

## *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 be 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, wadded 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

THE DAY BEFORE my father's burial, I remember Katie and me sneaking into our parents' bedroom—the last time we were able to do this for some years—and watching our mother daub herself with the perfume that my father had first bought for her on their honeymoon. It was Bal à Versailles—a name I couldn't pronounce—and tended to remain in the places where she had been, even long after she had gone away.

The smell of my mother's perfume—something like a cross between lemon and sauterne—filled the air in the back seat of the limousine that day. Katie remained surprisingly quiet on the way to the wake, while Grace cried and held onto my finger. I was six years old when my father died; Katie was three, and Grace was three months.

In the limousine, I stared down into the Ace bandage wrapped around my mother's sprained wrist as pictures from the last three days unwound in my mind. There was the young doctor shaking his head in the hospital, announcing that he couldn't predict when my mother would wake up; the pulsing of Grace's tender red tongue as one of the nurses changed her diaper on a bedside table; the quiver of my grandmother's lip when I pre-empted the doctor and informed her that my father was 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 after it clipped the tops of the trees and exploded in the orange grove surrounding the small, skid-marked airstrip. I stared at my mother's bandage as we drove to the funeral home, burnt orange blossom and engine fuel still lingering in my nostrils.

The limousine pulled into the carport of Parker and Son, and a young man in a dark suit opened one of the passenger doors. My mother set down her heel with the grace of a celebrity, and the man held her hand as she ascended from the back seat. Katie and I scrambled out after her, followed by my grandmother with the baby, and the young man closed the big black door of the limousine behind us.

“Hey there little guy,” he said.

He put out his hand but I did not take it. Then he smiled at me and tousled my hair. I buried my face in my grandmother’s hip and followed her to the front door of the funeral home.

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

The doors closed behind us and Babci said:

“Come here, Mikey.”

Eager to make use of the phrase I had been hearing, I walked over to give her a hug.

“Babci,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“For what, Mikey?” she said.

“That Daddy died.”

She stared at me with wet eyes, and pulled me close to her chest, and together we watched the ushers and Grandpa John finish transferring Dodi to the folding chair. Then the ushers lifted the chair, and Babci stood up and put her hand through my mother’s arm. My other grandmother held my hand, and I held Katie’s, and we all followed the

procession into the cavernous viewing room. As we crossed the threshold and spied my father's casket, I was overpowered by the smell of so many flowers that I would later grow up to detest. There were hyacinth, and freesia, and stargazer lilies—and roses whose delicate fragrance compounded the nauseating effect of the mix. And the smell of fresh water was in the air too, though it was tinged with traces of damp, floral foam, and the papier-mâché of the disposable vases.

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

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

And, “The children . . .”

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

My mother waved her hand, and whispered something to my grandmother. Then my grandmother looked down at us and said:

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

Katie and I remained with my grandmother while the others continued down the central aisle toward the casket. We took our places on one of the plush sofas near the back wall, and my grandmother pulled a bottle out of the diaper bag, and stuck it in Grace's mouth.

“Why can't we go?” I said.

“Shh,” my grandmother said. “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 said.

I slumped on the sofa, and from the back of the room we could see the funeral attendants struggling to lift Dodi’s chair above the casket. There was movement from Babci and my mother too, and Grandpa John approached both of them and put his hands on my mother’s shoulders. Then Babci grabbed the arm of one of the funeral attendants and said:

“That’s not my son.”

Her voice was a deep bellow—the way she spoke when she was angry.

Then there was more movement, and Babci kept saying “No—no!” and my mother started crying, and saying things we couldn’t hear.

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

Mumbling and more whispers. The ushers set down Dodi’s chair.

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

My mother tried to talk to Babci, but Babci grabbed my mother’s forearms and shook her. Then Grandpa John took Babci’s hands off my mother, and Babci turned towards the funeral attendants. She demanded again that they close the casket, and they looked at my mother who said, “No, don’t close it.” There was more movement and confusion, and all the dark-suited attendants were scrambling around like a group of frightened birds that didn’t know how to fly.

Then the lid of the casket squeaked as it went down, and hit the bottom rim with a thud.

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

I had taken charge of the bottle and was holding it in Grace’s mouth when Grandpa John finally returned to us to say that we could come to the front of the room. My grandmother guided us to the ornate kneeler in front of the casket where Katie and I knelt down to say a prayer. I looked 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 didn’t understand why there had been so much commotion over closing the casket. I was thinking more about the cartoons I was missing than what my father might have looked like in there.

As visitors began pouring in through the doors of the funeral home, my individual family members became lost in the crowd. My grandmother held 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 had to steal glances through a shifting current of pant legs and skirts. I did not know where Babci was, and my mother, seated in the first pew to receive visitors, had often disappeared whenever I looked over. The only constant in my surroundings, other than my grandmother, was my grandmother’s sister, my great-aunt Jane.

“Come here, Mikey,” she said to me during the wake. “You’ll never believe who came along with me in my purse.”

She pulled a tiny, beat-up rag doll from her handbag and formed 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 danced and kicked on Aunt Jane’s stockinged knee, and I laughed because I had never seen a doll that looked so funny.

“OK,” Aunt Jane said after a minute, “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 said.

“Well, yes,” she said. “We do have to come back.”

Later that night, after the wake, the funeral mob followed us back to our house. Most of the people were strangers to me, and I looked up at them apprehensively, unsure of where they had come from. Some of them were fellow pilots or fruit exporters who had worked with my father, while others were neighbors I had seen once or twice, or distant cousins I barely recognized. I was lost in a sea of bodies. Everywhere I looked there were people. They gathered in the bedrooms, the kitchen, and even the bathrooms; but the bulk of them swarmed in the living room, where my mother, materializing with a drink in her hand, floated from person to person.

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

“Mikey, you’re the man of the house now,” they said. “It’s your job to keep everything together.”

“Your mother and your sisters need you,” voiced 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 added, “he’ll be watching. Wherever he is.”

My parents slept in a separate wing of the house—a master bedroom that had been added three years before we moved in—and as I squeezed through more people and made my escape down our hallway, the echo of so many repetitive sentences grew fainter in the distance. When I at last arrived in my parents’ bedroom I discovered a selection of my mother’s black dresses scattered all over the floor. My father’s watch, wedding ring, and money clip dimly shimmered on her nightstand. The walk-in closet attached to the bathroom housed my father’s white flight shirts with their black and gold epaulettes. Opposite his clothing, on the shelves above her own racks, lived my mother’s haphazard purse collection, and a fox fur that she never wore.

I turned on the bathroom light but the closet remained dark, and in the shadows I scrutinized the ordered rows of ties that my father had hung on a cascade of flat hooks. There were so many ties hanging there, of all patterns and colors, but my favorites—and his favorites too—had always been the aviation ties, silky and dark, embossed with planes and wings. I could take one now—he would not be coming back, and could no longer spank me for touching things that weren’t mine.

I fingered and then slowly lifted out my favorite tie—a thick, navy blue one decorated with a fleet of gold jets. It still smelled like him—like suede, and shaving cream, and the starch from his flight shirts—and I put it to my nose, and stroked the pattern of the embossed jets. I felt that I should cry and be sad like most of the other people at the wake, but someone had told me that men didn’t do that, so instead I pulled my own tie off and wrapped my father’s around my neck.

I forced my father's tie under my collar and looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. Then, taking the two lengths of the tie in my hands, I formed the first stage of a knot. But what, I wondered, was I supposed to do next? I had never tied a tie on my own. I coerced my fingers into securing thick loops and tried to hold everything in place, but after three or four failed attempts, my face grew hot. No matter what I did, the tie either ended up in a mass of tangled fabric, or completely fell apart. I tore the knots loose, and bit my tongue by mistake. I could already hear everyone laughing at me.

I knew that Babci and my other grandmother would not be happy that I had left, and I thought that maybe I could secretly get Aunt Jane's attention. She would knot the tie for me, and she'd do it so beautifully, and then no one else would know that I had gone off on my own. I grew angry with my father for leaving to begin with and wished that he would come back to help me. Then, picking up the tips of the tie one last time, I realized that I wasn't alone. Behind me, in the darkened reflection of my parents' bedroom, lurked the tall, shadowy figure of a man.

My skin grew cold. I was afraid—and then hopeful.

“Daddy?” I said.

The figure loomed closer.

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

He stepped forward out of the darkness—his shadow slowly transforming into a brighter body in the outer glow of the bathroom light. It was Babci's brother, Owen. I had heard his name mentioned a few times before my father died, but because Babci no longer spoke to him, I had never met him before the wake.

“Here, let me show you,” Owen said.

He turned me back around so that we both faced the mirror, and as we looked at each other's reflections, I could feel the flab of his stomach pressing into the back of my head.

"It's very simple once you get the hang of it," he said, 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 moved methodically beneath my chin as he held back my shoulders, somewhat uncomfortably, with his forearms. I thought about how different it would have been if Aunt Jane had been doing the job.

"This tie is a bit thick for you," he said. "But I understand why you want to wear it."

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

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

He threaded the long face of the tie through the loop and yanked down along the front of my chest, and as he gave two sharp tugs to tighten the knot, the top of my shirt collar sliced into the back of my neck.

"There," he said grinning. "Very handsome."

He turned me around to face him and rested his hands on my shoulders, and as I was on the verge of thanking him, I was startled again by more movement in the bedroom.

"Mikey, where have you been?" Babci said.

She emerged from the darkness and, without looking at her brother, pulled me out of the room.

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

I apologized, but Babci’s face remained firm, and we proceeded down the hallway and into the living room where my other grandmother and Aunt Jane were sitting. I had not thanked Uncle Owen, and wondered if he’d be mad. Babci released me, and I walked confidently back into the crowd, sticking out my chest and saying hello to people. But nobody seemed to notice my tie. Whenever anyone said anything to me, it was more about remembering my father, and how I should grow up to be just like him.

As I steered through the crowd, I remembered the day before the plane crash, and how happy my mother had been during our trip to buy groceries for my father’s welcome home dinner; but then I also remembered how, after she had regained consciousness in the hospital, it was as if she had gone to sleep for a long time and awakened as somebody else. She had looked not just at me but at Katie and Grace too with confusion; and as the memory of her wilted arms and vacant stare made me forget about my tie, I wanted to find her and comfort her as I had seen my father doing whenever she cried.

I wove through the people, and searched for a hint of her perfume in the dank cloud of men’s drug-store cologne. When I found her, she was seated at a kind of bar we had in our living room, encircled by half a dozen of my father’s high school friends. She was nodding as they spoke in whispers, and I scooted past the thick legs of a man who had played football with my father, and grabbed my mother’s finger. I waited a moment for her to take my hand and pull me closer, but her arm just dangled at her side. Then I

tried to wrap her fingers around mine, but she drew her hand away and tapped my back saying:

“I’m talking, Mikey. Go see grandma.”

“But look!” I said, using my thumb to point out my tie.

Without moving she glared down at me, her eyes speaking impatience and anger. I could feel that I was about to cry, and squeezed my way out of the circle. Afraid to look back, I began wandering again, hoping that my constant motion would prevent anyone from observing my face. I hid amongst the people as one hides who is ashamed; and then, coming out into a clearing near the buffet table, I was spotted by Aunt Jane.

“Mikey!” she said, rushing over to where I was standing. “You haven’t tried my pound cake yet.”

She lifted a slice of pound cake from a platter and rested it on a paper napkin.

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

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

Aunt Jane stroked my hair and said:

“You see? It’s good—I told you.”

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

“Oh my, now that’s a very nice tie!”

I smiled slightly, and stuck out my chest.

“It’s Daddy’s,” I said.

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

I continued to break off small bites of the cake.

“Can I have another slice?” I asked.

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

In truth, I wanted to take the second piece over to my mother, but by the time I looked back she had already disappeared.

I finished my slice of cake and walked into the crowd with Aunt Jane, and for the rest of the evening, whenever we separated, I listened to others talk about how happy my father must have been, knowing that I was still around to take care of things. By the next day, when my mother reappeared before the burial, I had a well-developed sense of my newfound inheritance. At the cemetery, resisting my impulse to cling to my grandmother, I held my arm firmly around my mother’s bony hip, supporting her as we stared down into my father’s open grave.