

PATRICK RYAN

Ground Control

I was morphing into something I didn't want to be. My nose was growing bulbous, my neck was elongating, my hands were thickening into fleshy paddles that batted against doorframes and knocked over drinking glasses. When I looked in the mirror, every part of me was out of proportion to whatever it was attached. I would wake up in the middle of the night freezing beneath the unremitting current of the central air unit, under a thin sheet, on my stomach, humping the mattress like the last animal of its species desperate for contact.

Frankie was two years younger than me and infinitely better-looking. Because he slept with his door open, I could listen to his breathing—hear the back of his tongue clicking against the roof of his mouth each time he inhaled, a sound he'd been making in his sleep since he was a baby. My sister Karen kept her door shut. Clawing out of another warm, slick dream, I stepped into the refrigerated hall space and stood between their two rooms and Matt's empty room, an erection lifting the front of my pajamas and the blood pounding in my ears. I wanted something I believed was not of this world. Beyond that, I wanted to be someone else, getting it.

My father left during the summer of the Bicentennial, when I was eleven. His name was Roy and he was Frankie's father, too, but not Karen's or Matt's, and he had moved out so abruptly that he hadn't even taken most of his things. He was living with another woman now, less than fifteen miles away, at the north end of the island near the Space Center, and by 1981 we understood not only that he wasn't coming back, but that he wasn't very interested in knowing us anymore. Trace evidence of his existence remained in our house for awhile after he'd left—including not only the smell of his cigarettes but the Pall Malls, themselves, along with his lighter, an arrangement my mother preserved on the lower level of the end table next to the couch. Optimistically, cheerfully, she had told us he would be back by that first Thanksgiving, and by that first Christmas, and by Easter, and then by the time Matt, who was the

oldest, graduated from high school. Finally I came home one day to find my father's picture extracted from the faces on the dining room wall. His coffee mug was missing from the cup tree in the kitchen, and his cigarettes and lighter—along with the ashtray my mother had dusted for a full year—were gone, in their place a candy dish and a copy of *The Florida Catholic*.

Roy was the second man to move out on my mother. The first man was named Dermot, and I knew very little about him other than that he lived in Utica, New York, and that he was Matt's and Karen's father. Matt, as soon as he'd graduated from Merritt Island High School, left home and took a bus up to Utica, and not long after that, Dermot started calling our house to complain about him. I answered the phone one morning before school and heard a dry, squeezed voice say, "Teresa?" I started laughing. "I'm not Teresa," I said, "I'm a boy."

"Just put your goddamn mother on the phone."

I got my mother, then lingered close enough to listen to her end of the conversation. She said, "All right, Dermot," several times, and "All *right*," and then, "If you don't want him getting into trouble with the law, maybe you should think about what sort of example you're setting." Dermot's voice, coming through the receiver she held away from her ear, sounded like a tiny car engine trying to turn over. "No," she said, "Matt's an adult. He's eighteen and he can do what he wants. Besides, it's my understanding that he wrote to you and that you told him moving up there was a good idea.... Well, you ought to know by now, Dermot, that you shouldn't tell your child something you don't want his mother to hear. If it doesn't come out in confidence, it'll come out in a fight.... Maybe something like, '*If she's that crazy, then you should get away from her.*' Sound familiar?.... Oh, don't feed me that bullshit!" She slammed the receiver down hard enough to make the ringer chime. Then she closed her eyes, let go of the phone and crossed herself: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

She wasn't so tough with us. That is, she gave orders—told us to come to the table, straighten our rooms, get ready for church—and she yelled if we didn't follow through, but she didn't really seem to care. Karen, who, at seventeen, reigned supreme now that Matt was gone, did nothing she was told and had in fact turned mouthy. "So?" had become her favorite refrain. "It's almost time for Mass,"

my mother would say, to which Karen, legs splayed open on the couch, in front of the television, would respond, “So?” “So, I’d like you to get up, get dressed, and come with us.” “So?” My mother would work her mouth around a string of unsaid words, then finally spit out, “Fine. Stupid me for suggesting it.” She wasn’t a wife anymore; she’d been fired from that job—twice—and motherhood was the work she’d been stuck with.

But I got that from talking to my sister. In our back yard at night, in her uniform of short-shorts and tank top and bare feet, her shoulder blades spiked against the cinder block wall of the house and a cigarette wedged between two stiff fingers that hovered in front of her chin, Karen glared at the dark ribbon of canal at the end of our lawn and said, “You can hear it in the woman’s voice. She’s still got the volume, but she’s phoning it in.”

“Maybe she’s tired,” I said.

“Maybe she’s dead. As in, *Night of the Living*. She keeps the house freezing, like a morgue, you know? She’s like a zombie, but instead of eating you, she just nags you to death.”

Karen was sailing toward the end of high school and she’d lost her pudginess and grown sleek and dangerous over the past year. She’d chopped her hair off at the neckline (just as our mother was growing hers long), she’d gone skeletally limp, and she’d perfected a look of absolute hatred that she wore now instead of make-up.

“If you were smart, you’d be doing whatever you wanted,” she told me. “Mom’s not going to care.”

“I do what I want.”

A little bubble of adult laughter and smoke burst at the back of her throat. She stared at the canal and shook her head wearily. “You’re so afraid of getting into trouble, it’s pathetic. You don’t even ask if you can hang out with your friends. I don’t ask, anymore—I tell her what I’m going to do or I just *do* it. You have friends, right?”

I tried to mimic her laugh. “Yeah.”

Her head tipped sideways as if her neck were broken. “I mean, not just the people you sit next to in class. You have *real* friends?”

“Screw you,” I said. “Yes.”

“And I’m sure you can’t get a date to save your life—not till that face clears up, anyway—but if you could, you would, right?”

“Screw you twice.”

“Just asking,” she said. “Just trying to get an idea of where the family registers on the freak meter.”

“What about you? I don’t see you dating people.”

“Because I’ve already done it. I get straight to the good stuff, now.”

“What does that mean?”

“Two words,” she said to her cigarette. “Jeff Colby.”

She was a senior. I was a sophomore. Jeff Colby was a short, drum-playing junior who had shaggy blond hair and who’d been kicked out of band for having a joint behind his ear during a pep rally. He glowed with the fame of that scandal, and there were plenty of kids who longed to be part of his inner-circle.

“Good stuff,” I said, trying to sound indifferent, even bored. “I suppose you’re just dying to tell me all about it.”

“What I’m dying to tell you is that Mom doesn’t give a shit what you do, so you ought to start doing it. This goody-two-shoes thing is embarrassing, if you want the truth. I don’t bring my friends over anymore because they just see this whacked-out ghost-lady, this sixteen-year-old dork, and this little *Star Wars* freak who’s, you know, kind of old to still be playing with dolls, and they look at me and they say, literally, where’s the two-headed chicken?”

This was mean, but not entirely off the mark, given my own experience.

Try having a friend at school ask where your father was, and explaining that you *thought* he lived on North Tropical Trail but that you weren’t positive because you’d only seen his house once, from the back seat of a moving station wagon, and your mother had ignored the question, *Is that where Dad lives now?*

Or try explaining why your mother had been pulled out of the Communion line during Mass more than a few times and escorted to the back of the church by whichever off-duty priest had been assigned to keep an eye on her. Or why your little brother, who was fourteen, taped aluminum foil over his bedroom windows (which faced the street) and spoke sometimes in a language of his own invention called Sub-Middle-Earth Glocken. And just try explaining to anyone—your friends, your mother, your fire-breathing sister—what exactly it was that was happening to *you*.

I tried practical reasoning. A fat person who wants to lose weight shouldn't bake desserts for a living. A kleptomaniac shouldn't get a job in a jewelry store. An alcoholic shouldn't work at the drive-through beer barn, and an ax murderer shouldn't become the tool guy at Babcock's Hardware. Since I was incapable of abusing myself and *not* thinking about certain members of the varsity football team, I concluded that jerking off was making me queer, and I resolved never, ever to do it again. Two days later I chose a different strategy: proactive normalization. Alone in the house, I rooted through my older brother Matt's bedroom for anything even vaguely pornographic. Like my father, Matt had left a lot of stuff behind. Guitars and amplifiers and *wa-wa* pedals. A metal Nabisco snack rack he'd pulled from a dumpster and filled with handgrips and numb-chucks and empty shotgun shells. From under his bed I dug out surfer magazines, scuba diving magazines, stacks of *Rolling Stone*, but not a single copy of *Playboy* or *Penthouse*. Finally, I resorted to Farrah Fawcett-Majors. She was hanging on Matt's wall between a poster of Jimi Hendrix and a cross fashioned out of a crumbling palm frond. She flashed a set of teeth as white as shuttle tiles, her head floated in a storm of blonde hair and her nipples punched at the backside of a bathing suit the color of a circus peanut. *Come here, darling*, I thought as I took the poster down from the wall. Utilizing a pair of scissors from Matt's desk drawer, I acted with all tenderness and good intention, tried to become hypnotized with the visual of it, and succeeded only in giving myself paper cuts in the last place you would ever want them.

Frankie was on the floor surrounded by action figures, multi-colored dice and sheets of hexagonal graph paper. His head was bent down intently and he was drawing what looked like a rainbow that had been run through a blender.

"Did you take my new colored pencil set?"

"I did," he said without looking up, "but only for purposes of intergalactic peace."

"Frankie." I reached down and took hold of the ear I saw sticking out of his black, wavy hair.

He moved his head sideways with the tug. "Gravitational pulls! Misunderstood trajectories! There's no interspecies language for

this, the only way to keep track of them is to assign each one a different color!”

I let go and he jerked away from me, rocking the four-inch Luke Skywalker doll that hung from a shoelace around his neck. A week ago, when we were all fanned out across one side of the living room eating dinner on TV trays, my mother had asked him out of the blue why he was wearing that doll. Without looking away from the television, Frankie had answered her in Glocken.

My mother had cleared her throat. “Translation, please.”

“It’s not a doll,” Frankie said. “It’s an action figure.”

“Well, you don’t wear it to school, do you? I’m just afraid the other kids will—that the other kids might—”

“Beat him up?” I offered.

Through a mouthful of spaghetti Karen said, “If he wore that to my school, *I’d* beat him up.”

But Frankie was unfazed by whatever we had to say about him. He would be fifteen and starting high school next August. In one corner of his room, he’d hung a model of the Millennium Falcon and suspended on fishing line around it a little cluster of Styrofoam asteroids. On the back of a sheet of butchers’ paper taped to the inside of the aluminum foil that covered his bedroom windows, he’d drawn with an El-Marko a picture of Yoda, the *Close Encounters* alien, dwarfs, wizards, the cookie-tin-shaped robot Dr. Theopolis from the Buck Rogers show, Starbuck and Apollo, all gathered around a long conference table with Luke Skywalker at the center with his hands outstretched, like a clean-shaven Christ. There was a drawing taped to his closet door of the first Space Shuttle, the Enterprise, clinging like a pilot fish to the back of a 747, the way we’d seen it circling the island one afternoon before its journey out west to be scrapped for the soon-to-be launched Columbia—only in Frankie’s drawing, the pilot of the 747 was Frankie. He had yet to throw out the light saber he’d made from a gift wrap tube when he was ten. He walked around in Matt’s old karate vest and called the back yard Tatoonine. There was less than a two-year difference between me and Frankie, and while Karen made me feel like a child, around my little brother I became an abusive adult.

“Give me,” I said, “the pencils,” with as much venom as I could put into my voice.

He said, “What has roots as nobody sees, is taller than trees, up, up it goes, and yet never grows?”

I kicked the side of his leg.

“Ow! All right!” he said. Then he made a few clicks and whirs out of the side of his mouth and moved his arm like a robot’s, his fingers clawing at the colored pencils. He gathered them back into their clear plastic sleeve and held them up to me.

I took them. “What are you drawing?”

“I *was* drawing a nebula. But I really needed the pencils for the gravitational study I’m presenting in front of the Council.”

He turned his smooth, narrow face up toward me. There was no hint of cuteness, sarcasm, or lunacy in his voice; he could just as easily have been talking about his breakfast cereal.

“Well, I have to fill in a chromosome chart for biology. You can use them after that.” I started out of the room.

“Roger,” he said. “Would that be alien, or straight human?”

“What?”

“Some of us are one or the other, some of us are a mix,” he said, blending the nebula with his finger. “The mixed ones have the most complicated chromosomal structure.”

Our mother’s somewhat pronounced cheekbones had grafted themselves onto the four of us. Beyond that, we went our separate ways. Matt and Karen were of Dermot stock; I’d seen the snapshot of the man Matt used to carry around in his wallet, and there was the blond hair, the slightly flattened bridge of the nose, the full lips that distinguished my two older siblings. On Matt these features looked masculine; on Karen, somehow, feminine. As for Frankie and me, we were children of Roy: less meaty, faces narrow, noses sharp. Our hair was wavy and nearly black, and our ears were smallish and round, like side mirrors on a toy motorcycle. At least, that’s how I’d been up to the age of twelve, and I kept waiting for Frankie to start mutating as I had, to start growing ahead of himself in some misshapen way, or at least to start getting zits on his face. We were of the same blood; it only seemed fair that we should suffer the same disfigurements. But it wasn’t happening. In his hyper-focused, contented way, Frankie was perfect-looking—which only made me feel like more of an aberration.

At school, Karen had begun making a production out of denying I was her brother. This was done in the style of a grand joke, a running gag that no one in her clique ever got tired of hearing. I stepped out of Humanities class one day to go to the bathroom, and when I entered the commons area of C wing, there was Karen stretched out in one of the tiled recesses along the wall with Jeff Colby across her lap. Another girl sat on the floor in front of them. And leaning against the wall was one of Colby's followers, a guitar-playing pothead named Wes Markham.

They were all focused on Colby. He was folded into the recess sideways, his sneakers against one side and his shaggy head against the other, his blue-jeaned butt cradled in the valley between Karen's thighs. As I approached them, Colby finished whatever he was saying and the rest of them finished laughing at it, and the commons fell silent. One of my shoes screeched on the terrazzo floor.

"Not my brother," Karen said, "these are people. People, this is not my brother."

The girl sitting on the floor bent her head backward to look at me upside-down. Colby peered at me with one eye squinted shut. He said, "Nice hall pass."

"Oh—yeah, really." I hefted the piece of plywood that was larger than a dinner plate and strung with a rope handle. "Mr. Watley's been going crazy in shop. I've got Ms. McNerney, and she goes by 'Mac', so he made her this hamburger-shaped thing, like a Big Mac, and everybody's supposed to carry it around. It's total bullshit," I added, in an effort to sound like someone they'd want to listen to—but Colby had already turned away and was looking up at Karen, who rolled her eyes.

"As you can see, there's no family resemblance whatsoever," she said.

The girl on the floor stretched her legs out in front of her, kicked off a sandal and worked her toes over one of Wes Markham's white-socked ankles.

I knew Wes Markham because he was in two of my classes. He was long and lanky and had thick red hair that rose up like the bristles of a push-broom from his forehead. He walked like the Pink Panther, with a spring in his knees and a nod in his head and a swing in his hands—the hands that were buried now in the pockets of his corduroys. His elbows were locked, lifting his shoulders so

that the hem of his t-shirt rode high and revealed a quarter-moon of bare stomach. A little treble clef of hair. A waistband of Fruit of the Looms. When I looked up, he was staring at me, his mouth crimped into a slightly lopsided grin as if he were piecing together a punch line.

“You’d better get going,” Karen said. “McInerney times you when you’ve got the hamburger.”

“Right.” She was making that up, I thought, but I wasn’t positive, so I walked with my best what-do-I-care shuffle to the other side of the commons, the plywood disk bouncing off my thigh and then cracking loudly against the door as I entered the boys’ bathroom. Before the door closed behind me, I heard them break into a laugh.

“Am I the ugliest person in the family?” I asked my mother the following Saturday. We were in the station wagon on our way to Divine Mercy Church for confession. We’d left Karen at home because she’d told us she wasn’t handing her sins over to anyone, and we’d left Frankie because he’d started confessing things that weren’t real—hoarding Spice Melange on the planet “Arrakis,” breaking flight patterns on Y-wing patrol missions—which had finally prompted Father Malloy to pull my mother aside (in the same manner he used when she tried to crash the Communion line) and ask if this wasn’t some sort of code for larger and more relevant sins.

She took her eyes off the road and stared at my face for a moment—maybe to see how much it had changed since the last time she’d looked at it. “No,” she said leadenly, turning forward. “None of my children are ugly. None of them look like me, and none of them are ugly.”

Because she wasn’t allowed to take Communion, she refused to go to confession herself. I knelt in the booth and mumbled generic offenses into the screen. The priest, sounding bored, asked if I had anything more (meaning, I thought, anything *good*) to confess, I said no, and we wrapped things up. When I emerged, my mother was sitting alone in the middle of the church, staring toward the altar as if waiting for a movie to start. I walked down the aisle and was standing beside her before she realized I was there and made a small, startled noise. “Joseph. Jesus, you nearly gave me a heart attack. Did you say your penance?” I nodded my head yes, marking

the first sin on what was supposed to be my clean slate. In truth, I hadn't bothered saying penance because I hadn't confessed any of the actual offenses I'd committed. They were unutterable, and they were backed, reinforced, and dwarfed by all the things I still wanted to do.

That next week, Karen and Jeff Colby were caught cutting class and making out with lit cigarettes in their hands two days in a row, and they were suspended for the next three—a punishment they relished by riding around the island in Colby's Firebird listening to homemade tapes of his band, SALT. Their first day back in school, Colby made his lunch entrance by delivering a karate kick to the cafeteria door—slamming it into the head of Mr. Salkind, the history teacher. Mr. Salkind took two stitches, Colby was immediately suspended again, and Karen skipped school in solidarity.

I was moving with the herd of students between fourth and fifth periods when I felt a sharp pain on the back of my neck. Wes Markham was shuffling close at my heels. He had “thumped” me—cocked his middle finger beneath the inside of his thumb and then snapped it against my neck—and he was grinning lopsidedly with his hand poised, ready to do it again. Our schedules overlapped for two hours a day; he slept through political science several desks away from me, then followed the same path as me through the halls to the chorus room. Like Colby, Markham was a “problem case” who had no elective interests and was constantly getting kicked out of one elective class after another, shuffling from art to the newspaper staff and, most recently, to chorus. He had no interest in singing and couldn't carry a tune, but Mr. Childress seemed satisfied with just letting him sit high up at the back of the room with his unplugged electric guitar on his lap, quietly picking out riffs.

We worked on “Brian's Song,” “Both Sides Now,” and a 1960s retrospective medley that began with “Blowin' in the Wind” and ended twenty minutes later with “The Age of Aquarius.” Between songs I heard the distant, tinny plucking of Markham's guitar. I glanced back at him only once during class and he was staring right at me, his feet propped up and his pick hand fumbling inside the pocket of his Ron Jon's t-shirt. When class ended I looked again, and his chair was empty.

I gathered up my books and was walking past the row of darkened practice rooms when a hand reached out of one of them and closed

over my forearm. In the next moment I was dragged inside, the door was shut, and a voice said out of the darkness, “Kerrigan.”

“What?”

“*Keeerrrrriigan.*”

“I know who it is,” I said. “Open the door.”

The fluorescent light tube flickered against the low ceiling, flooding the tiny room with light. Markham was standing in front of the door. “You want to suck my what?”

“Let me out.”

“Not so fast.” He towered over me by half a foot. One of his long-fingered hands reached out and pushed my breastbone so that I fell backward onto the piano bench. Then he dragged a folding chair between me and the door, sat down on it and stretched his legs out, planting a shoe on either side of the bench. “You’ve seen the junk,” he said.

“I’ve seen the what?”

“*Junk,*” he said. “Sucking dick must be making you deaf. You’ve seen the *junk.*”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Your sister really isn’t your sister, is she? She’s, what, a cousin or something?”

“She’s my sister.”

“Your last name’s Kerrigan. Hers is Ragazzino. And she’s right—you don’t look anything like her.”

“We have different fathers.”

“Yeah, and both of them split, right? What’s wrong with your old lady? I mean, your old man lives, what, ten feet away? Karen said you never see him. That’s got to be fucking weird.”

I stared at him, my face burning.

He folded his arms over his chest and mortared the heels of his sneakers into the green carpet. “Thing is, if you were really Karen’s brother, I wouldn’t worry about it. It would be cool because there’d be that blood tie.”

“We have the same mother,” I said, insulted, “there is a blood tie,” though I didn’t know what he was getting at.

He dug his fingers into the pocket of his t-shirt. “Then I can half-trust you. At best. Because I know you saw *that.*” His hand snapped, and on the bench next to me landed a small plastic baggy of white powder.

I felt the skin tighten across my forehead. "I didn't see that. I don't even know what it is."

"You saw me moving it from my notebook to my shirt pocket. You looked right at me while I was doing it."

"That wasn't why I looked."

"Then why'd you look? 'Cause you're in love with me? 'Cause you want to suck my dick?"

"I just looked over," I said.

"If you were Karen's brother, I wouldn't care. But you're some kind a half-breed. I don't know *what* you'd do with information like this." He was staring at me, his eyes heavy-lidded and his face gone slack, as if all his circuit breakers had been tripped. Then he reached a hand up and pulled a joint—à la Jeff Colby—from his forest of stiff, red hair. He was already palming a book of matches.

Each practice room had a square foot of glass set into its door. Mr. Childress made a rule that these little windows were to stay unblocked, but students were constantly taping sheets of paper over them. The window just beyond Markham's head was covered with black construction paper. One corner of the paper had been torn away, revealing an eyelet large enough for someone to peer through, but it was the beginning of lunch hour and the chorus room, by now, was empty.

Markham lit the joint and his entire face came to life, lifting into a comedy mask and sucking inward as if the pot were pure lemon. He froze for a moment, then made a kind of whoopie cushion noise at the back of his throat. "Primo," he said, exhaling. "But, now, you probably shouldn't have seen *this*, either. Unless you want some."

I'd never had and didn't want any pot. I did and didn't want to leave the practice room. I shook my head no.

"See, this problem's only getting worse." Markham took another hit. He licked his thumb and forefinger, pinched the joint out, and put it inside his Adidas. Then he reached over and brushed the outside of my leg with his hand as he retrieved the baggy of white powder. "I'm going to have to get something on you."

"What do you mean?"

"The only way I'll know for sure you're not going to go nark is if I've got something on you. It keeps us honest."

"What's there to get on me?" My hands, I realized, were shaking. I closed them over the seat of the piano bench.

“Think about it,” Markham said. “You tell anybody about me, you’re going down for what you did. You tell your sister what you did, you’re going down *plus* some.”

He stood up from the folding chair. I started from the piano bench but he put a hand on my shoulder and kept me down. “I don’t get it,” I said. “What did I do?”

He reached behind him and turned out the light. “Plenty.”

We were in the middle of *Hart to Hart*—all four of us—when my mother turned to Karen and said, “I’d like it if you’d at least tell me about the major events going on in your life.” They were sitting at opposite ends of the couch. I was in the recliner on Karen’s side and Frankie was on the floor in front of the coffee table, wrapped head to toe in a bed sheet with only his face showing.

Karen looked across the couch and said, “*Hart to Hart*. It’s a major event in my life.”

“I don’t appreciate sarcasm,” my mother said.

“So?”

“If you’ve been suspended, I’d like to learn it from you, not from some school secretary!”

Karen made a half-hearted attempt at swallowing a laugh. “They *just* called you about that?”

“This is why you’ve been sleeping late,” my mother said. “This is why you haven’t had any homework, why you been staying out until who knows when...”

“*Mother*,” Karen said, wagging her head forward, “that suspension is over. That was last week. This week I’m not going because Jeff got suspended again and I’m his girlfriend.”

Frankie began to teeter: a metronome wrapped in swaddling clothes.

“I don’t even know who Jeff is,” my mother said. “You could meet me halfway, you know, just give me the highlights. Is that too much to ask?”

“Jeff *Colby*,” Karen snapped, as if the name should have impressed my mother. “You want the highlights? I hate school, I love Jeff, he’s screwing me and it’s great. How’s that?”

I had the footrest up and felt as if I were floating—not free of all this, but a part of it, drifting alongside the rest of them, like a bonafide member of the mismatched, fugitive fleet of spaceships

following the Battlestar Gallactica in the mural taped to Frankie's ceiling. I felt a pain when I swallowed: the spot Wes Markham had battered as he held onto my head, his long hands stretching from my jaw hinge to the top of my spine. There was an ache in my jaw and a sour fold in my stomach. My mother's daunted face was just one more item adrift. "I don't want to hear that," she said. "I don't want to hear that at all."

"Well, then, you shouldn't have asked."

"I *have* to ask," my mother said, raising her voice. "I'm your parent. I'm the one who's *here*."

"Bok, bok, bok, bok, BRAAACK!" Karen said, darting her head forward and flapping her elbows like a chicken.

I thought about television. There was that character on *Dynasty*, and there was another one on *Soap*. There were those two men on *Barney Miller* who wore scarves and blousey shirts and who swished around the police station with their hands dangling from their wrists. That was, what, maybe one millionth of all the characters on TV? And as for actual people, the only one I'd ever known whom I even suspected of being queer was a boy named Jeremy in my American Lit class who wore eyeshadow to school one day (and had it washed off for him in a toilet that afternoon) and who had since moved away to Vermont. The odds of Wes Markham and me being on the same point on the map, at the same moment in time, seemed beyond remote and infinitely lucky.

Karen had stopped clucking and both she and my mother had turned back toward the program. Frankie was swaying between me and the TV screen.

I said, "Hey, Twiki, you make a better door than a window."

"Don't be a fool," Frankie said. "This is my transparency wrap."

I heard his guitar plucking but didn't look at him at all during chorus the next day. He didn't call my name from the practice room after class. But when I stepped into it, he was there. He was sitting back on the same folding chair, with his legs spread apart and a cigarette pinched sideways above his upper lip like a mustache. A hard-on pushed against the front of his jeans. I said, "I wasn't sure, you know, if—"

The cigarette dropped into one of his wide palms. "Shut the fuck up and close the door."

I did what he said. He reached the light switch without getting up, the room went completely dark, and I got down on my knees. As on the previous day, I didn't open my pants, didn't touch myself at all, but this time he let go of my head long enough to close a hand over my crotch. I was soft. I wouldn't have known it until then. He squeezed a couple of times as if trying to identify what he was touching, then grunted and took hold of my head again. Seconds after he came, he stood abruptly and left the practice room without another word passing between us.

"My children are all named after saints," my mother said. She was talking to Frankie and me, I thought, as if we weren't her children but were two strangers having breakfast at her table. I was eating toast. Frankie was doodling behind a fortress of two cereal boxes. My mother hadn't looked up and it occurred to me she might actually be talking to *The Florida Catholic*. "Matthew. Mary Catherine. Joseph. Francis of Assisi. What could be more Catholic than that? Not good enough for the wafer club, though." She sipped her coffee and turned a leaf of the little newspaper. "I should have named one of my children Jesus. There's a Mexican woman at work; she's divorced and has a son named Jesus. She even says 'Jesus' when you sneeze. I'll bet they let her take Communion."

Karen was leaning against the kitchen counter eating an Oreo. She said, "Who's Mary Catherine?"

Mary Catherine was Karen. She'd refused to be confirmed when she was twelve and had chosen, instead, her own unofficial, 'unconfirmation' name: Karen Carpenter Ragazzino. My mother said, "Someone I used to know. I take it, since you're up and dressed, that you're going to school today?"

"Yeah," Karen said to her Oreo, "I thought I'd go. Jeff's back today, and, anyway, I have to get my locker cleaned out."

"Why?"

"I just told you why. Jeff's back, and I have to clean out my—"

"Why do you have to clean out your locker?"

"Oh. Because I'm out of there."

My mother looked up from the paper, then looked back down and began to fold it. "I don't want to hear whatever it is you're trying to hurt me with right now."

"I'm not *trying* to hurt you, mother. I'm dropping out of school. But I'm not trying to hurt anyone."

"I don't want to hear it," my mother said. She kept folding the newspaper until it was the size of a biscuit, then, squeezing it tightly, she looked at Karen and said, "What do you think is going to happen to you if you don't get an education? What do you plan on doing?"

"Well, I don't plan on shooting any rock stars or presidents, if that's what you're worried about."

"That's not even funny."

"Maybe I'll head up to Utica," Karen said.

"Maybe you should! If I'm doing that bad of a job, maybe you should all just run to your fathers! That'll solve everything! It's clearly worked out peachy-keen for Matt!"

Matt, we all knew, had called from Utica the previous week asking my mother for money, which she'd mailed to him only after refusing to do so.

Karen was walking forward, poking another Oreo into her mouth. My mother was folding and unfolding her arms, shifting around in her chair as if deciding whether or not to storm out of the room. The top of Frankie's wavy head of hair rocked over the cereal boxes. There was room for all of this in our family, I thought, there was even room for me: one of everything in a rag-tag, fugitive fleet drifting through space. Then Karen stepped up behind Frankie, looked down at his drawing and said, "You ought to fix her hair, twerp. That looks like two guys."

"It is two guys," Frankie said, without looking up. "It's me and Luke Skywalker."

"You and Luke Skywalker? So that makes you, what, Princess Leia?"

"I'm *me*," Frankie said. "That's *me*. We're *rescuing* each other."

"Great," Karen snorted. "Gay astronaut lovers."

"Yes," Frankie said, as if bored with these petty inquiries.

My mother reached out and took away one of the cereal boxes. "What is that? What are you drawing?"

With his felt-tipped pen still moving, his head bent down in concentration, Frankie said, "Me. Luke. The chasm."

She pulled the other box away, and all four of us stared down at the drawing of a metallic canyon shrinking in one-point perspective

into the center of the page, and in the foreground, holding onto some sort of cable-shooting pistol, Luke Skywalker in mid-swing, his other arm wrapped around a young man with dark, curly hair who looked an awful lot like Frankie. Frankie's arms were wrapped around Skywalker's torso. His eyes were gazing into Skywalker's, and his lips appeared to be touching the blond man's cheek.

"Queers in space!" Karen said gleefully.

"Yes," Frankie said. He reached for the cereal boxes. "May I have my shields back?"

"Karen, stop it," my mother said. "That's not what he means."

"It is what I mean," Frankie said.

"No, it's not. You don't mean that the two of you—in that picture—are... that way."

"In the picture, yes, I mean that exactly. It's a *fantasy*, Mom."

Karen snorted again and said, "Fag Wars!"

"Karen, shut up!" my mother said.

Frankie glanced at the two of them calmly. "She doesn't bug me, Mom. None of you do."

I had never given a thought to actually telling them I was queer. Suddenly, I saw that it was possible, and that I wanted to—and at the same moment I realized I couldn't. In his calm, innocent way, Frankie had seized that moon in the galaxy of crazy and had raised his flag.

Karen was laughing into her hand. My mother was staring aghast at her youngest son, who had returned to his drawing and was shading in his own curly hair. I wanted to shrink to a pinpoint and vanish from the room.

Wes Markham and I were never alone again. I didn't want it that way; in fact, after Frankie's announcement, I conjured up a very Frankie-esque fantasy about me and Markham in the new-fangled Space Shuttle, using it like a Firebird to zip from moon to planet to asteroid, never having to confront another member of our own species except for each other—and with each other we were entirely happy. Two days after our second session in the practice room, I was walking along the outside of the school, heading for Driver's Ed., when Markham leaped from between two portable buildings with his arm out like a lance. His fist, bony and solid, drove straight into my upper arm hard enough to fold one of my legs and

knock me down onto the sidewalk. My forehead burned against the cement. I heard clapping and a small eruption of laughter. “Shit, Markham,” Jeff Colby said, “you’re crazy.” Colby and Markham were with someone else, a boy with long hair who looked just as shocked and amused as Colby and who grinned down at me and blew me a kiss. Then the long-haired boy and Colby were gone. Markham was retreating, too, his hand still drawn into a fist and his eyes conveying a message that would have been crystal clear from a thousand light years away.

I could raise my left arm—but slowly, painfully, and not without it trembling in its socket. I didn’t go to Driver’s Ed. but walked instead to the boy’s room off the main commons, where I sat in a stall and cried, angry at myself for not getting hard, that last time, for being so stupid and for having such a stupid family, for crying. When I left the bathroom, I headed straight for the bike racks at the front of the school, unlocked my bicycle using only one hand, and pedaled off with my left arm hanging down at my side. I didn’t want to go home, so I turned north on Courtenay Parkway and rode up to Crockett Boulevard, then west toward North Tropical Trail. It took a long time—at least it felt like it did—and I told myself I didn’t know where I was going, though I did know; I just wasn’t sure if I could find it.

Tropical Trail was winding and narrow. The palm scrub grew right out over the road in spots, and the inlets to neighborhoods that were buried among the palms and citrus trees came out of nowhere, marked only by little sections of wrought iron gate or cinder block entrance walls. My father’s house wasn’t sunk back into a neighborhood but sat right off the Trail by itself, surrounded by its own concrete wall painted light blue and cut through with the shape of petals. It was only from my memory of this wall that I recognized it. There was a white plastic box for the newspaper at the end of the driveway, and a black mailbox bearing no name at all, as if he’d done his best to sink himself into a little compound of anonymity. My mother had told me he was selling real estate now and was doing well for himself. Behind the wall, the house, like nearly every building in town, was one-story, but given what I knew of Merritt Island, it looked like the home of a rich person. The lawn had a built-in sprinkler system. There were two Buicks in the

driveway. I turned off the Trail and stopped my bike just across his property line.

A woman was carrying groceries in from one of the cars. She was small and had reddish hair and her name, if I remembered it right from listening to my mother's end of those awful phone conversations with my father just after he left, was Leona. The trunk to the Buick nearest me was open and she had a bag in each arm. She spotted me as she was rounding the car. I stood perfectly still over my bike at the foot of the driveway. She looked toward the trunk, where another couple of bags sat, and then at me again, as if worried I was going to steal her groceries or maybe wanting me to help carry them. I didn't move. She walked up the drive, through the garage and into the house.

Cars whisked by on the Trail behind me. A dragonfly, like a miniature Huey chopper, zigzagged across the lawn and hovered in front of my face for a moment, then darted away. The door inside the garage opened again, and my father walked out with one hand holding a cigarette and the other sunk into the pocket of a pair of beige trousers. He was smiling. He was looking at me from inside the garage and when he emerged into the sunlight, his dark hair combed back and straighter than I remembered, he looked down and continued to smile as he walked between the Buicks to the foot of the driveway.

"Joseph," he said.

"Hi."

"Your head is bleeding."

I touched my forehead with my right hand and felt the sticky beginnings of a scab. "I ran into a branch," I said.

"You want a Band-Aid?"

"It's okay."

"You want to come inside? Wash it off?"

"No, thanks."

His smile leveled out. He drew on his cigarette and looked at my face, then glanced up the Trail and exhaled. "You, um... we haven't talked in a while. How's school?"

"Great," I said.

"Frankie?" he said. "He's doing okay?"

"He's great," I said, but I wanted to say, *Frankie's gay*. I wanted to say it so badly. *Frankie's gay, and Karen's dropping out of school, and*

Mom's getting into trouble at church, and I've been blowing a pothead but I'm never going to have sex with anyone, ever again.

"Karen?" he said. "And Matt?" He looked exhausted, running through this short list of names.

"Matt's in Utica."

"Right," he said. "I know." Then he glanced up and down the Trail again as if disappointed anyone could ever leave such a setting and said, "I guess he likes it up there."

I looked at the house behind him. "Do you have a pool?"

"No," he said, as if he'd expected this question, "not me. Boy, if I did, I'd have you kids over to swim in it. That would be fun, huh?"

I nodded.

"Listen, Joseph. What brings you around today?"

I thought about what I might tell him. I shrugged. "Nothing."

"So everything's all right? The house—is it...cool?"

"It's freezing."

"Ha, ha. That's good. I bought that central air unit, you know. Right after I—the old a/c broke—you all would have baked alive, but I had a new one put in. I wanted to contribute, you know, and I told your mother I'd pay the electric. The bill comes straight here every month. You all don't even see it."

"She keeps it pretty cool," I said.

"Ha, ha. Well, that's her right. Good for her."

"I have to go," I said.

"Do you?" He drew on the cigarette, burned down now almost to the filter. "Well, don't be a stranger, all right?" Then without warning his hand came up and patted my left arm. Pain shot into my chest and I felt tears come to my eyes. My entire body had flinched and drawn away from him, and a moment later, when the nausea was subsiding, I looked up at his face and saw that his own eyes had gone damp. The hand he'd touched me with was lowered and turned palm-up, as if to show me he wasn't holding a weapon. I said, "Okay," making little more than a whisper of sound, and I nodded yes, then turned the handlebar with my right hand, rolling away from him. He was saying something about a swimming pool as I began to pedal.

For the next couple of hours I rode around the island, down back roads with narrow shoulders, alongside ditches and swampy lots marked for development. I rode back and forth across a darkened square of repaired parking lot next to the First National Bank, where the previous summer a water main had broken and washed away the underlying dirt and a man's car had fallen through the asphalt crust, nose-diving halfway into a soupy muck of earth. By the time I got back to our house, it was after five and my mother was home from work. I pushed my bike into the back yard and came in through the sliding glass door off the dining room, and it was obvious there'd been a fight worse than the normal fights. Karen was sitting forward on the recliner and her face was red from crying. My mother was at the dining room table, her own face buried in the boxed well of her arms. Someone's suitcase was standing by the front door.

For an instant I thought I understood. They'd been fighting about Karen's quitting school, and Karen had blown her top and threatened to move to Utica again. But they looked so thrown, the two of them, that I started wondering if the suitcase maybe belonged to someone else. My mother might have packed it. Or even Frankie—though Frankie was leaning against the wall where the living room funneled into the hallway, watching the two of them like a spectator.

"I think my arm is broken," I said.

Karen cut her eyes toward me. Slowly, my mother lifted her head from the table. She said, "What?"

"My arm." I wasn't holding it. I was just standing there feeling it throb and wanting to be acknowledged, though I didn't want to tell them anything about what had actually happened.

"What's that on your head?" my mother asked.

"I cut it."

She looked straight up at the ceiling. She stared at a particular spot in the plaster as if a word were written there. Dropping her eyes again, she said, "I don't believe this."

I said, "My arm—"

"Your arm looks fine! I don't want to hear that it's broken, all right? There's entirely too much going on right now!"

I looked at her. I looked at Karen, who made the slightest squint-gesture with her already-pinched, damp eyes, declaring herself the winner of the moment. Then I walked through the living room,

past Frankie, and down the short hall to my bedroom, where I closed the door behind me.

When I didn't come out for dinner later that evening, it wasn't because I was vying for attention (I'd given up on that as quickly as I'd tried for it) but because I felt nauseous again—just enough to keep me curled miserably on my side. The house was nearly silent; there was only the recurring timpani of the air conditioner. Eventually I heard the clinking of silverware, and then a soft flow of unruffled conversation that could only have been coming from the television.

He tapped on my door sometime after that. I didn't answer. The doorknob was locked but was made with a small hole in the middle so that a nail could be pushed into it in case of an emergency, and a few minutes later I heard the sliding and poking of the nail, then the click of the lock giving way. I was lying on the bed, on my side, with my back to the door. Suddenly, I was afraid of him: he was so calm and so smart and direct; how could he *not* have realized what was going on with me? I felt as if he had x-ray vision controlled by a switch he could turn on at any moment, and that he was about to tell me he knew everything there was to know about me. But he didn't speak. I felt the mattress move behind me as he settled his slight weight onto it. His hand reached around and in the hollow space before my stomach he dropped one of those odd little cigar-shaped products no one in the house would touch but him: a waxy, vaguely chocolate rod called a Space Food Stick.

My arm, it turned out, was indeed broken. My mother would drive me to the hospital on the mainland that next afternoon as the shuttle Columbia climbed into the sky behind us, sounding out a rumble we heard through the closed car windows and carving an arc of gray smoke into the sky over the island, and she would bring her hand to her mouth as the doctor showed her the faintest indication of a fracture in my humerus, so insignificant that he wouldn't put a cast on it but would merely give me a sling to wear for a week—yet significant enough to make her suffer horrible guilt for not having believed me. Before Wes Markham would have a chance to see me in my sling, he would be suspended for selling a baggy of crushed aspirin to a fellow student in his P.E. class. Karen, who would turn out to be the one who had packed the suitcase

that sat by the door that night, would unpack it and pack it again several more times over the coming year, but would prove herself not in much of a hurry to go anywhere. Frankie would hold fast to his desire to be Luke Skywalker's intergalactic true love, until *Star Wars* met New Wave and Skywalker eventually yielded to Simon Le Bon. And I wouldn't hold fast to any of my desires, or to any truth about myself, for a long, long time.

But as for that night, as for that moment in my room, I felt temporarily less than miserable. I felt, even, okay. For Frankie, who could say anything regardless of the sense it made, who could speak his own invented language at will, said nothing at all. He bent over and, so gently that I almost didn't feel it, kissed my upper arm the way our mother used to when we'd hurt ourselves. Then he lay down behind me, eased his body against mine and rested his hand against the side of my neck, and for an eternity, for an hour, we drifted just like that—immobile and weightless.