Prologue

My mother's mother came to this country in the usual way—she got on a boat with other immigrants and sailed from Sicily. She wasn't one of them, however: neither tired nor poor or part of any huddled mass. Instead, she traveled alone, with her money in one sock and a knife in the other, coming to the new world with an old world motive—to murder the man that had left her for America.

After searching New York City, every neighborhood in every borough, for him, she traveled by train to anywhere in America that Italians could be found: Boston, Chicago, Kansas City, San Francisco, New Orleans. Back in New York, while waiting for a ship to return home, she met a man, a natural-born citizen whose grandfather had come from the old country to help build the Brooklyn Bridge. She married him and they settled in the Bronx, opening a grocery where Italian housewives bought their meat and pasta and vegetables. In the back of the store, my mother's mother fed the men who had no wives.

My grandparents would have four children—three boys and a girl. Then their boys, all three of them, would die fighting the war in Vietnam. And because of that, my mother's mother took revenge on her husband and daughter; the husband because he had convinced her to stay in America, where so much pain would find her; and the daughter because she was a reminder of her three dead boys. She didn't take her knife to her husband and daughter: instead she cut them with her sharp tongue, kept her distance with dagger stares.

It's no wonder then that my mother ran away with an orphan,

a wild man from Gun Hill Road, where the abandoned and the Irish lived. He was tall and hollow-cheeked, rode a motorcycle and boxed in the amateur ranks. He worked with his hands, building things; and drank with them, too, tearing things down. Despite his moments of violence, he had a sense of humor and a sense of movement, and this was enough to convince my mother to climb on the wild man's motorcycle and escape her wretched home. The young couple moved to the working-class towns of northern New Jersey, where city people in the seventies were buying starter homes and starting families. They would never marry, but would have three boys together. I'm the youngest.

As a family we had no identity, no story, as neither of my parents ever spoke much about their past. Despite this, my mother tried to instill a few traditions in us, like being around the table each night for dinner, though my father would frequently drown that tradition in belligerence and alcohol. I don't know what had happened to him in that orphanage in the Bronx, but when he drank, his eyes often became as hollow as his cheeks, turning from green to gray, and everything after that would be brutal.

While sometimes in a stupor he'd mutter through a veil of unwashed hair about the Irish who raised him so cruelly, it was also that culture that informed his best qualities, particularly the romantic accent and mystical claims. He told truths and he told lies, and it was hard to tell the difference, or if there even was a difference to him. No matter, I listened to every word he said. The man might have been damaged by his past, but he tried to give what he had left to his three boys. So, we learned all about Irish legends, carpentry and uppercuts.

We lived by the railroad, and the trains were with us all day and night—the clanging and whooshing, the warning of the whistle, and the ding, ding, dinging as the safety gates went down. The neighborhood kids made a fortress of the boxcars

beside the tracks. We jumped from rooftop to rooftop, chased each other under the bellies, and found warmth or shade within the walls of the abandoned cars.

The moving trains entertained us in a different way. From the cover of trees, we'd hammer the commuter with rocks as it whipped past. The freight trains, slow and unmanned, made for another game altogether. We'd pace our steps alongside the wobbling cars, and with a hand on the ladder, we kept running until our weight rose above the screaming wheels and our legs dangled and groped for the safety of a rung. Then we'd climb aboard and disappear in the distance like a snake into the woods, riding the straight rails on the swath of open land cut through the stretches of never-ending pines, under the open sky in the rattle and rush of movement and freedom. We'd eventually hop off, and on the walk home, down the same tracks from which we'd come, we'd talk about disappearing one day for real.

One day when I was twelve, my father grabbed my wrists in the backyard and told me through his thick, whiskey breath that my brothers and I were nothing more than a mongrel-mix that made us Woppi Indians from the Ghoomba Tribe. He didn't hide his brown toothed smile, but I wanted to believe him, so I did. By genetic good fortune, I grew up tall, dark-haired, and severe-cheeked as an Indian chief. To complete the picture, I braided my hair and wore a bandanna around my head, and in the summer, walked around without a shirt, rubbing the sunburn into my skin. One time, at a flea market, I stole a buck knife, which I kept tucked in the back pocket of my jeans. I spent hours with that knife, snapping it into place, mastering the handle, sharpening the blade and burying the point, over and over, into the bulls-eye of the box car where I hid.

That was the same year that my father, without a word or

warning, disappeared, leaving my mother alone to raise three boys. The oldest, Sallie, was thick and vicious. He claimed the house and ruled with rage, his presence like an angry dog as he bullied our mother and broke her heart on a regular basis. He reserved a special contempt for me, frequently bashing me with his brick-like fists and steel-toed boots. It was from Sallie that I hid in those boxcars. And it was to protect myself from him that I'd stolen that knife, learned to use it, and always kept it close.

My other brother, Angie, was a derelict prince. All the kids by the tracks followed him because he was cool and tough and smarter than the rest of us. He was the first to hop a train, and the first to take the blame when our delinquent stunts went wrong. Girls followed him, too, mostly home from school, and it was there, at home, that he served as a savior for me. Despite my knife, I couldn't have kept my oldest brother away without Angie's protection.

Because of this, the summer I turned fifteen, when a fight spilled onto the tracks and a commuter train killed my prince of a brother, I had no choice but to leave. So, on an August morning, I hopped a freight car and scaled my way inside. With my knife in one pocket and my money in the other, I rattled to Pittsburgh. I could pass for eighteen then, tall as I'd become, and found work and shelter soon enough, though I didn't stay in Pittsburgh long. I didn't stay anywhere too long. Over the next few years, I worked mainly in restaurants or bars, or building houses. I slept with waitresses and drank with cooks and carpenters, but after a while, I had to move on. And then I had to move on again. In each new place I'd find a job, a roof, the library, and a mailbox. During off-hours from work, I'd sit in the church-like quiet of the public library and learn the missing lessons from my education: literature, history, and the like. I'd study architecture and carpentry and cook books too.

At least once a week, I would write a letter home to my mother. I thought of her every day, at every meal, but I knew that the sound of her voice would be too much to bear, so I wrote her letters, which she always answered. Writing became our ritual. It's how she remained my mother, and how I stayed her son.

My mother had never traveled, so she'd ask me to describe each city I was in; to make her not only see the buildings and the people, but to also feel and hear and taste their lives. Through words, I'd send her the city I was in, from the streets to the sky. I'd observe the people in their routines—what they ate and drank, how they dressed and talked, how they fought and kissed.

One day, a letter arrived from my mother while I was staying in Louisiana, outside Lafayette, in a two-room shack behind a roadhouse. I worked in the kitchen and stayed with the owner's daughter, a Bayou child named Carmen with corkscrew hair and green-apple eyes. She taught me to Cajun jitterbug and cook Creole. The pockets inside her collarbones bubbled with moisture when we danced or made love in the jacket of tropical heat. Some nights we'd walk into the woods, lie on the banks under a canopy of live oak and Spanish moss, and fuck without fear of snakes or demons.

Afterward, in the hard smell of the swamp, as heat lightening flashed and animals died in the distance, we'd suck cigarettes and blow smoke at the yellow moon beyond the trees. I would have liked to stay there for awhile, with Carmen, but the letter from my mother brought me home. She told me that Sallie had been locked up and that she'd die soon.

Back home in New Jersey, I watched my mother waste away from cigarettes and sadness. From her bed, as her legs swelled and her shoulders shrank to nothing but skin and sockets, she spoke—for the very first time—of our family history: the building of the Brooklyn Bridge and her father the American, the

grocery he opened with my mother's mother who abandoned her homeland for revenge, and the inheritance of suffering she had handed to her husband and her daughter and her three dead boys, Salvatore, Angelo, and Caesar. With my mother's dry fingers like ribbons on my wrist, she spoke of her dead brothers then wailed over the fate of her three boys, Salvatore (Sallie), Angelo (Angie), and me, Caesar.

My mother, superstitious as she was, begged me to break the curse on the family started by revenge. Her mother had brought the bad spirits with her from Sicily, and they were with us like blood and breath. From her dying heart, she begged me to save myself from suffering, to break the chain of agony it extended. The curse was cradled by movement, she said, and all the bad that had happened to our family was because people ran away, trying to escape this curse. She asked me to stop running, to find a home. I promised her I would. And then I buried her alone. I received the little bit of money she had, and the house, with Sallie in jail, was mine, too, but I couldn't stay there, not with so much misery within those walls and Angie's ghost on the tracks nearby.

With the house boarded up I traveled to the city, arriving like an immigrant from the old world. Manhattan felt too confined after all that time on the open road, so I walked the bridge an ancestor had come here to build, determined to find a home in the mysteries of Brooklyn. The once-proud borough had become an anonymous land of strange faces and tongues, an alphabet soup of subway lines that extended far into forgotten zones. I walked its streets, rode the trains above and below ground. Neighborhoods were there to be discovered—each with their own separate story.

I eventually found a neighborhood where the sky was wide above the carved cornices of four-story brick and brownstone

buildings that held fire escapes suspended over sidewalk storefronts. A business offered hand-made hats, large and colorful. On the corner, a dread-locked man sold drinks in coconuts to school kids in uniforms. Hair salons and barbershops were two-to-a-block. The smell of southern food mingled with the music that came from canted porticos and open car windows. Traffic eased like the slow-walking women whose hips moved nearly as far sideways as their bodies did forward. The men glided along, shiny with confidence. The early evening streets filled with these graceful women and stylish men; surfaced from the subway with the skyline in sight but Manhattan left behind. They touched each other as they spoke, on elbows and wrists, on tree-lined streets with landmark brownstones aligned in formation like an architect's army.

Rippling down from the neighborhood's height were areas of increasing despair. At the far end, in the flats, a long shuttered navy yard bordered the East River. Up the slope, between the Navy Yard and a big green park, were projects, clusters of short-stack buildings the color of ash. Above Myrtle Avenue, the litter-strewn thoroughfare that severed the projects from the park, were in-between streets, where the houses were historic, but the conditions reflected a different history—a history, in some ways, like mine, of turbulence and the desire to overcome. All through the neighborhood, high and low, the majority of the people didn't look like me—they were black and I was whatever, but that didn't matter because I was alone.

On a quiet, tree-lined block, closer to the navy yard than the heights, I bought a crumbling clapboard of four stories pinched between two brownstones. I worked on the building all summer as the neighborhood kids chalked the sidewalks out front, jumped rope and rode bikes, and played games into the fading light of supper time. Afterward they would return to their

stoops to lick ice-cream and holler until the sky turned indigo above the tree line and the adults—who were always out front and knew all the kid's names—called everyone in when the street lamps blinked on.

Through the night, lights blazed inside the open windows of my empty house as I hammered and plastered and painted past August and into autumn. And before the trees lost their leaves and darkness came in the afternoon, I had finished. I bought a few pieces of furniture and decorated the best I could, but the echoing house didn't feel like a home, and because of my wandering nature, I had to live outside my door. So I searched the streets for a job and found one soon enough, once again working for someone else in someone else's bar, unaware at the time that the past was something I could never escape.