




*The Hour I First
Believed*

—
A NOVEL

Wally Lamb



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THEY WERE BOTH WORKING THEIR final shift at Black-jack Pizza that night, although nobody but the two of them realized it was that. Give them this much: they were talented secret-keepers. Patient planners. They'd been planning it for a year, hiding their intentions in plain sight on paper, on videotape, over the Internet. In their junior year, one had written in the other's yearbook, "God, I can't wait till they die. I can taste the blood now." And the other had answered, "Killing enemies, blowing up stuff, killing cops! My wrath will be godlike!"

My wrath will be godlike: maybe that's a clue. Maybe their ability to dupe everyone was their justification. If we could be fooled, then we were all fools; they were, therefore, superior, chaos theirs to inflict. But I don't know. I'm just one more chaos theorist, as lost in the maze as everyone else.

It was Friday, April 16, 1999, four days before they opened fire. I'd stayed after school for a parent conference and a union meeting and, in between, had called Maureen to tell her I'd pick up takeout. Black-jack Pizza was between school and home.

It was early still. The Friday-night pizza rush hadn't begun. He was at the register, elbows against the counter, talking to a girl in a hair-dresser's smock. Or not talking, pretty much. There was a cell phone on the counter, and he kept tapping it with his index finger to make it

spin—kept looking at the revolving cell phone instead of at the girl. I remember wondering if I'd just walked in on a lover's spat. "I better get back," the girl said. "See you tomorrow." Her smock said "Great Clips," which meant she worked at the salon next door—the place where Maureen went.

"Prom date?" I asked him. The big event was the next night at the Design Center in Denver. From there, the kids would head back to school for the all-night post-prom party, which I'd been tagged to help chaperone.

"I wouldn't go to that bogus prom," he said. He called over his shoulder. "How's his half-mushroom-half-meatball coming?" His cohort opened the oven door and peered in. Gave a thumbs-up.

"So tell me," I said. "You guys been having any more of your famous Blackjack flour wars?"

He gave me a half-smile. "You remember that?"

"Sure. Best piece you wrote all term."

He'd been in my junior English class the year before. A grade-conscious concrete sequential, he was the kind of kid who was more comfortable memorizing vocab definitions and lines from Shakespeare than doing the creative stuff. Still, his paper about the Blackjack Pizza staff's flour fights, which he'd shaped as a spoof on war, was the liveliest thing he'd written all term. I remember scrawling across his paper, "*You should think about taking creative writing next year.*" And he had. He was in Rhonda Baxter's class. Rhonda didn't like him, though—said she found him condescending. She hated the way he rolled his eyes at other kids' comments. Rhonda and I shared a free hour, and we often compared notes about the kids. I neither liked nor disliked him, particularly. He'd asked me to write him a letter of recommendation once. Can't remember what for. What I *do* recall is sitting there, trying to think up something to say.

He rang up my sale. I handed him a twenty. "So what's next year looking like?" I asked. "You heard back from any of the schools you applied to?"

“I’m joining the Marines,” he said.

“Yeah? Well, I heard they’re looking for a few good men.” He nodded, not smiling, and handed me my change.

His buddy ambled over to the counter, pizza box in hand. He’d lost the boyish look I remembered from his freshman year. Now he was a lanky, beak-nosed adult, his hair tied back in a sorry-looking ponytail, his chin as prominent as Jay Leno’s. “So what’s *your* game plan for next year?” I asked him.

“University of Arizona.”

“Sounds good,” I said. I gave a nod to the Red Sox cap he was wearing. “You follow the Sox?”

“Somewhat. I just traded for Garciparra in my fantasy league.”

“Good move,” I said. “I used to go to Sox games all the time when I was in college. Boston University. Fenway was five minutes away.”

“Cool,” he said.

“Maybe this is their year, huh?”

“Maybe.” He didn’t sound like he gave a shit either way.

He was in Rhonda’s creative writing class, too. She’d come into the staff room sputtering about him one day. “Read this,” she said. “Is this sick or what?” He’d written a two-page story about a mysterious avenger in a metal-studded black trench coat. As jocks and “college preps” leave a busy bar, he pulls pistols and explosives out of his duffel bag, wastes them, and walks away, smiling. “Do you think I should call his parents?” Rhonda had asked.

I’d shrugged. “A lot of the guys write this kind of crap. Too many video games, too much testosterone. I wouldn’t worry about it. He probably just needs a girlfriend.” She *had* worried, though, enough to make that call. She’d referred to the meeting, a week or so later, as “a waste of time.”

The door banged open; five or six rowdy kids entered Blackjack. “Hey, I’ll see you later,” I said.

“Later,” he said. And I remember thinking he’d make a good Marine. Clean-cut, conscientious, his ironed T-shirt tucked neatly

into his wrinkle-free shorts. Give him a few years, I figured, and he'd probably be officer material.

AT DINNER THAT NIGHT, MAUREEN suggested we go out to a movie, but I begged off, citing end-of-the-week exhaustion. She cleaned up, I fed the dogs, and we adjourned to our separate TVs. By ten o'clock, I was parked on my recliner, watching *Homicide* with the closed-caption activated, my belly full of pizza. There was a *Newsweek* opened on my lap for commercial breaks, a Pete's Wicked ale resting against my crotch, and a Van Morrison CD reverberating inside my skull: *Astral Weeks*, a record that had been released in 1968, the year I turned seventeen.

I was forty-seven that Friday night. A month earlier, a guy in a music chat room I'd begun visiting had posed the question, "What are the ten masterworks of the rock era?" Dozens of us had begun devising our lists, posting them as works in progress and busting each other's chops about our selections. (I came to picture my cyber-rockin' brethren as a single balding fat guy in a tie-dye T-shirt—size XL when XXL would have been a better fit.) My masterwork choices were as controversial as the next guy's. I incurred the good-natured wrath of several of my cyberbuddies, for instance, when I named to my list Springsteen's *Nebraska* while excluding *Born to Run* and *Born in the U.S.A.* "Dude, as spokesman for the Boss's TRUE fans," a trash-to-energy engineer from Michigan messaged me, "I regret to inform you that you're more f***ed up than a soup sandwich!" I dished it out, too, of course, not always successfully. I learned that I'd deeply offended a professor of medieval literature by stating that the bloodline of the Backstreet Boys could be traced to that *other* vapid and overrated boy band of an earlier era, the Beach Boys. The scholar asked if he could communicate with me privately, and I obliged him with my address. A week later, I received a FedEx envelope, postage paid by Princeton University,

which contained an erudite (if unconvincing) eleven-page defense of the album *Pet Sounds*.

For weeks, listening and list-making had consumed me: *Sgt. Pepper* or *Songs in the Key of Life*? Aretha or Etta James? I'd saved my tenth and final berth for the unorthodox but always interesting Van Morrison but was having trouble deciding between Van the Man's elegant *Moondance* and his more emotionally raw *Astral Weeks*. Thus, that Friday night, the earphones.

But it was armor, all of it, I see that now: the TV, the open magazine, the aural review of my life, the keyboard chatter. I'd safeguarded myself in multimedia chain mail to prevent emotional penetration from Maureen.

A shadow moved across the carpet, and I looked up from *Homicide* to her. "Caelum?" her lips said. She was holding our wicker tray, two glasses of red wine counterbalanced by a lit candle. I watched the wine rock in the glasses while she waited. The candle was scented—spice of some kind. She was into Enya and aromatherapy back then.

I lifted my left earphone. "Yeah, give me a few minutes," I said. "I want to let the dogs out, catch a little of the news. I'll be up."

Maureen, her wines, and her defeated shoulders turned and started up the stairs. I could read Mo from the back, same as I could the other two. But reading and responding are two different things. "Look, don't just stare at the pages," I used to tell my students. "*Become* the characters. Live *inside* the book." And they'd sit there, staring back politely at the alien from Planet Irrelevance.

Maureen's my three-strikes-and-you're-out spouse and, as far as I know, the only one of the trinity who ever cheated on me. That lit candle on the tray? It's one of the signals she and I came up with back in Connecticut, back in 1994, during the sensitizing humiliation of couples counseling—those seven sessions we attended in the aftermath of her Courtyard Marriott fuck-fests with Paul Hay.

Whom I'd met a few times at her staff parties. Who was in our

Rolodex. Come to think of it, we must have been in the Hays' Rolodex, too.

HELLO?" I SAID. ORDINARILY, WHEN the phone rang while I was grading papers, I'd let the machine get it. But the rain that March night had started making clicking sounds against the floorboards of the deck and the dogs had come back inside wearing ice crystals on their backs. Nervous about Mo's driving home from tai chi on treacherous roads, I was half waiting for a call.

"May I speak to Maureen Quirk?" the woman asked.

"She's out," I said.

"Are you Mr. Quirk?"

"Yeah, but look. No telemarketing at this number. Take us off your—"

"Do you know who Maureen's out *with*?"

I uncapped my pen. Tore off a piece of some kid's blue book to jot down her number. "Excuse me," I said. "Who'd you say this is?"

She identified herself not by name but by association: she was Trina Hay's best friend. Trina was sitting right there next to her, she said, but too upset to talk on the phone. "We just wanted you to know, in case you *don't* know, that your wife's having an affair with Paul."

I said nothing for several seconds, but when I finally did speak, all I could come up with was, "Paul who?"

"Paul Hay," she said. "Trina's *husband*. Did you know they have a little boy named Casey? Or that Trina has lupus? Or that they're building a *house*?" Jesus, she was giving me the whole *A&E Biography*, and I was still on *Paul Hay? Paul Hay? Where do I know that name from?* Maureen's betrayal hadn't broken the surface yet. Or maybe it had, because my instinct was to kill the messenger.

"So what are you—some no-life chick's gotta borrow her friend's business?" I asked.

"This *is* my business, okay?" she said. "I'm Casey's *godmother*."

“You’re fat, aren’t you? You have a fat voice.”

“Do you know who bought Trina and Paul the lot they’re building their house on? Trina’s *father*, that’s who. The month before he *died*.”

“Your options are limited, right? It’s either Tina’s problems or a spoon, a pint of Ben & Jerry’s between your knees, and *Touched by an Angel*.”

“Her name’s Trina, *okay*? And my personal life is none of your business. Just tell your little slut of a wife that if she thinks she’s moving into Trina’s new house when it’s finished, she’s . . . she’s . . .”

There was dead air for a few seconds, some muffled whispering. Then the avenger was back on the line, blubbing. “I am *trying* to stop your wife from destroying my friend’s marriage. *Okay*?”

“Yeah, sure, Fat Chunks. Your Nobel Peace Prize is in the mail.” I can’t remember which of us hung up on the other.

I paced, muttered. Sent my students’ blue books flying and the dogs running for cover. When I realized the cordless phone was still clenched in my hand, I whacked it five or six times against the refrigerator door. My car keys were on the counter. I stared at them for several seconds, then grabbed them.

The trucks hadn’t sanded Bride Lake Road yet, but I kept mislaying the fact that the road was icy. Passing the entrance to the women’s prison, I spotted oncoming headlights and hit the brakes. The fishtail I went into nearly sent me crashing into the security gate. My heart thumped. My breath came out in short blasts. I remembered who Paul Hay was.

I’d met him a couple of times at her staff parties. Reddish hair, bearish build. We’d small-talked. He’d tried home brewing once, but it had come out watery. He liked the Mets. Maureen was nurse-supervisor at Rivercrest Nursing Home back then, and Lover Boy was in her pool of per diem LPNs.

The karate school where she took tai chi was in a strip mall near the Three Rivers depot. There’s a convenience store, a bike shop, Happy

Joy Chinese, and Caputo's Martial Arts. The plate-glass window was foggy. I got out, walked to the door, opened it a crack. Twenty or so little kids in karate suits stood with their hands clasped as if in prayer. "Bow to the master, bow to the flag," the instructor said. Well, okay, I thought. She's guilty.

I slipped and slid my way back home. No car in the garage. I fed the dogs, picked the exam booklets off the floor, picked up the phone. No dial tone; I'd killed it. Two Johnny Walkers later, she came through the door with Chinese food. "Hey," I said. "How was it driving?"

"Not great, but I lucked out. I followed the sand truck all the way up Bride Lake Road. You eat yet?"

"Nope."

She hit the message machine. Her J. C. Penney order was in, one of her first-shift nurses was taking a "mental health day" and needed a sub. She put on a pot of tea, set two places, and opened the cardboard containers. "Look at this," she said. Her open palm was piled with soy sauce and mustard packets. "If someone consumed all this sodium, they'd have a stroke."

"So why'd you drive across town to the other place when you were right next door to Happy Joy?" I said.

"Because last time you said Happy Joy's too greasy."

Which was true—I had. It was.

We spooned out the food. The kettle whistled. Maureen got up to get our tea. "What happened here?" she asked. Her fingers were skidding along the refrigerator door.

"What?"

"These dents?"

"Tell me," I said. "Who gets on top, you or him? Or do you alternate?"

Okay, this next part's hard. I'm not proud of the moo shu and orange chicken dripping down the wall. Or the fact that when she tried to leave the room, I grabbed her so hard by the wrist that I

sprained it. Or the fact that she totaled her car on her way to her friend Jackie's apartment.

She wouldn't come back. She wouldn't take my calls. Each day, I went to school, taught classes, endured staff meetings, drove home, and walked the dogs. I spent my evenings calling Jackie's number on our brand-new phone. Redial, redial, redial, redial. When Jackie's boyfriend warned me to stop calling or else he'd *have* the calling stopped, I said okay, fine, I didn't want any trouble. I just needed to talk to my wife.

Next day after school, I drove over to the town hall and found out where Hay was building their dinky little shoebox of a house. It was out in the sticks, out past the old gristmill. I drove out there around dusk. The place was framed; the chimney was up. Overhead was a pockmarked moon.

I drove back there the next morning, a Saturday. His truck was there. He was up on the second floor. He squinted down at me, puzzled. I cut the engine. That's when I saw it, in the seat well on the passenger's side: the pipe wrench I'd borrowed from Chuck Wagner to tighten our leaky hallway radiator valve. It wasn't premeditated. I'd meant to return that wrench for a week or more. But suddenly its being there seemed just and right. There was a fire in my head.

Six weeks after that moment, in a darkened classroom at Ocean-side Community College, I would learn via an anger management class video about the cardiology, neurology, and endocrinology of rage—about how, as I reached for that wrench, my hypothalamus was instant-messaging my adrenal glands to secrete cortisol and adrenaline. How stored fat was dumping into my bloodstream for an energy turbocharge. How my heart was pumping overtime, sending a surge of blood to my muscles and lungs in preparation for what that instructional video called “the evolutionary miracle of fight-or-flight.” That morning, I saw Hay and took the former option.

Took out his windshield. Took the wrench to his stacks of not-yet-installed Andersen windows. When he came flying at me, I took a

swing at his head that, thank God, didn't connect. He head-butted me, knocked me backward, gave me a cracked rib and a busted lip, a bruised tailbone.

They arrested me that afternoon. Hay got a restraining order. Maureen got me out of the house and would not let me take the dogs. We all got lawyers. Mine, Lena LoVecchio, was a friend of my Aunt Lolly's. Her manner was brusque, her hairstyle a shellacked mullet. There were two framed posters on the wall behind her desk: the UConn women's basketball team with their championship trophy and Kramer from *Seinfeld*.

"How come he gets to screw my wife *and* be the victim?" I asked Lena.

"It's all about the wrench," she said.

I tried to explain to Lena how I'd reached the point where there was nothing between me and the pain of my wife's betrayal. She kept nodding, sad-eyed, her fingers stretching a rubber band. When I stopped talking, she said, "I'm your attorney, Caelum. Not your therapist."

Pending disposition of the case, I took a mandatory unpaid leave of absence from teaching. Took Aunt Lolly up on her offer to have me come stay at the family farm with her and her don't-ask-don't-tell companion, Hennie. (It was April, and my aunt was as practical as she was sympathetic; I got room, board, and laundry service in exchange for plowing and manure spreading.) I took the deal the lawyers hammered out. In exchange for two hundred hours of community service, completion of the anger management class, and restitution on all that broken glass out at the Hays' hacienda, I got the assault and damage charges reduced to misdemeanors. That meant probation instead of prison and a shot at qualifying for "accelerated rehabilitation." It would be the judge's call. If I got it and behaved myself for a year, my criminal record would be wiped clean and I could teach again. My case was on the docket for August the first.

I missed school—the kids, the daily grind. Had Melanie DeCarlo gotten into one of her dream schools? Had Mike Jacaruso gotten that

soccer scholarship? When the Wildcats made it to the semifinals in basketball, I drove up to their big game against Wethersfield. Made the mistake of sitting in the Three Rivers section. I left at the half, though. I couldn't take the fact that, although everyone was packed in tight on those bleachers, I had room on either side of me. Couldn't take the whispering, the swiveling heads: *that's that teacher who . . .*

The community service piece was punishment by acute tedium. I'd have been okay with a soup kitchen or group home assignment, but they gave me data entry at the DMV—six mind-numbing hours every Saturday for thirty-three weeks.

Hey, you think those Motor Vehicle employees are charmers when you're in line? You should feel the love when you're one of their community service penitents. This one woman? Had Disney crap pinned up all over her cubicle walls? She goes to her supervisor and accuses me of helping myself to the M&Ms in the glass canister on her desk. Which was bullshit. She's blowing her nose every two minutes and leaving used Kleenex all over her desk, and she thinks I want to get within ten feet of that germ pool?

And then there was anger management: twelve three-hour sessions run by Beth the Ballbuster and Dredlock Darnell, who, I'm guessing, must have been at least a *semifinalist* for Dunkin' Donuts' Customer of the Decade. They had this good cop/bad cop thing going, those two. He'd expound on "our feelings as messengers" and play the pathetically dated videos—*The Blame Game*, *Slaying the Dragon Within*. She'd try her best to incite us, drill-sergeant style, cutting off at the knees any guy clueless enough to claim that he didn't really have to be there or that, on some level at least, his wife or girlfriend had asked for it. "Bullshit!" Beth declared, in the middle of one sap's poor-me ramble about the connection between his mother's ridicule and the fact that he'd sunk a barbecue fork into his nagging wife's leg. "Stop using your lousy childhood as an excuse, and stop calling her 'the wife.' She has a name, doesn't she? Use it. And face the fact that you're a domestic terrorist." During break midway through our

second session, I'd rolled my eyes and quipped sotto voce to Beth that some of the bulletheads in our class probably needed stupidity management more than anger management. "Mr. Quirk, are you under the mistaken impression that we facilitators are your peer group?" she asked. "Because we're not. You're in the abusers' group." After that icing, I joined the smokers and gripers outside, neither nodding at nor challenging their mumblings about wasted time, whale blubber, and femiNazis.

I learned things, though. The curriculum may have been redundant, Darnell may have had food issues, and Beth may have bulldozed her way through resistance rather than dismantling it the way a more skillful teacher might have done. ("Hey, you don't *want* to fix yourself? Fine. Drop out. *I'm* not the one who needs the signed certificate.") Still, I went away with a better understanding of the biology of anger, what triggers it, and what I could do to short-circuit it. More than that, I had a twelve-week dose of humility. Man, I hated the sick-to-my-stomach feeling I got driving to that class every week. Hated the beat-up/riled-up feeling I always had afterward. Hated facing up to the fact that, whether she'd been unfaithful to me or not, if Maureen had gotten killed that icy night when she totaled her Toyota, it would have been my fault because she'd left out of fear. If I'd bashed in Hay's skull with that pipe wrench, his death would have been on me. I *was* in the abusers' group, not the group for the abused; that's what I learned. My childhood grudges, my righteous indignation, and my master's degree didn't count for squat. My Phi Beta Kappa key unlocked nothing. I was my failings and my actions, period. Like I said, it was a humbling experience.

In court, Hay's lawyer stood and asked the judge if his client could speak. Attorney LoVecchio and I exchanged uh-oh looks; this wasn't in the script. This couldn't be good.

In the months since the incident, Hay said, he had rediscovered His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He had broken the ninth commandment and had come to understand that he bore responsibility for the

outcome of those trespasses. He was not a vindictive man, he said. He was sorry for the hurt he'd caused. He hoped *I* could forgive him as *he* had forgiven me. He looked right at me when he said that last part. I looked away from him. Looked back and nodded. The judge granted me my "accelerated rehab."

Maureen had filed for divorce by then. That fall, I helped Lolly and Hennie with the milking and the apple and pumpkin sales. I also resurrected the Bride Lake Farms corn maze. During the fifties and early sixties, the maze had been a Three Rivers tradition; we'd get a couple thousand paying customers going through that thing in season. "People *like* to get lost for a little while," my grandfather used to say. But the maze's popularity had petered out during the late sixties, maybe because, by then, most of us were already more lost than we wanted to be. Out in the old desk in the barn, I found my father's pencil sketch for the original three-acre labyrinth, dated 5/12/56, and duplicated that. Did a decent enough job of it, so I went down to the newspaper and tried to get the features editor interested in doing a nostalgic story. "The Return of the Bride Lake Farm Corn Maze," something like that. She wasn't interested, though, and we couldn't afford *paid* advertising, so the whole thing kind of fizzled. I mean, we got some families on the few weekends that weren't rained out, and a few school groups during the week, but it was nothing like when I was a kid, when the cars would be parked a quarter of a mile down Bride Lake Road.

I took a stop-gap second job as night baker at Mama Mia Pastry, which was how I'd put myself through school back in the seventies. Mr. and Mrs. Buzzi had both retired by then, and their surviving son, Alphonse, was running the biz. The Buzzis' older son, Rocco, and I had been high school buddies, then roommates at BU, seatmates at Sox games. Being back at the bakery felt like a demotion, especially since, technically, Alphonse Buzzi was now my boss. When he was a kid, his brother and I used to tease Alphonse mercilessly. He'd ask for it, you know? Squeal on us, ambush us with water balloons.

“Baby Huey,” we used to call him, and he’d go crying to his mother. After Rocco died, Alphonse became a friend by default, I guess you could say. He was still annoying, though. Still a baby. My first wife? Patti? She was always trying to fix him up with women from her bank, but nothing ever took. I mean, even now, the guy’s in his mid-forties—runs a *business*, for Christ’s sake—and you know what he’s into? Paintball. You know what’s sitting on top of the file cabinet in his office? His friggin’ Super-Soaker.

But anyway, nighttime baking suited me okay; I wasn’t sleeping for shit anyway. I kept telling myself that my year away from teaching gave me the perfect opportunity to write again—kept feeding myself that “Life gives you lemons, make lemonade” crap. I bought a three-ring binder and a three-hundred-sheet package of loose-leaf paper. Put the paper in the binder, snapped the rings shut, put a pen in the pocket, and put it on the nightstand next to my bed. But I *didn’t* write again. Didn’t open that fucking loose-leaf binder once.

And then Maureen called me. Out of the blue, on Halloween night. Well, it was one in the morning, so, technically, it was already November the first. All Saints Day, I remembered, from my Catholic childhood. Mo was crying. She was scared, she said. Sophie, the older and needier of our two mutts, was sick. Dying, maybe. Dogs could die from too much chocolate, right? Maureen had overplanned for trick-or-treaters, then gone to bed, leaving most of the unclaimed candy in a bowl by the door. Sophie had chowed down on thirty or forty of those miniature Hershey bars, wrappers and all. She’d been vomiting chocolate, paper, and foil nonstop for two hours. The vet’s answering service wouldn’t pick up. Could I come over?

I stopped at the all-night convenience store on my way and bought Pepto-Bismol. Sent Maureen to bed and stayed up with Soph for the rest of the night. She stopped retching around three in the morning. I sat there, watching her sleep, her chest heaving. By dawn, her breathing had normalized. By seven, she was up again, looking better and wanting breakfast.

One thing led to another with Mo and me. She'd tell me okay, I could come over for a cup of coffee. "One hour," she'd insist. The first time, she even set the stove timer. Then she let me take her out to dinner. Then we started walking the dogs out by the reservoir. Started watching UConn basketball on TV. One night when I went over there, I brought a bottle of wine, and we drank it and made out on the couch. Made our way to the bedroom. We were awkward with each other, out of synch. I came before she was anywhere near ready. "It's okay," she kept saying. "It's fine."

Later, after I'd started dozing, she said, "Caelum?"

"Hmm?"

"Tell me a secret."

At first I didn't say anything. Then I said, "What kind of secret?"

"Something you've never told anyone before."

Mr. Zadzilko, I thought. I saw his broad face before me, the bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling of the utility closet. "I don't . . . I can't think of anything."

"Tell me something about your ex-wife."

"Patti?"

"Francesca. You never talk about her."

I rolled toward her, onto my side. And because I wanted to come home again, I complied. "Well," I said. "When I started writing my book? She bought me a computer. My first computer."

Mo said that wasn't a secret. It didn't count.

"Yeah, but wait. The day she left me? She took her house key—the one she left behind—and scratched something onto the face of the monitor."

"What?"

"Two words: emotional castrato. . . . Like our whole marriage was my fault. Like her living in New York all week and coming home on weekends—*some* weekends, I should say, fewer and fewer, actually—like that had nothing to do with it. And here's what a freaking masochist *I* was: I lived with that goddamned monitor. Kept typing

away, squinting around and past those words. It was four or five months before I unplugged the fucker and hefted it out to the curb. Lifted it over my head and dropped it face-first onto the sidewalk, just so I could hear the pleasure of it crash. Spring cleanup, it was, and the town trucks were driving around, picking up people's bulky waste. And the next morning, I heard the truck and stood at the window. Had the pleasure of watching them haul it away. . . . So there's your secret."

"Who else knows about it?" she asked.

"No one else. Just you."

She reached over. Stroked my hair, my cheek. "After my parents split up?" she said. "When I used to spend weekends with my father? He'd come into my room some nights, sit in the chair across from my bed and . . ."

"What?"

"Masturbate." My mind ricocheted. She anticipated the question I wanted and didn't want to ask. "That was as far as it ever went. He never . . . you know."

"Did he think you were asleep?"

"No. He used to watch me watching him. Neither of us ever said anything. He'd just do it, finish up, and leave. And in the morning, he'd be Daddy again. Take me out and buy me chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast."

"That's sick," I said. "How many times did it happen?"

"Two or three, maybe. Then he started seeing the Barracuda, and it stopped." The Barracuda was Evelyn, her stepmother, a high-stakes real estate broker. From the start, Evelyn and Mo had kept their distance.

"You tell your mother?"

"No. You're the first person I've ever told. . . . It was pretty confusing. I was only eleven. I mean, most of the time he was so distant. So unavailable. Then he'd . . . I knew it was wrong to watch him. Dirty or whatever, but . . ."

"But what?"

“It was this thing we shared. This secret. It messed me up, though. I slept around a lot in high school.”

I put my arm around her. Squeezed her tight, then tighter.

“Caelum? Do you think you could trust me again? I know I’ve given you good reason not to, but . . . I mean, if you’re going to be all Sherlock Holmes every time I go out . . .”

I told her I *wanted* to be able to trust her—that working on it was the best I could promise.

“Okay,” she said. “That’s fair.”

On our next date, she told me I could come back home if I wanted to. There was one condition, though: couples counseling.

Our therapist, the sari-wearing, no-nonsense Dr. Beena Patel, was a dead ringer for Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. I’d assumed Mo was going to be the one to take the heat, since she was the one who’d cheated, but within the first fifteen minutes of session one, I realized that Dr. Patel was going to be an equal-opportunity nutcracker. Besides, Dr. Patel said, she thought it would be more profitable for us to focus on the future than the past. And speaking of profitable, her fee was a hundred and fifteen a pop.

Dr. Patel assigned homework. She made Mo and me design a series of nonverbal requests we could use when asking directly for something made either one of us feel too vulnerable. Universally recognizable signals weren’t permitted. No raised middle finger in response to a cutting remark, for instance; no ass-grabbing if, walking into the kitchen and seeing her in those cutoffs of hers, I suddenly got in the mood. “The creation of signs exclusive to you as a couple is as much a part of the therapy as the employment of them,” Dr. P explained. “And, of course, with that, the careful honoring of each other’s reasonable requests.” So, a tug of the earlobe came to mean: *Please listen to me*. A hand over the heart: *What you just said hurts*. A lit candle: *Come upstairs*. *Be with me*. *Love me*. And I did love Maureen. I do. Ask any of us cynical bastards to lift up our shirt, and we’ll show you where we got shot in the heart.

“You can’t just *say* you forgive her, Mr. Quirk,” Dr. Patel used to insist during the solo sessions she requested because, at our regular appointments, Maureen was averaging 75 percent of the talking. “If you truly want to live inside this marriage, then you must shed your carapace of bitterness and *embrace* forgiveness.”

“My carapace?” I said. “What am I? An insect?”

Dr. Patel didn’t smile. “Or else, my friend, move on.”

But rather than move on, we’d moved. Maureen’s mom was dead; her father and the Barracuda had a grown daughter and a grandchild. They had nothing more than a birthday- and Christmas-card relationship with Mo, and even then, the good wishes were always in Evelyn’s handwriting. But Mo had this fantasy that she and her dad might become closer if she was back in Colorado. I couldn’t see why she wanted that, frankly. I mean, by rights, the guy should have been registered as a sex offender. But I never said that, and Maureen had never wanted to talk about Daddy with Dr. Patel. And as for me, the thought of standing in front of classes of high school kids who *hadn’t* heard about my arrest—as opposed to kids who *had*—well, that had a certain appeal. So we made umpteen phone calls. My Connecticut teaching license was transferable, and Maureen had never let her Colorado nursing credentials lapse. We flew out there in late June, interviewed, found a house we liked in Cherry Knolls. By mid-July, we had jobs at the same high school—me as an English teacher and Maureen as a backup school nurse. And so we hired movers, closed our bank accounts, sedated the dogs for the trip west, and went.

If, for Maureen, Colorado was coming home, I was a stranger in a strange land. “Welcome to God’s country,” people kept saying, usually with a nod to those ubiquitous goddamn mountains. “Drink water, or the altitude’ll do a number on you.” And it did, too. I’d get nosebleeds out of nowhere for the first month or so.

It was the small things I missed: the family farm in October, Aunt Lolly’s chuckle, my old jogging route, Fenway Park. I’d held on to those same Red Sox seats (section 18, row double-N, seats 5 and 6)

since my BU days. I'd sat with Rocco Buzzi in the early years, and later with his brother, Alphonse. I mean, I'd *go* to a Rockies game, but it wasn't the same. They're home-run-happy out there, for one thing; someone dings one, and the altitude takes care of the rest. Maureen would go with me to Coors Field sometimes in the beginning, but she'd usually bring a book, or drag me to some LoDo art gallery afterwards. "How many points do we have now?" she'd ask, and I'd have to remind her it was runs, not points. I don't know. It's just different out there. You know what you can get on a pizza in metro Denver? Mesquite-flavored tilapia, with or without goat cheese. Jesus God.

Hey, in my own defense? I was respectful of those signals of ours for a while. I'd see her hand on her heart and comfort her. I'd *act* on a lit candle. Light one myself from time to time. And it worked; it *was* better. I'll give counseling that much. But over time, I got careless. Got bitter again, gummed up in the flypaper of what I was supposed to be beyond: the fact that those Monday and Thursday nights when she was supposed to be taking tai chi, she'd been opening her legs and taking Paul Hay inside her instead. I don't know. Maybe that stuff with her father *had* messed her up. I mean, it had to have, right? But after that tell-me-a-secret night, we never went near the subject again—not even with Dr. Patel.

I tell you one thing, though: Mo's moving back to Colorado didn't get her what she wanted, father-wise. She went over to their house three or four times at the beginning. She'd get all dressed up, buy them gifts. I chose not to go with her. The thing was, I didn't trust myself. Figured seeing Daddy Dearest might trigger something, and I'd go off on the guy. Coldcock him or something. It's not like I didn't have a history. Maureen would always come back from those visits saying she'd had a good time, or that their house was beautiful, or that their granddaughter, Amber, was so adorable. She'd be down, though—in a slump for the next few days. Sometimes, I'd eavesdrop when she called them. Maureen would small-talk with Evelyn for a

while and then ask to speak to her father. He'd oblige her—come to the phone maybe half the time. And when he did, it made me sad to hear Mo doing most of the talking. He never called her. Neither did Evelyn. Or Cheryl, the half-sister. Somewhere during our second year out there, Maureen stopped calling, too. It was hard for her, as it had been hard for me. I knew a thing or two about abdicating fathers.

BUT ANYWAY, THAT FRIDAY NIGHT? In our Colorado living room? *Homicide* ended on its usual note of moral ambiguity, Van Morrison's "Slim Slow Slider" faded to silence, and the news came on. There was relative calm in the world that night. Nothing you'd stay glued to your recliner over. No sign of the trouble those two rage-filled little motherfuckers were planning. Channel Nine had a convenience-store stickup in Lakewood, an environmental protest in Fort Collins. There was the usual numbing news from Kosovo. Get up, I kept telling myself. Go to her. Instead, I'd stuck around for the Sox and Celtics scores, checked in with the Weather Channel for the national temperatures. We'd been out there for four years by then, and I was still keeping tabs on Connecticut weather.

Still, I meant to go up to her. I was going to. But the news led into *Letterman*, and since James Brown was the musical guest, I decided to open a beer and catch that soulful old reprobate, too. Should I add the Godfather of Soul to my masterworks list, I wondered. And if so, who should I bump? . . .

My eyes cracked open some time after three. I looked around until I recognized the room. Got up, got the dogs taken care of and the downstairs locked up. Went up there.

Our bedroom was lit by dying candlelight and aromatic with ginger. Wax had dribbled down the front of the bureau and cooled. Carapaced the carpet. Maureen was scowling in her sleep. She'd drunk both of the wines.

I dropped my clothes beside our bed and got in next to her. She rolled onto her side, away. *Moondance*, I thought. No, *Astral Weeks*. And in the midst of my indecision, I suddenly saw the long view of my inconsequential life: Mouseketeer, farm kid, failed husband, mediocre teacher. Forty-fucking-eight years old, and what had I accomplished? What had I come to know?

IN THE AFTERMATH, I'D LEARN that he lied to me on two counts that afternoon at Blackjack Pizza. First, he hadn't been as anti-prom as he let on; he'd asked a couple of girls and been refused. As was his habit when one of his peers displeased or slighted him, he'd gone home, grabbed a marking pen, and X-ed out their faces in his yearbook. Second, he was not headed for the Marines. The *Rocky Mountain News* would report that the antidepressant he was taking for obsessive-compulsive disorder had disqualified him. The recruiter had dropped by his home and delivered the news on Thursday, the night before I'd bought that pizza. His buddy *had* made plans to go to the University of Arizona, though; he and his dad had driven there a few weeks earlier and chosen his dorm room. Had that been part of the deceit? Had he been playing both fantasy baseball and fantasy future? Playing his parents along with everyone else? His computer offered no clues; they confiscated it within the first few hours, but he'd erased the hard drive the night before.

Over and over, for years now, I have returned to that Friday night: when I can't sleep, when I can, when the steel door slides open and I walk toward her, Maureen looking sad-eyed and straggly-haired, in her maroon T-shirt and pocketless jeans. Mo's one of the victims you've never read about in the Columbine coverage, or seen interviewed on the *Today* show or *Good Morning America*. One of the collaterally damaged.

I just wish to Christ I'd gotten up the stairs that night. Made love to her. Held her in my arms and made her feel safe. Because time was

almost up. They'd bought their guns, taped their farewell videos, finalized their plans. They'd worked their last shift together at Blackjack—had made and sold me that pizza that, piece by piece, Mo and I had lifted out of the box and eaten. Chaos was coming, and it would drive us both so deeply into the maze that we'd wander among the corpses, lost to each other for years. Yet there Maureen was on that long-ago night, up in our bed, waiting for me.

Get up those stairs! I want to scream to my clueless April-seventeenth-of-nineteen-ninety-nine self. *Hold her! Make her feel safe!* Because time was running out. Their first shots were eighty hours away.