

angry at both of you. Because I know how you are and I don't care to share.

This clenching.

I only ask because you won't.

Only you refuse me the right to be another character, and therefore throw me headlong into myself, expecting me to acclimate instantly.

In Chicago, I stood on the sidewalk across the street from American Girl, watching you above as you served tea to little girls, dolls, and mothers. We never met while I was there because of your schedule. Once again.

If we entered wholly into our daily lives, it wouldn't work. To make this a comedy, I'd paint us in a kitchen with a vase of daisies on the table. As I cooked breakfast, you hug me from behind, your still-wet hair from the shower dripping down my neck. But it's tragedy. I want this and since you don't, I pretend I agree it's impossible.

Move with me. I'll buy the U-Haul. Move with me and be there when I wake up. I'll be very quiet and creep around getting ready for work as you sleep. At work, I'll think of how you get out of bed and shuffle to the bathroom, tripping over my shoes. Then the hot water and how you wait until you're dressed to look in the mirror, or maybe you don't. But of course, you can't. There is your daughter, there is London in ten years. But she could live with us in the summers. She could fly down once a month. I already checked it out, and the airport's not too far. Maybe three cigarettes away.

Who else has loved the shadow of your anklebone?

The neighbors would hate us for not giving into pleasantries as we unlocked our front door. We'd be the writers next door.

He checks the weather in Tuscon.

I am afraid you are waiting for me to realize something, like a poem too aloof to completely be analyzed. I am floundering here.

The horoscope said we will not end our relationship even if it's floundering. You say, astrology is such a woman's creation. See me, I'm hanging up the stars right now. I'm hanging them just like your bathrobe and mine on the same hook. Knots of tissue balled in the pockets.

Flight

Andrew Touhy

Fields below. Closer. They're almost nothing but winter and liver spots. Cut corn stalks break through swatches of hard ground, like so many tawny whiskers from the chin of some white-skinned teen. Actually, I'm thinking Dalmatians. Lots. Bunched too tight to pry apart—a herd of buffalo charging off frantic after a gunshot, the report cracking across the sky. Spread 'em a mayonnaise thin on a slice of brown bread then, yeah, ya got what's down below. Then I'm thinking, No. What I am thinking is O. Oh? Ohio. O—Hi—O. High in the middle, round on the ends, back again. OH. Love of Indians or not, Great River or not, diving nose first into snow, Ohio's a hell of a place to die.

I'm waiting for the wings to crack off. The engines to stall. For us to lose the altitude we've gained. This *is* how it happens, right? And you act—well, I'll act—like you've seen it done countless times for show, on TV or in the movies, the high fear and drama breaking your heart, keeping you tuned and watching. Next to me a pretty, young couple is locked above the armrest. Both sets of hands clasped—a mound of fastened fingers—both faces smashed cheek to cheek like on a dance floor, a tango, say, or one lonely person pressed against a mirror. Clutching her he says, “But this is our first flight,” and smiles nervous. His foot's shaking.

I nod.

“Pretty couple,” I say

Lights flicker off, on. Off. We hit another pocket, bounce, then lurch. Cabin pressure drops. There's a sound like a rig throwing tread, then tire, the noise that comes just before the sudden halting jackknife to the road. The little plastic shades on every window rattle. For the first time I'm sure I know metal, its limitations that always seem so apparent. I hear stewards and stewardesses whisper breathy curses as they rush down the aisle. We are, we're not. *We can't be.*

But how would you really know the difference—

Rutter died once. Then he died again for real. All in all, it took him twenty-five years to do it, but he wasn't trying. He was doing what younger brothers do on their way to getting older: going about living life.

First time was a series of four-punch combinations. A final stiff right to the temple and Rut drops to the mat, a sweaty heap of pretzeled elbows and knees and glossy red Everlast trunks, LUCKY'S GYM spinning above him. Not a tunnel then, as he remembered it, no, it was tinkly and bugless and in Omaha or Idaho or Tallahassee. Maybe Montana. He's hiking through the woods along a mountain range, keeping to high ground to avoid what muddy damage the rains have done all summer. Hangs a sharp left and he's heading across an old plank and rope bridge for what's at the end, for what might be a pond or pool of water. About the time he reaches the middle, a board creaking underfoot, he stops and notices the empty sky around him. No bugs, he thinks. Not a zipping hiss, whirr or bite from one insect. No blood drawn. Not a drop to any fat horsefly or nameless mosquito. Nothing. Can't recall seeing even an ant milling about in the dirt and dry leaves of the trails he'd eclipsed before reaching the bridge. His legs feel dull and heavy then. Then cool and spiny. Like a thousand straight pins saying hello at once to the toes and balls of his feet, a barrage of stick and ouch that feels strange and good in waves. "Imagine," he said, "a footbridge with knotted ropes and everything. About this wide." I.V. tube taped to the faint blue veins on the back of his hand swaying. "I guess I felt tinkly. Not dead or dying. Mostly tinkly was all. And on a goddamned bugless footbridge to heaven. I don't know about the pool or pond. Never got that far before they brought me back."

Later, just prior to his discharge from the hospital, we all crowded into Rut's cubicle. The whole family surrounding his bed for a toast. We'd hung a banner above the cardiac monitor: DO OVER, spelled out in thick black letters with magic marker. Grandma made her sausage and egg breakfast casserole, his favorite dish as a kid. Dad popped the cork. We lifted our plastic champagne glasses toward the call light, the crucifix above it.

Fingertips strumming the bedrails Mom said, "Now you'll give up that sparring job and give that thick head of yours some air, right— Something without a fist in it. Waste of our money if you get Parkinson's and tremble around the house until you're dead." She absentmindedly rooted in her purse for cigarettes. Came up with a lighter, old crinkled cellophane wrapper. "We already have your brother."

Pursing her lips to sip, Grandma, though a fan of boxing, martinis, steak and other brutal pastimes, said, "You're one saint up, Rut. Don't step two sins back. Make a clean break from the sport, a fresh start. Use what you earned at college."

"Shit," Dad said finally, bottle still in hand, "you got a chance to fuck things up a

whole 'nother time. I'd kill for that. How about a few sets of tennis tomorrow— We're just an old bunch of soft-knucklers over at the club, you know. Nothing to knock the paste outta ya but my serve is all."

Me?

"Boxing, yes, yes, no life for you, Rut. You're good looking, got a brain. Not like that jaw of yours isn't crystal, too. Must be something else you want to do—can do—with what you studied. Philosophy was it?"

What did I know? I'm still hauling freight for a living, still a bundle of jangled nerves from coffee and pills for the headaches and west coast turn-arounds. My days of boxing are over, though, the truck stop brawls, bare-knuckled and lucrative when blood the crowd had stepped out to see spilled finally did, long past too, both something like old ghost stories, I suppose, to tell pretty small town waitresses on lonely nights, when the yellow, seemingly all-embracing glow of a roadside Wafflehouse rouses you from the downpour and your mind and a road you couldn't see for miles anyway.

His second death was something different: violent, permanent. There was an old single-engine Cessna—sad little makeshift job, they told us, coat of beige paint barely covering patches of primer, its shoddy prop bent like an old spoon, struts thin as spaghetti—that didn't have clearance but landed anyway. A tall, dread-locked Jamaican in a plum colored polyester three piece, carrying just a briefcase.

Rutter, just months out of Brunswick, just months from the soupy stench of a town that stretches like a cheap strip mall to the marshy coasts of St. Simon's Island, just months from the classrooms and physical fitness exams, from the mock body searches and multiple marksman citations, from the stage and ceremony and pomp and circumstance and post-graduation blow-out at the local watering hole, where he, like every new Customs inspector to leave that training center, carved the crooked letters of his name in the bar with the rest of his class, just months after pulling endless rookie overtime at Ft. Lauderdale-Hollywood International and Port Everglades and wherever else a man was needed, just months after his first bust, the kind of contraband seizure that can make you an agent in no time, though he had to spend more than fourteen hours with the *swallow* in the dank basement of Jackson Memorial, sitting outside the cell, reading a book, pacing while he waited for the Ex-lax to kick in, for the drugs to pass on a slide of thin shit from the guy's bowels to his hands, just months after he told me that story on the phone, how each of the eighty pellets was wrapped in a cellophane baggie and worth your life if broken and loose in the body's system, how the guy just finally had to be cut, his intestines squeezed because the coke had gathered and stuck, clumped so he couldn't move it through, just months, after we both said, "The shit work," at the same time, and

laughed at that, the way we always seemed to be laughing at something just before hanging up, Rutter takes three bullets in the chest at close range.

His own gun.

Rutter, what did I really know about you? This film clicks by like glints of sunlight breaking through high treetops of green leaves, like similar mailboxes on a familiar country road. Twenty-four frames per second. So fast. And my memory of the past is too suspicious, skewed by time and distance, by my always *going*, by my wanting, needing, to blaze out, make a mark on a world unaware of the shape and size of my longing. I was always busy being five years older. First. The one in the top bunk, then in his own room. The brother who got the front seat, the biggest helpings, the newest of everything passed down to you once worn out, like that old beater Firebird with the rust-eaten body, no brakes, and cracked dash by the time your hands gripped its sun-faded steering wheel.

Me.

The one who made it his job to put you in your place when you tried to be something more than younger.

So what do I really know? What? There's trivia of course. You loved every boxing flick. We both did. *Raging Bull*, *Tough Enough*, *The Champ*, the Rocky movies—first two, anyway. Any film ending with swollen, slumping fighters squared off in the center of the ring, each refusing, blow after blow, flurry of one careless exchange after another, to relent, to allow the pain and hurt to hurt, to wobble bandy-legged and drop to the canvas for the count finally, because standing was their last dignity. You sang yourself to sleep most nights as a kid. I remember storming into your bedroom once, fed up with my through-the-wall concert, ready to shut you up. Little tucked in you, four-, maybe five-years-old in your *Star Wars* pjs, holding tight to your big yellow headphones, eyes pinched closed, singing *Buddy you're a boy make a big noise playing in the street gonna be a big man someday* with Freddy Mercury. What could I do but listen—Stand above and listen. You thought you were alone, that no one was watching. I was watching.

And there are facts. Once you were 5'1", 5'6", then 5'10". You died a true 6'3". At seven you weighed forty-eight pounds, built like a wire hanger: bony shoulders poking from the loose folds of a lanky shirt; at twenty-four you're two hundred and six pounds, with an extra four after Christmas, after the eggnog and whiskey, the leftovers and sugar-crusted New Year's ham. You had seven fillings. When you opened your mouth wide enough, I could see four. Three were silver. Your braces, put on in the sixth grade, were taken off in eighth. Your MasterCard read 5642 2011 0029 4325.

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The Dead can't not listen. Can't go anywhere but the room they're pining in. Maybe you and God and His horde of manmade saints. A fraternity of cranky old white men in

flowing beards and lavender gowns and gold-fringed vestments, climbing the walls hurly-burly or crowding around a long, elaborately decorated banquet table for spaghetti dinner night at the Freemason's Lodge, piped up hot and right by nuns and loving housewives; you there, seated next to Him, wearing a tasseled Kiwanis fez, cocked just so to the left. You have to hear the living, hear me when I say I've got stories for you now.

There was your wake, Rutter, where I drifted from the drinks and others to the parking lot. I loosened my tie. Freed myself from my coat, slung it at the dumpster in an awkward gesture of ridiculous drama and raw pain. Head in hands, I sank to the curb remembering our first and only time shooting together. It was in that reinforced warehouse on Copans and Powerline, right—How intense yet cool you'd become. Collected, steady. A man. "This is a Glock, standard 9mm," you said, sounding all cop, "issued to me with two Class A uniforms and a badge after my twelve-week stint at the training center. Don't shoot your foot with it." You showed me what to do then. My little brother, raising a questioning eyebrow when I interrupted to say I'd handled a rifle before—a turkey shoot in Dayton—yet went on to hold your pistol all wrong. Wrists floating above my waist, muzzle turned up, my finger heavy on the trigger. At fifteen feet my forearms jumped as I scattered shots around the silhouette of a paper smuggler. You emptied the clip, punching tight clusters of black dots around his heart and head, sent a new target out for another round. "Come on, concentrate," you said, hands on my shoulders, "relax these some. Muzzle down range and take aim. Squeeze don't pull. Think turkey."

And remember you kicking my ass? That was the very first time you beat me at anything. Little brother's first big break. *Payback*. You a cocky sixteen, glove in my sweaty face like a hand out to help me up. Me on one knee, red-hot chin, stunned by the hard left you slipped from up and under, by the combination and fake that fooled my guard down. I could say we were only sparring, in the backyard for a light workout and some sunshine by the pool, that I had deliberately eased up to see what you had, but I was trying, just didn't see it coming. Didn't think it ever could. But Jesus you'd gotten fast. It's funny now, but believe me when I say I wanted to kill you—to spring up and drive one *through* your chest, all the force and weight of my sudden lunging behind me.

But there you were, above. Smiling. Beautiful in the sun. Already lean and growing. Had it in your bones to be taller than me. And you were. Just like that goddamned Russian from *Rocky IV*. "You okay?" you said, nudging me with your foot. Then, suddenly serious, "Hey, you all right?" before quickly unlacing your gloves with your teeth.

The Parents since you've been gone, Rutter. How about I tell you this one. How Mom averages our birthdays together. How because yours falls on December 4th and mine on October 4th, the two became a marriage in her mind. How every year since you've been gone she sends me a ticket, and I fly home to unwrap gifts for us both at six o'clock on November 4th. How, quivering, I'm in flight now because I'm coming back

from that. We turned you twenty-seven yesterday—didn't you know?—no matter about my real age. And the cake—it had a U.S. Customs insignia, the eagle and the shield, jaggedly outlined by the state of Ohio, our near-mingled names in red, white, and blue frosting at the bottom.

Or Dad?

His abandoning himself. He writes postcards, Rut, like a whaler out to sea. Not to me or friends or relatives, but to himself. Sends them to the house from the post office or some random address downtown. Maybe from that stout postbox kitty-corner Bubier Park across from his office. I've seen a thick handful of them banded together in a shoebox in his closet. Pictures of hotel and condo cluttered shorelines, of ember-orange sunsets at dusk, of smiling gators and private yachts and sailfish hanging from wide-mouth hooks on Anglin's pier, of dark sunglasses reflecting sand and bikini-clad models with soft and chiseled bodies, sculpted brassy hair. The backs were as generic as the fronts. White space and lines, a square place for the stamp. Captions as common as the cheesy block-to-block T-shirt shops lining A1A: HOT BRONZED BUNS, VACATION PARADISE, FLORIDA IS HERE—WISH YOU WERE BEAUTIFUL. His neat handwriting in the bottom left-hand corner: *Not an elegant man. Don't claim to be. Wish I'd said something more than Faauck shsss it! Me.*

Writhing—how about that? On the phone. Shifting and clearing my throat. How I tried to tell them. Tried to say no when they asked if I was going to make the trip this time. How I even said no later, when they told me they'd meet me at the gate, *no* when they told me it'd be London broil in, or seafood at the Cracked Conch once I got settled. How we were all on the line: both of them, myself, silence, and my slow explanation. Dad with the portable, static, cracking, bending, a signal found and lost on a short wave radio. Mom's close breathing. She was sitting in the kitchen—you remember, Rut?—on *her* stool near the breakfast island, exhaling used smoke, her hand pulling one of those long tasteless Carlton 100's away.

I had such a sorrow, could feel the weight of it all. Right there I made a wish. The gift of a decade or more age, forty-two, fifty-two, maybe—the notion being I would have lived long enough to know what to do. To know more than listening. More than just my tilting the space heater down. More than just the sound of it clicking off before my room went cold again, before the sound of Mom's voice again.

"We already planned the trip, Quincy. We're going to pick you up next Friday. In the afternoon," she said exhaling. "Grandma even said she'd come to the airport."

"It's all set up, Quin. I'm looking at the ticket," Dad said.

Mom sighed, pulled at the smaller Carlton now. I could hear the butt rub against the receiver. "Your father'll be pissed if you don't come, Quincy—"

"Okay, hon, he's coming."

But she kept on.

"He's already taken that week of work off for you, Quincy." There was more crackling. Another pack. The flint. Another Carlton. Or more static? "Don't know why you don't want to spend your birthday with your family."

Dad cleared his throat, signal bending again. I could hear other voices, too, the TV maybe, him shifting, the sound of papers rustling. "You'll be on the flight—"

I stood and moved toward the back of my house. Peered through the frost on the sliding door. The deck was covered in snow, the trees bare. I saw my face in the glass saying, "I'll try for Friday." I said, "I'll be in Friday."

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Fly, fly, fly. Flying. Up and away in this friendly box of teal and clouds. Where I'm thinking, So. So—so what haven't I said—What haven't I said up—Rut. Rut. Rutter. It should be. It should've been. Rutter. Rutter. Rut. Maybe. Maybe a thousand maybes. Maybe, Rut, you promised to teach me that sweet hook of yours. The one that came from past nowhere but curled in quick as a question mark to land like a sack of quarters. Brother, you could knockdown the world, then knock it out. But you never showed it to me. And when I do hit the gym, say for a few rounds with some friendly stiff, or just to jab the heavy bag, I'm a wreck. An invalid in shiny shorts, monstrously plump gloves, poking at whatever, whoever, like my fists are made of kittens, their bodies made of swarming insects. I'm all panic and fear but straight-faced, like now, after this turbulence, it rocky and terrifying, more and more than I thought.

Like now, with my stomach somewhere in the middle of my chest, pinched tight behind lungs and other organs, as we pull up and level out, begin our descent naturally, normally.

We are level, grid of yellow-white city lights below, rooftops—rows, I see now, of blue lights and, faintly, a runway. Landing, yes, all soon safe on the ground. Still, it's dark enough out there to die without seeing, dark enough not to know it just happened, percentages and risks always abound—darker than is fair when trying to fly. Which is fine, I suppose, what I'm having to learn to live with, except for this trembling young couple to my right, the one clinging for life and looking to *me*. Like there is something they have to ask. Something more I know, and can tell them. As if my saying to them, the instant we started to drop, "Feel each other's hands. Feel her pressing against you. Feel the weight of your ear against his pounding heart. Because then you just won't," wasn't also meant for once we'd landed.