

COME BACK TO ME, BABY

From Behind, Most Big Guys Look Alike

When his wife left him, Al Klugg turned into a ghost man. There had been sightings and rumors of sightings, but to me it seemed that Al had stepped from one dimension into another, that without Sophia by his side he chose only to exist in my peripheral vision.

When I turned to see if it was really Al standing in the prescription line at Walgreens or distantly waving to me in my rearview mirror, he turned into somebody else or disappeared altogether. Walking through the Home Depot parking lot alone one evening, not long after the Kluggs split up, I got the feeling he was there behind the tinted glass of a car, watching me.

Gassing up at the Chevron a few days later, I gathered my courage, walked up behind Ed Harding, and reached up nervously to pat his shoulder, thinking he was Big Al.

48 "Hey, buddy," I said, not sure what kind of reaction to expect but encouraged to see Al out in the world, thinking that maybe he'd come back to us.

Ed turned, smiled down at me, and said, "Oh, heya, Don."

From then on, Ed Harding thought we were pals, but I was still in the dark about Big Al.

His disappearance was all the more troubling because it dampened what, by all outward appearances, was shaping up to be a beautiful spring. It was late February, but this was San Diego. Winter was on its way out. The coast was all green hills and morning fog, and though I didn't want to dwell on Al and Sophia's split, it was all I could seem to do. At work, I drifted away during phone conversations with clients and spent afternoons searching the Internet for signs of where Sophia might have gone. Once or twice, I overshoot my freeway exit on the way home as I wondered what Al did or didn't know about his wife. And at night, after my wife, Nancy, and our boy, Pete, had gone to bed, I'd sit in the den with a drink in my hand and the news on the television with the volume turned low. Far away, homes were leveled by tornadoes, ships sank, birds and fish were poisoned, and all I could do was sit there and wonder if Al Klugg's heart was pure and forgiving or if he was planning my grisly death.

Jim Rusk & Mike Fife Have Some Theories

By April, it'd been over a month since anybody had seen Al, and though the rumors of his and Sophia's pending divorce still dumbly wound their way through the streets of Fox Stone and on the greens of our golf course, that spring was more welcome than any I could remember.

Walking from the sixth to the seventh hole one afternoon, Jim Rusk said that Al was building some kind of robotic arm in his garage, something secret, something that likely had military applications.

"Al's probably just under some kind of gag order," Jim said. "He'll resurface, and when he does, I guarantee he'll have a new sports car."

It wasn't totally out of the question. San Diego was filled with military types, and Al had been in the Navy. He was the kind of trustworthy that could land a guy high-level work. I pictured his solid arms sheathed in a pair of shining, robotic gauntlets. He choked the life out of wicked men in distant desert villages. He smashed entire city blocks to dust.

Mike Fife, a real estate investor who was a member of our group mostly because he was our kids' soccer coach, said he'd heard that Al was in love and was flying to Puerto Rico every weekend to be with some new, caramel-skinned knockout. Mike said he had a reliable source, some friend of a friend of his wife's. He said the Klugg marriage had been an unconventional one, and hinted at ménages-à-trois and encounters in Escondido sex clubs. According to Mike, this new chiquita had begged Big Al to leave Sophia and Al had finally acquiesced.

"Wait a second," I said. "I thought Sophia left him."

"Who knows?" said Jim. "For all we know, he could've been the one who ended it."

"Either way," said Mike, "I hear he's giving it to the Puerto Rican now." He bent down and spiked the verdant teeing ground, placed his ball for the shot, and, turning his head to look at us, said, "Al does love foreign women."

"Dark-haired, long-legged, big-breasted foreign women," added Jim.

We laughed at this, I maybe a little uncomfortably. I thought of something Al had once told me and couldn't help but agree—that Sophia Confortini-Klugg was the most enchanting woman in the world.

Fox Stone Is Not Your Average Gated Community

2065 Briarwood: We'd looked at the lot with a broker when Pete was just a soft piece of fruit in diapers. It was nothing more than bare dirt and a bunch

of surveying flags at the time. The clubhouse wasn't finished yet, and there were no fences or gates or circle drives, no in-ground sprinkler systems or wide back patios or pool houses or basement media rooms. We'd toured a beautiful model home together, Nancy and I holding hands, imagining the kingdom we could make of that patch of dirt.

At one point as we poked around the kitchen of the model home, picking up the plastic pears and apples, I set little Pete on the countertop and curled an arm around Nancy's waist. "Petey seems to like the place," I said to her, leaning in for a kiss. She turned her head so that my lips landed on her cheek and glanced over my shoulder to where the baby had climbed into the enameled sink. He peered into the black mouth of the garbage disposal and inserted a chubby fist.

"Pete!" said Nancy as she reached for him.

"Honey," I said, holding her back. "It's okay. It's a fake garbage disposal."

She was confused for a moment, and then we laughed at our new-parent jitters as Pete burbled in the sink, his arm lost in the recess of the toothless disposal. He was such a happy baby.

50

Not All Men Can Wear Pastel Shirts

All of this business with the Kluggs, with Nancy and me and with little Pete, this all started in the Nordstrom just after the new year, when the early spring lines of windbreakers and lighter knits hit the store. It's something I've always loved about California, how the mittens and musty down jackets of the east are reserved for trips to Tahoe or Jackson Hole, and how, truly, you could go nine months of the year without ever having to wear closed-toe shoes if that was your thing.

Nancy and I were evaluating the new Ralph Lauren polo shirts that had caught my eye, but to my great disappointment, we'd discovered that I couldn't pull off pastels.

"They wash you out," Nancy said, tossing up her hands in resignation after I'd tried on three or four. The spring catalog had really grabbed me for some reason, and I'd been looking forward to the trip to the mall with Nancy. It'd been a rainy holiday season and I felt ready to say hello to the sunshine, to warm colors and long weekend days on the course. Erasmo did most of the yard work, but I saved a strip of grass along one side of the house for myself. I wanted to put on an old undershirt and a pair of shorts and go mow it.

When I returned from the dressing room, the losing shirts draped over my arm, I saw Nancy and Al and Sophia standing next to the table of perfectly folded, candy-colored polos. My wife had Al by the wrist and was bending slightly as if examining the hairs on his thick forearm.

“Well, look who’s here,” Al said as I approached. He smiled broadly and looked down at his arm, which was within an inch of my wife’s nose. “I’d shake your hand, but I was attacked by the ladies at the cologne counter while Sophia was looking at lipstick. Nancy likes the Crystal Lake, but this Desert Roamer stuff is growing on me.” He fluttered his nostrils like a rabbit and brought his other arm, the one Nancy wasn’t smelling, up to his face. “Smells like sand.”

Nancy lifted her head, pointed her nose toward Al’s other arm, and nodded enthusiastically. “It really does.”

“I prefer the natural smell of a man,” said Sophia, swishing her hand back and forth in the air. “This cologne, really, I don’t like any of it.”

Her accent had always electrified me. Her voice seemed to run into my mouth instead of my ears. It shot down my throat and into my belly, where it was absorbed into my bloodstream. I could feel the Mediterranean timbre of her words pulse in my forehead and behind my knees.

51

“Nancy tells us that Ralph’s new knits aren’t working for you,” said Al. He gestured to the fabric hanging limply in the crook of my elbow.

“You really need to go gray before you can pull off pastels,” I said, eyeing the abundant, silvery threads that swam through his sidewalls, confident in the integrity of my own chestnut hair.

“Maybe,” Al said. “We’re actually here to find me a new sports coat, but Sophia can’t stand shopping unless we’re shopping for her.” Sophia shrugged and absently fingered the collar of a pink shirt.

“Well, I’m great with color,” said Nancy.

“Yeah?” said Al. “You want to help me find something?”

Nancy released his wrist. “Sure,” she said. “You good here, Don?”

“I guess,” I said. “I’ll put these back, then meet you guys.”

“I’ll help you fold,” said Sophia.

“You know,” Nancy said, “the clerks can do that. That’s what they’re paid for.”

“It’s okay,” I said.

Casual wear was on the first floor and suiting on the second. Big Al and my wife walked to the escalators while Sophia and I folded the shirts.

“You try this one?” Sophia asked, pointing to the lavender shirt that I’d already tried and that Nancy had smirked at. She’d said the color made me look like a member of the Lollipop Guild.

I hesitated, remembering Nancy’s easy dismissal of the garment, her unsportsmanlike laugh. She hadn’t meant to be callous, but sometimes Nancy could wound me in ways that blindsided me.

“Uh, no,” I lied, embarrassed because the shirt had seemed such a failure.

“You should,” said Sophia. “Men like you look good in purple.” I loved how she said *poor-pull*, the word exploding from her mouth. I thought of wild lavender bushes, the sun setting into Umbrian hills, the sky darkening to blue, violet, and black.

“Try it for me,” she said, holding it out, waiting for me to take it.

One Year Ago, or, Our Boys and My Waterfall

Last year, when they entered middle school, our boys—my Pete and Al and Sophia’s Al Jr.—were best friends. They were at that age when things were changing fast and they stopped talking when Nancy or I walked into a room. If we joined the boys in the backyard while they swam, they went mute or whispered to one another near the waterfall where the noise would drown out their conversation.

I’d insisted that Erasmo use more chlorine than was recommended in the pool, which irritated the boys’ eyes terribly but kept my waterfall pristine. That glittering column of water was the centerpiece of the backyard, and I spent many evenings outside listening to its peaceful roar.

I was hosing off the patio furniture and watching the boys jump off the diving board when I first realized that Al Jr. was becoming more like his dad every day, while my own son, my Pete, was becoming a stranger to me as he entered his teens.

Seeing the boys swim, it was clear that Al Jr. was the superior physical specimen. He tanned under the weakest sunbeam, while Pete spent the better part of every spring and summer in shades of peeling pinks and reds. Al Jr.’s shoulders were wide like his father’s and his hair jet black like his mother’s. He pulled complicated one-eighty, front-flip combinations while my Pete—who clearly admired and wished to emulate Al Jr.’s grace—succeeded only in wiggling in the air and screaming before crashing into the surface of the pool.

What Pete lacked was not enthusiasm for sport but skill. His arms were thin and his face was round and a bit girlish, like his mother’s. Nancy’s and

Pete's baby pictures were distressingly similar. I was relieved when he'd had his first boyish haircut as a baby. "Atta boy," I'd said, patting infant Pete's lumpy head. "There's my little man."

Even so many years later, waiting his turn to jump off the diving board, Petey looked like a baby to me. "Dad," he called, stepping up to the board after Al Jr. had executed a spectacular back dive, "watch this. I can do a perfect jackknife."

Pete jounced the board a couple of times and then leapt like a fledgling water bird, flapping high into the air before plummeting into the pool with an awkward splat. He climbed out, rubbing his reddening flesh, and trying to breathe his way through the pain of the severe back-flop he'd performed.

"I overcorrected," he explained, limping to one of the patio chairs.

"No problem, buddy," I said, clapping a hand on one of his wet shoulders as he passed me. "Next time."

Al Jr. floated in a sitting position with most of his body underwater, two neon green pool noodles buoying him up. He sipped a Diet Coke that he held above the surface of the water, careful not to get any into the can. When I looked from where Pete grimaced in the patio chair to where Al Jr. bobbed and drifted in the slow current, I was startled that the one looked so much like a man and the other so much like a child.

53

The Dressing Room, Part 1: Don Masterson Is CEO of His Own Destiny

When I returned to the dressing room to give the lavender polo another try, I stripped off the shirt that I'd been wearing. It was hunter green, a cold color, the color of shaggy winter pines in rain and wind. I looked at myself in the mirror.

I could stand to lose a pound or two, it was true. My love handles were full and pale, like an extra set of gummy shoulders that sat low on my torso and gave my body the look of a weirdly foreshortened hourglass.

My chest hair had thickened in my thirties and now, at forty-one, had fully established colonies on my shoulders and back. I'd always liked the line of hair that ran down my belly and disappeared into the waistband of my briefs. As a younger man, I'd thought it suggested something illicit and exciting. But now, that thick, dark trail was almost totally subsumed by the field that had sprouted up around it. Globalization had its indifferent fingers in everything—at my office, in the military, and even on the surface of my body, making everything look like everything else. The mass migration of

hair and aches and tweaked nerves, the bad dreams and concerns about my son—maybe these weren't things worth worrying about at all. Maybe this was all part of the new century.

I slapped my belly hard, watched it jiggle in the mirror, and thought, things aren't so bad. So what if I was no Al Klugg? Al Klugg was no Donald Masterson, the Donald Masterson of Donald Masterson, LLP. Donald Masterson, purchaser of his own lot and co-designer of his custom Fox Stone home. Weren't the Kluggs the second family to live in their house? Had Al Klugg designed his own waterfall? I didn't think so. Donald Masterson was CEO of his own destiny. Could Al Klugg say the same for himself?

I had my hands on my hips and was looking in the mirror, smiling, pushing my gut in and out, when Sophia opened the door.

"How's it look?" she asked.

I jumped, but she didn't flinch, and she didn't step backward and close the door, didn't apologize for intruding. She looked at my reflection seriously, looked right into my reflected eyes, and then stepped into the dressing room with me.

54

A Note about My Wife, Nancy

The thing about a wife like Nancy is that even when you desperately want her to be wrong, you know she's right. She'd been right about buying the lot at Fox Stone. She was right about the accent wall in the kitchen being sage green instead of seafoam. She'd been into wheatgrass and flaxseed and Pilates before anybody else in the neighborhood.

Listening from the hallway as Nancy demonstrated for Pete the proper usage of our new electric toothbrushes, or watching as she showed him how to make online purchases with her credit card, I knew that she was equipping our boy in ways I never could. She was really passing on what she knew, showing him the ropes, building him up so that someday, when Pete would have to make it on his own, he'd be able to thrive.

Even at forty, Nancy was a beautiful woman. She ate well, went for long runs with Jim Rusk's wife, Fiona, and their greyhound, Gypsy. She volunteered at the literacy center one Saturday a month and was involved in a statewide campaign to protect the California coastline from offshore oil rigs.

Granted, she refused to swim in the pool with me any longer, lest her blond hair turn green from the treated water, and a healthy fear of skin cancers led her, more often than not, to decline my invitations to join me in the backyard

to watch the sunset. But her precautions were necessary and virtuous. And while she spent more time with Petey than she did with me, that was natural. He's an only child, after all. A boy needs his mother's love.

I clearly remember waking up early the day after our wedding and looking at Nancy's long, soft back. I'd said my vows in front of our families and friends the day before, but they'd come out stiffly from behind the haze of a lingering hangover. Lying there in the hotel suite, looking at the sunlight on her naked skin, I understood—maybe for the first time, I really *knew*—that this was the woman I was supposed to spend my life with. What I didn't know, I remember thinking, is what I'd do if Nancy ever left me.

Let Me Tell You about My Granddaughter

That perfectly beautiful and terrible spring, Pete and Al Jr. were taking a class that was part sex ed., part psychology, and part home economics called Fundamentals of Life. Nancy and I had signed permission slips that allowed educators to talk clinically to our eighth graders about puberty, sex, masturbation, pregnancy, and birth control. Nancy had already laid the groundwork, but we both felt that for Petey's sake, if not our own, it might be better to have a certified educator fill in any remaining blanks. I expected that the class would be good for him, that it might help him grow up a bit, maybe give him more confidence. What I didn't expect was Samantha.

55

She showed up in May. By then, Al and Sophia's absence from our lives was the new normal. Feeling pretty good after our office's Cinco de Mayo party, I left work early and got home a little after four o'clock. Pete was sitting on the couch in front of the television. He was holding something swaddled in a pink blanket, his backpack and a diaper bag on the cushion next to him. He was humming.

"What you got there, Petey?" I asked, setting my briefcase down, trying to get a look over his shoulder at the bundle.

"This is Samantha," he said, rising from the couch and turning to face me.

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Samantha," Pete said, "meet your grandpa." He threw back a flap of pink blanket to expose the pinched face of a Cabbage Patch Kid.

"What's this all about?" I said. "Why are you playing with a doll?"

He cocked an eyebrow and gave me the knowing sneer that I hate. "Dad, this is the final project for Life class."

It took me a moment, then I remembered the course, the permission slips, all of it.

“This is Samantha,” he said, “and from now until the end of the year, she’s my baby.” He cradled the doll in his left arm while he retrieved a piece of paper from the diaper bag and read from it. “I have to feed her, change her diaper, and keep her in my sight—or find a suitable babysitter—at all times.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s for my final grade,” he said.

“Your final grade is based on you playing with a doll? What kind of class is this?”

“It’s Life, Dad,” he said, frustrated with me. He set Samantha on the couch and apologized to her for being agitated. He walked around to where I stood and continued in a more measured tone, almost a whisper. “I’m being graded on whether this little baby,” he pointed to Samantha, “lives or dies!”

“Okay,” I said. “You can just calm down. I get it.”

I removed my suit jacket and walked to the kitchen to fix myself a vodka tonic. I’d had a couple of margaritas and a Corona or two at the party and wanted to maintain the buzz I’d cultivated. Pete had reassumed his position on the couch. He was watching a cooking show in which someone was browning a large chunk of meat in a cast iron pan. It smoked and sputtered on the screen.

I walked to the couch, sat down next to my boy, and muted the sound coming from the television.

“Pete,” I said. “I’m sorry. I understand the assignment and that you’ve got to do this for a grade. Just hang in there, pal. The end of the year’s right around the corner.”

He looked at me seriously, and for a second I felt like we were starting to hack our way through this thing that had sprouted up between us. Then, looking down at Samantha, he said, “I like it. Parenting is fun.”

I could feel a headache blooming behind my temples. “Good, Pete,” I said. “I’m glad you like it.” We watched the meat sizzle on the screen. “Can I just ask you one question about Samantha, though?”

“Sure,” Pete said, delighted. “Do you want to hold her?” He held her out to me. I shook my head and sipped my drink.

“Why did you pick a girl baby instead of a boy baby?”

“Dad,” he said, breathing out heavily after he’d said it, as if it’d taken him some great effort to squeeze the syllable from his mouth, “you don’t pick the

gender of your child. The ovum contains an X chromosome, and it's the individual sperm cell that determines—"

I cut him off. Hearing Petey say *ovum* and *sperm* made my head light. I had to grab the edge of the coffee table to stay steady. "Just stop, Petey. I know that. It was just a question. Jesus."

The Dressing Room, Part 2: There Are No Tigers in Italy

I wish I could say I acted cool, that my forehead didn't immediately begin to perspire, and that my mouth didn't go dry when Sophia stepped into that dressing room. I wish I could say that I was calm enough to casually slide the lavender shirt over my body and model it for her as if that's what men did with other men's wives.

Instead, she closed the door and pushed me face-first into the mirror, holding my head against the glass with one surprisingly strong hand.

"Sophia," I squeaked, "what's going on here?" I could see a small spray of spit accumulate on the mirror as I spoke.

"Quiet," she said, releasing my head and then resting her palms on the rounds of my shoulders. She gripped hard, her nails digging small, red scythes into my flesh. She pulled me away from the glass, then pushed my right shoulder with one hand and pulled my left with the other so that I pivoted quickly around to face her. She shoved me again into the mirror. It was freezing against my naked back. I made an involuntary hissing noise at the feel of it.

"What?" she said.

"Cold," I managed. "The mirror is really cold on my back. They must have the air conditioning cranked up in here and—"

She interrupted me by kissing me deeply, plugging my mouth up with her warm lips and tongue. I kissed back and grunted.

"You like me?" she said, pulling away.

I made a kind of moan and kissed her again, sliding my hands around her sides until my palms rested on that sweet spot where a woman's lower back meets her backside.

"Sophia," I said after a moment of kissing, "I've imagined this so many times. You have no idea what you do to me."

"Tell me," she said, breathing hard and sucking on my neck, curling those athletic fingers into my sides. "Tell me what I do to you."

"You," I began, running my hands up her spine, underneath her blouse. I was stumped for something to say.

"Tell me," she demanded, clawing harder.

I don't know if I actually said all of what came next, or if I was thinking it. Either way, noise fell out of my mouth in damp mumbles. "You," I said as she ran the tip of her tongue over my Adam's apple, "you're more beautiful than a Roman goddess." She bit my earlobe. I said, "You make me wish I were a tanned, Latin-speaking wine-maker." She cupped a buttock in each hand and squeezed. "You make me feel like a tiger," I said, "a sexy Italian tiger man." I murmured a little growl and kissed at her lips, but she paused and pulled back, laughing at me.

"There are no tigers in Umbria," she said, before licking my face in one long sweep from chin to temple.

"Then I want to be the closest thing to a tiger in Umbria," I said.

"In Umbria, the pig is the wildest of the animals." She leaned in for more of my mouth.

"The pig?" I said. "Really?"

"Not like your little, pink pigs," she said, giving my butt another squeeze before bringing her hands around to the front of my belt. "Real pigs. Wild pigs. In Umbria," she said, fumbling with the buckle, "the wild pig is king."

58

Eggheads

As I learned when I slid Samantha off the couch and onto the floor, her body was actually a sack of flour, which was supposed to roughly mimic the weight and density of a real human baby. She landed with a thud, and a small puff of white powder escaped her pink blanket. The Cabbage Patch Kid head had been sewn onto the pillowcase that held the flour. The whole thing struck me as incredibly amateur.

"Dad!" screamed Pete. "What are you doing? You're going to break her eggs!" He picked her up and cried, "Don't you care at all that this is my child?" His face contorted horribly as he wept. I had a hard time looking at him.

I can only say now that I'm deeply ashamed of my behavior, and that I'm lucky Nancy wasn't home. After I'd poured Pete a sparkling water and fixed another vodka tonic for myself, I joined him at the kitchen table as he inspected and re-inspected each part of his "daughter." Eventually, he calmed down enough to explain to me the significance of Samantha's particular needs. Her body contained two eggs. One was embedded in the middle of her flour-sack body, and the other was surrounded by uncooked rice inside her plastic

head. Pete and Al Jr. were lab partners and, as such, were “co-parents” of this “child.” They shared custody of Samantha and would switch off every other week for the remaining month of the school year. Weeks one and three would be spent at the Masterson home, while during weeks two and four, Samantha would live with her Klugg relatives.

At the end of the month, after Pete and Al Jr. had spent the remainder of the term bonding with and caring for Samantha, they would turn her back in to their teacher, who, in front of the class, would eviscerate each child, first cutting open the sack bodies and then emptying their skulls. If one egg had broken over the course of the month, the parents’ grade for the semester dropped by ten percent. If both had shattered inside of their bodies, the highest grade the students could get in the course was a C.

“Pete,” I said, after we’d confirmed that everything was intact, “she’s fine. Samantha’s eggs are totally fine.”

The Dressing Room, Part 3: Al Klugg’s New Sports Coat

As Sophia fumbled with my belt, I could feel the electricity in my brain surge and then wane. Just as I was ready, more ready than I ever imagined I could ever have been, to take Sophia Confortini-Klugg in the men’s casual wear dressing room in the Nordstrom at the Boca del Playa Galleria, nothing seemed to work. Things petered out.

“Don,” she said, resting her head on my chest, rubbing my shoulder with one hand and my softening crotch with the other, “you don’t like me all of a sudden?”

“No, I mean, yes. I do. I want you.” I shivered. My senses were coming back.

“You’re not hungry for me any more?” she asked, running her hands up and down the length of my arms.

“I am,” I said. And then, picturing Nancy upstairs with Al, picturing her on the tennis courts with Petey, picturing her as she’d once been, topless and happy underneath our private waterfall, I said, “I don’t know what we’re doing.”

It took me a long time to get my head together after Sophia left the dressing room. When I did, I saw her back by the table of shirts. We took the escalator together to the second floor, where we found Al and Nancy at the register, a suit bag draped over Al’s arm.

“Don, your wife’s a whiz!” he said, unzipping the bag. “Check this out.”

He removed the coat from the hanger and slipped into it. He looked magnificent. The coat had clean lines, a classic notched lapel. It was a linen, cotton, and silk blend. The color was risky but perfect for him. It made his crisp, blue eyes jump out of his head like sharp slivers of ice. "It's incredible," I told him.

"Periwinkle," he said. "Go figure."

I Want My Baby Back

The real trouble started when Al Jr. didn't show up for school at the beginning of week three to make the handoff to Pete. Life was their third-period class, and Pete had wrung his hands for an entire afternoon before he could come home and call the Kluggs to check up on Samantha. After leaving several messages and riding his bike the half mile to the Kluggs' where he rang the bell, pounded on the door, and waited until nearly dark, Pete was defeated. He imagined the worst: sticky egg whites and bright, stinking yolks hardening in Samantha's neglected body.

Nancy and I tried our best to comfort him. "Petey," said Nancy, "Samantha's probably fine. I'm sure Al Jr. will be there tomorrow." Pete looked at her skeptically from the floor of his room, where he was sprawled on his back, rotating his head in small circles, following the slow spin of the ceiling fan.

"Probably?" he said.

Nancy walked to the edge of Petey's bed and sat down. "Honey," she said, "Al Jr.'s going through a rough time. His mom had to move away, and I'm sure that's been really hard on him."

At the mention of Sophia and Al Jr., my face got hot. Even in their absence, the Kluggs wielded a terrible power over us. I was sure then that if Pete's lab partner had been anyone else—Timmy Rusk or Ed Harding's fat twerp, Brandon—Pete wouldn't have been so worked up.

"I have to get her back," Pete said to Nancy, rising from the floor. "What if he left her in the car? Oh my god," he said, as he attempted and failed to pull on his shoes with the laces still tied. "What if she's in the *dugout*?"

"Honey," said Nancy. "You know your Uncle Al wouldn't let anything bad happen to Samantha, right?" She took Pete's sneakers and began untying the mess of knots in the laces.

"Mom, I have to do *something*."

"Petey, honey, there's a time for action and a time for contemplation."

"Dad," he said, turning away from Nancy and appealing to me in a way that he never did. "Dad, you have to do something. We can't just sit here!"

“Okay,” I said.

“What?” said Nancy.

“Really?” said Pete.

I was sick of being in the dark, of wondering where Sophia had gone. I was sick of driving down Fox Stone Lane and gunning it past the Klugg home, and I'd be damned if I was going to stand there and watch my son lose his mind at the hands of Al Jr. So what if Samantha was a doll? She was Pete's doll, and if anybody was going to help get her back, it was going to be me.

“Nancy, you're right,” I said, pointing a stiff index finger toward the floor for emphasis. “There is a time for action. We're going to put a stop to this right now. C'mon Pete,” I said, turning for the door.

He hopped to his feet but didn't follow, so I turned back around. “Well,” I said, “you coming?” He pointed to Nancy, who was struggling with the laces of his second sneaker.

Search and Rescue

For once, Pete and I were on the same page. We'd both tasted the bitter pill of resignation and had decided together to spit that pill out, to reject the premise that the Klugg men had agency and we Mastersons did not.

61

We marched to the Klugg home in a fury. We stood on the porch and banged on the door. I handled the decorative door knocker roughly, banging away and pulling on it, hoping the brass clapper might snap off in my hand. When it was clear that it wasn't going to, I walked to the end of the driveway, but I couldn't quite see into the high windows of the garage doors. Pete patted my arm.

“Piggyback,” he said.

I knelt and Pete mounted my shoulders. It was an awkward maneuver, and Pete was more substantial than I'd imagined, but a little back pain was a small price to pay for the kind of camaraderie we felt just then.

“What do you see?”

“The Shelby and the Indian,” he said, referring to Al's 1965 Shelby Cobra and his Indian motorcycle.

“Anything else?”

“Nope,” he said. “Too dark.”

I knelt to let Pete off my shoulders but was unsure of what to do next. I didn't want to break the *détente* we'd found through the establishment of a common enemy, but I was at a loss.

"I know she's in there," Pete said. "She has to be."

"Well, Petey, short of breaking down the door, I'm not sure there's much else we can do."

"We don't have to break it down," he said, snapping his fingers and moving down the gravel path leading to the backyard. He stopped at the exterior door to the garage and pried up one of the heavy stepping-stones that dotted the side yard. After a moment of unsure digging, he smiled and with a little flourish, produced a dirt-encrusted key.

"Pete, we might be taking this too far."

"It's fine, Dad," he said. "I have tacit permission to use this."

"Tacit permission? From whom?"

"Peachfuzz," he said.

Three summers ago, Pete had looked after the Klugg's cat when the family had gone to Italy for six weeks. "Well," I said, "Peachfuzz has been dead for a long time, Petey. Remember the cremation? The memorial service?"

"You're the one who suggested we break in. This is a more reasonable solution, isn't it?"

62

I tried to explain that I hadn't suggested we break in, that I have a tendency to speak extemporaneously, that I was there on his behalf and was willing to lend my full support to his search-and-rescue operation, but that I was reluctant to break into anyone's house.

"Fine," he said, sliding the dull key into the deadbolt and turning it. "You can wait here."

When Pete opened the door, a cool rush of industrial smelling air flowed over us. I warily flipped on the lights, but once illuminated, the garage looked utterly normal. No robot parts. No sex dungeon. There was the Shelby, under its wide muslin tarp, and the Indian, its chrome winking under the fluorescent lights.

We entered the house through the laundry room, and, truth be told, it felt good to be back in the Klugg home. I ran my hands over the dryer door and opened it. It was full of jeans and shirts and boxer shorts—men's clothing.

"You think she's in there?" Pete said.

"Who knows?" I said. Pete eyed me skeptically. "You look upstairs," I told him. "I'll search down here."

I rummaged through kitchen cabinets and drawers. Sure, I was looking for Samantha, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't also curious to see if there were any signs of Sophia or of the rumored Puerto Rican mistress.

I checked the hamper, which was full of socks and T-shirts. I went to the living room and looked in the big trunk that served as a coffee table. I checked the den and the bathrooms and the kitchen. I lifted the lid of the garbage can and found coffee grinds and banana peels and soiled paper towels. I looked under the sink. On a lark, I opened the refrigerator and was surprised and relieved to see Samantha there in the meat drawer, looking out at me, ready to be saved.

Fore!

We should have left then. I know that now. But I was intoxicated by the hard proof of Al and Al Jr.'s inferior parenting practices. The refrigerator might have kept Samantha's eggs fresh, but that was no way to treat a child. Pete would've been outraged. I was glad that he was upstairs and didn't have to witness it.

I carried Samantha through the living room and was planning to call out to Pete, to let him know that our work was done and that we could scoot out of there, but that's when it caught my eye. There, on the back of Al's desk chair, in the little study just off the entry hall, was the sports coat.

I was already in the house. I'd already rummaged through the garbage, and it'd take a few minutes for Samantha to return to room temperature anyway, so where was the harm?

Setting Samantha on the bookshelf next to Al's desk, I picked up the coat and slipped it on. It was big in the shoulders and long in the sleeves, of course, but it felt good. It was lighter than I'd expected, and it'd retained its new smell. There was a cut crystal decanter and matching tumblers on top of the bookshelf, and I poured myself a celebratory nip. I'd never developed a taste for Scotch, just as I'd never developed a taste for aquarium water or motor oil, but I pinched my nose and took a healthy gulp.

The tension and frustration of the previous months seemed to lift then. I recognized the foolishness of having feared Al Klugg. I could see how idiotic I'd been for carrying around such guilt at having vaguely fooled around with Sophia so many months earlier.

I poured myself a second Scotch and opened Al's desk drawers. Obviously, I was elated at the access, but Al's DMV records and receipts were just as dull as anyone's. Pleasant as it was sitting in his desk chair, sipping his booze, wearing his sports coat, I couldn't help but feel disappointed in Al. I wanted

something more invigorating. Divorce papers, evidence of involvement with the CIA or NSA or DEA. Something.

I'd barely managed to get down a third Scotch and was prepared to snag Petey and hit the road when I noticed that Al's briefcase was under the desk at my feet. I lifted it to the desktop and popped the clasps.

There were several files inside, each neatly labeled and organized by last name. There were files for Mike Fife and Jim Rusk and other men who lived in Fox Stone. There were also names I didn't know: Ryuichi Ikagami, Alex Petronelli, and somebody named Brick Steel. There was my name, too, Donald Masterson, with a question mark behind it. I burped and tasted Scotch and stomach acid.

In my file were still photos taken by what must have been a security camera. I could see the top of my head in the dressing room and, several shots later, Sophia opening the door and entering. Another camera, one shooting from farther away and from a much lower angle, caught our legs together behind the closed door. They were abstract, really. You couldn't know who was in that dressing room. I'm sure they wouldn't have stood up in any court. And how had Big Al gotten them in the first place? Had he hired a private eye to follow his wife? Had he used his Navy connections?

64

I topped up my drink and looked through Jim's folder and Mike's, which was thicker. I was disgusted at what I found. There were shots of Jim kissing Sophia in a playground, next to a long, yellow slide that was supposed to look like a banana. In Mike's folder, there was a pair of dirty athletic socks in a quart-sized Ziploc bag, a picture of a man's lower half—Mike's?—modeling women's lacy underwear.

Underneath the folders were copies of the divorce papers, naming Al as plaintiff against his (allegedly) serially cheating wife. Perhaps I should have felt sympathy for the Kluggs, but just then all I could seem to muster was the kind of self-pity that comes from seeing yourself as others likely do. Why would a bored immigrant five thousand miles from her ancestral town take a shining to me, over anyone else? And why would I assume that looking at Sophia longingly for the better part of a decade might have engendered a reciprocal feeling on her part? I was an idiot, a fool, a plaything.

"What are you doing?" said Pete. He stood in the arched doorway to Al's study.

I bolted up and grabbed the lapels of the coat. "How's it look?" I said, snapping my arms out in front of me, spilling the Scotch that I was still holding.

“Well, first, it’s too big for you,” he said. “And the color’s all wrong.”

Just as I was about to rip the sports coat from my shoulders and give Pete a lecture on the importance of being careful with other people’s feelings, Pete saw Samantha on the bookshelf behind me. The brightness in his face and the unabashed tone of love and thanks in his froggy voice as he said “Dad, you found her!”—there’s no way to replicate that feeling, no way to hold onto it or to bring it back. Pete ran to Samantha and scooped her up. He kissed her plastic face and whirled her above his head as I’d done with him so long ago, and then, quite suddenly, he grew quiet.

“Is that Aunt Sophia?” he said, looking at a picture that had fallen to the floor. In it, Sophia is pinning me to the mirror, though all that’s visible are my eyebrows and her shining hair.

“Nope,” I said, reaching for the photo. “This is just some of Uncle Al’s work stuff.” Pete cradled Samantha in one arm and snapped the photo up with his free hand. “Yes it is,” he said, and then, “Is that *you*, Dad?”

“Definitely not!” I reached again for the picture, but he yanked it away. He’s never been strong, my Pete, but he’s always been quick.

“It is, Dad. That’s definitely you. What’re you doing with Aunt Sophia?” He was yelling now, and his voice cracked. It was all very disconcerting.

“Pete, calm down.”

Should I be thankful that we heard the garage door open then? Should I be happy that, by coming home, Al spared me from compounding the lies that I was telling my son? Should I be grateful that Pete’s particularly acute flight reflex engaged at the sound of the parking car and that he shot like a bullet from that room, fake baby and incriminating photograph clutched in his hands? Should I thank my lucky stars that he didn’t have to witness me fumbling with the files and photos and the crystal tumbler? Should I be thrilled that he wasn’t there when I tried unsuccessfully to get everything back into that briefcase in some kind of order, or elated that as I ran out of the front door of Al Klugg’s home, Pete wasn’t there to witness that 4-wood—a beautifully made, shining club—make an elegant sweep at my forehead?

A Dirty Pig

When I came to, there was a fat welt above my eye. A trickle of blood flowed down my face, and the club lay on the lawn by my side. Examining myself, I could see that the sports coat was soiled with dirt and splattered blood.

I got to my feet and tried to sprint home, but my pulse banged painfully at my temples, so I walked. When I got to 2065 Briarwood, I could sense the activity before I entered.

I went straight to the den, where I could lie on the couch. I listened to Nancy bark orders at Petey, though I wasn't sure what she was saying. I covered my eyes with my hands and tried to clear my mind. Then I heard Petey tromp down the stairs in that chunky, uneven way of his. I opened my eyes and saw him watching me from two or three steps up.

"Hey, buddy," I said. He didn't respond but held the bundle of Samantha high over his head for me to see.

Pete looked at me blankly, pulled back the blanket so that Samantha's face pointed toward mine. "Samantha," said Pete, "say good-bye to Grandpa."

He walked into the kitchen and out of my sight.

"You," Nancy snarled, entering the den from the kitchen, her hands full. She held the picture aloft so that I could see it and then flung it at me. It fell to the floor in front of her. She also held the cordless phone and an ice pack, and these she threw at my head, missing me by centimeters. "If you need help," she said, "call 911."

"Nancy," I said.

"Don't say a word," she said.

"Nothing even happened." I tried to explain myself, how when you got down to it, this was essentially all a misunderstanding on Al's part.

"You're a pig," she yelled as she headed for the garage, "a dirty fucking cheating pig!"

The Summer Is Almost Over

And that was how the summer started. Nancy left and took Pete with her.

It's nearly September now, and every morning and afternoon, I apply sunscreen. I put it everywhere I can reach, but without Pete or Nancy here to help me, the sun has painted the unreachable desert between my shoulder blades and down my spine a ruddy brown. When my eyes are screaming from the chlorine, I get out of the pool and make myself a drink. Most days, I do the crossword. When I'm done or have given up, I sometimes doodle on the paper, right on top of the newsprint. I try to draw my waterfall or one of the birds of paradise that borders the yard. Occasionally, I try to imagine what Petey will look like on some far-off day in the future, and I doodle in his future family, a little dark-haired daughter and a lovely wife.

If I have to work, I bring my laptop and telephone outside and numbly read through my inbox, responding only to those messages flagged as urgent. I spend the evenings digitizing our old photo albums, reviewing images from Pete's birthday parties, our anniversary trip to Aruba, photos of my waterfall taken in different seasons and at different times of day.

I call Nancy's mother's house and leave messages. I say things like, "I was just looking at the pictures of you that I took in Big Sur," hoping that the things that still mean something to me still mean something to her.

When I wake to discover a line of ants moving to and from the melted daiquiri just inches from my face—I'd apparently fallen asleep on our patio table—I don't feel embarrassed. I'm actually sort of inspired by their determination. "You don't even know," I tell them. "There's all this trouble in the world, and there you are, still getting after it."

In my fog, I don't hear Erasmo cleaning the pool behind me.

"I thought you were dead, Señor," he says, a jesting, fraternal sort of love in his voice. "You need some water?"

When he sets the glass in front of me, I am immensely moved. "Look at this," I tell him, opening my dew-covered laptop. I show him pictures of the empty lot from so long ago. "This right here," I say. "That's where the pool is."

"Señor Don," says Erasmo, and I can tell he doesn't want to look at my cache of family photos. "You gotta start thinking about the future and not the past." He claps me on the shoulder and returns to the pool's edge. There's a deep sucking sound as he fusses with the filter.

I take a sip of water and open my e-mail, determined to write the words that will bring my wife and son home. The rancid taste of rum and kiwi-strawberry sticks to my teeth and my bladder is painfully full, but I can feel it there in my fingertips, the right message stirring just under the skin. There are some false starts, and at first I write Nancy a lot of nonsense. I write that I've been swimming (true) and running (lie) and that I've been thinking of her and Petey all day, every day (truths), that I've cut back on the booze and am considering taking the mindfulness workshop she'd once told me about (lie and lie), and then, at the end, after a lot of beating around the bush, I get to the thing I've been trying to say to her the whole time. I write: *Nancy, my sweet wife, I want you and Petey to come home to me. Just come back to me, baby, and I'll cradle your pretty, sweet-smelling head as gently as an egg.*