

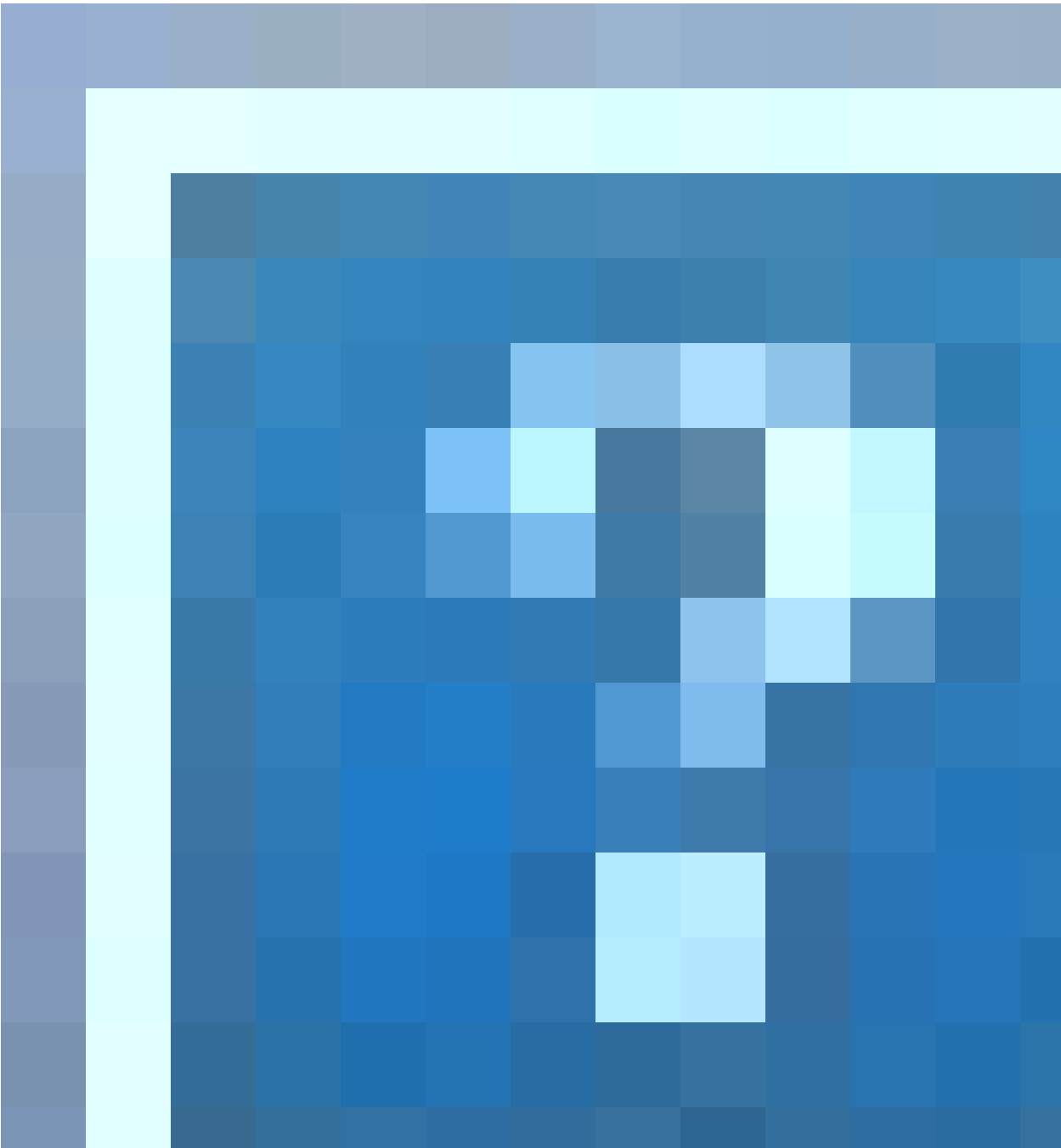
MODEL HOME

A Novel

Eric Puchner

Scribner

New York London Toronto Sydney





Also by Eric Puchner

Music Through the Floor: Stories

Model Home

A Novel

Eric Puchner

Scribner

New York London Toronto Sydney

The Southern California depicted in
this book
is a blend of real and imagined
geography.



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For Katharine,
through love and loss

PART I

Summer 1985

CHAPTER 1

Two days after his car—an '85 Chrysler LeBaron with leather seats and all-power accessories—vanished from the driveway, Warren Ziller crept past the expensive homes of his neighbors, trying to match his dog's limp. Buggy Whip Lane was shrouded in a mist that blurred his glasses. It was June, month of foggy mornings; vines of bougainvillea climbed the telephone poles and hung like tinsel from the wires. Warren tugged at Mr. Leonard's leash, trying to keep to the narrow horse trail skirting the road. The wood chips at his feet sent up a pleasing funk of manure. He passed the Hathaways' and Wongs' and Dunkirks', the Temples' and Starchilds', each house white as a tooth, distinguished only by a lone cactus or bronze deer in the yard or surfboard tipped against the wall. There was something very appealing about these surfboards. They looked doomed and precarious but never seemed to fall over. He'd lived here three years and the sight of them still gave him a thrill. When he tried to define California to himself, to reckon the fathomless miles he'd traveled from Wisconsin, Warren always thought of these beautiful toys on the verge of collapse.

Mr. Leonard stopped along the trail to inspect a rock and began to sing to it. A high, sorrowful croon, as if he might coax the thing into a duet. The mutt was old and arthritic, but it had never occurred to Warren that his mind might deteriorate. As dogs went, he'd always been bright and resourceful, sniffing out lost shoes or figuring out how to open doors with his paws.

"Have you noticed anything funny about Mr. Leonard?" Warren asked when he got home. His children were sitting around the kitchen table together, most likely by accident. The house smelled of McDonald's and bare feet. Mr. Leonard limped to his bowl and stared at his meager ration of kibbles.

"You mean aside from him singing to rocks?" Lyle said, clipping her toenails into an empty sneaker on the floor. The sneaker was presumably her own.

“You’ve noticed?”

“Any rock. He can’t resist.”

“Maybe someone gave him some LSD,” Jonas suggested.

“I don’t think so,” Warren said.

“Has he been jumping out of windows, thinking he can fly?”

Dustin scoffed. “That’s a myth.”

“Dogs can’t fly?” Lyle said, laying her clippers on the table.

Camille, his wife, looked up from the sink. “There’s nothing funny about it.”

“I think it’s inspiring,” Dustin said. “That he can find love so late in life.”

“In Vietnam,” Jonas said, “they kill dogs when they’re no longer useful and use them for food. There’s a dish called Dog Seven Ways.”

“Boys! That’s enough,” Camille said.

“Yeah,” Lyle said. “Mr. Leonard can hear you.”

The mutt caught his name and came limping over to the kitchen table, tail thumping.

“How do I love thee,” Dustin said, leaning to pet him. “Let me count the ways.”

Camille walked over to Mr. Leonard and bent down to stroke his head, then looked up at them accusingly. “I hope you remember this, what a laugh riot you’re having, when you’re singing to rocks.”

A guilty hush came over the table. In the silence, Warren had a chance to take in the spectacle of his children: Dustin, his college-bound son, shirtless as usual and eating an Egg McMuffin he must have picked up on the way home from surfing, preparing for another deafening day of band practice in the garage; Lyle, his redheaded, misanthropic daughter, sixteen years old and wearing a T-shirt with DEATH TO SANDWICHES stenciled on the front, her latest protest against corporate advertising; Jonas, eleven and haunted by death . . . what could he say about Jonas? Every morning he poured granola in his bowl and then spent five minutes picking out all the raisins and dates, only to *sprinkle them back on top*. He liked to know where they were so “they wouldn’t surprise him.” Today he was wearing an orange windbreaker over a matching orange shirt. Warren felt something brush his heart, a draft of despair. He glanced under the table: orange corduroys, and—glaring conspicuously above Jonas’s Top-Siders—coral-colored socks.

“Jonas, you’re dressed entirely in orange.”

Jonas nodded.

“He’s exercising his individuality,” Lyle said.

Dustin clapped Jonas on the back. “I admire you for making the rest of us seem normal.”

Warren watched his orange son picking raisins from his cereal. He had enough on his mind already without worrying about the boy’s mental health. “You look like a carrot.”

“Thank you,” Jonas said politely.

Warren frowned. He picked up the front page of the newspaper and was confronted with Mandy Rogers, the mentally retarded girl who’d disappeared from school. It had been two weeks since she went missing. There were signs hanging all over town: the flat, porpoisey face grinning at you from under a cowboy hat. Eerie and inescapable. Warren drove by the Rogerses’ house, its squadron of news vans, on the way to his office every day.

“I wish they’d just find that poor girl’s body,” he said.

“You don’t know she’s dead,” Camille said. “I wish you wouldn’t go putting ideas in their heads.”

“What do you think? She just wandered off?”

“Yeah, Mom,” Lyle said. “She’s waiting at the Lost and Found?”

“Maybe it’s the same guy who stole the Chrysler,” Dustin said.

“I doubt it. Car thieves don’t generally abduct people.”

Warren said this without batting an eye. There were surfboards leaning undisturbed in all their neighbors’ yards, yet Warren’s family had believed him when he’d said the Chrysler was stolen. It dismayed him, how easy it had been. A fake call to the police, a trip downtown to file a report. (The truth was he’d spent the afternoon at the office.) He’d smoothed any wrinkles of doubt by telling them there were bands of crooks who specialized in gated communities, knowing that people left their keys in the car. “Sitting ducks,” he’d called the families of Herradura Estates.

In truth, Warren had been in denial about the Chrysler. He’d hoped—despite the fact that he hadn’t made a payment in six months, had ignored the bill collector’s increasingly terse and belligerent notices—that the lender might just forget the whole business. Instead the men had come at night, while Warren was asleep. He’d gone out to the driveway with Mr. Leonard and found a dark drool of oil where his car had been. And the stain was only a herald of things to come. There was the furniture, the new Maytag washer,

the house itself.

Dustin finished his breakfast, licking some grease that had run down his wrist. It was such a boyish gesture, so casually innocent, that the taste of fear eased back down Warren's throat. He would protect this innocence at all costs. If that meant lying to his family until he found a way out of this mess, so be it.

"How are the Deadbeats?" he asked Dustin, who'd gotten up to wash his hands in the sink. Warren loved to sit in the garage while they practiced, listening to their brain-throbbing music.

"We're not called that anymore."

"You're not?"

"It's a dumb name," Dustin said. "We're trying to think of a better one."

He turned his back to Warren, searching for something in the fridge. Warren was very familiar with this back. He had whole conversations with it. It was a strong back, beautiful in its gentle slopes and mesas: he'd gotten to know it the way you get to know a favorite view or painting. A back, even a silent one, was better than nothing. Still, there was a certain amount of faith involved: you had to trust it was listening, hunched over a guitar or a surfboard as if you weren't even there.

His wife had disappeared from the kitchen. Warren got up from his stool at the counter and went to find her. The hallway, like their room itself, was decorated with shell sculptures and turd-colored macramé things and paintings not unlike the splotch of oil staining the driveway. Camille had bought them all at a store called Creativity Unleashed, which sold art by developmentally disabled people. Mandy Rogers's disappearance had inspired her to invest in heroically unattractive art. She'd wanted to hang it all over the house, but the kids had refused to adorn their walls with "retard paintings" and the bulk had ended up in their bedroom. When Warren objected, wondering if some types of creativity weren't better off leashed, Camille had called him hardhearted. He couldn't tell her it was the waste of money that frightened him.

Now he found his wife in the bathroom, tugging at her tennis skirt instead of getting dressed for work. He had to remind himself it was Saturday. Camille made educational videos for the public school system, and Warren often felt guilty for not taking it as seriously as she did. It was her goodness—her belief in higher rewards than money—that he'd always been attracted

to.

“Where did Jonas get orange socks?” he asked, watching her put on some lipstick.

“He picked them out at Nordstrom’s,” Camille said.

“You bought them for him?”

“How was I supposed to know he’d dress up like that?”

Warren sat on the bed to untie his sneakers. “Given the choice between a slow kid and a genius who dresses like a carrot, I might have chosen the former.”

“Any word from the police?” she asked.

“What?”

“About the Chrysler! Did they learn anything?”

Warren shook his head. “Probably scattered all over the state by now,” he said.

Thankfully, Camille didn’t seem to question this and began dabbing her lips with a Kleenex. A little pink T, like a cat’s nose, stained the middle. She was still lovely: blond hair and the sort of wholesome, cheerleadery face, freckled and wide-eyed and slightly bucktoothed, that caused people to smile at her from their cars. She was a Midwesterner in the way Blackbeard was a pirate: iconic to the species. Even when she was angry at Warren she seemed hopelessly preppy, her face a cardigan pink. He wanted to tell her that his project in the desert—for which he’d sacrificed everything, his family’s own future—was a disaster. Everything they had was in peril. If she knew, they could face down the debt collectors—the angry phone calls and investors—together. It would be like before they were married, when Warren was in law school in Chicago and they were living in a run-down studio in Rogers Park, so poor they’d been forced to eat a moose Camille’s brother had shot in Michigan. They’d survived on ground moose meat all winter, using Hamburger Helper to mask the flavor. Moose Helper, they’d called it, laughing at the TV commercials they’d thought up as a joke.

Warren got up from the bed and kissed Camille’s neck, holding the faint bulges that had recently formed at her waist. She turned around in surprise.

“Camille . . .”

The surprise on her face melted to concern. “What is it?”

“There’s something . . .”

He couldn’t meet her eyes. Last week, making love, she’d said something

to him strange and terrible, a confession of despair. *I want to die*. Through the bedroom window, he could see Dustin waxing his surfboard in the backyard, kneeling on the lawn while Jonas practiced his fencing moves. The sun had broken through the mist, lighting the persimmon tree near the garden into a blaze of orange fruit. Beneath it, lunging in the sunlight, his fruit-colored son looked weirdly beautiful.

“Mr. Leonard,” Warren said quietly. “Maybe it’s time we had him looked at.”

CHAPTER 2

Lyle's mother had to drive her to work, a universe of suck, because her dad's car had been stolen from the driveway and he'd had to borrow Lyle's Renault, which despite having the words "Le Car" stencilled on the door in bubble letters was infinitely less embarrassing than riding with her mom. They drove through the hills of Herradura Estates, slow as a hearse. An anemic-looking cyclist overtook them on John's Canyon Road. Lyle slid down in her seat. There were several things that embarrassed her about her mother's Volvo: (1) it had her mother in it; (2) there was a Post-it note on the steering wheel that said RECYCLE BOTTLES; (3) the stereo was typically playing something called "Come, Ye Makers of Song"; (4) they were often mistaken for people with special needs, because her mom insisted on signaling before pulling into a parking space. Worst of all were the slogans plastered all over the back bumper: NO APARTHEID, KEEP YOUR LAWS OFF MY BODY, GOOD PLANETS ARE HARD TO FIND, and the more bluntly confessional I BRAKE FOR SPOTTED OWLS. (Dustin wanted to replace it with I DON'T NEED TO BRAKE, BECAUSE I'M BARELY MOVING.) Last week her mom had added COMMIT RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS, which to Lyle perfectly summed up her psychotic brand of cheerfulness.

There was someone jogging on the wood-chipped trail that ran along the road. Jennifer Boone, a senior at Palos Verdes High who lived down the street. Lyle slid even lower in her seat. Her mother honked as they passed, which caused Jennifer to startle like a deer and veer dangerously toward the bushes.

"I can't believe Dad's car got stolen," Lyle said sullenly, hoping her mom was unrecognizable in tennis clothes. She was wearing a pink Izod, a skirt fringed with Lilliputian pom-poms, and a see-through visor that made her look like a bank teller from *Bonanza*. "Isn't that why we live in a gated community? To prevent theft?"

“This isn’t a gated community, honey. It’s an equestrian village.”

“There are gates, right? They go up and down?”

“That’s for the horses,” her mother said. “Otherwise people would drive through all day and scare them.”

Lyle squinted at her mom, wondering if she really believed they lived on a dude ranch in the suburban hills of L.A. An intriguing theory, since it might explain the visor. Lyle would not have been surprised if the horseback riders who occasionally ambled by their house were stooges brought in by Herradura Estates. She couldn’t help being impressed by the marketing genius involved—just paint some horse crossings on the street, call yourself an “equestrian village,” and rich people came running.

“This is all Dad’s fault for moving us out here,” she said. “The car getting stolen.”

“In Nashotah, you always complained about how boring it was. I seem to remember you saying you couldn’t wait to leave.”

“Anyway, the guards don’t do jack. They’re rent-a-cops. All you have to do is give the name of a resident.”

Her mom sighed, checking the rearview mirror. “Do you really have to be so negative? As long as people believe it, what does it matter?”

It mattered deeply. Lyle’s mother, of course, was one of the deceived. She read books with “healing” or “mindfulness” in the title. She went on check-writing sprees to save various birds of prey. Once she’d bought a newborn calf for a poor farmer in Mali and was shocked to receive a picture in the mail one day, a wordless thank-you, showing the meat drying in lurid strips from the farmer’s roof. She’d rushed to the bathroom in tears. *He’s starving to death!* Lyle wanted to shout. *Of course he’s going to eat it!* Most infuriating of all was her mother’s optimism: whenever Lyle said she disliked someone, her mom looked at her with her eyebrows pinched into a V, head cocked to one side as if she were draining an ear. “You don’t really hate that person,” she’d say. “You just have different values.”

But Lyle *did* hate people. Hating people was one of her biggest hobbies. Just last night, in fact, she’d started a list of things she despised:

1. People who call old women “cute”
2. People who talk about dead relatives as if they’re happier now
3. Anyone who refers to herself as a “chocoholic”

4. DBCs (Dumbshits in Baseball Caps)
5. The adjective “hot” for anything except weather
6. People who use the term “110%”
7. Song titles with numbers in place of words
8. People who own Smiths records and don’t know the lead singer is gay
9. Volleyball
10. Convertibles
11. Bob Marley
12. Anyone who uses the word “ganja”
13. Dogs small enough that they shiver when they take a dump
14. People who look at you funny when you use the word “ingratiate”
15. People who order in Spanish at Mexican restaurants (Mom)
16. People who say “Decisions, decisions” when looking at a menu
17. Bathroom graffiti that rhymes (“Wine me, dine me, 69 me”)
18. The Beach Boys
19. People who check their car for scratches before getting in
20. People who refer to little boys as “boss” or “chief”
21. Anyone who says the sentence: “And WHO do we have here?”
22. Volleyball (x2)
23. CALIFORNIA

This last one she’d written in big letters and retraced again and again until the letters engraved several pages of her journal, fading gradually like a wound. She detested it, this land of Jeeps and joggers. The Golden State. What kind of stupid nickname was that? Perhaps it wasn’t supposed to describe the place itself so much as a fascist condition. If you weren’t golden, you had no right to exist. Lyle used to go to the beach when they first moved here, hoping she might get a tan like the Audras and Stephanies in her class, her skin turning brown and luscious. She lay in a deserted corner of the beach, sweating and miserable, terrified someone from school would see her and notice how pale she was. A circus freak: the Whitest Girl in California. She was determined to stay until she looked like the other girls, the ones with butterflies of sand stuck to their asses, running into the waves and twirling around with a squeal. Instead she burned herself so miserably she couldn’t sleep. Her skin blistered and peeled off like Saran Wrap, leaving her whiter than before. After a month of suffering, she realized it was hopeless and gave up completely.

She'd been bored in Wisconsin, bored living on the same puny lake her whole life, but at least she hadn't felt like a freak of nature. She hadn't cried herself to sleep because some DBC had called her Vampira at school.

On their way out of Herradura Estates, Lyle's mother pulled up to the guardhouse and its red-striped gate, which lifted magically as they approached. She brought the car to a stop in order to say hello to Hector, the new gatekeeper. Lyle waited with mounting dread as her mother rolled down the window. Please don't speak Spanish, she thought. Please don't please don't please don't please don't please don't.

"*Hola,*" her mother said in a cheerful voice. "*Cómo estas?*"

"*Bien, bien,*" Hector said, smiling through his mustache. He looked vaguely amused, as though doing his best to conceal the fact that he spoke perfect English. "*Y usted?*"

"*Nosotros estamos yendo a la shopping mall.*" Her mother actually said "shopping mall" in a Spanish accent.

Hector cupped his ear. "*A donde?*"

"The mall," Lyle's mother said. "The Perfect Scoop. For my daughter's job. Ella vende helado."

Hector ducked down and smiled at Lyle in the passenger seat, as though she were six years old. She felt like flashing him her tits. "*Que bueno.*"

"*Le gustan los libros.* Siempre. How do you say it? A worm."

Lyle's mother stuck her finger out the window and began to wiggle it around. Hector squinted at it from the guardhouse.

"She still goes to work?" he said finally, looking concerned.

"*Claro que si!*" her mother said, smiling.

She said good-bye and Hector relaxed back into his chair, believing no doubt that Lyle had worms. Lyle wanted to murder her mother. She would strangle her slowly and then dump her out of the car and drive to New York, where she'd never have to wear shorts and where it was okay—sophisticated even—not to be tan. She'd never actually been to New York, but she was sure that paleness was a sign of cachet. Certainly there was no volleyball. If you tried to play volleyball in New York, people would throw things at you from the street. They would stone you with cigarettes and umbrellas.

At the mall, Lyle's mother dropped her off at The Perfect Scoop Ice Cream Parlor and then drove off to commit more random acts of Spanish. Lyle was surprised to find Shannon Jarrell already inside the store, sitting

with her legs crossed by the tower of plastic tables and reading a *People* magazine. Shannon's being there on time was a miracle of Newtonian physics, but she lifted her eyes casually, as if it were an everyday occurrence. "Hey."

"How did you get in?" Lyle asked.

Shannon looked back at her magazine. "Jared. He gave me the keys."

Jared was the manager, who had a crush on Shannon and was always staring at her ass. Today she was wearing cutoff jeans to show off her tan, a direct violation of the company dress code. Her legs were long and slender and glowed like hot dogs. She'd rolled the sleeves of her Perfect Scoop T-shirt over her shoulders, which had the same Oscar Mayer tan. A flip-flop dangled insolently from one foot.

"Did you cash in the register?" Lyle asked.

"No. I was waiting for you."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "You always do it."

Lyle swore under her breath and went into the back to get the cash drawer. She had to do everything. If the tubs were empty, Shannon would just tell the customers they were out of chocolate or vanilla chip or pralines-and-cream rather than get a new tub from the freezer. Not that Lyle gave two shits about the people who came in—but she couldn't afford to slack off like Shannon, because nothing would get done. And whose well-concealed ass would Jared fire?

She spun through the combination on the safe and retrieved the drawer of money. The back room was small and cozy, a home away from home, stocked for some reason with a shelf of cheap liqueurs. On slow afternoons, when she was working by herself, Lyle would sit back here with her feet up and sip Kahlúa from a mug, lost in whatever novel she was reading, so wrapped up in the vicissitudes of beauty and despair that she wouldn't notice the *bee-bong* of the door as a customer walked in. *Hello?* the customer would yell into the void. *Are you alive back there? Not exactly,* Lyle would yell back. Sometimes, if it was a good enough book, she'd put it down in a daze and wobble out to the front, greeted by a world—faces, movement, squares of sunlight on the floor—that seemed less real than the one she'd been reading about. It was as if God had decided to phone it in.

Locking the safe again, Lyle glanced at the corner of the room and noticed

a sleeping bag rolled into a strudel, propped beside a pillow. A flash of proprietary anger went through her. She carried the cash drawer out to the register.

“Christ. You didn’t *sleep* here.”

Shannon smirked. “Me and Charlie.”

“Your boyfriend?”

Shannon nodded, pleased with herself.

“Why?”

“We were playing Yahtzee.” She laughed. “What do you think? His parents are cool, but not *that* cool.”

So that’s why she’d enticed Jared into giving her the key. Lyle started to refill the syrup dispensers, watching from the corner of her eye as Shannon unstacked the tables and dragged them to their places. How did she make screwing on the floor of an ice cream shop seem glamorous? If Lyle had done the same thing, it would have swept PV High that she was a miserable slut. It wasn’t fair or just or randomly kind. Lyle watched the boys who came in for ice cream, how their faces changed when they saw Shannon: a wide-eyed slackening, as though they’d been conked in the head. It made Lyle want to tip them over like a row of bikes.

“You should give Jared the keys back,” she said now, snipping open a bag of caramel topping.

“Why?”

“Otherwise we’ll have to start charging by the hour.”

A flash of outrage crossed Shannon’s face before dissolving into a smile. As an object of male worship she could afford not to be angry, which drove Lyle crazy. Shannon picked the *People* off the windowsill and started to flip through it nonchalantly.

“You’re a virgin, aren’t you?”

“None of your business.”

She narrowed her eyes, smiling. “You are, aren’t you? I knew it.”

Lyle ignored her, carrying the pillow-sized bag of caramel back to the fridge. For the rest of the morning, she tended to customers while Shannon inspected her nails or browsed through magazines or whispered to friends on the phone as if she were selling nuclear secrets. (*I work with a virgin!* Lyle imagined her saying.) Once two people came in at the same time and Shannon made no move to get off the phone, letting the second customer wait

until Lyle was available. It was the sort of thing Lyle would have had fun complaining about to Bethany, her best friend, mocking Shannon's urgent whispering. Besides herself, Bethany was the only Californian she knew who didn't like the beach. It was Bethany's idea to make T-shirts with fake slogans on them, thinking up the brilliantly inspired PLEASE BUY THIS SENTENCE. Now that she'd moved to France for eight months, because of her dad's business, Lyle had no one to complain to but herself. She'd failed to anticipate the depth of her loneliness. Her old friends in Wisconsin had betrayed her after she left, falling in love with football players or pimple-faced tenth graders; they'd stopped writing very much, and then altogether. Now the same thing was happening with Bethany. Only a month and a half had passed, but already her letters had grown shorter: last week she'd sent a single paragraph and a picture of her "sort-of *petit ami*," a boy with large ears and Dickensian teeth.

Eventually, when she'd exhausted all sources of leisure, Shannon went out to get something from her car. Lyle knew she'd be gone for thirty minutes but didn't care. It was a relief. She sneaked into the back room and picked up where she'd left off in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. She felt a certain affinity for Tess. Actually, she couldn't help being a little attracted to Alec D'Urberville's "black mustache with curled points." Just as Tess was baptizing her dying son by candlelight, the door chimed; Lyle slipped the book back in the drawer, pained that she was too embarrassed to read it in front of Shannon.

It was the gatekeeper. Hector. He looked startling outside of his little guardhouse: a real person, rigid and wiry, his uniform ironed to a crisp. He looked like the inside of a closet. She smiled at him uncertainly, and he lifted his finger and wiggled it like a worm. She laughed.

"I was wondering if I could get some ice cream."

"Sorry. We only sell corn dogs."

He seemed flustered. "I mean, I'd like to get an ice cream cone."

"Never mind. A joke." She frowned. "What flavor do you want?"

He looked at her closely, studying her face instead of the tubs of ice cream displayed in front of him. His mustache, impossible to describe, reminded her why she only liked them in books. The word that popped into her head was "illegitimate." If mustaches had parents, this was definitely an orphan. "I don't know. What's your favorite?"

Lyle shrugged. "Pistachio?"

"I've never tried it."

"Here. Have a taster."

She grabbed a spoon and handed him a fluorescent green smudge of ice cream. His face fell. He eyed the smudge suspiciously and then sucked it from the little spoon, wincing for a second before he could recover.

"I'll have that," he said. "A sugar cone."

Lyle bent over the tub with her scoop, curling the ice cream from the sides and then packing it into a green snowball. By the end of the day, her arm would ache so badly she'd have trouble sleeping. She glanced up and was surprised to discover Hector looking at her breasts. She stood up straight, pressing the snowball into a cone. For the first time, it occurred to her that he hadn't just wandered into the store by accident.

He didn't leave, which surprised her as well. He sat at one of the plastic tables in the corner, eating his cone. He hunched on his elbows, closing his eyes to swallow. It was like watching someone eat his own shoe. Lyle took a weird delight in watching him suffer. Heroically, he licked the scoop down to an eroded-looking dune and then crunched through the cone, finishing the last bite without looking up. Lyle walked over.

"You've got green in your mustache," she said, offering him a napkin.

Hector blushed. He was younger than she'd thought: nineteen or twenty, though it was hard to tell with the hair on his lip. While he wiped his face, dabbing the ice cream from his mustache, Lyle stood patiently in the sunlight from the window. It was a feeling like being onstage. She knew that if she waited long enough, something would happen. The air was filled with glittering specks, like snow. Gravely, he asked if he could have her phone number.

"Yours," Lyle said, surprising herself.

She wrote his number on her hand and then went to hide in the back. Her heart was pounding—not from nerves but from a cold rush of power. He was still there; the door hadn't chimed. Lyle retraced the number in darker pen. She wanted Shannon to see it, but also wanted Hector to take off before she saw who it belonged to.

CHAPTER 3

“How about the Turpitudes?” Biesty said.

“What the hell does that mean?” Tarwater asked.

“My poor coxcomb.” Biesty shook his head. “Think depravity, but times ten.”

Band practice. Sunday morning. They were standing in Dustin’s garage, trying to come up with a name that would reflect the intelligence of the band while defining its commitment to rocking one’s ass back into the womb. So far in their six-month history, the perfect one had eluded them. (They’d been happy with the Deadbeats, or at least communally okay with it, until some hippie at a party had asked them if they covered Grateful Dead songs.) Dustin shot a weary look at Biesty, his best friend, whose glasses were perched on top of his head like a tiara. Biesty was the only person he knew who could quote Heidegger while tripping on three hits of acid. As a summer project, he’d decided to read *The Riverside Shakespeare* in its entirety while smoking large amounts of Royal Afghani, a project that had started to affect his sanity. Now he grinned at Dustin, as if the Turpitudes was really the best name since the Sex Pistols.

Dustin sighed. The garage was cluttered with bikes and ski equipment and at least one dartboard, which Starhead—their drummer—had placed on his stool to make himself taller. One of Starhead’s tom-toms refused to screw tight and drooped from its stand like a giant flower. Then there was the issue of Tarwater’s bass, which still had Twisted Sister and Def Leppard stickers on it from his formative musical years, circa last year. Occasionally, when they were tuning up, he’d break into the bass line of “Rock of Ages.” At times like this Dustin wondered whether they were really destined to write the next chapter in punk history.

“Turpitude is singular,” Starhead said. True to his nickname, he’d shaved a star into the top of his head, which he ducked down to show people whenever he introduced himself. “You can’t just add an s to it.”

“Who says?”

“It’s like being called the Friendships. Or the Moneys.”

Biesty shrugged. “You can say that. ‘Moneys.’ If you have different kinds of currency.”

“All right,” Dustin said, trying to avoid an argument. It often occurred to him that his main function as bandleader was keeping the peace. “So we’ve got the Turpitudes, Viet-Nun, and Toxic Shock Syndrome. We each get two votes, the rule being you can’t choose the same name twice.”

“What about mine?” Tarwater said. The fact remained that Tarwater was a good bassist, so you had to take his suggestions seriously no matter how stupid they were. If you pissed him off, he might threaten to leave the band or refuse to turn on his amp until you performed one of the dreadful ballads he’d written, perhaps “Despair Is My Silent Angel” or “Brothers Won’t Be Shackled (White, Red, or Brown).”

“Okay, Tarwater,” Dustin said equably. “What’s your idea?”

“The Butt Hawks.”

“The Butt Hawks?”

“Yeah.” He smiled proudly, despite the silence.

“What signifies this breed of hawk?” Biesty asked.

“What do you *think*?” Tarwater said.

Dustin cocked his head, trying to look encouraging. “Is it, like, a hawk that flies out of your butt?”

“No. Jesus.”

“I’m just trying to get my mind around it.”

“A bunch of guys who like women’s butts?” Starhead offered.

“No, you fuck-brains.” Tarwater paused, perhaps for emphasis. “It’s a *mohawk that grows out of your butt.*”

“Wow,” Dustin said.

“That’s disgusting,” Biesty said. Dustin shot him a glance over Tarwater’s head. “Disgusting, but ambiguous.”

“How about Asshawk?” Starhead suggested. “Just for, like, brevity.”

To settle things, Dustin shredded a piece of paper into little pieces and then handed them out. Everyone wrote down their top two choices and stuck them in a baseball cap. Dustin had a sense of something historic in the making. He tallied the votes. In the end, Toxic Shock Syndrome won out narrowly with three ballots. (The Butt Hawks got two, which could only be

explained by illegal voting.)

So began the first official practice of Toxic Shock Syndrome. Dustin tuned his Stratocaster with a feeling of long-awaited departure. He'd worked all spring at Randy's Audio Emporium so he could have enough money to take the summer off, his last before college, and steer the band toward greatness.

"Are you going to tell your dad our new name?" Starhead asked, twirling a drumstick.

"Why?"

"He's our number one fan."

Dustin frowned. "He's not a fan. He likes barbershop quartet records. I think he's just had a head injury or something."

"It's pretty weird," Biesty said, wedging a cigarette between the strings of his fretboard. "The way he veges on those steps. I'm waiting for him to shotgun one of those Cokes and start moshing around the garage."

They warmed up with some covers—"Los Angeles," "TV Party"—but the image of his father, nodding along to the beat and tapping his foot, kept messing with Dustin's groove. Who'd ever heard of a punk band whose biggest fan was a forty-three-year-old real estate developer in boat shoes? He was impossible to avoid, because you never knew when he was going to be home anymore. If Dustin turned up the amps to an ear-blistering ten, his dad would just shut his eyes and lean his head back against the wall. The louder they played, the more he seemed to enjoy it.

Today, sure enough, he wandered into the garage in the middle of "Mandy Rogers," Dustin's paean to loss and suffering in a godless universe. (*You prayed to Him at night like a good little nun, the one person, you thought, who wouldn't shun or make fun.*) As usual, his dad got a Coke from the fridge and then sat on the steps with that lost look on his face, as though he were waiting for a life-changing message to wash up on the beach. Biesty grabbed the mike from its stand and began prowling the garage while he belted the chorus, as though searching for Mandy or God or both; nor mally Biesty's stage antics inspired Dustin, but now they seemed dumb and overwrought. It was his father's fault. Somehow, just by sitting there, he had a way of making everything seem ridiculous. Why couldn't Dustin just have a normal dad like Biesty's, who never took any interest in anything and jerked off in his bedroom all the time to his ten-year stash of *Hustlers*?

“Would you play that one song you wrote?” Dustin’s dad asked while they took a cigarette break. He didn’t care if they smoked, which—despite Dustin’s griping—gave him a measure of respect with the band. “About the shit hitting the fan?”

“Dad, this is practice! We don’t do requests.” Dustin glared at his father’s polo shirt. “Anyway, that’s the Circle Jerks. We didn’t write it.”

“The Circle Jerks?”

This had always seemed to Dustin like the perfectly irreverent name—but now he began helplessly to doubt it. Wasn’t it a bit juvenile? Before Dustin could stop him, Biesty turned to his father with a courteous expression.

“It’s when you stand in a naked circle of men,” he explained, “and masturbate the participant in front of you.”

“Are they homosexuals?”

“No, Dad. Jesus.”

“Do you have a recording of it?”

Dustin shook his head.

“I’ve got it at home,” Tarwater said. “I could tape it for you, Mr. Ziller.”

“Thank you, Brent. That would be great.”

“You might like the Ramones, too. They’re more middle-aged.”

Dustin raised his voice. “Look, Dad, do you *have* to be in here?”

“It’s chill,” Starhead said. “He’s only listening to us practice.”

“It’s *not* chill. Christ. What are we going to do next? Invite the neighbors over for juice and cookies?”

The way his dad stared at his Coke, smiling as though he had indigestion, gave Dustin a twinge of guilt. Still smiling, his father hunched up the stairs—the back pocket of his khakis pulled out like a rabbit’s ear—and disappeared inside the house. Dustin remembered the Halloween when he was seven, how some teenagers had run by on his way home from trick-or-treating and stolen all of his candy. He’d come home in tears. Dustin’s father had taken him out later in the dark, carrying him on his shoulders under the strange high buzz of the streetlights, through the clumsy swooping of bats, knocking on people’s doors and rousing them out of bed in their pajamas, until Dustin had filled three bags of candy. But what was he supposed to do now, start doing whippits with the guy? Going on double dates?

“Finally,” he said. “Safely locked up.”

After band practice, Dustin drove to the beach to meet Kira, who'd been there since eleven working on her tan. He would have liked to be going straight to the beach, since the vision of his beautiful girlfriend lying in the sun—that sexy, inviting dip at the small of her back, like somewhere a kitten might curl up—was giving him a hard-on. It was bad enough to have a hard-on with your sister in the car, but he had to drive all the way to Miraleste to drop her at the library. He couldn't even blast the stereo, not with Jonas sitting in the backseat next to the only speaker that worked, gazing out the window at God knew what. How Dustin's mom had convinced him to drag the kid along with him to Rat Beach, he did not know. Somehow it had to do with the car shortage. Dustin got a kick out of Jonas, he was strange and hilarious and dressed for the second day in a row entirely in orange, but this did not mean he wanted to show up at the beach with an Oompa-Loompa.

Still, it was hard to be bummed out when you were driving basically beachward and the air would soon sting of salt and the fog had burned off into a spectacular California day, the sky so blue you had to remind yourself it was real, like those textbook photos of the Earth's atmosphere. They drove past the Courtyard Mall, which made Dustin feel sorry for the consumer zombies inside. He felt sorry for dead people. He felt sorry for anyone not from California (perhaps the same thing). He felt sorry for his bandmates, who were holed up in Starhead's house, high on his mother's Percocet and watching *The Decline of Western Civilization* for the zillionth time.

"Something weird's going on with Dad," he said, glancing at Lyle, who was wearing a T-shirt that said MURDER IS A FAUX PAS. She hadn't bothered to wash her hair, which hung over her eyes in greasy red strings. "He's always, like, hanging out in the garage."

"Maybe he misses the Chrysler," she said.

"No. I mean, he just sits there with this stupid expression, like he wants to hug me or something."

"Mom's the same way," Lyle said. "Especially when she looks at endangered sea otters."

"I'm being serious."

Lyle nodded. "Actually, I saw him last night. Doing the laundry."

"What?"

"Uh-huh. A big load of whites. It was three in the morning."

"Are you sure it was him?"

“Well, he was wearing boat shoes.”

“I can’t imagine him doing the wash at all,” Dustin said.

“Exactly! A pod person!” Lyle peered into the backseat. “Jonas, you’re the genius. What do *you* think’s wrong with Dad?”

Jonas shrugged. “He’s addicted to heroin and his veins have collapsed?”

“Where does he get these ideas?” Dustin said happily.

“Gee, I don’t know. I’m sure Mom’s videos have nothing to do with it.”

Lyle pretended to shoot a needle into her neck, tongue lolling from her mouth. Dustin laughed. They had fun at home, giving their mom a hard time or pretending their dad had gone deaf, talking to him sotto voce, but he and his sister never hung out together for real. It amazed Dustin to think how close they’d been as kids in Wisconsin, playing Pounce for hours on the bed or making tape recordings of made-up poems or selling Country Time lemonade to their neighbors in Nashotah, palming it off as homemade and making a killing. One summer they spent hours at a time inside the pink, echoey, breezeless cave of a flipped-over raft in the lake: it was like being behind an eyelid, or in the same luminous, too-loud brain. It was there, hidden under the raft, that they’d started playing Cats vs. Dogs. It was World War III and they had to decide what things to let into their bomb shelter; for every thing they saved there was something else they had to leave out, dooming it to extinction. Frogs were safe but not toads. Milkshakes but not banana splits. The Beatles but not the Rolling Stones. Lyle loved the game and insisted on playing it every chance they got. Dustin couldn’t imagine playing anything like it with her now. She hated everything; there’d be nothing, no one worth saving.

At the library, Lyle got out of the car without saying good-bye and strode off in her baggy T-shirt, eager to get to her books. His friends called her the She-Yeti. What bugged him more than the nickname was that they used it in front of him, as though his sister was so white and abominable he wouldn’t possibly object. Dustin had stuck up for her more than once, surprised by his own anger. Though he’d never tell her this, Dustin sort of admired her: she dressed the way she pleased and didn’t worry about being tan or popular.

At Rat Beach, Dustin parked the car in the shade of a eucalyptus and walked down the dirt trail with Jonas, who hadn’t brought a bathing suit with him or for that matter even shorts. As usual, the beach itself was nearly deserted. He loved everything about it. He loved parading down to his

favorite spot, skirting the breakwater where the sand wouldn't fry his feet to a crisp, the sexy-looking moms glancing up from their kids to watch him laze by. He loved the soreness in his face from the salt. He loved the lifeguard stand boarded up and gone to rot. He loved, when he walked, the way the sand fleas rose in front of his feet before he stepped, psychically attuned to his stride, as if there were an invisible person walking in front of him. He loved the seagulls, the mellow swells, the sun top-browning the water into three feet of delicious warmth.

He found Kira's radio and towel and then saw Kira herself, walking back from the Snack Shack with a frozen Snickers bar, its wrapper torn down like a banana peel. Her long brown hair was frizzled from the ocean. She smiled at him and Jonas, a rabbit two-teethed grin that drove Dustin crazy and often haunted his dreams. They'd been seeing each other for close to a year.

"Who are you supposed to be?" she asked Jonas, staring at his clothes. Jonas had laid his towel in the sand and was standing beside it, like a butler awaiting a command.

"A human being," he said.

"Right. Stupid me. Do you always go to the beach in corduroys?"

Jonas thought about this—or seemed to. It was hard to know. "No," he said. "Sometimes I go to the mall."

Kira looked at Dustin, who raised his eyebrows to indicate they'd entered the Jonas Zone and all present dispatches were useless. She really seemed to like his weirdo brother, a first in terms of his romantic history. "Do you think we'll have freaky kids?" she asked, leaning into Dustin's ear.

"Like deformed ones?"

"Ha ha." She kissed his cheek. "I just pray they get my brains."

"Good thinking," Dustin said. "If they were too smart, we wouldn't be able to sell them to the circus."

She punched his shoulder but couldn't help laughing. Just for kicks, Dustin imagined what their marriage might be like, how he'd be a lauded figure in the history of L.A. punk and they'd live in a bungalow in the Hollywood Hills, where he'd write his critically acclaimed songs in the bathtub. And being married meant they could screw whenever they wanted. That was one thing, to be honest, he could really get into. Right now their sex life was a little bit *unfulfilled*. Actually, it was an exercise in major suffering. They'd be going hot and heavy in the backseat of the Dart or on the

Shackneys' living room couch or on the dewy black tarp of their trampoline, dry-humping until Dustin's dick was chafed, until his pain and pleasure zones were thoroughly confused, but when it came to the magic moment—the unfastening of Kira's jeans—there was always the Grip, the hand that came down to stop him with a gentle, proprietary squeeze. That would be that, end of story, go back to Dustinville. Other girls had aimed the Grip at him before, and he'd protested with a fierceness that surprised even him. But Kira was different. She was the real thing, maybe the love of his life, and he was willing to wait until she was ready.

Now, perhaps to torture him, Kira stripped down to her bikini bottoms, bending over to pull her gym shorts leisurely down her knees, a sight that should be in *The Guinness Book of World Records* for most incredible boyfriend perk. She squirted some sunscreen on her arm and started to rub it into her skin.

"You look like a corpse," she said to Jonas, who was lying fully clothed on his towel with his eyes shut.

"Thank you," he said. Kira glanced at Dustin. "Actually, corpses don't think."

"If you're not a corpse, what are you thinking?"

"Don't start," Dustin said.

Jonas opened his eyes. "Do you really want to know," he said suspiciously, "or are you just making small talk?"

"I really want to know."

"I was thinking about whether it was worse to be eaten by sharks or to get picked apart by vultures, I mean if you're too weak to move and not fully dead."

Kira frowned, snapping the lotion shut. "Jonas, you're eleven years old. You should be worrying about, like, if gerbils go to heaven."

Jonas chose to ignore this. Nearby, beyond a raft of seagulls, Dustin could see two kids about Jonas's age playing in the sand. One was buried up to his head like a mummy while the other constructed a towering penis at his crotch, running down to the water and bringing back cups of wet sand to gigantify its length. "Holy crud!" the buried kid was shouting. "She's gonna collapse!" Dustin loved Jonas as he was but wished sometimes he'd build sand penises and say things like "holy crud" instead of worrying about being eaten to death. Lately he'd begun knocking on Dustin's door at odd times of

the day, asking if he would help him practice a fencing move or decorate some pointless card to Mandy Rogers. It made Dustin sad, that Jonas seemed so alone, but he didn't have time to be the kid's parent.

Kira tuned the radio to her favorite station, which was playing "Peace Train." Dustin hadn't told his bandmates about Kira's secret penchant for Cat Stevens and Fleetwood Mac. Nor had he told them the other things that, in a future wife, he found faintly troubling. Last week they'd gone to see a play in downtown L.A., one that Biesty had told him about, and during the performance an actor had unzipped his pants onstage and pissed into a bucket. Afterward, it was the first thing that Kira mentioned: *Was it really necessary that he take a whiz in front of everyone?* It wasn't even her objection that bothered Dustin but that he'd foreseen it so perfectly even before the actor had zipped up his pants, right down to the word "whiz." He couldn't shake the feeling that everything she did was utterly predictable. He knew that she'd close her eyes for a second and take a deep breath before entering a party; that she'd eat the edges of a Peppermint Pattie first and save the gooey center for last, asking jokingly if he wanted a bite; that she would stare at him sometimes when they were watching a movie and say, in the middle of the best scene, "You're so adorable when you're serious."

The problem was he had a different vision of himself. In this vision he was not adorable at all. He was strange and spontaneous and did charismatically delinquent things, like piss in a bucket for a crowd of strangers.

"I made you something," Kira said now, reaching into her purse. Always, as soon as he saw her beautiful, heart-melting face, any reservations he had immediately vanished. She pulled out a cassette tape and handed it to him. Slanting across the case, in embossed letters, was a label that said THIS OBJECT IS DESIGNED TO MAKE NOISE . "It's those songs you recorded at Biesty's house. I made ten copies."

"You did?"

"I thought we could sell them the next time you play."

Dustin was moved. She was always doing things like this, helping to set up gigs or sneaking into the teachers' lounge at school to Xerox flyers. Her belief in his talent stunned him sometimes. It was like having a fantastic dream about yourself, then waking up to find that someone else had had it too.

“Shit,” she said, sitting up on her towel. “There’s Taz. She saw me. The Witch of Endor.”

Kira’s sister trudged up the sand with a cigarette in her mouth, trailed by a shirtless boy in Elvis sunglasses. She had a streak of white dyed into her bangs. For some reason, the cigarette made her seem even younger.

“I need some money,” Taz said without even glancing at Dustin. She was wearing a saggy bathing suit and a pair of cutoff jeans that seemed to be biodegrading. She looked like Kira but wasn’t half as pretty; it was nice seeing them together because it made Kira seem even hotter. Her friend with the Elvis sunglasses stood there quietly, observing Jonas as if he were maybe a mesmerizing speed bump.

“Didn’t Mom give you any?” Kira said.

“I spent it already.”

“On cigarettes?”

Taz scowled. “What is this, the Inquisition? Like you don’t smoke all the time in your bathroom.”

“Is he dead?” the boy in the Elvis glasses said, nudging Jonas with his foot.

“Waiting to get picked apart,” Dustin said.

The boy stepped back.

“What are you going to buy with it?” Kira asked Taz.

“Some angel dust. At the Snack Shack.”

“Christ, just take some,” Kira said, pulling a five out of her purse. Her sister stuffed it in the pocket of her cutoffs without saying thank you and headed off down the beach, stranding her friend in a lizardlike trance. “Boo,” Jonas said, opening his eyes. The boy started and jogged after her.

“Little slut,” Kira said, watching them leave. “I guarantee you she just met that creep an hour ago.”

Dustin kissed Kira’s neck and made her squirm, because it was a beautiful day and you had to make your girlfriend forget about her bitchy sister, who’d been kicked out of ninth grade and sent to a “therapeutic boarding school” in Northern California for troubled teens. Something told him it was going to be a long summer. “Maybe she’s changed. You haven’t seen her all year.”

“Yeah, right.” She kissed him, smiling. “You’re too nice, that’s your problem.”

Dustin frowned. He took off his shirt and jogged down to the water, more

swiftly than he'd intended. Some guys he knew—surfers—waved at him from the other side of the lifeguard tower, giving him the hang loose, their boards jutting from the sand in a Druidic-looking circle. All bro-ness and sunshine. Sometimes he wished people didn't think he was so friendly. It was an annoying misunderstanding. For one thing, the thoughts running through his head weren't always very kind. They were nasty and irreverent. He wasn't sure how the misunderstanding had happened, but it had. He wasn't particularly nice to his parents, but no one ever got to see that and it did him no good.

He swam in the ocean for a while, bodysurfing on the close-to-unrideable waves, avoiding the little-kid surfers wiping out and getting sand facials. He gave up after a while and decided to head in, catching a puny swell that walled off into a sandy wash of foam. When he surfaced, Kira was standing waist-deep in the water in front of him, her face damp and somber. A bubble of foam withered in her hair. *She's going to break up with me*, Dustin thought miserably.

"What is it?"

She started to say something and then trailed off, blushing through her tan. "I think we should just . . . you know. Do it for real."

He kissed her happily. "When?"

"I don't know. Before you go to college."

His heart sank. "That's, like, three months away." He waded backward into the surf, so no one would see his hard-on. "Anyway, what difference does college make?"

"Everything will be different."

"UCLA's forty minutes from here. It won't change anything."

She frowned as if she knew more than he did about college life, even though he'd visited UCLA three times and even spent the night in some crazy art major's dorm room. "July thirtieth," she said quietly. "A month from this Thursday. It's our year anniversary."

Dustin nodded. She hugged him, smiling now, and they walked up the beach together in the sun, the water shrinking from his back like silk. A month! He'd waited this much time; in the history of the universe, a month was no more than a blip. But there was something about having sex for the first time on your year anniversary that seemed hopelessly conventional. *Nice*. They walked by an elderly woman in a beach chair, tan as a waffle, who

smiled at Kira as they passed. *What a lovely couple*, he could see the woman thinking. Dustin glanced at his girlfriend's face, smiling sweetly in return, and felt a surprising twirl of revulsion.

Ahead of them, over by their towels, some kids were messing around in the sand; Dustin was astonished that his brother seemed to have made some friends. And then he saw Jonas. Or rather, Jonas's scrawny-looking ass: he was naked from the waist down and lunging at the kids, who were throwing his orange cords back and forth and dancing in little triumphant hops. The penis-builders from earlier. Dustin yelled at the kids and they took off running, ditching Jonas's cords in the sand. He wrapped a towel around Jonas's waist.

"Where's your underwear?"

"I wasn't wearing any," Jonas said.

"Jonas, *why*?"

"I don't have any orange ones."

Dustin glanced down the beach at Kira, who was retrieving Jonas's pants. He saw how his brother's life would be an endless trial of humiliations that he was too orange and clueless to avoid. Jonas dropped the towel to put his corduroys back on, his shriveled little penis darker than the rest of him.

"They're lucky I didn't kick their asses," Dustin said.

"Yeah, right." Kira put her arm around him. "Like you could ever hurt a fly."

CHAPTER 4

Dawn. Warren lay in bed, listening to the cries of wild peacocks echoing in the canyon. After three years, he still hadn't gotten used to their eerie feline racket. He'd been up since four o'clock, waiting for the world to materialize again. It had been a long and eventful two hours. There had been fear, self-pity, vertiginous despair. There had been thoughts of deserting his family. There had been fury and remorse. Warren had lain there in the dark, wondering if the sun would ever come up.

Now, the light from the window bathed the room in a bluish glow. Everything was just as they'd left it last night: the bowfront dresser, the bowl of potpourri perched on the TV set, even *The Joy of Sex* stationed in the middle of the bookcase, its spine covered with masking tape. (This clever bit of subterfuge was Camille's, who thought the kids would be uninterested in a conspicuously large book whose title they couldn't read.) And still there, too, was the painting named "Pac-Man in Heaven," one of the pieces she'd brought home after Mandy Rogers disappeared. Not a painting, actually, but a furry, king-sized Pac-Man cut out of brown shag carpet and then glued to a background of Crayola clouds. What had possessed Camille to buy it he could only imagine. It was not only hideous but disturbing. Who, no matter how "disabled," would identify with Pac-Man enough to imagine his afterlife?

Warren stared at the furry brown circle, its mouth permanently ajar, as though its hunger had survived the grave.

He sat up in bed, careful not to disturb Camille. She was fast asleep beside him, facing the wall so he couldn't see her face. From the back, the first streaks of gray in her hair concealed by the blue light of dawn, she looked like the girl he'd fallen in love with. Warren watched her from above, admiring the delicate rise and fall of her back. He used to admire her this way that winter before they were married, when she was still finishing up college and he was at the University of Chicago for law school. On the weekends,

Camille would take the train down from Madison to see him and they'd walk the bitter streets together, huddled against the wind, the skyscrapers twinkling in the sun like swords. They were hopelessly, helplessly in love. He remembered sitting with her in the Amtrak station one Sunday afternoon, miserable at the thought of parting again even for a week, Camille crying into his parka as if she were leaving him forever. There was no question about her getting back: she had an exam the next day and would fail the class if she didn't take it. The train to Madison came into the station but she didn't move from the bench, didn't look up, gripping Warren's hand until it hurt. The train pulled away and they looked at each other for the first time, Camille's face ragged with relief. The joy was like nothing he'd ever felt. They bought a bottle of cheap champagne and spent the rest of the day in bed, giddy at the thrill of what she'd done, as if the world—its trains and exams and scheduled intrusions—were merely a nuisance to their love.

They had lost this feeling, the way you might lose a favorite gift you were no longer attached to. It had not seemed an important loss at the time: Dustin was born, and if anything a deeper, more devout-seeming love took its place. Once, while they were bathing Dustin together in the sink of their apartment, washing his scabbed-up belly button and tiny, heartbreaking penis, Camille had turned to Warren with a look of such stunning affection that he had actually lost his breath. *I will never be happier than I am now*, Warren had thought. Seventeen years later, he realized how sadly prescient this was. He did not know how he and Camille had ended up like this, so stranded in their own lives that they could barely wish each other good night, but it was one of the several ways in which love—so persuasive in its innocence—had betrayed him.

Warren climbed out of bed and sifted through his dresser, placed strategically on the left side of the room. He always slept on the left half of the bed, Camille on the right. It was one of those agreements they'd reached years ago without ever discussing it. Once, when Camille was out of town, he'd tried sleeping on her side and found himself inching back to his own spot, a homesick traveler. It occurred to him they would sleep this way until they died.

He got dressed quietly and walked down the hall. Stopping at Dustin's room, Warren cracked the door and was confronted once again with his son's naked back. He was lying on his stomach, covers kicked into a tangle at the

foot of his bed. There was something alarming in the way he slept: limbs thrown out, like the victim of a crash. Once, when Dustin was a toddler, he'd fallen asleep in the middle of the airport, spread-eagled on the floor as though he'd dropped from the ceiling.

Dustin's headphones had slipped from his ears and lay upright on the pillow, perched atop his head like a halo. Warren had tried his best to support him, to give him everything he needed—this kid who was more interested in the Circle Jerks than speaking to him. Really, Warren had done it all for him. He'd dropped out of law school after Camille got pregnant, gone to work for her father in Milwaukee so they wouldn't have to eat moose meat. He'd dreamed of being a judge, using his degree to rise up the ranks, but ended up getting into real estate because Camille's father had a connection. And he'd done well with it, developing condos and resort homes on the same lakes he'd fished as a kid. If there'd been any regrets or second thoughts, those first years, they'd vanished as soon as Warren got home from the office, as soon as he saw Dustin's face go brainsick with delight. They used to dance around the living room together, Dustin clutching his shirt in his tiny fists. He'd never expected his ambition—his dreams of greatness—could be so easily trounced by a baby's grin.

It was his single accomplishment, providing for these beautiful, snot-faced creatures that Camille had brought into the world. He'd moved them to California and bought a larger house than they needed, seduced by the idea of giving them even more. How proud he'd been showing them the big lawn and persimmon tree, the famously expensive views of L.A. He'd filled the extra space with overpriced furniture, leasing it until he had the money to buy it outright. He wasn't worried—in a year or two they'd be as rich as his neighbors. Now it was all disappearing: this room, this house, this life he'd built from scratch.

Creeping closer, Warren lifted the headphones gingerly from Dustin's head and bent down to listen. He longed to hear some thing, to catch the soundtrack of his son's dreams. But there was nothing. Silence.

After walking Mr. Leonard, Warren went into the kitchen and poured himself some Grape-Nuts, searching the Frigidaire for blueberries before remembering what Camille had said yesterday about their being five dollars a carton at the grocery store. "They think we're the Shackneys" were her exact words. Warren wondered if she was on to him. He was still looking into the

fridge when the scuff of slippers surprised him from behind.

“You’re up early,” Camille said. She was wearing pink pajamas, thin enough to show the lovely shadow of her breasts. Warren found he could not look at his wife without being reminded of his failure.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he said, pouring milk into his Grape-Nuts.

“Did you take a pill?”

He ignored this eminently practical question. On the counter was their long-distance bill from last month. He took it to the table with his cereal. “You called Nora Lundy eight times last month.”

“So?”

“Doesn’t she have any friends in Wisconsin?”

“We grew up together,” Camille said. “Anyway, what does it matter?”

“It just seems . . . I don’t know. Excessive. You don’t see me calling my friends from Wisconsin every day.”

She opened the dishwasher. “Which friends are you talking about?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. I just didn’t know you kept in touch with anyone, is all.”

He looked at her angrily. “Maybe because you erase my messages from the machine.”

Camille sighed. “That was one message. A year ago. And it was on the machine for a month.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Did you ever even listen to it?”

“Christ, I’m up to my neck in work! I can’t drop everything just because an ex-neighbor calls!”

“Please don’t yell at me,” Camille said.

She never lashed back or used bad words. Once, when they were playing doubles with the Hathaways and he kept stealing her shots, she’d called him—bafflingly—a “fud.” It occurred to him that they hadn’t played tennis with anyone for months.

“Warren, what’s going on?” she said sadly. “Is there something you need to tell me?”

Warren bent over his Grape-Nuts, avoiding her eyes. It was her calmly disappointed face, so pale and reasonable, that drove him crazy. The bird clock over the stove chirped like a summer tanager. Camille’s parents had given it to them years ago, when they’d moved into the lake house in

Nashotah. Warren couldn't hear the clock go off without thinking of the creaky, ant-infested house, wondering why they'd ever left.

After breakfast, he walked out to Lyle's Renault and squeezed behind the wheel and tried once again to move the seat back, his head touching the roof so that he was forced to stoop in front of the rearview mirror. He looked to himself like a giant mosquito. A half-naked Barbie doll dangled from the mirror, twirling from a shoelace noosed around her neck. The Barbie doll had on a T-shirt that said SAVE THE PARAMECIUM. Warren turned the key and the ignition squealed, jolting his fingers. He cursed. He tried again and the engine turned over, accompanied by a noisy, tailward rattle.

The rattling persisted as he drove up High Street. Warren wondered if the muffler was going to fall off. He slowed at the stop sign before John's Canyon Road, the brakes whining loudly enough to hurt his ears. The Shackneys' house loomed from across the street. It was the biggest house in Herradura Estates, a Spanish Revival with an indoor pool and a dopey ranch sign at the end of the driveway that said HACIENDA DE SHACKNEY in lariat-style script. The sign had been weathered to look antique. Standing beneath it, clutching surfboards, were the Shackney boy and a kid with hair slanting diagonally across his face. They had the invincible look of eleven-year-olds who didn't dress all in orange. He could not imagine what blissfully untroubled parent would pick them up at this hour to take them surfing.

"Nice car," the Shackney boy said.

"What?"

"Are you, like, French?"

"No," Warren said. It dawned on him, too late, that they were making fun of him. He pointed at the ranch sign. "Are you, like, Spanish?"

"You should get your brakes checked," the kid with slanty hair said.

"Why don't you kids mind your own business," he said angrily.

"Is that your Barbie doll?"

Warren stuck his arm out the window and gave them the finger. It was remarkably satisfying. Pleased, he looked up at the house and saw Mitch Shackney—the father of Dustin's girlfriend—watching him from the top of the driveway.

Warren touched the gas and the Renault rattled off, sending a desolate chime back from the canyon. He wondered if his mind was betraying him, like his own father's. When Warren was seven years old, his dad had ushered

him onto the roof on Christmas Eve and told him he was going to kill Santa Claus. This was in Oconomowoc, the town in Wisconsin where he grew up. His dad, an avid hunter, had grabbed one of his 12-gauges before leading Warren out of the attic and setting up watch on the hip of the roof. “We’ll wait here and then get him when he’s going down the chimney,” his father said. Warren, stiff with terror, sat there and waited for the far-off jingle of Santa’s sleigh. His father held the gun in his lap and combed the sky, as though he were scouting for ducks. They hunched there in the freezing moonlight for nearly an hour. Warren’s hands were numb, he had to take a pee—but he didn’t dare move. Finally, without a word, his dad sighed theatrically and led Warren back inside the house, his shoulders sagging in defeat.

Until that night, Warren’s dad had been a sober, hardworking man known for his friendly good nature. He owned a sporting goods store downtown and Warren remembered the constant huddle of men at the checkout counter, the smell of sweat and Brylcreem and sauerkraut. His dad’s only vice was poker, which he played every Saturday night at the Rotary Club, making sure to go home if he lost his five-dollar buy-in. He was unswervingly frugal, perhaps to a fault. After that night on the roof, though, he started to give things away to baffled customers or lock up the store whenever he felt like it, showing up at the house in the middle of the day to take a nap. One time, he came to dinner with one of Warren’s sock puppets, a dog with floppy ears and sewn-on buttons for eyes. He refused to talk normally, using a deep, woofy voice to ask for the salt. Warren thought it was funny at first, one of his dad’s jokes, but then his mom began crying and his father started to make the puppet cry as well, mimicking her quiet sobs.

The next day, Warren’s mom made his dad go to a doctor in Milwaukee, where they ran some tests and discovered he had a brain tumor. (“A sore in his head” was how she explained it to Warren.) He died a few months after that. They’d never been rich, but now Warren and his mother struggled to survive. The store was in a shambles; in his madness, his dad had given away half the merchandise and ordered three times what they needed from distributors. A rent increase crippled them further and the store went bankrupt. Warren’s mom, who hadn’t worked a day since she got married, ended up cashiering at the Exxon and waitressing at a German restaurant downtown four nights a week. Warren was left alone most of the time and

developed a seepy warmth in his chest that he identified as shame. He was ashamed of the tiny apartment they'd moved to, ashamed of his mom's gas-smelling hands, ashamed of the unfashionably wide ties she picked out for him at the Lakeshore Thrift. Oconomowoc was a vacation town, and every summer rich kids from Milwaukee descended on the lake for a summer of waterskiing and badminton and reckless sunburned drinking. Warren got a job at the Seven Seas Club, working as a dishwasher—what the old cooks there called a “pearl diver.” After lunch, he used to do yard work as well and see the kids lying down by the marina or drinking beer on their floatboats or rigging their C-boats for the weekend race, the lake cracking with gunshots. The girls were tall and willowy, with pageboys curling up their necks. They'd lie on the diving raft for hours at a time. Warren would watch them sunbathing with their slender legs crooked up, a row of lovely triangles, as he mowed the lawn in his uniform. He was proud of his tan Mediterranean skin and used to wear his shirt unbuttoned all the way down to his pants. He had some vague idea that he looked like James Dean. Once, while he was raking the easement down to the dock, he saw one of the boys with his shirt unbuttoned like his. The boy was raking the asphalt with a shuffleboard broom, the girls all giggling through their hands.

Warren kept his shirt buttoned after that, avoiding the dock as much as he could. At school that fall he devoted himself to his classes; he knew that his only chance was to work, to take advantage of the ethic he'd inherited from his father—that what ever romantically exotic attraction people felt for poor boys in movies was not to be found in real life. Sure enough, he got a scholarship at the University of Wisconsin, where he worked his ass off and stayed more or less with the other scholarship kids until he met Camille, identifying her immediately as one of the girls with willowy arms. She was as rich as the vacationers in Oconomowoc, the daughter of a businessman. But she was different, too: she blushed easily, she didn't drink, she was shocked by some of Warren's language—not like the wild girls he saw at the lake. Even in college, she was always volunteering at soup kitchens and nursing homes around Madison. He didn't notice at first how beautiful she was, but it revealed itself gradually the more he looked, like one of those pictures that invert mysteriously into something else.

Still, walking across campus sometimes, Warren would think of the boy with his shirt undone, the girls giggling, and his face would flush with shame.

He'd hear the bright, piano-y laughter, afraid to look up from the grass. It wasn't until after he and Camille were married, when they were living on their own and Warren was making more money than his parents—his father—ever dreamed of, that he'd been able to squeeze the memory from his mind.

Now, pulling up to the office in Lyle's Renault, Warren tried to ignore the Barbie doll beaming at him from her noose. Larry's Alfa Romeo was parked under the only strip of shade. Larry was his old friend and partner, the man who'd helped spell his ruin. He'd coaxed Warren out to California, seducing him with the promise of "easy millions." Those were his precise words. He'd shown him the sun-bleached acres of hardpan desert, the forest of contorted Joshua trees, and said, "This is the future of California." If he hadn't said that, if he'd said something along the lines of *This is the future of toxic waste*, Warren wouldn't have fallen in love with the fucking place and invested his life's savings in it. He wouldn't be down to a single credit card, a gravely wounded American Express, the others having been snipped in two by trembly cashiers.

Larry was waiting for him in the receptionist's chair, one foot propped on the desk. He preferred to work in the lobby, where he could catch the morning rays through the window. (They'd laid off the receptionist weeks ago.) Besides time and energy, he hadn't invested much in the project—it was Warren's baby, right down to the name on the deed. Anyway, Larry had two other projects in the works near Palm Springs. Retirement communities, miles away from anything toxic.

"I talked to the bank," Larry said, fiddling with a Band-Aid on his toe. "The lending officer." As usual, he was wearing a Hawaiian shirt and flip-flops, his legs brown and muscular below pleated shorts. Mr. California. In college, he'd been pale and sickly, always missing class because of the flu. "They're going to call the loan at expiration."

"They'll foreclose on us."

"That would be my, um, prognosis."

Warren's legs felt unnaturally heavy. He had not told Larry about the direness of his own predicament. "I've been stringing the GC along for six months. He's going to take me to court."

"Unless we move some of these units." Larry stood up and walked into Warren's office without asking, as though they were under surveillance.

Warren followed him into the sour-smelling room. His desk, a heap of papers and brochures, seemed living proof of something. “Look,” Larry said, lowering his voice, “there’s no legally binding reason we have to tell them about the dump.”

“Jesus, Larry. Does the word ‘cancer’ mean anything to you?”

“Astrologically?”

Warren put down his briefcase. “Did you lose your conscience, or was it surgically removed?”

“Look, this whole cancer thing’s a racket. Every day it’s something else. Now they’ve got this thing against grilled chicken. The black stuff’s bad for you.” He laughed. “I mean, we’ve been cooking meat since, like, early man. Neanderthals? You don’t think their woolly mammoth was charred at the edges?”

“They weren’t dumping toxic sludge in the Stone Age.”

“True. They were too busy bashing each other’s heads in.”

“Have you ever smelled one of these landfills?”

“Hellacious,” Larry said. “Like rotten eggs.”

Warren sat down. They’d been close in college, but their friendship had long since been whittled away by the stress of Auburn Fields. Warren wondered if Camille was right, if he’d truly lost all his friends. “And you wouldn’t feel guilty?” he asked Larry. “Selling houses nearby?”

“Why? Because the government decides to dump its crap next to our property?”

“I just don’t understand how they could do this to us,” Warren muttered.

“Exactly because it’s just *us*. We’re the only suckers around. Anyway, they’ve got a PR team that could get the pope to suck his own dick. Industrial sewer sludge, and they’re calling it ‘biocake.’ I mean, you’ve got to hand it to them. Sounds like a granola bar.” Larry actually laughed. “I’m sure the city of Palmdale’s getting kickbacks to beat the band. Ben Blyskal on the planning commission told me they’re donating twenty grand to the school board.”

Larry flip-flopped over to the wall and inspected the bulletin board that said AUBURN FIELDS at the top. There was a brochure thumbtacked to one corner; the cover showed a Latino family opening presents on Christmas, their eyes wide with wonder and delight. Below the picture, in Edwardian-looking font, was a quotation by Henry David Thoreau: *Go confidently in the*

direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined. The quote had been Warren's idea. At the time, before the county announced their plans, it had never occurred to him that building affordable homes in the desert would bankrupt him. It had seemed like a brilliant, even a noble, idea: first homes for Californians squeezed out of the market. The "drive-till-you-qualify" crowd, as Larry put it. Who wouldn't want his own house? Besides, the market was booming: Japanese investors were foaming at the mouth. Their pals at Sakamoto Investment had jumped at the chance. Even the infrastructure was a relative snap. They'd coaxed the county into declaring it a Mello-Roos District, so they were able to run the sewage and water and electricity out there on a municipal bond. Everything had seemed to fall magically into place.

At least that's the story Warren told himself. In truth, even before the dump issue, he'd had a chance to pull out. When Larry started to get cold feet after the feasibility study came in—when the estimate was far more than they'd expected—Warren had insisted they go through with it. He could have gone back to Wisconsin, could have eaten the cost of the study and saved his family from impending doom, but he'd convinced the folks at Sakamoto Investment that it was worth the risk. It had been Warren's idea, too, to build twenty houses before they'd sold the lots. "Create the supply," David Stockman had told the country, "and the demand will follow." It was a formula too seductive to resist. He could blame Larry for the mess he was in—he gave in to the temptation more and more—but in truth Warren had brought it on himself.

Now the dump had become the nail in the coffin. You could see the construction crew breaking ground from the Auburn Fields gate: less than a mile away, a cloud of ominous dust blooming from the earth.

"Look," Larry said, "if you really want to stop this sludge from being dumped, we should get as many families as possible in there. Nobody gives a flying fuck about two developers. But twenty families: they could form a coalition, go to the papers with it. Raise a real stink. See what I mean? It's in everyone's best interest to sell these houses."

"Are you forgetting our man jumped ship? It's against his 'professional ethics.'"

"Fuck the broker. We'll do it ourselves."

Warren closed his eyes. It had not occurred to him to lie to people. It was

morally indefensible, so why did the heaviness in his legs seem to lift? Even the room itself seemed slightly bigger, as if someone had pushed back the furniture.

“Ourselves?”

“We’ll hit the phones. The streets. Whatever it takes. For Pete’s sake, enlist your fucking family.”

Warren pretended he hadn’t heard this. “You’re forgetting about the view.”

“People like construction. It’s a sign of growth. If they ask, we’ll tell them it’s a shopping mall. Honestly, it could be just what we need to sell them on the desert.”

Warren stared at the papers on his desk. “Even if we could sell the things,” he said after a minute, “how are these ‘twenty families’ going to band together if they don’t know about the dump?”

“Word will spread. Believe me. These things have a way of getting around.” Larry cocked his head toward the phone. He was no longer smiling. “This isn’t Wisconsin, Warren—it’s the desert, kill or be killed. Survival of the fittest.”

Warren stood up and walked to the bulletin board on the wall. Larry was right: it wasn’t their fault the county had decided to dump sludge near their property. Why should Warren and his family suffer? It was wrong to lie to people, in a fair and righteous world—but this was not a fair and righteous world. It was a world where you could work for twenty years to give your children something, a life you never had, and then see it whisked away by some fucking bureaucrats living off your tax dollars.

Warren stared at the twinkling Latino family pictured in the brochure. Desperate straits required desperate measures. He would do whatever he could—lie, swindle, bust his ass—to save his family. He pulled the Yellow Pages from his desk and picked up the phone.

“I need your credit card,” he said.

“What are you doing?” Larry asked.

“Ordering some business cards.” Warren untacked the brochure from the bulletin board and flipped it over so the faces weren’t visible.

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