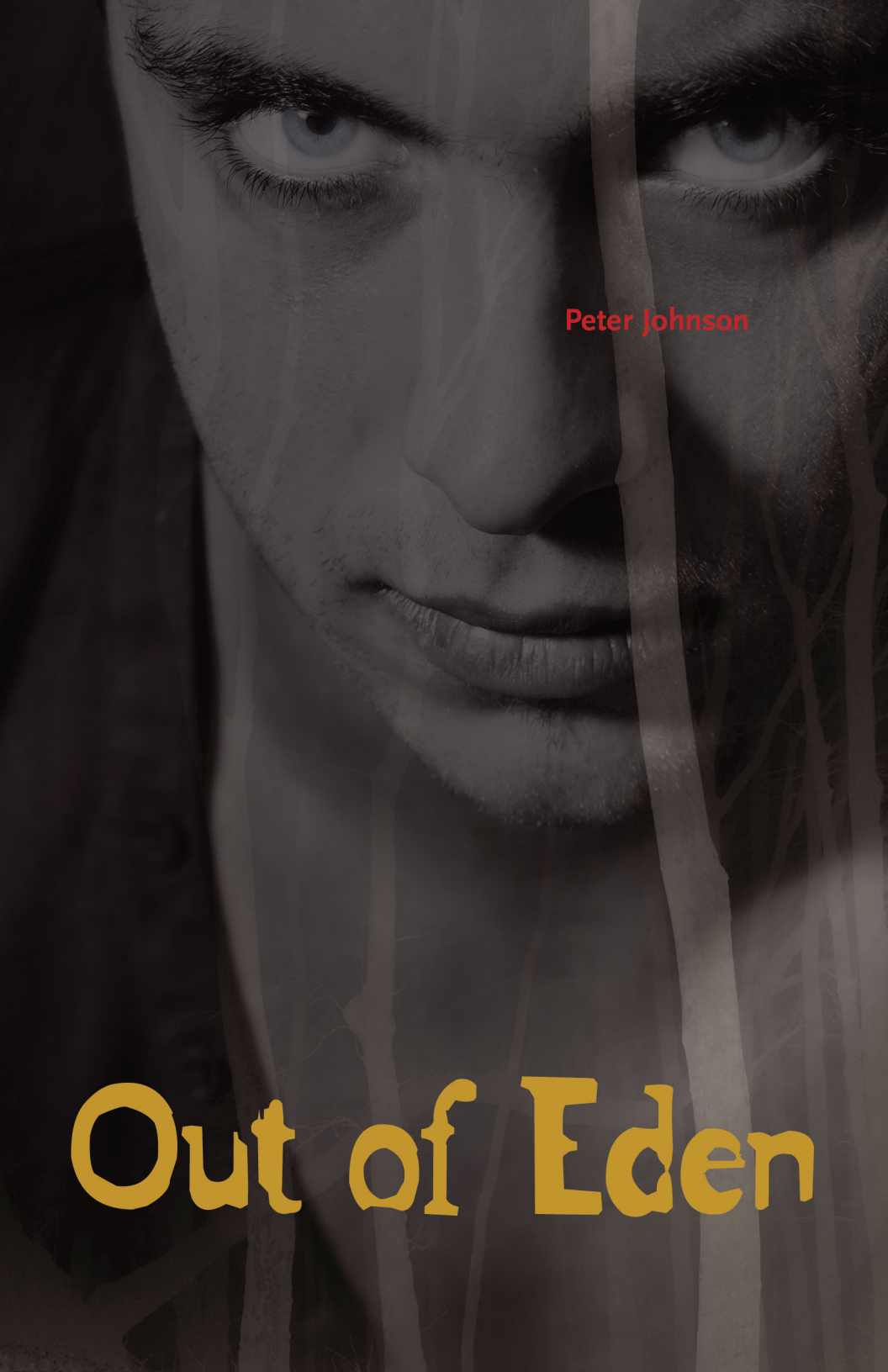
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Out of Eden

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For David Stokes and Urban Voll

*Leopold couldn't shake the roar of the Falls from his head, or his fantasy of the precipice breaking loose, hundreds of tourists tumbling into the mist, their fierce screams soothing him—so lost in his daydream Abraham had to drag him from the observation platform, both of them wet and laughing, drawing stares from tourists except for her, a disheveled Asian woman going through a garbage can by the restrooms, carrying a little brown canvas bag, dressed in what looked like a nightgown, Abraham seeing her too, so now there would be trouble, because Abraham would want her, and so they took her with them in the Taurus, because that was the deal he had struck with Abraham, knowing she'd be disposed of, like the others—*and the men of the city shall stone her with stones—*all this converging with the echo of the roar as they followed the Niagara River, then over a bridge into a city littered with boarded-up stores and rusty steel plants, until a normal hunger struck and they pulled into a little park, squatting under a tree, watching six men weighed down with golf bags approach a green fronted by a polluted pond, and across that, two other men standing on a brown patch of ground, holding clubs in their hands.*

"Give me the binoculars, Abraham," Leopold said, "and you"—pointing to the Asian woman at his feet—"don't say a word or you'll be sorry," Abraham laughing, taking a bite of the meatball sub he'd bought before entering the park.

Stony pulled out of the cemetery, mistakenly shifting the Forester into fourth gear. It bucked a few times, then stalled in the middle of the road. His mother, who was sitting next to him, gasped as a shiny black pickup truck, its chassis riding high above two oversize tires, squealed to a stop. The truck was so close he could see the man behind the wheel. His large head was shaved,

and he had a silver ring the size of an Oreo dangling from his left ear. He was swearing, his meaty arms quivering with each obscenity. Stony's mother lowered her window and shouted, "Give it a rest, the kid just got his permit."

"Screw you, lady," he yelled.

"Let it go, Mom," Stony said. "The guy's a jerk."

By the time Stony had finished his sentence, she was out of the car. She'd been a track star in college and still ran and lifted, but she was no match for the guy in the truck. Stony eyed his golf clubs resting behind the back seat and wondered if he could lay hands on his three-iron.

When he turned around, his mother was leaning toward the window of the pickup, both hands on her hips, nose to nose with the driver. "Screw you back," she said.

The guy looked startled, then laughed. He wagged his tongue in a crude sexual way as he slowly backed up the truck before peeling away.

"Did you see what he did with his tongue?" she asked when she returned to the car. "If I ever see you do that to a girl, Stony, you'll be sorry." Before Stony could respond, cars started honking behind them. "Just pull over to the curb," she said. "Everyone's in a big hurry today."

Stony was beginning to see this mishap as another bad omen. First, a visit to the cemetery to place flowers on his grandfather's grave, then the guy with the truck, and now he had to face his biggest test: playing golf with his father, whom he hadn't seen in a month and who had planned a "family trip" to New Hampshire with Stony, his sister Molly, and Sally, his father's live-in girlfriend.

"Sorry, Mom," Stony said, maneuvering the car next to the curb, "but no one drives a standard anymore."

"That's because they're lazy like your father."

"What does Dad have to do with it?"

"Did you think I'd forget your father's old rattrap is an automatic?"

"Geez," was all Stony could say. In fact, his father's car wasn't a rattrap but a mint-condition, blue 1984 Grand Marquis with leather seats and a thousand-dollar stereo system, equipped with a special amplifier switch under the steering wheel.

His mother finally composed herself, brushing strands of brown hair from her forehead. Yesterday she had it cut short like his sister's, and she wasn't used to bangs, always touching them as if they made her forehead itch. "Sorry," she said, resting her hand on his. "You know I want you to have fun with your father."

"I know," Stony said, pulling away from the curb. In front of them was the Basilica, an old church that was so enormous and ornate it could have been transplanted from some medieval Italian city. He glanced up at the elegant white angels suspended from four large domes flanking the entrance. They were pressing marble trumpets to their lips, trying to scare off demons.

"Did I ever tell you the story about that church?" his mother asked. "How Father Baker prayed for money, and when they began construction, the excavators hit natural gas?"

"You've told me about a hundred times."

His mother ignored him. "You know, your grandmother used to give tours there after she retired."

"Yeah, I know," Stony said.

"Well, it doesn't hurt to remind you of the good things in the world. Life isn't just gloom and doom."

Stony didn't know if she was trying to convince him or herself, since she, like him, was still haunted by his grandmother's violent death, even though it had happened six years before. Visiting his grandfather's grave made it impossible not to think about it.

When they reached the Basilica, he made a left toward a glass-domed building that housed the Botanical Gardens, finally gliding into the parking lot of a golf course. His father was waiting for them next to the first tee, leaning against a red ball-washer and talking to some old guys. A stranger would have said he looked like a movie star—tall, blond, and athletic, with high cheekbones and a small nose. His jaw was square and strong, his chin dimpled by a slight cleft. He was wearing a snug white T-shirt with writing on it that Stony couldn't decipher.

As he approached the car, Stony's mother said, "Oh no, what does he want now?"

"Let's not have any trouble," Stony pleaded.

"Just grab your clubs before he revs up his engine."

But it was too late. His father had already stationed himself near the passenger door and was helping Stony's mother out of the car. "Nice wheels, Kate. You've finally sold out and bought an SUV."

"It's not an SUV," his mother explained. "It has four cylinders and the same chassis as an Outback."

"Looks like an SUV to me," his father said, smiling. "Another gas guzzler to fill the pockets of white-collar creeps."

"Oh, give me a break," his mother said. "Nice T-shirt, too."

Stony could now read the green print on his father's chest: SOUTH BUFFALO BOYS DO IT BETTER.

"At least they got the 'boys' right," his mother said.

"Geez." Stony sighed and got out of the car. He grabbed his golf bag from the back and tried to escape into the clubhouse.

"Can't you see you're embarrassing Stony?" his father said.

She laughed again and pushed his father aside as she circled the car. She jumped into the driver's seat, started the engine, and began to pull away. "Goodbye, sweetie," she said.

"Goodbye, sweetie," Stony's father replied, trailing behind the moving car. "And I like your hair. You look like a little gymnast."

Stony stood there, feeling the weight of the golf bag on his shoulder. "I think she was talking to me."

"Just having fun, Stony. What's her problem?"

"We went to Grandpa's grave, then almost had an accident."

"Why did you go to his grave?"

"It's his birthday."

His father grimaced. "Stony," he said, "with all due respect for the dead, your grandfather was the man who destroyed my marriage. One day your mother realized she didn't marry her father, and it was downhill from there. And I'll never forgive him for how he fell apart after your grandmother's murder. Your mother really needed him then."

Stony had heard this complaint before, so he didn't respond, but he was surprised by his father's use of the word "murder." Usually people said things like "passed" or "unexpectedly taken away."

"I could tell you stories, Stony," his father added, but fortunately he decided not to. Instead, he grabbed Stony playfully by the arm and said, "God, you look great."

That was his father in a nutshell. Stony hadn't seen him in a month, but with a phrase or two, or a squeeze of an arm, Stony was five years old again, following him around the house like a poodle.

"Let me take your bag," his father said, grabbing it. They began walking toward the clubhouse. "We don't tee off for forty-five minutes, so let's get a Coke. Myron's looking forward to seeing you."

Inside, his father stopped by tables and bragged about Stony's prowess on the baseball field, even though he hadn't been to a game that spring, or praised Stony's grades, even though he hadn't been to a teacher's conference or seen a report card. But Stony still loved to hear him talk, loved to watch his body language and see his infectious smile. He could work a room as gracefully as a politician, and the men in the clubhouse respected him.

Lately Stony hadn't played at South Park, going instead to private clubs where his friends belonged, so he almost laughed when over the entrance to the clubhouse he saw a long, green ten-foot-by-eight-inch wooden sign with South Park Country Club painted in large white letters. It was a short nine-hole course, with dirt instead of grass tees. And the holes were far from picturesque, arranged around a stagnant pond spotted with rust-colored lily pads. To make things worse, the entire course was encircled by an asphalt road, where teenagers raced their sports cars.

But in spite of its shortcomings, Stony had a soft spot for the course. This was where he'd learned to play golf. He also had good memories of the clubhouse, with its heavy wooden tables and creaking chairs. When he

was a kid, his father would drop him and a few friends off on summer days at 7 a.m. and pick them up at 3 p.m. They'd play thirty-six holes and sip Cokes while eating peanut butter or tuna fish sandwiches their mothers had packed. And Myron still worked the bar and grill, which was where Stony and his father ended up after making the rounds of three tables.

Myron was an overweight ex-railroad guy with a cherubic face and one leg; he'd lost the other under a wheel of a railroad car. He always wore tight white T-shirts and blue painter's pants with one leg rolled up and secured with a safety pin. He refused to get an artificial leg, taking pride in how he maneuvered around the bar on one crutch. He compensated for the lost leg by lifting weights he kept in the back room. His chest was enormous, his biceps as large as Stony's thighs.

"Arthur and son," Myron said with a laugh, when they sat down. He poured two Cokes, then scanned a sheet listing tee times. "Listen up," he shouted to tables of men finishing off hot dogs and mugs of cold beer. "Art's teeing off after Al Capone." Everyone laughed, including Stony's father.

"Did your dad tell you about Al Capone?" Myron asked, shaking his head.

"You mean the gangster?"

Now everyone was laughing.

"He wishes," Myron said. "The guy's a punk crackhead from Lackawanna who hangs with a bunch of wannabe gangsta boys. But your dad put him straight."

Stony thought about the many times his father had "put someone straight." One summer the heel from one of Stony's sister's shoes broke off, and when the shoe store wouldn't exchange them, Stony's father dragged him down to the mall, where he pinned the store man-

ager against a display window until security guards arrived. Stony could only imagine what Al Capone had done to incite his father's wrath.

Myron was about to continue when a little bell rang. At the sound he hobbled over to a toaster oven and removed a hot ham and cheese sandwich, which one of the men sitting at the tables came over to fetch. While this was happening, six guys—strangers to Stony—stumbled through the clubhouse's screen door. Stony tracked everyone's reaction, noticing that the mood had suddenly darkened. Half-shaved and dressed in what appeared to be secondhand polo shirts, faded jeans, and beat-up tennis shoes, they didn't look too dangerous, except for one guy who had to be the one they called Al Capone. He was squat and powerfully built, as if he spent most of his time at the gym. He had heavily greased wavy black hair, chiseled features, a dark complexion, and a short beard spread unevenly on his face. He wore a red, flower-print shirt tucked into the beltless waistband of shiny gray pants. The pants themselves had uncuffed bottoms falling a few inches short of a new pair of white alligator golf shoes. To Stony, he looked like a pimp, or maybe he was just a bad dresser. He walked over to the bar, ignoring Stony and his father, while his friends positioned themselves near the door.

"Two threesomes," he said to Myron, laying down some cash on the bar. Myron took the money, shaking his head and mumbling to himself as he opened the cash register. He deposited the green fees and returned with a handful of scorecards.

"Remember," he said, "everyone uses their own clubs." Then he tapped the side of the man's head with the tip of a pencil. "Got it?"

When Myron poked the man, an expression flashed over his face that made Stony catch his breath. "I got it," he said, grabbing the scorecards and heading over to his friends, who were still standing expressionless by the door. Finally they all left, occasionally glancing behind them.

"Did you see the look he gave me," Myron said. "I noticed he didn't give *you* that look, Art."

Myron turned to Stony. "Last week that idiot scraped your father's car with his pull cart and tried to walk away, thinking no one saw him." Myron started to laugh. "Next thing I see is your old man chasing down this old black Altima."

Stony's father laughed loudly, shrugging his shoulders in mock confusion. "What could I do?"

After Myron finished giving details of the encounter, Stony and his father spent the next ten minutes finishing their Cokes and listening to Myron's theories on everything from aliens to midgets, the latter a group for whom he had great sympathy. Then they paid for their Cokes and went to the first tee. His father sat on a yellow metal bench and said, "Don't end up a punk like that jerk in the clubhouse."

"He didn't seem so scary," Stony said, though in fact there *was* something spooky about the guy.

"Well, he's been arrested a few times for beating on his wife, and it's common knowledge he deals drugs to kids. You know how I feel about that stuff."

"Where did you hear that?" Stony asked, knowing his father had a penchant for exaggerating.

"Ah, so you're one of those benefit-of-the-doubt kind of guys?" his father said.

Stony didn't like where this conversation was heading, so he didn't answer. Instead, he looked down

the fairway at one of the threesomes, anxious to get started. His father got up and walked toward the tee, then said, "Let the morons finish up before we hit. That way we won't have to slow down." Stony agreed, and they both sat down on the bench.

As they waited, his father seemed to forget about the man with the beard. "Let's play for a dollar a hole," he said to Stony. "Isn't that what the guys at the country club do?"

Stony had been hoping the conversation wouldn't turn this way—comments about his friends' private clubs, about rich girls Stony was no doubt dating (he wished!), and about a wager. His father was not only a bad golfer but a notoriously bad loser.

"Let's just play for fun," Stony said.

"What are you afraid of?" His father walked over to his bag, withdrew his driver, and thrust it forward like a sword. He grabbed its club face and jabbed the grip into Stony's side. "*En garde*," he teased.

Stony felt an old anger rise up in him. He dodged one of the thrusts, then smiled and said, "Let's make it two dollars."

"That's my boy," his father crooned.

After Stony made the bet, he felt like crying. He knew he'd win because his father was an even worse golfer under pressure.

"You go first," his father said.

The first hole was a short par four with a narrow fairway, guarded on the left by the road and on the right by a number of huge oak trees. Stony teed up and scanned the fairway, noticing the second threesome walking off the green.

"Don't drive into those trees, now," his father joked.

Stony swung and hit a beautiful high draw that carried the trees and landed in the middle of the fairway about sixty yards from the green.

"Big deal," his father said. "You have a lousy short game, anyway."

Stony didn't say a word, didn't even smile. He stood next to the tee as his father readied himself, wiggling his driver back and forth. His father took a vicious swing and almost fell down as his ball sliced toward the trees.

Stony nearly laughed but then felt bad. "There's a lot of room there, Dad," he said. "You'll probably have a shot to the green."

His father calmly returned the driver to the bag. "I don't need your cheerleading," he said. "We're not at the country club, okay?"

"Yeah, sure," Stony said, thinking, *And now it begins*. They walked down the fairway, Stony trying to make small talk, but his father was fixed on the trees. When they got there, they found his ball. It was a good lie, but to reach the green he'd have to thread a shot through a five-foot opening between two thick tree trunks.

"I'd probably drop from there," Stony said. "I won't count the stroke and you can give me one later."

"Spare me," his father said, removing a five-iron from his bag. Stony sought protection behind a tree as his father addressed the ball and let it rip. The ball hit one tree on the left, careened into the trunk of another on the right, and, much to Stony's astonishment, shot out onto the fairway. From there his father hit an eight-iron a few feet to the left of the green.

For Stony's second shot, he hit a soft wedge about five feet from the pin.

"You still have to make the putt," his father said, trying to unnerve him, but Stony calmly putted in for a birdie after his father had chipped onto the green and one-putted for a five.

"The important thing," his father said, "is that I didn't quit. I made you play your best. It's not just about the money."

Instead of replying, Stony headed toward the second tee, followed by his father. On the way there, they passed Al Capone and his crew, who were tracking their balls on the fairway. For some reason they had decided to play together.

Stony's father confronted their leader. "You can't play with six guys," he said.

"It's not six guys," the man said, smiling, "it's two threesomes."

"Well, we're driving into you," Stony's father yelled, hurrying to the next tee.

Once they got there, Stony saw in the distance Al Capone and his friends picking up their balls and throwing them close to the green. Meanwhile, Stony's father ripped his driver from his bag and probed his front pocket for a tee. The ground was packed solid, so when he pushed the tee into the dirt, it broke. "Damn," he said. Finally he got one to stick.

The fairway of the second hole, flanked on both sides by a hundred yards of big oaks, was treacherous, but Stony's father hit one of the straightest and longest drives of his life. The ball nearly reached the sixsome, one of whom turned and waved back, making his father even angrier. And this was how he played the hole—in a rush, but with a cool single-mindedness that raised

the level of play. His father's only disappointment came when they reached the third tee and discovered that Al Capone had already teed off.

The third hole was intimidating. Between the tee and the green was a hundred and fifty yards of water, and if you carried it, you still had to deal with a twenty-yard-wide sand trap in front of the green and an asphalt road behind it. Stony had rarely seen his father make it over the pond on the first try.

When they reached the tee, the sixsome was chipping onto the green from various places. Stony's father emptied the balls from his bag, looking frustrated that he only had five. He asked Stony for more, so Stony handed him about ten shiny Titleists. "Idiots," Stony's father said, teeing up one after another.

His first shot arced high over the pond and landed in the middle of the green. Stony could see Al Capone flinch as the ball fell a few feet from him. The next shot faded in from the left, making one of the other golfers lose his balance and tumble into a sand trap. "Yes!" Stony's father yelled.

Even when he hit a low liner, it skipped the last twenty yards of the pond and nearly hit another guy in the leg. With each shot the men scattered in different directions, until Al Capone decided to grab a ball and hurl it into the pond, shaking his fist at Stony's father. The other men followed his lead, and so it went for a good three or four minutes: Stony's father hitting balls with his eight-iron, the men tossing them into the water.

When he had exhausted the supply of balls, his father smiled and said, "Did you see what those guys

did, Stony? They threw our balls into the water. I think we should do something about that."

With a sick feeling in his stomach, Stony followed his father through a wooded path that led to the green. By the time they got there, all six men had claimed it, crouched around the pin, brandishing their putters. As Stony watched, his father reached for his driver and leaped onto the green, momentarily scattering the men. When they surrounded him, he waved his driver in circles to keep them at bay. "Get help," his father yelled.

Stony ran toward the clubhouse, which was a half mile down the road, wondering what Myron or any of those old guys could do. On the way there, he heard laughter coming from two sleazy-looking guys perched on the hood of a brown station wagon, which itself was parked under a tree behind the green. They were obviously enjoying his father's antics, and Stony felt like yelling at them. But then he noticed his father's Grand Marquis in the parking lot and remembered the extra key hidden in the glove compartment and the foot-long metal pipe under the seat. He ran toward the car, looking behind him as his father continued to swing the club in a wide arc, laughing like a lunatic.

When Stony reached the car, he found the key and started the engine, Jimi Hendrix's primal yawp blasting from the cassette player. The song was "Voodoo Child," and Stony listened to the lyrics, pulling out of the parking lot and gunning the engine once, twice. As he approached the fourth green, his father smiled, glad the cavalry had finally arrived.

Stony knew what the program called for: he was to drive up to the green and scare the hell out of Al Capone and his buddies. If necessary, he could toss his father the pipe and see if they might back down. But

as he watched his father hold off the angry sixsome, he decided that this time things would be different. He reached under the steering column and clicked on the amplifier switch, feeling the whole car trembling with Hendrix's guitar. Then he gunned the engine again, speeding past the green. At first his father seemed startled, but then his eyes locked onto Stony's and he smiled, as if enjoying the decision Stony had just made. Stunned and angered by that smile, Stony drove even faster, watching his father disappear in the rearview mirror. His hands began to shake, so he gripped the steering wheel tighter, listening to Hendrix chant, *'cause I'm a voodoo child, God knows, I'm a voodoo child, baby.*

After a few minutes the two across the water came into focus, a tall blond man and a boy, the blond man smiling, toying with golf balls, rolling them back forth on the ground like huge white marbles, as the boy looked on, shaking his head, Leopold then shifting the binoculars to the six men on the green only a hundred feet away, focusing on a bearded man wearing shiny white shoes that Leopold wanted, the way he had wanted that cowboy hat with the snakeskin band from the man in Iowa who the police thought had hanged himself, the thought making him smile, and Leopold would've gladly had a go at the bearded man, but he, like his friends, was preoccupied with golf balls raining down on them, while the two across the pond disappeared from sight, only to arrive a few minutes later, the blond man waving a metal club at the other six while the boy drifted toward the road, looking in the direction of a large building about a hundred yards away.

"Damn," Abraham said, his mouth half full of meatballs, "what kind of crazy is this?"

Leopold not answering but knowing his next victim

was among them, a thought like a heaviness now instead of a fire, because he couldn't stop the killing any more than he would be able to keep from handcuffing the Asian woman to the car at nightfall, but feeling sure this time it was the man with the shiny white shoes, though also drawn to the blond man on the green, who looked like one of those perfect models on the magazine covers he had spied as a boy at the local convenience store—a memory making him angry, as he watched the blond man hold off the other six while the boy jogged toward the building down the road, then broke into a run right past Leopold and Abraham, Leopold thinking, No, it's him, the boy, but why?

"Damn," Abraham said, doing a little jig. "That's some kind of crazy."

"Now, now," Leopold said, smiling, "be calm and a plan shall reveal itself."

Stony was holed up in his room when his mother tapped on the door.

"I know you're in there," she said.

He didn't answer. He'd been comatose on his bed for what seemed like an hour, still holding the keys to his father's car.

"You better come out," he heard Molly say. "The jig's up, you're going over the Falls in a cellophane barrel. You're disappearing in the mist." He could picture her smiling, and he wanted to remind her how embarrassed she was when their father nearly strangled that shoe salesman at the mall.

"This isn't funny, Molly," his mother said, though she was laughing too. "Really, Stony," she added. "Your father wasn't even mad. He just wants his car back."

Stony went to the door, placing his ear to the

cool wood, hoping to hear them walk away. When he cracked it open, he was confronted by their faces, no more than a foot from his own.

"Come out, sweetie," his mother pleaded.

"Boy, are you in trouble," his sister said. She had a round face, a tiny nose, and large, startling blue eyes. Her red hair was short and cut into bangs, and just recently, at fifteen, she'd moved out of girlhood and had become beautiful. It bothered Stony when he saw his friends gawking at her. But he didn't feel very brotherly now. She was being a wise guy, enjoying his situation.

"This is very bad timing," she said, waving her finger at him, "especially with the trip just two weeks away."

"Downstairs, Molly," her mother ordered.

As she left, Molly said Stony should be thinking of a good place to escape to. "Somewhere exotic," she said, "like Cancún or Costa Rica. They like Americans there."

"Downstairs," her mother repeated.

When she left, Stony opened the door and returned to his bed. His mother joined him. He could smell her perfume, and her closeness made him uncomfortable.

"What did he do this time?" she asked.

"You mean he didn't tell you?"

"He just said you had his car and he wanted it back."

Stony told her most of the story, leaving out only his father's comment about his grandfather, since if she heard it she'd get defensive and rehash every dirty detail of the divorce. She laughed at moments in the story when his father had acted most like an idiot, which didn't surprise him. If she had been there, she probably would've been at his father's side, poking a club into Al Capone's ribs.

His parents had gotten divorced because his father had been unfaithful, but they still had a weird connection. It wouldn't have surprised Stony if they met periodically in a motel behind Sally's back, the woman his father was currently living with, except that it would have made his mother as dishonest as the women his father had cheated with. And that's what had sent her over the edge, discovering that everyone, except her, had known about the affairs, until Mrs. Corbett, a retiree from across the street, told her about one particular woman his father had brought home at lunchtime.

His mother couldn't forgive that kind of humiliation, and she often made Stony and Molly aware of it. Many times Stony had wanted to ask his father how he could've have acted so despicably. He had even rehearsed a speech that ended with "How would you feel if I cheated on a girl?"

Stony's mother began to massage his neck, making him even more uncomfortable.

"He's really not mad?" Stony asked.

"He just wants his car back."

"Weird."

Stony's mother stood and faced him. "Not weird at all. It's pretty routine by now. Whatever was bugging him is out of his system and he can relax for a few days. He seemed more amused than anything. Just bring the car back and I'll follow you. You can drop it off and leave the keys in the ignition, then run to my car and we can speed off like two vandals."

"I can't legally drive by myself," Stony reminded her.

"It's just a couple of blocks, and you seemed fine making it home from the golf course." She was smiling.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"When you spend more time with your father, you might understand."

Stony thought that doubtful. He planned to go to college far away from Buffalo, but first he had to face his father.

It was a short drive to the working-class neighborhood where his father lived in a small, boxy house that he had inherited from his own father, whose death coincided with Stony's parents' divorce. At first it was depressing for Stony to visit his father there. He seemed a bit lost, unable to make himself dinner or clean the house, which was strewn with ketchup-stained wrappers from fast-food joints. But then he met Sally and the house didn't smell like old people anymore. All the knickknacks and framed pictures of the Pope were replaced by scented candles and paintings of sunsets and mountains, and the living room furniture, previously preserved in form-fitting plastic, gave way to a leather recliner and couch. A lot of people had moved out of the neighborhood, but Stony's father loved to describe how his own father's generation worked swing shifts dressed in blue or gray khaki pants and shirts, carrying black lunchboxes filled with bologna sandwiches and thermoses of hot coffee.

Stony's mother was driving so close behind him that he could see her smiling, as if happily anticipating another confrontation with his father, though she had promised not to interfere.

As Stony steered the car into the driveway and slowed to a stop, he could see his father and Sally sitting on the front porch, his father holding a beer and Sally

tossing a tennis ball from hand to hand. His mother pulled into the driveway behind him and, ignoring her promise, stepped out of her car. Stony sighed.

When he turned off the engine, his father moved quickly toward him, smiling, as if nothing had happened. He even opened Stony's door and helped him out. "I didn't think you had it in you," his father said. He was wearing a different tight white T-shirt, this one with a huge black question mark on it. "You look surprised I'm in one piece. You're probably thinking: did he fight those nasty guys or run away?"

Stony knew running away was never a possibility for his father. But he did wonder what had happened, so he asked, "Are you okay?"

His father did a pirouette, which made even his mother laugh. "Your running away saved me, Stony."

"What?"

"When you drove by and I saw that look on your face"—he tried to mimic it, bugging his eyes out as if someone had kicked him in the groin—"I couldn't stop laughing. I fell to my knees and rolled around on the green. Those guys just froze. They thought I was crazy."

"I think they were on to something," Stony's mother said, eliciting a laugh from Sally.

His father ignored them. "At any rate, when I got up, I leaned your bag against a tree and warned them not to touch it, and I played through. I played really well."

"I bet you did," Stony's mother said, leaning back against the hood of her car.

Sally laughed again.

"Hi, Sally," his mother said.

"Hi, Kate. Sorry about this." Unlike Stony's family, Sally wasn't hardwired with anxiety. She was an avid hiker, short but very strong. She had a small, pretty

face, gray eyes, and a thin, delicate neck that, along with her perfect posture, made her appear sophisticated. Her long brown hair was tied into a ponytail, and she was wearing a red T-shirt, hiking shorts, and running shoes.

Even Stony's mother liked Sally. At first this surprised him, but then he realized Sally had appeared a year after the divorce, so there was no reason to hate her, especially since she seemed to stabilize his father. Also, Sally was a counselor at a local high school, and Stony's mother, who was a middle-school teacher, admired that.

"He's your problem now, not mine," his mother said.

"Tell me about it," Sally replied.

"Won't anyone take up my cause?" his father pleaded. "You're not going to desert me twice in one day, are you, Stony?"

Stony handed him the keys and started toward his mother's car.

"That's enough drama for one day," Sally said, dragging his father toward the porch, then doubling back to Stony. "You know, he didn't mean to get you upset."

"He never means it," Stony's mother protested, and Sally shrugged again, explaining that his father was still a "work in progress."

"Been there, done that," his mother said.

"Can we just leave?" Stony asked.

"What are you all saying about me?" his father yelled from the porch, grabbing the beer and taking a swig.

Stony almost screamed, "That you're an idiot," but he couldn't muster up that level of courage.

Sally touched Stony's arm before he walked away. "Will you and your sister visit a few times before the trip? I think it might be good to establish some kind of rhythm."

Stony nodded, then got into his mother's car. As they drove away, he waved lamely to his father.

"Cheer up," his father yelled. "In two weeks, nothing but kayaking and fishing and golf."

Stony liked kayaking and fishing and golf, but right now he would have preferred living in the Gulag, spearing fishheads with a rusty fork from a clay bowl of cold potato soup. Still, he forced a smile as he and his mother drove away. "You sure you don't have trouble with this trip?" he asked.

"Of course not. In fact, I'd rather you go with her than him."

"I was thinking you might be concerned about him messing up my head."

His mother looked perplexed, as if she'd never thought about that possibility. "That's a little dramatic, isn't it?" she said. "It's only a week."

Only a week, Stony thought.

Molly was waiting for him and his mother when they got home. She was lying on the couch, a book in one hand, a half-eaten tomato in the other, pink juice glistening on the bridge of flesh spanning her upper lip.

"Don't stain my new couch, Molly," his mother said.

Molly licked away the juice, resting her book on the hardwood floor. "What's the verdict?"

His mother laughed.

"Just let it go," Stony said.

"Did he want to arm-wrestle you? Did he cancel the trip?"

Stony walked past her and up the stairs to his room.

"You can't hide, Stony. None of us can. Remember what I said about Costa Rica." Her laughter was the last thing he heard before closing his bedroom door.

When Stony went to college he wouldn't pine for his mother or father, but he'd miss Molly. Right now she was being a jerk, but she often made him laugh. That's how she dealt with problems, while Stony would go for a run or disappear into his computer. He wasn't big into video games, but he'd liked to Google major cities and download pictures of places he wished he could visit. He would research what the inhabitants ate or drank, what their flag looked like, and how to say hi and goodbye in their language. He would then imagine scenarios where he was studying abroad and would meet an exotic girl who would be more experienced in sex than he was, which wouldn't have been hard. Girls seemed to like him, and a few even called the house, but he had never stuck with anyone.

But he had his books. Not many novels, though he'd bought everything written by Hemingway and Flannery O'Connor. He especially liked O'Connor's characters because they seemed hopelessly damaged but had the possibility to change. Still, unlike Molly, who read nothing but old, fat, nineteenth-century novels, he didn't see much value in inventing make-believe characters when there were so many interesting living and dead real people. That's why most of his books were biographies and autobiographies, not of prestigious men and women but of oddballs or people considered to be dangerous or evil, like John Wilkes Booth or Rasputin.

Better than anyone else, he knew his need to understand a certain kind of human cruelty was a response to his grandmother's death. She was a tall, beautiful woman with fierce blue eyes and wild salt-and-pepper curls that spilled over her shoulders. Because she'd been a nurse before retiring, she owned a stethoscope, and one summer afternoon she and Stony had listened to each other's hearts. At first it scared him, but after a while he enjoyed moving the little metal cup from his chest to hers, their heartbeats engaged in a special private conversation. Sensing his initial fear, she had hugged him, saying, "Don't be afraid. There's a certainty in that beating, a kind of strength. It's who you are, and that 'who' will do great things someday."

He'd always assumed she'd be alive to help him discover that "who," but when he was eleven something terrible happened. He remembered being picked up from school early by his aunt. When they arrived home, vans from local TV stations were prowling up and down the street, his father yelling at reporters to leave them alone. He also noticed his grandfather, his mother's father, peeking out from a corner of the picture window, as if he were ashamed of something. Everything afterward was extremely fuzzy, though Stony was able to piece together the tragedy from overhearing conversations.

His grandparents had a handyman named John, whom his grandmother had met one Saturday while distributing clothes at a soup kitchen sponsored by her church. John, a Vietnam vet, was a big man with a large belly and a white beard. He always wore jeans, work boots, and plaid flannel shirts, even in the summer. When he walked he moved from side to side, ape-like, but he was a gentle man and often played catch with Stony. He was missing some teeth on top, and the

remaining ones were different shades of dark yellow or brown because he smoked and chewed tobacco. But his eyes, a bright blue, were soft and kind. John didn't live with Stony's grandparents, but they were fond of him, so they'd invite him to family cookouts.

Then something went wrong. One day after cutting the lawn, John inexplicably stabbed Stony's grandmother to death, then called the police. When the police arrived, John rushed them, brandishing the knife, and they shot him dead on his grandparents' front lawn.

Stony's grades plummeted a few months later, so his mother took him to a psychologist. Off and on for the next year, he, his mother, and the therapist dissected the murder, trying to piece together the weeks before it happened, looking for signs, talking about chemical imbalances and how the horrors of Vietnam could change a man. In the end, the therapist concluded it was all "a terrible tragedy." Whether we like it or not, he said, life is "messy and sometimes inexplicable." When he said that, Stony thought, *That's it? That's the best you can do?*

For months he stumbled around feeling as if a huge iceberg were lodged in his chest, his skin sensitive, like the nerves beneath had been rubbed raw with steel wool. But gradually the horror dissipated, morphing into numbness, so that he was able to function better, get good grades, play sports, talk to people. Still, he knew he could never accept that his grandmother's death was inexplicable, so he began to read books that might explain why people do unprovoked crazy things—biographies, even a collection of essays on evil by famous philosophers, who couldn't give definitive reasons for random cruelty, but at least they tried harder than his mother's therapist. One of the things he learned,

though, was that if he read too much on this topic he actually felt worse, experiencing a rage every bit as dark as the one that probably haunted John. It made him wonder if evil could go viral, which would account for Nazi Germany. Stony had already bought two biographies for the trip: one about John F. Kennedy, another about Lee Harvey Oswald.

"Don't you think that's a little weird?" Molly had said when she saw them.

"I want to see if there was a reason they crossed paths."

"You know how Dad feels about the Kennedys."

"So he should be glad I'm reading about JFK."

"But not Osgood."

"It's Oswald."

"Who cares, it was so long ago."

Stony just shook his head.

As he walked around his bedroom now, he could hear Molly and his mother talking downstairs. He spread the curtains of his bedroom window and looked down on a patch of tall sunflowers he had planted in the spring. A squadron of tiny winged insects swarmed relentlessly above the flowers' long stems, which seemed to be genuflecting toward the west, where the sun was about to set. Although it was very quiet, he felt edgy. He thought about going for a run, but he'd been outside enough for one day. He looked at his weights scattered in the corner; they had been a gift from his father last Christmas. He sat down on the bench and grabbed two thirty-pound dumbbells, doing a few bench presses, feeling the blood rush to his arms and chest. It felt good, so he kept the weight low and did twenty repetitions, wondering how strong he could get before the New Hampshire vacation.