's go find out.”

The two cohorts ambled up the wide cement staircase and through the front door. When they arrived at the tree they stood there perplexed, puzzling over Mary who still knelt with her head and arms thrust underneath the lowest branches of the seven-foot Douglas Fir. She swore quietly to herself in Sicilian.

“Hi, honey. What's wrong?”

Mary had not seen the pair walk up the stairs nor enter the room. She stopped abruptly, then slowly backed from underneath the tree. As she did so, hundreds of tiny brown needles fell effortlessly onto the cotton snow.

“*Look* at this,” she said. “It's dead. The thing's been shedding needles all day.” She shook her head, looking distressed. “I've been trying to water it, but I don't think that'll do any good. It's ruined.”

Nick gazed up the desiccated hulk of his family's Christmas centerpiece. “What are we going to do?”

Mary looked down at her son and felt real pain. “I don't know, honey. Maybe we could just bring in the little artificial one from the other room.”

Tony looked at his grieving wife and sullen son, then at the brown tree, ornaments drooping, falling off, no longer supported by the brittle limbs. He began to nod his head slowly, then found the look of a wise man following a distant star, and stared seriously at Mary and Nick and said with no mercy, “Well, we just have to get rid of it.” Then his face began to widen and grow red, his short neck appeared even shorter as his shoulders began to shake up and down. He leaned over and propped his hands against his knees to support his upper body. At first Mary took his actions as grief, then what had at first sounded like sobbing emanating from Tony's hunched body grew louder and deeper, and as the sound grew so did Tony rise until he stood up very straight and held his arms out wide. Mary realized now that he was laughing uncontrollably.

“What the hell's the matter with you?” she asked half angry, half puzzled.

Tony stopped long enough to gasp out an answer: “We have to get rid of it because...it's a fire hazard!” He continued laughing, looked at the two standing next to him, dumbfounded, and then at the ridiculous tree, and laughed even harder. And as with a yawn, the laughter spread contagiously, first to Nick, who then looked at his mother and offered his hand. She grasped it and began to chuckle herself.

“It's eighty degrees outside and it's Christmas Eve,” she laughed, and the three fell onto the couch in a big laughing ball.

"But, what are we going to do about a tree?" Nick finally asked.

"What do you mean? Come on! Let's go get another one." Tony jumped from the couch, motioning with his arm at the other two who followed him out the front door and into the warm twilight.

Construction time on the new tree proved far shorter than on the original. There was no web of lights to untangle, no boxes of ornaments to exhume from the year long hibernation in the garage; the three simply removed the lights, pulled the old tree out, set the new one in, and systematically transferred all the ornaments over, one by one. Within an hour, their second tree shined and smiled back at them. It did not possess the same traditional, tall pyramid shape of the original; it actually skewed a bit too much in one direction and then back again towards its center. But the odd shape gave not a grotesque impression but an amusing, playful one; the tree looked paused, as if surprised, caught in the midst of a happy dance.

As they stood on the sidewalk this time, arms linked together in a camaraderie that transcended even familial ties, each of them felt not only their collective happiness but a significant, separate joy that surpassed every old Christmas-time feeling. Tony just couldn't believe how well everything was working out. Though his chronic optimism pervaded even the most hopeless moments, he always prepared himself to be slightly disappointed come Christmas Eve. This year seemed different, though. The tree was his good omen.

Nick felt something so different, so foreign and strange to him, that he did not realize that it was rather what he *hadn't* felt since his mother's attack at the wall. Since then events seemed to allow him more participation, a voice which was not always overlooked as insignificant nor crushed as an insurrection. From his bargaining with Sal, to his successful venture into the swimming pool, and especially to his uninhibited reaction to the dried-up tree, he acted, for the first time he could remember, without fear.

Mary felt the simple joy of being pain-free for almost two entire days. She was hungry again, and actually looked forward to the feast at her brother and sister-in-law's house. The tree was, for her, a symbol that anything can be reborn, that, even out of a dead hulk, something new and wonderful can rise. She could have become angry at Tony for laughing at her futile attempt to resuscitate the tree. But something carried her beyond her usual reaction, moved her instead to incongruent joy.

"Oh, my God," Mary said, glancing at her husband's wristwatch. "Honey, it's almost six o'clock. I have to heat the sauce and put the lasagna together and bake it before I can even get ready."

"You get ready. I'll put it together."

"Oh, no. Thank you, though."

"Okay." Tony shrugged, and watched as Mary rushed up the porch and into the front door.

Chapter 9

It was easy to distinguish Frank and Teresa's house from the others on the long block; their home radiated Christmas like no other he had ever seen. Lights bordered every window and door, and a large nativity scene stood solemn watch on the front lawn directly across from the jolly fat man himself standing astride eight not-so-tiny reindeer poised to leap into flight. The lights easily illuminated a huge red banner strung across the front porch, bright gold lettering beaming "*Buon Natale!*"

The scene looked so familiar to Nick, yet so out of place this year. It was the warmest winter on record, and the temperature, even now at eight o'clock at night, barely dipped below eighty degrees. He sat in the back seat of his parents' sedan, stretched his legs and leaned firmly into the aging vinyl, relaxing as best he could to reserve his stamina for the party. The warm wind blew through the open car windows and brushed his hair gently to one side. The breeze also carried the scents of the season from this particular neighborhood ranging from the roasted peppers and garlic smells of Italian households, to strange new smells, some pungent and bitter, others caressingly sweet and full of warmth, the smells of the newest inhabitants from Mexico and Central America, from Southeast Asia.

Nick could see his uncle standing on the porch greeting guests as the sedan glided to a stop in the driveway. Frank leaned casually yet proudly against his open front doorway, his coal-black hair pomaded back like Elvis'. He wore a short sleeve knit shirt

with a pattern of three huge vertical stripes of red, white, and green which served to hail the holiday as well as to mimic the Italian flag. With one hand he waved to newcomers, and with the other he deftly balanced a large tumbler of whiskey, ice, and water. Nick watched him scan the perimeter of his Christmas manor with hazy yet deliberate eyes until he noticed his nephew struggling up the driveway with a great arm-load of precisely wrapped presents (Mary was an expert wrapper and insisted that no department store could even attempt to supplant her skill.).

"Hi, Uncle Frank!" Nick called from behind the presents.

"Hey, the little fisherman! Merry Christmas! My God, where'd all those presents come from? You rob Santa's workshop?"

Nick smiled and hurried toward his uncle, but walked carefully to avoid dropping any of the delicately wrapped boxes, or even to jostle a bow. He set them down gingerly on the porch and stretched upward toward his uncle's open arms. "Merry Christmas, Uncle Frank," he whispered.

"Merry Christmas, Nicky."

"Did you make your octopus salad this year?"

"He's in there waiting for you."

Nick would never dream of even trying to eat something as bizarre sounding as a salad made of octopus. It was how his uncle presented the dish that he waited to see. Each year, after the bite-size pieces of chewy meat were properly marinated and mixed with the accompanying spices, Frank would take a whole, small octopus, bulbous head still in tact, tentacles spread over the top of the serving tray, and dress him in some garish

outfit suitable for a party. This was Nick's first stop on the tour inside, even before the obligatory "Greeting of the Relatives." His mother allowed him this normally unacceptable indiscretion: it *was*, after all, Christmas Eve.

But before he could bolt into the house, Nick heard a stern direction from behind him on the porch: "You'd better put those presents in the other room before you go running all over the house, young man. And I'd better not see any torn paper."

"Yes, Mom." Nick gathered the boxes and proceeded into the house.

"Hey Mary, Tony, Merry Christmas." Frank beamed to his sister and brother-in-law climbing up the steps with the rest of the packages and the food Mary had prepared. "Boy, you guys win the present contest this year. Who are all those for?" He carefully brushed aside a large, floppy red ribbon to uncover the hidden tag, but before he could open it Mary stung his hand with a slap that did not even pretend to be playful.

"You keep your hands off of these till midnight."

"Oh, how come we have to wait so long?" he whined, childlike.

"Listen to you. How many drinks have you had already?"

"Uh-oh. I'm in trouble and you're not even in the house yet."

"Come on, honey," Tony laughed. "Leave poor Franky alone and let's go inside. I need something cold to drink."

Inside the air conditioner hummed as the first guests mixed drinks and began to pick at the myriad appetizers laid out on a huge picnic table in the dining room. As Mary passed the threshold she noticed her son leaning on the table in the dining room, staring at the baby octopus that wore a tiny red Santa hat, two green push pins sticking out of its

head for eyes. In front of Mary on the floor stood her carefully wrapped presents, abandoned at the entrance. She strode quickly to where Nick stood and grabbed him by the arm, towing him to the small room off the entrance hall where presents were usually stored. “Where do the presents go?” she demanded, pointing to the deserted boxes.

“Here, Mom.”

“That’s right. Not in the damned hallway. And you'd better mind tonight or your going straight to bed.”

Nick hurried to organize the boxes for their staging, trying to look interested in what he was doing. But as he stacked the dozen or so packages, his fear subsided and he became engrossed in seeking out the presents brought for him. By the time he had properly stacked all the boxes he could barely move through the room; he guessed that there must be hundreds, some small and heavy as he picked them up to examine the tag ("To: Rosie Fr: Gino"), others as big as he thought presents could get, far too large and heavy for him to lift, and he had to struggle to reach the tags. Though he had to hurry, he successfully identified two for him: a small box from some distant relatives—probably socks—and a very large box wrapped with metallic red paper and topped with a huge green bow. This was from Uncle Frank and Aunt Teresa, and he tried to shake it but could not lift it off the ground.

Having spent so much time pouring over the presents, Nick thought it best that he re-emerge from the little room and get in his mother's sight. Mary paid meticulous attention to him when they were together in any kind of public setting. But Nick found that, as long as he stayed in relatively plain view, he would manage to stay out of trouble.

As he moved about the large living room and adjoining dining room, he found his mother and made brief eye contact. She gave him a glance which directed him to begin formally greeting all relatives, with brief yet respectful *hellos* given to family friends. Usually, he walked around with his father when they first arrived which satisfied this requirement. Tony was, however, deeply engaged in a conversation with Frank about the newly mounted deer trophy on the wall, and Nick doubted his father's desire to accompany him on the relative tour. So, he began on his own, waiting quietly for his turn at the elbows of each adult.

"Merry Christmas, Aunt Teresa."

"Merry Christmas, honey. What's Santa going to bring you this year?"

"I don't know," he shrugged and gave a false grin.

"We loved your Christmas play. You were so good."

"Thank you." He looked at the floor.

"Why don't you come in the kitchen with me an help me get the pizza out of the oven?"

Nick pondered this for a moment: would his mother get angry if he did not continue the greeting? Probably. But if he was actually helping his aunt with a project, it would be acceptable, though barely.

"Okay."

He followed his aunt into the warm, bright kitchen, held the oven door open as Aunt Teresa removed sheet after sheet of flat, crusty bread. The steam that rose embraced Nick's nose with the over-ripe smell of yeast. He loved his aunt's pizza best of

all and would not eat the kind bought in stores or even made in restaurants. Teresa did not roll out a thin, flat piece of raw dough and pile it with toppings. She baked her dough first, and it rose inches high as the top layer crisped and sealed in the thick, chewy bread.

"Here, Nicky. You take one end."

The two carted the large rectangle over to the counter like ancient servants carrying sacred tablets. Lovingly, Teresa ladled out heaps of thick red sauce onto each. Nick followed with a sprinkling of shredded cheese, then salami. Then they heaved the pizzas back into the oven so that the cheese could melt and the meat warm.

"Nicky, I'm going to turn the oven down, but you watch them. Make sure they don't burn."

Nick nodded and stared at the pizzas through the oven's steamy glass. The cheese had just begun to bubble when he heard footsteps rumbling over the noise of the house and into the kitchen toward him. For a split second he thought that his aunt was hurrying in to check on progress, though he recognized the force and gait of the steps and turned to watch his mother approach.

"What are you doing?" Mary demanded, shooting a barbed stare at her son.

"Aunt Teresa asked me to watch the pizzas so they don't burn."

"Hm." Mary marched forward to the oven door and threw it open. Nick watched her scrutinize the pizza as Teresa reappeared in the kitchen, a stainless steel tub of *gnocchi* straining her arms as she lumbered with it to the counter.

"Look at what Cecilia brought! I don't know how I'm going to keep them warm."

Seeing her sister-in-law struggling with the great load of dumplings made Mary laugh out loud, and her mood lightened.

"Nicky, go finish saying 'hello' to everyone. I'll help Aunt Teresa."

"Okay, Mom," he said dejectedly. He had hoped to hold out long enough to get a fresh, early slice before they were dispatched to the huge pan warmer on the dining room table (they never tasted the same after this). He lingered a moment, then dutifully turned and, seeing a newly-arrived aunt and uncle, greeted them as warmly as he could and redoubled his trek.

Teresa gave Mary a curious look as they scooped saucy mounds of pasta into smaller bowls and placed them into the oven to warm. She appeared different, though Teresa could not tell why. Thinner? Perhaps, but her slight frame had never carried much more than a hundred pounds. *I remember when she was pregnant with Nicky, Teresa thought. God, she looked good. Probably about 125. But as soon as she had him—boom! Back down. Said she couldn't gain if she tried.* She felt that tonight was different somehow. To her Mary looked not simply thinner, but vacant, as if she had lost something far more vital than weight, and though she might struggle to regain whatever this essence might be, she was not succeeding.

"Hey, how are you doing? I haven't talked to you since—"

"I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get mad at you. I was just taking it out on you because I couldn't get any madder at her."

"You don't have to make any excuses. Have you talked to her since?"

"No. Is she here yet?"

"Frank just went to walk her over. Do you want me to say something to her?"

"No. I'm just going to be pleasant because it's Christmas and I don't want to start anything."

They finished dividing up the pasta, and more relatives and friends arrived and trucked their specialties into the kitchen: thick, heavy lasagnas, savory *frittati*, trays of homemade salami and cheeses, platters of crisp *canolli* bursting with sweet, creamy filling. These were serious recipes, not the frivolous hodge-podge of neo-Italian cuisine touted in trendy magazines. Some of these had first been created generations ago, variations on the ancient fare of these peoples' poor ancestors. Though the composition had changed over the decades, become more complex and richer as had people themselves, they still retained the genuine simplicity and honesty of food eaten by people who struggled for any small bounty they reaped.

Mary carried a platter of her own lasagna over to the table as the front door opened and Frank walked in with the matriarch of the family, her tiny yet sturdy frame balanced on a thick cane. As she appeared in the doorway the whole house seemed to get up and move toward her at once, each individual struggling to attain proximity to greet her. But she waved them away so that Frank could help her toward the corner of the large couch in the living room-—her spot—and, once seated, she took greeters one by one like a queen holding court.

Mary rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and laughed to herself at the spectacle. She shook her head in wonder at the old woman, who at ninety-three still possessed the

mind of a person nowhere near her age. It angered Mary that she used her broken English as a shield against anyone whom she did not care to speak to, but to those she loved, even the ones who did not speak Italian, she spoke openly with ease and wit.

Cradling a warm bowl of sauce in her arms, she remembered the times in her mother's kitchen when the old woman stood over her and criticized her every move. *Not enough oregano...too much wine...you burned the garlic...the meatballs are too small…* All she had ever yearned for was an encouraging look, a word of praise. Instead she caught the criticism and threw it back in the form of better and better cooking, until the day when her mother stopped coming into the kitchen when Mary cooked. She felt a sad triumph, knowing that she had surpassed the old woman's abilities, but missed her intruding presence nonetheless, still waiting for the acknowledgment that would never come.

Goddamn it, she thought. *I take care of you for years; I get your groceries, I take you to the doctor, I talk to you...I don't ask for anything in return and you contradict every word I say and everything I do. You can't even say anything pleasant to me, let alone a thank-you.*

She stood there seething and staring at the old woman on the couch and felt transported to some other space, some realm in which nothing existed except her mother and her, the younger one standing at a distance, refusing to move closer, imagining the other looking miserably around herself, groping, lost in a void—nobody to dote on her, nobody at all, only space and time closing in on her like a fog, stealing the space, choking the light.

And suddenly Mary's vision shattered around her and came crashing down in a red splash as she felt a hand on her shoulder and jerked suddenly away from it. Frank's drunken weight shifted back away from his startled sister as the bowl of sauce crashed onto the table in front of them and invaded every dish in the near vicinity.

“Oh, shit! I'm sorry, Mary,” Frank laughed drunkenly.

“Goddamn it! Look what you made me do!”

“I said I was sorry. What the hell you so jumpy for, anyway?”

She leered at her brother. “Why don't you put that glass down for just once tonight and help me clean this up,” she said, then paused. “Oh, for God's sake, would you look at this?” She said this to no one in particular and looked down at the table. The sauce had successfully covered several dishes which were now indiscernible, but which had certainly not called for sauce. Disgusted, Mary began picking up the submerged plates and trays and taking them into the kitchen where Teresa stood, arms open.

“Here, let me help you with these,” she said to Mary then leaned nearer and whispered, “Don't worry! This is Rosie's damned "homemade” salami that she buys from the butcher every year.”

“You're kidding.”

“I saw her there yesterday. Now, come on. I'll help you clean up the rest.”

Mary shook her head and half-smiled, yet while armed with Teresa's levity, still cringed when she returned to the dining table to see her mother lean against one edge for balance and stare at the sauce-soaked plates. The old woman then shifted her gaze from the table to the daughter. Mary could barely look into her mother's coal-black eyes.

I know just what you're saying. 'Stupid, why can't you be more careful? Looks like how you used to leave my *kitchen...*'

But the old woman did not say anything of the sort, only grinned slightly, shrugged, and announced a smiling "*Buon Natale*" to Mary in apparent sincerity. The whole room full of guests, which by now had quieted considerably and focused their attention on the stand-off, took this as comic relief and burst out into raucous laughter, looking at one another and repeating the words, *Merry Christmas*. Mary stood perplexed, her mouth open, watching her mother slowly turn and shuffle back to the couch. By this time the rest of the house had deserted the dining room, focused their short attention on other matters, and left the sauce incident far behind. But Mary continued to stand completely still, as if stuck in the time of a few moments ago, and stared at the empty spot where her mother had stood while the rest of the house swirled merrily around her. Finally, she felt pressure on her left shoulder and turned to see Teresa's hand resting there, her face smiling softly.

"Look," she said, motioning to the table and smiling. "You missed the *cannoli*."

Mary looked at Teresa as if she did not understand, confusion becoming contempt. "You really think it's funny?"

"Mary, she only meant to make light. She didn't mean anything against you."

"You don't understand. You have no idea what she does to me. Did you think she'd yell and scream like Dad used to? She doesn't have to. She's too smart for that. She's smarter than any of you realize. That's all she had to do—say one word and the whole room looks at me like I'm an idiot. *Merry Christmas...*"

“Mary, it's Christmas Eve.”

“I know what day it is.”

Teresa paused, pushed beyond her usual mild nature.

“Okay, let's say your mother just did exactly what you say she did. She thought of the most subtle, most hidden way that she could imagine to make you look stupid, to deliberately hurt you, even better, to try and provoke you and ruin your holiday."

Mary crossed her arms and waited for Teresa to continue.

“So...are you stupid? Are you a fool? No. Are you hurt? Maybe. But what are you going to do about it? Even if she does this exactly as you say, it's not because she's smart. It's not a smart thing to do. It's a childish thing. Like part of her didn't grow up. At best she's a petty old woman with an ax to grind with you for...who knows what? Does it matter? Are you going to let yourself be a child and play into her?”

Mary looked at Teresa with sad round eyes. The expression that shone defiance had entirely melted from her face; she shrank, all her ferocity gone, her arms, no longer rigid, hung slack at her side.

“But, she's not supposed to do that to me.” She tried to force an angry tone, but instead finished the phrase in a sob and leaned forward to let Teresa hold her. “She's my mom. She's not supposed to do that.”

And suddenly she no longer stood in her sister-in-law's dining room at all, but through her tears felt the dizzying rush of time cut through her like a swift blade. Teresa's shoulder transformed into Mary's own scabbed knees as she sat in the back of the garden behind the tall stalks of corn, huddled at the bottom of the fence, her tiny legs

drawn up against her chest, the cold wind chilling the tears that clung to her bruised cheeks. She felt the hard, slow footsteps echo on the earth below her, crashing through the brittle stalks, then shut her eyes tightly until she saw the stars, and pretended for a few moments that she was safe.

Nick, lost in a sea of guests, had missed the sauce incident entirely. He thought it strange, though, that all the adults had been diverted for some reason to that part of the house, and that the presents room stood void of attention. By now, there were usually far too many people in the house for any one section to be left empty of guests, so many that every room writhed in a constant shifting and positioning with adults balancing cocktails and appetizer plates while children snaked by them on the floor. Nick's wondering soon gave way to the far greater curiosity of seeking out his gifts, and he crept among the multicolored packages, leaving no tag unturned. He checked the clock—9:00 p.m. "Santa" would arrive within the hour. Nick wondered who would be sly enough to slip out into the night, don the bright suit, play the role, and return to the crowd before anyone knew otherwise? He ruled out Uncle Frank, who had just risen from napping on the couch and stood propped against the dining room table, Aunt Teresa building him a plate. Last year Nick felt convinced that his father acted the part, but as soon as the great one had entered the house and stood *ho-ho-hoing* while Nick scrutinized his every move from the living room, Tony appeared at his son's shoulder, smiling down at him and laughing harder than everyone.

Nick now worked his way to the middle of the room, the midpoint of the great hoard of gifts. This was the best place from which to search; he had grown enough since last year so that if he leaned far forward and braced himself against a piece of furniture or particularly large box, he could reach almost every tag. Discovering this newfound ability, he continued to pour over the packages, counting those marked "To: Nicky" which now numbered an even dozen. But, despite his advantage, he pushed himself beyond his limits while stretching to one of the extreme corners of the room; his weight overwhelmed the chair on which he leaned, caused it to lurch away from him and he crashed down on top of several of the wrapped boxes, landing hard against one particularly solid gift.

"Nicky!" The loud whisper rushed from the hallway door, and Nick turned to see the worried face of his father peering in.

"What happened?"

"I was just looking at the presents and I fell."

"How do you fall looking at presents?"

"I lost my balance."

"Sounds like you were looking a little too close. Come on. Let's get you up."

Tony stepped into the room and offered a hand to his son who in one great heave stood upright again. The two looked back at the landing zone. Nick's fall had caved in two boxes, and others suffered torn paper and ribbon.

"Uh-oh," Tony said. "We better try and fix them up."

The two instinctively shut the door which opened onto the hallway and stepped gingerly among ruined packages. Finding extra wrapping supplies in the corner, they set about patching the boxes with enough success to satisfy the unwitting, spirited crowd. Before rejoining the party they turned very nonchalantly to examine the room, as if they had merely passed and offered a disinterested glance. All looked normal enough, perhaps a bit too normal, yet only to the perpetrators themselves.

As the two smiled at one another, Teresa appeared in the hallway, her face uncharacteristically weary.

“Hey, how's it going?” Tony said.

“Fine,” she smiled, then looked at her nephew. “Nick, could you do us a favor and mix us fresh drinks?”

“Sure, Aunt Teresa,” Nick answered with great enthusiasm. His mother forbade him going anywhere near alcohol, but on holidays this rule relaxed as the alcohol itself flowed freely in the adults around him, his mother included, and they often asked him to refresh their stale glasses. He relished doing so, for during the few moments of accepting the request, receiving the glass, performing the work, and delivering the potion back to its owner, he felt a part of their secret world. And they treated him differently, not as if he had brought them an extra chair or a snack; they did not fawn over his actions, take any extra care in thanking him. They simply treated him like anyone else who had mixed them a drink, not smiling any wider, not speaking any slower, even dropping the diminutive "y” from his name as they addressed him. And though the occasions when he performed this rite remained few, he relished each construction with slow practice,

paying strict attention to every step. He now held in each hand the tumblers his aunt and father had handed him, felt pride in that they did not convey any cautionary advice that might have diminished his experience, but simply handed him the glasses.

Walking toward the kitchen, the spent remnants in hand, he looked carefully at each glass, noticed the now tiny cubes of ice floating in the opaque liquid, felt the dampness on his hands from the saturated napkins. He approached the portion of the counter that served as the bar and in one deft move cast the dregs of each glass into the sink, then, rinsed and dried, refilled them with perfect diamond cubes from the brimming bucket. Finding both his father's Scotch in the tall, green bottle with the red cap (this always reminded him of Christmas) and his aunt's crystalline vodka, he poured equal portions in each individual glass, then topped them with their respective mixers of soda water and orange juice. After generously stirring the drinks, he placed each on two fresh cocktail napkins, picked up glasses and napkins together, and began a careful route back to where his father and aunt stood in the hallway.

Teresa had watched Nick as he retreated toward to kitchen, then turned to her brother-in-law. Her feeble attempt at a calm, festive expression vanished as her eyes met Tony's.

“Teresa, what's wrong?”

“Mary and I got in a fight about Mom. Well, not really a fight...”

“What happened?”

"She thought Mom was trying to embarrass her for dropping a bowl of sauce on the table."

"What?"

"She spilled sauce all over the table and we were cleaning it up. Mom walked over and smiled at her and just said 'Merry Christmas,' and Mary flipped. I tried talking to her, but I got frustrated with her. I think I upset her even more."

"Where is she?"

"She's in the bedroom. I'm sorry, Tony. I didn't know she was so hurt."

"Don't worry about it. I'll go talk to her. It'll be okay."

"It's just that I don't know what to do anymore. I try everything I can. I know Mom can be a pain in the ass sometimes, but why can't Mary just ignore her?"

Tony looked at the rug at his feet and thought for a moment. He had been witness to many of his wife's outbursts concerning her mother, had seen Mary's urgency and despair. The old woman could say one seemingly harmless word, and Mary would grow enraged. Tony questioned her many times, but she spoke of the problems only in generalities, never specifics, as if the base reasons were so obvious that she had no concept that others did not comprehend them. At first, he thought it was actually a language difference—he did not speak Italian and understood little of the rapid Sicilian Mary and her mother fired at one another. But as he listened to them more and more throughout the years, he began to pick up words until he pieced together the gist of conversations. But even this understanding simply held no more than surface meaning to him, and he could glean nothing maddening, nothing outrageous.

"I'll let you know later how she's doing," he said and placed his hand on Teresa's shoulder before turning toward the back bedroom.

When Nick walked deliberately up to his aunt, both drinks full to the brim and balancing in his chubby hands, he saw his father's retreat.

"Where's Dad going, Aunt Teresa?"

"He's going to talk to your mom, honey. She doesn't feel too good."

"Doesn't he want his drink?" Nick asked, dejected.

"Maybe later, Nick. But I would *really* like mine."

He smiled and handed her the frosty glass. "How is it?"

She sipped, careful not to let any escape down the side. "Mmm, delicious. Thank you."

Nick gazed at her, his face warm with pride, then turned and walked back into the kitchen, glancing quickly and carefully around and, seeing that no one near paid him any attention, took a large gulp from the drink he'd made for his father. He swallowed fast—it tasted like medicine—and then dumped the rest down the sink, grimacing and shaking his head. Then he poured himself a glass of 7-Up and leaned against the counter, feeling the delicious, giddy warmth spread throughout his body.

Chapter 10

Mary lay curled in a fetal position in the middle of the four-poster in the master bedroom. On top of the dresser and night tables sat framed photographs of her parents holding various newborn children in their arms. Her mother beamed a wide smile in the photos, her father tilted his head without smiling, impassive and proud. He had died when Mary was only eleven, yet she remembered with fear his dark, stone face which could fill full of hate in an instant, terrorizing her and her brothers. When she was young she tried to act as quietly around him as she could. When she grew older and realized that this tactic failed, she simply avoided him as much as possible. It had been easier for Frank and her other brothers; eventually they got into a fistfight with him and ended up leaving home, joining the army, something. And though Mary's physical acuity struck fear even in all but the largest boys in the neighborhood, she felt paralyzed by her father's very presence and could not think of striking out against him in any way.

Looking at the photos now awakened the pain and nausea she had numbed earlier and she shut her eyes tightly against the swirling, uncontrollable rush. When she did so with enough force the nausea subsided, but the calm that replaced it did not lend her solace. Instead, she opened her eyes to the cornfield, or so she called it when she was a little girl, for it seemed immense and boundless. When she grew older her exploration into this corner of the garden grew bolder, and she tracked every square inch of it, knew every stalk of every row, discovered the best places to hide.

She remembered little else about being five, or six, or seven, did not remember much detail of her life at all until she reached her early teenage years, did not consider her lack of memory in any way abnormal, though she thought it curious when conversing with women who spun intricate tales of bright, playful childhoods, brimming with detail, thought it amazing that they remembered the name of everyone in their first grade class, the color of dresses they wore on Easters long past, things they had squealed about at pajama parties. Mary only recalled vague memories of her bedroom, the kitchen, mostly the garden. Her room was a death-trap: tiny, no closet, only one way out, and she abandoned it as a place of refuge after trying to dive under the bed once, which proved a horrific mistake. The kitchen held many places to hide, many cupboards, bins, closets, but offered far too many weapons within arms reach that could be used against her. She discovered this once after her father knocked her unconscious with a skillet from the stove. So, when she needed to hide, she ran to the garden.

The garden became more than her refuge; it became her friend. There her size was an advantage, allowing her to tuck unnoticed between the leafy rows of corn. She found this especially effective when she picked her way quickly through the maze of stalks and squatted down next to the back fence, pressing hard against the whitewashed slats, trying to make her scrawny frame disappear into the wood. From there she held her breath and slammed her eyes shut, squeezed the palms of her hands vice-like against her ears to fend off any sound. Yet despite these buffers, she still heard him, tearing the yard apart, kicking over the tin trashcans, knocking over the woodpile, dumping baskets of wet laundry onto the ground. The first time she had sought refuge in the corn patch she

immediately felt a searing regret envelop her, thinking he would soon discover her obvious hiding place. But its location off to the side of the house and distance from the more immediate places must have eluded her father. Later this made sense to her; he only attacked when he was drunk. His sober demeanor was impassive, dispassionate, void of overt reaction to anything; friends of the family even wondered if he was *really* Sicilian. When he was not drinking he merely ignored Mary, and she floated about him like a cloud, omnipresent yet unnoticed. His drunkenness actually worked to her ironic advantage—sober, he surely would have possessed both the mental and physical alertness to discover her refuge, and easily capture her in the midst of her flight. Drunk, rage engulfed him and along with the alcohol dulled his senses.

His temperament was an anomaly to the rest of the family; his brothers were talkative jovial people who became a bit louder and much more jovial when they drank. Alcohol only accentuated his already trapped, seething emotions until his unerringly cold demeanor no longer held them back. He then exploded with such venom, such unrelenting fury, that anyone in his path became a target. Not surprisingly, he never attacked those who could put up a reasonably able fight; the men he assaulted in bars had no real chance of defeating his bulldog ferocity. His tiny wife could only hold her arms up and try to deflect his blows away from her face so that she would not bruise visibly and attract attention. Mary's bruises were more easily explained away as the clumsy abandon of a tomboy.

She spent as much time in the garden as possible, helping her mother tend to the vegetables, watering, weeding, planting new rows of tomatoes and peppers, eggplant and

zucchini. At first she considered these tasks neither drudgery nor bliss, but simply practice, like a skill one learns when beginning a new job. She memorized the entire terrain of the garden, the precise paths to use between the neat, tight rows so that she could escape into its foliage without disturbing the smallest leaf or displacing even a piece of soil in a narrow furrow. When she dove in with precision speed she did not simply hide in it, but disappeared from her own physical world and became part of it. Through this diligent practice, accompanying her mother, she actually acquired a love for the place and came to relish her work there; she fell in love with all the different vegetables (her father forbade flowers which he considered useless). They let ripen every hue of bell pepper: fiery reds and soft saffron yellows, rich greens and playful oranges. She liked the green beans so much because they were easiest to grow and seemed to leap from the earth overnight and explode upward, grasping for their pole. The tomatoes she found fussy and particular, but when she paid them their required attention they yielded heavy, sweet fruit. She had trouble with the zucchini because of its prickly vine barbs which stung her soft skin, and though her mother always required that they be picked early, as they lay small and tender, she always managed to forget one on the back side of the row where her mother did not pay attention. She watched this one grow into a giant, sometimes reaching over three feet in length and gaining so much weight that she had to solicit help from her brothers to cut it loose and roll it away.

Sometimes during the summer months when the heat lingered late into the night, she crept from her bedroom and out into the garden, looking up at the smiling silver moon which illuminated all her friends and lent them an ethereal quality. If she sat still

enough and remained completely silent, she could see them grow, the beans lurching their way from the tight ground, the zucchini swelling, the tomatoes slyly stretching their delicate skin, thought how wonderful it would be to transform herself into a garden vegetable, to be able to be there always with no other motive than to grow.

Children are resilient. Though small even for her age, Mary endured the severity of her father's lunacy throughout her childhood. Though her patch of corn served her well, she fell capture to the rage more often than not, betrayed by the lack of dexterity in her child's body. As she lay on the ground outside next to the garden, bruised and bleeding, her heart beating so hard that it became difficult to hear anything else, she wondered what she could have done to warrant such severity. Her father's drunken ramblings and obscenities offered no reasoning, and she would have gladly changed her habits if she could only imagine her offense. As painful as her ordeal seemed, it became nonetheless routine, something she could expect, and she actually fell into the role so easily that at times she surprised herself. She of course still tried to escape, but when the garden proved too far away she found it almost easier to take the beating and get it over with. He would soon tire of her seemingly lifeless body, and then turn and thunder back into the house where he resumed the terror against his wife. Mary lay on the ground listening to her mother's moans, hearing the sickening thud of his fist against her soft flesh, watching their silhouettes in the bedroom window as her mother's shadow flew onto the bed and his lunged after it, falling on top of her dark outline and slamming against her over and over again, her groaning keeping time with his thrusts until he squeezed her mouth shut with his hand to finish his task.

Two of the most important events of Mary's childhood happened almost simultaneously, and it was this strange, almost unbelievable coincidence that held most of the responsibility for her surviving into adulthood. Her father, having been in his mid fifties when she was born, had just turned sixty-five years old. As his health had declined so had his energy and, guided by the family physician, his drinking. He mostly indulged in a glass of wine or two on Sundays which almost immediately put him to sleep. Expectedly, his violent outbursts declined, yet his demeanor grew more sullen, and he spent much time asleep. Mary's beatings became less and less frequent until she actually questioned whether they had happened at all, whether they were actual events or merely phantasms of her own mind, perhaps acts of contrition sent from God to punish her elusive sins.

She continued to maintain her garden with real devotion, growing in love for it as her body grew larger and stronger. Though still very young, she had willfully taken almost complete charge of it, and with such skill that her mother allowed her the leeway, planting new vegetables, lengthening the rows, adding a border of immense yellow sunflowers that towered over and stood guard to her beloved corn stalks. And she planted more corn; row upon tight row of it until the size of the original patch had almost tripled in area. Her mother warned her not to plant each stalk so close so that they would choke one another, but, confident in her relationship with them, she continued to plant them as close together as she could get them, and they always survived, even flourished as their leaves intertwined and they embraced. Mary would often pick her way carefully

through the tight rows and snuggle between two stalks deep in the patch, then close her eyes and let her body relax, concentrating on each section of her anatomy, letting her breathing become at peace with the breeze and the beating of her own heart. After a long while she would sense the first tickle of a leafy stalk. If she smiled it would shy away, then return accompanied by the other leaves of the stalks which surrounded her and together they would embrace her, actually hold her in place as her pliant body yielded to their support. A split second before she opened her eyes to see the loving arms of corn, they would, of course, retreat for good. She continued to plant new rows, purposely staggering them in relation to one another so that one could not look through a tall stalk and see beyond the row in which it stood, and her patch became a thriving jungle of bright ears and thick, protecting flax.

It was very near her eleventh birthday that Mary was weeding around the tomatoes. She had just wrenched a knot of weeds from its stronghold next to her favorite plants when she heard the family sedan pull up to the curb and looked from her work to see her father explode out of the car and into the house. She stood still in the middle of the garden, small shovel in one hand, the other leaning against the ground to support her weight, and watched her mother chase quickly behind him and into the front door. She knew that they had returned from his monthly doctor's appointment, yet his reaction puzzled and frightened her, not having seen him express such active displeasure over anything in so long.

She assumed, correctly, that the appointment had not gone well. Actually, the doctor had given him less than a year to live, his organs so damaged from alcohol abuse

that he had aged far beyond even his sixty-six years. Though he had shown the doctor only calm resolution in the past, this news pushed him over an edge on which he had teetered for so long. The demon surfaced in him during the ride home; he screamed at his wife and cursed his children, accusing them of thanklessly taking advantage of him, inflicting him with grief and worry his entire life and making him an old man before his time. When they pulled the car in front of their house, he flew out and headed directly into the front door and unlocked the liquor cabinet, yanked a bottle and glass from its hidden depths, and disappeared into his bedroom, slamming the door to the entire world.

Mary and her mother sat in the kitchen cutting different shaped pasta out of thinly rolled dough. They had not heard a sound out of the bedroom for hours and hoped, then actually believed, that he had passed out asleep in an alcoholic stupor. Just as nighttime veiled the world their solitude shattered when the bedroom door crashed open, sending splinters of wooden frame flying into the hallway. The two at the table tossed their cutting wheels and leapt from their chairs in unison, then looked toward the kitchen doorway where he stood, chest heaving, eyes blazing. It seemed that the three were caught in a brief moment in time as they stood their respective ground and stared at one another, each waiting for the other to react. The stalemate eventually enraged him even more, and he finally roared a slurred obscenity at the ceiling and charged forward. Mary did not think of her mother, only turned and ran out the back door. He followed, hampered briefly by his wife's feeble attempt to block his rush, and he threw her against the stove.

Outside, a huge, full moon lit the entire world in a brilliant luminescence that rivaled daylight. He burst through the back door and onto the porch and saw Mary quite plainly, her form washed in the exposing moonlight, running toward the garden. He charged forward, delighted when he watched her dive into the corn patch, thinking he had surely trapped her. But as he thrashed about wildly, knocking down entire stalks, turning from one side to another, he became lost, unsure of the direction she had taken or of which way he should turn.

Having felt him too close behind her, Mary had known that the corn would offer no sanctuary this time, its collusion now discovered. Though she entered the patch as she had before, she did not stop to hide but continued along the fence which made up its back border, underneath the towering sunflowers, all the way to the end of the lot and out onto the sidewalk, then cutting back into the yard next door, finally stopping, squatting down low in the shadow of the neighbors' house, waiting. She listened as her father destroyed her garden, hearing her corn stalks scream as they broke in half or were wrenched from their footing altogether, feeling their pain. Then the noise suddenly stopped. Mary poked her head up slightly so that her eyes could peek just above the fence-line and into her yard. She watched as her father took long, hard strides into the garage, heard him rummaging inside, then saw him emerge with a large can. He walked immediately over to the garden and, removing the stopper from the top of the container, began to slop its contents out onto Mary's vegetables.

She watched, frightened but fascinated, not understanding what it was that he poured onto her frightened friends until he shook the last of the unknown liquid out and

flung the can aside, then, staggering backward, he reached in his pocket for a small book of matches. He struck one, then lit the entire book and tossed it casually out into the middle of the soaked vegetables.

The entire garden erupted simultaneously in tower of flame, the fire consuming the tall, defenseless stalks of corn and they waved in agony in the merciless breeze, stuck doomed in their rows by the very roots that fed them life. Mary leaned against the stucco wall of the neighbors' house, frozen before the spectacle, and watched as the wind grew stronger and pushed the flames in the direction of the nearby garage. Her father stood his ground for a long moment, gazing up at the flames that now licked at the hanging leaves of the tree behind him. Suddenly, a gust of wind propelled the waving tendrils of fire into the heart of the tree and it burst into flame like the head of a match directly above where he stood.

Mary saw the tree ignite and winced at the sudden rush of heat that engulfed her, throwing smoke into her eyes, and she squinted and coughed, temporarily blinded by the stinging fumes. She did not see the structure of the tree branches collapse into the flames at this same moment, did not see the great knot of burning branches break away from the weakened trunk and crash to the ground where her father staggered, his vain escape attempt too hampered by the alcohol that paralyzed his legs. When Mary finally rubbed the smoke from her eyes she scanned the scene for the figure of her father but could not find him amid the glare and smoke. Terrified that he had left the burning yard to search for her, she turned toward the street and ran as far as she could, following the parked cars toward the nearest intersection and continuing toward the cliff overlooking the wharf

several blocks away, not stopping until she heard the faint moan of sirens in the distance growing louder against the quiet of the night. She stopped breathless and turned to watch the pulsing glow above the rooftops in the distance.

When the ambulance finally arrived the only one left to administer to was Mary's mother. She sat on the back porch, her head in her hands, rocking back and forth, singing a Sicilian lullaby softly, over and over. She responded to no one around her, seemed to sit in some other place. When two firemen finally lifted her to her feet, she began to scream and thrash about so violently that the paramedics had to sedate her. In their panic they did not pay close attention to the procedure and administered an overdose from which she did not recover for several days. This succeeded in erasing the clearest memory she had of that night, and when she awoke in the hospital bed, had to be reminded that her husband had been killed. This allowed her to grieve normally, accepting that he was gone, but having lost all details of his cremation which she had watched from the back porch, had watched and, despite over forty years of devotion and obedience, had made the very deliberate decision not to run to him, not to try to pull him from the flames. In reality, her efforts would have proven useless and she would have succeeded only in allowing the flames to drag her down to burn with him. Yet this did not matter. Her shame lay buried in the realization that, despite the years of torture and abuse, she had never wished him ill, had remained true to her faith and forgiven him the sins he practiced, sins she knew were, after all, alive in all of us. Now she felt compelled

that, at her next confession, she would have no choice but to tell the priest that she had murdered her husband.

The five firemen who stood around the charred web of branches that imprisoned the corpse of Mary's father had never seen anything like this. They had, of course, seen many dead bodies; old women and men, young boys and girls, babies, yet nothing before startled them like this scene. The fire had burned his body with such destruction that it was nearly indistinguishable from the branches which surrounded it. The firemen did not understand how this type of fire could have possibly burned someone beyond recognition—it just wouldn't have been hot enough. Even more curious was the manner in which the body lay encased in the branches. They surrounded him like the bars of a cage, tightly, securely, so much so that no opening existed large enough for a body to have been forced through in the first place. It looked as if the branches had fallen on top of him and in a freak act of nature, closed in on him like the fist of some great burning giant, contracting its fingers so that the prey could not escape. The men finally shrugged and accepted the scene, knowing that fire could twist the most mundane into the impossibly grotesque.

When Mary wandered back to the charred remains of her yard, the ambulance had already taken her mother to the hospital. By now the neighborhood encircled the scene, and Mary had to struggle through the onlookers still clad in their bedclothes despite the cold. She made her way through the crowd and over to the base of the tree where the firemen worked at freeing the blackened corpse from its prison. Feeling a rush of confusion overtake her body, she succumbed to its weight and fell hard against the

concrete slab, and did not awake until the next morning, wrapped in the sterile confine of the hospital bed. She turned her head slightly to the left, toward the light of the window, and saw her mother, unconscious, a tube protruding from her arm, laying in the bed next to her. Thinking that the old woman had perished in the fire, this startled her, then amused her, and she chuckled openly. Later, when they were both awake, they sat in their separate silences, each expecting the other to say something. They had been wrenched from the familiar territory of kitchen and garden, and with the absence of scenery, the lines of the script seemed to vanish for them as well. When the nurses arrived with a meal, the two felt obliged to acknowledge each other and would share a few indirect pleasantries, dampened by the presence of the nurses. They were discharged from the hospital after two days of this forced juxtaposition.

At home nothing remained to be done: Mary's brothers who had come from out of town had arranged for the funeral and completely purged the yard of any sign of destruction. When she walked through the house and out to the back porch on her arrival, she stopped and, leaning against the freshly painted wrought-iron railing, gazed out at the yard. Everything stood in place, either newly painted or repaired, or newly razed and rebuilt. Everything except the tree: it, of course, had to be cut down (the grape vines that climbed the trellis behind it were gone, too), and the garden. Frank and the other boys had intended on replanting, but there just wasn't enough time to turn the soil and buy new seedlings, let alone plant them. The space where the garden had thrived lay sterile and uniform, the dirt picked clean of every remnant of charred vegetation, the borders swept neatly away from the freshly washed cement of the yard. Mary stared but could not

believe that this large patch of dirt, so vacant and lifeless, had ever held the life of her garden.

She stood upright from her leaning position on the rail and walked down the porch and toward the dirt, stopping where the corn had waved at her in the sunlight every day. Closing her eyes, she tried to relax her body as she did before, but this time no loving arms embraced her. Instead the unchecked wind whipped her face and arms as the tears ran down her face and splashed onto the barren earth. She lowered her body to the ground and sat with her legs out to one side, leaning against the cold, unfamiliar soil with both hands, the wind stinging her wet cheeks.

She cried there, cradled in the ghost of the garden, for a long time. Her mother finally approached her, tried to comfort her with the promise of a new garden by the next spring, and this idea made her tears recede. Yet she could not imagine replacing the corn and decided silently at that moment that she would never grow it again, unable to imagine the new being as dear to her as the old, yet if it were, she could never again bear its destruction. And so she decided it better that the corn did not exist at all.

The next day, the day of her father's funeral, began normally. She rose early, completed her chores (fewer now with the absence of the garden), washed, dressed. As she walked about the house and yard she felt the strength of the sun intensify as early morning turned to late, and by noon the day had grown unseasonably hot. She heard her mother drawing the cool bath she always did on days when the weather turned warm, and listened outside the bathroom door as the old woman sat sobbing in the tub. Mary thought of going inside and comforting her, but finally decided against the idea. She

instead walked back toward her room, crossing herself as she passed in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary that stood in the tiny hallway alcove, noticing that a third candle had been placed at the Virgin's feet, and for a moment wondered why. She knew that the one was for her brother Mike who had been killed in the war, and the other for the brother who died stillborn long before she had been born; he had no name. The third candle sat fat and new in a gilded, rose-colored glass; the other two had been pushed back and to make room for this one. The flame of the other two candles stood calm and erect in their cobalt blue votive cups, their short flames glowing contentedly next to the Virgin's feet. But the new candle's flame jerked about wildly in its more ornate confines, and made gaudy shadows against the statue's robes. Mary thought it curious that the other two that stood so near could remain calm while this one thrashed about; she could feel no breeze in the hallway. It looked to her as if the flame actually fought a baleful struggle against its own wick, trying to escape the presence of the Virgin. Mary looked at the statue, resplendent in the candlelight, gazing down with palms outstretched to lend comfort to the souls represented by the flames. She then lifted her hand to her mouth and wet her thumb and forefinger, reached for the fat, struggling flame, and pinched out its light with a hard squeeze, not wincing even slightly at the sting of the fire.

She did not cry at the funeral, showed no emotion at all, but sat bolt upright with the same impassive, stone face of her father's, looking coolly at the life-size statue of Jesus agonizing on the cross that towered in front of the first pew. She sat in the middle, flanked by brothers on either side. Her mother sat two brothers down, and Mary listened

intently to the woman's moaning. Once during a moment of silence Mary glanced to her left, expecting to see the now-quiet woman bowing her head in supplication for her husband's soul, but instead was met by a pair of contemptuous eyes. She tried to look away but could not break free from the damning stare that seemed to say that Mary's very presence vitiated the sanctity of the entire ceremony. Then Mary blinked, and after that split second her gaze again rested on the view of her mother. But instead of meeting the recriminating eyes, she saw only her mother's bowed, sobbing head framed by her son's arm and shoulder. It did not appear that her mother could have averted her own hard stare so quickly; the mournful repose she emanated now could not have coalesced so quickly from the scattered shards of misery Mary had just witnessed on the face. She wondered who it was, or what it was, she had actually seen. Could she have kept her eyes closed longer than she remembered and merely witnessed a side of her mother never displayed before? But though this seemed the logical explanation, it felt to Mary like the most unlikely, most remote. Could her guilt have projected from her body and transfigured the face she watched so that it was actually her own face? Did some demon from hell possess her mother just long enough to show Mary a glimpse of her future, the penalty for her life? Had the ghost of her father himself possessed the woman, a vain last attempt to lash out from beyond?

As all these images reeled in Mary's mind, burst upon her consciousness like an exploding light, one after another, faster and faster, until they no longer possessed any delineation, any separation, and all melted into one horrible miasma of possibility spinning brightly against her vision, though her eyes remained shut. Feeling light-headed

and queasy, she tried to rest her head against one of the shoulders on either side of her, but this did no good as the images continued to spin and twist in her mind. Finally, she forced her eyes open and reached for the wooden rail in front of her pew which separated them from where Jesus hung. Holding one hand over her face and balancing her entire weight against the rail, she stumbled over her brothers' shoes until she escaped the pew's confines, then walked as quickly as she could down the side aisle of the church, letting her hand push off the tall wooden end-cap of each row as she walked past. When she reached the restroom she knew that the toilet stood too far out of reach and instead stepped quickly to the sink just inside the door.

As she vomited into the unstained porcelain, her stomach began to relax from its contractions, as did her mind. Her heaving subsided, and her heart slowed. Gradually, the blinding strobes which pulsed beneath her closed eyes grew less frequent and bright, replaced by the quiet, returning darkness. Though her eyes remained shut she could feel the scene changing, transforming around her, gradually, like the winter thaw becoming the spring bloom. Suddenly she stood more aware of where she was and less of where she had been, leaning with her hands against the cool familiar surface in front of her and tried to recall her thoughts of a few moments ago. Though the details seemed lost, the feeling they left behind remained, drifting through her like the wake of some lost vessel. She opened her eyes onto the small bathroom inside Frank and Teresa's bedroom, a nightlight glowing dimly in the wall socket the only illumination. She reached for the light switch and prepared herself for the mess she would clean up. But when the light fell brightly onto the sink, it shone white and clear.

Mary stood upright and took three slow, deliberate steps backward. When the backs of her legs touched the edge of the bed she sat down in one, quick motion like that of a child. She was sitting like this, staring at her own reflection in the vanity mirror, when Tony walked into the room.

"Honey?" No reply. "Mary," he said, a bit louder this time. "Are you okay?"

The sound of her own name brought her part way back, and she answered, "Yeah, I'm fine" in a puzzled manner.

"You don't look so fine."

Silence. Tony breathed deeply and tried again. "Teresa said you were feeling sick."

As Mary sat on the bed pondering all she felt and all her husband was saying, she focused on the names—Tony, Mary, Teresa—and as she did so her thoughts grew more solid, her memory more substantial, and the real events of the evening flooded back into her mind. She looked up at Tony, then at the clock on the nightstand, realizing that she had been in the bedroom for only fifteen entire minutes.

"I'm sorry, honey," she said lucidly to her husband. "I had an upset stomach and I had to lie down. I just woke up when you walked in."

"You're feeling better?"

"Fine, really."

"Teresa said you got into an argument with Mom."

"It was nothing. I was over-reacting."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," she said, too abruptly.

Tony walked into the room from where he leaned against the doorway and sat on the bed next to his wife.

"Honey, why don't you talk to me about it? Maybe I could help you find a way to deal with her so you wouldn't get so upset."

Mary looked at him tiredly and said, "I know how bad you want to make everything okay. But having a conversation about it isn't going to change the fact that it's *not*."

"It could be a start."

Mary sighed deeply. "Tony, my mother blames me for making her life miserable. I've tried for years to do everything I can to help her, but it doesn't matter. I just have to live with it."

"Why do you think your mother—"

"I don't *think* it. I *know* it."

"Okay. How do you *know* that your mother blames you for making her life miserable?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does. If there's a reason and you know it, and believe it, you're just as at fault as she is."

"What the hell are you talking about?" She stared sideways at him with wide eyes.

"What I mean is, whose opinion is it that you make Mom's life miserable."

"Its not an opinion, it's a fact."

"Come on..."

"Okay. It's hers."

"Right."

"So what?"

"So, if someone has a different opinion than you do, you don't have to agree with it. And I've never known you to agree with someone if you really don't."

"It's not the point whether I agree or disagree…"

"Yes, it is. It's exactly the point." He turned his body toward her, his forehead folded into concerned wrinkles.

"If you have a child, a little child who believes everything you tell it, and you say, 'You're stupid' to it every day, no matter what it does or how, and you keep this up, what's the child going to believe?"

"That it's stupid."

"Of course, even though it's not. But if someone who has great influence on a person tells that person something, as unbelievable as it may be, it can become the truth for that person. Because why would someone with such great power not be telling us the truth?"

Mary looked at Tony skeptically. "So, you're telling me that the reason I have problems is because *I* believe I make her life miserable."

"You just accept her opinion as the truth. Why would your mother lie to you?"

"Tony, it's not what I think, it's what *she* thinks."

"Mary, if you didn't believe it on some level, it would be just like me calling the child stupid."

Mary stared at him. "That's ridiculous. I'm sorry, I know you're just trying to help. But you're saying that this is my fault, and it's not."

"Honey, no. I'm not saying it's your *fault*, I'm saying that it's your *choice*. You don't have to believe her anymore. Even if she's the most sinister, conniving person in the world. You don't have to believe her opinion. She doesn't have any power over you anymore."

Mary stood up and shook her head. "Tony, please. I'm tired of talking about this. I know it seems simple to you, but it's not."

"But, Mary—"

"No. Stop, please. Christmas Eve's almost over, and I just want to enjoy the rest of it. Come on. Let's go make us a drink and see what Nicky's up to."

Mary turned and walked toward the doorway, waving for Tony to follow into the living room. Inside her mind a phrase repeated quietly yet persistently, over and over again—*...not my fault. It wasn't my fault…*

Chapter 11

In the body of the house, Christmas Eve reveled. Every chair stood occupied, every couch overflowed with people sharing cushions, even the low stoop-like hearth of the fireplace served as a hard, crowded bench. During this time the children had the most fun; it was by now way past all their bedtimes, yet the importance of this night, of course, commanded the suspension of standard time. Armed with the punchy, frenetic energy that fueled them, they kicked in their holiday afterburners and tore around the house like little ornamental jets. The adults, their mobility hampered by the lack of room and plenitude of cocktails, could do nothing but watch as the small ones scurried under tables and through legs. Actually, by this time, the adults couldn't care less about what the children were doing. So for a short time all inhibitions hung suspended—the children stopped looking over their shoulders at every move for overcautious adults, the adults stopped breaking eye contact with each other to search for misbehaving kids. Everyone just had a good time.

Nick stood careful watch in the kitchen, staring into the steamy window of the oven door at the dozens of broiling Italian sausages.

"How do they look, Nicky?" Aunt Teresa asked.

"I think they're ready."

"Okay. You get the big bag of rolls from the refrigerator in the garage. I'll get these things out of the oven."

It was Nick's tradition to help his aunt prepare and distribute the Italian sausage sandwiches every Christmas eve just before midnight when Santa would arrive. Nick would hold open each of the crusty, split rolls as his aunt stuffed them with a still-sizzling link. These sandwiches required no toppings, no sides or condiments; in the thirty-seven years Teresa had made them for her family and friends, even the non-Italians, no one had ever asked for mustard. They remained complete in their plainness, complex in their simplicity; just a broiled tube of meat and herbs stuffed into a crude piece of bread. Their wholeness came from not what they were made of or how, but the sheer wonder in some ancient time that they had been made at all. The ancestors of these people were not Roman patricians, but Sicilian peasants who sold most of what they made to remain on their indentured land, who ate pizza not as a novelty, but as a necessity. Their Christmas Eve sausages symbolized a simple hope of something better.

"You know, Nicky, when *Nana* was a little girl, they only ate these once a year."

"How come?"

"Because they were poor. And also, they were fishermen. They didn't have the sheep and pigs."

"Why didn't they just eat fish?"

"Well, they did. But most of it they had to sell to buy other things. And when you eat fish almost every day for a year, it's nice to treat yourself to something different."

"We have sausage and peppers every week."

"I know. Remember that every time you eat them." Teresa peered through the oven window at the sausages, thinking of the first time she remembered eating them as a

little girl (it was actually her first memory of childhood) in her parent's tiny apartment in New York after arriving in the United States. It was not Christmas and they could not afford them, but her father insisted that they indulge anyway to celebrate the occasion of their new home.

"Nicky, what time is it?"

"Twenty minutes to midnight."

"Oh, my God. I've been sitting here reminiscing and it's almost time. Quick, take this tray and start handing them out. I'll put the rest together myself. When you run out, come back for more."

Nick took the wide baking sheet that held two dozen sausage sandwiches, balancing the load against his chest, maneuvering very carefully past the bar and into the crowded dining area. When he appeared, everyone in the near vicinity erupted in unison cheers and lined up to grab a sandwich. In a few moments Nick's tray lay empty in his hands. He hurried back to the kitchen, loaded another two-dozen, and started out toward the opposite side of the house. As the sausage-hungry crowd gathered around him, he saw his parents appear from the hallway across the living room and watched them approach, his tray becoming lighter by the second.

"Hi, son," his father said.

"Does Aunt Teresa know you're passing these out?"

"Yes, Mom."

"So, she decided to do the sausages early this year, huh?"

"It's almost midnight, Dad."

"Midnight?" Tony's eye searched frantically for a clock. "Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh."

Tony turned to Mary, his back to the sausages, and whispered. "I had no idea what time it was. I forgot all about Santa Claus."

"What do you mean?"

"I was going to get Vinnie to do it this year, but I never got a chance to ask him. Then, when I went back to the car to get the suit, I realized I left it at home."

"You left it? Oh, Tony..."

"Yeah. I had it in my hands when we were walking out to the car, but I put it down on the front porch to help you with the food. I didn't realize it until we were here. Then I forgot. *Shit*."

Mary gave her husband a sympathetic look, but smiled playfully inside.

"Well, I have to go get it now."

"Tony, no. You've been drinking…"

"I'm fine. I'll go home, change, and run back. It won't take that long. So Santa comes at little late this year." He shrugged. "Damnit, I just wanted to have someone do it Nicky wouldn't recognize."

"It's okay. He'll love it just the same."

"Yeah, I know." He spoke dejectedly, then turned and maneuvered past the sausage seekers clamoring in the hallway and out the front door.

All the way down the narrow streets illuminated with winking lights Tony eased his sedan with his right foot on the gas and left on the brake, a technique he'd practiced in his youth to sharpen any possibly dulled reaction time relative to the number of beers he'd downed at the party. He'd *had* too much to drink, and he balanced the fear of discovery—the police cruisers brilliant strobe, the failed sobriety test, the stinking holding cell, the mortifying call to Mary—with his wish to make just one more Christmas Eve special for his son, his family, his friends, himself. When he pulled to the curb in front of his own house, tree lights blinking in opaque bursts through the closed drapes, he expected to dash to the porch, find the forgotten garment bag, secure himself again behind the wheel and, with his two-footed method navigate the small side-streets back to Frank and Teresa's. But when he approached the stairs, he saw no bag, neither lying on the steps, on the landing next to the small planter box, nor over the porch railing.

Trying to laugh off his blurred memory, he chuckled and unlocked the front door; surely the suit lay on the coffee table opposite the entry, on the couch to the right, draped casually on the chair that led to the bedroom. But for as many logical places that Tony searched, none held the missing bag. Nearly sober now and with bowed head and shoulders, he grabbed a spare Santa hat from among the household displays—one too small for even his head—and decided to return to the party, hoping Frank had tucked in the confines of his garage something, anything, that Tony might fashion into a Christmas disguise.

He entered the garage from the small utility entrance, not wanting to attract attention by opening the main door. Though the place was as familiar to him as his own

home the darkness and myriad objects strewn about created a challenging obstacle course to the light switch on the adjacent wall. When he edged forward he bumped into a trashcan and knocked the lid to the floor with cymbal-like results. Swearing, he reached the switch, and as he did, heard a shuffling sound from behind Frank's truck parked inside.

Tony peered warily into the dark, waited an extra moment as he scanned the blackness in front of his eyes then flicked on the light. When his vision adjusted to the brightness he noticed that the stacked boxes and other stored items on the far wall still shook slightly from the disturbance of a moment ago. *Goddamn cat*, he thought, then, considering the possibility of a holiday burglar, called out gruffly, "Hey! Who's there?"

No answer. Seeing one of Frank's shotguns leaning in a dark corner but within arms' reach, he picked it up and slid the pump noisily back and forth.

"If you're there, you better stand your ass up."

For a moment he heard nothing, then saw a white-gloved hand raise slowly, slowly from the opposite side of the truck. The hand grew into a smallish arm clad in a red sleeve with white fleece trim, and as the rest of the body followed, Tony saw through the notch in the shotgun's sight a small, too-thin Santa Claus emerge with both gloved hands raised high in the air.

Tony continued to draw down on the elf-sized Santa then let the shotgun drop safely out of aim and watched the besuited man release a deep and long-held breath and allow his cotton-flocked eyebrows and face to relax. Tony felt a vaguely familiar feeling rise within him and he concentrated his stare on the impostor's eyes and the familiarity

coalesced in his mind; he knew of only one set of eyes with such calm and sparkle, life and resolution. He heaved a sigh of relief and placed the shotgun back in its corner. The other dropped his arms and said, “There. I didn't think you could actually shoot Santa on Christmas Eve.” He winked a green-gray eye.

“For Christ's sake, Sal. What the hell are you doing in here? And what on *earth* are you doing in that costume?”

Sal Amato stood completely erect now, the tautness of his body emanating even through the padded layers he wore. For a moment he stood at attention then let himself relax, leaning up against the large, gray-steel fender of the truck.

“Now, Tony, what kind of question is that? I'm not wearing a goblin mask and calling out 'Trick-or-Treat.' Don't you think this fits the occasion?” And as he said this he moved his body with the deftness of a dancer from his leaning position against the fender into a straight, graceful stance, his arms outstretched, displaying his attire.

“You old nut.” Tony shook his head.

“Hey,” Sal shot back, allowing himself the luxury of a little anger. “Don’t come off at me like that.”

Tony squinted at the old fisherman. “What do you mean...?"

“You're pitying me.” Sal scowled.

Tony stared at the old man's face but could not meet his eyes. “Sal, look, I know a lot of people who think a lot of different things about you. I know you and Franky are good friends, and I respect that—”

“No, you don't.”

Tony paused, took an audible breath. “What you do mean, 'No I don't'? Okay, it doesn't matter. Look, I just mean it's not the smartest thing sneaking around in people's garages, that's all.”

“But, that's what you always do.”

“Huh?”

“That's what you always do on Christmas. You sneak around in the garage, dress up like Santa Claus, then surprise everyone inside.”

“Yeah, but Sal, I grew up across the street from this house. My brother-in-law and I played in the dirt this house was built on. This is my family. I belong here.”

“And you're saying I don't belong? Fine. But the next time you have a few too many holiday cocktails at the office, and come home before Christmas Eve even gets started without enough wit to remember what’s been so important to you for so many years, don't accuse someone who’s just trying to help you.”

“What do you mean?”

“And you didn't leave it on the porch, by the way. You left it on the coffee table.”

“But...how do you know that?”

Sal sighed and stared at Tony. “Yes, I was in your house.”

“How the hell did you get in my house?” Tony strode toward the old man.

“Wait a minute.” Sal held up one hand and Tony felt the impact of an unseen force, as if the strength of the hand emanated invisibly forward. He stopped still.

“I came by your house to wish you 'Merry Christmas.' I usually stay home on Christmas Eve—it's a quiet time for me—but I thought I'd break tradition this year and go

visit with you and your family for a while. When I got there, there weren't any lights on inside except for the tree in the front window, but the door was wide open. So, I thought you were still there, but when I walked inside and called out, no one answered. I knew you usually go to Franky's on Christmas Eve, so I thought you were in a hurry and didn't close the door well enough when you left. But then I saw the clothing bag lying on the front room table. I unzipped it and saw the suit, and I thought, 'How could someone who loves to play Santa so much be in such a hurry he forgot this?' I think the rest is pretty obvious.

"I had no intention of sneaking around in anyone's garage tonight, certainly no intention to barge in on Frank and his family, but I thought I'd do you a favor. You always want to surprise your son, and you always fail. So I flung the suit over my shoulder and walked down here. I figured the garage would be open for you. I just wish I could have seen the look on your face when you saw the real Santa Claus walk through the door."

Tony stood staring at the cement floor of the garage, his face hot and red, not understanding how this strange old man could discern so clearly what he should have no ability to know. He tried to shrug off Sal's insight as a lucky guess, but his stony assurance and indignant calm puzzled Tony. He stared at the dull truck fender and waited for Sal to continue, but the old man just stood there, still fully in costume, his arms not crossed in defiance, neither vulnerably folded behind him, but hanging straight down at his sides in complete neutrality. Tony felt not angry nor even embarrassed, but the confused, helpless sensation of a little child who feels that the power to change his

circumstances are so incomprehensible that he prefers his misery remain rather than attempting the impossible. Sal then stepped forward toward Tony and stood directly in front of him.

"Tony, I'm sorry."

"*You're* sorry. For what?"

"It wasn't fair of me to attack you like that."

"You were right. I drink too much, and I forget sometime. My God, I can't believe I forgot this costume."

"Everybody drinks too much sometimes."

"Not everybody points shotguns at people."

"You thought you were protecting your family."

"Yeah, what if it was one of the kids playing in here? What if it was Nicky? Here I am waving a gun around and it could have been my own son…on Christmas Eve."

"Tony, now you're being too hard on yourself. It wasn't your son and you didn't hurt anyone. The gun is not even loaded."

Tony cast a surprised look at Sal.

"I can tell," the old man said. "I've been around a few guns in my life. Anyway, you're just very angry because you're reading too much into your mistake. You didn't disappoint your son, you just forgot a suit. Look, I'll get out of this thing and you can—"

"No." Tony spoke resolutely. "You leave it on. I think that would be the best thing to do." He laughed to himself and smiled slightly. "Besides, he won't be expecting you."

"Are you sure? It'll be quite a commitment."

"Whatta ya mean?" Tony shrugged.

Sal let a pleased smile appear on his face as he looked at the confused man standing in front of him. "You're a pretty wise man, Tony. You have a sense of what is right even when you don't understand it yourself. You can still let it be. Not too many people can do that. They're usually too stubborn. Especially Sicilians."

"I'm *Napolitan'*."

"Yes," Sal laughed. "I know."

"Well, come on you wise old fisherman. Let's get this Christmas show started."

Tony felt lucky to discover Sal's covert activity in the garage, for, as he prepared the old man for his Santa debut, he realized that the costume required much reconstructive work. Sal's thin frame did not begin to fill out the shoulders of the jacket or waistband of the pants that Tony's thick trunk fit so snugly. Searching the garage, he discovered some old blankets stacked on one of the storage shelves and wrapped them around Sal to add to bulk, then duct-taped the padding onto his body before applying the suit; there would be no slipped-pillow incident for this Santa. Tony adhered some extra cotton from a roll he kept to bulk up the thin fake beard and hide Sal's familiar face. He applied a bit of rouge onto Sal's cheeks, a set of clear glass spectacles to frame his eyes, and finally helped him pull on the boots which, though two sizes too big, added several inches to his height.

This process took an undue amount of time, and for a while Tony thought the costume would just not work; Sal's diminutive stature, though powerful on its own, did not exude comfort with the extra girth, a familiarity that only a fat man could have, used to carrying such bulk. But Tony continued to work, looking up at Sal from time to time as if to extract a measure of confidence from the resolute eyes, and as he did this Sal would say reassuringly, "Try a little more padding over here," or, "This is starting to feel right," and, feeling charged by the old man's comments, Tony did not relent, sweat rolling down his face as he applied more padding and tape, and he thought, *By God, this skinny old bastard is going to look like Santa Claus if this takes all night*. And as he applied the last extra tape to secure the costume against attacking two-year-olds he noticed that the uneven bulges of blanket that had protruded so noticeably just moments ago from underneath the red velvet had somehow smoothed. Then he saw that the cotton that ringed Sal's face in barely even clumps seemed to coalesce, transform into something that resembled an unruly silver beard, that the thin, weathered face which clearly displayed its sharp, sun-hewn angles had smoothed, somehow plumped. All of this seemed so subtle yet so clear to Tony that he shook his head and thought he was simply caught up in some momentary Scotch-induced illusion that would soon melt away. But as he smoothed the pant legs down over the tops of the tall, black boots and then righted himself, walking backwards to get a wider perspective on his work, what he saw struck him, though he again attributed it to the dim light and sharp whiskey. He stood there amazed with his mouth open, head tilted slightly to one side, looking up—for now he *had*

to look up to meet the eyes, up farther than it seemed the boots could have propped the old man—and gazed at one of the most convincing, exuberant Santas he'd ever seen.

"Sal, it looks like you just gained a hundred pounds and grew a white beard."

The two stood in locked stares, Tony with mouth agape and the other offering a gentle smile.

"Sal? How did—"

But before he could realize the thought and form words they seemed to simply disappear, or rather flee from the confines of his mind on their own.

"Shhhhhh," the other whispered gently as he pressed a huge, plump index finger to his lips. The quiet reverberated in the garage like sleigh bells. "Tony, don't question. Release your wondering. Let it go. Come on." He held out his gloved hand, bending over at the same time to lift up a huge, thick crimson sack that Tony did not remember seeing.

Tony's hand now felt dwarfed by the one he held, and he walked slightly behind the towering red-clad figure, having to trot every couple of steps to catch up with the other who took long strides toward the lighted porch. As they marched forward he felt the wind swirl up his legs and around his body and a sudden cold strike which had not been forecast for that night. The wind tousled the leaves on the lawn and driveway and sent them swirling upward like flurries of snow. As they approached the door, the giant looked back at his small partner in tow and said in a large, low voice, "Tony, can you hear them? Can you *feel* them? They think it's too late. They think I've forgotten them. Wait till they see!"

He spoke and the green-gray eyes gleamed a shining light at Tony who stood now at the bottom of the porch balancing the huge sack, which stood almost as tall as he. Then he looked up and saw the giant take one huge stride over the five concrete steps that separated the yard from the front door. He stood their staring for a few moments, chest and stomach jutting sharply toward the threshold, head held high, hands resting on his round stomach, then he gave Tony one more quick glance with a smile that looked as if he held back a great laugh and could no longer contain it, then raised his clenched fist high in the air and thrust it toward the wooden door. He pounded once, twice, three times, and Tony thought that a cannon shot had rung out as he watched the rigid door give way to the force of each blow. It looked as though the whole side of the house shook, and as Tony watched the plaster dust fall silent and white to the ground, he heard the front door creak open. He looked up to see Frank's face painted with a clear coat of anger that immediately transformed into awe as he gazed at the figure towering in front of him, looking down and smiling broadly. And as the rest of the now silent revelers queued up behind Frank, the giant drew in a heavy breath of cold Christmas air and rang out a joyous bellow from deep within his belly, a greeting which sounded at once the most familiar and yet the strangest, most distant sound any of them had ever heard. For everyone there heard not only the words spoken to them, but that which their hearts held, those secret words that they may not even have realized, the words that meant Christmas had finally come. For Frank the words boomed out simply, bouncing off the walls inside the house and ringing again past his ears and out into the now chilly night, echoing over

and over up and down the block. Frank looked at the neighborhood around him and noticed lights flick on in dark windows and front doors burst open as

HO, HO, HO! MERRY CHRISTMAS!

rang over and over throughout the air, shaking the trees and charging even the dimmest stars in the sky to shine brighter against the endless dark. Looking again into the house he saw that smiles and expressions of sheer joy had replaced the awe-struck faces and that everyone inside had begun to laugh.

And as they did, Santa grabbed for his sack and strode into the house, Tony close behind; opening the sack he cast a gleeful smile at the ecstatic crowd, shaking his silver locks, his jubilant belly heaving up and down. And then, as he bent down on one knee, still standing taller than everyone else in the room, he opened the sack and thrust his hand deep inside, smiling broadly at Frank, then rummaging noisily, fishing with a look of wonder looming on his huge, smiling face. He must have discovered the treasure he sought, for suddenly his eyes grew wide and he began to chuckle deeply, then to laugh aloud as he pulled forth his hand from deep within the bag. He held his open palm toward Frank who looked down to see a small, metal object, brightly painted and gleaming in the light of the room. Frank looked curiously at the item, saw two figures, one a baseball pitcher in mid wind-up, the other the catcher, ready to receive the fast ball down and in. And as the realization of what the figures were appeared in Frank's mind he felt his memory unlock, burst from a time beyond which he could remember, back to a Christmas morning almost fifty years before this night, when he had opened all his presents and, to his grievous dismay, did not find the little mechanical bank he had

wanted so badly, the one he'd told his parents about, the one at the dime store downtown. Suddenly his eyes widened and tears welled up and overflowed down his cheeks which stretched wide from his smile.

"It's my bank!" He called out to no one in particular, but to everyone in the room. "Look, it's my bank! It's the one I wanted! Look everyone, watch." And he fished a penny from his pocket and slid it into the groove of the pitcher's hand, then cocked the arm back into the locked position and pulled the lever mounted on the metal base. The pitcher's arm flung into motion and the penny hurled forward, landing perfectly into the slot in the catcher's mitt, the deposited coin clinking sharply in the empty metal.

The entire room burst into cheers as Frank picked up the bank from the huge white palm and held it high in the air, laughing loudly, and looking past the outstretched hand up to the shining pink face and said, "I didn't think this even existed anymore. My God, it looks like it's brand new. Thank you, Santa! Thank you!" He held the bank tightly to his chest and walked back into the crowd to show off his wondrous prize.

One at a time, each person in the house stepped up to Santa, and he searched within his bag to find something for them. Sometimes it was a long forgotten toy, like Frank's bank, other's received things they thought they'd lost, to others still he simply leaned over and whispered something into their ears and they immediately began to smile and laugh. But no matter whether their gift was a long forgotten treasure or a simply a whispered confidence, all the gifts seemed to bring something to the receiver that they'd long ago discounted, brought to them a feeling that, no matter how far away it seemed, happiness was really within reach, if they just let themselves have it.

Tony watched all of this in awe, saw smiles stretch across the faces of grouchy friends whom he'd never seen smile before, watched relatives who could never feel surprised by anything shout with wonder. He watched as his son held out his hands and received an intricate wooden model of a small fishing boat, every detail meticulously rendered, and felt a vague familiarity engulf him as he stared at the boat in his son's hands, then realized that it was his own father's boat which had been wrecked off the Calabrian coast when Tony was about Nick's age. He'd helped his father with that boat every day of his life until that time and felt that a part of him had died when it sank.

"Nicky, may I see your boat?" he asked and held out his hand. His son smiled and gently handed him the model. Tony peered into the tiny little cabin and wondered how this could have been duplicated. He shook his head and handed the boat back to his son.

When everyone else in the room had retreated to their seats to wonder at their new toy or talk to one another about the things they had just heard, Tony saw Mary walk up to Santa who still knelt at his sack, saw her look sadly into his eyes. He held out his hand and pulled her head gently toward his shoulder and she rested it there. He motioned with his eyes to Nick and toward where Tony stood and spoke softly into Mary's ear. She in turn raised her head and returned his offering with what looked to Tony like a question, or perhaps a request. For the first time that night the giant's expression dropped ever so slightly as a thin veil of sadness shrouded his shining face. But soon a gleam of comfort and ease beamed toward Mary and she looked hopeful. He then leaned toward Mary's ear and whispered, and as she listened she smiled and nodded. The two stood back and

looked knowingly at one another, then Mary turned and walked toward her son, sitting next to him and ringing his shoulders with her arm as she admired his toy boat.

While the entire room sat transfixed in their reverie, Santa picked up his empty sack and motioned for Tony to follow. As he had done earlier, he held his finger to his pursed lips and *shhhhhshed* Tony gently then strode out the front door and into the cold outside. As the two walked slowly away from the house, Tony realized that he had not received anything from the sack, and for a moment wondered if, in the busy excitement of the event, he had been forgotten. In the moment it took for the thought to course his mind he and Santa stopped simultaneously and looked into each others' eyes until Tony could answer his own question.

"This whole thing, whatever we did, *this* was my present. The visit from Santa I always wanted to give them that I never could have."

The towering figure who was at the same time so familiar and so foreign smiled once more, then motioned that Tony return to the house. Tony grasped Santa's huge shoulder and smiled a thank-you, then turned and began the walk back up the driveway. He felt a sudden gust of wind and thought of turning around, but decided against it, and just smiled instead and continued toward the porch. Then he heard the neighbor's door open and a cranky, tired voice yell, "Hey! Could you knock off the noise?"

"Merry Christmas, Angelo!" Sal's familiar voice answered. Tony turned and saw not a towering figure but the old fisherman, Santa suit drooping from his frame, fake beard askew.

“Oh, hi Sal! Merry Christmas!” The contented neighbor retreated into his house, and Tony watched as Sal waved and turned, head held high as he walked down the block and out of sight.

When he stepped into the bright light of the house Tony glanced at the clock on the wall just inside the entrance. It read five minutes until three o'clock. He stared and wondered if one of the kids had moved the hands forward as a prank. Then he glanced at the watch strapped to his own wrist and saw that the two timepieces confirmed one another's accuracy. The whole visit seemed to have lasted about fifteen or twenty minutes, and he thought he must have misjudged how much time he'd spent in the garage. He stood there in the hallway looking into the living room which still danced with more energy than he'd seen there in years. Usually, the party would be long over by this time. But everyone had stayed, filled with the intensity of the night's special visit that seemed to suspend time, or at least render it meaningless for the moment.

Tony thought of going in and taking a seat next to someone to hear what they thought of the event, but as he looked into the room where everyone smiled and laughed loudly and openly he realized that there was simply no spare seat available. Then he realized a ravenous hunger and, seeing that the dining table lay full of food but void of takers, he walked quickly to it and began heaping portions of pasta and sausage onto a plate.

"Tony! Tony, where the hell have you been? I've been looking all over for you." Frank hurried to his brother-in-law, toy bank in hand. "Did you see what Santa gave me?" he asked with a child-like smile.

"Yeah, it's great," Tony smiled back through a mouthful of food.

"It's better than great. I don't know how he could have found this. It's either a copy or it's forty years old."

"It's no copy. It's the one you wanted," Tony said, almost too knowingly.

"No, that's impossible. But, I don't care. It's exactly right, *exactly* right. Hey, how do know anything about this?" Frank widened his eyes and he lifted a pointed finger at Tony. "You set this up, didn't you? You did this whole thing!"

Tony smiled a little, not knowing what to say.

"But, who was Santa? My God, who could have known so much about us to give us these things? I thought it was you, but then I saw you standing behind him. Jesus, he was a big son-of-a-bitch. So, come on, how'd you do it?"

Tony thought for one ridiculous moment of telling Frank the truth, but then thought, *what truth? That Sal Amato is Santa Claus? That the whole fisherman thing was a front, or at least a diversion? Franky knows Sal too well. He'd never believe me. Hell, I barely believe myself…*

Tony continued to chew his sausage slowly as he pondered an answer when a thought seemed to appear in his mind from somewhere, though he knew it was not his own. He smiled and looked at Frank squarely in the eyes and said, "It's amazing what you can do with a good costume, isn't it?"

Frank watched skeptically as Tony took another bite of sausage and turned to reach for the bottle of Scotch behind him on the bar, then instead picked up a bottle of plane soda water and poured it over ice.

“You've got to at least tell me who it was. Who knows that much about us? Or who spent that much time finding it out?”

Tony smiled, chewed silently.

“You're not going to tell me, are you, you no good son-of-a-bitch?"

“Nope.” Tony grinned.

Frank sighed and walked over to the bar to mix a drink. “At least tell me why,” Frank begged over his glass.

“Why what?”

“What's the big deal?"

“Because this year I want everything to be different. I want everyone to look back and not have any other explanation except that was the year Santa came.”

“Okay.” Frank smiled then shook his head. “You big fucking kid…Come on, have a drink with me.”

“I got a drink.”

“Let's go listen to everyone talk about Santa Claus.” He placed an arm around Tony's shoulder, pulling him close and planting a loud kiss atop his bald head as they strode arm in arm toward the living room.

Chapter 12

Tony, despite his reckless poor planning and drunken memory, had succeeded in his quest for the perfect Christmas Eve; the entire family spoke of the events of that night

well into the weeks beyond the new year. When he met with clients to show a house or go over paperwork, almost all invariably had heard the story from a friend or relative, and Tony's business benefited handsomely from the informal notoriety; it appeared that everyone wanted to buy a house from "Santa's Helper," the agent with Miracle-on-34th St. charm, who always seemed to match his buyers with their perfect home.

As he had hoped, though no one forgot about that Christmas Eve, almost everyone had let go of the ultimate question: "Who was Santa Claus?" Everyone except the two he wanted to mystify more than anyone. When Nick looked into the scintillating green-gray eyes as he reached for his present that night, he knew immediately, believed immediately. He felt about as certain of this as a Catholic does of the Immaculate Conception. He only wondered 'How?'—not the skeptical questioning of an adult, but the wondrous, accepting curiosity of a child. Other than the pure science of the event, it all made perfect sense to Nick. His awareness did not hinder Tony from keeping his secret.

Mary, on the other hand, pursued Tony doggedly. She, too, knew whom she was speaking to that night, the voice with its velvet persuasion, that language that only she could understand though she'd never heard it before (except for the time in the kitchen). She knew she was right and she wanted Tony to admit it, to validate her insight. But he would not, could not actually; he remained too afraid that if he spoke of the actual events he would somehow detract from the power of what had occurred.

Despite her tenacity, even Mary's stamina waned after several months of unsuccessful pursuit. Yet, though her attempts at the truth grew less frequent until they ceased altogether, her juxtaposed wonder and fear of what Sal had conveyed to her that

Christmas Eve expanded as did the pain in her body. She did not remember one single word, for nothing was uttered that approached the common definition of language, yet the feeling he instilled in her, or rather, that which he extracted from her, allowed her to feel what she had never allowed herself. In the days that followed, she actually thought he had removed the cancer from her body, though the pain persisted, waxed and waned as it always had until she beat it back with pills and strong drink. So, it was not the disease itself that was gone or had changed, but her view of the disease; as she looked into the bathroom mirror she no longer saw the lost, helpless woman who dwelt their before, no longer felt the chaos envelop her feelings, but saw someone who exhibited a calm resolution, who felt a natural order replace the fear—

That's it, she thought one day while staring into the mirror, pondering her newfound ease. She'd stumbled onto the word haphazardly while looking at her face, noticing that its once gaunt, exhausted geography had actually smoothed, relaxed, recouped some of the life it had previously relinquished. She had been wondering all this time what the mystery gift had been, what she received that made such a difference, until she realized that he really hadn't said anything new to her, had only reminded her of what she already knew, that she needed nothing added to her life, only to release the guilt, the feeling that she was abandoning her husband, her son, even her mother. When she realized this she then knew that her death was the most natural, most personal thing she could experience, and that dreading it, hating it, would not prepare those whom she loved for her departure. For doing so, hating death, is hating all that is natural, the very cycle of the universe, just as hating her own body, or the colorful dying leaves of autumn.

Hating death is hating life, she whispered to her mirror image.

But what of her own abandonment, the inevitable assent into darkness she projected would occur at the moment her body ceased to exist? She thought long of this, and felt at first remorse for abandoning all but the most circumstantial aspects of her own religion, those which would have taken her beyond the corporeal reality—the only one she, or anyone, knew. *Faith*, she thought. But faith in what? Could she rekindle the flame she had drubbed out long ago, that God which in her eyes had cheapened, trivialized Himself by accepting her father into the realms of the penitent?

All these things she conveyed that night to the transformed figure of Sal, not through words but, as the concerns flashed across her mind and she looked deeply into the soft, accepting eyes, she felt her unpurged, solitary thoughts transmute into the shared yet private apprehension of two ancient friends. She gazed into the shining, ubiquitous face, and saw a look of utter comprehension and empathy, and though his lips never moved, she distinctly heard the words *You're afraid to die* emanate softly all around her though they seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time, and Mary heard *Yes* follow these words, this time in her own mind's voice, though she, too, had not moved her mouth to speak. She then watched the huge, glowing face widen into a kind consoling smile and the eyes peak as if in gentle surprise, soft and bright. Then he placed a gloved hand on her shoulder, motioning her forward. The two leaned over toward one another, and Mary felt his breath which was at one time soothingly warm and refreshingly cool, which smelled of the tang of salt air and the dusty warmth of ripened grape vines, the fecund sweetness of baking bread and the moist flavor of loamy earth as

vegetables are pulled from a spring garden. All the smells of Mary's childhood that she had forgotten, or rather rejected, that which had indeed made it a child's life instead of the perverse false-adulthood she'd suffered, she smelled all these again and for the first time felt the freedom, the safety, the unbending love of self that only children feel, and at that moment these feelings ceased to be the result of any external influence, that he had only awakened what she herself held deep inside, and she again allowed herself to feel them, to be comforted by them, to be as a little child.

And then, as she smiled up at him and gazed into his face, he leaned toward her ear and for the first and only time he actually spoke to her, not out of any necessity, but, she thought, to be as convincing, as reassuring as possible, to ensure that she realized his meaning was not veiled in any metaphor, was as simple and literal as all the greatest truths, a child's laugh, a mother's smile… And she again felt the warm, cool breath caress her ear as he whispered so softly, *"Don't worry, Mary. Life never ends*."

Afterward the two gazed at one another and held hands, smiling together at their shared secret. Then Mary released her hold and looked at him one last moment in thanks, though she knew his expression said something like *Don't thank me, thank yourself,* because there was no way he could have coaxed her, even coerced her into her own realization. He could only push her where she had already started.

Though Mary's rejuvenated self began to heal her soul, her body continued to deteriorate. Finally, in late February, she agreed to enter the hospital "for tests." On the cold, clear Tuesday when she left, Nick lay in bed, home from school with one of his

many very real flus. Still tired and nauseous, he turned onto his back slowly so that he could best hear the commotion outside his partially closed door.

What was unusual about this morning was that his mother always paced the house in monkish silence, her small footsteps reverberating through the hardwood floor underneath the garish green shag rug, no chattering radio news or droning stereo orchestra distorted the sounds she made; if she spoke on the telephone to anyone, Nick could not hear her. But as he awoke he distinctly heard muffled voices which he identified out of his morning grogginess as his mother and father. They seemed to bustle about as if preparing for a family trip, though their movements seemed less fluid, more ponderous, not hurried but not distracted with any sense of anticipation. Nick felt strange enough to hear his father's voice. Tony left the house at six o'clock each morning and never returned until six or later in the evening. As he listened more intently he could not hear what the voices said, but could feel something strange afoot. Finally after much movement there was a brief pause, then heavy footsteps growing closer as his father's face finally appeared in the bedroom doorway.

"Hey pal, how you doing?"

"Okay, Dad."

Nick noticed that his father's usual consoling tone had softened even more so that it did not seem natural.

"Mind if I come in, son?"

Nick did not even attempt to answer the question. He did, however, wonder at its intent; no one ever asked permission to enter his room. By this time his father had

granted himself entrance and walked slowly and with hunched shoulders as if he shouldered a large load over to the edge of the bed. He sat down so slowly, so gingerly that it looked as though he doubted the mattress would support his weight, or as if the surface on which he sat bore painful shards of glass, not soft folds of cotton.

Nick lay on his back, his hands tucked underneath his head.

"Mom's not been feeling too good, son. So, we're going to go over to the hospital so she can see the doctor. He's just going to do a few tests, see? Find out what's wrong so they can help her get better."

His father's tone floated softly into his ears, and Nick thought that this, indeed, was the most sensible thing to do—if she was sick, she should go to the doctor who would make her better.

"Okay, Dad."

"She's going to be there for a couple days, Nicky. That's the best way, instead of her coming home every night and then going back in the morning."

Nick nodded approvingly. That approach seemed very reasonable.

"I'm going to have to be up there for awhile, just to get Mom settled in, so Aunt Teresa's going to come by to stay with you. I'll be back before lunch. And then the three of us can eat together. Sound good?"

As Tony said this his face took on a look of thankful relief, surprised that he managed to direct his monologue away from the primary subject.

"So, I'm going to go wait for Aunt Teresa to get here." He placed his hand lightly on Nick's forehead. "You're still warm. You rest. I'll get you an aspirin."

Nick nodded obediently, still confused by his father's calm yet delicate composure. But he accepted the reasoning completely. *Mom was going for tests—she would be home soon. Of course, these tests would take several days because these were not the spelling tests or math tests taken in school (that would be ridiculous, a three-day spelling test) these were hospital tests, and everyone knows that hospital tests take this long.*

Finally the bustling in the other rooms quieted and he smelled the familiar cigarette smoke and coffee wafting from the kitchen. He knew his mother was now seated in her usual station. Then he heard a firm rap three times on the front door, and as his father opened it, listened as Aunt Teresa's vibrant voice rang a greeting to Tony, then toward the kitchen where Mary sat. They exchanged the usual adult salutations that Nick heard every day, then their voices softened, became flat and furtive, lost all tone and inflection, nothing more than monotone whispers. Then Nick heard what he thought was the strangest change yet. His aunt began to speak Italian to his father, and, though clumsily, Tony answered in his own dialect, hastily interspersing mumbled English words so the conversation would not prolong beyond what was absolutely necessary. Nick strained to understand but was dually hampered by his own lack of the language and his father's confusing banter. The only thing he could make out was the phrase "*…in a couple of days…*" Soon the voices he heard transformed back to his aunt's energetic lilt and his father's jocular baritone. His mother did not speak.

"Nicky, come here!"

His aunt's voice rang out from the kitchen and reverberated in his room like a clapper hammering the inside of a bell. He sat bolt upright but stopped his motion there.

"Nicky, *andiamo*!" his aunt sang again. He then leapt from bed and hurried out to the kitchen, stopping in the hall doorway and peering in at the three who sat smiling at him from the kitchen table. His father and aunt sat opposite one another and looked like mirror images that had been somehow distorted; both rested one arm on the kitchen table and allowed the other to hang slack at their respective sides. Each crossed one leg over the other, their heads angled toward where Nick stood, and projecting almost the same manufactured smile. His mother sat at the far end of the room, shielded by the table, her arms resting lightly on its surface, cigarette poised between left index and middle finger. She shined a smile as did the other two, yet hers looked more convincing, actually projected a feeling of composure.

"Come here, son." Mary spoke with uncommon delicacy. He vacated his post at the doorway and walked toward her. Mary wedged the cigarette inside the blue kidney-shaped ashtray on the table, for a moment watched the smoke trailing up toward where it pooled near the ceiling, then held out her arms as Nick approached. She wrapped one hand around the back of his head and gently coaxed it toward her shoulder where it came to rest, then stared at the cold, bright day outside the kitchen window. The two remained in this position for a long time until Mary looked toward Tony.

"Honey, how soon till we have to leave?"

Tony studied the clock that hung on the wall above the sink. "Pretty soon."

"I want to talk to Nicky." Mary looked to her husband and sister-in-law who sat confused for a few moments until they realized the dismissal. Then they rose, quickly and apologetically, and left the room; neither of them had ever seen Mary appear so composed, despite her obvious pain.

Mary continued to hold her son and to stare at the linoleum, the stark reality of her task pressing harder against her than she had anticipated. Finally, when she felt able, she shifted his position so that Nick stood directly in front of her and the two looked at one another.

"I want you to mind your aunt while I'm gone."

"Yes, Mom."

Mary looked hopefully into his eyes, thinking, *not a very good start*. Then a very orderly thought appeared in the midst of her confused, racing mind, and she smiled slightly. "Would you like to sit outside for a minute?"

"Isn't it cold?"

"Let's see." She rose, taking his hand and towing him gently behind her and out the kitchen door to the partially enclosed patio. The two sat on the cement steps in front of the door, still behind the covered portion of the yard, out of the chilling breeze.

"Is this okay?" Mary asked.

"Uh-huh."

They sat for few minutes just gazing out at the covered patio furniture in the corner, the leaves of the trees rustling in the wind, the vacant birdbath dry and bleached a lonely white. The patio's windbreak provided them a calm, warm spot in the midst of the

clear, chilling February day. The sun, full and bright yet angled radically away from its glorious summer declination, caressed their skin just enough to allow them to relax against one another instead of bundling against the cold. Mary continued to survey the patio yard, pointing to a small patch of flat earth in the far corner where nothing grew.

"See that place over there, Nicky?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to plant a garden there. Would you like to help me?"

"Yes, Mom." He spoke expectantly, even excitedly.

"Good. I think we've already had all the rain we're going to get this year. Even if we get some more in April, that will be okay. Listen, while I'm gone I'd like you to start getting the ground ready over there. It'll take a lot of work, so don't worry if you don't get it all done. Nothing's ever been planted over there, so we'll have to fertilize anyway. But just get a shovel and start pulling the weeds and turning the dirt over. Okay? When I get back we'll start on it together."

"Okay, Mom." He looked directly at her face, which still stared out to where the imaginary garden bloomed in the corner of the yard. She smiled and looked down at him.

"You think you'll like doing this with me?"

"Yes," he said, then, "will you be back on Friday?"

"I think maybe Saturday."

"Okay."

Mary waited for him to ask another question, to lend another comment, but none came.

“Nicky, you look so serious. What's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“What?”

He paused. “It's just that today is so different. Dad's home and you're leaving. Everyone's talking like they’re telling secrets and you want me to help you plant a garden.”

She watched as he stared into her eyes, his holding a look of worry, then averted her own eyes to collect her scattered remnants of thought, concentrating on the barren patch of dirt she hoped to live long enough to see as a garden, her son tending it in the warm summer sun. “Nicky, do you know that everything changes? In fact, everything is constantly changing?”

“I don't know…”

“Like you. You don't fit the clothes you wore a year ago. You say things differently now. You do things you couldn't do before.”

“Like what?”

“Like the swimming. Remember how scared you used to be? Now you’re having fun.”

“Oh.” He felt surprised yet pleased with himself.

“You see, Nicky, people try to say that some change is good and some is bad, just because they don't necessarily like to change. But since everything changes, there is no bad change or good change, just change.” She looked down at his puzzled face. “Look, see the patch of dirt over there? What's it like today?”

"Just dirt and weeds."

"Right, but what's going to happen to it after our work?"

"It'll be a garden."

"Right. And when the garden starts to grow and we pick all the vegetables we can—"

"Can we have flowers, too?"

She looked at him, surprised.

"Sure, we can have flowers. And when all the flowers bloom for the year and all the vegetables are gone, the garden dies."

Nick stared at the barren dirt. "Why does it have to die?"

"If it doesn't die, it can't change. And if it doesn't change, it will never grow again."

He gave her an expression that looked confused yet accepting. Mary smiled slightly and looked at him pondering the fate of the garden. She heard Tony's heavy footsteps across the kitchen floor.

"Honey," he said, leaning out the open door to the patio, "I think we better go."

"Come on," she said and stood, reaching for Nick's hand and making a grunting sound of mock exertion as she pulled him up from the steps. Then she crouched down and looked directly into her son's eyes.

"You be good, okay? And on Saturday we'll start on the garden."

The two smiled and hugged one another, then Mary stood up and, motioning to her husband, walked quickly from the kitchen into the living room and onto the front porch before anyone could see the tears running down her tired face.

On Saturday morning, Nick realized that he had not weeded any of the yard in preparation for planting the garden, so that morning he rose and put on jeans and tennis shoes and an old sweatshirt and retrieved his father's keys from the kitchen table. He walked to the garage and unlocked the small door, fumbling for the light switch inside. He collected an impressive array of implements—shovel, hoe, rake, a small sharply pointed trowel for particularly tenacious weeds, an entire box of forty-gallon plastic bags. He tried to make the journey from the garage past the bedroom windows to the yard off the kitchen without making a sound. Halfway he realized that this would be impossible and set down his load as quietly as he could. In three trips his gear sat carefully positioned around the most hard and weed-ridden patch of earth in the farthest corner of the yard. He stood, showing no mercy, ready to assault the craggy ground, looked at his weapons and carefully chose the large shovel, placed the sharp nose at the point, which would define the furthest corner of the flourishing garden, gripped the handle tightly and thrust the shovel head into the cold, gray dirt. The shovel barely penetrated the unyielding surface, and Nick stepped back angry and perplexed. Then he heard the sound of the back door to the kitchen creak open.

"Nicky, what the hell are you doing?" Tony whispered as loud as he could, not so much in anger as in fervent curiosity.

"I'm weeding the yard so me and Mom can plant a garden—"

"It's 6:30 in the morning. Do you know how much noise you're making?"

"I'm sorry. I thought I was being quiet."

"You thought you were being quiet..." Tony parroted back, shook his head and smiled slightly. He had not slept much in the last three days and had finally, with liberal help from a bottle of Scotch, fallen asleep at about three that morning. He looked up at his son standing with the shovel like a miniature dust bowl farmer then beckoned him forward with his hand.

"Come on inside. Let's have breakfast."

"But I have to weed the garden—"

"I know. But let's eat first. Then you can weed all day long."

"Okay." Discouraged, Nick let the shovel fall clumsily onto the hard dirt, then walked into the kitchen and felt secretly glad to be wrapped in the room's warmth, out of the chilling gray.

"So, why are you so excited about planting a garden all of a sudden?"

"Mom said we could after she gets back from the hospital. She said for me to start and when she got back she'd help me. Then we'd plant it."

Tony frowned at the box of oatmeal in his hands. "You know, when Mom gets back, she might not feel like pulling weeds for awhile. She's been pretty sick."

"That's okay. She can watch me. I can do it. And when she feels better she can show me how to plant."

Tony set the oatmeal on the counter and sat down at the table across from Nick.

“Nicky, what I mean is, she's very, very sick. It might be a long time before she can plant, or even get out of bed. She needs to rest if she's going to get better. And when she gets home, we have to be very good to her and let her have all the rest she needs.”

Nick looked at his father blankly for an uncomfortably long time, his eyes not blinking, only shifting from side to side in thought, staring at other random object in the room—the flour canister, the fruit bowl, the drain board—then returning to stare directly into his father's face. He took a shallow though noticeable breath. “Is Mom going to die?”

Caught off guard, Tony reacted instinctively. "No! God, no. It's just that, when people get older, like your mom and me—”

“Are you going to get sick, too?”

“Nicky, all I’m saying it that grownups, they just need more time to get well.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“It’s just something that has to be taken care of, son. She needs doctors’ help, and lots of treatment and rest. We just have to be there for her and let her have the time she needs, that’s all.”

“Mom says we have to die to grow.”

Tony looked at Nick, then the table. “I don't know. But the point is, your mom's not going to die.”

Tony rose and reached for the coffee pot, drawing water from the sink and avoiding his son's eyes. He occupied himself with small kitchen tasks until he thought

the moment had passed, then returned to the table. Nick still stared, but with a less hopeless expression.

"Dad, will you help me with the garden?"

"You bet."

"Then we can show Mom when she's better. She'll be surprised."

"She sure will, honey."

Honey. Nick had only heard this father use this term in direct reference to his mother. He had always been *son, pal, sport*...

"I'm going to grab a shower, then go down to the office and get some paperwork to bring home. You want to come with me?"

In the past, Nick would have jumped at the chance to accompany his father anywhere, especially to such a strange, exciting place as "the office." But at the moment, he did not want to leave the kitchen chair. He waited for a long time, his father staring at him now, concerned.

"Dad, is it okay if I stay home and weed the garden?"

"I'd rather you not stay here alone. How about if I call Aunt Teresa? See if she can—"

"No," Nick began, frustration heavy in his sigh. "It'll take too long. I'll just go with you."

Tony heaved a breath and looked at the floor, then turned and retreated toward the bathroom.

Nick remained at the kitchen table listening intently to the hum of water rushing through pipes, the pipes themselves knocking against the wooden beams underneath the house whenever his father adjusted the pressure. He remembered years ago watching his father try to coax him to crawl into the tiny opening that led to the dark underside of the house, the maze of piping and mounds of cold, gray dirt. He had wanted to see what made the *knock-knock-knock* that he heard every time someone turned off a hot water faucet too rapidly. He stood at the bathroom sink one morning, turning the water on and off repeatedly, listening to the banging pipes, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound. Fortunately, his father woke up first and in his playfully curious manner, searched out his son and asked him what he was doing. When he found out, he invited Nick into the mysterious depths of the house; the crawl space was barely large enough to accommodate Tony's ample belly. But Nick just sat on the berm of the cement border around the opening, heard his father laugh, saying, '*Aw, come on...it's just a little dark...there's plenty of room....* then watched as he slipped into the darkness, thinking it looked like the house had just swallowed him alive. Once he built up the courage to lean into the opening and look, but when he did he saw nothing. He remained there, staring at the opening until his father returned.

Now his thoughts recoiled along with his body as a firm knock in one-two-three succession resounded from the front door. Nick climbed from the chair and walked quickly toward the large bay window adjacent to the front entrance and peeled back a small piece of the drapes so that he could check the porch. Brian stood there, hands folded in front of him, staring hopefully at the large wooden door. Nick was about to

inch his way back to the kitchen when his father emerged, a huge white bath towel wrapped around his midsection.

"Nicky, who's there?" Tony had seen his son peering through the window out to the porch.

"It's Brian," Nick said flatly.

"Yeah? Well, open the door for him."

Nick sighed and stepped toward the front door, turning the dead-bolt, and stepping backward as he pulled the door open.

"Hey, Nicky. How's it going?"

"Okay."

"Is your dad home?"

"I'm right here, Brian." Tony stepped forward into partial view. "Come on in."

Brian smiled a wide, innocent smile and stepped through the doorway. After the hose incident, Nick and Brian had avoided one another in a conscious yet unconscious way. Brian knew Nick had a problem with their friendship but didn't understand it; Nick knew what the problem was but didn't have the words to explain it. Their interaction in the months since had been limited to brief comments about baseball and school and usually executed with quite a bit of sidewalk in between them.

"So, how you been Brian?" Tony asked sincerely. "We haven't seen you too much for a while."

"Good. Really good. I've been staying busy with school and church."

“That's good.” Tony smiled, then, looking down at himself, said, “Oh, excuse my appearance. I was just about to get dressed and go down to the office to pick up some work. You two go ahead and visit. Nicky, why don't you get Brian some coffee?”

“Oh, that's okay,” Brian said. “I'm fine, really. I just wanted to stop by and say ‘hi’ to Nick.”

“OK. You two talk then. I'm going to put some clothes on.”

When Tony disappeared into the bedroom, the two were left to interact without his buffer and immediately fell silent for several moments until Brian made the first attempt.

“Mind if I sit down, Nick?”

Nick shrugged.

“Thanks.”

Feeling stranded in the middle of the room, Nick lowered himself onto the nearby couch opposite Brian.

“Nick,” Brian began deliberately, “I feel like we're not friends anymore, and I'm confused and don't feel good about that. How do you feel?”

Nick looked at the rug.

“Nick, I've already apologized to you. I can't be any more sorry than I am. If you haven't forgiven me, there's nothing I can do about it. But I'd much rather we be friends than keep acting like we don’t know each other.”

“What do you want me to say?”

"It's not what *I* want you to say; it's what do *you* want to say? You know, I don't hang around with you because I feel sorry for you or because I think you need me. I think you're a really cool kid. You're no jerky little brat like the rest of them around here. You're kind and you think about things. I'd have never started talking to you about the Lord in the way that I do if I didn't think you were able to appreciate it. All I'm saying is that I really like you. If you don't really like me, that's fine. But I need to know. I need to know if I should keep trying or not."

Nick sat for several moments feeling heavy and embarrassed. Then he looked up at Brian. "Want to see where me and my mom are planting a garden?"

Brian smiled slowly, broadly. "That'd be great."

Chapter 13

The sun hung high above the trees, its strength gaining as each spring day ebbed and summer grew closer. A thin veil of mist shrouded the big orange globe now in the still early morning, the same mist that clung languidly to the tall, yellow blades of grass covering the crown of hard lumps and craggy earth where the garden would be. Nick stood in the middle of the patch, pointing to what he saw as the clear and evenly delineated sections of each variety of vegetable, each hue of flower.

"The tomatoes go here, next to the zucchini, and the grapes start here and then climb up the fence."

"Wow, you have some ambitious plans for this garden," Brian said. "But you're going to have to do a lot of work first."

"I'm starting today," Nick, his tone boisterous with pride. "I have to start before Mom gets home."

"Well, I'm not doing anything today," Brian offered. "Okay if I help?"

Nick smiled and nodded, handing Brian a shovel and watched him launch an unsuccessful attack against the petrified earth.

"Wow! This ground is impossible. Hey, Nicky, let me show you a trick my dad showed me on how to loosen it up. Come here."

Nick watched as Brian walked to where the garden hose sat coiled snake-like in front of the spigot, as if ready to strike out at the hard earth. Brian picked up the hose and turned the valve. Then the water began to sputter out, forcing out the unwilling air, and he pointed the soft, even stream at the spot where the garden would be, covering the nozzle with his thumb and allowing only a fine spray to coat the unyielding ground.

“See,” he said to Nick. “First we soften up the ground by getting it a little wet, but not too wet. Then it'll be a lot easier to dig.”

“I want to try it,” Nick said stepping forward and reaching for the hose.

“Okay, but be careful. Too much water it'll just make mud.”

Nick began to spray the area with a stream of water not quite as fine as Brian's, but not too heavy to create a swamp. As he continued to wet the garden spot he heard the back door creak open and turned to see his father standing on the porch.

“So, you watering the garden already?” Tony said smiling.

“No, we're making the ground soft so it'll be easier to dig.” Nick spoke deliberately to impart his small air of expertise.

“I see. Brian, would you mind staying with Nicky until I get back from the office? It'll only be a little while.”

“Not at all. I'm going to help him weed the garden.”

“Thanks. I'll see you two soon.” Tony turned to go, then added, “Boy, I can't wait to see this garden.”

Nick continued watering the future garden, not mindful of the little pools growing more numerous underneath the thick spray, until suddenly the stream of water ceased and he stood holding a dry hose. He turned to where Brian stood and saw him turning off the spigot.

“If the ground gets any wetter we'll have to wait until tomorrow,” Brian said.

“We can't. Mom will be back today.”

“Don't worry. It'll be ready to weed in a while. Where is your mom, anyway? I thought she never went anywhere.”

“She had to go to the hospital to take some tests,” Nick said matter-of-factly.

“The hospital? What’s wrong?”

Nick heard the urgency in his friend's voice and his body fell numb.

“I don't know. She's just taking tests.” He thought for moment, then added, “But she'll be back tomorrow. We can ask her.”

“So, how long has she been there?”

“Since Tuesday.”

“Wow. Well, I'm sure she'll be fine. Let's get to work on this garden so she'll have something to see tomorrow.”

Nick thought for a moment of the reassurances of everyone around him, the ubiquitous “I'm sure she'll be fine” he heard from anyone discovering his mother's hospital stay. This confused him even more than the mysterious circumstance of her illness; it was already obvious to him that she would be fine. That's why people went to the hospital. To get well. When he heard the unnecessary reassurance, it reminded him of someone repeating an obviously unnecessary comment: “Oh, don't worry about the washing machine. It fills up with water,” or “Oh, don't mind the oven. It gets really hot.”

The two picked up shovels and sank their points into the moistened earth that yielded now with far more ease. Nick thought of the circumstances of the day, the week, the past several months, and as he did so he plunged the shovel into the dirt harder and with less care. Soon he was not digging at all but only stabbing the same black spot over

and over, uttering a whimpering grunt louder and louder. He stopped suddenly when he heard Brian's voice.

"Nick, what're you doing? What's wrong?"

Then he dropped the shovel and sat down hard on the ground, his face desperately trying to hold back tears.

"Nicky," Brian said, stepping close to him and crouching to his level, "I know you're worried about your mom. But I'm sure she's going to be fine. My aunt had to go into the hospital for a few days last year. It's nothing to worry about."

"How do you know? Why does everyone keep saying 'don't worry' when there's nothing to worry about?"

"Look...I'm just saying that...if you're worried, why don't you pray about it? Jesus knows what you're feeling, what you're going through."

Nick shot a tear-streaked glance at Brian.

"Jesus doesn't do anything! I pray to Jesus and nothing happens. He's a liar. I don't care if the world ends and I don't go to heaven. I don't want to be there."

Nick jumped up from his soggy seat and ran through the kitchen door, slamming it locked behind Brian. He ran into the den and turned on the television, raising the volume very loud to drown out the persistent knocking on the front door.

Brian continued to knock for a long time, then stopped and sat on the porch steps. He wondered what he had said that made the kid he wanted to comfort repel and run. *What do I do, Lord? Sometimes I feel just as lost as Nicky does. I'm only doing what you*

said to do. Won't you tell me what I'm doing wrong? I know you, but I'm not like James or John or Peter...they really knew you, spoke to you. You told them what to do…

The thoughts filled Brian's mind until he could no longer see the lawn in front of the porch, or the cars on the street beyond the yard, but could see a large sea and a small boat with four men sitting in it and staring at one point on the shore, but Brian could not discern the subject at which they gazed, could not focus on the spot which held their attention. Then a feeling rose in his mind as he stared at the imperceptible spot, and the feeling grew until it took form and direction and became audible and seemed to fill the space around him. Then the words came from the direction of the four men, actually from the spot at which they were staring...*Don't be afraid...from now on you will fish for the souls of men...*

The words repeated in Brian's head over and over, faster and faster, finally merging into one continuous sound that was now as unclear as its source. *What am I doing wrong?* he repeated to himself, trying now to defeat the noise that the words had transformed to. Then suddenly out of the chaos of his thoughts he heard a voice so clear, so close that he felt it touch his brain, and he jumped up from the steps in fear and saw the street and the yard again, heard only the passing cars and the breeze whistling through the power lines. And standing at the foot of the stairs was an old man, his head tilted slightly to one side and his face wearing a curiously concerned expression. He reached up to his head and removed the wool cap he wore, folding it in his hands.

"He's not a man yet, you know."

Brian's heart still pounded in his chest and he felt like a small animal ready to spring away from a predator. The old man then bowed his head slightly and cleared his throat.

"I think I must have startled you. I apologize. I didn't realize how deep in thought you were."

Finally, feeling his vision dissipate completely, Brian let his body relax onto the steps.

"You scared the crap out of me. Who are you?"

"Again, I'm sorry. It was rude of me to interrupt you without introducing myself. My name is Sal Amato. I'm a friend of the Lucera's. I was just in the neighborhood and—"

Sal stopped speaking suddenly, as if to check himself, then continued

"There's no need to keep secrets from you. You're close to the family as well."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, Nicky talks about you. It's Brian, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"It's good to meet you finally, Brian. What I meant was, I wasn't *just* in the neighborhood. I came to talk to Nick. Is he at home?"

"Yeah, he's inside. But his dad's not around and I'm supposed to be watching him. I don't think I should be letting someone I don't know into their house."

"Of course not. Would you mind if I waited for Tony with you?"

“I guess not.” He stared at the old man, unease still heavy in his stomach. He didn't ever remember seeing him around the Lucera's house, but thought he looked familiar for some reason.

“Uh, would you mind if I sat down on the step with you? I just walked from the wharf and my legs are a bit tired.”

“You walked all the way from the wharf? Oh, please have a seat,” Brian said and stood offering a spot after realizing that he was taking up the entire step.

“Thank you,” Sal said and smiled a warm smile without showing any teeth. Then he stared directly into Brian's eyes and for a moment Brian thought that the gray-green was the exact color of the sea in his vision. The two sat there staring at one another for a long time.

“What was it that you said to me when I first saw you?” Brian asked

“I beg your pardon?”

“When I looked up and saw you standing there. You said something. What was it?”

“Oh, I said, 'He's not a man yet.' I was speaking about Nick.”

Brian looked away from the piercing eyes that seemed to be staring through him now rather than at him.

“How did you know I was thinking about Nick at all?”

“Well, Brian, I know that Nick's going through a very difficult time now, and, assuming you were who I thought you were, and that you looked as upset as you did

sitting on Nick's front porch, I just decided that you were probably worried about your friend."

"But what did you mean?"

Sal took a deep breath, held it for a moment, then allowed it to escape evenly out of his mouth.

"What I meant was that I think you're expecting a bit too much out of Nick right now. You're asking him to act like a man, but he's not. Don't get me wrong, he's an exceptional boy. But he has a lot of growing up to do before he can relate to what you believe. Later he'll have the ability to come to terms with it on his own, accept it or reject it, decide whether it's right for him or not. Now, it's just because he looks up to you, respects you, wants to please you but doesn't know how to deal with such things yet, and he's scared enough as it is."

"Wait a minute." Brian took a step back from Sal. "How do you know what I believe?"

"Oh, he tells me. At least he tells me about going to your church and that he likes it, but I also get the feeling that it makes him very uncomfortable. Anyway, I know you think very highly of him. It's just that he's going to have to grow up very fast soon, and he'll need to figure out things for himself without trying to please you in the process."

"What do you mean, he'll have to grow up soon?"

"His mother is dying and he knows it. He just hasn't admitted it to himself yet."

"What are you talking about? You can't know that. She just went into the hospital on Tuesday."

“Mary and I are very close. I'm sure Tony will tell you when he gets home from the hospital.”

“Mr. Lucera isn't at the hospital. He went down to the office to get some paperwork.”

Sal smiled a slight, sad smile and looked at the sidewalk, then up at Brian. “He's going to ask for your help, but it's not your job. It's something Tony has to decide for himself. It's his way of coming to terms with it, admitting it to himself.”

“I don't understand.”

“I know. You will.”

Suddenly Brian pursed his lips tightly and squinted at Sal, felt the anger rise inside of his chest.

“Sir, I don't want to be rude to you, but I don't appreciate you just showing up from nowhere and acting like you’re some sort of mind reader. I know Nicky's scared. I'd be scared, too, if my mom was in the hospital. But I think it's really insensitive of you to say his mom dying when you have absolutely no—”

But before Brian could continue with the next word, Sal stood and held up his open palm in front of Brian's face, blocking out the glare of the sun and casting a shadow across his eyes. Brian immediately fell silent, his mouth closing and his face relaxing until all the tension had dissipated. He felt the words leave his mind and no longer remembered anything he was about to say. Sal let his arm drop to his side.

“What did you just do?” Brian asked quietly.

“I'm sorry for being so abrupt. I didn't want Tony to hear what we were saying,” Sal said and motioned to the street. Tony's car had pulled alongside the curb in front of the house. He stepped out and stared curiously at the two standing on the porch, then approached them, his steps slow and burdened.

“Sal…” he said as he reached the porch and walked up to the old man who opened his arms and held Tony for a long time. Tony bent his mouth toward the old fisherman’s ear and whispered. “The doctor said three months. Six at the most. My God, I knew she was hiding something, but I had no idea.”

Then he looked at Brian for the first time. “Brian, I'm sorry. This is Sal Amato…"

“I know. We've been talking.”

“Oh, good. Where's Nicky?”

“He's inside. I upset him again. I'm really sorry.”

Tony shook his head. “I'm sure it's not your fault. He's a smart boy. He knows something's wrong. My God, what am I going to say to him. It'll be like I lied to him.”

“What do you mean?” Brian asked.

“This morning I told him his mother wasn't going to die.”

The color poured out of Brian's face and he felt as if his legs would not hold his weight. He had to sit back down on the steps.”

“I had no idea. I'm so sorry.”

“I know,” Tony said. “None of us did. But I should have known. I could have made sure she went to the doctor—”

“Tony…” Sal said and stopped, letting his sentence trail off into air without being voiced.

Tony looked down at the sidewalk.

“Yeah. But it would have been something.”

The three stood there for a long time. Tony and Brian each looking away from the other, though not out of any discomfort, but simply to find a perspective, a view of the world away from the microcosm of events crashing down upon them. Sal stood between them, not touching them but supporting them in some invisible, ethereal way, and they felt the strength next to them until the old man stepped slowly back and left the two to support their own weight.

“I have to get back to the boat, Tony."

“Sal, I thought you might…”

“You know I can't.”

Tony nodded.

“I'll come see you tomorrow. I promise,” he said and turned, stopping only momentarily to stare deeply into Brian's eyes, then began his deliberate steps away from the house and back toward the distant wharf.

“What just happened here?” Brian asked.

Tony looked at Brian and paused, pondering a response. “He's a very special, wise man. He's helped us all a lot.”

As the two turned simultaneously toward the house and started up the front steps, Brian thought about the feeling he had, the unfamiliar yet comfortable warmth that

pervaded his body now. He wanted to say something, to manifest his thoughts into speech, to gain Tony's perspective, or acknowledgment; surely Tony must have felt this before, Brian thought. Or was it in actuality to deny the feeling, to ask assistance in rejecting it as a lie, a sin. Brian had tried in the beginning, when he first perceived the old man's form, to ignore it, like pretending not to recognize an acquaintance from times past, feeling the same discomfort, the same vulnerability. He could not, however, bury what he felt because he longed for this feeling so deeply; it was the same feeling he felt the night a few months past at church when the old woman spoke in tongues, the same sense of wholeness and the complete absence of aloneness he felt after praying for a long time while overlooking the vast ocean, the same intensity he felt when for the first time he stood in the packed church, hundreds of other teenagers singing, arms held high and swaying toward the ceiling, and walked, almost glided, calmly yet resolutely, toward the alter where the minister waited and then looked down at the beaming young man, and held out a warm hand to pull him up onto the platform with the other converts, saying, 'Son, do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior?' and Brian answering in such joy that his response bordered laughter, 'Yes, oh yes!'

Brian stopped suddenly midway up the stairs and held his head in his hands.

“Brian, are you all right?”

“It's okay. It's nothing.” He breathed deeply.

“I know,” Tony said very quietly and placed a hand on Brian's shoulder. “Come on. Let's go inside,” he said and lead the young man slowly up the stairway and into the front door.

Chapter 14

The chill of early spring softened into gentle warmth. Mary returned from the hospital, but several weeks after Nick had anticipated. He remained resolute, however, and vigilantly tended the hard, weedy piece of ground until it lay ready to accept planting; he began to make rows, plowing the little shallow trenches where water would course between vine and stalk, coming to settle around the young plants and then sinking slowly into the earth beneath them, below to the depth where the greedy roots soaked up the wet life.

After the rows lay fresh against the ready ground, Nick began to plant the seeds. With great anticipation he slowly tore open the first packet—green beans—and, after reading over the short, simple instructions several times with the ardor of a monk pondering an ancient scroll of wisdom, he perforated the little hill at the head of the first row with his favorite trowel and dropped a few seeds into the opening. He filled up each hole with soil, careful not to tamp the ground too tightly, and then drove a small stake next to each covered hole so that the young vines could reach out and pull themselves toward the sun.

Mary acted as superintendent to the garden project, sitting on the porch step in the cool shade of the stucco wall, watching her son go through the meticulous steps of planting, watering, the constant maintenance of weeding. She did so despite her unending nausea, shrinking appetite, and pain. She chose to shun the doctor's morphine, relied on lesser medications that were far less effective; but she dared not cloud her perception and reduce her reality to a dreamlike state (she had already quit drinking

shortly after her encounter on Christmas Eve with the transformed Sal, not wanting to dim her experience at all).

Watching her son tend the garden eased the pain. She grew quite impressed with his devotion, had never seen him apply so much uninterrupted effort to anything before. The change in her own demeanor allowed for this, though she was less aware of her own influence than in her son's burgeoning abilities. Mary knew she had a choice; Sal had helped her to realize this. She could live the short rest of her life in anger and regret, or she could live it to a fullness she had never allowed herself before. Choosing the latter seemed to prolong her immunity to the disease, and though the cancer did not recede, neither did it spread, but appeared held at bay by some benevolent force.

She completed the course of treatment in mid August. Slowly the savage effects of the radiation receded, fading away like the lingering haze of some awful nightmare. The pain, once omnipresent without the help of medication, also dulled, became intermittent, more of a distraction than the torture it had been. The wig she now wore became the only outward physical sign of the disease—even her appetite had returned and her face and body shone with a thin yet living brightness again. Her progress confounded her doctors; the cancer had acted very aggressively, and they considered the course of treatment more of a standard operating procedure than a potential benefit, something to legitimize the huge bill to the insurance company. They thought she'd be dead by the second month of treatment.

Then the cancer just stopped. At first they thought their tests faulty. But retesting confirmed the first results. The doctors had seen aggressive forms of cancer treated

successfully before, had even seen eventual remission last for several years. But they had never seen such a "spontaneous remission," as if something had scared the disease away.

Tony noticed this newborn resilience in Mary far more than she did herself. Despite the ordeal of imminent death she seemed to take on a new outlook. Her rash decisiveness became a more patient spontaneity, she pondered thoughts and words more slowly, seemed to chew on them as on a complex gourmet dish, savoring every nuance. This fresh, glowing contentment shone most dramatically on Nick, which Tony noticed especially when Mary sat next to the garden. There, her demeanor rested on her face as sincerely as did her body in the wicker lounge chair in the weakening September sun. Seeing her like this rekindled Tony's own feelings, longings—their lovemaking had grown sporadic and had ceased altogether long before Christmas. Worry about Mary's illness had taken up so much room in his consciousness that he felt no room for desire, even averting his eyes when young women passed his office window.

All the newness, all the warmth he felt from his wife allowed him to relinquish his own grip on Mary's cancer, to let it be where it was, to make room for feelings other than worry about something he could not change, grief for someone whom he'd not yet lost. He thought of these things as he walked out the kitchen door and toward where she sat staring out into the waving stalks of corn.

"Hi," he said, placing his hands on her shoulders from behind.

"Hi, honey," she said brightly.

"What you doing?"

"Just talking to the corn."

"What does it say?"

"What do *they* say? There's more than one, you know."

"Sorry. They all look the same to me."

"Well, they're not."

"Okay. So, what's with them?"

"They're sad."

"Why?"

"Because it's fall and they're dying."

"They get to come back next year."

"No, honey. This corn will die. You'll have to replant them next year, though you can turn their stalks into the ground to make the soil rich. They say they know, but it's not the same," she said with far more concern that Tony expected, turning to show him two tear-filled eyes.

"Honey, it's okay," he said kneeling down and taking her in both arms, pressing her head gently onto his shoulder.

"What if it's not okay," she said with urgency, lifting her head up and looking closely into his eyes.

"What do you mean, Mary?"

"What if it's different and that's not…" she said, letting her last words trail off into silence, knowing he could not understand her fears.

"I don't know what you mean."

“I know,” she said more calmly. “It's just me. It's just hard to have faith in yourself when it all seems so new, but so final at the same time.”

Tony looked into her eyes then rose to his feet, pulling her up with him. They stood there for a moment looking at one another, then almost simultaneously turned and started toward the patio door. Inside Tony halted in the middle of the kitchen.

“Where's Nicky?” he said.

“He went up to church with Brian.”

The two looked at one another, then Mary took Tony’s hand and led him out of the kitchen.

The last heat of summer waned as September passed into October and Nick abandoned his garden to lie dormant into the coming season. After several more weeks Mary's short remission also began to fade, giving way to the cold sickness she had felt before. She returned to the hospital for what was thought to be a further session of treatment, but when the doctors' received the results of her latest labs they saw that the cancer had spread into her vital organs. They quickly changed their prognosis, canceling the new series of treatment and replacing it with the steady intravenous morphine drip needed to maintain her comfort, and a respirator to assist her breathing. How she could not have felt any symptoms before the last few days confounded them.

Tony learned what he knew all along had been the inevitable, even though his hopes had seemed so close to fulfillment only a few days before. He occupied his time as

best he could by keeping the house clean, as if preparing for her impending return, and spending increasing hours at the hospital. He told Nicky that she needed more tests.

"For what?"

"What do you mean, son?"

"I mean, what do they need to do more tests for? They already know she's sick."

"They're doing more tests so they have more ideas on how to make her better. That's all."

"When's she coming home?"

"I don't know."

"Can I go to see her with you today?"

"Not today, Nicky. She's been real tired after the tests."

Nick looked at the floor.

"Son, why don't you get your homework out and start it. Brian's going to come over and stay with you while I—"

"I don't want him to come over."

"Nicky, you—"

"I want to go down to the wharf to see Sal."

"Son, Mr. Amato doesn't need you in his way."

"He told me I could come any time."

"He said that to be polite, Nick—"

"No he didn't. He meant it."

Tony took a quick, agitated breath. He knew his son was right.

“Listen to me,” Tony said sternly, kneeling down and taking hold of Nick's arms. “Brian's going to be here in a few minutes and I want you to behave, do you understand?”

Nick stared at his father’s face and said nothing

“Answer me when I speak to you!” Tony said angrily, surprising himself more than his son.

“Yes, Dad,” Nick said, startled by the unusual display of emotion on his father's face.

The two turned from one another and retreated to their own neutral corners of the house. After a while, Brian knocked at the door.

“Son, would you get the door, please?” Tony called from the bathroom in a conciliatory tone. Nick did not reply but stood up from his chair in the kitchen and walked to the front door to let Brian inside.

“Hey, Nick. How you doing?” Brian spoke slowly, sincerely.

“Okay.”

“How's your mom?”

“She's back in the hospital,” Nick answered flatly.

“Oh, my gosh. She was doing so well. Is everything all right?”

Nick shrugged. Tony emerged from the hallway.

“Hi, Brian. How are you?” he asked, extending an open palm to Brian.

“Fine, Mr. Lucera. Nick says Mrs. Lucera is back in the hospital?”

"Yes. The doctors, they thought she should be doing a little better than she is, so they had her come back in to see what else they can do," Tony said in the vague, ambiguous terms of someone lying to himself as well as everyone else.

"Well, I'm sure they're doing their best," Brian offered weakly. Tony did not reply but only reached for his jacket hanging on the coat rack.

"I'm going down to the office for awhile. Got to keep an eye on my agents," he said in a mock smile. "Nicky, you be good," he said, beginning toward the door, then quickly looked at Brian. "Walk with me to the car, would you?"

"Sure, Mr. Lucera."

The two descended the front steps, Tony in the lead, both silent until they crossed the parkway and arrived at the curb. Then Tony stopped and turned to face Brian, standing very close to him. He watched over Brian's shoulder as Nick stared at them from the big bay window in the front room, watched without speaking until the boy sank back into the house and out of sight.

"Brian, listen, I didn't want to worry Nicky. I'm going to the hospital. I might be late. I was wondering if you'd maybe stay with him, at least until I get home."

"We could go up to my youth group meeting and then come back and have dinner with my parents."

"They wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not," he said and paused. "Mr. Lucera, is Mrs. Lucera all right? I mean, is she going to *be* all right?"

"No."

Brian stared quietly at Tony, then took a deep, struggling breath.

“I don't…”

“I know. Neither do I.”

“I was thinking about that elderly man who was here the other day, about the things he was saying.”

“You mean Sal? What about them”

“He, well, I felt very uncomfortable around him. I thought the things he said were really out of line. I was afraid he'd worry you. Make you lose faith."

A small, ironic smile widened on Tony's face. “Lose faith? Brian, to Sal, faith is truth. He values the truth over anything. He was just preparing me for what's to come. At least as much as he was able to.”

“But, saying you know someone is going to die… Only God knows that. It was wrong of him to—” He thought for a moment. “It was just wrong.”

Tony struggled with what to say for a moment. He wondered how to explain the encounter when he barely understood it himself.

“Brian, just believe me when I say that what Sal did was right. Really.”

“But, she was doing so well…”

“I know. It's like she was preparing, too. Saying 'good-bye' in her own way.”

The two stood silently for a moment.

“Look, Brian, I have to get going. I really appreciate your help.” He turned and walked toward the driver's door of the car, then looked up suddenly.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Nick's Uncle and Aunt are going to stop by later. Teresa will probably bring food."

"Okay. We should be home by seven."

"Thanks again," Tony said opening the car door and lowering himself in.

Brian stood for a while alone on the parkway in front of the house, watching the first dark rain clouds of the year coalesce behind the backdrop of the setting sun and thought about what to say to Nick. He said a quick, silent prayer toward the darkening sky and turned toward the steps. When he walked through the front door he expected to hear the drone of the television in the background, the shuffle of chair legs on linoleum, the creaking of floorboards underneath thick carpet. But he sensed no presence, only a solitude, an emptiness that houses possess when they stand devoid of any flesh and blood interaction, when there is no other energy for them to absorb and mirror back to the world. Brian checked the den, the bedrooms, bathrooms, the now cold and blustering back yard, the patio, the dying garden, even the garage, but no one was there.

Through the sheets of wet fog that soaked his hair and rolled down his face like tears, through the knife-like wind that cut his coat and pierced his skin, Nick road his bicycle hard, breathing heavily and rising off of the seat to drive as much force as possible into each peddle, only sitting back when a downhill slope gave some relief. The way was mostly downhill, yet he still labored even on the flat sections. Normally he would have never ventured so far alone, especially on his bicycle; the almost entirely uphill return would have proven impossible for him, but he did not intend on returning.

When he finally rolled onto the thick wooden deck of the wharf, he rode first down to the empty section between dry-dock and the fish companies where piles of nets lay patiently waiting for the menders' hands. He coasted slowly behind one dark mountain of woven fiber and dismounted his bike, looking up and then down the length of pier into the thickening fog. He could see no one. Then, steadying the handlebars with his left hand and grasping the seat firmly with his right, he shoved his bicycle toward the edge of the pier and watched the red fenders, white plastic seat and silver frame splash into the green-black water, heaving upward once as if to reach for help, then, much quicker than he thought it would, resignedly sink out of sight.

Nick heaved a sigh, one phase completed. With his bike resting dead on the bottom of the harbor he felt resolute, decisive, having planned and executed the greatest act of defiance he had ever conjured. He knew that the price to pay for such disobedience could be lethal, but did not intend to ever experience it. Instead he turned and began the short walk up the wharf where Sal Amato's boat tugged gently at its mooring on the tarred piling. The entire wharf lay deserted; even Sal sat at home waiting for the first storm of the season to blow over. Nick carefully lifted each leg over the side of the bow, bending his knees to steady himself against the rising and falling deck. He found a place between the pile of readied nets and the small skiff and hunkered down. The wind had almost completely dissipated by now, but clouds thickened beyond the fog where Nick could not see. Soon the rain fell steady and cold, the waves pitching the boat harder against the wharf pilings, each deck board creaking and stressing as the storm's strength grew. After a few moments of panic he lifted himself from his hiding place next to the

soaked netting and hurried toward the tiny cabin in the middle of the boat, falling once hard onto his knees as the deck fell out from under him.

Inside the cabin, shivering in his now drenched clothes, he searched for something dry, finding an old, oily wool sweater and pair of yellow rain pants underneath the cabin bench. He struggled to pull off his own dripping clothes, feeling the cold air sting his naked skin, tugged the sweater over his head—it smelled of motor oil and fish—and pulled the vinyl pants over his bare legs. At first the pants felt clammy, but soon their imperviousness allowed the heat to concentrate inside. The sweater's course wool scratched him but also warmed him quickly. He discarded his wet socks and plunged his bare feet back into his rubber rain boots. Soon his entire body sat bathed in perspiration and the frightening urgency of seeking warmth fled, chased away by a cloak of exhaustion. Nick leaned against the cabin wall and fell deeply asleep to the rocking of the boat.

When he thought he opened his eyes it seemed he had slept only a short time. Yet somehow he, the boat, the entire dock, the ocean beyond, had changed. The sun shone brightly, too brightly, and glared off the dock as if the dull wood had transformed into a shining metal. The small bridge which led to the wharf was gone, also the street beyond it, the warehouses, the fish markets. In their place lay a scene too familiar to Nick, yet so out of place that he did not at first recognize it. As he stared through the cabin window at what should be piles of nets and a parking lot, he saw instead his own house, the green parkway lawn, the long planter-box with roses and poinsettias in full brilliant bloom, the

pink brick of the retaining wall alive in its color as if blood coursed through it instead of cement and steel, the white of the house pure as wet paint, glaring so much from the light that he squinted and looked slightly away. Confused, afraid, yet feeling a strange belonging, he rose from his seat and walked out of the cabin and onto the deck of the boat. His makeshift wardrobe of the night before had somehow transformed into his own clothes but not those he had chosen for his flight. Instead he wore a favorite red shirt (a Christmas present from his aunt and uncle), and jeans, not the "husky" variety that he loathed so much and donned to the constant derision of any school acquaintance who noticed their label, but a pair in a style worn by all the other kids, a present from other less familiar relatives. These jeans were several sizes too small and sat buried in his closet out of sight and memory. He noticed that they fit freely now as he walked to the side of the boat, jumping over its heavily varnished railing and onto the deep, green lawn. When his feet hit the grass no sound rose, and as he walked toward the front steps of the house no other sound came from his footsteps, no crunching of stiff, new blades of grass, no scuffing of his shoes on the pavement. When he reached the top of the steps he walked through the open doorway into his house, everything in its place, except shining with a glimmer of newness that none of the items had ever possessed. Suddenly the silence fell like a curtain dropped onto a stage and chattering, animated voices filled Nick's ears. He looked toward the opening to the kitchen where the voices seemed to emanate and saw his father, his Uncle Frank and Aunt Teresa, his neighbor Brian, all sitting at the kitchen table, saying something to one another that Nick could not at first understand. But whatever they said, it was something that made them all very happy, for

as they spoke, simultaneously looking back and forth at one another with wide eyes and mouths, they laughed loudly and freely.

Nick strode toward them and, as he did, the words they said became clearer, and as he stood beside the table he finally heard them distinctly, and what he heard was not a conversation at all, but just the same phrase repeated over and over, with an excitement and anticipation that Nick could not understand, seeing them turning to one another and repeating again and again: “It's time! Did you know it's time? It's time...”

He watched them for what seemed a long while and then realized that they continued their chanting without ever noticing him, and he moved close to the figure of his father and placed a hand on his shoulder. The figure did not cease the endless litany of 'It's time,' but turned his head and, his eyes meeting Nick's, changed his incantation to, “Oh, Nicky! Did you know it's time? It's time!”

He then turned his head to the others at the table and said loudly and with a strange enthusiasm, “Hey, everyone, it's Nicky!”

Nick watched as the others simultaneously turned their heads toward him and, smiling, repeated, “Hey, Nicky! Did you know it's time? It's time!”

They repeated their chant until he could no longer stand the crazy, ridiculous drone. Afraid at first, then angry, he took a deep breath and screamed.

“What do you mean?! Why are you saying that?!”

Suddenly they stopped, looked at one another with blank, bewildered faces, as if in disbelief that he could not comprehend the simple meaning of their phrase, then turned again with knowing smiles and pointed at the clock on the wall above the sink. Nick

turned and looked at the familiar spot where the clock usually hung as it did now, except that, other than it's round outline and body, it looked completely blank, it's face devoid of hands or numbers or even lettering, only a small white disk on the wall. Nick turned his head toward the group and shot a confused stare at them. They appeared very pleased and content, continuing to point at the clock: "You see? It's time!"

Nick backed away from the table and kept a wary eye on the group as they again began their happy, maniacal chant. Then he noticed that one chair at the table, his mother's usual place, stood empty. Again he raised his voice to pierce the incessant repetition.

"Where's Mom?" he yelled at them, then watched as they turned their heads to stare at the empty chair, then back at one another with confused, questioning faces. Then, all at once, their faces transformed into expressions of excited realization. The figure of Nick's father turned toward him and said, as if he had known all along, "She's in the garden!"

Nick backed away from the table and toward the open kitchen door that lead to the garden. He eased himself down the steps, one eye on his footing and the other on the group. Then, seeing them preoccupied again with their chant, he turned toward the spot where the garden lay. Instead of the dead earth and yellow remnants that lay there only yesterday he saw a lush, thick entanglement of plants, some familiar, others strange, all tall and vibrant with color, writhing around as if in the rhythm of the endless repetition of words from the group around the table.

As Nick walked toward the garden he sensed eyes on him and turned to see that the group had risen and now stood on the steps. When his eyes met theirs they began a new incantation.

"She's there! In the garden!"

Turning again toward the strange, dancing plants, Nick noticed the figure of a woman backing out from the corn stalks. But instead of his mother's small, lithe body, clad in jeans and a tee shirt, the figure loomed large and fat, the seams of the thin, flowered dress she wore straining against her girth. As she turned Nick first noticed her hands, outstretched, holding two ears of corn torn from their stalks. The ears undulated in the same rhythm as the rest of the garden, but as Nick looked closer at them he noticed that they pulsed slower and slower, and that from their base seeped a small yet steady trickle of red. The more thickly the red flowed the slower the ears moved, until their motion stopped completely and they drooped dead in the hands of the woman who let them fall to the earth. Nick looked to where they had fallen and noticed that smoke began to rise from them, growing until flame erupted and engulfed the dead ears, consuming them in seconds, leaving only a pile of gray-black remnants.

"Ashes to ashes…" the group from around the table now chanted, startling Nick. He turned toward them and listened as they repeated, "Ashes to ashes...ashes to ashes..." over and over until the figure of Brian appeared to glide very close to Nick, looking down with a serious, urgent expression.

"It's time. What will you say?" he said once and waited. Nick just stared at the frozen face.

"It's time, Nick. What will you say?" the figure repeated, lifting his arms now and pointing toward the garden. As Nick turned his head to look in the direction that the finger pointed a flash of compound memories crashed onto his mind. When he looked up and finally notice the face of the woman in the garden, he now realized her as the same woman from Brian's church from several months ago, the woman who tore the silence of the group prayer with the harsh, metallic words. And as Nick now looked straight into her face, he remembered the question—What will you say? What will you say when He asks you?—seeing her face contort as it did months before, her mouth losing its human shape, becoming the faceless circle of the clock on the kitchen wall, then melting into a light almost too bright to view as the sounds came again, Nick seeing them this time as flashes of the light shooting from where the mouth should be and landing as flame all around the garden, fire erupting wherever the flame landed.

Nick stood terrified as the flames grew, engulfing everything around him, and soon the entire garden danced in fire and his fear transformed into resignation. But just before he let his legs weaken and lay down amid the burning corn, he heard another voice in vibrant contrast to the groups drone still behind him, a voice alive and vital, full of strength and anger.

"Nick! This isn't the end! Fight back!" the voice said growing louder as it approached. Nick, awakened now, turned to see Sal Amato, clad in his usual work clothes, except younger, larger, approaching in great strides that shook the burning ground.

Sal stopped in front of Nick and repeated, “This isn't the end. They just want you to think it is. You can beat them and they know it. They're afraid of you. Go ahead!”

And Nick turned and looked at the woman and suddenly charged her with both arms outstretched, fists clenched in tight defiance. He let his entire body slam into her, knocking her back into the flaming garden. Suddenly the pulsating motion of the entire scene stopped, became completely still, and after a brief moment, everything began to move silently in reverse, like a film reel run backwards. Nick stared at the fallen figure as the flaming light that had shot from her mouth retreated to its source, and soon the flame receded in the same manner until it died completely. He looked down at the piles of ash where the two ears of corn had burned and watched the ash spring into flame, then the flame dissipate and the torn ears reappear, jumping back into the woman's hand, then onto their stalk, green again with life. And as they did he felt a slight breeze, heard the stalks rustle and smelled the verdant soil. The woman and the figures of his family and friend stood petrified, their once convincing faces drooping like cheap masks.

“Good,” Sal said to Nick, and he watched as the old man looked toward the figures in the scene and barked at them in an irritated tone: “Go!”

Nick thought he heard them gasp quietly, but when he turned to look they were gone.

He felt the scene around him suddenly melt into a calm whiteness and felt Sal's hands press against his arms. He closed his eyes and let the warm hands hold him, then felt them shake him gently. When he opened his eyes again he saw Sal, as old and small

as he had always been. Nick smelled the ocean salt and pungent fish, felt the wood of the bench where he lay, and knew that he was back on the little fishing boat.

"Nick, wake up. What are you doing here?"

"I came here to wait for you."

"Wait for me? What for? Why didn't you just come in the morning? It's been storming."

"I'm not going back."

"What do you mean?"

"I want to be a fisherman. I want to go out to sea."

"Nick, you have to go home."

"No. I don't belong there. I want to be where I belong."

"Nick, if you don't learn to belong at home, you'll never feel like you belong anywhere else." Sal shook his head. "I'm sorry, I can't expect you to understand that now. But you will. For now you have to trust me, all right? Your belonging will come, in time."

Confused, he looked into the old man's eyes and saw in them an ancient and sad wisdom, an unwavering certainty, and the boy felt trust in what he saw and heard, and shuffled himself up from his nook in the cabin to prepare for the way home.

Chapter 15

Brian sat down in the kitchen at Tony's house and leaned his weight onto the table top, supporting his head with his hands. He shook his head slightly from side to side as he prayed, wondering what else he could have said or done to change what was happening to Nick, allowing himself to wonder why his God had failed him with such a basic, obvious task.

Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted… Brian thought, then looked up at the blank ceiling and said out loud,

"Well, he *is* mourning! He might not realize it yet, but he is."

He dropped his head and sobbed, feeling a dual torment—a sense of anger at his inability to help his friend and betrayal for questioning his God.

"Why won't you let me help him? Is this another one of those things that Pastor always chalks up to your will? Whenever we don't understand something or when things don't make sense, when people suffer or starve or die, we pray our prayers and shrug it off as *your will*. Well, I'm sorry, but I don't agree with that anymore. If you're going to forgive us in the end, then why put us through this now?"

Brian bowed his head and slumped back in the kitchen chair, suddenly feeling spent and weak, knowing he should fall on his knees and beg forgiveness but not feeling that he could and mean it, because he was not sorry for what he had said. He sat still for a long time in the chair before a knock at the door startled him, and he jumped up from

the chair and walked quickly to the front door, seeing Nick's uncle and aunt waiting grimly on the front porch, a steady rain now falling behind them in the night, as he opened the door.

"Hello, Brian," Frank said flatly, walking through the front door, Teresa silently behind.

"Tony called and said you'd be here with Nicky. He really appreciates your help, you know that. So do we." Frank paused and looked pensively at Brian. "If I made you think I didn't like you, when we met, I mean, I'm sorry."

"No, no. It's fine. Listen, I'm sorry, but I need your help. Nicky's not here."

Frank and Teresa gave one another a puzzled look, then stared at Brian.

"What do you mean, he's not here?"

"He ran away. At least that's what I think he did. When Mr. Lucera left and I came back inside he was gone. I searched all over the house for him."

The three stood still in the living room for a long moment, each encapsulated in their separate worlds of thought. Teresa broke their silence.

"Come on. Let's sit down and figure this out before Tony gets home. My God, that's all he needs, a sick wife and a missing son."

The three moved methodically into the kitchen and sat.

"Brian, did he leave a note? Did he take anything with him?"

"I don't know. It didn't look like it. I didn't see any note anywhere. I just came back in the house and it was empty. Where could he have gone, especially in the rain?"

"I don't know," Teresa said wearily. "It's not like him to do something like this. He's always such a good boy."

"He's very upset," Brian said. "He knows something's going on around him but no one will tell him what. He needs to know."

"What? That his mother is dying?" Frank said angrily.

"If that's what's happening, yes. And he needs to know that it's not his fault."

"She's not dying, goddamnit!" Teresa shot suddenly at Brian. "She's getting better! She's been getting better…" She began to sob heavily.

"I'm sorry, but if you're wrong—"

"Why the hell should he think it's his fault? How could it be his fault?" Teresa shouted suddenly, jabbing her face at Brian.

"It's *not* his fault, but he has to hear that from you, and from his dad!" Brian shouted back, rising from his chair, then raised his hands, making a conciliatory motion in the air and sat back down.

"Look," he said quieter, slower, "Nicky has been raised very, very strict. I get the feeling that he knows really well when he is wrong, but I don't think he has a clear idea of when he's right. Do you see what I mean? If you're always pointing out to someone when they're wrong then they always feel wrong, whether they are or not. He doesn't have any other way of looking at it. He just needs to be loved right now, to be loved and told the truth and that, no matter what happens, you'll love him."

"I know. You're right. But we can't tell him anything until we find him," Teresa said, calmer now.

“I think I know exactly where we can find him—” Frank said, then started along with Teresa and Brian as the front door opened. The three turned toward the living room to see Tony close the door and turn, slowly walking toward them, looking straight forward but with a vacant stare as if he did not see the three sitting right in front of him. Down his uncovered head poured beads of fresh rain that dripped onto his shoulders. He pulled himself toward Teresa and Frank and slowly knelt onto one knee, placing his arms around their shoulders and pulling them gently toward his own bowed head.

“She's gone.”

Teresa sobs returned. Frank breathed heavily and held his thumb and index finger up to his eyes. Brian stared blankly at the three, knowing enough to remain silent.

By the time Sal had discovered Nick asleep in the boat the rain had stopped, the clouds parting to reveal a black, starry sky shimmering with moonlight. The two walked from the boat to Sal's perfect '51 Ford pickup, the old man opening the passenger door for Nick, leaving it ajar for him to close himself. Nick did so, feeling the cold air rush from the truck's cab. Once sealed inside he felt a strange sense of security, a warmth he did not associate with the interior of vehicles. As he listened to Sal's footsteps circling the truck and waited for the old man to enter from the other door, Nick looked around the cab's interior. It looked so new—no scratches on the side panels, no cigarette burns in the seats. It even smelled new.

Nick turned to look at the old man as he opened his door, reached for the steering wheel and leapt up into the driver's seat.

“It smells so good in here,” Nick said.

“You noticed? That takes a very keen sense. Most people don't have it.”

“It doesn't smell like a truck.”

“Not surprising. It's not.”

“What do you mean, it's not? Then what is it?”

“It's whatever you believe it is. Or, whatever you treat it as.”

“But we're sitting in a truck.”

“Are we? How do you know?

“Because we're *here*. We're inside the truck.”

“You mean we perceive we are inside the truck.”

Nick sat silently.

“Okay. What's that over there?” Sal pointed to a pile of nets.

“Nets.”

“And that?”

“It's your boat.”

“And that,” he repeated, this time pointing to a complex apparatus hanging from a framework of welded steel.

“It's the thing they use to get boats in and out of the water.”

“Yes, but if you didn't know that that's what it was for, what would you call it”

“I don't know. I wouldn't call it anything.”

“Yes!” Sal’s tone pitched with excitement. “That's right. You wouldn't call it anything at all.”

Nick felt more confused than ever, especially at the old man's enthusiasm.

“In fact, if we were on the wharf and I said to you, 'go over to the winch station and wait for me,' you wouldn't know where to go, would you?”

“No.”

“Now, if I pointed to that same thing and told you that it was a pickup truck—”

“But *this* is a pickup truck.”

“If you had never seen a pickup truck, and I pointed to that thing and told you it was a pickup truck, what would it be to you?”

“I guess it would be a pickup truck.”

“Exactly! You see? Everything depends on perception. If I told you from the very beginning that this thing we're sitting in is called a giraffe, where would we be?”

“Inside a giraffe.”

“Now, can you see how everything is like that? Everything depends on our perception of it. If I say 'boat' to identify the object that sits in the water and takes me fishing, then it is a boat. If I say it's a pickup truck, it is. More exactly, you *believe* that it is.”

“So, if I say you're Santa Claus, you are.”

“If that is what you perceive.” Sal smiled.

“But what does that have to do with how your truck smells?”

“It has everything to do with it. To me, this thing that you call a truck is many things.” Sal gazed about the interior of the cab. “A friend, a companion, a helper, trusted ally, a business partner—”

"But all those are people."

"Why?"

Nick thought for a moment. "Because that's what we believe they are?"

"That's right!" Sal placed a hand on Nick's shoulder. "Do you see now? If I believe that this 'pickup truck,' as you call it, is all those things to me, then it is. If I treat it as such, and truly believe in it as such, it reacts like all those things. It gives me back what I give to it. It's also a source of food for me, a nourishment, a garden."

And Nick realized that the sweetness, the freshness he smelled inside the truck felt unfamiliar only because it was so out of place. He smelled the faint, moist presence of loamy soil, the tart pungency of ripe tomatoes, the crisp sweetness of red bell peppers, just as if the truck were speeding by a farm, not sitting in a parking lot by the ocean.

"Even more," Sal continued, "if *you* can sense what I sense, too, without even knowing it, that means you have the ability to perceive life as it really is, not as we're taught it is."

Nick gave the old man a questioning look, wanting to ask for some clarification, but feeling unable to form a question.

"I know," Sal said. "It's not evident to you now. But you'll see, you'll understand. I'm giving you some very advanced lessons, but only because I know that your soul is at a very advanced stage of growth."

Nick thought it strange and out of place that Sal should mention the soul. He felt these discussions as the protected territory of priests and people like Brian, those worthy of speaking of the same things associated with God. His parents had taught him that,

when he died, his soul would continue on though his body would rot. So he naturally associated the soul with the moment of death, felt unknowingly disassociated with it now, in life. As he puzzled these thoughts he felt Sal's eyes on him.

"Yes," Sal said, "that's right. You don't have to wait until you die to realize your own soul. It's what they'd like us to believe, though, the priests and those who think they have God in their back pocket. That way they can control how you feel about yourself now. But if you know that you and your soul are one in the same, that you *are* your soul right now, that you know your soul by knowing yourself, listening to yourself and valuing what you think and believe, then you know God. You have no need for the priests. They become obsolete.

"So they preach to you that only in death will you be set free, and then again only through the help of God, or Jesus, or Mohammed, or by paying sufficient penance, or by converting so many others to your own faith, and so on and so on. They don't want you to know that you can be free right now, in this moment."

"Why not?"

"Hm?"

"Why don't they want us to know now?"

"Oh, it's simple," Sal explained: "because *they* don't now, and they're scared. It's not their fault. They just don't know any different. And there's nothing wrong with not knowing, nothing wrong with being afraid. It's when they pull others down into the same fear that's wrong."

Nick stared into the darkness of the pier that disappeared into the black night beyond the last lamp pole. He wanted to understand all of what Sal had told him, but did not. He wondered if Sal considered Brian to be one of the scared people trying to make others as scared as he must be. But to Nick, Brian did not seem scared, seemed instead quite sure of himself and in what he believed. And Nick understood the parameters of what Brian believed. They were very simple, they made sense to him. If we sin, we ask forgiveness. If we ask in sincerity, we are forgiven. If not, we are damned. When the world ends, the forgiven will live in paradise and the others will suffer in hell. Nick's fear of what Brian believed came through this understanding. He did not understand what Sal believed, and found in that not-understanding a far greater fear than any other uncertainty.

"Nick, are you ready to go home?"

Nick nodded because he knew there was no other choice. As the truck pulled onto the road, he thought desperately of what to say, of how to defend his actions, but could think of none. He knew that his mother would not find out immediately of his disobedience, so perhaps her retribution would soften in its delay. However, he felt unsure of how his father would react. Nick had watched him become more and more agitated and impatient as his wife's illness progressed and could no longer count on the usual mild understanding. Suddenly Nick felt alone, solitary, felt the finality of his decision to leave home, felt that, even though he found himself compelled to return, nothing would be as it was just a few short hours ago. The unknown of the open ocean seemed small in comparison to the unknown he sped toward in the truck.

As Sal pulled along side the curb in front of the Lucera's house, Nick looked up at the kitchen window that beamed the only light from the house. He saw the vague outlines of four shadows from figures seated at the kitchen table, and thought immediately that his mother had returned from the hospital and now sat alongside his father and most likely his aunt and uncle, all bent in worry over cold cups of coffee. Fear gripped him by the chest and he felt his heart swell and quicken as he thought of his loved ones' fear and worry transform into furious anger when they saw him pass through the doorway.

"Nick, are you ready to go inside?" Sal asked calmly. Nick said nothing but opened the truck door and slid from the high cab seat onto the cement. He waited there for several moments, then, not hearing Sal's movements following, turned to see the old man still seated in the driver's seat, his left arm resting at twelve o'clock on the steering wheel, the rest of his body angled toward the passenger window. He could see, feel actually, from Sal's position that he had no intention of leaving the truck.

He opened the passenger door again and stared at Sal but said nothing.

"I can't go inside with you. This is something you began on your own."

He lowered his gaze from Sal's face and stared blankly at the cream-colored leather of the seat, looking at the indentation where he sat a few moments before. Just as he was about to back away from the door and turn toward the house, he heard Sal speak again.

"Nick, come down to the wharf sometime soon, whenever you feel like it, and help me mend nets."

He nodded, not really hearing what Sal had said, thinking only of his opening line, of getting as much said as he could before the pain started, before the screams beat his ears or the callused hands raised their fury to his face. He was half-turned toward the porch when he heard Sal, felt him, again, not in a physical way but sensed a presence, a fine filigree of dream-lace still lying lightly atop his sleepy, half-consciousness. The presence wafted diffusely at first all around Nick and then in a microsecond coalesced in his cerebral cortex, firing into his cognitive mind, realizing in a thought. Nick felt the thought travel from the ethereal reaches of his mind and land quite solidly in the back of his tongue, working its way toward his lips, and as he murmured the words they felt at once so natural, innate, and at the same time foreign, as if someone else had placed them in his mouth.

Everything changes, he said barely aloud, feeling significance much heavier than the two simple words. He thought of this as he walked up the steps and toward the front door, thought that, despite whatever punishment he had to endure, it would at least not last long, their rage would soon subside, and perhaps then this would be enough to restore life as it had been—his quiet, inconspicuous life.

He grasped the door knob firmly and turned it, not jerking it but allowing the bolt to retract from the strike silently, then letting the knob turn back on its own but holding it to a steady motion and pushing the door open into the dark living room. Warm air rushed out into the cold night and enveloped him as he walked from the porch and into the

darkness, feeling immediately stifled by the unusual heat. His mind, reacting to the drastic change in climate, immediately thought that someone must have forgotten to turn down the thermostat, something his mother monitored religiously. In a fraction of a second the logic flew through his consciousness: his mother always kept the thermostat set low, but it was obviously set high, given the immense heat inside the room, therefore something must have distracted her from the usual routine, or she must not be in the house. He walked into the middle of the dark living room, turning toward the light from the kitchen. There around the table sat his father in his usual place, Uncle Frank and Aunt Teresa to his father's left and right, and in the chair opposite his father, his mother's chair, sat Brian.

Nick at first felt relief—with his mother absent he could possibly defer physical punishment, perhaps avoid it altogether. All he had to do now was endure the anger and disappointment of his father, aunt and uncle. He stood still for another moment and then walked slowly toward the lighted kitchen. As he did so, his father raised his head and turned toward the living room.

"Nicky!" Tony said, rising quickly from his chair and meeting his son half way to the kitchen door.

"Nicky, are you okay? Are you okay son?" He knelt and held the boy, rocking him back and forth.

"Where've you been? We've been so worried about you."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm really sorry. I went down to the wharf—"

"The wharf?"

“I rode down on my bicycle and hid in Sal's boat. I pushed my bike into the ocean, Dad. I'm sorry. I didn't mean—”

“How’d you get home?”

“Sal drove me,” Nick said and turned toward the big bay window that looked out onto the street, pointing to where the truck should be, but when his eyes caught up with his hand he saw only the empty street.

Tony looked out the window, then back toward his son.

“It doesn't matter now. Come on, Nick. Come into the kitchen.”

Nick walked toward the kitchen, his father behind, resting his hands heavily on Nick's shoulders, too heavily, he thought.

It was not Nick's habit to offer testimony in his defense, which would enraged his mother who considered it ‘talking back.’ This time, however, given her absence, he felt safer, felt that his case would be, if nothing else, heard before his sentencing, before execution.

“Dad, I'm really sorry I left and didn't tell you. I'm sorry I didn't mind Brian.”

As Nick offered his apologies he looked at the four sitting at the table, noticed them puzzling quietly at one another, mumbling inaudible phrases and not really paying attention to Nick at all. Then his father turned toward him. “What was that you said, son?”

“I said that I was sorry I ran away.”

“It's okay.”

Nick sensed the hollowness in his father's words, as if they were a meaningless prelude to the real lines that remained unspoken. He watched as his father looked at Frank and Teresa, then at Brian, then back at his son.

"Nick, there's something we—there's something I have to tell you."

He looked at his father and felt the dread at first creep into his consciousness unrecognized and thought instead that a cold draft from an open window had blown through him. He looked at the others sitting, all focused on his father; his uncle placed a hand around Tony's shoulder, Brian, looking embarrassed, suddenly stood from his seat and stepped to stand next to Tony. As he did this, Nick stared at the empty chair on the opposite side of the table and then behind it at the cold darkness in the window.

"Where's Mom?" he asked plainly looking straight into his father's eyes. Tony hesitated only a moment.

"Mom's—gone. She's gone now, son…"

Nick thought he should feel something but did not, instead he looked at the others, his aunt, uncle and Brian all with bowed heads, moving their lips in a silent repeated chant. Then he realized the familiarity, felt the dread inch ever closer like a dangerous animal.

"Is it time?" Nick asked, backing away slightly from the four. His father raised his head.

"What?"

"Is it time?" he repeated, then looked at Brian for validation. "Is it? Is it time?"

Brian did not raise his eyes, but shut them tighter than before and continued his silent entreaty. Seeing this, Nick backed another step away. “I'm not ready. I don't know what I'll say.”

“What, Nicky?”

“I don't know what to say, Dad! I don't know—” and before he finished his sentence the dread engulfed him completely. The cold he'd felt course through him the moment before returned now, this time chilling him from within. Before he could think, he felt his feet move, turning his body toward the living room and finding the front door. Somewhere far in the distance he thought he heard the sound of muffled footsteps shuffling to follow him. Bursting onto the porch and down the steps into the cold, wind-still night, he looked up and saw the full moon blaring against a backdrop of charcoal sky, illuminating everything in front of him in a pale, silver light, and he realized that to run was useless, realized that the light penetrated everything, cast the shadows of trees and cars and houses onto the cold street as if in the noontime sun. For a moment he thought of trying to hide from the light, but knew somehow that doing so would be worse, and instead walked slowly, resignedly to the tall eucalyptus tree at the far end of the front yard. Circling its base once he found the big, flat scar of the huge dead branch, cut away so long ago. He stopped there and turned his back to the wounded trunk, leaning his entire weight against it, letting his body slide down the rough surface and into the cold shadow, then bowing his head to wait for the end of the world.

Chapter 16

The world does not end. Rather, a season passes bathed in a haze of half-memories, and he recalls only snippets of events, images that play out like a familiar TV show in re-run. At his mother's funeral many refer to him in third person as he stands with his father. Then he is seated next to a great-aunt he barely knows—crowded onto a satin-covered couch he keeps sliding off of and has to tuck his hands beneath his legs to catch himself. They sit in the family area of the mortuary (Tony had tried desperately for the Catholic church, but their schedule had no opening). A woman presses through the crowd of familiar and unfamiliar faces and kneel in front of Nick.

"Nick, hi. Do you remember Shelly Cooper, from second grade? I'm her mom…"

He does remember Shelly, wants to say so, to acknowledge that someone has reached out to him and him alone, and he finally looks into the woman's face, sees tears begin to form in her eyes, and offers a reassuring, "Yes."

Nick wants to say more, to ask about Shelly, but the old aunt shoos Mrs. Cooper away. The remaining details of that day come in shards: the intense weight on his shoulders from his father's arm, the shocking sight of his mother's still, exhausted face, the pinch of dress shoes, the bite of salami and cheese.

The funeral lasts for seconds, for days—the silver-gray satin of the casket lining at the viewing, the incessant crowd of suited adults at the service, the cavernous

limousine to the green rolling hills of the cemetery, and afterward the gathering at his uncle and aunt's not much different than Christmas Eve but for somber blue or black wardrobes replacing the vibrant reds and greens. In the weeks and months afterward, people's reactions to him change, and he finds himself reassuring others, kids at school who have never addressed him reacting with the rehearsed lines with which their parents have prompted:

"Hi, Nick, I'm really sorry about your mother."

"It's okay," he tells them all.

The adults need even more reassurance, lamenting about how terrible his loss is, how devastating, perhaps because they are so much nearer the end themselves.

Years fade along with the death-image of his mother, and he is always surprised when new friends comment awkwardly, when his first girlfriend tears up—every time someone asks of his mother's death, *he* is the one who ends up comforting *them*. Nick wonders at how life changes, his aunt Theresa and uncle Frank spending more time with Nick and his father, who stops drinking, pours himself into his work until, as his brother-in-law had predicted, indeed becomes one of the richest real estate men in town, which prompts his ambition to grow, his needs to change.

"But, *why* are we moving?" Nick laments.

"Because we're living in the past in this house, son."

"I'm not gonna know anyone on the hill."

"It's one of the best high schools in the country, Nick."

"I don't care."

"Listen, son, you have to look at this long term. It's three years, then you'll be at college. You're gonna be able to pick and choose whatever one you want. The recruiters know that school."

"I don't know if I want to go to college."

"Nick, it's just the next step. That's how you've got to look at it. Just from one stage to the next. You have the opportunity to do anything you want, to have what people call the American dream."

"What if it's not *my* dream?"

"Nick, if not for me, do it for your mom. She always said our son is going to do things we couldn't. And one of those things was college. After that you can do whatever you want."

Nick walks the gray-wet planks of the wharf, his bootsteps dampened by the moisture that soaks the ancient, weathered wood. He searches for Sal Amato, but knows his seeking is in vain. No one has seen the old fisherman in several years, long since Mary's funeral, which he'd attended but preferred to linger back, away from the crowd, and wait for a private moment with the family; but Nick walked to where Sal stood beneath a sprawling oak, cap in hands and head bowed in pious contemplation. When Nick approached the old man raised his head and opened his arms in simultaneous greeting, and the boy did not hesitate to accept the embrace that seemed to last for comforting hours. Afterward he looked up and watched Sal's mouth curl into a close-lipped smile, the green-gray eyes sparkle, and he nodded his head as if in affirmative

answer to an unspoken query, then turned and walked away, disappearing beyond the gravestones and trees.

That was the last anyone had see him, and after a year or more even his fellow fishermen stopped wondering, inquiring to one another about him. The harbormaster assigned a new boat to the abandoned slip, and many in the town forgot about the old man, dismissing his curious ways as if they had never occurred. But Nick never forgot.

Nick, seventeen now, a year from college, watches the charcoal gray of the fog-shrouded sky lighten but remain thick and low on the gunmetal water. The only activity at the wharf save a few men readying to cast lone lines off the pier for ocean perch are the barking of seals that sit on the high cross-members between the pilings and the flutter and cry of bickering gulls. He passes the men who do not acknowledge him, continues to the end of the pier where the fog obscures the wood of the last railing; it looks like if he were to continue, he would disappear into the clouded uncertainty of another world. He leans against the railing and peers across the water as far as he can see—perhaps a hundred yards—thinks he hears the rumble of an engine growling somewhere in the mist.

He believes that the sound is a phantom, carried to him by some trick of the wind, the same breeze that carries the sea lions' bark a mile from the shore, though the animals sound near enough to see. But just as he is about to dismiss his sense, turn and leave, the faint outline of a tiny fishing boat appears just beyond the border of fog. The boat's outline is vague and it looks more like an apparition, but the sound of the engine is prominent now and Nick cannot deny its presence.

Suddenly the engine stops. The ghostly boat bobs gently in the low rolling swells that have traveled thousands of miles to splash lightly against the pilings and continue on to the shore, climb the sand and retreat to make the journey all over again. He hears another engine, much smaller, and the grating of metal against metal, recognizes the anchor chain unraveling from its spool, lowering into the harbor depths until the chain begins to slacken, the anchor secure to the bottom. He sees what looks like a small figure emerge from the pilot's cabin and move toward the skiff secured at the stern, and suddenly the whole scene looks familiar. The figure unties the knots, releasing the skiff from its confines and manipulates the ropes to gently lower the small boat into the water. Then he unfurls a rope ladder over the side, turns and climbs over and down until seated in the skiff. From beneath the sides of the skiff he produces two oars, secures each into its lock. Nick hears the alternating splashes as the figure turns the small boat then begins to row toward the wharf.

Nick watches the skiff approach, the details growing clearer as the figure retreats farther from the fog. He sees now that what had looked like dull gray wood is painted a bright white, the oarlocks a shining stainless steel and oars clear varnished wood; the entire outfit looks brand new. The figure, still with his back to Nick, ships the oars as the skiff comes alongside the pier, then secures the small craft to a piling with rope. Climbing gingerly onto the wooden platform, he walks with his head bowed, hands in the pockets of a navy pilot jacket. His head is crowned with a gray woolen cap. Nick watches him ascend the steps from the platform until he reaches the level of the pier, and

is at once amazed and expectant when the man turns to reveal the weathered face of Sal Amato.

"I expected it would be easy to find you, but not *this* easy." Sal smiles.

"Sal, I can't believe it! Where've you been?"

"I'm semi-retired now, and I wanted to take a little trip up the coast to some places I used to know."

Nick steps toward the old man's open arms. "I've been thinking about you lately," Nick says, accepting the embrace.

"I know. That's why I thought it was finally time for a visit. But, let's get out of the cold. You know any good places for breakfast around here?"

"Sure. You don't mind walking?"

"I always enjoy a good walk. Lead the way."

The two stroll down the wide empty lanes of the pier, passing the two men Nick had seen earlier, one leaning against the railing and peering hopefully at the point where his line disappears beneath the water, the other packing his gear to leave.

Sal walks casually toward the men, Nick following but hanging back a few steps, curious at what the old fisherman will do.

"Good morning. How's fishing today?"

"You kidding?" one man says, placing his tackle box and rod on the bed of his battered pickup. "Sometimes I think there ain't no more fish left in this damn bay. Like we fished 'em all out or something."

"I know what you mean," Sal says. "I've been in the same place many times, wondering when, when would the fish ever come again. But, I learned to have patience. That's what makes the difference, because with patience comes faith."

"Now you sound like my priest, old man." The man raises himself into the cab of his truck. "I got no more time for patience today." He starts the truck's engine, pulls out of the space and guns down the pier.

"No time for patience, no time for faith," Sal says, smiling at the other man.

"I know," the other man says. "Sometimes it's hard, though, you know? I mean, I'm not here because it's fun. I was doing good for a while, working construction. But I got laid off when things slowed down. Now there's nothing out there. I can take my chances, stand in front of the lumber yard with thirty others guys, waiting to see if anyone's gonna come by with jobs. Or I can come down here and try to get something to eat."

"I know. Believe it or not, I've been there, too. All I can tell you is not to let yourself feel discouraged. If you feel it coming on, look out there at the ocean. There are more molecules making up the water that surrounds us than our minds could possibly understand. Look at the beach. Think of how many tiny grains of sand must there be. The universe expresses its infinity, its abundance all around us. Remind yourself that there is always enough for you, for every one."

"I never thought of it that way," the man says then looks oddly at Sal. "Act as if you had faith—"

"—and faith will be given to you," Sal says, finishing the man's words. "Exactly."

"Now you're sounding like *my* priest," the man smiles. "I'll try."

Just when his gaze returns to the blank water of the bay the motionless pole snaps forward, bending in a radical arch and the line trembling with tension.

"Whoa!" The startled man grabs the pole as the line unreels with a high-pitched *whizz*. "That's no tire!"

Nick watches as Sal encourages the man, gives him a few tips on how to land the fish, and finally after much work the man hands Sal the pole and leans over the railing to net the large striped perch.

"God, he must weigh ten pounds! I've never seen one this big."

"Congratulations," Sal says. "Enjoy it."

As they continue their way down the pier toward town and breakfast, Nick turns to the old fisherman.

"Did you give that guy a fish?"

"No. He gave himself the fish. I only reminded him that negative thinking would certainly produce no fish at all. Once he had the right mind set, once he put out the proper message to the universe, that there is plenty of fish for everyone, even him, the universe answered."

"How'd you know that quote of his?"

"That wasn't his. That was Jesus'. People like to think that what Jesus was talking about—about having faith, about loving yourself—that these are some sort of

quaint notions for religious people. They are anything but. Jesus didn't say to go to church on Sunday, or to be a Catholic or a Methodist or a Baptist. He had no concept of such things. I'm sure he'd be appalled that his very name was used to label an organized religion. He wasn't talking about organized religion. All he said was, Love God, which is accepting yourself, others, and have faith that the universe created for you can give you whatever you want. All you have to do is *attempt* to believe. The saying isn't, '*Have* faith and faith will be given to you,' only *act as if*. Just, try."

Nick shakes his head.

"I know. The important thing is that you're still trying."

The two walk in silence until the small downtown appears ahead, about a half mile from the wharf. The fog still drapes low in the sky, and wisps of vapor cling to the sides of buildings and the leaves of trees. The salt and fish scent of the wharf gives way to exhaust from passing delivery trucks, warm bread from a bakery, the curtained bay window of a small café. The hostess opens the front door and beckons the two forward, seating them at the front table so that they may enjoy the early morning view.

"My dad wants us to move."

"I thought he would, eventually."

"He keeps saying how I need to go to this big school on the hill so I can get into a good college. But he never asks me what *I* want to do."

"It's hard for him to understand, Nick. He had it all, or so he thought: a wife he loved, boy he loved, business starting to take hold. Take one leg off a three-legged stool and it collapses."

"But, our house should remind him of Mom."

"It does. That's why he wants to leave it."

"I don't understand."

"He wants to grow, Nick. He wants you to grow, too. He's trying to help you do that in the only way he knows how. I know what you're going to say. You want to decide for yourself which dreams to follow. You will. But you need some context first. You need a framework from which to explore your future. Your father's framework may not be the one for you, but it's a start."

Nick stared at the street outside beginning to fill with passersby, thought of the new house, the neighborhood filled with strangers, wealthy ones his relatives had always derided, when they'd see a Mercedes leave the Italian bakery downtown and flee up the hill toward their refuge away from the fishermen, laborers, immigrants who lived by the harbor. He remembered watching secretly as his mother would perch on the couch, drapes fully open to the view of the hill as she gazed in solemn contemplation, or so it seemed to him, despite the chiding of her brother or sister-in-law, other relatives, friends, she seemed to hold a secret longing for that destination so few miles removed from her existence yet so remote. He wondered how she would feel now, about Nick and his father moving to where she had only dreamed. Without her.

It seemed hardly any time had passed since when she was still there, yet he had changed so much in those few years, and though her image had not dimmed from his mind he knew there remained so much about her he did not understand, that she'd kept

locked inside for none to suffer but herself. He longed to unlock those secrets and know, as well he could, the person who'd held them fast.

"Sal."

"Yes, Nick?"

"Tell me about my mother."

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