

Adam Druck

Rich

There was a certain sinking feeling spreading across parts of America in that time. One that no one could seem to grab onto and know exact, and how much more so did it spread, slow and hidden beneath the gloss and gleam of what was, in financial terms, years of great boon. A kind of lowering of spirits in some as if they'd finally been looked away from, unappreciated and unsought for, as if the truths they'd once built themselves up on no longer reigned true. Then more and more as it spread, a misty veil began to cover their eyes which the grand lot of our lucky-plenty could still not hope to see. But then again, how could we? It was September 20th, 1987. The New York Times would not be writing about that sort-of thing or those kinds-of people for another 15 years. It was still just a feeling, for each affected to struggle up against silently, in their own way; hardly any allowed their fellow other to become aware of what was building inside, hardly any allowed their own self; so how, then, could we have known? It was as if, in the darkness of each night, they were all wrestling against the very same one of God's sent angels. Yet it was as if, at the end of every night, they all looked up, in dissatisfaction, only to their very own moon.

James was 27, and though still young, his soul already felt to him wearied and depleted, like there was only so much more time left to lean upon it. It was for that reason, more than any other, that he was now on the interstate, speeding up the east coast from Georgia, where he'd of late been aimlessly drifting, to the town in North Jersey in which he'd first grown up. That town in North Jersey that he'd not been back to, since first leaving at 18, eager, then, only to get as far from his pregnant high-school sweetheart as possible, thinking confidently that all the chains that'd ever formed between them would have to, with enough distance, break. Yet, in the near-decade since then and now he'd thoroughly realized his youth's foolishness,

as in every part of America he'd ever found himself, what he'd felt and carried in his heart for her had never altered in the slightest. So now, finally, he'd decided to come back to her, to that hometown she never left and to that house of another man's, where he'd learned from some friends back-home, she and the child had ended up.

For so long, before that decision, he had been in a kind of turmoil that he couldn't yet admit to. Not until a moment, in the earliest hours of that same day while driving on a local highway, as he began to lose control of the car that he'd sunk everything into, and the driver-side ripping apart destroying all the added cosmetic value along with it, and slamming his foot down on the breaks that very instant before it would've flipped right over as the chunks of his life passed before his eyes like a picture reel, it was right then and there that it hit him; none of this mattered in the slightest. Whether he lived or died, there was no difference as there was no longer a direction he wished to go towards on either side. It was as if everything for him on the ground and in the sky had already been expended, or as if, he wondered listlessly, he'd truly never had a chance.

Only once he got his car back working and on the road did that stark notion begin to really shake him. Then, oddly, like a lifeline or a distraction, or maybe just a counterpoint to all in his mind more-heavy, he thought of his son for the first time that year and he wondered how old the boy was before quickly giving up on the math. Yet, for the very first time that deeply, and almost catching him off-guard, he suddenly remembered that he didn't know his son's face either and he felt a great wave of familiar shame then wash over him; an unwelcome reminder of why he so rarely let his thoughts wander in the boy's direction. It was only a few hours after that accident which should have scarred him, yet only had scarred his car, that he found himself impulsively back on the road, loaded up on his one last speed-ball and with but a single thought in mind. It was time to see his son's face.

And simply to have somewhere again to go towards, it all caused such a reinvigoration of hopeful thought, listening to early Bruce all the while and telling himself the world was back at his feet. He no longer had any means of making a living for himself. His shoulder clicked, his head hurt, and the age of his spirit had made it so he was no longer capable of carrying out a single day. But it was only, he told himself, because he couldn't still be pushed to work these same couple-of-jobs doing the same couple of soul-crushing tasks, whether it be on a rig or in a factory, on the road or in a field, it all never building towards

something greater, and yet him still always telling himself if he just remained in the same place long enough, then maybe it would, like it does, if you'd only build roots.

In that way, there was a selfishness to James's decision, solely in his need, finally, for a home. It was that, most of all, which kept him from really thinking out how he was going to present himself; or how he was going to be accepted; or how Carol would look at him after these nine years with not a word between. In the part of his ego that had been fostered since as early as women had been involved, he just took as a given that she would be happy to take him in; even if he was looking a little haggard; even if he'd lost a bit more weight than she'd be used to. He took as a given that, now that he was ready, he could come home and be the father that he needed to be. He'd already forgotten about the step-father, step-child, and their shared lives entirely.

As James drove farther north, the leaves continued to change colors in ways they hadn't before, and even some on the branches looked ready, before their time, to fall. Occasionally, he'd try to sing along to the music, as a means of distraction, with that same force as Bruce, who'd always represented to him the ideal of what an American should be, self-reliant; an individualist; unbound by his past and in-control of his story. Yet James couldn't bring that same power into his voice, that feeling inside like it could all be his. He could no longer say it aloud without a sudden wave of unexplainable tears striking up against him. The very tears, he'd just told himself that morning, had finally been thought away.

A few hours later, he pulled up in front of a one-story home not all that different or far from where his father had once lived, with the same lead paint chipping from the outside. It was in the later hours of Sunday afternoon, when everything is hushed, and almost immediately the door opened and the mother of his child and another strange boy in a little-league uniform came rushing out. His son was nowhere in sight. He got out of his car and simply yelled "Carol." It struck a panic into Rich's step-brother, Nicky, that a savagely battered car door from across the street should swing open and that a pale, emaciated figure should then be coming towards and yet his step-mother didn't seem to react at all. All Carol could do was stand there stiffly, trying to convince herself only that this strung-out man coming towards her was anybody but the one her lingering memory had always told her Rich's father would, one day, once more, be.

"Carol come on, it's me. I need to talk to you."

The searching in his voice lent a weakness to its sound, briefly softening her still unshaken anger towards him, which despite long before ceasing to grow, she'd never fully been able to release.

"Of course I know who you are James. I can't talk to you now. We have to go."

She motioned for Nicky to go towards the car, but hesitated an instant longer than would have been natural, and she said "Now" like there would be a later as James's sleep-addled mind continued to tell him it was all proving as favorable as he'd imagined it; so charmed had James life once been when still able to be around her.

"Okay, can I follow you then?"

A panic entered into her as she began to question whether or not he was fully on the level in that moment. She looked closer into his eyes, unfocused and glazed over. He was still handsome though, despite his deteriorations, and she brought a harshness into her voice to try to knock him out of that daze she saw clouding over.

"No you can't follow me. Are you crazy? I'm taking my son to a baseball game." She suddenly lowered her voice as she noticed how closely Nicky was trying from across the front-yard to listen in. "I mean my husband's son." Then, she looked away from James almost with fear, as if it'd only just dawned upon her how shaken his presence made her. Somehow, it only seemed like more of an opening to James.

"Okay, but I need to talk to you." He looked over at Nicky and their eyes met; the little boy's defiant; his panicked; but each recognizing something of their own in the other. "You know about what."

Still looking away, she whispered hesitantly. "You can call me tomorrow. At 12. My number's in the phonebook." Yet then like a miracle, she looked again into his eyes with a boldness and smiled; a real, honest smile forced upon her and suddenly forcing some part of their years together back upon them both. No longer was it a memory with any real precision or attention to detail, like a sculpture, but rather in a cloddy and unformed shape; like it was only the heaviness of the material of sculpture that could be remembered, the heaviness of something built, and yet it warmed her up to him more with each rising instant they remained in each other's presence. But the innocent lightness of it all just as suddenly made her remember this was all something not right and it weighed her back down, finally, to that kind-of floating malaise that he'd long subjected her to ever since he'd first forced her to learn, when barely a woman and able to know any better, that she'd always be alone in this world; the other beside you barely ever there at all. And seeing

him smile back at her, how his teeth were blackening and caving in like an outward mirror of what she soon realized must have been his soul, she began to pity him, and she hated him once more, as was normal, and she so wanted, then, to see the safe, stable, terrifyingly heavy arms of her husband around her. Without another word, she turned her back on him, rushing towards Nicky and the car. James could do nothing but stand in place, silently watching her go.

Carol drove Nicky to his game without a word, and so little did they react to what had just occurred that it soon seemed like it would pass away as smoothly as the wind; but another unmentionable, in that house, like so many others. In that way, Nicky went right along with her and soon forgot about it all, and when they were a minute late, he was mad at her only for having missed the last green light having already forgotten the added minutes of that familiar stranger entirely.

But only for as long as the game lasted could each hide from their own thoughts. As when Nicky's father never showed up, like he'd promised, and it was only the two of them back in the car after Nicky's team had lost and it was just beginning to get dark, then, she cried right there in front of him. The first time he'd seen it in the three years he'd known her, and in the simple fact that she showed him her vulnerability, Nicky realized for the first time how greatly he loved and wanted to be loved by her. Yet it only lasted a minute, and then a minute later, she pulled herself back together with an unmistakable mark of shame on her face which told Nicky those tears had never been for him. It then hit him, brief but hard, what that pitiful creature this morning had managed to teach him. That no matter what he wished, they would never be a true "mother and son." That no matter what he wished, his actual mother was still far, far away.

Ten minutes later, Rich's mother and step-brother were in a nicer part of town, waiting for Rich to come outside after having spent the whole day at the house of a school friend. Carol honked once, but was hesitant to do it twice, as everything seemed so much more peaceful and quiet here, like such a brutal sound from her was not even proper. As a result, they waited there awkwardly, with Rich's mother unwilling to go to the door and get him and Rich's brother unable to realize it must be done as he just continued to stare longingly out his window at the homes all around. "So much larger, so much nicer," he thought as a lump, he could not yet explain, entered into his throat, "How peaceful they all seem." Finally, Carol worked up the courage to tell Nicky to go to the door. He did as he was told and when it opened, Rich came running out toward the car barely noticing the brother he ran past. Behind him stood Daniel's mother, there at the

threshold of the entrance, waving at Carol gingerly; a subtle opening that said if Carol chose to come out and meet her, Daniel's mother would be so greatly pleased. But Carol knew she couldn't, so often she felt like she couldn't breath in a house like that, as if there was an air in there she wasn't used to. She just smiled in a slight way, without waving, and when Rich came in, and then Nicky right behind, she found herself speeding off in a panic, her face red with embarrassment. Daniel's mother hardly thought anything of it, she assumed the woman must have been in a hurry and then she turned back, smiling, to her precious child, both content and unworried.

There was a similar, satisfied smile on Rich's face all throughout the ride, even after they'd turned onto the main street of the town, even after passing over the train tracks which so conspicuously divided their part of town from the other, that smile still never wavered as his thoughts only reflected back upon him all the earlier moments of the day in such indiscriminate directions. He thought about the funny meal they'd all had for lunch, the whole family sitting together around the table, and Daniel's father making jokes which Rich barely understood yet he knew must have still been funny, and so he laughed and laughed and laughed. He thought of Daniel's older brother, a year or two older than Nicky and already so self-assured and able to take care of himself like he was more an adult than any of the adults Rich knew. He thought about Daniel and all he had, and all the toys and games they'd played with, and then, he almost wanted to laugh. Because he knew it was only a matter of time before he would have precious things too.

The whole while, Nicky watched Rich from the rear view mirror with a measure of envy. He'd never bridged that gap with the kind of kids Rich had just been with, and even though they were all from the same town, most went to the same schools, it was always, to Nicky, as if they were an entirely different breed of people than him living under an entirely different sky. As he continued to watch Rich, he began to wonder what he wanted his little brother, so moldable like him, to be. Rich never had been taught to expect or believe in much of anything, whereas Nicky had expectations to measure against, ideals and images his father had taught him to face. Yet all those ideals and images seemed to do was weigh both father and son down, filling them up only with the false illusions that they never seemed willing to give up, even after they knew for certain they'd turned sour. Soon, Nicky reasoned that they should be just alike, after all, they were family now. From the moment he'd seen Rich's mother shed those slight tears, she became his mother, and

then it was like they were a family complete. Just the three of them. “Even if those tears had never been meant for you! Even still!” He told himself forcefully.

Carol had none of these childish thoughts in mind, all she could think of was her husband, and her child’s father, and her own, and how they’d all seemed to think they were allowed to just leave and enter and leave and enter into her life whenever they so damn pleased. Suddenly, she got lost between the faces in her mind as they all molded into one singular image left without a personality but rather just a vague sense of underlying color which scared her to internalize and had her speeding up, driving a little recklessly so that she could just get them home and away from those thoughts on the road.

When they got back, no one but Rich was surprised or disappointed to find the father of the house not there. He wasn’t even sure why he wanted to see him, yet ever since he’d been around Daniel’s father, there had entered into him this vague desire to see his own. He just wanted to see the man who was currently filling that role in his life like maybe he could study him, to simply try to understand why he was not like the father Rich now saw that others could be. But for the rest of Rich’s night, that father would not appear. The three of them would gather around the table together silently and the three of them would split a single box of macaroni and cheese barely enough for two, and then afterwards, she would send her two boys off to sleep at Rich’s normal time, but for Nicky, the hour and a half before. They went to their separate rooms and tried to do as their mother asked, and though Rich, further down the hall, always could sleep on these night so obliviously, Nicky never even bothered. He simply understood these things too well, and he knew that whenever this kind of tension would enter into the home all it meant was that by the end of the night his father would finally come back, and then they would scream, and then he would be woken up regardless, and be so helpless not to listen to their every single, broken sound.

Nicholas Sr. arrived to the house at half-past eleven after a day out drinking with a few others from construction. As he entered the house humming a Sinatra tune he didn’t know anything about beyond that his own father used to hum it, he was dismayed to see his wife awaiting him at the entrance with a question on her lips she barely had to say aloud.

“Did you drive back drunk?”

“What? You know I can’t ever understand you when you talk that low.”

He walked past her towards the kitchen and sat down heavy, soon looking up at her expectantly like some food should have already been laid in front of him.

“I don’t like you driving back drunk, you know that.” She said, as she followed him into the kitchen.

“Well I don’t like you waiting up all night worrying about me. I don’t like you repeating yourself either.”

She spoke softly once more as she began to fix him his plate, and yet with every gaining word there seemed to rise a kind-of authority to her voice that was still barely discernable to him, yet all the same, becoming undeniable to her. “Worried about you? I’m worried about us, your kids, you know you promised Nicky you’d come to his game. What happened? Did you just forget?”

“I needed to do other things today. He’s fine. He understands. He probably didn’t want me there anyway.” He told her with some annoyance.

“And whose fault would that be?” She asked loud enough for the whole house to hear, looking into his eyes intensely in a way she never before could and finally instilling the slightest bit of fear to briefly rise in him; at least just enough to better notice her.

Eyeing her down warily, he said, “I swear Carol, I don’t get involved with you and how you’re raising Rich, you don’t get involved with how I’m raising Nicky.”

She laughed back spitefully as she dropped his plate on the table and muttered to herself more than loud enough for him to hear, “Who are you raising? Like you’re home long enough.” But he pretended he hadn’t listened, and with that refusal to acknowledge, a silence conspicuously crept up between them.

As he ate the leftover cold cuts that she’d prepared, she sat across the table from him unsure exactly what she wanted to occur, conscious only of his own desire to be left alone and it was only that which kept her there; her anger manifesting itself no longer in her sound, but in her presence, her nuisance; this role that he had forced upon her. He didn’t think much of it; he didn’t want to engage any longer with the troubles and worries of the day and he knew if he just remained silent, his wish would soon be granted. Not long after, midnight struck. A new day began and the phone instantly rang.

Instinctively, they both looked at the time and then back to each other as was so natural when a strange call appeared at a strange hour. But too quickly, he saw her eyes change over from that immediate confusion they shared to something more intimate and hidden, as if she knew exactly who it was calling and

there was even shame in the knowledge. He thought he could see, entering into his wife, that same bashful look of resignation he'd always believed must have first been given to Eve when realizing her true sin. Yet contrary to what normally passed between them, he didn't feel worthy of judging her in that moment, as he could feel a strange sense of kinship to her gesture, a sense of responsibility even, as if he were both the tree and serpent who'd led her toward that temptation.

He rushed to the phone while she remained at the table, almost paralyzed; how well she knew that the fool had screwed up the time, the A.M. and the P.M., and yet how quickly did she resign herself to its consequence, as if there'd just been this sudden break in her which she'd yet been building towards since as long as, when still barely a woman, she'd first been made into a mother. This break that made it so a man could do anything to her, from here on out, and it wouldn't have to matter; like any more pain could be justified so long as it pertained solely to herself, and not Rich. Never again Rich.

It was a man on the other line, not sounding confident or self-assured like he was calling his lover, but rather strung-out, nervous; lost in and out of place. He didn't wait for someone to say hello, assuming it could only be Carol picking up, and his words came out like rapid fire, unaffected by the lack of response.

"Carol, we need to talk now."

"I've been waiting all day so let's just talk."

"It's for our boy Carol, our boy. Please!"

A fury slowly spread through Nicholas as he looked down at her, certain she already knew so much that he simply couldn't. Yet that look of indifference she then returned back swiftly stole away his anger and left him feeling only weak and confused, so unlike how he ever wanted to be made to feel by her. Slowly, he moved across the room and handed her the phone.

"Come on, answer me. I don't have much more time Carol, come on!"

She couldn't help herself, as soon as she heard how weak he was, how weak her husband was, how weak they all were, she just wanted them to destroy each other, and then, to destroy her too. This appetite for destruction which erupted in her, for deceit and more than that, amusement; this appetite for anything which might bring some actual change to her life as finally now, too late and yet it never could have been earlier, she didn't want what she'd always yet been given; this way of life, this way of being, she resolved,

right there in that moment, that she would never again accept it like this. All she knew was that she would need to take the first step. Her men would handle the rest from there.

“Hello James. I’m here. Where are you right now?”

“I’m at a bar on... Cedar Lane. Cottage Bar, do you know it?”

“Cottage Bar?” She repeated aloud.

“Yeah. Can you come here and get me?”

Her voice was cold but her words, how could he hear anything but the words?

“Ok, I’ll be right over. See you soon.”

She looked up at her husband breathing menacingly down upon her. Yet how comical also was the gesture, as she knew he’d never hit a woman. He may have been a brute of a man who occasionally hit his kid, but he had been raised by a brute of a man who also beat his wife, and she knew then that he would never allow himself to cross that same line. In that way, at least, he could still tell himself there was progress in his home. She let him go on standing over her, till finally, she could take it no longer.

“Well, what are you waiting for, then?”

He didn’t think about her words or their reasons or intentions, simply allowing them to carry him right out the door. Within minutes he was standing outside The Cottage Bar, the very place he’d first met the other love in his life long before he’d ever met Carol; “The mother of your child, long gone who knows where.” He sadly repeated half that thought back to himself, “The mother of your child,” letting his memory linger over her for the first time since he could remember before entering that familiar bar which should have already been reminding him of that past, time and time before.

Immediately, after scanning the sad couple of faces still there, he knew exactly who he was looking for. It almost caught him off-guard, the sorry look in the man’s eyes; not in its gesture or appearance, but rather that Nicholas had never till now, noticed that very look so deeply mirrored off his own.

The bartender was a rough-looking, middle-aged woman in her sixties, who ignored her customers while they ignored each other. It almost made Nicholas feel like he was disturbing her just by ordering a drink. So rarely had he ever felt such a lack of pride like this before. The bartender recognized him though, with a smile, and told him it was on the house as she’d already made it last call. He took it appreciatively and sat next to his prey. James didn’t acknowledge or look in Nicholas’s direction, instead maintaining his focus

solely on his own glass and the ice inside near-completely melted. Nicholas watched him out the corner of his eye as this sinking feeling of impotence continued to grow inside which he thought himself only so unfamiliar. He questioned in his heart, over and over, where it had originally come from. He wondered where eventually it'd go and, to his dismay, all he could see in his mind's eye as answer was his son Nicky's face. Then, he noticed the marks on Rich's father's arms and finally, he could take the silence no longer.

"She's not coming." He said matter-of-factly.

Without thinking, James responded back, "No, she's not." Then, finally looking over at the man now sitting next to him, this stranger already so far inside James's head that he could be repeating aloud James's very thoughts, James peered into the man's unknown eyes with a measure of hope that instantly caused Nicholas to bring his own gaze shamefully back down to the ground. Without ever having touched his drink, Nicholas rushed out the bar, eager only to get out of James's presence. But James, intrigued and confused, lost from so much hope but that tiny bit still left and, with it, letting himself believe this man turning his back might be a true sign, a signal, to follow, impulsively went right after Nicholas into the darkness. It was quiet out there, with Nicholas only a couple paces ahead rushing up the steep incline of a street that was normally so busy, but always deserted at that hour. James could only ask his question to the back of the man's head.

"Hey? How did you know I was waiting for someone back there?"

Nicholas turned again towards his wife's first love. When he looked back at the man, weak and pitiful, unwilling to be anything more, his tired eyes, his worn-out jeans and his faded one-colored shirt ripping at the seams, Nicholas could see so much of his own self inside. A heaviness then entered Nicholas's heart as he suddenly saw his own self clearly, as he suddenly wondered if they were one and the same; these two men lost from their first purpose and place and yet searching for any other that'll never do. But knowledge, or empathy, even when they strike, there's no law that says they need be adhered, and that hungrier part of himself, so frustrated and angry, could still notice that there was no one else outside in that moment who'd see what he might do in the darkness.

Nicholas then rushed towards him with a raised fist. James watched it come only with a kind of awe, never trying to defend, as the light of his moon shined down upon Nicholas's head like a halo, his brain

already so wearied from waiting and doubting and suffering and asking for something, anything else but this.

Nicholas looked down at the little junkie lying unconscious on the dirty ground, pleasantly surprised by his own strength, and he told himself this was how the man probably spent a lot of his nights, cheek-to-cheek with the concrete and the cold wind swaying through the trees above. He thereby reasoned there was nothing else to feel bad about. He didn't hurry from the scene, but rather sauntered back up the hill, ready now to just be home, thinking there would no more be a thing to worry about in his life till the sun would rise again. How there simply couldn't possibly. For some, for as long as it's not yet made otherwise, that's all it really takes. Even a thing like guilt could be thought away.

When he arrived home a few minutes later, he was surprised to find that his wife had begun packing her things, her bags hastily laid all-around his empty, living room chair. He made himself small and silently took it in. So much so, that she didn't, at first, realize that he was back in the house. The suddenness of his presence then struck her all the more. Yet he didn't emanate strength in that moment. There was clearly anger in him, but it lay too closely beside a heavy exhaustion that never, till now, had he been all that conscious of, yet one he still somehow knew had been growing in him since that first moment he'd believed himself a man. It made him feel weak and rejected by the world, but more than that, it made him feel like he could have been anyone at all. Like the man he'd brought to the ground; as if neither any longer had any control over their own story. It was that kind of distance from the moment, that clotting of the deepening subjectivity inside, that allowed him to hover over and away from his body and its hunger, and it was in that vein that he was able to accept a thing more ably than in so many others moments which could have led them both through such terribly dark doors. The abruptness of his voice, so hollow in the quiet, sent a particular chill down her spine.

“Where are you going to go?”

“Back home for awhile.” There was a hurt in her voice, and it brought a pang to his heart to think his way of life, and all it fostered, could have ever been the cause.

“But this is your home.”

She finally turned toward him and away from her things, their voices each beginning to rise with every passing moment their sense of silence slowly dampened.

“I can’t... I don’t want to do this anymore. We’re not happy, neither of us are and that’s all I want. Just to be happy.”

He stood there only in the same spot by the door that he’d first seen her bags, his shoulders still sunken and his head hung low.

“I don’t want to do this anymore either. But what about Nicky?”

She’d never heard him say his son’s name so lovingly, and she repeated his own words back to him with some mild surprise as if Nicky had always remained the farthest thing from her mind.

“What about Nicky?”

He pretended he hadn’t heard her indifference.

“I don’t want him here with me. I don’t want to do it to him anymore, to keep giving him what I have. I try not to, but I can’t help it. The world, sometimes, it gets you so angry, and then to see out in it something so weak and breakable and yet it looks just like you, and you think you’re only damaging yourself and you’re only hurting yourself and yet it’s always him, always him...”

Suddenly, he broke into ferocious tears and had Nicky not already been awake, he would have most assuredly been awakened by this. Carol didn’t approach her husband; she didn’t want to relate to his pain, and though some part of her had never wanted him to, it upset her that he was, only now, willing to open himself up like this as if it were only some last grasp at holding her. She felt cold to his plight, his epiphany, to the sudden waves of remorse which strike men, so often, only at the most opportune times, only once enough of the best parts of life have already been enjoyed and lived and it can only be downhill from there. She tried to ignore the minor scene breaking inside and outside him, and she wanted to push past it. She knew the sound of a single name would calm him down.

“What did you do to Jimmy?”

“Jimmy? Jimmy’s fine. Jimmy’s a bum you know?”

“Of course I know that. I don’t want him around anymore than you do.” Her voice humbled saying this, more in her common way, and it restored some stream of power back into him as he began to feel like things were slowly reverting back to their natural order.

“So what are you doing?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to say it again. I don’t like what we do to each other. You make me feel so helpless, and seeing James again, and yes I did see him today, I realized I’ve always lived my life for other people, for what they’ve wanted and never for myself or even Rich for that matter...”

He was barely listening, barely reacting. There was no more fight left in him and he began to wonder if there ever had been against anything, in particular, beyond that lingering feeling of helplessness that he’d found himself carrying since long before he’d ever met her. Never had he been taught, like so many others, that a woman or love could fix that type of emptied space inside, rather, it was just the unfillable hole that made us all broken. He thought back on them, all the men in his life, and the sad women, and the mothers and sisters, all the tragedy in when things never change. He let her go on rambling and he didn’t speak a word as the memories, hidden and slow, flowed through him in a way akin only to those flashing moments before a lucid mind’s solitary death. When she finished, he asked her once more his first question, the only one still consistent in his already-so-far-come-down-heart.

“Can you take Nicky though, take him with you?”

Immediately, a thousand implications flooded over her widening eyes.

“I...I can’t take him; you know that? He still looks up to you, he wouldn’t just want to leave you.”

“You know that’s not true.”

The distance in his voice and the fact that he still never looked up from the bags on the ground, the oddness of it all allowed her to better realize the weight of this moment all the more easily without that added panic and rush of bringing your thoughts together in times of conflict. Suddenly, it was like there’d never been a conflict between them at all, only a negotiation.

“But I don’t have room for him, I haven’t seen my folks in almost a decade, since the moment I first told them about Rich. You know what it took to call them? You think I wanted to? I can’t just bring another kid with me too.”

The harshness in her voice, and the lack of subtlety that crept out and carried her hidden motivations to light, that trait once so perversely endearing to him in the way it always made him feel in control when in reality, since the very beginning, it had only meant it a matter of when, from each other, they’d slip away, it

all brought the blood back to his head and a sense of cold beating to his heart. Finally, he could look back up at her knowingly.

“I know what you’re getting at Carol. Take the house, take the divorce, take whatever else you want, but stay here with Nicky. Let Nicky be yours now.”

The direct way he spoke, with a voice she’d almost never been allowed to take in as a younger girl in a religious home, a voice of solidity that had led her astray since from that first childhood home she’d been cast out, it made her feel weak again, as if she were only something to be pitied.

“And you’ll go?”

“Just as long as you take Nicky, you can have whatever you want.”

She didn’t respond at first, just letting him continue to stand there awkwardly as a kind of hideous anger spread through her to think over if anything would really change if she was still to be, in so many ways, under his thumb. But then, she thought of Nicky, of how much better it would be for him if she just did the right thing and simply let herself love him in a way she never completely could. In her thoughts forced to the forefront, she quickly acquiesced to all parts of the transaction while never letting anything yet on her face be shown, and, still never looking into his eyes, but rather just at the tattoos on his arm of the crucifix and the snake, she told him calmly.

“Fine, but you have to leave now, you can get your things together over the weekend. I’ll take them out somewhere, but you have to go now.”

All he then said was “Okay,” and all she said back was, “So go then,” and only once the door shut and he’d heard his father leave could Nicky’s own tears begin. He’d been listening to their every word. Curled up in a ball on his floor with his ear to the door listening now only to her empty silence, Nicky imagined Rich jumping out of bed tomorrow for breakfast and never even realizing their father was gone. How he would just shrug at the absence till someone would eventually tell him it was permanent, and then too, he would only shrug, because he’d never expected any better out of it. He’d never had a father of his own to make him believe otherwise. Nicky was angry, growing angrier, not with himself but with the mother who he was unsure he was supposed to still love; with the father who’d given him away like he’d thought Nicky wanted; with the wave of contradictory thoughts coming from every direction and paralyzing him as he tried only to be quiet, rocking softly back and forth, on the ground of his own, safe room. He felt like he’d been infected

by something that was not ever to leave him. He couldn't tell whether it was a feeling or a thought. He hardly knew a thing about it at all aside from when it'd first entered into him; at that singular point when Rich's mother had been able to repeat Nicky's name back to his father without any hint of love at all. With only indifference. At that point, it was almost like all the bad air of the world had suddenly replaced all around him that had ever been good. He could feel something spreading in him, this twelve-year-old boy, and he thought it was only the silence, like for the first time in his life he understood why it needed to be defeated. Then, so thankfully and gracefully, the phone rang and put an end to the stillness. He couldn't hear the other side of the conversation, only the abruptness of his mother's frantic words before she quickly slammed the phone back down.

"I don't care what he did to you, don't call here anymore. I don't want you around him, I don't want you knowing him, just stay gone!"

And so much of a black mark did the clicking sound of her phone-line breaking leave in James battered, weary heard that he almost couldn't breathe the air afterwards, turning short of breath and light-headed like something had truly scarred his lungs, or his heart. He rested his head against the pay phone, a few blocks from where he'd been laid out the hour before, and closed his eyes, letting all his weight upon it for support. It felt nice, the particular rush of calm that entered into, as if now it could be reached once more like when he was a child, like when he still could believe in the world only in his father's terms. Yet soon, unavoidably, he had to open his heavy eyelids back up and the force and pain of that strange angel or devil's fist was all the more harshly felt now that he was certain there'd be no warm, familiar home to put ice over and take care of it; how much more a pain is felt once you know it won't soon be lost? He thought on her last words, how she could so intuitively have known that a man had hurt him and it took him awhile to connect the dots, so innocent still could she be in his eyes right up until no longer. But even when he realized what she'd done, it didn't hurt him all that much more than what he already felt, nothing of late really could, as it all just seemed to wash and billow into an endless sea of broken and unified parts and how the Caspian knows not what sings in the South Pacific and how we never can see the ways that each pushes and pulls at the other, so too did this final wave of pain strike up against him and them all.

He walked aimlessly up the unlit parts of that street, utterly unsure where his car was and or where he'd go if he found it. Slowly rising to the top of the incline, he grew more and more heavily dejected that

he'd not found another place to go. Yet as the sidewalk then began to dip back downward, he could see there were more prominently shining lights only a bit farther below. Suddenly, he remembered the church where the light was, and he found himself almost running towards it, his whole heart inexplicably rising with hope as he'd never believed or gone to that church, or any other, as a child.

When he reached his desired destination, he found the building barely intact and clouded in darkness; abandoned by its congregation, fallen into disuse, and sprouted like weeds on either side, the true cause of that false deceiving light—a Bank of America and a Dunkin Donuts. From then on, he simply followed that street which goes from one end of town to the other with no more a desire in his heart. A few leaves above his head began to fall and a cop car drove past with sirens wailing, back up the hill the other way and never noticing him walking alone at all. It made him laugh seeing them rush like that, how they were all rushing towards nothing but their own doom as they slowly took so much of their fellow neighbor's life away leaving a hole in a community that they'd all shared. He'd spent some time in prison, not long, just for a minor possession, but once that happens, there's nothing to do but live on the margins and outskirts. That fact had never bothered him much before as for so long he'd thought he deserved such punishment. Still, he'd never believed in this country's right to exact it. A kind of sorrow then floated into him thinking back on that time, and when he came upon a bridge above the train tracks, he remembered his father who used to love the trains. That was where James had first thought, as a boy, he'd long work among. But trains. No one cares about trains in America any longer, and then, how can you feel good about putting every part of yourself into something that... when nobody seems to care.

He thought there was a better place to end his night than there, and he walked on towards a strange part of that familiar city. So weighed down of late had his footsteps become, and so much of him now, in contrast, enjoying each singular moment of this walk, of this silence that he'd long thought you could only find in the country. How little did he ever know what some parts of suburbs could be? It made him feel satisfied and broken all at once, how he'd never been able to walk like this and feel safe and whole in his own hometown; how no one ever could but the faceless faces here who never could look at his kind straight. By now, he had turned off the main street of the town and towards its most affluent parts. The lawns looked trimmed, the happiness manufactured, and he wondered where these people who had such things could come from. He worried over how close they were to Rich that he should always have to see them, these ones

who'd started from this place on high where the struggle never had to be faced, all it took was walking up and back down a hill. How quickly it had all changed. It didn't used to be this obvious which parts of town were for whom. Then, his mind went back to the call. How all it meant was that she'd sent that large man, who reminded him only of his father, to exact that familiar anger. He didn't blame her for it; he knew, only through her, how very deserved it had been. Suddenly there was such a pain in his heart to be admitting that as he finally thought he understood how he'd failed her, and only her. How all life he'd been tested and tricked into believing that the sky he looked up to was his own, while in fact everyone who'd ever lived a life that was full looked up to a sky that was shared. Tested and tricked into thinking it was only his gaze he looked through when for everyone else who ever lived fully it was because they'd all managed to see through the gaze of another. She once had been that chance to break him; the bridge only some know how to take; the offer to build one way into two. He realized then that he could never be like these people, and these homes, but he could have had their happiness in the first hours of his child's life, when still the lungs and mind and the eyes of his child were not yet taken out of such a sterile and distant place. How he could have been there once and now to come twice was a farce, and he laughed at himself for it as he came upon another bridge, this time not above the forgotten trains but rather a bridge above a bustling highway, "Route 4", he remembered fondly as he began to climb over the barrier which prevented any happy people from ever tipping towards that sad place below. Perched up at the very top, James Connors looked back down at the cars with his vision no longer obscured by the steel points of a separating-fence that he'd never had a hand in building. For the first time in a long time, he felt, like his fate and destiny were back firmly in his own control.

It did not take long for Carol to realize that she wanted James to call her once more, how she might relinquish some small part of herself to him and let her child see him if he were to just call once more. She sat there unable to go to sleep in the dark until the blossoming light of that endless night would finally rise. She sat there waiting for another call from him and a final bit of proof that he was willing to actually be there, that he was willing to be serious about all this. How irrational her thoughts became as she continued to force her mind from wandering away from James and his smell all around her, and that sense of protection, in spite of the realities, that it had always fostered. Yet, in that forced place were not memories, but rather only these flimsy little fantasies in her head that could never actually be true. Of James cleaning

up, of them being a family like they should have been, of him always at Rich's side. She didn't picture Nicholas then, and she didn't picture Nicky, though she would have wanted to, as simply to think of James again in that light, it was like Nicky had never existed if that very glaze of light must still, and she sat and she waited for James's one more call.

James hurled himself over the highway. His last image looking up was of the trees and leaves and sky blending together like a broken sea from a forgotten dream. His family and his community had never been religious, there was no place he thought he was going towards. But there was still here, and there would always be here. He wanted just to have some final effect; or if not that, at least to be noticed.

Luckily, the roads below were not very crowded, as the time of night, and only so few, then, were forced to see the most gruesome parts of his smear as the authorities were able to clean the area in almost no time. A few hours later, when the good, happy workers and schoolchildren like us and Rich would be commuting in the early light of the day, we would never need know the exact parts of ground that he'd spilled over, the parts we've been driving over since then, time and time again, never will we need know where a lonely man's mark will forever be stained upon. But then again, how lucky that we don't see the many stained points and marks of our roads and highways? How fortunate things are for us in this good country where we can still drive, blissfully unaware, over our own blood; happy just to be content; where the lucky are plenty, and the unfortunate are few.