

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*The Smallest Ass at the Family Reunion*

After Grandma Francesca died, Grandpa Angelo never even looked at another woman — except for Heather Locklear on *T.J. Hooker*. As Grandpa explained, it was okay for him to watch the show religiously to gaze upon Heather, because she looked exactly like Grandma did when they first met. Ever the romantic, Grandpa's son Carmine chuckled, "Let's be serious, Dad. I loved Mom, but she was never as pretty as Heather Locklear." Uncle Carmine was nine years older than his baby sister, my mother. He and Grandpa had spent Mom's childhood working together at the Bon Soir night club in Greenwich Village.

Grandpa was the service bartender at the Bon Soir, responsible for making the drinks in the back for waiters to pick up and bring to the patrons. Since Grandpa worked near the performers while they waited backstage, he had plenty of time to chat with Kaye Ballard, Phyllis Diller, Carolyn ("Morticia Addams") Jones, and a pre-famous Barbra Streisand and her boyfriend Elliott Gould. In addition to getting to meet performers, Grandpa and Uncle Carmine rubbed elbows with some famous customers, including Abbott and Costello, Max Baer, and "Slapsie" Maxie Rosenbloom, all of whom autographed the same hardcover scrapbook.

Grandpa's work in the bar encouraged him to drink a little too much, but he was supposedly a harmless and funny drunk. According to Mom, one night, Grandpa came home buzzed to find his family watching *The Millionaire* on television, and dinner plates and Chinese take-out boxes still on the table. Too drunk to realize he picked an already eaten spare rib off a plate of discarded bones to gnaw on, he started cursing, "Jesus Christ. There's no fucking meat on these fucking spare ribs!" Mom, Carmine, and Francesca laughed uproariously at this mistake, pointing out the five untouched spare ribs they left for him in the take-out bag on the table. Mom always laughed when she told this story, but Uncle Carmine never found it funny.

"Dad drank way too much." Carmine's words carried enormous weight. Using his natural, "Edward G. Robinson" voice, Carmine spoke his version of the unvarnished truth in simple, declarative,

conversation-ending sentences. I was uncomfortable that Carmine's version of the truth rarely matched Mom's. Still, Mom's mythology was kinder and more romantic. Also, I found Carmine an unreliable narrator, especially when he would grumble highly controversial sentiments out of the side of his mouth like, "All boys should have mandatory military service before they're twenty," expecting us to agree wholeheartedly without pause. A larger-than-life figure, my Mom's brother had a big heart, was easy to mimic, and difficult to talk to.

Carmine was also remarkable in being a "self-made man." Throughout his youth, he scrimped, saved, and schemed to class jump his way out of his parents' three-room Brooklyn apartment. He concocted elaborate business plans and hit up relatives for investment capital to buy a Burger King franchise, gas station, or restaurant. While Mom was too risk-averse to give him any of her money, he raised the cash he needed somehow, eventually purchasing a string of businesses that made him one of the few wealthy members of our extended family outside of Cousin Emily. Carmine's money bought him a three-story home and Olympic pool in Marlboro, New Jersey — a palatial spread compared to our family's modest semi-attached house, let alone the tiny Brooklyn and Greenwich Village apartments the older Basiles had lived in all their lives. There were the usual jealousies directed at him, as well as expressions of profound respect.

Mom voiced disapproval of his ostentatious displays of wealth more often than she praised his business acumen, but her disapproval was not borne out of jealousy. Instead, she was troubled by his drive to succeed because she viewed it as a repudiation of their second-generation immigrant upbringing. Mom was not wrong. As much as she loved her childhood, Carmine did not share her enthusiasm for the bygone era. Mom felt nostalgia for a Brooklyn Italian community he could not wait to escape from at the time and did not enjoy recalling now. Neither one could understand the other's perspective. Their conversations made me wonder if there were such a thing as a coherent family history. In the end, did each person write their own life story? What of "history" itself? Was history not so much a reliable account of past events, but just another form of folklore? Were *all* histories and biographies *fictional*? Was "non-fiction" even real? On one of Carmine's

visits to our Staten Island home, Mom showed her brother her collection of non-fiction books about Italian American history, spearheaded by *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* by Jerre Mangione. Intuiting what her newfound interest in ethnic history and anthropology was about, Carmine slouched in his chair and looked sideways at Mom. “All our relatives were a bit nuts, Gianna. I’m not saying don’t love ‘em. If you can’t forgive your family members for being stupid idiots, who can you forgive? I’m saying you need to admit they were nuts and not pretend they were angels.”

Mom wasn’t sure if he was mocking their relatives or praising them. “I still don’t think Dad’s drinking was a big deal.”

I watched their exchange with interest and tension: I wasn’t sure where it was headed. I sat with them, Dad, and Leo at the dining room table on a Sunday afternoon, drinking tea and eating Napoleons. Carmine swallowed the ends of his sentences, making him extra special hard for my tone-deaf mother to hear, but he made a valiant attempt to speak to her. “Gianna, you don’t see people as they are. You see them as you want to see them. Everyone has some flaw.”

“I loved our family growing up. The big Sunday dinners after church. Making fresh ravioli with the flour and water and eggs. I miss that so much.”

Uncle Carmine shook his head sadly. “I couldn’t wait to get away.”

“Remember Cousin Aldo? Wasn’t he great? Coming over in his police uniform to taste the fresh ravioli made by the grandmothers?”

“Aldo? The corrupt cop on the take? I hated that sonofabitch.”

Mom’s hearing aid stopped working as he said this. She took the hearing aid out and fiddled with it, trying to figure out if the battery was dead or if ear wax had plugged up the tubing. “And how about the grace that Uncle Chicky would say every time before dinner?”

Uncle Carmine laughed. “‘Potatoes and meat? Christ, let’s eat!’ That’s a legitimately good memory. Uncle Chicky was a cool cat.”

I laughed loudly. “I like that grace!” I finally found the perfect place for me to shoehorn myself into a conversation I had been shut out of. Meanwhile, Dad and Leo remained on the sidelines, looking unsure what to do with their hands.

“Yeah, that grace was funny.” Carmine shrugged and resumed speaking in a clipped tone. “I still got out of there as soon as I could.”

Mom nodded. “I know what you mean. I miss them all too. So many died so young.”

Uncle Carmine glanced at Dad. “I guess it’s just as well she can’t hear a word I say. She talks so much about ‘the good old days.’ I don’t get it.”

Leo nodded. “I don’t get it, either.”

Dad sighed. “She can’t hear anything.”

Encouraged by Leo’s taking his side, Carmine said to him, “I bet her nostalgia is only because Staten Island sucks. You all should move to Jersey.” Carmine didn’t like the fact that our house was semi-attached and felt we could buy a better place for the same money closer to his home. When he named his home state, he didn’t say “Joysie” instead of “Jersey” — that’s a Joe Piscopo *Saturday Night Live* comedy sketch exaggeration of how people from Jersey talk — but I still loved the way Carmine said “Jersey.”

“Staten Island is kinda the same as Jersey,” Dad replied. It was funny when Dad, who didn’t have a kind word to say about Staten Island, would get his back up whenever Carmine would talk smack about our borough.

“Staten Island is shitty New Jersey,” Carmine declared.

I piped in. “My teacher says there’s no such place as New Jersey. He says ‘There’s suburbs of New York City and suburbs of Philadelphia, but New Jersey itself doesn’t exist.’”

“Well, I don’t like your teacher,” Uncle Carmine declared. To him, that ended the argument. He was right about my teacher. He was right about Staten Island. He was right about Chicky, the corrupt cop, and Grandpa’s drinking, and he was right about mandatory military service for high-school-age boys. It was cool to be right about absolutely everything. I hoped one day I would grow up to be as right as Uncle Carmine.

While Dad and Uncle Carmine weren’t above a bit of verbal sparring, the real animosity in our extended family was between my dad and Carmine’s wife, Beatrice. A heavyset Sicilian housewife with spiked, white hair, Aunt Beatrice cursed, smoked, drank ten cups of

coffee a day, and watched soap operas all afternoon as she cooked and did the laundry. The first time I saw the Walt Disney film *The Little Mermaid* in 1989, I couldn't stop laughing at how much the villain, Ursula the Sea Witch, reminded me of Aunt Beatrice. The throaty voice! The imperious air! They were twins! I didn't feel guilty making this mental association between a family member and an over-the-top cartoon villain because Beatrice always struck me as mean-spirited. My aunt was a strict mother, and sent her children — eldest child, Concetta, and the twins, Gabriel and Lorenzo — to bed every night at seven p.m. whether the sun was up or not. And yet, her kids adored her. Clearly, they knew firsthand a softer side of her that I never saw. Whenever the subject of Beatrice was brought up, Mom said the same thing, almost verbatim, "I never cursed, drank coffee, or watched soaps until my brother married her." Dad would always offer back the same retort: "So the sweetheart was a wonderful influence on you? Taught you how to be *uncouth*!" Dad was the sort of person who would overlook Hannibal Lecter's cannibalism because Lecter had good manners but loathe the Beatles for cursing and challenging authority. Dad was fixated on manners to a borderline absurdist degree. Still, in the case of Beatrice, I was with him. Beatrice was a significant figure in our family history because she relentlessly opposed my mom marrying my dad.

"Carmine feels the same way!" Beatrice informed Mom on the phone shortly after the engagement announcement. She was brave, but not brave enough to talk with Mom in person.

"Then let *him* talk to me! Not that it's any of his business, either."

In the end, everyone attended my parents' wedding. The surprise boycott came later. At the very last second, Beatrice adamantly refused to get into the car with Carmine and Grandpa when they were about to pull out of their driveway and head to the church for my baptism. Mom was sad and shocked when Carmine arrived with his three children and Grandpa, but not Beatrice. Grandpa stalked back and forth in the church foyer swearing under his breath, "That Black bitch. That nigger. Stupid, angry, busybody Sicilian. Can't come to meet a fucking newborn baby and attend a fucking baptism. Goddamn Sicilians! Always starting trouble!" Grandpa didn't stand for Beatrice's behavior and demanded she attend every family function from then

on, even if my dad were involved. Beatrice complied with ill grace, vowing to call Dad “Shithead” instead of by his name. The first time I was there to hear her casually call Dad “Shithead” in the middle of a conversation without blinking, I was so startled I burst out laughing. Dad was humiliated in front of his own son.

On August 16, 1984, our family of four attended what would be the first-of-three annual Basile family reunions at Carmine and Beatrice’s Jersey estate. We found about sixty of Mom’s cousins, second cousins, aunts, uncles, and other relatives gathered around Carmine’s outdoor pool, drinking beer and cocktails, and eating barbeque hot dogs, hamburgers, and chicken, along with some spaghetti and Caprese salad skewers. Everyone, including us, wore their nicest 1980s short-sleeve summer outfits. Looking more like Ursula the Sea Witch than ever, wearing red lipstick, pale blue eyeshadow, a purple tank top, and purple shorts, Beatrice saw us first, and approached. She made a point of greeting Mom, Leo, and me warmly. Then she placed a fake smile on her lips and said to Dad, “How are you, Shithead? How’s your crappy job?” She couldn’t remember which crappy job Dad had at the moment, or she would have tailored the insult for maximum effect. Dad was not usually around during the evenings on weekdays because he worked nights, first as a mail clerk at the law office Fried Frank, then as a salesman who worked on commission for Tops Appliance City. Dad stared daggers at Beatrice, who gave no fucks about his rage. She thought him lazy in general, but particularly resented his good fortune getting an astronomically high Vietnam War draft lottery number when she lost a younger brother his age to the Tet Offensive.

Walking away from Beatrice and the three of us, Dad found himself a beer by an open cooler placed strategically by the front gate and sat down at an empty deck table. Emotionally shut down already, he was no longer eager to be social to anyone. Mom only half heard what Beatrice had said, but could guess what happened. Not willing to allow the whole reunion to go up in smoke less than three minutes in, she continued to greet the family with Leo beside her.

I sat beside Dad. Fortunately, Grandpa had seen the exchange from afar and joined us at the table. Grandpa looked gaunt and pale. The lung cancer was taking its toll.

“Where were you the night of the murder?” I asked Grandpa, producing a small pad and a golf pencil, ready to take his statement.

Grandpa looked at Dad for an explanation, and Dad provided one: “He loves Columbo.”

Grandpa smiled and said to me, “I was closing up at the Bon Soir. Got home late.”

I nodded at him. “That alibi checks out. We already have corroboration.”

Grandpa looked at Dad. “Howya doin’, Vincent?”

Dad sat slouching in his vinyl chair. The sun on his shoulders and shade provided by the yellow umbrella had yet to restore his mellow good cheer. “Ah, you know.”

Grandpa pursed his lips. It was the mannerism we mimicked most when doing affectionate impressions of him. “You working on any new horror movies with your friends?”

Dad brightened and sat upright. “We’re hoping to do one soon. Remember Joe Boland? The great bear of an Irishman with jet black hair all over his body — giant black beard, shaggy hair, hairy palms — who played our Rasputin and Dracula? He’s back on board. I’ve got most of my old crew back together, but we have a few key people we need to replace. The script is almost done. I’m hoping we can start shooting soon. It’s called *The Pod People Take Staten Island*.” His enthusiasm for movies and filmmaking was infectious, and horror movies were his greatest passion of all. In the 1970s, Dad majored in theater at LIU Brooklyn, building a ragtag troupe of actors and film crew members with dreams of making their own horror movies on a shoe-string budget, a la *Night of the Living Dead*. Without the resources required to complete a ninety-minute sound feature film, they settled on the less-ambitious goal of shooting silent, color horror shorts on Super 8 film stock. Even though Dad’s favorite Hammer films were European period pieces, he built upon the model of *Dracula A.D. 1972* by transplanting the villains of Victorian Gothic horror literature to the present day. Essentially, Dad and his friends made a

silent, color, *Rasputin A.D. 1973* and *Dracula A.D. 1974: When Co-op City Dripped Blood*. To this day, the gritty realism of the silent, “home movie” footage, shot in the box-cars-and-plaid-clothing Bronx of the 1970s make the films a compelling time capsule. The comparatively short running time, action-packed plot, hammy acting, absent sound, and gonzo practical effects make the films surprisingly watchable — especially when a female vampire in a black nightgown summons a tarantula out of thin air and orders it to eat the face off of a drunken, sleeping physician. Growing up watching my Dad’s films was a blast. They were all super cool, but my favorite was *Twilight of the Living Dead*, because Mom was the star and spent most of the film fleeing and fighting off a trio of zombies. While Mom and Dad had been shooting the film, a heroic and confused passerby ran into the shot to help rescue Mom from the shambling flesh-eaters. The fellow didn’t understand a movie was being made and had been worried Mom was in genuine trouble. He was so nice, he wound up with a cameo in the film.

In retrospect, it was a shame Dad had no idea how to parley these personal projects into a full-fledged career in filmmaking. Like Ed Wood, Dad learned to do everything because he didn’t have a large crew to work with. He became a competent hand at directing, acting, screenwriting, lighting, photography, editing, and special effects, but was not comfortable working with sound and had no idea how to even attempt to find distribution for his films. Even with a portfolio of five films under his belt that were longer than shorts but shorter than feature films, he made no substantial connections in the industry and never connected with the cult film overlords he needed to: Roger Corman, Milton Subotsky, and Max Rosenberg. The greatest success to come out of his amateur troupe was their youngest cameraman, teenage Tommy Dolan, who went on to shoot live sports coverage for CBS. Still, listening to Dad talk with such passion about his filmmaking craft by the Olympic pool, Grandpa could see what his daughter saw in my father, and was disappointed Carmine and Beatrice could not.

“I want you to show me that *Rasputin* film.” Grandpa barely had the sentence out of his mouth when he winced in pain. He reached over his shoulder to massage the area above the bandaged, open wound



in his back. Dad moved to offer help, but Grandpa waved him off.

I piped up. "I was in a vampire movie."

"Yeah?" Grandpa asked. "He's in this next one?"

"No," Dad replied. "I made a fun little five-minute vampire movie with him and Leo. I put some plastic fangs in Damien's mouth and dabbed some theater blood on his lips and had him chase Leo around the backyard. It came out cute."

"I got to be the vampire!"

Grandpa gave me an encouraging smile through another wave of pain.

"You have another doctor's appointment soon?" Dad asked him.

"Too soon. Not soon enough."

When it looked like Dad and Grandpa were going to start talking about medical treatments and hospital visits, I knew the conversation would turn boring, sad, and technical, so I left to find Mom and Leo. I had only gotten a yard or two away when a trio of women I had never met before stopped me by the side of the pool. The leader, "Wall Street" Emily, tried to explain the difference between second cousins and first cousins once removed. One of them was a second cousin to me and one was a first cousin once removed. I didn't understand a word Emily said and couldn't grasp if she was one of those categories or her two pals were. The more frightened and confused I became, the more times Emily tried to unpack the terms for me.

"You do understand now, right?" Emily asked.

I was still at a loss, so I changed the subject. "Where were you the night of the murder?"

The other women were totally floored by my question. Emily was game and answered immediately. "In Monte Carlo on my yacht, entertaining Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia."

I consulted my spiral notebook. "Then why were you seen at the Staten Island OTB?"

"I only place my bets in person, at the track. I never go to OTB."

I poked the underside of my jaw with my pencil eraser. "Interesting."

Meanwhile, Mom's Aunt Bianca, a sweet, elderly lady in bright red lipstick, a yellow dress, broad-brimmed yellow hat, and sunglasses, was walking about the pool party sprinkling holy water on everyone with

her fingers. "Yesterday was the Feast of the Assumption. The priests blessed the ocean waters. I'm sprinkling holy ocean water on you to bring you God's blessing." A couple of bald men, sitting by the pool in folding chairs smoking cigars, nodded in appreciation at Bianca. The one who looked the most like a cast member from *Barney Miller* said, "I can use all the blessings I can get. I'm getting too old and too fat."

Bianca sprinkled one of the younger relatives: an athletic, thirty-five-year-old woman in a black leather skirt and form-flattering top. The sexy woman yelped, "Hey, with throwin' water!"

"It is a pool party, Nicole," laughed the same bald man who spoke before.

Still standing beside me, Emily Basile-Scrosciare called over to her leather-skirt-wearing younger sister. "Come talk to Damien, Nicole. He's adorable."

"They're all adorable," Nicole grumbled. "Then they hit puberty and turn into sharks."

Not understanding, I pumped my little fist in the air. "Sharks! Like in *Jaws*!"

"Ooookay, then, Nicole." Emily sighed. "My sister. Jeezum Crow."

Holding an empty serving plate, my cousin Gabriel walked by me on the way to his mother, Beatrice, who was cooking up another batch of hamburgers for him to distribute. Gabriel was easily one of my favorite relatives, for partly selfish reasons: he gave me fun presents for my birthday, like *Masters of the Universe* action figures and Bon Jovi records instead of socks and fresh undershirts, like my aunt always got me. As he passed me, he asked if I wanted a burger. I nodded. He said, "I love that Nicole to death, but she's such a little bitch, isn't she?" He patted me on the head and continued walking towards the barbeque.

Meanwhile, Nicole continued to fret over her wet leather skirt, gesturing wildly at the empty pool. "Nobody is swimming! None of us wants to get wet! We like being dry!"

I raised my hand. "I wanna swim." I never missed an opportunity to swim. I also didn't know how to talk to adults without raising my hand to be called on.

Nicole clapped her hands in my direction, silently and sarcastically. "Good for you."

Mom's Aunt Bianca sprinkled some ocean water on me. "And a blessing for the birthday boy. Your birthday was two weeks ago, wasn't it?"

"August 1," I proclaimed.

"Remember that God and your Great Aunt Bianca love you." This was my first encounter with Aunt Bianca, the most adorable human being of all time.

"Where were you the night of the murder?" I asked Aunt Bianca.

Aunt Bianca laughed heartily. "At church, playing Bingo with the other old fogies."

Carmine offered Bianca a hamburger on a paper plate. "Burger, Aunt Bianca?"

"Oh, I'm fine." Bianca smiled and sprinkled some sea water on Uncle Carmine.

"Blessed water?" Carmine asked. "Make sure you get everybody. Especially my wife!" He laughed. (I assumed Beatrice would take even less kindly to getting damp than Nicole.)

"I will!" Bianca promised.

Carmine looked thoughtful. "Hey, Aunt Bianca, lemme ax you a question. When are you gonna move out of dat apartment you're in?" *Whoa. Did Carmine's accent just get stronger?*

"Oh, I love it there! It is the best apartment building anyone could live in. We all love it." The "we" included her sweet, shy, sanitation-worker husband — now nursing a beer as he wandered alone about the outskirts of Carmine's property — and their daughter, Baby Bianca.

"I thought all the Italians left!" Carmine exclaimed.

"There are still Italians in the building."

"But you got all these Blacks and Hispanics and Asians in there now, too, right?"

Bianca beamed. "And they are all wonderful! I've had everyone from every apartment over for dinner at one time or another. And I've thrown parties and invited everyone!"

"You had them *all* over?"

"Why, yes! We are all God's children," she twittered.

"I tell you what, Bianca, when they made you, they broke the mold!"

“We are all God’s children,” I repeated to myself. “I like that.”

“And some of God’s children are a pain in my ass.” Carmine leaned in conspiratorially. “Hey, I gotta joke for you, Bianca. ‘What’s the definition of mass confusion?’”

Aunt Bianca shrugged.

“Father’s Day in Harlem!”

Aunt Bianca frowned and caressed his cheek. “Oh, my dear, dear Carmine. God loves you even though you just told a mean-spirited joke that isn’t funny at all.”

Carmine was uncharacteristically chastened. He glanced over Bianca’s shoulder at his athletic but lethargic teenage son, Lorenzo. Sleepy-eyed and dressed down in gym shorts and a Phil Simms football jersey, Lorenzo had just rolled out of bed, having slept through all the party preparations. He was the spitting image of Carmine at a slim twenty. Lorenzo, his twin brother Gabriel, Carmine, and Grandpa all had essentially the same face, though they were very different ages and weights. Carmine laughed openly at his lazy son. “Here he is. Alexa Hente! The Demanding One. You decided to grace us with your presence? Is it noon already?”

Yawning, Lorenzo pointed at me. “Where’s his dad?”

“Sitting with your grandfather near the gate. Why?”

“He’s the only one here who doesn’t give me shit.”

Carmine laughed again. “Because he’s lazier than you are!”

“Where were you the night of the murder?” I asked Lorenzo.

Lorenzo scratched an itch under his right buttock. “I ain’t got no alibi because I’m the one that did it.”

“You better come with me!” I yelled.

“You’ll never take me alive, copper.”

“I’ll see you behind bars, if it is the last thing I do, Alexa Hente!” I cried, my first in the air. Lorenzo yawned and moved away, done with the conversation. Aunt Bianca sprinkled some ocean water on Lorenzo as he stumbled past.

Mom was talking to her father’s brother Skippy, who was another gentle soul like Bianca. I couldn’t imagine the chubby, ruddy-faced old man saying an unkind word or committing a selfish act. Astoundingly or wisely, Mom had chosen him to complain to about approaching

middle age and going deaf, when he had her problems to the power of ten. Still, they probably could have had a lot of meaningful things to say to one another — if they weren't both too deaf to hear each other. In an effort to avoid saying only, "Can you repeat that?" and "Excuse me?" each one guessed the appropriate follow-up to the last thing that was said. The result was a string of non sequiturs that would have made Monty Python and Laurence Sterne proud. My invisible cuteness detector was registering off-the-charts levels of cuteness. I moved in closer for a cleaner reading. Of course, moving in close increased the risk of death by cuteness overload. Now, it might seem cruel, insensitive, and impolitic to consider two people with hearing disabilities in conversation adorable, but when you consider one looked like Betty Boop and the other looked like Ernest Borgnine from *Marty*, and both parties were trying valiantly to conceal how little they were hearing (and failing utterly), then you might begin to see where the conversation was captivating to watch. (No, that still sounds like a jerky and ableist thing to say. I have enough verbal irony as I write this to realize that. Still, please remember, it was 1983, and I was eight.) Anyway, I ran up to both Mom and Uncle Skippy and showered them with kisses on their cheeks. "T.C.F.W.! Too Cute for Words! I can't take it! I can't!"

Mom laughed and lightly pushed me away. "Get outta here! Silly."

I pounded my chest with both fists, King Kong celebrating tearing open a Tyrannosaurus Rex's mouth. "I have succeeded in bestowing a fuss upon those worthy of many kisses! Boom!"

Leo had been sitting there quietly the whole time, watching the conversation in enormous suspense, wondering what unexpected turn it would take next. I struck up a conversation with him about the Muppets and our stuffed animals while Mom and Uncle Skippy talked about folks from the old neighborhood in Brooklyn they both knew who had died recently.

"Remember Nina? With the clubbed foot? Her father was local bocce champion?"

"No," Mom said.

"Her sister fell off the Cyclone Roller Coaster in Coney Island?"

"Oh, yeah! I remember her."

“She just died.”

“Oh, no!”

Mom and Skippy had this same conversation ten more times about ten more people, with the names and a few key details changed. After the tenth such exchange, Leo and I were beside ourselves with laughter, tears flowing down our cheeks. Both Mom and Skippy thought we were laughing at something else, but it was the parade of dead friends and relatives we had never met that was the funniest graveyard comedy routine of all time. Right around the time Mom and Skippy had verbally buried half of Brooklyn, Baby Bianca, my Great-Aunt-Bianca’s twenty-year-old daughter, appeared from somewhere inside Uncle Carmine’s house. Baby Bianca was dressed in a one-piece yellow bathing suit and a pair of yellow flip-flops, with a large brown beach towel draped over her shoulder. With high cheekbones and long, straight black hair, she could have been Shannen Doherty’s stunt double. Baby Bianca walked up to me and said, “I hear you’re the only one going in with me? Would you believe nobody else brought their bathing suits! With this gorgeous pool? Davvero?”

The funny bald man must have overheard her because he piped up, “Everyone else here is fat!” *I love that guy! Who is he? I need an introduction.*

“Then what’s the pool for if nobody is gonna swim in it?” Baby Bianca called back to the mystery bald man.

Alexa Hente’s twin brother Gabriel walked past holding a freshly replenished plate of hamburgers. “Keeping up with the Joneses,” he observed saucily, while handing me a burger on a small disposable plate. Considering he grew up in a wealthy family, Gabriel liked to cast aspersions upon his parents for being nouveau riche. “What’s the point in being rich if you aren’t happy? Am I right, little man?”

“Yeah! Buy a pool, swim in the pool!” I bit into my burger.

When Bianca dove into the pool, I ran up to Mom, clutching the burger. “Hey, Mom! Can I go swimming?” I was still wearing my clothes: tan cargo shorts and a paisley, button-down, short-sleeve shirt. Mom had brought all our swimsuits, expecting us to change inside after we had eaten lunch. While lunch did look good, I was eager to get swimming. After touring the hotel swimming pools and

beaches of Wildwood, New Jersey, each summer, I discovered that swimming was my very favorite pastime. “Mom, I want to swim with Baby Bianca. Can I go in now?” Mom couldn’t hear me. She and Skippy were still communicating about as effectively as ambassadors from two different alien races tasked with making First Contact. If I waited too long to change into my suit, Bianca would come out just as I was going in and I’d have to swim all alone. Without a buddy! I found this situation totally unacceptable. I wolfed down my burger so quickly I nearly gagged on it.

Meanwhile, Dad was checking in with Lorenzo (“Alexa Hente”) Basile’s sex life. They were sitting with Grandpa at the same round deck table with the large umbrella. “You’re, what? Twenty? Going with any sexy ladies these days?”

A young athlete as a study in inertia, Lorenzo looked like a dead fish that someone had tossed carelessly onto a deck chair to dry out in the sun. “Women. Who needs ‘em?”

Grandpa spoke directly to Dad. “Don’t let him fool you. His heart’s broken.” He searched for Lorenzo’s eyes and found them. “My heart broke when my wife died. I know what that looks like. I know when my grandson is in pain.”

“What the hell happened?” Dad asked Lorenzo.

“He dated a Jewish girl,” Grandpa explained. “There was some opposition on both sides. Things didn’t work out. I thought they were gonna get married.”

“Me too.” Lorenzo sighed.

“The opposition was that great?” Dad asked.

“It would have been easier if everyone drew a line in the sand,” Lorenzo said. “It was all passive aggressive shit. Everyone was a little too polite. A little too unenthusiastic. That was hard to fight. All the slights were so small, they seemed not worth fighting over. They chipped away at us, and we didn’t notice they were doing it.” Lorenzo’s voice trailed off as his attention was drawn over Dad’s shoulder. “Wait a minute. What’s your son doing?” Lorenzo watched as I placed my socks and shoes on the floor next to Dad and took a running jump into the swimming pool, landing in the water in my clothing. Lorenzo chuckled. “What the hell is he doing?”

Nonchalant, Dad glanced in my direction to see me walking on my hands in the shallow end of the pool. “He jumped in after a girl, so I’m okay with it.”

Shuffling away from the barbeque, Aunt Beatrice rushed out onto the deck of the pool, still grasping her giant barbeque tongs. She brandished the tongs with her right hand, placing her other hand angrily on her left hip. “What the hell are you doing? Put on a bathing suit, retard!”

I surfaced. When the water emptied out of my ears, I asked Beatrice what she wanted.

“I axed you a question!” she yelled. “Are you a special needs child?”

I jumped up and down in the water, punching the air with both fists. “I am the dominatrix! I rule all I survey!”

Laughing, Baby Bianca swam up to me. “No, dummy. You are ‘the dominator.’”

“I am the domi—what? Dominator? Isn’t that what I said?”

“You’re behaving very strangely!” Aunt Beatrice yelled.

I swam up to the edge of the pool and looked up at her furious face. “You’re behaving pretty strangely yourself. Where were you the night of the murder, toots?”

Aunt Beatrice’s jaw dropped open at being called “toots.” She was not used to being on the receiving end of an offensive soubriquet. She could dish it out but couldn’t take it.

My Mom pulled herself away from Skippy and walked up to Beatrice by the pool. Beatrice shot her a dirty look. “Is your son a retard, or what?”

“I’m a retard!” I called out gleefully. “And you’re a retard! And we are all retards!”

Mom crossed her arms in front of her chest and glared at her sister-in-law. “Listen, if you keep calling my son ‘retarded’ and my husband ‘shithead,’ I’m gonna make you eat those tongs.”

Beatrice looked my Mom in the eyes for several seconds before returning to the grill. Once Beatrice was gone, Mom frowned down at me. “What’s with you?”

I raised a Black Power fist in the air. “I am the dominatrix! I’m a retarded kid from Staten Island! I bring love to all God’s children



in New Jersey!”

On the drive home, I sat in the back seat reading *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O'Dell. I was wearing my bathing suit since it was dry and unused. My wet clothes were wrapped up in the towel I'd used to dry off and tossed into the trunk. Everyone else had gone into the pool in their actual bathing suits, so they could wear regular clothes home and not be cold in the air-conditioned car.

The first person to speak was Dad, who made the following pronouncement: “That’s it for me. I need a break from your family for at least six months.”

Mom looked about the car. “Did any of you have any good conversations? Because I can’t hear too well, and I didn’t get to talk to everyone.”

“You didn’t miss nothing,” Dad said. “These people are as boring as that Stanley Kubrick movie with the Neanderthals and the obelisk.”

“I loved the pool!” I yelled.

“I loved the food,” Leo offered. “The braciole. Both the beef and the pork. That was amazing. I never had that before.”

“Yeah,” Dad enthused. “That was great! We should have that at home. Hey, Gianna, why do you cook the same crap all the time? Why not make some braciole?”

“I can make some braciole.” Mercifully, Mom had not heard Dad’s entire statement.

“I wish someone would tell me what that chicken was caught on,” I said. “Something blue? What’s blue?”

Leo smacked me on the shoulder. “It’s called ‘Chicken cordon bleu.’ It’s French.”

“I liked it,” I declared. “It was tasty and looked healthy. Bet it’s high in beta-carotene.”

“The food was good,” Dad observed. “Too bad the company wasn’t.”

“I know what you mean,” Mom smiled. “It’s great to see everyone in one place.” She enthused about how wonderful it was to see everyone at a reunion instead of a funeral. Oddly, a good dozen of the single relatives were getting suspiciously old without tying the knot, making happier occasions such as weddings and baptisms a rarity. This trend exacerbated Mom’s perception that her family was going extinct.

"I don't know how many of them I like outside of your father and the Biancas," Dad said.

"Oh, I like them all," Mom said.

"If I rated them as a family, I'd give them two-and-a-half stars *at best*," Dad declared.

"The one person who always rubs me the wrong way is Emily," Mom said.

"Um, excuse me! You mean, Emily Basile-Scrosciare," Dad corrected.

A strange exasperation crept into Mom's voice. "I can't relate to any woman who chooses not to have children, but then shows people photos of her cats, and tells stories about her cats like they're her children. It's really weird."

"I'm allergic to them," I said, "but I can see where some people would like cats. I just don't like when Emily tries to explain the family tree to me. And who is Habib of Tunisia?"

"Can she even have children?" Leo asked. "We don't know. Maybe she's lonely and loves her cats. Besides, kids are a pain in the neck. You see them screaming, running around, and throwing food at their parents at Denny's every time we go." He sounded twenty instead of five.

"I'll say one thing for Emily," Dad added, "she dresses very chick."

"*What?*" Mom asked.

"Emily!"

"What *about* Emily?"

"She's very *chick*."

"She's *what?*"

"Chick!" Dad yelled.

Leo intervened. "Dad means *chic*, Mom. Dad thinks Emily dresses *chic*."

"Oh, *chic!*" Mom giggled. "My hearing is *terrible*. I thought your dad kept calling her a *chick*."

I laughed and clapped. "He *did*, Mom! You heard him right the first time!"

"What the hell is *chic?*" Dad asked. "I'm saying she's chick!"

"You really mean *chic*, Dad," I said.

"Well, I *never* heard 'chick' pronounced that way," Dad sulked.

"Of course, a lot of the single women are getting older and don't know how to do it gracefully," Mom observed prudishly. "As much as Emily likes to doll herself up, at least she looks classy. That sister of hers always comes off *trashy*. I hate it when Nicole wears sexy clothing. She's getting a little long in the tooth for a leather skirt."

"I don't care how old you are," Dad replied. "You can wear a leather skirt your whole life if you have the ass to pull it off. You got a nice, round ass and some great legs? Wear a leather skirt at seventy! I'll be there to appreciate it. But that woman has no ass whatsoever."

"Sure, she has an ass. It just isn't huge, is all."

Dad shook his head violently. "No! There's her back. You look down. There's her legs. No ass in-between. Back. Legs. Back. Legs. No ass in sight. People with no asses shouldn't wear sexy bottoms. They should wear baggy bottoms and put all their efforts on their tops. Wear something low-cut with a necklace to draw the eyes."

"I have enough ass for the both of us," Mom grumbled. "She can have half of mine."

"No, no. Don't wish your ass away. Bad enough Nicole doesn't have enough ass. I don't want you losing too much of yours, too. Where would that leave me, I ask you? With no asses to look at during these boring family reunions."

"Why does it matter if she doesn't have an ass?" I asked. "If I could get rid of my ass, I would. Asses fart." I was angry at my own ass because I was lactose intolerant and didn't know it, so I couldn't understand why I spent so much time after lunch and in the early evening farting continuously and running to the bathroom. Also, I was genuinely confused and upset on Nicole's behalf. It wasn't just Nicole they took apart after each visit. A good number of relatives got the Friar's Club Roast treatment in the aftermath of a given family gathering, and I was never into it. After all, I'd just had a nice time talking with everyone. I didn't ever see the justification. However, since I had no ear for passive-aggressive jibes, I didn't understand that Mom and Dad often had plenty to vent about following a visit I had deemed an unqualified success mainly because it involved me and Leo playing pool and air hockey in an unfamiliar basement. In hindsight, Nicole probably said something to piss them both off. Meanwhile, I

viewed Nicole as a put-upon, lonely woman who was sad all the time. I didn't feel right saying anything negative about Nicole, even though she wasn't the sort of person I was usually interested in spending time with. (*I mean, for God's sake, when I mentioned the Starship Enterprise to her, she had no idea what it was! You don't need to be a Star Trek fan to have heard of the damn Enterprise! Still, I was willing to let that slide since she seemed so gosh darn sad.*)

"I guess she's on the prowl again," Mom wondered aloud.

"You think?"

"Nobody with a belly full of fish uses that much bait."

"Isn't she with that guy with the walrus mustache?" Dad asked.

"They got divorced."

Dad was genuinely surprised while not being invested in the news. Mom explained that they had broken up a few months after the last family wedding, during which I ate as many cocktail shrimp and deviled eggs as I could while they made a spectacle of themselves arguing over the most effective way to lose twenty pounds. I intuited right away that Walrus Mustache was not just a bully, but a total knob. I was at the same table as the couple, watching Walrus Mustache rebuking, humiliating, and sniping at Nicole, making her cry all evening. The fighting built to a crescendo, ending with screaming in the hotel lobby at one a.m., after most of the guests had gone home. All night, I had no idea how to intervene and I desperately wanted to.

"I hated him," I announced. I understood that, as a boy, I was supposed to side with boys when they argued with girls, but I could tell, even that young, that Walrus Mustache was evil.

"Was he in the Mafia?" Dad asked. He added as an aside to me, "I hated him, too." I gave Dad a thumbs up.

"There was a rumor about that," Mom mused, "but I think he was just an asshole. Nobody in the family is in the Mafia. My brother was a bartender, so he knew some gangsters through work. He tried to stay out of their way. They never tipped or even paid their bills."

Dad laughed to himself. "Buncha losers. And *The Godfather* makes them look so cool. Ha! Back to the other jackass. I heard a rumor that Walrus Mustache beat Nicole's ass like an animal on a regular basis."

"Oh, no!" I gasped. *That poor woman! Who cares if she wears a*

*miniskirt or not?* I raised my hand in the back seat like I was at school. “I have a question about Nicole’s ass.”

Dad glanced at me in the rear-view mirror. “You don’t have to raise your hand.”

Mom murmured, “I suppose we shouldn’t be discussing Nicole’s bum with the children.”

“If she doesn’t have an ass,” I began, and then got too embarrassed to finish.

Mom and Dad exchanged glances, barely suppressing laughter.

Leo knew where I was going and finished the question for me, “How can Walrus Mustache beat it on a regular basis?”

Mom burst out laughing. “Of course, she has an ass!”

I pointed an accusing finger at Dad. “But he just said she didn’t!”

October 2, 1984

Grandpa Angelo died less than two months after the family reunion. Mom and Carmine were so devastated that it fell to Dad to work with Aunt Beatrice to make most of the wake and funeral arrangements together. If anyone had predicted Dad and Beatrice would engage in tacky bickering during this period, they were proven wrong by what did happen. In their interactions with the funeral director, Beatrice found herself struck by Dad’s sensitive and thoughtful questions. Throughout the planning stage and the packing up of Grandpa’s possessions, a man she had thought of as a gadabout had demonstrated decisiveness, maturity, and intelligence. She never called him “Shithead” again.

Mom, Dad, Carmine, and Beatrice had been together the first time they unlocked Angelo’s apartment after he died. Everywhere were signs of a life on pause that Angelo had expected to return to after a routine specialist’s visit. Angelo’s glasses still lay open on top of a newspaper on the kitchen table. The crossword puzzle was half done. Uncle Carmine picked up his father’s glasses and held them close to his chest. “He’s not coming back for these. Or finishing that crossword.”

Mom slid sunglasses over her eyes to hide her freshly gathering tears.