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shriner

big *a novel*



brother



big

*a novel*

brother

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## **dedication**

*To Greg—who was unfailingly, improbably glad for anything good that ever happened to me, and in the face of whose drastic, fantastic, astonishing life any fiction pales.*

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## epigraph

The dieting industry is the only profitable business in the world with a 98 percent failure rate.

—[eatingdisorderfoundation.org](http://eatingdisorderfoundation.org)

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**I: Up**



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## chapter one

I have to wonder whether any of the true highlights of my fortysome years have had to do with food. I don't mean celebratory dinners, good fellowship; I mean salivation, mastication, and peristalsis. Oddly, for something I do every day, I can't remember many meals in detail, while it is far easier for me to call up favorite movies, faithful friendships, graduations. It follows, then, that film, affinity, and education are more important to me than stuffing my face. Well done, me, you say. But were I to honestly total the time I have lavished on menu planning, grocery shopping, prep and cooking, table setting, and kitchen cleanup for meal upon meal, food, one way or another, has dwarfed my fondness for *Places in the Heart* to an incidental footnote; ditto my fondness for any human being, even those whom I profess to love. I have spent less time thinking about my husband than thinking about lunch. Throw in the time I have also spent ruing indulgence in lemon meringue pies, vowing to skip breakfast tomorrow, and opening the refrigerator/stopping myself from dispatching the leftover pumpkin custard/then shutting it firmly again, and I seem to have concerned myself with little else but food.

So why, if, by inference, eating has been so embarrassingly central for me, can I not remember an eidetic sequence of stellar meals?

Like most people, I recall childhood favorites most vividly, and like most kids I liked plain things: toast, baking-powder biscuits, saltines. My palate broadened in adulthood, but my character did not. I am white rice. I have always existed to set off more exciting fare. I was a foil as a girl. I am a foil now.

I doubt this mitigates my discomfiture much, but I have some small excuse for having overemphasized the mechanical matter of sustenance. For eleven years, I ran a catering business. You would think, then, that I could at least recall individual victories at Breadbasket, Inc. Well, no, exactly. Aside from academics at the university, who are more adventurous, Iowans are conservative eaters, and I can certainly summon a monotonous assembly line of carrot cake, lasagna, and southern cream cornbread. But the only dishes that I recollect in high relief are the disasters—the Indian rosewater pudding thickened with rice flour that turned into a stringy, viscous vat suitable for affixing



wallpaper. The rest—the salmon steaks rolled around something or other, the stir-fries of this and that with an accent of what have you—it's all a blur.

Patience; I am rounding on something. I propose: food is by nature elusive. More concept than substance, food is the *idea* of satisfaction, far more powerful than satisfaction itself, which is why diet can exert the sway of religion or political zealotry. Not irresistible tastiness but the very failure of food to reward is what drives us to eat more of it. The most sumptuous experience of ingestion is in between: remembering the last bite and looking forward to the next one. The actual eating part almost doesn't happen. This near-total inability to deliver is what makes the pleasures of the table so tantalizing, and also so dangerous.

Petty? I'm not so sure. We are animals; far more than the ancillary matter of sex, the drive to eat motivates nearly all of human endeavor. Having conspicuously triumphed in the competition for resources, the fleshiest among us are therefore towering biological success stories. But ask any herd of overpopulating deer: nature punishes success. Our instinctive saving for a rainy day, our burying of acorns in the safest and most private of hiding places for the long winter, however prudent in its way, however expressive of Darwinian guile, is killing my country. That is why I cast doubt on whether the pantry, as a subject, is paltry. True, I sometimes wonder just how much I care about my country. But I care about my brother.

**A**ny story about a sibling goes far back indeed, but for our purposes the chapter of my brother's life that most deserves scrutiny began, aptly, at lunch. It must have been a weekend, since I hadn't already left for my manufacturing headquarters.

As usual in that era, my husband Fletcher had come upstairs on the early side. He'd been getting up at five a.m., so by noon he was famished. A self-employed cabinetmaker who crafted lovely but unaffordable one-of-a-kind furniture, he commuted all the way to our basement, and could arrive whenever he liked. The crack-of-dawn nonsense was for show. Fletcher liked the implied rigor, the façade of yet more hardness, fierceness, discipline, and self-denial.

I found the up-and-at-'em maddening. Back then, I hadn't the wisdom to welcome discord on such a minor scale, since Fletcher's alarm-clock setting would soon be the least of our problems. But that's true of all *before* pictures, which appear serene only in retrospect. At the time, my irritation at the self-righteousness with which he swept from bed was real enough. The man went to sleep at nine p.m. He got eight hours of shut-eye like a normal person. Where was the self-denial?

As with so many of my husband's bullying eccentricities, I refused to get with the program and had begun to sleep in. I was my own boss, too, and I detested early mornings. Queasy first light recalled weak filtered coffee scalded on a hot plate. Turning in at nine would have made me feel like a child shuttled to my room while the grown-ups had fun. Only the folks having fun, all too much of it, would have been Tanner and Cody, teenagers not about to adopt their father's faux farming hours.

Thus, having just cleared off my own toast and coffee dishes, I wasn't hungry for lunch—although

following the phone call of an hour earlier, my appetite had gone off for other reasons. I can't remember what we were eating, but it was probably brown rice and broccoli. With a few uninteresting variations, in those days it was always brown rice and broccoli.

At first, we didn't talk. When we'd met seven years before, our comfort with mutual silence had been captivating. One of the things that had once put me off about marriage was the prospect of ceaseless chat. Fletcher felt the same way, although his silence had a different texture than mine—thicker, more concentrated—churning and opaque. This gave his quiet a richness, which dovetailed nicely with my cooler, smoother calm. My silence made a whimsical humming sound, even if I didn't actually hum; in culinary terms, it resembled a light cold soup. Darker and more brooding, Fletcher was more of a red wine sauce. He *wrestled* with problems, while I simply solved them. Solitary creatures, we never contrived conversation for the sake of it. We were well suited.

Yet this midday, the hush was of dread and delay. Its texture was that of sludge, like my disastrous rosewater pudding. I rehearsed my introductory sentence several times before announcing aloud, "Slack Muncie called this morning."

"Who's Mack Muncie?" asked Fletcher distractedly.

"Slack. A saxophonist. From New York. I've met him several times. Well regarded, I think—but like most of that crowd, has trouble making ends meet. Obligated to accept wedding and restaurant gigs where everyone talks over the music." All of this qualified as the very "making conversation" I claimed to avoid.

Fletcher looked up warily. "How do you know him?"

"He's one of Edison's oldest friends. A real stalwart."

"In that case," said Fletcher, "he must be very patient."

"Edison's been staying with him."

"I thought your brother had an apartment. Over his jazz club." Fletcher imbued "his jazz club" with skepticism. He didn't believe Edison ever ran his own jazz club.

"Not anymore. Slack didn't want to get into it, but there's some—story."

"Oh, there's sure to be a *story*. It just won't be true."

"Edison exaggerates sometimes. That's not the same as being a liar."

"Right. And the color 'pearl' isn't the same as 'ivory.' "

"With Edison," I said, "you have to learn how to *translate*."

"So he's mooching off friends. How's this for *translation*: your brother's homeless." Fletcher habitually called Edison "your brother." To my ear that decoded, "your problem."

"Sort of," I said.

"And broke."

"Edison has been through thin patches before. Between tours."

"So because of some mysterious, complicated story—like not paying the rent—you brother has lost his apartment, and now he's couch surfing."

"Yes," I said, squirming. "Although he seems to be running out of couches."

“Why did this *Slack* person call, and not your brother himself?”

“Well, I think *Slack* has been incredibly generous, though his apartment is small. A one-bedroom where he also has to practice.”

“Honey. Spit it out. Say whatever it is that you don’t want to tell me.”

I intently chased a floret, too undercooked to fork. “He said there isn’t enough room. For the two of them. Most of their other colleagues are already doubled up, or married with kids, and—Edison doesn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Anywhere else but *where*?”

“We have a guest room now,” I pleaded. “Nobody ever uses it, besides *Solstice* every two years. And, you know—he’s my *brother*.”

A contained man, *Fletcher* seldom looked visibly irked. “You say that like playing a trump.”

“It means something.”

“Something but not everything. Why couldn’t he stay with *Travis*? Or *Solstice*?”

“My father is impossible and over seventy. By the time my sister was born, *Edison* was nearly out of the house. He and *Solstice* barely know each other.”

“You have other responsibilities. To *Tanner*, to *Cody*, to me. Even”—a loaded pause—“to *Bab*. Moronic. You can’t make a decision like this by fiat.”

“*Slack* sounded at his wit’s end. I had to say something.”

“What you had to say,” said *Fletcher* levelly, “was, ‘I’m sorry, but I have to ask my husband.’ ”

“Maybe I knew what you’d say.”

“And what was that?”

I smiled, a little. “Something like, ‘Over my dead body.’ ”

He smiled, a little. “Got that right.”

“I realize it didn’t go that well. The last visit.”

“No. It didn’t.”

“You seemed to get on the wrong side of each other.”

“There was no ‘seeming.’ We did.”

“If it were just anybody, I wouldn’t ask. But it isn’t. It would mean so much to me if you tried a little harder.”

“Got nothing to do with trying. You like someone, or you don’t. If you’re ‘trying,’ you don’t.”

“You can give folks a break. You do that with other people.” I took a moment to reflect that in *Fletcher*’s case this wasn’t always true. He could be harsh.

“Are you telling me that throughout this negotiation you never talked to your brother directly? So his friend is trying to offload the guy behind his back.”

“Maybe *Edison*’s embarrassed. He wouldn’t like asking favors of his little sister.”

“Little sister! You’re forty years old.”

An only child, *Fletcher* didn’t understand about siblings—how set that differential is. “Sweetheart, I’ll still be *Edison*’s *little sister* when I’m ninety-five.”

Fletcher soaked the rice pan in the sink. “You’ve got some money now, right? Though I’m never too clear on how much.” (No, he wouldn’t have been clear. I was secretive.) “So send him a check. Enough for a deposit on some dump and a couple of months’ rent. Problem solved.”

“Buy him off. Bribe him to stay away from us.”

“Well, he wouldn’t have much of a life here. You can’t say Iowa has a ‘jazz scene.’ ”

“There are venues in Iowa City.”

“Pass-the-hat gigs for a handful of cheapo students aren’t going to suit Mr. Important International Jazz Pianist.”

“But according to Slack, Edison isn’t—‘in the best form.’ He says Edison needs—‘someone to take care of him.’ He thinks my brother’s confidence has taken a knock.”

“Best news I’ve heard all day.”

“My business is doing well,” I said quietly. “That should be good for something. For being generous.” *The way I’ve been generous with you*, I almost added, *and with kids who are now my children too*, but I didn’t want to rub it in.

“But you’re also volunteering the rest of this family’s generosity.”

“I realize that.”

Fletcher leaned on either side of the sink. “I’m sorry if I seem unfeeling. Whether or not the guy gets on my nerves, he’s your brother, and you must find it upsetting, his being down on his luck.”

“Yes, very,” I said gratefully. “He’s always been the hot shot. Being strapped, straining his friends’ hospitality—it feels wrong. Like the universe has turned on its head.” I wasn’t about to tell Fletcher but Edison and Slack must have fallen out, since the saxophonist’s urgency had been laced with what I could only call, well—disgust.

“But even if we did decide to take him in,” said Fletcher, “*and we haven’t*—the visit couldn’t be open-ended.”

“It can’t be conditional, either.” If I was going to think that way, and I preferred not to, I had amassed, as of the previous couple of years, most of the power in our household. I disliked having power, and in ordinary circumstances rather hoped that if I never exercised this baffling clout it would go away. For once, however, the novel agency was useful. “Saying, ‘only for three days,’ ” I said, “or ‘only for a week.’ That doesn’t sound gracious, but as if we can only stand his company for a limited period of time.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” Fletcher said curtly, leaving the dishes to me. “I’m going for a ride.”

**O**f course he was going for a ride. He rode his bicycle for hours almost every day—or *one of his* bicycles, since he had four, competing with unsold coffee tables for limited space in a basement that had looked so cavernous when we moved in. Neither of us ever mentioned it, but I’d bought him those bikes. Technically, we pooled our resources. But when one party contributes the contents of a eyedropper and the other Lake Michigan, “pooling” doesn’t seem the right word, quite.

Ever since my husband had started cycling obsessively, I wouldn't go near my own ten-speed clunker, by then gathering dust with deflated tires. The neglect was of my choosing, but didn't feel that way. It was as if he'd stolen my bike. Were I ever to have dragged the thing upstairs, greased the chain, and wended down the road, slowly and not very far, he'd have made fun of me. I preferred to skip it.

Every time Fletcher went for a ride I got annoyed. How could he stand the boredom? He'd come home some afternoons in a state of brisk satisfaction that his time had improved, usually by a few seconds. Churning the same route through the cornfields to the river a smidgeon faster was of no earthly consequence to anyone. He was forty-six, and soon the computer on his handlebars would simply track his disappointment in himself. I didn't like to think that I begrudged him something of his own, but he had the furniture making, which was private enough. He used those rides to shut me out.

I felt so guilty about this annoyance that I went to lengths to disguise it, forcing myself to suggest he go for a ride in order, say, to get out of his system some frustration with Tanner, "since it makes you feel so much better." But a too-lilting falsetto gave my falsity away. Most confounding: he *liked* that the cycling annoyed me.

Clearly, I was a bad wife. Aerobic jaunts would lengthen his life. After Cleo, his ex, went so bizarrely off the deep end, Fletcher had grown ever more consumed with control, and as obsession went the cycling was harmless. Between exercise and his stringent diet, my husband had lost the tire roll at his middle for which my own mashed potatoes and muffins had been to blame. Yet I'd cherished that little roll, which had softened him in a larger sense. By soliciting forgiveness, the gentle excess had seemed also to dispense it.

I required that forgiveness in some quantity. During the previous three years I must have put on about twenty pounds (I was loath to stand on a scale and confront an exact number). When running Breadbasket I'd been pretty thin. In the catering trade, food has a way of becoming repulsive; a vat of cream cheese is indistinguishable from a batch of plaster. But in my subsequent endeavor, the Mexicans on my staff were forever bringing trays of tamales and enchiladas into work. I'd cooked on my feet; now I sat in my office. Thus I'd come to squander an appalling proportion of my mental time on empty vows to cut down to one meal a day, or on fruitless self-castigation over a second stuffed pepper at lunch. Surely on some unconscious, high-frequency level other people could hear the squeak of this humiliating hamster wheel in my head, a piercing shrill that emitted from every other woman I passed in the aisles of Hy-Vee.

It wasn't fair, but I blamed Fletcher for those twenty pounds. I may have been a quiet sort who hugged the sidelines, but that didn't mean I was a pushover. I was the kind of person at whom you could finger-wag and tut-tut-tut, who wouldn't talk back, who would submit to all manner of browbeating while seeming to take it all in like a good little camper, and you'd walk away and think *There, that's put her straight*, and then I'd sift off and blithely do whatever you'd just told me not to.

That defiant streak had backfired when I started noshing pointedly between meals on whatever

entire food group Fletcher had recently disavowed. (The repudiation of cheese was deadly. The day after that announcement, I returned from the supermarket with half a wheel of Brie.) His spurning the very dishes that had entranced him during our courtship and early marriage—banana cream pie, homemade deep-dish pizza—hurt my feelings. I shouldn't have conflated love and food, but that's a mistake women have made for centuries, so why should I be any different? I missed cooking, too, which I found therapeutic. Hence I still baked an occasional coconut layer cake, which Fletcher would boycott, and even the kids would avoid as their father glowered nearby. Well, someone had to eat the cake. Fatally, I felt sorry for it.

We had at least evolved a ritual compromise. From each contraband confection, I cut a one-bite *amuse-bouche*, arranging it with a dab of whipped cream, a garnish of mint, and a couple of pristine fresh raspberries on a large china dessert plate with a sparkling silver fork. This I would leave in the middle of our prep island, the way kids put out cookies for Santa, then make myself scarce. Fletcher would never take the bait while I was watching; still, it meant more to me than I can say that the illicit samplers of what he now deemed "toxic" vanished within the hour.

Strictly speaking, as a nutritional Nazi my husband had grown more attractive, but I'd been attracted to him before. Besides, a pointiness was now more pronounced. He had a high forehead and a long oval face; shorn to a prickly furze to minimize the balding, his head was bullet-shaped. His long strong nose in profile looked like a checkmark, and the wire-rimmed glasses added a professorial sharpness. Some strict, censorious quality had entered the triangular geometry of his wide shoulders and newly narrow waist, so that simply being in his physical presence made me feel chided.

As I collected our dishes, it bothered me that Fletcher hadn't stayed to tidy the kitchen, which wasn't like him. Commonly we dispatched cleanup with the interlocking fluidity of synchronized swimmers. We were at our best working side by side—neither of us understood or relished "leisure time"—and my fondest memories were of just this sort of cleanup on a grand scale. When we first started dating, on nights I'd catered a big buffet Fletcher would install Tanner and Cody in sleeping bags on my living room floor, so he could help with the kitchen. (When I first saw him shake his hands at the sink—thrusting fingers downward *splat-splat*, a small, instinctive motion that ensured you don't dribble water all over the floor on the way to drying your hands on the dishtowel—I knew this was the man I would marry.) Swabbing counters, sealing leftovers, and rinsing massive mixing bowls, he never complained; he never had to be told what to do. He only took breaks to sidle behind me as I removed another set of warm tumblers from the dishwasher and kiss my neck. Believe it or not, those cleanups in spattered aprons were romantic, better than champagne and candlelight.

Such memories in mind, I could hardly begrudge sudsing the broccoli steamer after lunch for two. I reviewed our conversation. It could have gone worse. Fletcher might himself have announced "over my dead body"; I'd slyly said it for him. I'd never asked outright, "Is it okay if my brother stays in our house for a while?" He'd never said yes or no.

*Our house.* Of course, it was our house.

Having rented most of my life, I still hadn't shaken the impression that this address on Solomons

Drive belonged to someone else; I kept the place fanatically neat as if the real owners might walk any time unannounced. The house was larger than we required; the kitchen's plenitude of cabinets invited the purchase of pasta- and bread-making machines that we'd use once. Deserving of the contemptuous tag *McMansion*, our new home had been an overreaction to the cramp of Fletcher's tract rental, one of those "temporary" resorts men seek post-divorce, from which unless a new woman puts her foot down they never move. I'd been flushed with awe that I could suddenly afford to buy a house, in cash no less, and in some ways I bought it simply because I could.

Also, I'd wanted to find Fletcher a workspace. Furniture was his passion, so I bought his passion for him. Naïve in the ways of money, I couldn't have known beforehand how much he would resent me for it.

Earlier in our marriage, Fletcher had worked for an agricultural company that made genetically modified seed. I'd been keen to enable him to quit because he wasn't a natural salesman—not from an environmentalist aversion to fiddling with nature, or political outrage that corporate America wanted to patent what was once literally for the picking. I didn't hold many opinions. I didn't see the point of them. If I opposed the production of nongerminating disease-resistant corn, it would still be sold. I considered most convictions entertainment, their cultivation a vanity, which is why I rarely read the newspaper. My knowing about an assassination in Lebanon wouldn't bring the victim to life, and given that news primarily aggravated one's sense of helplessness I was surprised it was so widely heeded. Refusal to forge views for social consumption made me dull, but I loved being dull. Being of no earthly interest to anyone had been a lifelong goal.

In kind, this brick neocolonial had no character. It was newly built, its maple floors unscarred. I adored its unstoried blankness. The sockets were solidly wired, and everything worked. I'd never courted character on my own account, save in the sense of being disinclined to shoplift or cheat on my husband; Edison was the one who sought the designation "a real character," and he could have it. I gloried in anonymity and by then violently resented that the glare of an uninvited public spotlight had turned me into someone in particular for other people. (For pity's sake, you'd think after purposefully burying myself in the very middle of the country the least I could expect was to be inconspicuous.) I had enough history, and with the lone exception of Edison himself my instinct regarding the past was to draw the shade.

The big, lobotomized house formed the perfect neutral backdrop against which Fletcher's furniture could stand out. At this point my husband's handiwork had replaced most of the department-store appurtenances of our original combined households. (This joining of domestic forces was the first time in my life that someone had helped me move. With ferocious efficiency, Fletcher could carton a room in an afternoon, which has to be even more romantic than prizing the fiddly scraps from the food processor.) So lithe were his creations that whenever I walked into the living room the furniture seemed to have been grazing on throw rugs moments before. Its back corners curled like stag horns, bowed legs prancing on pared feet, the couch was weighted down with pillows, without which the skittish creature might have cantered out the door.

Though Fletcher liked to think he was improving, my favorite piece was one of his first. We called it the Boomerang. Its red leather cushion was oval. The rail forming the contiguous arms and back sloped high on the right, then arced down on the left, until the far end of the left-hand arm almost touched the floor. The chair looked as if it had been hurled. The slats supporting the great rising back line were also curved—laminated Macassar ebony, rosewood, and maple that he'd soaked for a week to bow. The Boomerang was a talisman of sorts. Most people who've refined a skill may cling to such a touchstone: early proof they've got the goods. The object to which they can always refer when their current effort is foundering: *See? If you can do that, you can do anything.* I'd no equivalent myself because I didn't care about product. I liked process. Be it a marmalade cake or the absurd merchandising I sold then, output was chaff to me the instant of completion. I found finishing projects perfect or awful.

After scrubbing the beige film from the rice pan, I peered out the front window. It had started to rain, but that never drove my intrepid husband home. Safe in my solitude, I crept upstairs to my home office and booked a plane ticket between LaGuardia and Cedar Rapids, choosing an arbitrary return date that we could always change. I wrote a check for five hundred dollars with "incidentals" scrawled in the lower-left-hand corner. Enclosing the check and e-ticket printout, I addressed a FedEx mailer to Edison Appaloosa, care of the address Slack had dictated that morning, and booked a pickup on my account.

My having bought this house with the proceeds of my offbeat business two years before might have meant that I had the "right" to install my brother in its guest room without permission. But pulling fiscal rank struck me as vulgar and undemocratic. There were three Feuerbachs in that house, and only one Halfdanarson.

What called me to run roughshod over Fletcher's opposition was something else. I was not, as a rule, held hostage to family. At some point I would make the disagreeable discovery of how deep a tangle I retained to my father, but not until he died; meantime, I was free to find him unbearable. My sister Solstice was sufficiently my junior that I could almost be her aunt, and it was only at her insistence that she visited me in Iowa every other summer. (She grew up in the fractured remains of a nutcracker family, on which she'd long tried to impose a more appealing cliché. So she was the only one who bought presents, sent cards, and paid visits whose perfect regularity suggested a discipline.) My lovely mother Magnolia had died when I was thirteen. Both sets of grandparents had passed. A long time until Fletcher, I'd borne none of my own children.

Edison was my family, the sole blood relative whom I clearly and cleanly loved. This one attachment distilled all the loyalty that most people dilute across a larger clan into a devotion with the intensity of tamarind. It was Edison from whom I first learned loyalty; it was therefore Edison from whom all other loyalties flowed, and the beneficiaries of this very capacity to cling fiercely were Fletcher and our kids. I may have been ambivalent about the past we shared, but only Edison and he shared it. In truth, I hadn't hesitated for a heartbeat when Slack Muncie called that morning. Fletcher was right: it was a trump. Edison was my brother, and we could really have ended the discussion the



and there.

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## chapter two

I'm picking your uncle up at the airport at five." The pecans on my pie smelled nicely toasted, and I pulled it from the oven. "Be sure and join us for dinner."

"Step-uncle," Tanner corrected, standing at the counter getting toast crumbs on the floor. "Right next door to total stranger in my book. Sorry. Got plans."

"Change them," I said. "I wasn't asking. You and Cody will be at dinner, period. Seven o'clock, the plane's on time." I'd always felt shaky about exerting authority over my stepchildren, even shaking now that Tanner was seventeen, and when you don't feel confident of authority you do not have it. He did as I said, he would obey out of pity. "When you have a houseguest," I added, laying on the parental shtick even thicker, "you may not have to be around for all the other meals, but you do on the first night."

"Is that so?"

I wasn't sure what I'd said was true. "I mean, I'd really appreciate your being here."

"So you *are* asking."

"Pleading."

"That's different." He wiped butter from his mouth with his sleeve. "The guy was here once before, right?"

"A little over four years ago. Do you remember him?"

"Got a dim recollection of some blowhard. Kept yakking about bands nobody's ever heard of. Couldn't remember my fucking name."

The characterization stung. "Edison has a son somewhere, but his ex got full custody when the boy was a baby. So your uncle doesn't have much experience talking to kids—"

"Got the impression the problem was the way he talked to *adults*. He was boring the shit out of everybody."

"He's a very talented man who's led a very interesting life—much more interesting than mine. This is a rare opportunity to get to know him." I was speaking to a brick wall.

I hadn't quite cracked my stepson. Tanner had a blithe sense of entitlement, a certainty that he was destined for an undefined brand of greatness. Though already a month into his senior year of high school, he had yet to evince the slightest interest in the college education for which I was expressly saving the proceeds from my business. He wanted to write, but he didn't like to read. That summer the boy had announced that he'd decided to become a screenwriter as if doing Ridley Scott a personal favor. I'd wanted to shake the kid; had he any *idea* the poor odds of breaking into Hollywood even as a runner? Uncertain whether my impulse was kind or cruel, I'd held my tongue. I had pointed out that his grammar, punctuation, and spelling were atrocious, but Tanner imagined that word processing took the care of all that silly prose-style folderol. Anyway, he'd said, for screenwriting you had to know how people *really talked*, for which a grasp of proper grammar was only an impediment. Okay, I'd thought begrudgingly, one point for Tanner. Throughout his adolescence, Fletcher and I had praised the boy for every poem, extolled the creativity of his half-page short stories. Parents are supposed to. But, to my horror, Tanner had believed us.

Tall, pale, and unmuscled, the boy had that undernourished look that girls so often fall for. His dark hair was painstakingly disheveled. The clashing layers of his clothing showed like peeled-back layers of old wallpaper: a checked sweatshirt over dangling striped shirttails, parted to reveal the elastic waist of plaid boxers rising above his slumped, unbelted jeans. Most of his friends stopped by in the same state of harlequin half-undress. Tanner carried himself with his hips canted forward, and he'd recently developed a disconcerting habit of touching himself while he talked—smoothing palms down his hips or up his rib cage to his flat chest. He may have been chronically unimpressed, but that skepticism did not extend to himself, and I was amazed how readily his peers and teachers alike took his superficial assurance at face value.

I had to watch myself with Tanner. When I noted that “girls” would fall for his looks, I should have clarified: at his age, I'd have been one of those girls. It's not that I was tempted to be flirtatious with him; after all, I could still discern traces of the wary, closed-down ten-year-old I first inherited, who had to be coaxed into the open like a cat from under a bed. Nevertheless, I recognized my teenage stepson as just the sort of poised, hip, self-convinced young man with whom I was besotted in high school, where I'd huddled the halls praying above all to be left alone. (My classmates at Verdugo Hills were more than happy to oblige. Unlike Edison, I continued to go by “Halfdanarson,” the surname with which I was born; I never let on that I was Travis Appaloosa's kid.) What I had to watch with Tanner, then, was resistance. It was tempting to parade before myself how as a grown woman I no longer fell for such a huckster, and I didn't want to indulge a too-ferocious, slightly vicious determination to see through him.

Viewed from the impunity of marriage, the penchant for unrequited passion that persisted through my early thirties had paid off. The likes of Tanner might not have known I was alive, but if you never spoke to the young man he would never reveal his disillusioning enthusiasm for the Bee Gees. Having nursed my loves in private, I had kept them inviolate, and was now spared looking back at a string of deranged entrancements with mortified incredulity. Marathon devotion had developed my emotion

endurance, in contrast to Tanner's sprints with three or four girlfriends a year. I feared that my stepsister wasn't learning to love women but to harbor contempt for the women who loved him.

"Glop that much jam on your toast," Fletcher grunted en route to a glass of water, "might as well be eating cake."

"Whole wheat!" said Tanner. "And he still won't give it a rest."

*I'm sorry, but I don't eat daaaaaaaairy!* Our thirteen-year-old, Cody, had abandoned her piano practice to tug the pull-string doll propped on the dining area's middle shelf in case her father needed razzing. The doll was a first effort from four years before, and then a mere whimsey of a Christmas present. I'd sewn it from scratch on the heels of Fletcher's sudden health kick. The crafts project had doubled as therapy, embodying my struggle to keep a sense of humor about the fact that he would no longer come near my celebrated manicotti.

The stuffed ragamuffin wore a miniature version of Fletcher's standard black fleece, to which I'd glued his signature dandruff of sawdust. The doll had stovepipe black jeans, and other than a few teasing threads that spiked upright it was bald. The calf-high leather boots were constructed from the tongues of a fatigued pair of the life-size kind and soled with a retread strip that had fallen off a truck on Highway E36. I'd fashioned the wire-rim glasses out of aluminum paperclips and stitched a permanent scowl of disapproval into the forehead. One hand clutched a chisel (really a jeweler's screwdriver), the other a square of foam rubber that I'd had to explain was tofu. The fabric was starting to fray, but it had become a matter of professional importance that the mechanism inside was still going strong.

*Shoes off the rail, Tanner! The Boomerang took me three months!*

Since I'd involved my best friend Oliver Allbless in the joke from the beginning, it was his voice I'd recorded, and he'd proven adept at mincing his tones into the huffy and judgmental. The electronic device buried in the torso included twenty edicts and exclamations. Little had I known that my mischievous little handicraft would soon become a monster.

The Fletcher doll was an instant hit with our kids, to whom the mocking recordings of their father's oppressive decrees helped to endear their stepmother. Taking the teasing good-naturedly, Fletcher had been touched by the scale of my effort, down to engaging Oliver to design an updated digital technology. (Not much better than rubber bands, the governor belts that drove the plastic records on turntables inside the old Chatty Cathys from the 1960s had been prone to snap—which is why few of these collector's items still functioned.) Dinner guests never wearied of pulling the string. The following year, Solstice had *begged* me to fashion a similar caricature of her new boyfriend, whose incessant repetition of faddish expressions like "Good to go!" and "That's my bad!" was driving her crazy. I'd been reluctant. I was still running Breadbasket. To work the same magic, the doll would have had to capture the boyfriend's build and dressing habits. Sensing my hesitation, Solstice offered to pay. I cited a price high enough to put my sister off, but she attached photographs and a list of phrases to an email the very same day.

Word of mouth no longer depends on gabbing over a picket fence, and with the aid of the Internet

the customized pull-string doll business went viral. By that year's end, I had folded Breadbasket, and Baby Monotonous—though thanks to Fletcher's goading misnomer some locals believed *Baby Monotonous* was my company's real name—had headquarters outside New Holland and a full-time workforce. The formula was irresistible: ridicule paired with affection. And while expensive to make, the dolls were far more expensive to buy. Besides, they'd not have been so popular if they were cheap. Costing about the combined price of a KitchenAid mixer and a top-of-the-line Dyson, a Baby Monotonous doll had become a status item, one by popular accord more rewarding than the average vacuum cleaner.

Aptly for the last father-son interchange, the third time Cody pulled the doll's string it declared with exalted sanctimony, *I want DRY toast! I want DRY toast!*

Both kids fell about laughing.

"I'd like to know why that thing never stops being funny," said Fletcher.

"Doesn't matter why," said Tanner, struggling to stand up straight. "They're always funny, they only get funnier, and that's why Pandora is rich."

"We're not rich," I said. Leaving aside my stepson's inflated assessment of our family circumstances, *rich* was a word for other people, and generally for those one doesn't like. "We're only *doing okay*. And be sure not to say anything like that around your uncle." I corrected with an eye roll. "Step-uncle."

"Why not?" asked Tanner.

"It's impolite to talk about money. And your uncle Edison seems to have fallen on tough times. You don't want to rub it in."

Tanner looked at his stepmother sideways. "You don't want him to tap you."

"I didn't say that."

"Didn't have to." Tanner may have overestimated his literary gifts. But he was pretty smart.

**D**riving to Cedar Rapids Airport, I wondered how four years could have passed, the longest Edison and I had been apart. We had talked on the phone—though more than once his number had been suddenly out of service. He was constantly shifting digs, and often away on tours of Europe, South America, or Japan. It was up to me to track him down by calling other musicians like Slac. Exasperation that my older brother didn't keep up his end of our relationship was pointless. He always sounded happy to hear my voice, and that's all that mattered to me.

In the flurry of ordering bolts of fabric and bales of cotton stuffing, maybe it was little wonder I hadn't seen Edison. While establishing my headquarters, hiring actors for the recordings, taking on yet more staff to handle orders and ensure that the portly doll with the hard hat that demanded, "Where's my grub?" went to Lansing, Michigan, and not to Idaho, it had been tricky to remain attentive to Fletcher, Tanner, and Cody, or even to fit in phone calls to family farther afield. Although one call three years back had sounded fractionally off-key. My product had just begun to capture the popul

imagination, and I was still excited; why, my pull-string dolls were apparently all the rage among the upper crust in my brother's own city, having just been the subject of *New York* magazine's lead story "Monotonous Manhattan"—with inset scripts of Donald Trump and Mayor Bloomberg dolls. But the tone with which Edison congratulated me on my appearance on that cover had disinclined me to do so again soon. All the words were in the right place, and the slight sneering or testiness might have been in my head; you could never quite trust the phone.

Since then, for me Monotonous had become too successful—meaning, all that remained was for the enterprise to become less so. Only a tipping point awaited, beyond which orders would decline. It wasn't a "problem" with which I expected others to sympathize, but recently I'd been suffering from an insidious lassitude that derived from having everything—more than, really—I had ever wanted. On the personal side, I had found Fletcher Feuerbach, to others tightly wound, but warmer and funnier behind closed doors than most suspected. (Stripped, he was a surprisingly handsome man, and he had once said the same of me: we were "stealth attractive.") I'd had none of my own children, but my adoptive ones were still speaking to me, which was more than could be said of the average teenager one had borne; I'd skipped the bawling-baby stage of childrearing, and gotten in on the best part. On the career side, I had never been ambitious, and suddenly I headed a thriving business of the most improbable sort: one with a sense of humor. I'd made just enough money that the prospect of making a little more left me cold.

Wise high-flyers kept this battle with the baffling flatness of success discreetly to themselves. Picture how bitterly hordes of the frustrated, disappointed, and dispossessed would greet any complaint about being too satisfied and too wealthy. Be that as it may, it really isn't a very nice sensation to not want anything. Thwarted hopes are no picnic, but desire itself is energizing. I had always been a hard worker, and this damnable repleteness was enervating. Without a doubt, there was only one solution to my growing torpidity, my Thanksgiving-dinner stupor writ large:

I needed a new project.

Brown with elegiac hints of yellow, cornfields drying for the October harvest slipped past my window. Overland electrical cables scalloped rhythmically by on creosoted poles, while globular water tanks on narrow stems glowed in autumnal sun like giant incandescent lightbulbs. The pastoral effect was blighted by big-box stores and strip malls—Kum & Go, Dollar General, Home Depot, and the recent explosion of Mexican restaurants, while as ever the Super 8 bannered in garish black and gold plastic: GO HAWKEYES, SUPPORT OUR TEAM! Yet on pristine stretches the countryside expressed the timeless groundedness and solidity that had captivated me as a child on visits to my paternal grandparents: white clapboard, potato crops, the odd horse. Whatever foofaraw was roiling the rest of the country always seemed far away.

Since then, Iowa had changed. A wave of illegal immigrants had arrived to work in the pork processing plants. State politics had grown a febrile right-wing fringe. Most family farms of the sort my grandparents tilled had long ago been sold or rented to agribusiness, so that numerous farmhouse barns, and outbuildings along this route had collapsed. The crop already subsidized to the hilt, mo-

than half of that corn would be converted to ethanol—netting still more lucrative federal subsidies and so slathering a whole second layer of corruption on a grain once a byword for wholesomeness and hokey sense of humor. The subdued isolation that was soothing to me was soporific to modern young people, for whom the anonymity in which I wallowed was swallowing. Just like my father in his youth, my stepson was frantic to get out.

By contrast, Fletcher was born in Muscatine, and his never having moved from his home state didn't signal a lack of imagination; rather, a contented acceptance and even a certain profundity. "Iowa is somewhere," he said once, "and that's as much as anywhere can claim." The modesty of the Midwest, its secure, unpretentious self-knowledge, its useful growth of crops that people ate opposed to the provision of elusive "services," appealed to us both.

Nearing the airport, I looked forward to having Edison around again—finally, company with *appetite*. My brother had been imbued with all the verve, the flair, the savoir faire that I lacked. Tall, fit, and flamboyant, he'd inherited our father's Jeff Bridges good looks without also assuming the oiliness that had always contaminated Travis. Edison's younger features were fine, almost delicate, and last I'd seen him the somewhat broader lines of his face at forty still hadn't buried the high cheekbones. He kept his dirty-blond hair just long enough to flare into an unruly corona around his crown. The manic keyboard of a smile glinted with a hint of wickedness, the predatory voracity of a big cat. In my early teens, my misfit friends were always smitten with my brother. He had an energy, an eagerness, a rapacity; even into adulthood, he never hugged me without lifting me off the floor. Edison was bound to breathe some life into that vast blank house on Solomon Drive, a residence that since the advent of Fletcher's mad cycling and cheerless diet, had erred on the grim side.

For I was a homebody. I hated travel, and gladly let my brother act as my alter ego, catching my eyes while I slept. I recoiled from attention; from childhood, Edison could never get enough of it. Aside from the obvious competition with our father, I was mystified why my brother wanted so badly for other people to know who he was. I could see coveting recognition for his talent, but that wasn't what made him tick. Ever since I could remember, he'd wanted to be famous.

Why would you want to sell millions of people on the illusion that they knew you, when they didn't? I adored the fortification of proper strangers, whose blithe disinterest constituted a form of protection, a soft, oblivious aspic of apathy in which I could hide, like a square of fruit cocktail in strawberry Jell-O. How raw and exposing instead to be surrounded by strangers who want something from you, who believe they not only know but own you. I couldn't imagine why you'd want droves of nitpickers to comment on your change of hairstyle, to regard everything from your peculiar furniture to the cellulite in your thighs as their business. For me, nothing was more precious than the ability to walk down the street unrecognized, or to take a seat in a restaurant and be left in peace.

But then, the joys of obscurity were my own discovery. Like everyone else in L.A., I was raised to regard being a nobody as a death. It may have been easier for me to reject that proposition because from the age of eight I grew up with celebrity at ready hand—or celebrity by association, the worst kind: unearned, cheap.

I found being admired myself unpleasant, and far preferred looking up to someone else. While I looked up to numerous teachers as a child, that comfortable hierarchy—in which the weaker party isn't humiliated by the submission—is decreasingly on offer in adulthood. Grown-ups are more likely to despise than adulate their bosses, and in my own self-employment I could only despise or adulate myself. Long gone were the days American electorates looked up to a president like JFK; we were more apt to look askance at politicians. Celebrities splashed across magazines excited less adoration than envy; in an era of the famous-for-being-famous, the assumption ran that with the right PR rep this talentless no-account with all the goodies could be you. I used to look up to my father, and the fact that I did no longer pained me more than I admitted. I loved Fletcher's graceful, sinuous furniture, but I didn't look *up* to him. In fact, maybe if you look *up* to your spouse there's something wrong.

I looked up to Edison. I knew little about jazz, but anyone who tripped out that many complicated notes without creating sheer cacophony was accomplished. I was never sure the level of recognition Edison had achieved in his rarified circles, but he had played with musicians whom folks in the know seemed to recognize, and I'd memorized their names in order to rattle off an impressive list to skeptics like Fletcher: Stan Getz, Joe Henderson, Jeff Ballard, Kurt Rosenwinkel, Paul Motian, Evan Parker, and even, once, Harry Connick, Jr. Edison Appaloosa was listed on dozens of CDs, a complete set of which enjoyed pride of place beside our stereo—even if we didn't play them much, since none of us was big on jazz. I was in awe of his travels, his far-flung colleagues, his fearless public performances, and his sexy ex-wife—the vast canvas on which he'd painted his life. He may often have made me feel mousey, tongue-tied, not quite myself. I didn't mind so long as someone in our family was dashing and flashy, gunning a harvester through the hay of the daily grind. Fine, he smoked too much, and kept insensible hours. Fletcher and I were up to our eyeballs in sensible, and a splash of anarchy was overdue.

Still, I pulled into short-term parking with a pang of misgiving. Edison himself wasn't the beanpole he'd been as a track star in high school, and though he hadn't kept up with the running he'd always been one of those men (they simply don't make women like this) whose naturally athletic build sustained all manner of drinking and sloth. My brother was sure to ride me mercilessly for looking so shopping-mall and middle-aged.

Cedar Rapids Airport was small and user-friendly, its beige décor a picture frame for whatever more colorful passengers deplaned there. At the end of September, baggage claim was deserted, and I was relieved to have arrived before Edison's flight landed. If people divide into those who worry about having to wait and those who worry about keeping others waiting, I fell firmly into the second camp.

Soon the connecting flight from Detroit was posted on Carousel 3, and I texted Fletcher that the plane was on time. While passengers threaded from the arrivals hall and clumped around the belt, I loitered from a step back. In front of me, a lanky man in neat khaki slacks—with a tennis racket slung over a shoulder and the remnants of a summer tan—was conversing with a slender brunette. The



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