

The Angelic Darkness

Chapter I

It was my father's story of the Ethiopian baby that I couldn't get out of my head on the night of Tuesday, June 3, 1986. I was sitting up in bed with the lights on, seeing the glimmer in his eyes, hearing the clink of his lighter, and watching the smoky words cascade out of his mouth, wondering if it was right then that my life started to go wrong. Although I couldn't figure out the exact connection, I knew that things had to have skittered off course somewhere, very probably there, because here I was, scared of the dark and shivering alone at two in the morning, without any semblance of a family; my wife, Alexandra, had left me for good that morning.

Not that I hadn't expected Alexandra to leave; we'd been fighting on and off for months—about my need for other women; whether she was suffocating me or belittling me; if she'd listened to what I'd just said; eaten leftover pizza earmarked for me; or purposely pruned the plum trees too severely. Weeks before, I'd risked discussing it all with my younger brother, Jay. I was sure I was no longer in love—after all, I rarely even felt like touching her and the very idea of having sex with her was enough to make me nauseous. It seemed like the most sensible explanation. But I was wrong; Jay said authoritatively that I couldn't stand Alexandra—that I'd become obsessed with our arguments, in fact—because I was *too much in love with her*. Maybe he was right. Or very possibly, he was nuts. But what to do then? As if he were playing at police detective, impersonating his beloved Captain Furillo on *Hill Street Blues* most likely, he told me that I'd better figure out what my motives were.

So I did my best to separate the white light of the explosions that Alex and I produced into a spectrum of my desires and fears, then transferred it all to a coloring book which I could refer to whenever I wanted. Color incest violet; disapproval, indigo; loss of control, blue; abandonment, green; punishment, yellow. My parents and brother had helped me mix all these dyes. And I was the painter and publisher; I had final responsibility. But it was no fucking help, of course; there were so many more tones contributing to the surface colors of my emotions that I could hardly ever know what was really going on. Besides, it was no one color (or even two or three), but instead the great white light of uncontrollable rage that could no longer be quelled and which flash-fired to ashes the last dazed fragments of our marriage.

On that first night alone in the house we'd shared in Pacific Heights for four years, it wasn't the intricacies of my wayward life with Alex that tangled up my thoughts, however, but my long-ago conversation with my father; I kept seeing him grab a hold of his cherished silver jug and telling me his story of the Ethiopian baby—only this time the infant's blood was sluicing like new wine over his callused hands.

For years, my dad had kept his jug on the top ledge of my parents' walk-in closet, out of reach, just in front of the small trapdoor to our attic. Studded with beveled colored glass squares and banded with intricate arabesques, it was always black with tarnish. Even so, my father had

forbidden my mother—the designated silver polisher in our house—from touching it. Not to mention Jay and me. It was too valuable to risk being scratched or even smudged, we figured, having been carried back from Ethiopia to Naples when my father was a soldier fighting to extend the Italian Empire back in the 1930s.

Lacking any evidence to the contrary, my brother and I fantasized that the jug was from the sixteenth century, having picked that particular time-period because it looked more archaic and pleasingly imperfect than any of the polished pewter mugs and cups we'd seen in our schoolbooks on colonial history. Having long ago discovered the capital of Ethiopia on the beach-ball-sized globe I kept in our bedroom, we guessed that Dad had bought it at a crumbling antique store in Addis Ababa. Or maybe he'd looted it, Jay thought with starry-eyed envy, stolen it from a Thousand And One Nights palace crowning a lonely desert mountain. We figured it was magical, of course, like Aladdin's lamp.

Then one day when I was nine—back in the summer of sixty-three, that slow hot postcard-perfect August when we'd all seen John-John and Caroline running happily along sandy beaches with their parents, a mere three months before their own world would be shattered to pieces—I found out what it really was.

My father called me into my parents' bedroom. He was standing by his night table, had his big coarse hand inside the jug, was winking at me as if he really were about to perform a magic trick. My mouth was probably hanging open; it was the first time I'd seen his prized possession outside its protective shrine.

Taking out a small piece of rough brown leather, he motioned me over to him and dangled it in front of my eyes. It was hanging from a straw-like string, was maybe an inch and a half long and an inch wide, a bit pimply in spots, as if it might have been covered with tiny hairs at one time. It looked just like dried hide, I thought, though I didn't know how I might know that—maybe from our yearly field trips from Searingtown School to the Museum of Natural History in Manhattan. As he jiggled it up and down, arousing my curiosity, Dad's deep-set black eyes began shimmering with pride—pride mixed with corruption, I've thought in years since. As if he enjoyed how he was about to soil me.

"Take a look-a this, Billy," he said in his gruff voice, a slight Italian accent adding weight to the ends of his words, not like Rossano Brazzi or any the other Italian actors whose exhausting movies my dad made us watch on TV—much darker, without any trace of charm or comedy.

I turned the hide in my hands, sniffed it. It smelled like dust, a bit sour, too, as if it had been pickled or something. I could tell he wanted me to ask him what it was real bad. I didn't want to, because I'd already figured out, of course, that this was going to be trouble. When I did, he replied, "Billy, that little dried *niente* you're holding—that *nothing*—was the future of Ethiopia. Back when it still had a future, I mean."

He smiled cagily, then sat down on the edge of his bed. My father was just over six feet tall, muscular then, though he would develop a hanging belly and hairy breasts over the next few years. The bed sank with a groan. "Come here," he said. "Now that you're nine, you're old enough to hear about it. Might do you some good. Keep you out of trouble."

I didn't like sitting next to my father. I never liked being within arm's distance of him. Or smelling his caustic scent of tobacco, which mingled with the Old Spice aftershave.

"Sit, boy," he said, seeing me hesitate. "You're such a little *topo* sometimes—a mouse. No one's going to eat you." He opened his mouth to show me his browned teeth and gold fillings, then laughed; my father found things funny that other people didn't.

After I dropped down next to him, he explained that long before I'd been born he'd been fighting in Ethiopia. This one time, he said, his platoon had been destroying railroad tracks near

the coast when some villagers started to protest. The captain in charge ordered the soldiers to kill them. "Maybe fifty or sixty of them," Dad said. "With guns, it's not that hard—doesn't take much time."

At that, I remember not being able to hold back any longer and trying for an escape: "Hey, Dad, I'm kinda worried my bike might get stolen," I said. "I left it in the driveway. I better go get it."

He threw his arm across my chest, as he did to keep us from flying forward if we were sitting in the front seat of our Dodge station wagon and had to stop short. "You just sit still and listen for once, you little *topo*." After I nodded, he continued: "So, after we killed them, and just before we dug the pits to bury them...it was sunset, and there was this group of kids that must have been playing away from the village. They came back wet. Like they'd been swimming. Maybe your age, Billy, though smaller than you."

I could hear my mother preparing lunch downstairs, the tap-tap-tap of her slicing something on her round cutting board, probably plum tomatoes; I'd seen a thick white rope of mozzarella sitting on the kitchen counter on my way toward the stairs, and my dad liked a big tomato and cheese salad during the summer. I was hoping she'd call us down before this story got much farther.

Dad took his pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes from his shirt pocket, stuck one in his mouth, and lit it with his clanky lighter. I was wondering where Jay had escaped to, and I was thinking that it was just as well that he was probably playing at one of our neighbor's houses; maybe my hearing this story would mean that he wouldn't have to. Dad took a greedy puff, then said, "I'd never killed kids during the war. It was a rule I had. Pure *pecoraggine*. Being...being yellow. So my friends in our platoon, they wanted to see me kill the kids. When I told them I couldn't, they all laughed. Except the *capitano*—Fortanelli. A big bastard from *Torino*. *Feroce*, and built like a *rinoceronte*. He hated southern Italians like me—*meridionali*, *terroni*. He ordered me to kill the kids. You didn't argue with him. You just didn't. So I pointed my gun at the oldest one first, held it out..." Here, my dad thrust out two fingers with his cigarette in between, then pointed his thumb straight up, making a revolver. He gave a nasty laugh that didn't seem like a laugh at all. More like the sneer he sometimes gave my brother and me when he thought we were too American. "So there I was, with my hand shaking. I squeezed the trigger and pow...! He fell over, half his face blown off. Not like a kid anymore. Like a bleeding animal. Black and red all over."

He was silent for a while, getting back his composure, inhaling hard on his cigarette, as if he were drawing in stubborn memories from it. I could hear my mom opening and closing the refrigerator door. Maybe if I yelled down to her to ask if I could help make lunch, she might agree, and I could dash out before my dad bashed me. When I looked up at him, however, he seemed to understand my thoughts. His shimmering eyes conspired to say, *Just try it!*

"As we were leaving, one of the soldiers discovered a girl giving birth. She'd crawled somewhere outside the village, was lying behind this big thorny bush. She was maybe fifteen, was trying not to scream. Kind of grunting, Billy. I'd never seen anybody giving birth. None of us had, I think. We were just kids ourselves. I was only eighteen, you know. And watching that girl, I had this moment, this... It was like I was alone in the world with her." Unable to explain his feelings at that moment, his hands swirled in lazy circles, "I was like a character in a play or something. I felt like I understood things about life. I mean, there was this baby coming into the world—it was the future for these people, these Ethiopians. And I understood that *their* future belonged to *us*—should belong to us, anyway. I mean, that was our goal in Africa. I realized it was the most important thing—killing them, killing the kids." He gripped the leather in his fist, the cord dangling down, then opened it front of my nose. He stood up. He towered over me. "A

few of the men helped the girl have her baby,” he continued. “Then I killed it and cut this off. *È il suo...*”

Dad said some other word in Italian I didn't get. It probably meant *ear* or *nose*. Or maybe even *testicles*. Jay speculated a few years later that he'd actually cut off a section of the umbilical cord. That's a word I definitely wouldn't have understood at the time. But we never learned exactly what he'd said.

It was now more than two decades since my dad told me his story, and yet I *still* found myself regretting never having found out for sure. Sitting up in bed, a shivering blanket draped over my shoulders, I was watching my father drop his keepsake back into the mouth of his silver jug, listening to him say matter-of-factly, “Your mother must have lunch almost ready by now. Go wash your hands, then come down.” He spoke as if the story he'd told me didn't change anything for good, as if we could just go on with our lives.

“What about the girl, Dad?” I asked. “The girl who gave birth?”

He flapped his hands dismissively and said that she'd screamed like a hyena when they'd killed her newborn, but that they—Africans—don't feel death as deeply as Europeans, so it wasn't so bad.

“And did you kill her, too?”

“Course we did, boy. When we were ready.”

Something about that word, *ready*—now, I began wondering what else he and his friends might have done to the girl. Though maybe it was all a lie. Maybe Italian soldiers never committed any atrocities in Ethiopia and the keepsake was nothing more than animal hide. Maybe he and his friends didn't hunger after trophies like ears and fingers, didn't try to convince themselves that the people they'd just killed were really only animals. And it would have been just like Dad to invent a story to scare me. Though I never bothered asking him; I'd never have believed his reply either way.

But when Dad told me all this, I was only nine, of course, and I wasn't wondering about the connotation of particular words like *when we were ready* or having any heretical doubts about the truth of his story. I *knew* it had happened just as he had told me. And I felt the dry hot wind of an overwhelming sickness pervading me, as if I'd been shipwrecked on an island, as if I'd spend my whole life alone, never have a real family.

As it happens, this feeling of utter loneliness came back to me twenty-three years later, after my wife's outraged accusations had subsided and she'd withdrawn into the silence of her imminent departure.

Kicking my legs over the side of the bed, holding my head in my hands, I remembered that as my father was walking away, I called after him, “And what about the jug?” I guess I was hoping that there was some remnant of good in his story, some potential for magic still vibrating inside that tarnished silver.

He turned at the doorway to his walk-in closet. He held it up. “This?”

I nodded and said, “Where'd you get it? Did you find it in a cave or something?”

He shrugged. “I just picked it up somewhere—some store. It's nothing. It's what's inside that means something, that's important.”

That's important... I knew now that he was right, because here I was speculating that the break-up of my marriage might even somehow have its origins in that dangling swatch of stolen flesh, in the years of future life cut away from a child I never knew. And I was convinced, too, just as when I was a kid, that my only friend was the light filling the room from a bulb above my head, that if I were to flip a switch and cede to the darkness lurking inside my own house, that I, too, might be murdered.

Why my fear had always taken this form—linked to the dark, I mean—I couldn't say. The few friends to whom I'd ever mentioned it usually intimated that it represented years of repression—that what I really wanted was for the horned witches inside my closet and psychopaths under my bed to reach out for me and lead me off into their embracing darkness. You could've fooled me. But, as I found out while trying to discover the motives behind the failure of my marriage, the First Law of Self-Sleuthing might very well be: *who the hell really knows for sure why we do anything?*

So there I was on my first night alone in quite some time, inside the house I'd shared with Alex since just before our wedding, learning once again that every creak was the jungle drumbeat of my impending doom. Listening for ghostly whispers through my closed door, leaning forward as if to eavesdrop upon my own timid imaginings, I realized in an instant of icy clarity that I was the very same person who continually took this posture of terror in childhood. Or at least I was his descendent—somewhat larger but equally panicked.

My first instant of pure naked fear was touched off by the groan of a lamp downstairs. I recalled with despair my skittish mother informing me years before that such noises were symptomatic of "the house settling." *Settling into what?* I'd always wondered. *And for how long would we descend?*

As a kid, I always constructed nighttime protection out of my two pillows; when the first was placed horizontally under my head and the other arranged vertically against the border of the bed, they formed the bricks of a magic wall that no murderer could ever breach. I normally arranged my blue fur pussycat at the corner of the two pillows and, despite fears of carbon dioxide poisoning, occasionally draped a blanket roof—or in summer a sheet—over my head.

These days, I figure that the witch in the closet was my mother and the murderer under the bed my father. Most people who've met them tend to think I'm exaggerating wildly, but then, we never really get to know other people's parents. At least not what they're like with the doors closed and locked.

My fear became so bad one summer—I was fifteen, I believe—that I would unfailingly burst up out of dreams of criminal evil into a confining darkness, my whole body poised for imminent death. Although the towel I kept by my bed could soak up my sweat, neither it nor my electric light could dispel the stalking eyes of the grotesque monsters who inhabited my nightmares. It was impossible for me to fall asleep again until the appearance of the sun. Often I would tiptoe into my parents' room wrapped in a protective blanket, nuzzle myself into the green lounge chair onto which my father tossed his dirty clothing, and watch my mother and father sleep all night long. Dad was pretty overweight by then, having taken a desk job the year before as sales manager for Perucci Brothers Construction, where he'd previously been a foreman. He'd also grown a pencil-thin mustache that made him look a bit like Oliver Hardy. He wheezed when he slept. My mother was small and disheveled, had droopy eyes and a bald spot at the top of her head where she'd pulled out her hair. She curled into a ball while she slept. Both of them would turn occasionally under the covers but rarely wake up. In fact, I can't remember them ever spotting me there. Maybe they did—I'm not sure they would have cared. Anyway, I'd sit there listening for creaks and rumbles, expecting the first footstep of my murderer at any moment. I would count and count. I'd be up in the tens of thousands when oblique rays of blessed sunlight would finally pierce their Venetian blinds, and I'd trudge with relief back to my room to fall instantly asleep.

With my newfound penchant for looking at things in inverted ways, I'd now wager that instead of coming into my parents' room for comfort, I was really keeping an eye on them to make sure they wouldn't do me in while I slept.

With Alexandra gone, however, these insights didn't help much. And when I did finally talk myself into slipping under the covers and turning off the lights, I tossed and turned over a frigid

sheet, fighting the urge to build my pillow fortress again. I was amazed that I was now thirty-two years old and that I was less upset about her leaving than about my fear of the dark. I fantasized about telling Jay what had happened, pictured him standing there frowning at me as I detailed Alexandra's accusations and my own motions for the defense, as if he were sure that I didn't have a clue what our arguments were really about. I don't know why I picked him for my imaginary conversation; after all, I had been given ample reasons not to trust him over the last ten years. Maybe I figured that he was just the right person to make me feel even worse about my life. Anyway, in my imaginings with him, out popped my certainty that Alexandra was never coming back and that if I wanted her to return, which I wasn't sure I did, it was really only to dispel my fear of living alone—which most frequently came down to my fear of the dark. I said that maybe what I really needed was a tenant to share my house in the meantime, explaining to Jay that the layout of rooms would make it easy to live with someone and still maintain my privacy. I added that I needed the extra income if Alexandra wasn't going to pay half our mortgage anymore. "It's a practical solution," I concluded.

"Yeah, it sure is," he replied eagerly. But I could see him thinking I was a moron.

"Maybe...maybe it won't work, after all," I added. "Maybe it won't get to the root of my problem."

"No, it probably won't," Jay nodded.

He seemed happy about that, so I took a deep breath and rushed him out my fantasy front door.

Looking hopelessly for a warm spot inside the icy sheets, I thought for a while about how hard it is to effect real change. Then Jay, like my own personal homunculus, was back inside my head, and I told him, "I think that maybe I'm going to try to find a tenant as soon as I can."

"Go ahead. If you think *that's* going to work, be my guest."

He was so smug. And *be my guest* was an expression my mother would have used against me. Which made me angry. And knowing that I desperately needed someone else's presence in the house, I came swiftly to the conclusion that I was damn well going to look for someone to live with. Only I also wanted to wait a little while in order to be certain that letting a stranger inside the crumbling walls of my life was the right thing to do.

I didn't need great patience. My second night alone in the house, I imagined that slumbering spirits, awakened by each rutling of leaves, would blame me for their being disturbed. So I buried my head at the corner of my pillow fortress and slept in and out of dreams of feral animals and strangers who had somehow stolen into the house. In the worst of my nightmares, a lizard-faced taxi driver was sitting on the back of the white couch in my living room. In the panic of my first waking moments, I sensed this reptilian thing downstairs, looking up covetously at the closed door to my bedroom. I crept forward to this barrier between us, turned the handle ever so carefully—so as not to create any noise that would give away my position—and caressed it open. I turned on the light...

The living room was empty. The front door was locked and latched. Same with the back entrance and the door to the spare rooms.

And yet my heart was thumping.

I got no sleep the rest of that night. My father's voice kept coming to me. He was telling me how soldiers get used to the blood. "To the *puzzo* of death, too—the stink," he was saying. "You even like it—like it *a hell of a lot*. Because it means you're still alive." With a wink, he added, "But that's a kind of secret."

Back in bed, I began picturing Alexandra lying on the futon in the spare room at my brother's house; I was pretty sure that that was where she'd gone. I wondered how she was faring, if she

maintained symmetry by thinking of me. But mostly I waited for spirits. Now and again, I tried to figure out from what depths I'd conjured them up from, why my fears took this form.

That night firmed my resolve. After work the next day, I listed the back rooms of my house with a flat-finding service on Divisadero Street.

I saw four prospective tenants on Friday. All of them were awful. I passed the entire weekend haunted by nefarious spirits, stopped shaving and bathing. On Monday, I told the people at work that I was growing a beard. Who knows what they thought of my odor. The only person I told about my split with Alexandra was Jessica. She'd met Alex a few times at the office, once for a movie. She also knew a little about my trysts with other women. We'd even joked about them. So the breakup wouldn't be the biggest shock in the world. And unlike the rest of the vultures at work, she wouldn't dig her beak into me for scraps she could pass along to her friends.

Jessica's got sad black eyes, a large nose, which she claims to have inherited from her Sicilian grandmother, thick brown hair cropped like a porcupine.

"That explains your...your less than professional state," she said when I told her about my separation from Alexandra. "So when did it happen? Did she just walk out on you? No tears...no note?"

"A few days ago. We argued. The usual—my affairs, women. She said she couldn't take it anymore, that she'd been building to this ...'like a pyramid on which she'd finally placed the last stone,' she said.

"A pyramid?"

"It's just Alex—her metaphors. An English teacher she loved once told her it was an effective way of communicating. And Alex loves to be effective. Her best...God, once she said that all my emotions were like the sewage in a cesspool—hidden way underground, decomposing, putrid, unavailable to the living."

Jessica laughed.

I smiled; it did seem strangely funny now. "You know, we didn't always get along," I sighed. "But I thought we'd go on for a longer time than this."

My words conjured up a silence founded in failure. I gestured that Jessica was free to leave. She shifted her position, shrugged. "Yeah—we all think like that," she observed. "But she'll probably come back."

"No."

"You don't think so?"

"Not this time. She turned into a bigger mummy than I'd ever seen before—stiff, rigid, hard. No way. She's taken a lot of her stuff already. And we already agreed that I could stay in the house indefinitely. No way she's coming back—no way."

Jessica came forward out of the doorway and bent down in front of me, peering at me with those big eyes of hers as if I were a hurt kid. "It's hard," she said with a mothering pout. She rubbed my shoulder. "I know. But wait and see what happens. Maybe you're wrong. Lots of things can happen in life."

I didn't want to tell her that maybe I didn't want Alex back. "I suppose anything's possible," I replied.

She stood back up and sighed, "Life," as if it implied a series of inevitable disappointments. I felt she understood me till she added, "Maybe it has a positive side, you know."

Jessica waited for my acknowledgment. I demurred; I was wondering if finding a positive side to everything was a late twentieth-century disease or if it had been released into the world during some earlier age. Maybe women were particularly susceptible to it; unflagging optimism had been one of Alex's most exasperating qualities as well.

"So what's the positive side?" I asked, giving in to my fate.

"This way, you'll know if you really want her or not," Jessica declared.

I nodded rather than press the issue.

"And besides," she twinkled, "this way you can screw other women without feeling any guilt!"

I rolled my eyes. "You think so, Jessica?"

"Sure. That's the way it was for me after the divorce. Now I sleep with anyone I want without having to worry a bit that I'm hurting anyone."

"Except yourself," I said.

"Ooh, that's heavy." Jessica giggled and strutted back into the doorway, blew me a kiss, and gave me a thumbs-up sign. "Go for it!" she said.

That was the last confessional experiment I tried. The only person I really wanted to talk to was Alex herself. Part of me wanted to assuage my guilt with stories of how well she was doing and another little dark part of me wanted her to have sagging eyes and tear tracks on her cheeks, of course—disheveled hair, maybe a nightgown on in the middle of the day. During one of these cruel daydreams, I realized with a start it was my mother I was describing. *I was hoping she had turned into my mother!* Pretty damn strange.

That week, it began to get really difficult for me to face going home after work. At the time, I had an office on the thirty-fourth floor of One Post Street, just one more tower inside the growing steel and glass sprawl of downtown San Francisco, was editing a bimonthly magazine for employees of McKesson Corp. So I'd hibernate there till maybe seven in the evening, then get a little tipsy on gin and tonics at a sleazy bar on Mission called the Belfry. When my stomach began crying out for food, I'd walk home on Sutter Street through the Tenderloin, San Francisco's senseless-crime district. Any other neighborhood would have provided a contrast to my mood, you see. But not the Tenderloin. It advertised depression. I mean, those transient hotels with the horrible neon signs out front. God, they always made me think of old people having to put up with sludge in their sinks and cockroaches in their beds after fifty years of sweating it out on some assembly line. Where's the justice in that? And the whores... I was fascinated and repulsed by them at the same time. Never visited any, you see. I guess that would have dispelled the magic. But for me, they were representatives from another world, a bit like elves. Or maybe more to the point, like those witches I used to imagine. I'd watch them teasing one another, compare their ludicrously snug outfits, marvel at the way they pranced around in spiked heels like prosaic Tina Turners, all the while wondering what they thought about, what sex meant for them. I'd marvel at my missing obsessions, too, my lack of libido. I couldn't figure out where it had it gone of late. Then I'd continue on home to my house on Clay Street in Pacific Heights. Once there, I'd look around as if on patrol, whisper with bravado to myself *this ain't so bad*, flip on the TV, and boil some ziti. By then, the San Francisco sunset of pink and gold had usually splashed itself across the big bay window. I'd sit on the couch and eat. I'd think of Alex being gone a lot, of course. But I was pervaded by a companionable loneliness, the I-know-I'm-feeling-sorry-for-myself-but-it-feels-too-good-to-stop sort that I'd felt as a kid when I was punished and sent to my room.

One thing I began to understand for certain, however: the downfall of my marriage had banished me to the isolated, solitary world which I'd originally built for myself as a child.

I'd come home to the landscape that was my birthright.

All this is not to say that part of me didn't know that I was letting my home decay into a pigpen of self-pity. But I figured a little wallowing didn't matter. For despite even my most indulgent intentions, my comfortable home would fade each night with the descent of dusk. In the dark, I'd

turn around into a house I no longer trusted, with closets that just might be hiding killers who could be incited to murder by the slightest noise.

I saw two more people interested in my spare rooms at the end of the week: a giant nature girl wearing a Mexican poncho and a walnut-faced grandpa with tufted eyebrows. They brought out my nastiness and loneliness. I ushered them quickly out of the house as if they were exiles from a Nathanael West novel.

Then, on Monday, June 16, thirteen days after Alexandra had left, I started to cry convulsively—for hours at a time. And for no particular reason; my tears were simply beyond my control. I knew then that I was very little changed from the shy college freshman who'd been exiled from sexuality and the thirteen-year-old boy who'd been trapped inside a world of abusive adults; for several days each time, I'd entered a horizonless landscape composed only of tears.

It was as if—during these two periods of my life—the rusty armor bequeathed to me by my father had cracked.

In my calmer moments, I now considered that maybe I would be subject to such displays of fragility every few years until my death; they were like repetitive phrases in the long slow symphony that was my life.

Yet there was a difference this time; now, there was the added realization that this world was just a moment's loss of balance away.

Thankfully, however, I was also able to remember that I'd already gone beyond what my parents had planned for me in just being able to love Alexandra. If I never accomplished anything else, I'd surpassed my grandest dreams and escaped maybe the biggest of their snares.

At times, I considered calling a few friends just to talk. Or even my brother Jay; after all, he'd known me longer than anyone. But I sensed that the time for shoulders to cry on had passed, and I didn't want to risk having to speak with Alex if I called my brother.

While I was trying to keep my tears from forming an untraversable moat around me, an intriguing man left a message on my recording machine. I know for sure that it was Wednesday the eighteenth of June because, months later, when I finally got home from the hospital, I saved the calendar on which I'd written all my appointment notes in the hopes of reconstructing this extraordinary sequence of events.

It was the man's undefined accent that made me curious; I'm a sucker for foreigners, probably because you can't really understand all they're saying and end up giving them the benefit of the doubt that it's intelligent. Or perhaps because learning that other countries didn't just exist as colored shapes on maps was important for me. His name was Peter something. I couldn't quite get it. He sounded as if the recording machine confused him. I liked that.

I returned his call right away, and he asked in an enthusiastic voice if he could come by that evening. In my mind, I made a mad list of excuses for why he couldn't come, but I was somehow able to see that even a crying spell in front of him might be absurdly amusing. In the end, I agreed that we should meet.

