

## CHAPTER NINE

*Wonder Woman, the Brides of Dracula, and Dad*

September 14, 1983

When I was seven, I was allowed to go out and play on Kell Avenue in suburban Staten Island under one condition: when Mom looked out the front door up and down the long, nearly traffic-free, residential block, she would catch sight of me somewhere. One day, I went farther than I had before, and found myself tempted to go farther still. I stood at the corner of Kell and Westwood Avenue, daunted by the width of the street I'd have to cross, fearing my mother's psychic powers. Up until last week, Mom had a musical jewelry box in her bedroom, a souvenir from one of her 1960s Italy excursions. I was not supposed to touch it. Ever. The problem was, I liked the song a lot, even though I couldn't identify it. Last week, I went into the bedroom to open the music box. I was extra gentle with it because I didn't want her to know I'd touched it. As I lifted the lid, it came off in my hand as if it were meant to. It lifted so easily that I had to take notice of the snapped hinges to realize that — yes — it was broken. I was responsible. I returned the music box to where it had been, gently replaced the lid, and sprinted out of the bedroom, hoping Mom wouldn't blame me for the broken hinge. This was a hope in vain. While I was not sure what the hell had happened, Mom was convinced that I had done something rough with the hinges to break them. I was convinced it would have come off as easily in her hand if she had opened it first. And yet, in retrospect, I wonder if I hadn't just snapped the lid off with my little monkey hands, not knowing my own strength. After all, in 2013, I snapped the spoiler off the trunk of my friend Jim's car by slamming the trunk shut too hard. (*Ape man can't be trusted with anything nice.*) The music box incident forced me to conclude that I should *not disobey any more rules at any time for any reason*. This moral was reinforced by the overly didactic gothic horror stories for children that I grew up with: *Pinocchio* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Break a rule? Get turned into a donkey or gruesomely disposed of to the musical accompaniment of Oompa Loompas! Be nice and a fundamentally decent person? Inherit a chocolate factory.

I really wanted to inherit a chocolate factory.

Why wouldn't Mom let me travel beyond the boundaries of our one residential block? Was it a fear of me getting hit by a car? Falling in a ditch in one of the few remaining undeveloped stretches of grassland? Or did she fear my running into a crazy-person kidnapper or child-killer? We *did* move to Staten Island during "the Summer of Sam," when I was one, and the 1983 made-for-TV movie *Adam* about the abduction and murder of six-year-old Adam Walsh put the fear of God into many parents during the Reagan Revolution. Over the course of my childhood, the number of kids participating in Halloween in our neighborhood dropped sharply thanks to fears of apples concealing razor blades and cocaine-laced candy corn. There were also, during the retrograde 1980s, a plethora of rumors about Staten Island being hagridden with Satanic cults, though it wasn't clear if there really were Satanists in Richmond County or if parents were merely spooked their children listened to Black Sabbath and Judas Priest. As a kid, I couldn't understand why Mom was so afraid of our neighbors. They seemed like reasonably nice people when I caught a glimpse of them sprinting back and forth between their car and front door. On the other hand, one neighbor in particular — a silent, angry-looking middle-aged woman named Mrs. Grass — *never* waved hello to me, no matter how many times I waved to her. One time, I made Maria-Bamford-like pterodactyl screeches at her to see if I could frighten her into acknowledging my existence. She continued ignoring me and let herself into her home. I was impressed and upset that my pterodactyl screech did not rattle her. I stepped into my living room and saw my parents watching. Dad said, "Don't make dinosaur sounds at the neighbors."

Mom added, "Mrs. Grass needs a good lay. I don't think her husband is up to the job."

So, yes, the mostly working-class Staten Islanders hid in their semi-attached homes and only ventured outside to play basketball in the hoop mounted over their garage doors or swim in their above-ground pools in their backyards. They only spoke to their neighbors during street-wide blackouts. This was why, whenever the police and reporters would ask any given Islander, "What was your neighbor like

*before* he killed thirty-seven Russian women and buried them in his basement?” the response would always be, “He was so normal! What was his name again?”

Anyway, here I was at the intersection, afraid to cross the bloody street. I was a Hobbit at the edge of the Shire, terrified to take my first step into a larger world. Two local kids whizzed by on bicycles, then looped around back and passed me again. Back then, people on my block still rode bicycles: a rare sight in recent years, since all those who used to cycle had either got old enough to buy cars or moved off Staten Island. I had blown my one chance at a bike of my own when Mom saw me almost plow into a moving car on my first day of riding. It was irritating yet understandable that Mom was taking few chances with her young son’s life, but she tore the bicycle out of my hands and never let me ride it again.

One of the bicycle boys saw me standing by the street corner, staring impotently across the block, and skidded up beside me. The boy, Ilan Schulman, was part of the local Orthodox Jewish community. He wore a green Camp Morasha T-shirt and a yarmulke over curly black hair. Laughing genially after I told him my problem, Ilan lowered his bike onto the curb and walked back and forth across the street. “It’s easy,” he said. “See? Your Mom will never know you did it.” That was true. Unless Mom chose that second to look for me, there would be no forensic evidence of the transgression. Evidence was a big problem, not just for me, but every kid on the block. Kell Avenue was so inordinately dull that the kids next door, the Birnbaums, entertained themselves by walking along the roof of their family car. Every so often, their mom would appear in the doorway, yell at them for walking on the car, and then head back inside when they slid down the hood to the ground. This saga played itself out time and again, but the kids were so small at that age that it took them a full year to put a truly significant dent in the car’s body. Once that happened, I never saw the kids prancing on their Mom’s Impala again. They had left *evidence*, just as I had left evidence when I broke Mom’s music box. Evidence was the enemy of fun, but I wouldn’t be leaving any such evidence just by crossing a darn street. I ran across Westwood. I looked at the world on the other side. I ran back home. I was so nervous that I didn’t enjoy the experience at all.

I'll be the first to admit that most people find me a bit strange. They often wonder how I wound up turning out the way that I did. My family members have competing theories involving a traumatic head injury or developmental disability that either occurred in the womb or shortly after I was born. In late December of 1975, my honeymooning parents took a ride on Space Mountain in Walt Disney World, not knowing Mom was pregnant with me. End of first theory. On August 1, 1976, I was born one month premature, the size of half of a loaf of bread, earning me the nickname "half a loaf." A full-sized kid a year later, I graduated to "loaf" and "Captain loaf," respectively. On October 9, 1976, Dad was amusing himself by tickling me and rolling me around on the Queen-sized bed in the master bedroom of their roach-infested apartment in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. Tragically, I rolled past his receiving right hand, dropping right off the bed and slamming my head against the hardwood. The three events combined constitute "The Origin of 'Italian American Man,' Staten Island's First Guido Superhero!"

Just kidding. These were not big head injuries. Other factors were, of course, more important in setting my personality in stone early on. I was born into "The Oregon Trail" Generation, situated in the No Man's Land between Generation X and the Millennial Generation. That generational identity played a role in shaping my cognitive and emotional development, as did my astrological sign of Leo and my being born in "The Year of the Dragon." Even more revealing is my Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality inventory INFP (introversion, intuition, feeling, perception), which casts me as a "mediator" and "idealist" in the mode of real-life figures John Lennon, Tom Hiddleston, and J.R.R. Tolkien, and the fictional characters Amélie Poulain, Anne of Green Gables, Frodo Baggins, and Peeta Mellark.

All these forces of culture, biology and mysticism conspired to make me more than a little odd, but one of the most significant events in my cognitive development was my early exposure to the *Wonder Woman* television show starring Lynda Carter. The show had broadcast new episodes when I was in my infancy, so I saw most of them when I was five- or six-years-old during afternoon repeats broadcast on one or another of New York City's three syndicated television stations: WPIX,

WNYW, or WWOR. I loved that Wonder Woman used her metal bracelets to deflect bullets and a lasso to subdue villains. This practice was a big, welcome departure from killing the bad guys, like cowboys in Westerns did. Also, the round-faced, black-haired actress Lynda Carter had a Mexican mother, subconsciously reminding me of my round-faced, black-haired Italian American mother, Gianna Cavalieri. On some level, I've always viewed Mom and Wonder Woman as one and the same person. That has been an occasion for much confusion and consternation when men see my Wonder Woman comics and merchandise and say things to me like, "Yeah, baby! She can tie me up anytime! I know that's why you like her, too! Hubba, hubba!" When pressed on the issue, I'd sometimes manage to say something like, "I was so little when I first saw her show, I didn't even know what being attracted to a woman was. I just thought Diana of Paradise Island was cool." *Wanting* Wonder Woman always struck me as inappropriate, much like having the hots for Audrey Hepburn. Who *lusts after* Audrey Hepburn? *And that's Mom they're talking about!*

My father was one of those people who thought Lynda Carter was hot, so he didn't mind watching the show with me. He didn't mind when Mom bought me a tin Wonder Woman lunchbox and an invisible jet toy. He also shrugged off the purchase of a vinyl Wonder Woman placemat. The arrival of the Wonder Woman Barbie, however, made him reach for the TUMS. When he pressed Mom on the purchase, she explained that the Amazon princess was my best buddy. Dad balked at that terminology. "If we're going to do this, she's his imaginary girlfriend. If we call her his *buddy*, we'll wind up with a son who becomes *friends* with women, like Gabriel, who has all those fat women friends he isn't sleeping with."

"There's nothing wrong with raising our son to be *friends* with women. And don't say bad things about my nephew, Gabriel!"

Dad crossed his arms over his chest. "No straight man on earth wants to 'just be friends' with Lynda Carter. Let's be serious. No straight man can be 'just friends' with any woman. It isn't possible. The sexual tension is always impossible to ignore."

"I don't know that that's true."

"I do. Let's not lead our son up the garden path thinking he can

be ‘just friends’ with women. And let’s not make him gay, either.” Dad lost the argument and did not make his displeasure known to me. For more than a year, I took my Wonder Woman Barbie and placemat everywhere my parents, younger brother, and I went: church, family reunions, trips to the park, and to pre-school and first-grade class. Each time I tucked the placemat under my arm and clutched the Barbie in my hands, Dad gritted his teeth and grumbled under his breath. After witnessing six months of my co-dependent relationship with the superhero, he resolved to confront me about the creepiness of my attachment to her. As he was mulling over potential approaches, he wandered in on me — then seven-years-old — sitting on the brown shag living room floor carpet, undressing the Wonder Woman Barbie. Once I slipped the clothes off, I inspected its smooth, anatomically incorrect nude body.

“No nipples or labia, huh? She doesn’t look real at all.”

I started at the sound of Dad’s voice. Hastily, I dressed the doll again. I felt like I had been caught doing something wrong and began perspiring. Even as I dressed her, I considered that Dad was right. It didn’t look like the women I’d caught fleeting glimpses of in the showers and dressing room at the YMCA when Mom took me swimming. I knew what nipples were, but that other word he used was beyond me. “Yes. The labia is the most important part,” I said, pretending to know what it was.

Dad decided then and there that the last thing I needed was an anatomically incorrect doll to undress. That night, when I fell asleep, Dad snuck quietly into the bedroom I shared with my brother and gathered up all my Wonder Woman merchandise. He put his electric blue windbreaker on, tiptoed past Mom, who was still awake grading freshman composition papers in the kitchen, and slipped out the side door. He walked up to the two garbage cans he had placed out in the front of the house in time for morning sanitation pickup, plucked the lid off the nearest can, and dropped my Barbie, placemat, lunchbox, and plastic invisible jet inside. By the time I woke up the next morning, the sanitation crew had made their collection. Our empty garbage cans lay on their sides in the middle of the street, rolling one yard back and forth in the

wind. No evidence remained that I had ever owned a single stitch of Wonder Woman memorabilia.

Dad was unnerved by how long I cried and screamed over the loss.

A week later, Dad found me hidden in the wood-paneled basement, sitting at a long oak table in the toy room filled with shelf after shelf of *Star Wars*, *Masters of the Universe*, and *Transformers* toys, trying and failing to copy John Buscema's pencil art for *The Savage Sword of Conan* comic. Each time I made a mistake drawing Conan decapitating someone, I crumpled up the page and tossed it on the floor next to the other discarded Buscema copies. "I'm terrible. I must be better. I want to go to LaGuardia or the School of Visual Arts when I grow up."

"High school and college are both a long way away." Dad eyeballed some of my Transformers and began buttering me up. "I think these toys are very impressive. I really like Shockwave and Optometrist Prime."

"*Optimus Prime*," I said, severely.

Dad laughed at himself. "Of course! I have to remember that." Dad looked with less favor upon the rows of *Star Wars* action figures, saving his most sour facial expression for Luke, Leia, Han, Yoda, and Lando. "I can't shake the terrible feeling these people are all liberals."

I blinked a few times, not knowing what he meant. "You have to like Lando, at least. He's my favorite. He got put in a tight spot, poor guy. Vader made him betray his friend."

"Hey, guess what? I have something for you." Dad sat beside me, producing the oversized military history coffee table book he had been hiding behind his back. "Ta-da! I bought a biography of *Rommel, the Desert Fox!*" When I gave Dad a quizzical look, he elaborated. "One of the things I don't like about Wonder Woman is she fights Germans. We're Germans. Remember, World War II soldiers weren't all Nazis. The Wehrmacht were apolitical."

"Mom says we're Italian."

"You're three-quarters Italian and one-quarter German. Never forget the German part! We can claim Mozart, Oktoberfest, and the Desert Fox! Rommel was a tank commander in North Africa in World War II. He was such a brilliant tactician that even the Allied commanders respected him. He launched offensives without orders, would win, and not get court-martialed!"

I started to show grudging interest. “Wow.”

“Nothing succeeds like success. You bend the rules. You break the rules. If you succeed, you will be beloved. Captain Kirk proves the same point.”

“That’s true. Is he still alive?”

Dad looked at me suspiciously. “Captain Kirk is a fictional character.”

“I know, Dad! I mean is Rommel still alive?”

“Oh!” Dad frowned. “No. He died because of a stupid failed attempt to assassinate Hitler. That idiot von Stauffenberg put a bomb in a suitcase under a thick table. The table shielded Hitler from the full brunt of the blast. So stupid. If you’re gonna kill someone, don’t mess around with a bomb! A Mafia hitman would have just walked right up to Hitler and shot him in the head. Unfortunately, von Stauffenberg wanted to replace Hitler with Rommel as head of Germany. When Hitler found out, he ordered Rommel to shoot himself. Remember: don’t be too charismatic or jealous people will take you out.”

*I thought I needed to be charismatic so I could get away with breaking rules?*

Dad placed the book on the table next to me. I regarded my father’s hero. Based on the cover photo alone, Rommel was a humorless man with a severely short haircut, cold eyes, a deeply cleft chin, and oversized ears. He wore a giant cross of iron over a gray tank commander’s uniform. This man was nowhere near as adorable as Diana, Princess of Themyscira. Where Diana was soft, Rommel was flinty. Where Diana exuded compassion, Rommel radiated rigidity. “Rommel is an appropriate hero for a man,” Dad concluded. “Feel free to fantasize about feeling up Wonder Woman, but if you’re looking for a hero, here’s your man.”

*No. Rommel is just not cute enough. He’ll never replace Wonder Woman in my heart.*

Dad’s concern about my exposure to Wonder Woman was a bit ironic, since he had no compunction about showing me a number of lesbian vampire movies with softcore porn seasoning — especially Hammer studios’ Karnstein Quadrilogy: *Vampire Lovers*, *Lust for a Vampire*, *Twins of Evil*, and *Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter*. In the



1980s, many fortunate young boys grew up with access to a cable channel or two, such as HBO or MTV, or stumbled across their father's dirty magazine collection by accident. Often that was the extent of pre-internet-era sex education. In my own case, we didn't have cable, and I never found my Dad's dirty magazines, so my sex education came largely from my father's nearly limitless supply of vampire movies from around the world, made between the Bela Lugosi *Dracula* (1931) and the original *Fright Night* (1985). I also learned a little bit about the broad concept of sex from the two 1981 sex comedies Dad dragged me to the theater to watch when I was five, the Bill Murray military romp *Stripes* (co-starring my man Harold Ramis) and a sleazy comedy with Peter Falk about female mud wrestlers called ...*All the Marbles*. As a kid, I didn't mind the sex comedies so much. It was the horror films that occasionally branded gory images on my semi-photographic memory. For example, Dad treated me to the Stephen King portmanteau horror film *Creepshow* in 1982, when I was six. It gave me lifelong roach and zombie phobias. Not every movie Dad took me to see was a hard R, but they were mostly cult and genre films. There were notable trips with Dad to see *Godzilla 1985*, *Invaders from Mars*, and *Aliens*. The whole family went together to see *Gremlins*, *Ghostbusters*, *Little Shop of Horrors*, and each new *Star Trek* film. Any more mainstream fare was off the menu (so I still haven't seen *The Big Chill*, for example).

In 1988, when I was twelve, Dad took me to see *The Unholy*, an *Exorcist*-style "Catholic horror movie" about a priest-murdering demon disguised as nubile redhead. Every year on Good Friday, the demon Desiderius dressed in a see-through black nightgown and approached priests as they knelt before the altar. She tempted them by brushing her breasts against their faces. If, in a moment of weakness, the men reached up with trembling hands to caress her breasts, she slashed their throats open with long red fingernails. That film left an indelible impression upon me, shaping my views of both sex and religion for life. The AIDS-era lesson was clear: *No touchy boobie! No touchy! Touchy boobie? Get throat cut!*

*The Unholy* notwithstanding, Dad left the wildest film viewings of all for home, when he managed to acquire on home video all the cult Grindhouse films he had watched during his formative years.

They had shaped his youth. He couldn't wait to show them to me and shape my youth with them as well. I remember Dad proudly unpacking his first Panasonic VHS player in 1983. As he pulled the bubble-wrap off the cutting-edge technology, he proudly explained to Mom how he was going to build his personal movie collection. "Now that I have this Panasonic, I can get all my movies on VHS!" He saw this machine as an upgrade from our video disk player, and entertained hopes that a far deeper library of films would be available to him than the Disney cartoons and epic movies he'd been getting on disk the last several years.

"The horror movies we saw on dates in those XXX theaters in Manhattan?" Mom asked.

"The Grindhouse theaters!" Dad shouted, unnecessarily loudly. He liked to shout when discussing his favorite movies. He had had noticeably more *joie de vivre* when the topic of movies came up than he did when discussing *any other topic*. "Especially the Hammer and Amicus movies we saw, but I also want to get the old Universal and RKO horror movies." Mom perused dad's handwritten wish list, vaguely remembering being dragged to see half of them over the past eight years: "*Werewolf in a Girl's Dormitory*, *Them!*, *The Uninvited*, *Invisible Man*, *Curse of the Demon*, *Bedlam*, *The Innocents*, *Bride of Frankenstein*, *Island of Lost Souls*, *Death Takes a Holiday*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (both), and *The Louisiana Hussy*."

Dad beamed. "I had a great thing happen. The video rental guy doesn't carry these movies. The catalog he orders from charges \$70 for customers. He'll order all these movies for me *at cost!* Forty dollars each! All I have to do is let him unwrap them, dub himself a copy on a blank VHS of his own, and he'll give me the once-viewed movie *at cost!*" Unsurprisingly, twenty years later, that video store owner was arrested for violating federal copyright law by duplicating several thousand movies. Dad and I will always be grateful for the man's unparalleled selection of cult and arthouse films. Such fare was not found in mainstream Blockbuster Video outlets, which stocked thirty copies of new releases like *Rambo: First Blood Part II* instead. I was younger than Quentin Tarantino, but VHS rentals were my film school, too.

"Forty dollars is still a lot for a movie," Mom demurred. "And this is a long list."

"That's the first of many such lists!" Dad declared. As an avid film collector, Dad had several genres and periods he favored: Pre-Hays Code sex romps of 1930s Hollywood, 1940s film noir, 1950s science fiction, 1960s Euro horror, 1970s westerns, and 1980s action movies. All told, his taste in films was impeccable. For example, one time he proclaimed: "All the Westerns people talk about being so great? *The Searchers*, *Fistful of Dollars*, *High Noon*, *Rio Bravo*? They're two-and-a-half starts *at best*! The best Westerns are *Valdez is Coming*, *Hired Hand*, *Fastest Gun Alive*, *Day of the Outlaw*, *Requiescant*, *Appaloosa*, and *The Long Riders*." The opinion was so heretical, I didn't believe it. Then I watched all the films he name-dropped and determined he was correct: The more obscure films were far superior to the lionized ones.

Leo enjoyed watching these movies just as much as Dad and me. Still, he had a more ironic sensibility than we did, and could see the ridiculousness in our collective movie-watching obsession. He used a pink Pekingese plush toy named Amanda Wingfield (after the poor-but-genteel mother from Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie*) to needle us. Affecting a stricken, ashamed female voice, Leo spoke through the Amanda plushie: "Nobody goes to the movies night after night. Nobody in their right mind goes to the movies as often as you!"

"My sons are talking over my head again." Dad didn't get the reference, but I laughed with Leo because Mom had taken us to see a Wagner College theater production of the play.

For a guy who adored cult and camp films, Dad was surprisingly into deconstructing films and finding plot loopholes instead of being forgiving of their low-budget, gonzo daring. At first, I liked the critical thinking skills Dad taught me when he demonstrated the flaws in every film we screened. Later, I just wanted to see what was good about a film and became allergic to focusing on what was bad. Each time Dad raised a complaint, I provided apologetic readings: "I bet that happened between scenes, Dad! They just didn't show it for pacing reasons." (Years later, the "Deleted Scenes" included on DVDs would retroactively prove me right often.) Annoyed, Dad wondered why I would side with the movie over him 99 percent of the time. I wasn't

trying to be a jerk. I was just way more into “feeling” a story and judging it on its own terms than I was into picking at its seams. I had the most fun watching films with Dad when he gave himself over to a movie and just enjoyed it with me. There were moments when he would allow himself to laugh uproariously at a joke, fully feeling the emotion of the film. He’d do this most often when watching Marx Brothers mayhem or when Claude Rains or Gene Hackman said something arch or misogynist in one of their edgy, Oscar-worthy supporting roles. I was also tickled that Dad and Mom reminded me of both Groucho Marx and his eternal foil, Margaret Dumont, not just in their physical appearance, but in their relationship. When Groucho’s roving eye would fixate on a pretty flapper, Dumont would give him the cold shoulder, reminding him she was the one with the money. Then Groucho would say, “Can’t you see what I’m trying to tell you? I love you!” and break the fourth wall by wagging his painted-on eyebrows at the movie audience. During each scene with this flavor, Dad would laugh and say, “He sounds cynical, but in his heart of hearts, I know he loves Margaret Dumont.” I found Dad’s projecting on Groucho both alarming and reassuring. *Groucho is a cad who truly loves the woman he cheats on? Dad relates to Groucho? Uh-oh. Are Groucho and Dumont my parents!?!*

Other topics of conversations during film viewings included Dad’s fun facts (“I tried out for the role of the kid genie in *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad*, but didn’t get the part”) and character-actor identification exercises (“I can’t believe you didn’t recognize Michael Ripper! He’s in all these Hammer movies. He’s the constable in *Plague of the Zombies*, the barkeep in *Scars of Dracula*, the drunk Irishman in *The Mummy*, and the drunk Irishman in *Curse of the Werewolf*.”) Sometimes questions seemed innocent that were not, including, “What is your favorite Hammer movie?” My first mistake in instances like these was to offer my honest opinion: “Dunno. *The Devil Rides Out*, *Cash on Demand*, or *Shadow of the Cat*?” Dad shook his head. “You should have picked *Horror of Dracula*, *Brides of Dracula*, or *Kiss of the Vampire*.”

Joking and needling my father aside, we had a lot of fun watching films together over the years and did it as often as we could. I found that watching movies with Dad made me happier than doing just

about anything else. Since vampire movies were Dad's favorite films, they became my favorite films. Over the course of ten years — from 1983 to 1993 — I saw every possible adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* with Dad at my side. No matter the adaptation, Dad's favorite scene was the one in which Dracula's female consorts tried to seduce and murder his guest, Jonathan Harker, while he slept on the couch in the parlor. Dad really got into these moments: "Dracula's three brides are descending upon Jonathan! A blonde, a brunette, and a redhead. If you gotta go, that's the way you should go! Killed by three hot vampire women!"

I found it a reasonable assertion when I considered how unappealing other kinds of deaths seemed in comparison. Still, I wished Dad would stop talking about death by sex. Once we discovered a praying mantis while poking around in the rough, uncultivated land at the end of our suburban street and dad fed it. He caught a cricket, placed it on the ground a foot away from the mantis, and watched it pounce and bite the cricket's head off. "Zeus!" he yelled.

I was mesmerized by the sight of the mantis chomping away at the struggling cricket.

"Praying mantises do this to the males right after they mate, not unlike human women!" Dad joked, nudging me with his elbow.

At seven, I was never quite sure how to respond when Dad asked me to identify the sexiest vampire woman in the movies we watched. He'd press me, "Come on, now! Don't be shy. Who would you most like to bite you in the neck and drink your blood?"

I hid behind my bag of cheddar cheese Doritos and remained silent.

"You have to have some preference! I'll give you a hint, son. Not an ice queen blonde. Always go for the sultry, dark-haired woman. I can't abide Eva Marie Saint types. Horrible."

On the TV screen, one of Dracula's brides whispered, "I want to suck on Jonathan."

"Me, first!" another bride declared.

"They're fighting for the right to suck on him!" Dad cried, pointing at the TV. "Yes!"

I scrunched my eyebrows together. "I can see how that's cool." (No, I couldn't.)

“We should stay up late tonight,” Dad declared. “*Lust for a Vampire* is up next.”

I took a closer look at the actresses hovering about Harker. “I think all three are pretty.”

“You have no standards!” Dad declared. “You’re like a socialist.”

I hid behind the Dorito bag again. “Nobody is *unattractive*.”

“The blonde is unattractive. This blonde is as washed-out as every other blonde.”

“I think the redhead is my favorite.” The redhead reminded me of Spider-Man’s girlfriend, Mary Jane Watson, in the comic books I read. Mary Jane was probably partly responsible for my blossoming affection for hazel-eyed redheads, as was the redheaded girl in my class, Claudia Occhiogrosso, a child model who starred in a Wendy’s commercial.

“Redheads are two-and-a-half stars, but they’re better than blondes. I only know two hot blondes: Nan Peterson from *The Hideous Sun Demon* and Nan Grey from *Dracula’s Daughter*.”

“I like Nan Grey,” Leo chimed in unexpectedly.

Dad nodded. “She’s so sexy, I can almost forgive her for being blonde.”

All joking about the ridiculousness of “scream queens” and the sexism of horror movies aside, they have their good parts, or I wouldn’t still embrace them as an adult. Horror movies and gothic novels might be dismissed as sadistic and nihilistic, but many of the gentlest and most oppressed people I’ve known have found comfort and catharsis in the only genre that understands their pain. Horror shows what it is like to be bullied, stalked, and sexually harassed, and it addresses the inevitability of death unflinchingly, while many other popular genres would prefer to pretend their protagonists live happily forever after. Indeed, as absurd as the supernatural elements of his stories are, Stephen King may well understand the dark underbelly of the American dream better than many more respected and naturalistic storytellers. King is adept at dramatizing the pains of childhood, the small-mindedness of small towns, and the existential angst of the introverted intellectual. King’s readers see themselves in his characters, and that identification helps them understand themselves and stop feeling alone in the world. At least,

that is the effect his writing has on me. *Stephen King gets it. I'm not crazy after all.*

King's worldview is not my father's. Dad finds King's gritty depictions of working-class life uncouth, so King does not provide Dad the comfort he provides me. Still, Dad's love of horror stories in general seems to be therapeutic, as mine is. Though not much of a reader, Dad found film noir and horror screenings comforting. Instead of providing fuel for fresh nightmares, they gave him a brief reprieve from the bad memories and nightmares of an unhappy childhood. Next to whatever appalling things happened to him in real life before I was born, Hammer's sexy vampire women were fun fairy tale creatures, imaginary girlfriends, and old buddies who kept him company, not anything truly "horrific." While I was grateful to Stephen King for placing before me unflinching reflections of the sixth-grade bullies who scarred me for life — both realistically in the form of Carrie's tormentors and allegorically in the shape of Pennywise the Dancing Clown — Dad did not want to confront his pain *quite* as directly. He preferred wish-fulfillment horror films as far removed from his Bronx childhood as he could imagine. Dad loved nineteenth-century European settings, polished villains, and happy endings in which a gentleman adventurer, often played by Peter Cushing, saved the women and children, and vanquished the evil. Peter Cushing even looked remarkably like my grandfather, Vincent senior. I'm sure that influenced Dad's affection for Cushing.

Unfortunately, horror movies were not very effective at keeping Dad's bad dreams away. Sweating and gasping for air, Dad often woke in the middle of the night. He had flashbacks to his childhood he couldn't shake. What would he dream about? I wasn't sure. Maybe he'd remember working a paper route for two years, saving for his future as a writer-director, only to find his stash emptied out one morning after his parents raided it for rent money. What lesson had they taught him? Don't work hard, because someone will just come along and rob you blind after you wasted years of your life working and saving. Dad could also be dreaming of his dog, a Golden Retriever he named Polyphemus in honor of the cyclops from *The Odyssey* and *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*. He was eight years old when his parents

announced that they would be moving to a new apartment in Co-op City tomorrow; it was smaller, cheaper, and did not allow pets. What lesson had his parents taught him when they dropped this bombshell? Don't allow yourself to love anyone, pet or human, because they will only be taken from you. These were the bad memories he had told me about. There were others so painful he referred to them elliptically or kept them to himself. He once mentioned "getting mugged by a Puerto Rican kid with a switchblade for my paper route money" as justification for blocking me from getting a paper route of my own. He cited "being made to walk on broken glass down an alley by some redheaded Irish thug" for why he didn't let me wander more than a few yards from our house. "Sniffing glue and boosting cars with my friends, and then crashing the car into the side of the road" was the provocative reason he never let me attend any sleepover parties. Dad had lived too much as a youth and didn't want me exposed to any of the dangerous elements that had almost landed him in jail or killed him. Mom, meanwhile, had been so pure of heart, she had done nothing illegal her whole life, and lived through the entire 1960s without even trying pot. Dad laughed at her over this. "I've had it. Nothing, really. You could have tried it, Gianna!"

Between Dad's wild childhood and mom's sheltered one, neither of them was going to let me off my short leash, that was for damn sure. Dad sought to protect me from having his childhood all over again, just as he continued to run as far from it as he could. That is why, as frustrated as he was that he and Mom had accidentally purchased a home in the wrong ethnic enclave, he was glad to raise his children in a nearly crime-free neighborhood. Still, feeling isolated by being one of the few Christian households on Kell Avenue, Dad would get bored with the silence and inactivity of Shabbos and pine for a weekend jaunt to Pennsylvania. When he could con my mother into agreeing, he would take solo trips to ski at Camelback Mountain Resort and gamble at Mount Airy Casino and Resort, sometimes meeting up with his great bear of a friend, Joe Boland. More frequently, he would bring us all along on day trips to the Poconos to fish for largemouth and striped bass at Brown Fish and Pay Lakes, dine at the Great Wall Chinese restaurant, browse wax waterfall sculptures at Pocono Candle in East



Stroudsburg, or pick up “Pocono Crunch” dessert at Callie’s Candy Kitchen. Once a year, we ventured deeper into Pennsylvania to visit the Amish Communities of Lancaster. Over time, I developed a fascination with the Amish, and a respect for their stubborn refusal to participate in modern life. I felt a certain kind of jealousy for the Amish. As much as I might be tempted to criticize my father for being motivated by a “white flight” syndrome in his yearning for rural Pennsylvania, he did instill in me something sorely lacking in both suburbanites and city dwellers alike: an appreciation of nature. Thanks to Dad, I grew up a staunch environmentalist. Ironically, I was an environmentalist who happened to be deathly allergic to Nature. All my life, I have sneezed up a storm and developed allergic shiners — looking like I had two black eyes — upon the minutest exposure to birch, grass, oak, ragweed, and cedar pollen, as well as mold, pet dander, cigarette smoke, and whatever the fuck is in most barns. Additional symptoms included mysterious irritability, fatigue, and constant low-level sinus pressure that spiked into an agonizing migraine at four a.m. after causing a blood-curdling nightmare. These symptoms also appeared three hours after any visit I made to the house of a person with one cat, or two seconds standing in the doorway of a home with three cats. Unfortunately, Dad’s favorite relatives — Aunt Irene and Uncle Cesar — owned a cat. We could never visit their house without my getting badly sick.

Instead of professional allergy treatment, I armed myself with Dimetapp to pull off going outside. Dimetapp was better at sedating me than blunting my symptoms. Dad finally took me to an allergist, who exposed me to forty allergens by pinpricking me up and down both arms and all over my back. He left the examination room for fifteen minutes to give the samples I was allergic to time to flare up. Upon his return, he found my entire back and both arms covered in bumps. “Good lord!” he cried. “You are an allergic person! You may need to become the next *Boy in the Plastic Bubble*!” May you never fascinate the specialist with your condition.

Dad and I were the biggest fans of Pennsylvania in the family. Leo could take it or leave it. He liked everything Dad and I liked about the area, but was more acutely aware of the rural poverty, gun clubs, and

Confederate flags, as well as what they signified. Meanwhile, Mom was never at ease in the Poconos or Lancaster county for more than an afternoon. Thanks to her upbringing, going outside into the great outdoors meant playing stickball in front of her Brooklyn apartment, watching old Italian men who owned their own homes play bocce on their stamp-sized front lawns, or sunbathing on the roof of the apartment building in a lawn chair. Spending time in a rural area that was miles from the nearest hospital, grocery store, firehouse, or police station terrified Mom. On one of the few occasions Dad successfully coaxed her into staying overnight in a cabin in the woods, Mom stayed awake all night, staring up at the ceiling, panicked by the possibility of an enormous grizzly bear bursting through the front door and eating us all alive. Dad slept his first restful night beside her, comforted by the number of miles he had placed between himself and the Puerto Rican kid who had mugged him and the Irish thug who had forced him to walk on broken glass.

Since Dad had only worked wage-slave jobs that ranged from minimum wage to payment on commission, he did not make enough money to buy the Pennsylvania weekend home he longed for. Mom was the one with the living wage, as well as the family member least enamored of Pennsylvania. Periodically, Dad would coax Mom into agreeing to look at model homes in Pocono housing communities that catered to the New York weekender crowd. When he'd find a house that looked good to him, he'd flash Bambi eyes at Mom, asking wordlessly, "Can you buy this for me? I can't afford it on my own." Mom would refuse. Wasn't the area too quiet to stomach? Where were the honking car horns? The furious arguments of neighbors heard through paper *mâché* walls? The drunk staggering home from the pub, peeing on the alley wall? No, she couldn't buy a house. During one of these fruitless model-viewings, the unfortunate salesman had the misguided impression my parents might have serious interest in closing a deal that day. The salesman made two additional, wildly incorrect assumptions: first, that Dad was the breadwinner, and second, that Dad could be goaded into putting the money down if he were teased about being whipped. In front of Mom, the salesman said to Dad, "You don't need your wife's approval here, right?"

Mom heard that one. I'll never forget how crimson Mom's face turned. "You've got some nerve talking about me like I'm not sitting right here! Like I'm the enemy of fun!"

Dad jerked a thumb in Mom's direction. "She's the one with the money."

"Who in the hell needs to own two houses two hours apart?" Mom shouted. "Let's keep the one house and drive out on weekends like we've been doing and save our money."

They were now talking like they were alone, and not right next to me, Leo, and the salesman. Leo thought now was a good time to tune everyone out. He sat on the grass near our car and resumed reading his Carl Barks *Uncle Scrooge* comic.

Mom added, "Everywhere we go is only ninety minutes away, the way you drive, Mad Max. And what about Damien's allergies? Can he live in a rural area for an *entire weekend*, when a *few hours* are a stretch for him?"

Dad winced. "Not without his head exploding, like in *Scanners*." Dad looked back at the salesman. "I guess that's a 'no.'"

The salesman had figured this out and was already halfway to his jeep.

Under my fascinated gaze, my parents morphed into doubles of Groucho Marx and Margaret Dumont. Margaret Dumont tapped her foot impatiently at Groucho. He wagged his eyebrows and held up a picture of Kamron, her college boyfriend. "You mean a woman of your culture and money and beauty and money and wealth and money would marry this fellow instead of me?"