

Prologue

MY GRANDMOTHER used to tell me that when I was five years old, I could read back to her whatever story we had just finished. I wasn't reading of course, but remembering what I had heard. The picture is easy to reconstruct in my head—my grandmother with the colorful book open on her lap, flocks of red and purple birds migrating through brilliant white pages, my chin in the crook of her doughy elbow, the patchwork quilt that covered our legs on the bed. I'd like to call this a wonderful memory, but I'd be lying if I did. It's something that took place long before I started remembering, a comfort I retain in my graveyard of memories only because my grandmother assured me that it happened.

My other grandmother, whom we all called Babci, also used to remind me about some of the things I had long forgotten. For example, one day when I was twelve and piping deviled egg filling into egg halves with her star-tipped pastry bag, she said, "Do you remember the first time you did that?" When I said no she told me about the day a few months before my father died when I had insisted on helping her make the deviled eggs for my sister's christening. With her hands guiding mine, we pumped soft yellow mountains of egg yolk and mustard into the glistening white cups. We used her herb scissors to cut tiny fans of parsley from the messy bouquet on the table, and added the greenery, along with thin strips of pimento, to the peak of each deviled egg. The pastry bag smelled of egg yolk, and when we were finished, I helped her wash it with cider vinegar. It's another picture I like to recreate in my head when I want to trick myself into thinking I remember it.

Even today, after so much remembering, I still wonder why we need to forget. Sometimes forgetting helps dismiss the billions of details that would overwhelm us if we retained them—faces on subways, ads on highway billboards, the bank teller’s scarf and the color of her nail polish on Tuesday. At other times, I think we forget things because we want to forget them—the candy wrappers and orange rinds that once confined a sweet experience, the memories that don’t quite fit with how we’d like to remember an event. Without forgetting, our favorite memories would exist in a cloud of meaningless noise—the blurred color of all those highway billboards whizzing past us once again.

And then there are those things that we don’t remember for other reasons—the dinosaurs we bury away in drawers that we don’t want to open, or can’t. These are the memories that live deep within caverns darkened by age—monsters with clumsy, warted feet forever trying to master a two-step. They nap and they snore, waiting to be awakened by some smell that comes their way, their greedy nostrils flapping as we douse ourselves in dangerous fragrances. We tread quietly, hoping not to wake them, terrified of discovering the extent of their hunger.

We are both the wardens and the prisoners of the memories we lock away.

PART ONE

I

IT IS THE DAY before my father's burial. Katie and I are sneaking into our parents' bedroom—the last time we are able to do this for some years—and watching as our mother daubs herself with the perfume that my father first bought for her on their honeymoon. It is Bal à Versailles—a name I can't pronounce—and it's something I know remains in the places she has been, even long after she has gone away.

The smell of my mother's perfume—something like a cross between lemon and sauterne—soon fills the air in the back seat of the limousine. Katie remains surprisingly quiet on the way to the wake, while Grace cries and grabs onto my finger. I have just turned six years old; Katie is three, and Grace is three months.

In the limousine, I stare down into the Ace bandage wrapped around my mother's sprained wrist as strange snapshots from the last three days flash through my mind. There is the young doctor shaking his head in the hospital, announcing that he can't predict when my mother will wake up; the pulsing of Grace's tender red tongue as a nurse changes her diaper on a bedside table; the quiver of my grandmother's lip when the doctor tells her that my father is dead; the ride in the back of the ambulance with my mother, and the hiss of the rubber mask attached to her face; my mother's collapse at the end of the runway where we often waited for my father to land his twin-prop plane; the teetering of the plane as it clipped the tops of the trees and exploded in the orange grove surrounding the small, skid-marked airstrip.

The limousine pulls into the carport of Parker and Son, and a young man in a dark suit opens one of the passenger doors. My mother sets down her heel with the grace of a celebrity, and the man takes her hand as she ascends from the back seat. He is

handsome—one movie star joining hands with another. Katie and I scramble out after our mother, followed by my grandmother with the baby, and the young man closes the big black door of the limousine behind us.

“Hey there little guy,” he says.

He offers me his large hand but I do not take it. Then he smiles and tousles my hair. I bury my face in my grandmother’s hip and follow her to the front door of the funeral home.

The rest of my grandparents are waiting in the lobby. Grandpa John is helping two men in black suits move Dodi (our father’s father), from his wheelchair to a folding chair. Babci, our father’s mother, is sitting on one of the couches.

The doors close behind us and Babci says:

“Come here, Mikey.”

Eager to make use of the phrase I’ve been hearing, I walk over to give her a hug.

“Babci, I’m sorry.”

“For what, Mikey?” she says.

“That Daddy died,” I say.

She stares at me with wet eyes, and pulls me close to her chest, and together we watch the ushers and Grandpa John finish transferring Dodi to the folding chair. Then the ushers lift the chair, and Babci stands up to put her hand through my mother’s arm. My other grandmother takes my hand, and I hold Katie’s, and we all follow the procession into the cavernous viewing room. As we cross the threshold and spy my father’s casket, I am overpowered by the smell of so many flowers that I’ll later grow up to detest. There are hyacinth, and freesia, and stargazer lilies—and roses whose delicate fragrance

compounds the nauseating effect of the mix. And the smell of fresh water is in the air too, though it's tinged with traces of damp, floral foam, and the papier-mâché of the disposable vases.

A funeral attendant hurries toward us from the other end of the room, and begins whispering things to my mother.

“We could only do so much . . .” he says.

And, “The children . . .”

And finally: “You might not want them to—”

My mother waves her hand, and whispers something to my grandmother. Then my grandmother looks down at us and says:

“OK kids, we're going to stay back here for a second.”

Katie and I remain with my grandmother while the others continue down the central aisle toward the casket. We take our places on one of the plush sofas near the back wall, and my grandmother pulls a bottle out of the diaper bag, and sticks it into Grace's mouth.

“Why can't we go?” I say.

“Shh,” my grandmother says. “Just wait.”

“Well how long do we have to stay back here?”

“Not too long—just a few minutes.”

“Then can we go home after that?”

“No, Mikey. We have to stay here for a little while.”

“But I'll miss Felix!”

“Shush—you can watch Felix tomorrow.”

“Felix won’t be on tomorrow,” I say.

I slump on the sofa, and from the back of the room we can see the funeral attendants struggling to lift Dodi’s chair above the casket. There is movement from Babci and my mother too, and Grandpa John approaches both of them and puts his hands on my mother’s shoulders. Then Babci grabs one of the funeral attendants and says:

“That’s not my son.”

Her voice is a deep bellow—the way she speaks when she is angry.

Then there’s more movement, and Babci keeps saying “No—no!” My mother begins to cry, and mutter things we cannot hear.

“It looks nothing like him!” Babci shouts. “I want this casket closed!”

Mumbling and more whispers, as the ushers set down Dodi’s chair.

“It’s not him!” Babci says. “I don’t want anyone to see that person!”

My mother tries to talk to Babci, but Babci grabs my mother and shakes her. Then Grandpa John takes Babci’s hands off my mother, and Babci turns towards the funeral attendants. She demands again that they close the casket, and they look at my mother who says, “No, don’t close it.” There is more movement and confusion, and all the dark-suited attendants are scrambling around like a group of frightened birds that don’t know how to fly.

Then the lid of the casket squeaks as it goes down, and hits the bottom rim with a thud.

“That’s not the way people should remember him,” Babci says.

I’ve taken charge of the bottle and am holding it in Grace’s mouth when Grandpa John finally returns to us to say that we can now come to the front of the room. My

grandmother guides us to the ornate kneeler in front of the casket where Katie and I kneel down to say a prayer. I stare at my distorted reflection in the bright, burnished handle of the casket, my small nose and cheeks stretched out into a fat and watery image. I don't understand why there's been so much commotion over closing the casket. I am thinking more about the cartoons I'm missing than what my father might look like in there.

As visitors begin pouring into the funeral home, my individual family members become lost in the crowd. My grandmother holds us fast to her side during most of the wake, but to see Dodi in his wheelchair, or to find the familiar shine of Grandpa John's dress shoes, I must steal glances through a shifting current of pant legs and skirts. I do not know where Babci is, and my mother, seated in the first pew to receive visitors, is often gone when I look over. The only constant in my surroundings, other than my grandmother, is my grandmother's sister, my great-aunt Jane.

During the wake Aunt Jane says, "Come here, Mikey—you'll never believe who came along with me in my purse."

She pulls a tiny, beat-up rag doll from her handbag and forms legs for it by sticking her fingers through two holes in its skirt.

"This is Little Lulu, and she likes to do a little dance."

The puppet dances and kicks on Aunt Jane's stockinged knee, and I laugh because I have never seen a doll that looks so funny.

After a minute, Aunt Jane says, "OK, that's enough of that. Tomorrow we'll bring her out and see if she wants to dance again."

"Do we have to come back here tomorrow?" I ask.

"Well, yes," she says. "We do have to come back."

Later that night, after the wake is over, the funeral mob follows us back to our house. Most of the people are strangers to me, and I look up at them apprehensively, unsure of where they've come from. Some of them are fellow pilots or fruit exporters who have worked with my father, while others are neighbors, or distant cousins I barely recognize. I am lost in a sea of bodies. Everywhere I look there are people. They gather in the bedrooms, the kitchen, and even the bathrooms; but the bulk of them are swarming in the living room, where my mother, materializing with a drink in her hand, floats from person to person.

Periodically I have the courage to make my way through this crowd, only to be stopped by an unfamiliar cousin, or some other stranger whose name I have never heard.

"Mikey, you're the man of the house now," they say. "It's your job to keep everything together."

"Your mother and your sisters need you," says another. "You've got to take care of them, you know."

"Make your father proud."

"You'll grow up to be a fine man like him some day."

"And remember," someone adds, "he'll be watching. Wherever he is."

My parents sleep in a separate wing of the house—a master bedroom that someone added a few years before we moved there—and as I squeeze through more people and make my escape down our hallway, the echo of so many repetitive sentences grows fainter in the distance. When I at last arrive in my parents' bedroom I discover a selection of my mother's black dresses scattered all over the floor. My father's watch, wedding ring, and money clip dimly shimmer on her nightstand. The walk-in closet

attached to the bathroom houses my father's white flight shirts with their black and gold epaulettes. Opposite his clothing, on the shelves above her own racks, lives my mother's haphazard purse collection, and a fox fur that she never wears.

I turn on the bathroom light but the closet remains dark, and in the shadows I scrutinize the ordered rows of ties that my father maintains on a cascade of flat hooks. There are so many ties hanging there, of all patterns and colors, but my favorites—and his favorites too—are the aviation ties, silky and dark, embossed with planes and wings. I finger and then slowly lift out a thick, navy blue one decorated with a fleet of gold jets. It still smells like him—like suede, and shaving cream, and the starch from his flight shirts. I feel that I'm about to cry, but someone at the wake had said that men didn't do that, so instead I pull my own tie off and wrap my father's around my neck.

I force my father's tie under my collar and look at myself in the bathroom mirror. Then, taking the two lengths of the tie in my hands, I form the first stage of a knot. But what, I wonder, am I supposed to do next? I have never tied a tie on my own. I coerce my fingers into securing thick loops and try to hold everything in place, but after three or four failed attempts, my face grows hot. No matter what I do, the tie either ends up in a mass of tangled fabric, or completely falls apart. I tear the knots loose, and bite my tongue by mistake. I can already hear everyone laughing at me.

I know that others, especially Babci, are not going to be happy that I've left, and I think that maybe I can secretly get Aunt Jane's attention before going back. She will knot the tie for me, and she'll do it so beautifully, and then no one else will know that I've gone off on my own. I grow angry with my father for leaving to begin with and wish that he would come back to help me. Then, picking up the tips of the tie one last time, I

realize that I'm not alone. Behind me, in the darkened reflection of my parents' bedroom, lurks the tall, shadowy figure of a man.

My skin turns cold. I'm afraid—and then hopeful.

“Daddy?” I say.

The figure looms closer.

“It looks like you could use some help with that, Mikey.”

He steps forward out of the darkness, and his shadow transforms into something brighter in the dull outer glow of the harsh bathroom light. It is Babci's brother, Owen, whose name I've heard many times in the past; but because Babci no longer speaks to him, I have only met him for the first time today.

“Here, let me show you,” Owen says.

He turns me back around so that we are both facing the mirror, and as we look at each other's reflections, the flab of his stomach presses into the back of my head.

“It's very simple once you get the hang of it,” he says, reaching around in front of me. “The trick is to start with the thinner end up closer to your neck. That way, you have enough tie to wrap it all the way around, and come up and over through the back.”

His milky fingers work methodically beneath my chin as he holds back my shoulders, somewhat uncomfortably, with his forearms.

“This tie is a bit thick for you,” he says. “But I understand why you want to wear it.”

He wraps the tapered length around itself to form the front of the knot. Then, inserting the tip of the tie into the horizontal loop, he says:

“I tied your father’s ties for him a few times too, you know. When he was your age.”

He threads the long face of the tie through the loop and yanks down along the front of my chest. As he gives two sharp tugs to tighten the knot, the top of my shirt collar slices into the back of my neck.

“There,” he says. “Very handsome.”

He turns me around to face him and rests his hands on my shoulders. Then, as I’m about to thank him, I notice more movement in the bedroom.

“Mikey, where have you been?” Babci says.

She emerges from the darkness and, without looking at her brother, takes my hand and leads me out of the room.

“No more disappearing,” she says. “You stay in the main part of the house, where we can see you, do you hear?”

I apologize, but Babci’s face remains firm, and we proceed down the hallway and into the living room where my other grandmother is sitting with Aunt Jane. I wonder, while we walk, if Uncle Owen will be mad because I left without thanking him. Then Babci releases me, and I return confidently to the crowd, sticking out my chest and saying hello to people. But nobody seems to notice my tie. Whenever anyone says anything to me, it is more about remembering my father, and how I should grow up to be just like him.

As I steer through the crowd, I remember the day before the plane crash, and how happy my mother was during our trip to buy groceries for my father’s homecoming; but then I also remember how, after she had regained consciousness in the hospital, she had

looked not just at me but at Katie and Grace too with confusion, as if she were in some kind of pain. I wonder where she is. I am eager to show her the tie.

I weave through the people, and search for a hint of my mother's perfume in the dank cloud of men's drug-store cologne. Eventually I come across her seated at the bar in our living room, encircled by half a dozen of my father's high school friends. She is nodding as they speak in whispers, and I scoot past the thick legs of a man who played football with my father, and latch onto my mother's finger. I wait a moment for her to take my hand and pull me closer, but her arm just dangles at her side. Then I try to wrap her fingers around mine, but she draws her hand away and taps my back saying:

"I'm talking, Mikey. Go see grandma."

"But look!" I say, using my thumb to point out my tie.

Without moving she glares down at me, her eyes speaking impatience and anger. I can feel that I am about to cry, and squeeze my way out of the circle. Afraid to look back, I begin wandering again, hoping that my constant motion will prevent anyone from observing my face. I hide amongst the people as one hides who is ashamed; and then, coming out into a clearing near the buffet table, I hear Aunt Jane calling my name.

"Mikey!" she says, rushing over to where I am standing. "You haven't tried my pound cake yet."

She lifts a slice of pound cake from a platter and rests it on a paper napkin.

"Your grandmother wanted vanilla icing," she says, "but I insisted on chocolate. Everyone loves chocolate you know—and just you wait, in an hour it will all be gone."

She hands me the slice of cake on the napkin, and I break off a small corner and put it in my mouth. The first bite is hard to swallow because of the tightness in my throat, but with the second, and third, and fourth bites, my insides grow warm and restful.

Aunt Jane strokes my hair and says:

“You see? It’s good—I told you.”

Then, looking down toward my neck and widening her eyes, she says:

“Oh my, now that’s a very nice tie!”

I smile slightly, and stick out my chest.

“It’s Daddy’s,” I say.

“So handsome,” she says. “If Nana were here, she’d eat you right up.”

I continue to break off small bites of the cake.

“Can I have another slice?” I ask.

“Well you’ve got to finish that piece first!” Aunt Jane says, laughing.

In truth, I want to take the second piece over to my mother, but by the time I look back she has already disappeared.

I finish my slice of cake and walk into the crowd with Aunt Jane, and for the rest of the evening, whenever we separate, I listen to others talk about how happy my father must be, knowing that I am still around to take care of things. I go to sleep that night, and the next day, my mother reappears just before the burial. She is dressed all in black, as is everyone else, but somehow the folds of chiffon that fall loosely from her shoulders appear more beautiful than anything that anyone else is wearing. At the cemetery, resisting my impulse to cling to my grandmother, I secure my arm firmly around my mother’s bony hip, supporting her as we stare down into my father’s open grave.