

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Christmas with the Addams Family

November 11, 1984

Dad was planted in an overstuffed orange armchair before a small analog television in our finished basement, playing *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Treasure of Tarmin* on the Intellivision video game console. Leo and I sat cross-legged on either side of him, watching as he made his way through a first-person adventure game in a state-of-the-art 3-D environment (that would seem like a boxy, pixelated mess nest to the PS4 *Spider-Man* game I'm playing these days during quarantine). Dad's hero character navigated a green maze, opening a series of blue doors, hoping to find treasure, weapons, and monsters he could vanquish with a spear, sword, or magic fireball. "This is fun, right boys?" Dad asked, suddenly aware he was playing a one-player game and we were just watching. "The three good guys are hiding together in the basement." Dad had spent yesterday in Atlantic City with his buddies, the Bollands, gambling and acting like a carefree single fellow, while Mom stayed home to run the household and watch us kids. When Dad returned home early this morning at 4 a.m., instead of at the agreed upon 11:30 p.m. last night, he had music to face. Dad opted to hide with us rather than face it.

"Intellivision. That's Intelligent Television," Leo observed. "Cute." He was five and I was eight. We were both pretty wee in 1984. Leo was proud of himself for figuring out what the game console's name signified, and disappointed when I took the conversation in another direction: "If we're the three good guys, is Mom the bad guy?"

"She's kinda scary now, isn't she?" Dad asked.

She was. Mom worked hard enough on a day-to-day basis that, whenever Dad did something unusually fun without her, she resented it. If he went skiing with friends at Camelback Ski Mountain, or took me to see Tom Seaver pitch at a Mets game, or brought Leo and I fishing for porgies, sea bass, and fluke on Sheepshead Bay, he would return home to an unusually angry Gianna Cavalieri. He would rather battle fictional pixel monsters in a video game than face his real-world, non-analog wife. On the television screen, Dad's hero avatar opened a

blue door and a giant ant greeted him. Dad pressed some buttons on his controller, hurled a spear at the ant, and it vanished in an amusing puff of pixel smoke. As Dad slayed his digital opponent, we could all hear Mom shouting, cursing, and stalking around on the floor above our heads. Sometimes she would stop and pound her fist upon the kitchen table, kick the wall, or throw a chair across the room. She had swallowed weeks of complaints against Dad, not speaking up when he annoyed her. She was silent no longer.

"She's always concerned with how *right* she is," Dad sighed. "Such a martyr."

"Maybe she wanted to go on the trip with you," I suggested.

"She doesn't like the stuff I like to do. She used to be game. When we were dating. Now, nothing interests her." On the television screen, Dad's hero went down a blue ladder to the next subterranean level, in search of more enemies to fight and booty to discover.

"Why is she so mad?" I asked.

Leo cocked an ear to listen to more of Mom's outbursts. "She's pretty clear about that. Nobody does chores. Nobody talks to her. We sleep too late on weekends. We don't notice when things break and need fixing. We don't get her presents on Mother's Day and Valentine's Day."

Dad snorted. "Who cares about Mother's Day? I *never* celebrated that growing up. Is that even a proper holiday? That and Valentine's Day are scams to sell chocolates and greeting cards."

I was finding it difficult to agree. Mom was more correct than he was, but terrifying.

"It isn't what she's upset about, really," Dad said. "Those complaints. They don't normally bother her. They aren't real complaints."

"They're fake complaints?" I asked. "Who would make fake complaints?"

"She goes *out of her mind* when she gets her period."

I scratched my head. "When she gets her *what*?"

"Women get weird once a month according to a cycle of the moon. It's a thing they do."

"Like a werewolf?" I asked. *Was Mom a werewolf? How did I not know this?*

"*Exactly* like a werewolf." Dad sounded like he was joking, but his face was grave.

"Does the full moon make her honest about what's bothering her?" Leo asked.

"It sounds like a bunch of baloney to me," Dad rejoined.

"But we do all the things she's complaining about," Leo insisted. "She's right."

Dad looked down at Leo. "So, what's your point?"

Leo said, "You can do some of the things she's asking you to do."

Dad waved his suggestion away. "There's no pleasing her. Nothing I do is enough."

"You should at least try," I said, supporting Leo.

"When she's this mad? No way."

We heard a thunderous crash overhead. *What was that?*

Leo cocked his ear, listening. "Dad's right. We should wait until she cools off."

"Isn't now the *best* time to talk to her?" I asked. "Why hide down here for two days? Let's face the problem head on and solve it right now!"

"The psychiatrists call what I'm doing 'avoidance behavior,'" said Dad. "My favorite way of dealing with problems. I recommend it. Remember that phrase: avoidance behavior."

I slap my knee decisively. "I've got it! *I'll* go talk to her. And you can come, too, Leo."

"I will," Leo said. "But later."

"Don't do it," Dad warned.

"We'll do it together when she's calmer," Leo said.

"There's no time like the present!" I got up and walked towards the steps.

"Nice knowing you," Dad muttered, and continuing playing his game.

I had been expecting to wander into a war zone, thanks to the mysterious banging and crashing bleeding through the basement ceiling over the past several hours. Instead, I found Mom sitting with a cup of coffee, brooding in an impeccably clean kitchen. Both Felix Unger and her late mother would have been proud: the tile floor sparkled, countertops were pristine, and the oven had been freshly scrubbed. The

contrast between Mom in full rant-and-rave mode and the current, noiseless tableau was equally startling. I asked myself what was worse: When Mom threw violent tantrums or when she sat, fuming, for hours in silence? Easy call. The silence was worse. I always knew what she was thinking, anyway. I heard her noiselessly screamed thoughts in my head, and breathed air around her heavy with the humidity of deferred dreams.

What plagued her? Only everything. This tiny, iron-willed, Italian lady with the adorable face was miserable. She was inconsolable over her father's death, eternally worried about money, disappointed in her wannabe filmmaker husband's shortcomings, bitter about the arc of her career as a college English professor, fearful of her own mortality as she drifted into middle-age, and eternally frustrated with her hearing loss, allergies, dizzy spells, collapsed arches, the size of her hips and thighs, and the general condition of her body. I would have given anything to take all her problems away from her. If I could be granted three wishes, the first would be to make her happy. Without a genie, I was powerless to help her. In fact, I was part of the problem. I was a burden. She was responsible for my well-being. Even the love I felt for her, and the need I had for her attention, was just one more weight upon her shoulders that crushed her will to live. If she could flee from everything about her life and go anywhere else, she would. Of course, fleeing wasn't in her character, but she fantasized about it, anyway. Sometimes, I wished she would run away to parts unknown, both for her sake and for all our sakes.

What could I do to help Mom help herself? Beg her to work less hard? As if that were possible for her. Suggest she see a counselor or take a Valium? Out of the question. Urge her to reinvent her whole life from top to bottom? She lacked the energy, vision, means, and will to do that. The best I could do to help her was make her tea, give her a hug, tell her a joke or two, buy her astonishingly insightful gifts for her birthday and Christmas, make a small gesture to help her out around the house, and listen to her vent and rage. That was all I could offer her. It wasn't enough. I wanted to share her burden. To carry it for her. Failing that, maybe if I ran away, when she couldn't, I could be one less thing for her to worry about. I had no idea. Not the first clue.

"Hi, Mom," I whispered.

Mom took another sip of her coffee.

I tried to think of what adult small talk sounded like. "What's doin'?"

Mom kept staring past me. I really, really hated talking to walls. It happened to me a lot.

I tried one last time. "I came to see if I can help."

"It's too late," Mom said quietly.

I magically produced a small yellow pad and a golf pencil from my back jeans pocket. "I can take notes! What are your demands?"

"Did your father send you to butter me up?"

"I sent myself!" I proudly punched my own chest like a Klingon. "Qapla'!"

"Tell him that's pretty low, sending you." Mom sipped her coffee again. "Just go back downstairs. Be 'the three good guys.'"

I blinked several times. "You know that's what Dad calls us? Pretty funny, right?"

Mom turned slowly and looked at me. "*Hilarious.*"

Three days later, Dad made his first overture to establish détente. Leo and I were playing a game with our stuffed animals not far from Mom, who was doing a crossword puzzle. Dad cheerfully announced he was taking us all out to dinner. Mom stared dubiously at him. "You haven't bought a meal for me since our second date. What's the catch?"

Dad produced two coupons from his pocket. "Buy one dinner and get 75% off the second dinner. Also, free sodas!"

"Coupons," Mom said flatly. "I should have known."

I ran up to Dad. "Are we going to Jade Island?" It was my favorite restaurant: a Tiki culture classic that served Polynesian and Chinese American food, and made the best shrimp and lobster sauce, egg foo young, Happy Family, and pu-pu platter I've eaten anywhere in America.

"Killmeyer's Old Bavaria Inn!" Dad grinned. "Traditional German food! I've never been there, and it is high time I went. It is on the whole other side of the island, so we should leave soon if we don't want to eat too late."

I craned my neck to look at the coupons. "There's such a thing as German food?"

Dad was offended. “Of course! Sauerkraut, sausages, potato dumplings, goulash, Jello.”

I clutched at my own throat and gagged. “That sounds *awful*! I didn’t think *anything* could *possibly* be worse than Tex-Mex! I was wrong! German food found a way to be *worse*!”

Mom looked dubiously at Dad. “Do they serve anything edible?”

Dad paused dramatically, and then delivered what he thought would be the perfect suggestion. “Cranberry Pork Loin! The menu describes it as ‘boneless pork medallions sautéed in a sauce of Amaretto and cranberries. Served with sweet potato fries and fresh vegetables.’ I memorized the one thing on the menu you and Damien would order.”

“Ooooooh!” I said. “Cranberry is the best!”

“Actually, that sounds great,” Mom said. “I’m fucking starving.” She stood up. “I’m going to change. I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes.”

“I’ll put on my Nightcrawler T-shirt!” I announced. “He’s German Catholic, a flirty swashbuckler like Errol Flynn, and he’s in the X-Men! I love Nightcrawler!”

Mom paused. “Here’s the thing, though. I want the basement vacuumed before we go. Get it done right now, or you’re still in the doghouse.”

Dad sighed with relief. *Détente* at last. “It will be taken care of. Promise.”

“Good.” Mom hurried upstairs to change. Dad shot me a commanding look. “Do me a favor. I’m gonna need you to vacuum the basement before we leave. Can you handle it?”

My armpits began to perspire. I hadn’t ever vacuumed anything before. “Um . . .”

“Glad to hear it. You go get it done ASAP, or we’re never getting out of here.”

December 23, 1983

A Mormon Tabernacle Choir Christmas vinyl played on a turntable as Mom greeted her in-laws, helping them shed their winter coats when they stepped inside her living room. Because it had been eighteen

months since their last visit, the in-laws took a second to register the plush carpeting, cool colors, and artificial, “snow”-covered Christmas tree that stood in front of the bay windows looking out onto the suburban street. Mom reflected, bitterly, that her actual parents had both died and abandoned her to this grotesque mockery of an extended family. Of course, her brother and his wife and three children were all still alive, but Carmine and Beatrice and their kids were celebrating Christmas together in New Jersey without her. Carmine was furious with Mom for not lending him the money he needed to keep his restaurant afloat. He hadn’t spoken to her since having to close its doors last month. Beatrice was acting as go-between, working through Dad to repair the rift, but their joint efforts had yet to bear fruit. Now, Mom was stuck celebrating Christmas with her in-laws, the Addams family.

Playing the role of the Cavalieri family patriarch was Vincent senior, a hawk-nosed, sallow-cheeked, and taciturn chess Grandmaster who looked like Peter Cushing. Mom was never sure what his actual job was before he retired. The importer of record for some company? Vincent senior came as a matched set with the chain-smoking Antje, a ditzzy, gossipy, and relentlessly passive-aggressive housewife and former telephone operator with curly, chestnut hair. Vincent and Antje had brought with them their nervous-energy younger son, Garth — a traveling medical supply salesperson — and his needy, punk-rock girlfriend, Sheena — a traveling beauty product salesperson. Dad, Leo, and I joined the new arrivals in the living room and distributed a round of welcome hugs and kisses.

Grandma Antje looked me up and down. “Okay, I know it is winter, but you, young man, look like a ghost. Have you seen the sun even once in the past six months?”

“I look like a *ghost*?” I smiled. “Awesome!”

“No,” said Antje. “Not awesome.”

“Oh, put a sock in it, Antje,” Aunt Irene said, reminding Mom that at least one tolerable relative was on hand. Vincent senior’s strawberry blonde sister, Aunt Irene, was a firecracker who looked like a sixty-year-old Joan Blondell. She was brilliant and had the soul of an artist but had chosen family over career. She greeted me with a big hug and kiss.

The Bronx wing of the Cavalieri family had arrived at the semi-

attached home of the Staten Island Cavalieris in two cars. Garth and Sheena drove Antje and Vincent senior in a box-shaped, turquoise car that they had successfully parked on our driveway. Meanwhile, Aunt Irene's husband and daughter were still circling the block to find a second parking spot to place their boxy maroon car. There was never much parking on our block on Shabbos. Dad gathered their four winter coats in his arms and trotted them upstairs to throw on the master bedroom bed, since the closet beside the front door was filled to bursting. Mom stood, flanked by Leo and me, helping them get settled.

Without a separate foyer or mud room, the living room served multiple functions, operating as a foyer, study, dining room, and living room. The area by the door held the Christmas tree, framed by a loveseat and sofa placed around a rectangular wood-and-glass coffee table. Against the wall opposite the sofa was a set of mahogany shelves filled with American pre-Civil War literature, British literature of the long 19th century, Russian masterpieces, and complete collections of Agatha Christie mysteries, Sherlock Holmes stories, and P.G. Wodehouse's adventures of Jeeves and Wooster. Amongst these works could be found a broad sampling of more contemporary books, including *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Gore Vidal's *Burr*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *The Accidental Tourist*, and a selection of books by Italian and Italian American authors, including Dante, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, John Fante, Helen Barolini, Tina De Rosa, Pietro di Donato, Diane di Prima, and Gregory Corso. Grandpa Vincent ran his disapproving eyes over the selection. "You have nothing to read."

Flabbergasted, Mom gestured expansively at the collection. "Excuse me?"

"It's all fiction and historical gossip," he tutted. "Where's the science? Only in science and mathematics can we find truth. The rest is fever dreams and propaganda."

"These books are about what it means to be *human*," Mom glared back.

Aunt Irene burst out laughing. "My brother doesn't know what it means to be human!"

"I know I'm right," Grandpa Vincent insisted.

“Remember when you were a kid, you loved reading all those Sax Rohmer *Fu Manchu* books?” Irene asked her brother archly.

Vincent senior didn’t reply.

“How would you describe those books?” Irene asked.

“Potboilers. Trash literature.” Vincent shot his sister an annoyed look. “I was a kid.”

“You liked fiction *then*,” Mom added. *Racist, imperialist fiction*, she thought, *but* fiction.

Vincent pointed his chin up at his daughter-in-law. “I’m older and wiser now.”

“You’re certainly older!” Irene slapped him affectionately on the shoulder. He blinked.

Perusing the library herself, Grandma noticed the one Christmas knickknack placed eye-level amongst the books: a ceramic statue scene of Santa Claus smoking a pipe and reading the Bible in an armchair beside a roaring fire. “That’s cute.”

Mom couldn’t believe that Grandma had said something nice and braced herself for a snide comment. The snide comment came, but not from Grandma. Irene elbowed Mom in the side. “Hey! Any more religious kitsch around? Statues of Mary stepping on a snake? Vials of Dead Sea ‘holy water’ that *really* came from Cardinal O’Connor’s toilet? Ha! Disney Studios and George Lucas think they know how to merchandize! They’re pikers next to the Church!”

I blushed. Irene’s good opinion was important to me, and I understood she was making fun of us, even though I didn’t grasp her meaning. I’d never heard the word “kitsch” before.

“Look around for yourself,” Mom said to Irene. “Go on a kitsch artifact hunt.”

Grandma walked past the circle of couches into the dining room portion of the living room, which included a flip-top mahogany desk decorated with Mom’s collection of ceramic houses from a Charles Dickens style Christmas village, and a bowed fish tank filled with guppies positioned under the stairway leading upstairs. Across from the fish tank stood a grandfather clock and mahogany dining room table. Dad’s Lionel toy train set looped around the table, passing diminutive homes and town square buildings, villagers, and miniature

trees and mailboxes. Garth and Sheena crept up to the dining room table, watching the Lionel train circle the tracks. Garth gave Sheena a nervous smile. “My brother loves stuff like this.”

A gentle soul uncomfortable in his own skin, Uncle Garth would say complimentary things, then look about the room expectantly for approval. If he found the approval he sought, he’d flash a half-second smile, giggle, and grin toothily. Just as quickly as it appeared, the grin would vanish. Then Garth would look about warily, worried the approval he’d just won would be capriciously withdrawn. If, under different circumstances, Garth said something calculated to garner approval and didn’t get the instant validation he sought, he would shrink back, chastened. Desperate for love, if he felt affection was being withheld from him for too long, his good-natured giggling would curdle and turn into a volcanic rant — a litany of insults and grievances directed at all and sundry, twice as vicious and long-reaching in historical scope as the worst of Mom’s periodic meltdowns. As a child, I found Uncle Garth’s mood swings impossible to fathom. By the time I was a teenager, I understood him perfectly, seeing in the Jekyll-and-Hyde monster he had become a probable fate for me if I went feeling unloved for too many years.

Garth’s girlfriend, Sheena, wore too much of everything: mascara, eyeshadow, hairspray, and perfume. A Cyndi Lauper wannabe, she wore a billowy, blue-sleeved blouse, skin-tight leopard spotted pants, and black leather pixie boots. While Sheena spent an ungodly amount of time a day putting on make-up and striving to look like an MTV video jockey, Garth owned his regular guy looks, not bothering to wear contact lenses or comb over his prematurely thinning hair. Nor did he wear anything more fashionable than a powder blue polo shirt with a little polo player breast emblem on it. They were like one of those improbable sitcom couples where the woman was at least twice as attractive as the man. However, in this case, it was clear why they were together: Both Garth and Sheena were deeply insecure people who fed off each other’s neurotic tendencies, augmenting them in one another instead of mitigating them.

Uncle Garth mussed my hair affectionately. “You know Sheena, right? She’s gonna be your aunt, sometime. When we figure out what

we're doing with our lives, and stuff."

Sheena blew me a kiss from two feet away. Then she spoke in her thick, "Harley Quinn," New Yawk accent: "Yeah, we met befaw, rite, Damien? Hey, lemme ax yew somethin', Damien, becauz we wur tawkin about it in the caw."

Garth's eyes bulged. "Don't bother the kid about this. That was a private talk."

Sheena placed her hand over her heart. "How old do ya think I yam?"

My body temperature jumped, and palms went clammy. "I'm no good at guessing age."

"Kids always tell da truth. I'll trust what ya say! I won't get mad, I sweah!"

"I don't know anyone's age. I only know I'm eight."

Sheena beckoned, her six brass bracelets jangling. "Come awn, come awn."

I made little fists, clamping my eyes shut until I saw a red haze. "Forty?" I guessed, meekly. I opened my eyes. Sheena couldn't have looked more shocked and surprised if I had drawn a gun from a holster and shot her through the heart. "Fawty! You tink I look fawty!"

Garth put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "He's just a kid. He doesn't know."

"I can't beweeve he tinks I look fawty!"

"But my mom is forty, and she's beautiful," I offered, helplessly. "I don't know how old people are. I assume everyone is my age or forty. Or old, like Merlin."

Garth shot Sheena an amused glance and offered her a nervous giggle. Sheena pursed her lips in annoyed thought. Aunt Irene appeared behind Garth and Sheena. "That's what you get for asking an eight-year-old."

"I figured he'd be awnest."

Grandma placed a loving hand upon Sheena's shoulder. "You're gorgeous, Sheena! Look how marvelously your pants show off your curves! You have a taut, finely sculpted posterior!"

"I try." Sheena wiggled her ass, appreciatively.

"Adults sure like showing each other their culi," Leo whispered

to me. “Here’s my culi.’ ‘Oh, yeah? Here’s *my* culi!’ That’s every adult conversation.”

I felt too sad, nervous, and guilty to laugh. “Is all this because I got her age wrong?”

Leo looked thoughtful. “I think it is every kid conversation, too: ‘Culis to you.’”

Grandma continued her catalogue of Sheena’s mouthwatering lady parts. “You have pert breasts, a swan neck, and a straight nose. And look how your eyeshadow brings out your crystal blue eyes. I luxuriate in the lingering scent of your perfume as you glide through the room.”

Irene whispered to Garth. “Your mom better cool it before she gets around to complimenting Sheena’s alluring cameltoe.”

Garth stopped himself from laughing, but the effort turned his balding head crimson.

“Sheena, you are what every man wants!” Grandma cried. “What every woman fears! You are the ultimate, modern-day woman, in your formidable, indomitable prime!”

Irene crossed her eyes to make me laugh when she saw me looking her way.

“Awwwwwww, shucks, Mom.” Sheena was already calling Grandma “Mom,” while my mom never called the old woman “Mom.” Mom was incapable of betraying Grandma Francesca’s memory by referring to Grandma Antje as “Mom.” Sheena’s expression of fealty was one of many reasons Grandma Antje preferred Sheena to my mom. The other was that Grandma was not an intellectual and neither was Sheena — both were in over their heads around my mother, Irene, and the Vincents. Grandma turned to Mom, who stood beside the bookshelves, staring at the titles, trying to figure out what was so awful about her collection. Grandma presented Mom to Sheena as if Mom were a museum exhibit. “Now, Sheena, let’s compare you to Gianna. Gianna has put on more than a few pounds sitting around reading all those books. Sheena, no one would mistake your twenty-four years with Gianna’s forty. You have nothing to worry about. Don’t take Damien’s age guess to heart.”

“Antje!” Irene gasped. “What an unforgivable way to talk about Gianna! Are you nuts?”

Grandma sniffed. “I speak my mind. It is my cardinal virtue.”

Thanks to her poor hearing, Mom only understood about ten percent of Grandma’s speech, but ten percent was enough to make her flush in silent rage. Unfortunately, Grandma wasn’t finished: “Don’t worry, Gianna. All hope is not lost. As with most housewives, you are a mere thirty pounds away from a rosier pair of cheeks and less saggy hindquarters.” Grandma produced a Weight Watchers brochure from her purse and offered it to Mom. When Mom refused to take it from her, Grandma placed it gently on the coffee table. Then Grandma put her arm around mine and led me away. “Have you heard the story of Fatty Arbuckle?”

As Sheena, Garth, Grandma, and I disappeared into the kitchen, Mom was left alone with Irene. Irene took Mom’s hands in hers. “I know. I’ve hated her my entire life, Gianna.”

Mom gritted her teeth. “She’s been here *maybe* ten minutes?”

“I’ll testify that you killed her in self-defense.”

Noticing more than hearing that the Mormon Tabernacle Choir album had come to an end, Mom put on Johnny Mathis’ “Give Me Your Love for Christmas” before following the other guests into the adjoining room. Irene lingered by the train set alone. She turned in time to see Dad come back downstairs and noticed his expression sour. “Not Johnny Mathis again!”

Irene shook her head at him. “Where were you? You just threw your wife to the wolves.”

Dad looked helplessly at his aunt. “I was only gone a minute! There’s been a fight?” Dad felt like cursing and did it so infrequently, he had to summon the expletive from his diaphragm. “That’s . . . fucking . . . great. It’s Christmas and I think I hate everyone except you.”

“No, you don’t,” Irene reassured him. “You only hate your mom and Sheena.”

Dad considered this. “That may be true.”

Irene gave Dad the short version of what had transpired. His anger moved from being free-floating to settling squarely on Grandma and Sheena on behalf of my mother and me. “We’re dealing with a real meatball squad, here.”

“Exactly,” confirmed Irene.

When Dad entered the kitchen, he found his mother praising the scent of Sheena's perfume as having been brought down to the Earth from Mt. Olympus itself. "Don't you just love Sheena's new perfume, Gianna?" Grandma gushed. "The name is darling! Love's Baby Soft!"

"It is *truly* magnificent," Mom managed to say.

Pretending he didn't hear a word of that last exchange, Dad called out to the crowd, "Can any of you smell that? What is it? It's horrible! Burning my nose! Does anyone know what it is?"

Mom nodded in approval. Sheena looked sheepish. Garth was outraged. Grandma looked confused. "I don't smell anything."

"It's cold out, but I'm opening a few windows until whatever that is disperses." Dad proceeded to throw every window on the main level open, giving us all instant goosebumps.

Mom really loved Dad at that moment. It was a helluva performance.

Meanwhile, an oblivious Grandpa Vincent Cavalieri senior sat on our living room couch, staring off into space, daydreaming about the legions of prostitutes he had bought sex from during his salad days. My father, Vincent Cavalieri Jr., once referred to his father, Vincent senior, as "the world's greatest intellectual sex maniac." It was an odd title to bestow upon a reclusive, hawk-nosed logician in black, plastic spectacles. And yet, Grandpa spent every Friday night of his adult life shooting pool, drinking, smoking, and picking up prostitutes. This revelation shocked me since, growing up, I regarded Grandpa as, essentially, a Vulcan from *Star Trek*. Vulcan he may have been, but he also went into Vulcan heat *every weekend* (#PonFarrFridays). In actuality, Grandpa was more like horny iconoclast comix creator Robert Crumb — with some "Fast Eddie" Felson seasoning — than either the Mr. Spock or Mycroft Holmes figures I'd pigeonholed him as. Prostitutes aside, the billiards element of Grandpa's weekend ritual fit his nerd profile perfectly. His geometry and physics knowledge dovetailed to make him the Bronx's undefeated pool shark answer to *Rain Man*. Sadly, over time, word got out that challenging Grandpa to a billiards match was an exercise in masochism, as was betting against him.

Despite being a pool shark, chess Grandmaster, and left-brained chemistry prodigy, Grandpa suffered from an immobilizing lack

of ambition and abundance of jangled nerves. Brilliant as he was, these flaws prevented himself from taking any risks in life. Sometime during Dad's 1950s childhood, Grandpa became obsessed with a radio show riddle that would have awarded five hundred dollars to the first listener to solve it. Grandpa worked several hours at his desk finding the indisputably correct answer, but was too painfully shy to call it in. Grandpa's lame excuse to young Dad was, "Someone's probably solved it already, anyway." It took two more days for someone else to win the five hundred dollars. Dad never forgave Grandpa for missing this rare opportunity to monetize his brilliance. To Dad, the obvious moral of this story was, "Always try to win, even when defeat seems certain. Even if you think you're wrong, you *might* be right. Even if you expect a 'no,' ask anyway. Go for the 'No!' Force them to say 'no.' You may get a 'yes' you weren't expecting." Dad imparted this lesson to me frequently.

Yes, Grandpa *was* more of a mouse than a man. He was so cautious, his motto was, "It only has to happen once," as in: "You only need to lose an eye one time." Clearly, he did not believe a mistake could ever be rectified. He would rather make no choices at all than make mistakes. It took World War II to bring Grandpa some of the most noteworthy, non-whore-related excitement of his life. During the war years, he was the oldest enlisted member of the Flying Tigers, the First American Volunteer Group of the Chinese Air Force. Later, he wrote a war memoir that he was too skittish to publish: *Ding How: The Misadventures of a G.I. in China*. I read the manuscript at sixteen and was impressed by Grandpa's Douglas-Adams-meets-Samuel-Fuller narrative voice: a dry, self-effacing sense of humor and philosophical outlook on life, laced with colorful language and good-old-boy talk that his own son would find "uncouth." Until I read this memoir, I never knew grandfather was almost killed when the Japanese bombed the air strip control tower he worked as radio operator in. It was also a surprise when I discovered he had barely escaped from the MP's jeep searchlight one night when he'd snuck into a Chinese brothel. Of course, most people who knew grandfather well didn't really know anything about him at all, because he virtually never spoke. He let his chatterbox wife do all his speaking for him. The ever-silent man

had constructed an emotional wall about himself that made him less endearing in the flesh than he was on the printed page. Sadly, Grandpa's coldness damaged the psychological and emotional health of his wife and children. These two Grandpas — the fundamentally loveable author of unpublished nonfiction and the cowardly recluse who was too cold to Grandma, Dad, and Uncle Garth — made it impossible for me to love or hate the man. He was a well-rounded Hemingway character to contemplate with detached fascination, and not my Grandpa. When he died, I mourned an author I enjoyed reading, not a relative.

Shortly after the curious incident of Sheena's stinky perfume, Leo sat beside Grandpa and attempted to get him to talk. "How are you, Grandpa?" Leo asked, sweetly, showing Grandpa his stuffed animal lion, also named Leo. "This is Leo. He's my avatar. Part me, part Edmund Blackadder. He wants to say 'hi.'" In a ventriloquist act unconcerned with the concealing of moving lips, human Leo made cuddly toy Leo say in falsetto, "Merry Christmas!"

Grandpa placed his palm down on the couch and made it slither across the cushion towards my brother's leg. "Rattlesnake," Grandpa whispered.

"What?" human Leo asked.

"The snake," Grandpa whispered. "Beware the snake." He moved his hand another inch closer, touching the tip of his middle finger against Leo's right leg. "The snake."

Leaping off the couch, Leo scampered to my side. "Grandpa's doing the 'snake' again."

"That's your thing you do, right?" I asked.

"It's *all he says* to me!"

I snorted. "He doesn't say *anything* to me. Anyway, you two mutes need to be more outgoing. You *both* make me nervous. I *always* have to do *all* the talking!"

Justifiably annoyed at my reaction, Leo moved away from me and walked over to Sheena, who was standing in the kitchen corner, between the sink and the refrigerator. Rocking herself lightly, with her arms crossed over her chest, Sheena grasped her own elbows so tightly her knuckles turned white. Leo noticed her long, red, Lee Press On

Nails first. Then he saw the intersecting white and red scratch marks tracked on the backs of her hands. Sheena's head snapped around as he approached. She let out a strangled cry, shrank away from him, and hid her hands behind her back. "Are you staring at my hands? Don't stare at my hands! *Don't!*"

Leo stopped short, holding his stuffed animal lion aloft. "I was coming over to say 'hi.'"

"You're here to stare, complain about my perfume, and tell me I look fawty!"

Mom hastened over to Leo and Sheena. "Is everything okay?"

Garth appeared between Mom and Sheena as if he'd teleported there, smiling unnaturally broadly at Leo. "Sheena is sensitive about her hands. It's no big deal, Leo."

Leo stared at Garth and blinked repeatedly. Garth replied with a nervous, high-pitched laugh reminiscent of Tom Hulce's from *Amadeus*. Eager to cut through the tension, I leaped into the midst of the crowd and struck a dramatic pose. "I heard a fantastic song at school! 'Ask Me No Question' by Yellowman!" I dove headfirst into serenading my family, not grasping that a song full to bursting with double-entendres was not appropriate for Christmas.

Grandma silenced my singing by declaring, "Sheena has no reason to feel self-conscious. She is a goddess among mere mortals." Grandma Antje Cavalieri shared her husband's hawk nose but not his intellect. The German American with the curly, chestnut hair chain-smoked and monologued ceaselessly during all conversations, resenting it whenever anyone else tried to get a few words in edgewise. Grandma's gossipy tendencies were at their most destructive when she worked as a telephone operator during World War II. She listened in on her neighbor's phone conversations, collecting dirt on them. Her fellow phone operator and future sister-in-law Irene Cavalieri silenced her whenever she tried to spill the tea about all the adultery being committed in their building: "These are people's lives, you idiot!" A love of gossip drew Grandma into an obsessive interest in Hollywood scandal sheet news. She never tired of telling young Dad the story of how Fatty Arbuckle accidentally killed Virginia Rappe during sex by crushing her to death under his enormous girth. Grandma also

informed Dad about the deep, dark secrets of his favorite actors: *You like Claude Rains? He's so egotistical! Charles Laughton? A closeted gay man in a sham marriage with Elsa Lanchester! Chico Marx? Compulsive gambler and sex-addict. And Jewish!* Grandma went to the movies religiously, taking my father to see everything under the sun, from Westerns to heritage films to screwball comedies. While she preferred glamorous MGM extravaganzas to all other films, she was not above taking Dad to more grotesque fare when he was still in knee-high socks. Grandma didn't like science fiction, but a movie was a movie, so she was simultaneously bored and entertained by *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* in 1953.

Roaring and moving on all fours down the streets of New York City, a gargantuan, reptilian monster bit the heads off the police officers who dared shoot at him. The Beast stomped parked cars flat, lumbering relentlessly towards the auditorium where Dad and Grandma sat, ready to burst forth from the silver screen into the real world. Screaming, Dad fled from the theater. Grandma caught up with him outside by the parking meters, scolded him for embarrassing her in public, and dragged him back into the theater to finish the film she had paid \$1.02 for two tickets to see. A reasonable parent might have learned from this experience not to take her son to see terrifying atom-age movies, but Grandma continued to take him to see every movie released in her neighborhood. She was a bored housewife who hated being cooped up at home and had no one handy willing to watch her son for her. In 1958, grandma took her son to see *Horror of Dracula*, exposing him for the first time to a gorgeous vampire woman who tried to "kiss" small children and drink their blood. Lucy, "the Bloofer Lady" character played by Carol Marsh, was so terrifying and *so sexy* to a Vincent Cavalieri junior on the cusp of puberty that he developed a life-long fetish for vampire women. Starting when he was old enough to go to the movies under his own steam, Dad spent the rest of his life watching every vampire film he could find to recreate the thrill he felt as a young boy watching Carol Marsh sexily attempt to murder a little girl.

Why was Grandma so bored and unhappy in her marriage that she had to resort to spending most of her spare time in a movie theater,

taking her son to see deeply inappropriate pictures? In 1941, Antje had been seventeen when she met the twenty-seven-year-old Vincent senior. Vincent's stunningly beautiful and razor-sharp younger sister Irene had made the mistake of inviting Antje to her family's apartment for a bite during a lunch break from their telephone operator job. Naturally, the moment Irene left Antje alone in the family room with Vincent, Antje draped herself over the cold intellectual and began nibbling his ear. By the time Irene had returned to the family room with the demitasse, her brother and least favorite co-worker were an item. Horrified at her accidental matchmaking, Irene campaigned against her brother taking Antje out on even a single date. In December 1941, Antje and Vincent married outside an air force base before he left for China. At the ceremony, Irene admitted to herself that she had failed to scuttle the romance.

Antje's main motivation in seducing and marrying her coworker's brother was getting herself out of the fire-trap apartment she shared with abusive parents and six siblings. Antje had escaped this unhappy childhood home into an unhappy union with an introvert who believed in open marriages. Since Antje was an extrovert of below-average intellect who did not believe in open marriages, she had exchanged a physically abusive home for an emotionally abusive one without realizing it. A couple of years before Garth's birth, when Dad was seven, the crisis came to a boiling point. Antje suffered a nervous breakdown. She was placed into a mental institution for the better part of a year. Her emotional collapse almost triggered a sympathetic meltdown from her husband. While he wasn't placed in the room next to his wife, Vincent senior's fragile emotional state meant he couldn't handle raising my dad.

Enter Aunt Irene, who took my father in. Living with Aunt Irene gave my dad the happiest ten months of his life. At twenty-six, Irene was not yet married, and had raised questions as to whether she would ever marry. Still, she started dating her future husband, a gruff-but-funny veteran of the North African campaign named Cesar Kowalski, five months into Dad's time living with her. The vet came by for weekly dates with the eternally busy Irene. Irene's impassive, Italian-speaking mother would babysit Dad during their nights out. While

Cesar waited in the living room for Irene to get ready, he regaled Dad with stories of facing off against legendary panzer division commander Erwin Rommel. The war stories enraptured Dad, who spent the next day in the local library researching German tiger tanks and the life and career of the Desert Fox. Despite seeing some signs of what we would later discover was Cesar's less-than-admirable treatment of Irene, Dad generally found Irene and Cesar to be a fascinating couple who stood in stark contrast with his cold, dull, incompetent parents. When Dad's extended stay with Irene ended, he returned home to find a recovered-but-permanently damaged mother and an even-more-withdrawn-than-usual father. The grim homecoming made Dad wish he could turn around and go immediately back to Irene.

"That was the only time in my childhood I felt like I'd been given real love," Dad told me wistfully, when I was ten. "I didn't know how to process it." Then, embarrassed at his emotional vulnerability, he added, evily. "Because I couldn't process it, I wound up wanting to zonk my own aunt! Ha! *I'm a terrible person.*"

That Christmas brought Irene and her family to our home. Our front door opened, and the two remaining Christmas guests, Irene's husband, Cesar Kowalski, and their daughter, Carmella, entered. They removed their winter coats, scarves, and hats. Red-faced, square-jawed, prematurely gray, and smelling of bourbon, Cesar had entered our home in mid-tirade: "And fuck the Major Deegan Expressway! And fuck the Cross Bronx Excrapway! And I musta circled this block fifty times looking for parking, and all I saw was three hundred Orthodox Jews walking to synagogue in the middle of the street, not using the sidewalks. Buncha lemmings! I got a new invention! It's called fucking sidewalks!"

Emerging from her winter outdoor looking fetching in *Charlie's Angels*-style red bell-bottoms and a filly white blouse, Carmella was a vivacious, long-haired teenage artist, psychic, and Tarot Card reader. She smiled brightly at us and shrugged to indicate there was nothing she could do to get her father into the spirit of the occasion. Standing in the kitchen, watching the scene unfold from a safe distance, Dad chuckled and said to Irene, "Your husband's funny."

"In small doses." Dad didn't notice that Irene's face blanched at the

sound of Cesar's yelling voice, or that she had shrunk in her clothes. He didn't know her long sleeves and pants concealed fresh, purple bruises. Dad headed into the living room to greet the new arrivals.

"You okay, Aunt Irene?" I asked.

"When you get married, be nice to your wife, okay?"

"Of course!" I whispered back. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Kids, take me to the basement and show me your toys."

Delighted, Leo sprinted wordlessly out of the kitchen, into the hallway, and thundered his way down the staircase to the basement. Irene slunk after him with the stealth of someone sneaking past a machine-gun nest mounted atop the Berlin Wall. I followed, leisurely. We escaped Cesar's notice, but Carmella spotted us and loped after us.

Irene, Carmella, Leo, and I congregated in the back room of the shag-carpeted, wooden-paneled, finished basement. The room had little sense of feng shui, since none of us were sure what its main function was. There was an exercise bike; TV and VHS combo; record player and vinyl collection; a gecko in a plastic terrarium; a long oak table covered in LEGO, drawing paper, and colored pencils, and a set of display shelves filled with He-Man, Transformers, Star Wars, Gremlins, Aliens, and Real Ghostbusters toys. Hanging on the walls were my parents' diplomas and a Sacred Heart of Jesus print. Delighted and annoyed, Irene smirked at Jesus.

"Want to hear the *Chariots of Fire* theme?" I asked. "I fake conduct to Vangelis! We also have movie soundtracks by John Barry, John Williams, John Carpenter, and Jerry Goldsmith."

"This is your little escape area, huh?" Aunt Irene looked about for the best place to sit. Her options included the exercise bike and a wooden chair by the art table.

"Had your fill of Dad already?" Carmella asked her Mom, watching as Leo fed a cricket to his pet gecko, Harry Sullivan.

"That was a loooooooooong drive," Irene said.

"I like this plan of hiding in the basement with the children," Carmella replied.

"HEY!" Cesar's voice thundered down the basement stairwell from the main floor landing. "Where is everyone? How dare you all leave me up here with Garth and Sheena?"

Irene flinched and closed her eyes. “Never get married.” She slouched towards the stairs and my brother followed.

I was too lackadaisical to go right back up, so I stayed. Staying with me, Carmella fished a pack of cigarettes and lighter out of her skintight red bell-bottoms and lit herself a cigarette.

“My Mom’s not going to like the smell of the cigarettes,” I warned.

Carmella shrugged and puffed away.

I raised my hand like I was at school. “Miss! Can I ask you something?”

“You don’t have to raise your hand.”

I lowered it. “Dad says you can tell the future and read minds and stuff.”

Carmella chuckled. “Not exactly.”

“Oh.” I’d just found out that there was no such thing as Santa.

Carmella walked up to me, sat on her heels, leaned her elbows on her knees and stared searchingly at my face. Deciding to trust me, she started talking with her cigarette dangling perilously from her mouth. “I bet I seem listless to you, right? Know why? It’s hard enough dealing with everyone’s feelings when you hear what they say and see what they do. When you can feel directly what they’re feeling, too? That’s a little much. So, I like to hide in basements at Christmas parties with inquisitive little boys and answer their questions about my superpowers.”

“I feel like I always know what everyone else is feeling,” I said. “And I can guess a lot of what they’re thinking. But I don’t understand it all, because sometimes it’s about the stock market or cancer. But I can figure out a lot, and it gets to me. People say weird things to each other, and I don’t know how I feel about what they say. When I go to bed, it all comes back.”

“Fellow empath. Whadda ya know?” Carmella took the cigarette out of her mouth. “Want to try a puff of this?” She placed the lipstick-covered end of the cigarette in my mouth. I took in a shallow breath of smoke. My eyes watered. I coughed. Nodding, Carmella took the cigarette back. “You’ve had the CPI: The Cigarette Puff Initiation into the Secret Society of Empaths.”

“Is that real?” I asked, hopefully.

"Nope. Wouldn't it be great if it were?" Carmella's lower back hurt, so she stood.

"Can you read my future in a tarot deck?"

Carmella mimed patting her pockets in search of a deck she knew she didn't have. "Not on me right now." She held up an inspired finger. "How do you feel about a palm reading?"

"Yes, please, Cousin Carmella!"

"First Cousin Once Removed Carmella."

"I don't understand."

"Fuhgeddaboutit." Carmella dropped herself onto the wooden chair beside the art table. The table was littered with LEGO bricks and my crumpled, failed attempts at drawing Conan, Psi-Judge Anderson, Spider-Man, and the Thing. Keeping her cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth, Carmella held out her hands and took mine. "First of all, you give off a blue aura, which means you are quiet, sensitive, and intuitive. You avoid confrontation. You can't accept it when relationships you value come to an end."

"Blue? Cool."

"Now for the palm." Carmella read my love line first, which confused and annoyed me, because I suspected it was about kissing. The line was split at the end, suggesting the people I loved tended to hurt me.

I was confused. "The people who I love are always good to me."

"When you start dating, you will be the kind of guy who never believes it when a girl says she loves you. You'd prefer it if she never said it but spent time with you instead. Actions speak louder than words. In general, you don't believe people when they say things to you."

I was legitimately confused. "I kinda believe everything people tell me."

"You don't, though. You don't trust anyone at all. Not in matters of love, anyway." Carmella coughed, and the cigarette almost fell out of her mouth. She maneuvered it around with her lips, felt it tuck back into the corner of her mouth, and stared down at my palm.

"I trust you," I said. "You're cool and have magic powers."

Carmella noticed small "sensitivity bumps" on the tips of my fingers. "You are an old soul, remarkably mature for your age. This

means you will have absolutely nothing in common with boys your age. You will even be more mature than girls your age. Your ideal friends and girlfriends are women one to ten years older. Male friends need to be ten years older than you and have an intellectual job, like librarian or professor.”

I frowned. “These older people will see me as a little kid, though.”

“No, they’ll recognize a kindred spirit in you. After they do a double-take over your age.”

I was getting impatient. “We can stop talking about girls now, right? Will I ever own every issue of *Amazing Spider-Man*?”

“I’d like to remind you he’s eight,” Aunt Irene’s voice rang out. She had returned to find out why we had not followed her upstairs. “I see you two would rather hide down here flirting than come upstairs and protect me from Cesar?”

I blushed. “We’re *not* flirting!” (I thought the word “flirting” meant “kissing.”)

“I’d like to remind you he’s eight.” Carmella smiled behind a cloud of cigarette smoke. She re-checked my palm. On the area of my hand where my fingers met my palm, there were a series of small, raised areas. “These are usually found on emotional people. You have two sides to your personality: your sensitive side and your masculine side. You haven’t figured out a way to balance them, but you are in touch with both.” She turned my hand around. “You bite your nails. That’s not a psychic insight. That’s an observation. It means you’re eating at yourself. You shouldn’t do that. You should get your feelings off your chest. If people are being jerks, tell them they’re jerks. It’s not your fault they’re jerks, so don’t bite your nails.”

“Okay.”

“As an older and wiser psychic, can I help you in any other way before we wrap this up?”

I nodded. “I’ve always wanted to know one thing and I’m too young to know.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“Who is Kotter, and what is he coming back to?”

Aunt Irene laughed. “I guess he *is* young, isn’t he? ‘Who is Kotter?’ Ha!”

Carmella patted me on the head. "You're Kotter! Or, you will be . . . in a few years."

We heard the approach of soft footsteps and turned as one to see Garth creeping into the room like Gollum. "Can I join you down here? It's getting tense upstairs. Mom's telling Leo the Fatty Arbuckle story. Gianna tried to cut her off a couple of times, but she's soldiering on. Then Gianna got mad and started yelling at Mom. Vincent hauled Gianna out of the kitchen. And then Mom kept telling Leo about Fatty Arbuckle. So, I came down here."

As if on cue, Sheena crept into the room. "Can I come down here, too? I've heard dat Fatty Arbuckle story eight times today. And dat's just today!"

"The more the merrier," Irene said.

I looked over the motley crew. Deeply unsympathetic, yet deeply sympathetic. Totally uncharismatic, yet oddly charismatic. I liked these people, but I didn't know them. They were family, but I didn't love them. Just then, I had an accurate premonition. I would never see any of them again. Indeed, I would be saying my farewells to virtually all of them over the course of the next two years. One year from then, during a weekend trip to an Atlantic City resort, Grandpa would experience severe chest pains, but refuse Grandma's exhortations to call an ambulance. He would be dead by sunrise. Dad never forgive his mother for failing to call 911. The interesting parent had died first, leaving the boring one unjustly alive. After Grandpa's death, Garth and Sheena married. Only Grandma had been invited to the secret wedding ceremony at the city clerk's office in lower Manhattan, mere hours before the couple moved to Baltimore.

Cesar died less than a year after Garth and Sheena went away to Maryland. My father was upset by Cesar's passing, but Irene felt emancipated from her decades-long prison sentence of a marriage. She was happy! Reborn! Ready for a new life! Until Grandma darkened her door.

Irene's evil sister-in-law had arrived without calling first. Antje laid out her scheme for them to live together. "It will be like *The Golden Girls*!" Antje effused.

Aunt Irene felt a chill. Would she exchange one jailer for another?

Cesar for Antje?

Antje surveyed Irene's home, sniffing with disapproval. "If I'm going to live here, we're going to need to make some serious changes in the décor. We should gut this place. Start over."

"Gut it?" Irene's eyes flashed. "You want to 'gut' my house?"

Antje puffed away at her filtered cigarette. "It *is* tacky, isn't it? Don't you think?"

"No! No, it isn't *tacky*."

"If you say so." Antje toured each level of the house and the grounds around it, remodeling it from top-to-bottom in her head.

Irene called after her, "I never invited you to move in! You're being presumptuous!"

Antje called back, "You know you'll get a bang out of having me around all the time!"

Three months later, Irene appeared without warning on our doorstep. She visited with us for an hour while Carmella circled our block endlessly, unable to find a parking spot. Dad was heartbroken. He'd lost his father, Cesar, and now Irene. Irene was simultaneously apologetic and unapologetic. "I've spent my life surrounded by people I hate. I refuse to do it a moment more."

"Where are you moving?" Dad asked, plaintively.

"I can't tell you. If I tell you, Antje will find a way to ferret my new address out of you."

"We won't tell her," Leo and I chorused.

Irene set her jaw firmly. "You all never figured out just how awful and underhanded Antje really is. She's an implacable enemy. I have to be free of her. I need to be, functionally, in witness protection to escape her clutches. This is my last chance to live."

Carmella pulled up in her large, broken-down station wagon, double-parking it in front of our house. Dad, Leo, and I walked Irene to the car. Mom watched from the open door, standing inside the living room. Irene gave my father a long hug. Carmella stepped out of the car, leaving the engine running. Today's skin-tight bell-bottoms were canary yellow. She still wore a frilly white blouse. Puffing at a cigarette, Carmella looked at me over the rim of her sunglasses. "We're gonna disappear into the mist for parts unknown."

"Don't go!" I exclaimed. "We're supposed to get married!"

Carmella's jaw dropped. Irene laughed and slapped herself in the thigh.

"I'm supposed to be with older girls! You said it yourself!" I'd been cheated. God was taking First Cousin Once Removed Carmella from me! What had I done to deserve that? And I had known Carmella's mother far better, so Irene's departure was twice as painful.

Carmella mussed my hair. "That's very sweet of you."

Aunt Irene laughed again. "Vincent, your son is a card. I love him."

Remembering something, Carmella snapped her fingers. She opened the rear driver's side door and leaned inside, fishing around some bags. She emerged holding a bedroom pillow and brought it over to me. "I got this for you as a goodbye present. It protects people from curses and bad dreams while they sleep. I filled a white mojo bag to the brim with anise seeds and sewed it inside this pillow. It is a medieval witch's spell. Keeps the evil eye and bad dreams away."

"Cool!" My fingers closed around the pillow with reverence. "This is the greatest present in human history! A gift for the ages!"

"If you believe it will work, it will," she said. "That's how these charms work. They bring out the power inside you. They don't have power in and of themselves. Really, it's just a pillow and some seeds." I got a nice cousin hug from Carmella and aunt hug from Irene.

Before I knew it, their car was pulling away from our home, driving towards the Staten Island Expressway. Would they head north towards the Verrazano and Brooklyn or south towards the Outerbridge Crossing and New Jersey? None of us knew. Their departure had effectively brought an end to our extended family. Only Grandma would be around to visit with now, and Dad tried to see her only once every two years, making a time-lapse story of her mental deterioration at the hands of Alzheimer's Disease even more dramatic. Our extended family would be just our Staten Island nuclear family now: Vincent junior. Gianna. Leo. Damien. Us against the world. Everyone else was just a stranger.

The last Christmas season visit three generations of Cavalieris made together was confined to four hours. No presents were exchanged, no Christmas carols sung, and no alcohol consumed. Mom had prepared bruschetta, spaghetti with muscles in tomato sauce, tartufo, and coffee. No one helped Mom either serve or clear off any of the three

courses. Sheena, Garth, and Irene were the only ones to compliment her cooking. Since the Cavalieris virtually never slept over each other's homes or bought one another gifts, the guests were ready to leave once dessert was gobbled down. They retrieved their coats, offered us farewell hugs, and went outside. Irene and Carmella began the long walk with Cesar around the block to find where they had last seen their car. Garth and Sheena helped Antje and Vincent senior into the back seat of their car. Then they waved goodbye to us, got in the front, and drove away.

The moment they were gone, Dad asked Leo and me if we wanted to take a drive to Electronics Boutique in the mall to look up the answer to a puzzle he was stuck on in the new Sierra Entertainment graphic adventure game, *King's Quest*. The store wouldn't be open for much longer. Still, Dad really wanted to get out of the house as soon as possible. I refused the offer, but Leo accepted. Dad furtively looked at my silent mother, who was still tidying up, unassisted. "You sure you don't wanna come?" After I expressed a wish to stay home and read comic books, Dad and Leo got in Dad's car and headed off.

Needing time alone to recover from all the socializing, I grabbed a small stack of Roger Stern *Spider-Man* and John Byrne *Fantastic Four* comics that Mitchell had introduced me to and headed to the basement to read. After thirty minutes, I was becoming sure that Roderick Kingsley was, indeed, Spider-Man's mysterious new archenemy, Hobgoblin. My one reservation was a scene when Roderick and Hobgoblin were both in the same room at the same time. *I think it may be Kingsley. Mom has no idea who the Hobgoblin is, but I must tell her I may have solved this great comic book mystery!*

I emerged from the basement to find that, in the time it took for me to read a handful of comic books, most of the Christmas decorations had disappeared. Mom had returned her Dickens Christmas village houses and religious Santa sculpture to the original boxes that she stored them in during off-season. The wreath was torn from the front door and tossed to the side like a sweaty gym sock. Miraculously, Dad's Lionel train set remained intact, but no longer running. Mom must have been fearful of breaking an expensive adult toy she didn't understand how to disassemble. Worst of all were the bare and dusty

bookshelves. Mom had packed up all her works of literature into small cardboard boxes and taped them shut.

I found Mom glaring at the Christmas tree with her hands on her hips. A huge cardboard box stood open on the floor beside her, ready to receive the tree. First, Mom had to remove all the ornaments and place them carefully back into the five boxes she left open on the sofa. Mom removed the red and gold ball ornaments, placing them back in their respective boxes. She then unwound the tinsel from the tree. I walked up beside Mom, curious as to why she was doing this Grinch impression. It was the evening of the 23rd, yet she was stripping the house bare of its Christmas decorations.

"I've been a terrible mother," she said in a voice so controlled that it alarmed me. "Here we are, celebrating Christmas when there's no such thing as God or Jesus or Heaven. Or Santa or Rudolph or the Little Drummer Boy."

"I like the Little Drummer Boy," I said.

"And there's no telling the difference between Aunt Bianca's holy water and toilet water. Toilet water! How repulsive!" I was surprised that Mom's rage was directed at Aunt Irene, who had leapt to her defense when the others had teased her about her books and weight. Then Mom made it clear. "If your Dad's wonderful, hilarious, and brilliant Aunt Irene thinks all this is a waste of time, who am I to argue? She thinks I'm raising you to be superstitious fools! Sorry!"

"I don't think Aunt Irene meant for you to do that," I said, tentatively.

"And I'm sorry for poisoning your mind with literature. Why should I have you read books that aren't true? Only science books for us from now on. No literature. None!"

"I like literature, Mom! Keep the books for me!"

"I like literature, too." Mom threw her hands in the air. "But what do I know? I'm just a Southern Italian immigrant! All your father's family are oh, so sophisticated! You'd never know they also came from the same dirty peasant stock as me. They've done so much better evolving and educating themselves. They're not superstitious like me. They're smart. Never mind that I teach college and they're housewives, clerks, and traveling salesmen!"

Mom plucked the angel off the top of the tree and pitched it into an open box. She pulled my tiny, framed baby picture ornament out of the tree, with the year 1976 written over it. Leo's baby picture ornament, 1979, came out of the tree next. Then she tore Rudolph and Jack Frost and several faux-crystal snowflakes away from the tree and chucked them into the box. "On the one hand, I might be a little sad my mom and dad are dead, and there's no heaven. I might feel lonely that I'm on Staten Island with all my surviving relatives living hours away."

I waved at her. "I'm right here, Mom!"

"I grew up in an Italian neighborhood. Now, I live among Orthodox Jews who can't eat in my home because I don't have separate dishes and silverware for meat and dairy products!"

"I'm Italian, Mom! We can be Italian together!" I moved to tap her on her arm to remind her that I was there.

"But I am not alone," Mom yelled. "I have more family and friends than I know what to do with! I have a husband who tells our children that he's the good guy and I'm the bad guy! I have a mother-in-law so *concerned* for the state of my health that she ever so *helpfully* has made me aware of the existence of Weight Watchers! Let's not forget Sheena, who bathes in the worst-smelling perfume ever, scratches the skin off her own hands, and scares the living shit out of my children. Small waist and even smaller brain! If only I had a waist that small, since my larger brain doesn't garner me any respect from my 'chess Grandmaster' father-in-law." Mom used her fingers to put scare quotes around "chess Grandmaster." "What good is a large brain if it is packed full of literature and not scientific fun factoids and memorized Bobby Fischer games?"

I felt scared and sad, but I understood why she was upset. "They're gone now, Mom."

Mom's furious energy fizzled. Her body sagged. The fire in her eyes dimmed. Her clenched fists went slack. All that remained was fatigue and defeat. "I'm too tired to take down this whole damn tree." Mom stared down at the floor, her arms hanging slack by her sides. "I didn't know when I was well-off. I miss being a teenager. I miss my parents being alive. I miss bouncing around Europe. I miss dating the

Persians. Miss my one date with Fabian.”

My eyes bulged. “Fabian? The ‘Turn Me Loose’ Fabian?”

“Everyone in my family is dying off, one by one. I’m forty. I’m never going to Italy again. And I’m going to spend every Christmas with my in-laws discussing Fatty Arbuckle. Why in hell are those freaks alive when my parents are dead? Mutes! Cynics! Psychics! Gossips! Bullies! That’s my family now! The fucking Addams Family!” She straightened, reached up with her arms, grasped the tip of the Christmas tree, and pulled it off balance, towards her. The tree collapsed in a heap onto the floor between us. Then Mom marched into the kitchen.

I dropped to my knees next to the tree, scooping the tip up in my arms and standing to lift it. I got it a foot or so off the ground, but was too small to push it all the way back up into a standing position. A Styrofoam Christmas tree ball beaned off my head.

“Leave it!”

When I lowered the tree to the floor and sat beside it, mom retreated into the kitchen.

For an instant, Mom seemed as if she might settle down at the kitchen table and let her rage ebb. Then she noticed our rotary phone fixed to the wall, and felt her anger reach a new height. She tore the phone from its mounting and began wrapping it up in its own cords as if she were hogtying a pig. “Our phone is out of date, is it? We need a touchtone! What did everyone’s favorite Aunt Irene ask? ‘Does that phone dial Nixon direct?’ Ha, ha, ha! Very funny!” I missed that exchange. I wondered if Mom was right to be mad, or if she didn’t have a sense of humor.

I heard a key in the front door lock. The boys walked in, with Leo brandishing a walkthrough guide to *King’s Quest*. Dad exhaled sharply through his nose when he saw what the Tasmanian devil had done to the family room. “I knew this was coming.” He looked down at me. “Bet you wish you’d come with us to Electronics Boutique.”

“Boy, oh boy, oh boy,” Leo said.

“Welcome home,” Mom’s sarcastic voice called out. She stood on the threshold between kitchen and living room, watching the “Three Good Guys” reunite beside the fallen tree.

Dad’s voice sounded tired and neutral. “Honey, I love what you’ve

done with the place.”

“*Very* funny,” mom glowered.

Dad’s voice grew louder, building to a crescendo. “So, what now? I lock you in the bedroom? Hire Grace Poole to bring your meals to you? Because you’ve gone barking mad!”

“Oh, leave me alone,” Mom whimpered, bursting into tears.

“Leave *you* alone? Who took the house apart? You’re a Goddamn maniac!”

“Merry Christmas.” Walking like she was half-dead, Mom proceeded up the stairs to go to bed. She closed and locked the bedroom door behind her.

Leo put a hand on my shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Dad scoffed. “Course he’s ain’t okay.” He walked over to the wine cabinet built into the now-empty bookshelf and opened it fearfully. Luckily for him, the wine, liqueurs, and cocktail mixes had survived Mom’s tidying. “I need a Brandy Alexander desperately.” He glanced at Leo and me. “I’m making three.”