

What We Talk About
When We Talk About
Anne Frank

Also by Nathan Englander

For the Relief of Unbearable Urges
The Ministry of Special Cases

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Everything I Know About
My Family on My Mother's Side

1. Watch the husband and wife walking down Broadway together. Even looking at their backs, even from a distance, you can see the wife is making big sweeping points, advising. There is wisdom being shared. But she is a kindly woman, the wife. You can see this, too. Because every few paces, the wife slows and reaches toward the husband, hangs an arm around his shoulder, and pulls him close. There is clearly love between them.

2. If we weave through the crowd with a little gusto, we'll make progress. If we take advantage of the pause when the two stand by a table of trinkets—bracelets and lighters and watches, all of them, oddly, embossed with the faces of revolutionaries—we get close enough to become suspicious of their relationship, about the nature of its husband-and-wifeness.

3. The two stop right in the middle of Canal Street. The wife faces the husband, and the point she argues is so large, it's as if the wife believes traffic will stop for it when the light changes, as if, should the cars roll on, it's worth being run down to see her point made.

It's then that we catch up, then that we're sure—as the woman smiles and hooks her arm through the man's, guiding him safely across—that the wife is not a wife and the husband not a husband.

4. What they are, it seems clear now, is boyfriend and girlfriend. And that girlfriend, upon closer inspection, seems to be a cat-eyed and freckle-faced Bosnian. Standing next to her, looking ten years older and with a mess of curly hair, the other one—the boyfriend one—is, we see, just a little Jew. And recognizing the face, taking it in, we see that the little Jew is me.

5. It's because of how they walk and talk, in the way their shoulders bump and how her lower back is held and released by him at every corner, that we assume a different type of intimacy. There is an ease—a certain safety, you could call it—that just makes a person think husband and wife. From a distance, it just seemed another thing.

6. The argument that they—that is, that she and I—settle in the middle of Canal Street sounds, in a much truncated form, like this, with me earnest and at wit's end: “But what do you do if you're American and have no family history and all your most vivid childhood memories are only the plots of sitcoms, if even your dreams, when pieced together, are the snippets of movies that played in your ear while you slept?”

“Then,” the girl says, “those are the stories you tell.”

7. Her family tree is written into the endpapers of a Bible whose leather cover has worn soft as a glove. She was raised in the house in which her mother was raised, and her mother's mother, and in which, believe it or not, her great-grandmother was born. Think of this: The ancient photos around her had grown old on the walls.

When the Bosnian came to America with her parents, they took the Bible, but the pictures, along with the still-living relatives in them, were left behind.

8. We're still in the street, arguing over my family history gone lost, and I say what I always say to this girl who was swaddled in a quilt sewn from her grandmother's dresses: "Oh, look at me, my uncle shot Franz Ferdinand and started World War One, then Count Balthus came to Sarajevo to paint a portrait of my mother playing badminton in white kneesocks." For this, there's always a punch in the arm and a kiss to make up. This time, I also want a real answer.

9. "What you do is tell the stories you have, as best you can."
"Even if they're about going to the mall? About eating bagel dogs and kosher pizza?"

"Yes," she says.

"You don't mean that."

"I don't mean that," she says. "You find better stories than that." And looking at me, frustrated, "You can't, not really, know nothing! Tell me about your mother. Tell me an anecdote right now."

"Everything I know about my family on my mother's side wouldn't even make a whole story." And she knows enough of me, my girl does, to know that it's true.

10. The Bosnian, my Bean—and, admittedly, that's what I call her—she fills me with confidence. I go from saying it's hopeless to telling her about the Japanese beetles, about the body in the stairwell, about the soldier with the glass eye. "You see," she says, "there is story after story. Plenty of history to tell."

11. My mother's father had two brothers, both of them long dead. My grandfather never told me about either brother. These are the stories he told me instead: "During Prohibition, we drank everything. Vanilla. Applejack. When I was down in Virginia, we used to go out to where the stills were hidden in the woods and buy moonshine. Always, you take a match to it first. If it burns white, you're all right. If it burns blue, then it's methanol. If it burns blue and you drink it, you go blind."

12. Applejack, it's just hard cider. My grandfather told me how to make it. You take fresh cider and you put it in a jar and throw in a bunch of raisins, for the sugar. You let it ferment, watching those raisins go fat over time. Then you put it in the freezer and you wait. Alcohol has a lower freezing point than water. When the ice forms, you take out the jar, you fish out the ice (or pour out the liquid), and what's not frozen, that's alcohol—easy as pie. I tried it one Thanksgiving, when suddenly, even in suburbia, cider abounds. I threw in the raisins. I waited and froze and skimmed and drank. I don't think I got drunk. I don't think anything happened. But neither did I go blind.

13. If you were to climb into my childhood head and look out from my childhood eyes, you'd see a world of Jews around

you: the parents, the children, the neighbors, the teachers—everyone a Jew, and everyone religious in exactly the same way. Now look across the street at the Catholic girl’s house, and at the house next door to hers, where the Reform Jews live. Now what do you see? Is it a blur? An empty space? If you are seeing nothing, if your answer is nothing, then you are seeing as I saw.

14. Now that I’m completely secular, my little niece looks at me—at her uncle—through those old eyes. She asks my older brother sweetly, “Is Uncle Nathan Jewish?” Yes, is the answer. Uncle Nathan is Jewish. He’s what we call an apostate. He means you no harm.

15. My great-grandfather gave up on religion completely. And my grandfather told me why he did. This is true, by the by. Not true in the way fiction is truer than truth. True in both realms.

16. What he told me is that his father and two other boys were up on the roof of a house in their village in Russia. One of the boys—not my great-grandfather—had to pee and peed off that roof. What he didn’t see below him was a rabbi going by.

Like a story, every stream has an arc that has to come down somewhere. The boy pissed on the rabbi’s hat. The three children were brought before the anointed party. They were, all three, soundly and brutally beaten. The punishment meted out was an injustice my great-grandfather couldn’t abide. He thought, in Russian, in Yiddish, in his version, Fuck the whole lot, I’m done.

17. Up until this story, all I knew was that our family was from Gubernia. That's where we hailed from. And when I tell my sweet Bosnian, who also speaks some Russian, she shakes her head, looking sad, as if maybe everything I know really isn't enough. "*Gubernia* just means 'state,'" she says, "like a county. To say you were born in *gubernia* would be like saying you were born in *state*. As in, New York State or Washington State. To be from there is to be from everywhere."

"Or nowhere," I say.

18. It's when I'm asking my mother about the other side, about my grandmother's side, that she says, "Well, it's when Grandma's grandma, that is [and here, the middle-distance stare, the ticking off on fingers], when my mother's mother's mother came from Yugoslavia to Boston—" And that's when I stop her. Thirty-seven years old, and for the first time, in writing this, I find that my great-great-grandmother—my people—came from Yugoslavia. How does that not ever come up? I'm flabbergasted, and I want to call the Bosnian to say, "Hey, neighbor, it's me, Nathan. Guess what?" But she is not the person to call with such news—not anymore. That's how quickly things change. Some truths, you can hide forever, but when you finally face them, finally take a look . . . well, with me and the Bosnian, it's done.

19. About Yugoslavia, about the news, my mother doesn't pity me over stories suppressed. She says, "You have nothing to complain about. I had it worse in my not knowing." Her uncle, my grandfather's brother, died at age eight of a brain tumor. There was nothing to be done. A brain tumor killed the littlest brother of the three. My grandfather was twelve at the time, his middle

brother ten, and his dead-of-a-brain-tumor brother eight. And my mother worried about every headache I had in my life. She worried about every little twitch and high fever in my childhood. She waited for the malady to start, the disease that eats the brains of young boys.

20. And then, in 2004—“That spring,” my mother says—she drives up to Boston because Cousin Jack needs a new hip, a new shoulder, a new valve; she drives up to Boston because Cousin Jack is getting fitted for a replacement part. There she learns a different story from Jack, different from the one she’s carried her whole life. My grandfather, all of twelve, was crossing Commonwealth Avenue with his littlest brother, with Abner, when a car came over the hill and clipped him. Knocked little Abner from my grandfather’s grip. Abner got up. Abner looked fine, except for his right hand. A deep cut in the hand that might have been of concern to the driver had he taken a closer look. Instead, he got out of the car, stared at the little Jew boys looking fine enough, and drove off.

21. My grandfather led his brother home. Great-Grandma Lily (my grandfather’s mother) screamed in shock. “A car? An accident? Look at this cut.” She cleaned the wound. She wrapped the wound. And she made her littlest son lie down. She cleaned and wrapped, but she did not call a doctor. My great-grandfather did not call a doctor. It would get better. It would get better even after the fever took, even when, running up the arm, was a bright red line, an angry vein. The boy would mend, until he didn’t, so that my grandfather’s littlest brother died from nothing more than a cut to his hand. Lily would not recover. Her husband would not recover. My grandfather

would not recover. But, in a sense, they did. Because on the outside they did. Because it turned into a brain tumor. It turned into what was so clearly God's will and so clearly unstoppable, a malady that begs no other response than a *tfu-tfu-tfu*.

22. There were two brothers left. And then there was, a decade or so later, a world war. My grandfather, legally blind, could not be sent over. He was drafted, but worked an office job.

23. His office mate was a soldier with a glass eye. At night, this soldier would drink and drink, and then, when everyone was as drunk as he was, he'd pop out his regular glass eye and pop in one that, instead of an iris, contained one red swirl inside another—a bull's-eye. A little trick to get a laugh, to make the uninitiated think they'd had one too many, which they already had.

24. My grandfather's brother was killed in the war. His brother died fighting. That's how it was, until right now.

25. My favorite family story didn't come to me through blood. It's about Paul, my grandmother's father, and it came by way of Theo (who married Cousin Margot) and was, for the next thirty years, my grandfather's best friend. Inseparable. They were inseparable, those two.

26. "Your Great-Grandfather Paul, he had a bull's neck. Eighteen, nineteen inches around. He was a tough motherfucker."

Theo tells me this on the day we bury my grandfather. We're outside a restaurant near the graveyard; everyone else has already gone in. Theo and I stand in the parking lot. He stamps his feet against the cold. "One day, after work, me and your grandfather and Paul, we went to a bar for the train workers. We were sitting at the bar, the three of us, and the man right next to your great-grandfather, he turns to Paul and says, 'You know what the problem with this place is?' Your great-grandfather sizes him up. 'What's the problem?' he says. 'I'd like to know.' So the man tells him. 'Too many Jews,' he says. Your great-grandfather puts down his drink. He's still sitting, mind you. Still facing forward and seated on his barstool. Without even much of a look, he balls up a fist and he just pops the guy—crosswise—just clocks that guy right in the jaw. Sitting down! And then your great-grandfather picks up his drink like it's nothing, and he throws it back. One quick punch, and he knocked him out cold." Theo shakes his head in remembering. "That mutt just fell off his stool like a sack of corn."

27. And I can't even handle it, it's so good a story. "What'd you do?" I say. "What happened?" And Theo is laughing. "What do you think?" Theo says. "I said, 'Let's get the fuck out of here.' Then me and your grandfather, we grabbed Paul and got the hell out of that bar."

28. And what can I contribute to my own family history, what stories have I witnessed firsthand? I can tell you about breakfast. My grandfather cooked like nobody's business. And, above all, it was breakfast he did best. Burned coffee and burned eggs and bacon burned black. Bacon that we did not eat as a religious family—though our mouths watered at the smell. When

we stayed at my grandparents' (my parents, my brother, and me), we'd wake to a cloud of burned-bacon smoke filling the house. It would summon us, cartoonlike, lifting us from bed with a curling finger of smoke.

29. Right before the end of things, Bean and I walk to Greenpoint to buy chocolates at one of the Polish stores. We pass a Ukrainian grocery, which reminds Bean of her Ukie parts. She tells me of a great-uncle, a butcher, who slipped and fell into a vat of boiling hams. He was dead in an instant, leaving eight children behind. "Even your bad stories are good," I tell her. "A very bad story," she agrees. And I add, upon consideration, "That's possibly the least Jewish way to die." "Yes," she says. "Not the traditional recipe for Jews." And looking around at all the Polish stores, I agree. "Traditionally, yes, correct. Jews go in the oven. Pagans, burned at the stake. And Ukranian uncles . . ." "Boiled," she says. "Boiled alive."

30. Theo tells me this: When he was three, he was left alone in his family's little bungalow in Far Rockaway. "Still standing," he says. "They've torn down practically all of them, but that one still stands." In his parents' bedroom, under his father's pillow, he found a loaded gun. Theo took the gun. He aimed at the window, at the clock, and then took aim at the family dog, a sweet, dumb old beagle asleep next to the bed. He pulled the trigger; Theo shot that dog through his floppy ear. The bullet lodged in the floor. "You killed him?" I ask. "No, no, the dog was fine as fine can be—fine but for a perfect circle through that ear."

Sammy (the dog) just opened his sad, milky eyes, looked at Theo, and went back to sleep.

31. Cousin Jack stands with me while Theo tells that story. Jack doesn't believe it. "What about kickback?" he says. "You were all of three. Should have shot you across the room. You'd have a doorknob in your ass until this day."

"A .22," Theo says. "There doesn't have to be much kick. A .22 short wouldn't have to knock over a flea."

"Still," Jack says. "A little boy. Hard to believe it."

"I guess I handled it," Theo says, and looks off. And to me, there is nothing in that look but honesty. "I must have handled it," Theo says, "because I still remember the feel of that shot."

32. It is "the feel of that shot" that does it. It is "the feel of that shot" that undoes another sixty years for Jack. Because out of nowhere, he is talking again, Jack, who does not keep secrets—or keeps them for half a century, until suddenly the truth appears. "Terrible," Jack says. "It was a terrible phone call to get. I can still remember. I was the one who picked up the phone."

33. "What phone?" I say. "What call? What terrible?" I rush things out, desperate for any history to put things in place. I'm sure that I've already scared the story off with my eagerness, my panic. I'm sure it's about Abner, about the little boy dying.

"The call about your grandfather's brother."

"About Abner?" I say, because I can't keep my mouth shut, can't wait.

"No," he says. "About Bennie. The call from your grandfather to tell me Bennie had died."

34. Margot is now standing there, her arm hooked through Theo's, her face full of concern. "You got the call about Bennie being killed in the war?"

"Yes," Jack says. Then: "No."

"You didn't get it?" she says.

"I did. I got the call. But it wasn't the war."

"He was killed in the war," Margot says. "In Holland."

"He was buried in Holland," Jack says. "Not killed there. And he wasn't killed in the war. It was after."

"After."

"After the fighting. After the end of the war. His gun went off on guard duty."

"You always said," Margot says incredulously, "everyone always said: 'Killed in Holland during the war.'"

35. Jack puts a hand on my shoulder, hearing Margot but talking to me. "'Guard duty' is what your grandfather told me that day. 'An accident.' Then, a few months later, we're out in my garage—I remember this perfect. I'm holding a carburetor, and he takes it, and he's looking at it like it's a kidney or something, weighing it in his hand. 'It was a truck,' he says. 'Bennie asleep in the back, coming off guard duty. Something joggled, something fired, and Bennie shot through the head.'"

It's Theo who speaks: "That's one in a million, that kind of accident. Spent my life around guns."

"It is," Jack says. "One in a million. Maybe more."

36. What I'm thinking—and maybe it's the way my head works, maybe it's just the way my synapses fire—but in this Pat Tillman, quagmire-of-Iraq world, I'm thinking, I don't like the sound of it. And maybe I'm being truly paranoid. It is, as



I said, sixty years later. The idea that it already sounds funny, and already is the cut hand turned brain tumor, is not for me to think. And then Jack says, “I never did like the sound of it. That story never sat right.”

37. Margot says, “I don’t know why your grandfather never visited.”

“There was talk,” Jack says. “Right after. But then, like everything else in this family”—and no one has ever said such a thing before, no one ever acknowledged the not acknowledging—“it just got put away and then it was gone.”

38. I am in Holland on book tour. I am at the Ambassade Hotel in Amsterdam, eating copious amounts of Dutch cheese and making the rounds. There is one day off. One day free if I want to see *The Night Watch* or the red lights or to go walk the canals and get high. My publisher, he offers me all these things. “No thank you,” I say. “I’m going to Maastricht to visit a grave.”

39. When you tell the Americans you are coming, the caretaker goes out and does something special. He rubs sand into the marker of your dead. The markers are white marble, and the names, engraved, do not show—white on white, a striking field of nameless stones. But with the sand rubbed, the names and the dates, they stand out. So you walk the field of crosses, looking for Jewish stars. When you find your star and see the toasted-sand warmth of the name, you feel, in the strangest way, as if you’re being received as much as you’re there to pay tribute. It’s a very nice touch—a touch that will last until the first rain.



40. Do you want to know what I felt? Do you want to know if I cried? We don't share such things in my family—we don't tell this much even. Already I've gone too far. And put being a man on top of it; compound the standard secretiveness and shut-downness of my family with manhood. It makes for another kind of close-to-the-vest, another type of emotional distance, so that my Bosnian never knew what was really going on inside.

41. This happened at the bridge club, back in '84 or '85. My grandparents are playing against Cousin Theo and Joe Gorback. (Margot never plays cards.) Right when it's old Joe's turn to be the dummy, he keels over and dies. The whole club waits for the paramedics and the gurney, and then the players play on—all but for my grandparents' table, short one man.

They wait on the director. Wait for instruction.

And Theo looks at my grandparents, and looks at his partner's cards laid out, and over at the dead man's tuna sandwich, half-eaten. Theo reaches across for the untouched half. He picks it up and eats it. "Jesus, Theo" is what my grandfather says. And Theo says, "It's not like it's going to do Joe any good."

"Still, Theo. A dead man's sandwich."

"No one's forcing you," he says. "You're welcome to sit quiet, or you can help yourself to a fry."

42. My grandfather wasn't superstitious. But it's that half sandwich, he's convinced, that brings it on Theo—a curse. That's what he says when Theo parks his car at the top of the hill over by the Pie Plate and forgets to put his emergency brake on. He's heading on down to the restaurant when he looks back up and sees his car lurch and start rolling. And he still claims it's the

fastest he ever ran in his life. Theo gets run over by his own Volvo. He breaks his back, though you'd never tell to look at him today.

43. My couch is ninety-two inches; it's a deep green three-cushion. It seats hundreds. But that's not why I got it. I got it because, lying down the long way, in the spooning-in-front-of-a-movie way, in the head-to-toe lying with a pair of lamps burning and a pair of people reading, it fits me and it fits another—it fits her—really well.

44. She is gone. She is gone, and she will be surprised that I am alive to write this—because she, and everyone who knows me, didn't think I'd survive it. That I can't be alone for a minute. That I can't manage a second of silence. A second of peace. That to breathe, I need a second set of lungs by my side. And to have a feeling? An emotion? No one in my family will show one. Love, yes. Oh, we're Jews, after all. There's tons of loving and complimenting, tons of kissing and hugging. But I mean any of us, any of my blood, to sit and face reality, to sit alone on a couch without a partner and to think the truth and feel the truth, it cannot be done. I sure can't do it. And she knew I couldn't do it. And that's why it ended.

45. It ended because another person wants you to need to be with them, with her, specific—not because you're afraid to be alone.

46. My grandmother had one job in her life. She worked as a bookkeeper at a furniture store for a month before my grandfather proposed. The owner proposed first. She turned the owner down.

47. She had another job. I thought it was her job, and I put it here because I put this scene into every story I write. I lay it into every setting, attribute it to every character. It's a moment that I add to every life I draw, and then cut—for it contains no meaning beyond its meaning to me. It comes from my grandmother and her Mr. Lincoln roses, my grandmother collecting Japanese beetles in the yard. She'd pick the beetles off the leaves and put them in a mason jar to die. And I'd help her. And I'd get a penny for every beetle, because, she told me, she got a penny for every beetle from my grandfather. I believed, until I was an adult, that this was her job. A penny a beetle during rose-growing season.

48. About sacks of corn and the one time I felt like a man: My grandfather and I drive out to the farm stand. It's open, but no one's in it. There's a coffee tin filled with money, under a sign that says SELF-SERVE. Folks are supposed to weigh things themselves and leave money themselves and, when needed, make change. This is how the owner runs it when she's short-staffed. We've come out for corn, and the pickings are slim, and that's when the lady pulls up in her truck. She gets out, makes her greetings, and drops the gate on the back. And in the way industrious folks function, she's hauling out burlap sacks before a full minute has passed. My grandfather says to me, "Get up there. Give a hand."

49. I hop up into the bed of the truck and I toss those sacks of corn down. It's just the thing an able young man is supposed to do—and I'd never, ever have known. But I don't hesitate. I empty the whole thing with her, feeling quiet and strong.

50. They are sacks of Silver Queen and Butter & Sugar, the sweetest corn in the world. She tells us to take what we want, but my grandfather will have no such thing. We fill a paper sack to overflowing and pay our money. At my grandparents', I shuck corn on the back steps, the empty beetle jar tucked in the bushes beside me and music from the transistor coming through the screen of the porch. And—suburban boy, Jewish boy—I've never felt like I had greater purpose, never so much felt like an American man.

51. The woman I love, the Bosnian, she is not Jewish. All the years I am with her, to my family, it's as if she is not. My family so good at it now. My family so masterful. It's not only the past that can be altered and forgotten and lost to the world. It's real time now. It's streaming. The present can be undone, too.

52. And I still love her. *I love you, Bean. (And even now, I don't say it straight. Let me try one more time: I love you, Bean. I say it.)* And I place this in the middle of a short story in the midst of our modern YouTube, iTunes, plugged-in lives. I might as well tell her right here. No one's looking; no one's listening. There can't be any place better to hide in plain sight.

53. On Thanksgiving, this very one, I am hunting for a gravy boat in the attic. I find the gravy boat and my karate uniform (green belt, brown stripe) and a shoe box marked DRESSER. Lifting the lid, I understand: It's the remains of my grandfather's towering chest of drawers—a life compacted, sifted down. Inside, folded up, is a child's drawing. It's of a man on a chair, a hat, two arms, two legs—but one of those legs sticks straight out to the side, as if the man were trying to salute with it. The leg at a ridiculous and impossible angle. It's my mother's drawing. She hasn't seen it in years. She doesn't remember filling that box.

54. The drawing is of Great-Grandpa Paul. "Hit by a train," she says. And already—in a loving, not-at-all-angry, Jewish son's way, I'm absolutely furious. She knows I'm writing this story, knows I want to know everything, and here, Great-Grandpa Paul, a lifetime at the railroad and killed by a train. I can't believe it—cannot believe her.

"Oh, no, no," she says, "not killed, not at all. Eighteen when it happened. He survived it just fine. Only, the leg. He could never bend that leg again."

55. The first time Bean brings me home, we walk to the river in Williamsburg. We stand next to a decrepit old factory on an industrial block and stare at Manhattan hanging low across the water, a moon of a city at its fullest and brightest.

56. Bean takes out a key. Behind a metal door is a factory floor with no trace of the business that was. The cavernous space is now a warren of rooms, individual structures, like a shantytown

sprouting up inside a box. “I’ve got a lot of roommates,” she says. And then: “I only just finished building. The guys helped me put the ceiling on last night.” Toward the back, behind a mountain of bicycle parts, is a grouping of tiny rooms with a ladder (which we climb) leading to a sort of cube on top. She’s bracketed together scavenged frames of all shapes and sizes to make four window walls under a window ceiling through which one may stare at the rough beams above. It’s a miracle of a room, a puzzle complete. “I guess I’ll need curtains now,” she says as we sit on her bed. And I say, “You live in a house made of windows, but”—and I motion—“you can’t see outside.” She takes it well, and takes my hand.

57. I mention him to my grandfather just once. Visiting from college, drinking whiskeys, playing gin. I mention his dead brother Bennie—the army brother—who I’d just found out existed. I say something awkward about the only guy at school called up for the first Iraq war—the good one. I say something about younger brothers, being a younger brother myself.

58. My grandfather picks a card, arranges his hand—making sets. “For a while we owned a building. Two stories. We were landlords to a deli on the ground floor and a pair of tiny apartments upstairs. More than once,” he says, “I found a body. I’d head over to check on things before work, and I’d find them. One time in the stairwell, and another, a stiff in the alley, still wearing his hat. These weren’t crimes of passion, either. These were deals settled, people done in.” He lays his cards facedown on the table. I look at their backs. “Gin,” he says. And he goes out to the porch to smoke a cigar.

59. I use the Freedom of Information Act to get at it. We don't have such a law in my family, but the government, the government will tell you things about a missing brother. The government will sometimes share secrets if you ask.

60. Where is my Bean when I need her? Where is Bean when I'm having a feeling I can't face? It's not that I want to share it. It's the exact opposite—the old me in play. What I want is to turn pale for her, saying nothing. I want to go anxious and ask her—should anyone call—to come find me under the bed.

Where she is right then is out dancing on tables. That's what I see in my head. And that's our standard joke during the rare times we speak. Me saying, "I picture you out dancing on tables whenever I wonder what you're up to." "Oh, yeah," she says, "that's me. Out dancing every night."

61. The letter is real—in both realms real. There is an envelope from the government, a pack of papers, forms typed uneven, faded reproductions, large spaces for the clipped explanation. In it is a letter written in my grandfather's hand. It's a beautiful, intelligent, confident (but not cocky) script. It's a polite letter to the government, a crisp, clean letter. He is writing on behalf of his mother, about her son—his brother, killed in (after) the war. They'd filled out the forms, and they'd still not received—he was wondering when they might get—his dead brother's things.

His effects.

Bennie's worldly effects.

62. Here is me, fictionalized, sitting on the couch with a letter, written in my grandfather's hand. I am weeping. I don't

know if I've ever seen his handwriting before. I think to call my mother, to tell her what I'm holding. I think to call my brother, or maybe Cousin Jack. But really, more than anyone, I think to call that missing love—that missing lover. Because it's her I wish were with me; it's her I want to share it with right now. And more so, to find myself weeping from a real sadness—not anxious, not disappointed, not frustrated or confused—just weeping from the truth of it, and the heartbreak of it, and recognizing it as the purest emotion I've ever had. It's this I want to tell her, that I'm feeling a pure feeling, maybe my first true feeling, and for this—I admit it—I am proud.

63. I am sad for my grandfather, ten years passed, and his mother, dead forty, and his brother, sixty years gone from this world. I am on the couch alone, and I am weeping. It is the purity of the letter, the simplicity of it: Your last brother dead, and you're asking for his things.