

## Eat with Guys You Trust

THE BRONX, NEW YORK, 1968

“**W**ar is full of smoke.” Lanzi’s laugh is a single gruff exhale. Cigarette smoke gushes out his nostrils and up into the light over the table. His eyebrows are thick and black and move up and down one at a time, fast as pinball flippers. His left eyebrow is interrupted by a hanging ball of skin. I shiver with laughter and duck under the thick stream of smoke. “You call this smoke, Daddy, you don’t even know what smoke is.” My father calls me Daddy. He belongs to me. He lays the cigarette down on a plate. The smoke rises in one white rope that curls around the wagon wheel chandelier and spreads out across the tin ceiling patterned like ten thousand *pizzelle*. We sit together most nights, just me and him at the maple table. My brothers and sister are old enough to be out. Rosemarie works at Macy’s. CarKey and Ant’ny run the streets. My father says with boys, you don’t need to know where they are all the time. I wanna be a boy. I put my feet up on the table, eat with my hands, get my clothes filthy, lean back on the hind legs of the chair. When the women do the dishes, I sit with the men at the table. I feel like a boy most of the time, but I’m not as free as real boys. I feel most free when I’m alone with my father. He takes the time to teach me things. He draws a circle around the name of a racehorse and underlines the jockey’s name. He draws an arrow at the horse and writes “*sloppy at the start,*” with a pencil the size of his cigarette butt. He sharpens the tip with a steak knife, the wood and lead shavings mix with the ashes. I cough. He spansks the curls of smoke that hang between us. We study the names of horses and jockeys. He points to a column of numbers and shows me how many races each horse has run on sloppy track dirt. Other columns list how much money the thoroughbred won this year, how many wins the jockey has, what’s the horse’s lifetime purse. He tests me on the different answers. On my father’s knee I learn the words: *furlong, flank, platoon, kamikaze*.

“Cigarettes are staples,” he says, “the military issues cigarettes in K-Rations. Two Chesterfields, a slab of cheese, and a couple of crackers. That’s all the body needs. As long as you eat with guys you trust.”

This is the Bronx. You learn your lessons early.

I learn to count with a deck of cards. “Ace deuce tree fo’ fi’ six seven eight nine ten Jack Queen King.” He calls and I repeat. “The ace can come in high or low.” He pushes aside his horse-racing binders, takes out two decks of cards and begins to shuffle. I run to get my jar full of coins from under the bed and dollars from my sock drawer and dump it all on the maple table. Lanzi shuffles the cards one hand to the other then makes the fluttering bridge between his two hands. My hands aren’t big enough to do that. Lanzi’s hands are massive. He crushes a walnut between the knuckles of his fore and middle fingers. Knuckle skin, underneath his nails, and the lines of his palms are etched in black, from oil stains built up over the years; his destiny is indelible. He smacks the deck onto the table. Blue streams of smoke gush from his nostrils.

“Cut, Daddy,” he says.

I grab half and smack it down. He puts the stacks together.

“We’ll bury one,” he says, and takes the top card, shows its face, and puts it on the bottom. It’s the deuce of diamonds. Lanzi raises one eyebrow at the steepest angle an eyebrow can go. He licks his thumb and flicks cards down, one to me, one to him, one to me, one to him, seven times. I fan my cards out in my hand. They are too many to hold. I put the fan of cards down in front of me.

“So Daddy, you’re all Gung Ho ’bout kindy-garten, huh? Good. Good. Just remember, listen to me, keep your eye on the pavement and your mouth shut in the schoolyard. Be a listener not a talker. The guy who knows the most is always saying the least. Remember that. You, are your own business. Everyone else is an intruder.”

He looks into the smoke he blows. The veil rises over me. I crease my dollar bills and make them face the same direction. He picks a card and throws one down.

“Walk directly there, one foot in front of the other. If someone looks at you in the street, you say nuttin’, you keep walking. You must constantly be aware of who’s behind you. If someone smiles at you, they want something. Stay away. Stupid things don’t happen to those aware. Look both ways you understand before you cross even a one-way street. One-way street, one way, who says the one way? When you sit down in class, make sure you don’t sit near the windows. A bullet coming in through the bottom of the window will cause the greatest shrapnel effect. You wanna duck below the window. You wanna cover your head. You never know. You hit the floor. Keep ya’ mouth shut and if anybody aggravates ya’, get rid of ’em.”

Old dollar bills smell to me like fire. My father hands me his magnifying glass, and I pass it over the details on the bills the way he taught me, the

signature of the Secretary of Treasury, the shadow on the head of the number one, the eye over the pyramid, the code of numbers that start with a capital letter to trace where the bill was born. Philadelphia. Denver. I pick a card and fit it into my hand.

“Don’t pull your cards up so high. What if I’m in cahoots with a guy standing behind you? What if there’s a mirror there? Hah? Be aware of what’s behind you. Be aware of who’s behind you.”

Pennies I stack into towers of ten. “Wheat chaff” pennies, I put aside to save in my mechanical bank. I put the penny in the hunter’s rifle, pull the crank, and he shoots it into a tree stump. Stacks of pennies I put into towers, towers I put into rows, rows into platoons.

“Throw down,” my father says.

The King of Clubs looks like my father. He has a curl at the bottom of his hair and swings a club at anybody he wants.

“I knock,” he says, and lays his cards down. My father gets all the points in my hand. “Loser deals.”

Lanzi pushes all the cards in front of me. I try to shuffle them but they fall, some face up. That’s a no-no. I turn them all over and begin again. There’s one woman in a deck of cards and three men, the Jack, the King, and the Joker. The Jack of Hearts looks like my brother CarKey, blond with tender blue eyes. Ant’ny is the Joker. He laughs for no reason and I never know what to expect from him. Dollar bills disappear from my sock drawer. Quarters from my piggy bank. But he never means any harm and he tries to be entertaining. He makes blueberry pancakes, sings the melodies of songs by repeating “na na na” and “doop do doop do doop” instead of real words, and lets the batter drip freely over the stove. The Jokers we put on the side. They watch us play. Rosemarie and my mother Rachel both look like the Queen of Spades, blue eyes, a serious look. They hold scepters like long wooden spoons. The King of Hearts holds a knife behind his head, and I can’t imagine why.

I flick a standing quarter. It flies across the maple table. I practice flicking my finger in the air.

“Concentrate Daddy. Are we playing pinochle or spinning coins?”

“I am concentrating. Just show me once.”

I release my middle finger onto the edge of a standing quarter held up by the pulp of my left hand’s forefinger. The coin falls.

“Try again Daddy, you gotta learn to have the right touch.”

“My hands are small.”

“It doesn’t matter. You gotta flick the edge. You’re hitting too much of the coin.”

He gets five quarters spinning at one time. Ghosts of my father’s spinning coins whirl in the maple table’s shine. Mine fall flat or fly into the curtains.

“Curl the middle finger like this, see, into the pad of the thumb. Hold it tense, the whole top of the finger, so when the thumb lets go, the finger flies. And if you find quarters that are solid silver, they are older than you. Hold onto ’em.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Look at the side-wall ridges, Daddy. See the split band of copper and nickel? See if you can find one without that. Just silver. Those are the old ones.”

The maple table is our rink. My fingertips blacken from playing with money and smell like copper. Later I will go into the bathroom and dip my hands in my father’s can of grease solvent that’s up on the toilet. I will rub the gritty solvent into my hands. I will look in the bathroom mirror and I’ll say, “They don’t make a soap can take the grease off these here hands. This is the history of New York. Who do you think fixed all the oil burners in all these here buildings? Who do you think brought all the ice up all the stairs?”

We play until eleven p.m., then we put the money and cards away. My mother Rachel walks over with her lemon oil rag, tells me to sit the chair up straight on four legs, and gives the table a rubdown. The maple table stands under the light like a race horse in a stall. My father pushes down on the table to get up from his chair, and the table grunts.

My mother says something.

And he says, “Shut up, you.”

Rachel pushes the rag in circles with her bare strong arm, flips the rag, refolds it, and pushes circles to a slick shine. I kiss it and can see my lip prints in the shine. The table’s legs bulge into shapely calves. Four strong legs she strokes up and down.

I follow Lanzi to the living room where we watch the news. The First Marine Division is in Vietnam and that’s what he wants to hear about. My brothers are teenagers, and the draft is coming up. At midnight Lanzi and me make *sangwiches*, a piling of salami, provolone, ham, lettuce, tomato, mustard, on Italian bread. We watch *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. We fill cereal bowls with ice cream. We watch the *Twilight Zone*. The tension in my body matches the tension in the stories. One episode replays in my mind for years. A prop plane with red markings on its wings crash lands into a house, rips through the living room walls, and lands next to the couch. The woman in the house has a past connection with the pilot. He’s been lost since the war. She has waited. This is the episode that won’t leave my mind. The lost soldier crashes into the living room and brings his war right to the couch. I can see my father as a young Marine, my father circles overhead, my father can demolish the plasterboard that surrounds our rooms at any moment now. The walls can split anytime now. I face the television set. I run my fingers in the corrugated-patterned

terrain of our deep blue-green living room rug. I see ocean waves in our rug. I see the Pacific Ocean. I see my father on the islands of Okinawa and Guadalcanal in that sea blue. I see the First Marine Division cut the island of Okinawa in half. I see the Sixth Marine Division to the north. The army to the south. I say what my father would say:

“We landed on Blue Beach from the USS *Magoffin*. We called it My Coffin.”

The television is the only light on, and the taillights of my Hess oil truck. Gray plastic dinosaurs from ESSO Fuel Oil Company stand in the truck’s way. My truck drives over the sea, where the dinosaurs walk out of the water. I lay down in the water.

My father carries me to sleep, sits on a chair next to my bed, and tells me a story.

“Once upon a time there was a white horse, and on the white horse was a princess named Annie. Princess Annie rode the white horse up a mountain. On the way up the mountain they met a goat. The goat said, ‘Hey, where ya goin’?’ And Princess Annie said, ‘To the top of the mountain.’ And the goat said, ‘Can I come too?’ ‘Sure,’ Princess Annie said, and the white horse and goat went up the mountain. And on their way up the mountain they met a lion. And the lion said, ‘Hey, where ya goin’?’ And Princess Annie said, ‘To the top of the mountain.’ And the lion said, ‘Can I come too?’ ‘Sure,’ said Princess Annie, and the white horse and the goat and the lion went up the mountain. And on their way up the mountain they met a rabbit. And the rabbit said, ‘Hey, where ya’ goin’?’ And Princess Annie said, ‘To the top of the mountain.’ And the rabbit said, ‘Can I come too?’ ‘Sure,’ Princess Annie said, and the white horse and the goat and the lion and the rabbit went up the mountain. And on their way up the mountain they met a bird. And the birdie said, ‘Hey, where ya goin’?’”

My father drifts off into silence and stares into the dark. “We went up the left flank of the hill. There was an explosion out the roots of a tree. I thought I got him. But he got you. I said, ‘No Hewitt. No.’ There was nothin’ I could do. But I got him. I got the ear. I got the gold teeth. For you, I got him.”

I fly through the living room and narrow hall outside my brothers’ room. Soupy Sales flies behind me through the hall that leads to the kitchen. He chases me in between double doors that separate the kitchen from the rest of the house, a screen door and a glass door. Soupy Sales has a big smile. He wears a bow tie. His black-and-white houndstooth suit makes me dizzy. I shut him out with the doors. He flies right through them and chases me into the kitchen. I fly to the left, down the spiral stairs into the basement. The basement is pitch black. I am trapped. I fall into the black abyss, I fall. I clutch the mattress and it falls with me, and I fall back into bed.

## Breakfast Is to Coat the Stomach

**M**y mother starts me off with a hot bowl of farina—"It coats the stomach"—and burnt toast. She holds a shirt over my head for me to push my arms through, zippers my pants, ties my shoes. She even coats my insides. A square of butter shines steep roads winding up farina mountains to milk rivers and lakes. It all slithers through the tunnels of my throat, stomach, and guts. Mornings are peaceful. Lanzi and Rachel never fight in the morning. I love breakfast. I can eat breakfast morning, noon, and night. Farina, toast, waffles, pancakes, always feel good. Sunday mornings were our American rendition of the Italian *primacolazione* or before-breakfast breakfast. My father's sidekick Uncle Stanley came over with buns-n-rolls, which is what you ate if you were a Bronx Italian and it was Sunday: crumb cakes, jelly donuts, raisin buns, buttered rolls dunked in cups of coffee. Mom and I walked home the two blocks from Santa Maria Church, and Mom put on her indomitable pot of coffee. Lanzi and Stanley, who Dad called "The Big Pollack," sat at the maple table awash with newspapers, buns-n-rolls, horse racing sheets, and the voice of the television newscaster. Joey and Stanley always had a laugh. They were quite a pair. Once when my father had a flat tire, Uncle Stanley lifted the back of the station wagon and held it while my father changed the tire; the whole family sat in the car. Stanley had the girth of our maple tree. I hugged him from all angles but could never get my arms around even half of him. He laid cement and came up with other ideas for businesses, like the "homemade lunches for construction crews" idea, where Aunt Evelyn had to cook a pork roast and a specialty roast every day. The result was that we ended up having hundreds of Styrofoam to-go plates that he had bought in anticipation of the business's success. My mother aptly surmised his business plan, "The business would have taken off if he had had ten Aunt Evelyns." Evelyn was one of my mother's best friends from Jane Addams High School where they both had studied Beauty Culture. Evelyn and Stanley lived off Allerton Avenue and took us to the underground grotto at Saint Lucy's Church, where water poured in caves. Wet Madonnas stood straight up and blessed us. I held my hand in the flowing water, then touched my forehead, heart, left shoulder, right shoulder, and kissed the water. My Mom, Aunt Evelyn, and I had droplets of water on our foreheads. Back at their house, Aunt Evelyn reached deep into the washing machine where she kept a bottle of clear liquid she took swigs from. She saw me watching her and gave me a big smile, her dimples sucked deep into her cheeks. Her pork roast, mash' potatoes, and string beans were the best I ever had. When me, Lanzi, and Rachel went over there, we hung out for many hours, and these were the most peaceful and happiest nights of my childhood.

## The X

**M**y mother boils water on the stove. Water is always boiling. My father pulls a chair out to sit down and the chair falls apart in his hand. The captain's bar breaks off. *Ay!* he yells, and she turns on the kitchen faucet. The water runs on with his yelling. He curses the chair and hammers it together with his fist. He leans on the table to sit, and the table creaks. I have work to do. I am five years old. One day I will be allowed to play in the street and I better be ready for stickball. I have ball skills to practice. I kick the back door open. Penny slinks by me and runs out into the backyard. Penny is our Belgian Shepherd. Her fur is all black with a white messy diamond under her neck. Everywhere I run, she is underfoot. There are spots of blood on the kitchen linoleum.

My mother says, "The dog is in heat," and she wipes the floor with a rag and squeezes it out in the sink.

I don't know what my mother means, but I put a rag of cool water on Penny's forehead and kiss her nose.

I run out the back door, down the steps, up the alleyway to the back of the house where the alleys open up into backyards—back to back, two by two, up and down the whole block in a row, separated only by a wire fence gut-high that the neighbors talk across at the corners where four backyards touch beneath the fencing; where you can see that they really all are one, although each has been painted a different color that provides distinction all along the edges. The trees hang fruit over the property lines and in September drop them. In one corner Penny and Gigi, the tiny gray poodle, and Lucky Two Balls the Chihuahua, nose each other where their tails join their bodies; and in the other corner Penny and Cocoa, the giant poodle do. I jump from one big flat stone to the other. My father painted each stone a different color: orange, light blue, pink, red, brown, white, purple. Each stone is a different island I land on.

I break off a corner of plasterboard from scraps leaning against my father's garage and kick open the gate into our outer yard; a vast expanse of cement, on which he painted the lines for a regulation half-court basketball game. Our half-court rule is when the opponent rebounds a ball, he has to take it out past the foul line, before shooting. One day I will have my own full-court. I am the only kid on the block with a real basketball court. I practice shooting night and day. When I feel like it, I invite the boys over to play.

I chalk over the faint X on the side of the house with the hunk of plasterboard. The concrete walls of the house are high enough to throw against, and above the walls the asbestos siding is a color dead in the middle between pink and tan.

I throw the ball against the wall. I throw. I throw alone. I throw my pinky ball against the side of the house as if the force and accuracy of my throwing arm can change the world. The ball hits a leg of the X, spins off the wall, takes an odd hop. My parents shout. The house shakes with their yells. The rectangles of window glass shake, the windows my mother and I squeaked to a shine with white vinegar on sheets of my father's *Daily News* crumpled in our fists. My father's boots pound the underlying structure of the floorboards while my mother's slippers whisper across the linoleum. Her pots and pans bang and clap as his fist hammers together the struts, legs, and dowels of the maple chairs. My Spaldeen slaps the outside wall of the house to the rhythm of his yells and the crash of her pans.

"*Bafangool!*"

"Joe, don't come near me, Joe. I'm warning you."

"*Bafangool!* Cow! Snake!"

"Joe, please. I'll call the cops. Don't . . ."

"Say it again, Ray, say it again, Ray, say it. Gahead call the cops. Whaddo I care? What are they gonna do?"

I throw the ball. I throw the ball against the wall. I throw. I throw alone. I throw the ball at his head. I throw the ball in the soup. Through the window I throw. Into tomorrow. This ball bounces high so I can't see its top. The ball has an invisible top. I throw the ball and he catches it. I throw the ball and she stops to mark the place. I throw the ball and the rain comes down. All the doors open at once. I throw.

It's not their yelling that scares me, it's their lapse into silence. Silence means my father has run out of words. In silence is violence. I clutch my Spaldeen and run into the house. Penny follows me like a long black shadow. I open the door and it slams behind me. My father sits at the table looking up into the light. He swings the wagon wheel chandelier across the table and it catches my mother in the back of the head. She cries out. He laughs. The kitchen faucet runs. My mother slides down almost to the floor, she grabs onto the maple table and gets up. Her face is squeezed red tight. My father whistles the "Marines' Hymn," *From the Halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli . . .*

I pull my feet up from where they are stuck to the floor.

"Mom, you okay?"

I run to my brothers' room. I slam into the louver doors and they swing inward. There is a teaspoon hidden behind the heat pipe. I grab it. I bang on the pipe. Spoon to pipe spoon to pipe spoon to pipe *ppkink ppink pppink ppink!* Pulse alarm up the pipe's tall copper hollow. Alarm fast as pain to brain. *ppkink ppkink!* "Come down quick, Jesus Christ, he's gonna fuckin' kill her!" *ppkink! ppkink!* "Call the cops! Quick, quick. Hurry. *ppkink ppkink ppkink* I hack until I get a rapid tap back.

Two cops stand in our kitchen. One folds his arms over his chest.

My father sits in his chair like a bear. "Officer, I'm a hard-working man. I served my country."

My mother is red and holds her head. "Can't you do something? He cannot lay a hand on me!"

"She's going through her changes, Officer. You see? She's hysterical. She's imagining things. You want coffee?"

"Ma'am, have you been to the doctor lately?"

"The doctor? There's nothing wrong with me. Bring him down to the station house. I need protection."

"Ma'am, we didn't see anything."

## Stoop

**F**rom the top of my stoop I watch the boys in all their freedoms, zooming up and down the street, running in and out of passing cars, peeling their T-shirts up over their heads and tucking them in the backs of their pants, whipping the air with their mothers' broomsticks, whacking Spaldeens far over rooftops, launching Spaldeens up into the sun.

I sit on the top step and smell my Spaldeen and dream of the day I'll be allowed to play in the middle of the street where the big boys play stickball. I hold my treasured Spaldeen. My Spaldeen is alive. It's made of electrons. My Spaldeen wants to roam, to hop down the stoop and take off under a car chassis, into the current of the street where a car can bump a Spaldeen for blocks. I am four, and confined to games that take me up and down the stoop. I must toss things that have no bounce: popsicle stick, bobby pin, small flat stone. Stoop, sidewalk, street; this is the order of progression of my entrance into the world.

Our stoop has eleven steps. Our last name, eleven letters. Our zip code is 10461. Numbers are the things I am sure of. It is war. One has to know exactly where one is in the world. I toss the bobby pin down a step. I learn to spell my name by going up and down the stoop, one letter per step, L A N Z I L L O T T O. If I miss a letter, I go back up and start again. Each step glitters, a cement mix of crushed glass crystals, white and gray pebbles, crushed stone bits with mica veins that course with the chrome sun.

Our stoop is just behind the home-plate sewer cap, optimal for a tomboy such as me, a bleacher seat for the block's stickball game. Sewer caps are home plate and second. Chrome car-door handles are first and

third. Spaldeens hit through windows past second base, are automatic doubles. Automatic homeruns are hit over the rooftops three sewer caps away, where Saint Raymonds butt-joints Zerega. In front of the stoop we have big even squares of cement, optimal for boxball with two or four players, and boxball baseball, which is played three squares in a row. To the left of my stoop is the johnny pump, so no cars will ever block my stoopball game for long, and my father's the one in the summers to open the hydrant water for all the kids to cool down. He walks down the driveway from his garage, pipe wrench in hand, and gives the wrench three two-handed pulls. The hydrant cap opens, falls, hangs by its chain, and out comes the glorious white force arching into the middle of the street. My father laughs loud as all the kids jump up and down and dance with the water. Cars slow down, roll up their windows as the rush of water crashes against their windshields, onto their hot hoods, and smacks their driver's side. Cars were our transport animals, they needed to cool off, too. The cold force of water was good for all our systems. We stitched in and out with fast little steps, barefoot on the asphalt, in and out of the forceful arch of water. We got bashed by water. We got bashed by each other. We got bashed by life. We stood as close as we could to the source of the water and still stay up on our feet. We ducked in and out, backed up into it. Cold water bashed our bodies back into the middle of the street. Anyone can learn how to swim, but not everyone can stand the sheer ice punch of all that water.

From my stoop, I watched every move Blaze made. Blaze is the most coordinated kid on the block. He rides up the street, lets go of his handlebars, stands up on the crossbar of the bike, and surfs it. I am amazed. I rehearse his moves in my body, the way he tosses himself the Spaldeen, double pumps his bat and steps into it, how he focuses his brown eyes on the pinky ball, the expression on his face before and after slamming a Spaldeen, and the way he pulls Yo-Yo up against him. Yo-Yo is the most voluptuous girl on the block. Blaze holds her with his right hand clamped over his left wrist, locking her into place against him, as he leans back against a parked car. Their mouths lock for hours, and he leans all the way back onto the hood of a car. When he releases her, their body prints are left behind in sweat on the car hood.

When there's nothing to do and no one around and Lanzi's not home to strip copper wire with, I gather long thick twigs from underneath our maple tree. The boys on the block talk about one Puerto Rican kid who dares bicycle up Saint Raymonds Avenue. Nobody knows what block he is from. Our block is our world. Defending the block is part of our job. Gangs of kids from other blocks are enemy tribes. When a gang of kids from another block raid our block, the boys on our block stand together like a wall. Nasty words and rocks and punches are thrown back and forth. One day I'm on my stoop

and I hear the whizzing of gears. It's that Puerto Rican kid who dares ride down our block. I launch a twig at the spokes of his wheel, it gets caught in the spokes, locks the wheel, and flips him over the handlebars. I run up the stoop and into the house as if the maple tree had done this all on its own.

## The Return of the Rust

**R**achel comes out on the stoop to check on me. She eyes something off to the side. She wrings her hands on a striped dishtowel. I look down at the stoop. Nothing is unusual or out of place. Rachel is a hawk, eyes something that needs to be cleaned. She walks back into the house and leaves the front door open, she'll be right back. I close my eyes and watch the sun's psychedelic starbursts behind my eyelids. She comes back with a cup, dark-green lens sunglasses, and yellow rubber gloves. She steps down the stoop and waves me away with her rag. She sits on a step and pours a clear liquid carefully over a spot of rust that bleeds out onto the step from where the iron pole of the banister drills in.

"Acid. Don't go near, or it'll blind you."

We wait while the acid sits.

I stroke the scars that wind around my mother's knees. Scars the years make wide enough almost to talk. With my finger, I trace each scar. Scar flesh is the softest and shiniest skin.

"Mommy, tell me again, what happened?"

"What happened? Oh, that was a long time ago." She takes off her gloves, lifts the scapular around her neck, kisses it, and hesitates with the story. But I want to hear it, again and again. It's the story of the miracle of our family's existence. And no one ever says more than one or two sentences about it. I want to know more.

"There were no childproof window guards in those days." Her blue eyes swell and fill as if to spill over when she doesn't finish her story.

"How old were you?"

"A baby. All I know is the neighbor thought somebody threw a doll out the window."

I squeezed my eyes to picture her as a baby, tumbling down into the alley. The alleyway between our house and the next-door neighbors was just wide enough for metal garbage pails, and boys who could scale the houses, one leg and arm on our house, one leg and arm on the neighbor's house.

"Where was GranmaRose?"

"I don't remember. She must have been there."

“Where was Aunt Patty?”

“Annie please. All I know is, it was July sixteenth, the feast day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.”

*La Madonna del Carmine. La Madonna di Monte Carmelo.* I’d heard about the saint all my life. My mother’s older sister, my Aunt Patty, was the only witness to my mother falling, but she would never tell me anything about it. My mother was two. Aunt Patty was four.

She takes her wire brush and scrubs meticulously around the post on the stoop.

“No matter how much I scrub, rust always returns, but this way it’ll be clean the rest of the summer.”

I bounced my Spaldeen on the top landing of the stoop. The Spaldeen went off on its own, down the stoop and into the street. I waited for it to settle underneath a car, and for one of the big boys to get it for me. The boys ran in the street around an oncoming car. Retrieving each other’s Spaldeens was part of the play on the block.

I wasn’t allowed off the stoop. I watched for the rust to grow back. Rust always returns.

## A Good Eater

CarKey walked up the stoop and in through the front door. Something special was happening. My brothers usually shot in the back door and let it hammer close behind them. *Boom. Boom. Boom.* CarKey had shoes on, and a girl with shiny lips and a sweet smile walked in behind him as they came through the living room, down the hallway, past the bathroom, and into the kitchen, which was situated in the back of the house. This girl was important. Otherwise he wouldn’t have brought her all the way into the kitchen. They would have leaned up against cars the way the guys on the block did with girls, laying their shadows down into the shine. Enza had a swell of hips, black bangs and hair up on her head and down in swoops along her neck. She smelled sweet, her eyes were bright and alert, and she held a pocketbook by her side. I crawled under the table with Penny. Sitting under the maple table was my favorite spot in the house. Cigarette smoke didn’t come down there as much, and I could tell what people were really feeling by the way their feet moved under the table. Both my brothers’ legs always shaked, nervous around my father. Enza smiled, said hello with her lips and her eyes, and hung her pocketbook by its strap off the corner of a maple chair. Penny offered her

black wet nose and Enza's hand came down over the nose. Her shoes crossed and uncrossed and tapped the linoleum. My mother walked around and around the table and the floor whined under her steps. I pinched Enza's toes in her strap shoes and laughed as her feet tapped, lifted, and fell. Enza's toes had bright slick nails, and her feet kept tapping the floor, and her ankles crossed and uncrossed. Her shoes were the fanciest things I'd ever seen on our kitchen floor. My father had on white socks and brown leather strapped slippers; Enza wore high heels with a gold buckle and delicate black cross straps. The maple table jittered. My mother walked back and forth from the table to the stove in her penny loafers, clashing plates and cups and the aluminum coffeepot. She'd let me place the pennies in her shoes. I'd chosen pennies from the year I was born. My father slapped the table as he talked. I wondered if Enza knew it was important in our family to be a good eater and that afterward the adults would size up whether she was a good eater or not. I pinched her toes and her feet jumped and her hand waved playfully under the table. I knew my father was trying to see her teeth. He'd taught me:

"You can tell a good woman like a horse, by her teeth."

Enza's shoes tapped the kitchen floor like they were telling secret codes into the linoleum. Penny's nose pushed Enza's hand, and the hand came over Penny's head gently and around to her chin. Enza reached under the table and handed me two presents. I opened them under the table; an alligator soap dish named "Gaylord Gator," and a rubber clock filled with bubble bath. My mother had forbidden me to use bubble bath, saying, "It could burn you down there." Gaylord Gator stayed with me my whole life, as did Enza's sweet smile and warm hand reaching under the table. My father and brother were different when she was around. Even when they began to yell in her presence, their yelling was a bit held back, as if they had something to lose.

## The Tin Ceiling

**M**y mother doesn't just clean, she purifies. White vinegar and capfuls of bleach accompany her, and acid, when necessary. She performs an endless cycle of housecleaning. She is the kind of homemaker where no one can take a shower because curtains are being soaked in the tub, nobody can throw out a piece of trash because the garbage pail is soaking with white vinegar, you can't brush your teeth because underwear are soaking in the sink, nobody can put anything in the oven because when you open the oven door socks are drying inside, you can't take a nap because the pillowcases are

off the pillows drying on the radiator and the blankets are airing out on the line. "Don't wash the pan. Let it soak. The sink is clean."

A speck of black on her kitchen ceiling bothers her. She paints the tin ceiling with Q-tips. One day she was up on the ladder for hours. I begged her to take a break. I wanted her to come down. The enormity of the task made me sad. First, she did the ceiling with a roller, but the golf-ball patterned recesses in the tin stayed black in places. So she went up with Q-tips, dipped one into the can of paint, and lifted it up into the holes. After a few hours, I whined for her to come down and be with me on the ground, but she wouldn't take a step down. I climbed up the weak side of the ladder to help. She let me fill in a few holes. I stepped up on the top step to reach the ceiling with the Q-tip. The batter of thick glossy white paint made me dizzy. I loved being high up, able to look down on the life of the kitchen. My mother made the ceiling pristine. I made her a ham sandwich with leaves of lettuce and tomato on rye bread. I painted the yellow mustard on the pink meat and brought it halfway up the ladder.

"Please, at least eat something."

"Thank you Tootsie-pie." She wiped her forehead with her sleeve and ate the sandwich up on the ladder. "How nice being served for a change. I feel like I'm out at a restaurant."

As long as she is up on top of the ladder, Lanzi can't expect her to answer the telephone for his oil burner business that is run out of her kitchen, or perk pot after pot of coffee. She can make everything perfect at least across her ceiling, a ceiling as shiny as a porcelain plate, so clean we could eat off it, if only we could all defy gravity.

## Sidewalk

**R**achel allowed me to play on the sidewalk. I played catch with the men on the block as they returned home from work. Santo next door played a gentle but challenging catch with me under the shade of the maple tree. He never threw the ball too high or over my head. Santo was the son of Sadie and Jimmy Petta. Sadie was the Mae West on the block. She had a hoarse voice, teased red hair, long nails, and ran the card parties. Sadie babysat me and Jimmy sang up to me at my mother's clothesline window, "*When I'm calling you oo oo oo, will you answer true oo oo oo.*" My mother said Santo had "a heart of gold." I pictured this. Most people had red hearts, but a few had glowing gold hearts. My parents talked about Santo at the table. This was the

first time I heard the word *cancer*. Then I didn't see Santo around anymore and we never played catch again. Heart of gold and cancer.

Junkies were more gentle than marines. My brothers were very different from one another, and so were their friends. The one thing they had in common is that a lot of them died as teenagers. My brothers shared a room. Ant'ny had a mirror on his dresser covered in matchbooks from different clubs, and a poster of Jimmy Hendrix. I looked through his record collection: Jimmy Hendrix, Ten Years After, Joe Cocker. Once in a while, he'd wake up on Saturdays and make blueberry pancakes, my favorite, and sometimes at night he told me stories about a family of Saint Bernards he made up, called the Schultzes. He wore rings made out of bent silver spoons, and navy platform shoes with marshmallow heels. His windowpane dungarees were taller than I was. Ant'ny and his friends laughed all the time. Ant'ny came into the kitchen a couple of afternoons and said that another of his friends had OD'ed. He was sad and slumped on his bed. I didn't know what OD'ed meant, just that his funny teenage friends stopped coming around the house to call for Ant'ny. He looked at the floor a lot and kept asking me for money, swearing me to silence. I was five and good at making money. I beat my father in poker and did chores for quarters around the house.

"Gimme fi' dollars. Don't tell nobody. Ya got fi' dolla's? Don't tell Mommy or Daddy. Keep ya' mout' shut."

I walk up and down the sidewalk with my Spaldeen and keep an eye on the block. Saint Raymonds Avenue between Zerega and Westchester Square Hospital is a small street of two-family houses separated by thin alleyways. Alleyways are full of argument. Backyards are crisscrossed with laundry. Our block is Italian and Irish families, twenty kids are out at night to play Manhunt in two teams of ten. I become expert at counting off perfect seconds. "Ten Mis-sip-pi, nine Mis-sip-pi, eight Mis-sip-pi, seven Mis-sip-pi." Five Italian sisters live on our block in houses to either side of us. Greengrass is the neighborhood boy to be feared and Bow is the dog on the block to be feared, and Bow and Greengrass fear one another. Greengrass with his red hair, skinny wiry body, and his terrible motor and Bow with his ears swiveling just ahead of the roar. Bow is the shepherd dog outside the white house down the corner on Saint Raymonds at Zerega. They keep Bow on a chain they call a choker. Whenever anyone walks by, Bow shoots out as if the lengths of chain will never end but chains do, and Bow gets yanked back up into a twisted leap and chokes. That's why they call that chain a choker. I count on that chain for my life I count the years I count the links I count the rust, one day that chain is gonna break and Bow will fly right out over that little white wall two cinderblock high and land dead in

the middle of our street just as Greengrass in his white hot rod is burning rubber round the corner onto St. Raymonds from Zerega the way he does without looking.

The night of the blackout, everyone was out on their stoops at once. My father filled the maple table with thick wax candles, tin foil, and Mason jars filled with water. He lit a candle with his match, and taught me how to drip hot wax into the bottom of jelly jars and stand the candles upright in the hot wax. Then we put the jelly jars inside Mason jars of water. We added pennies to the bottom of the jelly jars until they sunk. The light magnified into a round glow of a lantern. Lanzi wrapped one side of each Mason jar with a piece of tin foil. The light reflected bright. We carried these outside and sat on our stoop. We had the brightest lights on the block. The Italian sisters all came to see my father's ingenious magnified light.

## Licking Batteries

**A**t the maple table, my father taught me to see. He never took out a coloring book, or read any story to me from a book, he made them up, and took out blank paper. He turned it sideways and filled a page with interlocking circles. He didn't lift his blue BIC pen from the paper until the page was covered in circles over circles. Then he hands me the pen.

He asks, "What do you see, Daddy?"

I say, "Circles."

"In the circles. Look between them, in them, around them. You gotta see what's not there. Here I'll show you." He takes the pen and outlines curves. He thickens parts of the walls of circles until a set of eyes appears, and above them, a crown. "You see the Queen's face?" Round eyes he fills in with blue ink. The eyes looked sideways.

"Now what can you see?"

I take the pen and draw a mouth. Faces and crowns and castles, whole kingdoms appear out of connecting the curves of circles. Once we're done we start all over again with a new blank page.

Lanzi is color blind. I run to get the Life book that has a full page of colored circles. I open the page and say, "Daddy, what do you see?" but he never sees the number fifty-seven, which is so clear to me. I wonder how this can be, how my father can see something so different. I follow him around the basement and garage and he puts me to work. He gives me a thick black

round magnet that he got from the insides of a speaker he took apart, and tells me to pick up screws and nails from the basement floor and add them to his bucket. Then he tells me one of life's great lessons that I would apply to a thousand situations throughout my life; my first lesson in metallurgy and all things precious.

"If it doesn't stick, keep it."

He pulled a handful of coins out of his pocket and passed the magnet over them. Nothing. "See?" Then he lifts it to my gold holy medals. Nothing. "See?"

Lanzi gave me a bucket full of batteries and said, "Daddy, test them there batteries." He told me to figure out which batteries had a charge and which were dead and to separate them. I knew batteries held a secret power, and that this power runs out. The batteries were all different sizes. I looked around for a radio or something to get started. I looked for this gadget I'd seen him use, which had a red wire and a black wire to test electrical circuits.

"Get back here. I tole you test the batteries."

"I am. I'm looking for the whaddyacallit."

"Sit down, over here, I'll show you. You don't need anything. You just gotta lick 'em."

He sat me on an overturned bucket. I picked one up and licked it with a wide flat tongue like an ice-cream cone.

"No," he said, "you gotta focus the tip of your tongue on the cathode to taste if there's a charge there." He demonstrated how to point the tip of the tongue and only touch the tip of the nipple on top of the battery. "You taste it? Hah? The energy is salty and will sting." I could feel the sharp pinch of volts on the tip of my tongue, and soon I became expert at licking batteries. Dead batteries just tasted metallic, cold. Live ones connected to me, I could feel the voltage from the tip of my tongue to way down inside.

## Teaspoons and Heatpipes

**I**t was me who hid teaspoons behind the heatpipes. I was too young to reach the telephone, otherwise I would have called the cops myself. I lifted my mother's solid silver teaspoons and hid one behind each heatpipe, in the shadow where no one would find them, not even my mother when she vacuumed. I placed the head of the spoon almost touching the pipe, its tail in line with the shadow, so when I grabbed it, the scoop was my handle,

the tail swift to swing into action, out of the sheath of the pipe's shadow. I tapped the pipe for help from whoever upstairs heard me.

Heatpipes are an urban form of communication. On heatpipes neighbors tap invitations up and down, from apartment to apartment—simple social messages, like Hey coffee's on, come up when you're ready; or, I'm going shopping in five minutes, you need somethin', meet me in the hallway; or, He just left, come on up, now—We got a half an hour. My code was much more urgent, an SOS: Come down quick, Jesus Christ, he's gonna fuckin' kill her. *ppkink ppkink!* Call the cops. Wake up. Call the cops. Wake up quick! *ppkink ppkink ppkink!* I can't stop him."

First my godparents lived upstairs, Aunt Archangela and Uncle Orazio and their four kids. When they moved, my father rented the apartment to strangers, an Irish cop and his family. One day the cop's daughter played with me on the stoop. We tossed a bobby pin up and down the steps, asking each other questions to advance. We called this game "Teacher." The cop's wife called the girl's name. She went running when she heard her mother call her name, and I blocked her at the front door. I wouldn't let her pass. This new game was, you want to pass, and I block you. Finally, I let her go and she ran up the stairs. I walked down the stoop. The boys were in the middle of the street playing stickball. My forefinger slid down the white wrought iron railing, which ended in a three-layer curl. The cop's wife came down pulling her daughter by the arm. She stood at the top of the stoop with a wild look in her eye and yelled down to me, "She says she didn't come when I called because you were blocking the doorway. I said, I'm gonna ask Annie, she always tells the truth. Were you blocking the door? Were you?" The front wooden doorway framed their two bodies. The cop's wife was right, I was in the strict practice of telling the truth. Less to go to confession for, plus we had a cherry tree in our backyard that I equated with "George Washington never told a lie." Every July my Dad covered the tree with netting so the birds wouldn't get every single cherry. I ate those cherries like they gave me the strength to tell the truth. The arm of the cop's wife was cocked up high and ready to strike. She had a long white cigarette out the side of her mouth that shook as she talked.

"Were you blocking the doorway?"

She trusted my word over her daughter's. I felt pure fear, I knew I'd catch a beatin'. I shook my head "No." She beamed at my verdict, showed her teeth, said, "Thank you." The hand swung down and slammed her daughter's rear end so hard the girl swung up and out over the stoop. She smacked her again and the girl shouted a wild cry. I watched the whole beating, the kid's pale Irish face turned horribly pink and her mouth opened in a full-lung wet cry. It was my fault she caught a beating. All my fault.

## Kitchen Bird

A bird flew into our kitchen through the window my Mom left open at her clothesline. I watched the birdie's wings flutter as it rose over the table, through the wagon wheel chandelier, into the orange curtains with green and white daisies, then over towards the sink. The birdie landed on the silver arm of the faucet, then flew up and hit the glass of the closed window. The bird knocked into the glass three times. It flew back and forth, gained speed, and aimed for the closed window. My father rolled up a newspaper like a bat and swung at the bird. Rosemarie yelled, "Don't kill it," and ran out of the room.

"Birds carry disease," Rachel said. "Just get it out of my kitchen, Joe."

I stood against the cold tile wall. Lanzi swung the newspaper and hit the cabinet. The bird jumped to the wall. I yelled, "This way, come here bird, come here." The birdie flew high, near the tin ceiling, and made a series of quick darts in different directions away from my father. The birdie smacked into the glass over the kitchen sink. I ran to the other side of the kitchen. "C'mere birdie. Come over here." I hoped the birdie would follow me to the clothesline window. Lanzi swung and cursed the bird.

"Son of a bitch."

He rolled his newspaper bat tighter and closed the clothesline window. The birdie hopped across the countertop. I jumped and swung my arms. "Bird, this way." With two quick swings Lanzi knocked the bird into the cupboard and the bird fell onto the countertop. The bird reached up onto the wall. Lanzi charged the bird, and brought the newspaper hard against the wall and pressed. He grunted, dropped the newspaper on the counter and walked away. A stream of red and black and blue hot guts splattered down the wall.

"Hey you, Coffee."

## Kindergarten, Boot Camp: 1968

CarKey's number came up for the draft. I started kindergarten the same time CarKey left for boot camp. Enza became what my father called "a permanent fixture" on our couch.

I was five, vigilant, well trained. The big boys on the block chose me to be the Lookout. I sat on the hood of a parked car at the corner of Saint Raymonds and Rowland, and aimed my sight over the line of parked car roofs in three directions to skim the car tops for cherries. The boy next

door taught me how to do this. I could pick a cop car out easily that way. “Cop cars can come from any direction,” he trained me, “they don’t have to obey the one-way signs.” Cop cars were like Queens in a chess game. The boys raced go-carts and minibikes in the intersection. The boys were always lighting something that exploded.

To prepare me for kindergarten, my mother sat me down on the piano stool and put a plastic cape around me. “These are special scissors,” she said, “very sharp, from when I was in the beauty parlor. You have to hold your head still and sit up straight, or God forbid . . .” She left her sentence hanging and walked around me. The scissor made sharp slices next to my ears. I wondered if she knew about my father’s friend in the war who had a jar of ears.

“Put your head down forward. I’m giving you what they call a Buster Brown.” She combed the hair on top of my head to the front, pulled strands up between her fore and middle fingers, and snipped straight across.

“Mom, how’d you first meet my father?”

“Stay still.”

“Okay, so . . .”

“I saw him washing the windows of his father’s business. That’s where I changed trolleys to go to school. One of my girlfriends said, ‘Look at him, he’s so handsome.’ We were impressed by his muscles as he cleaned the windows. Now put your head straight, and close your eyes.”

“Where was the trolley transfer?”

She carefully snipped bangs, protecting my eyes from the scissor with her hand. I wiggled on the stool. “On 161st Street, where I changed trolleys.”

“Where were you goin’? Why was he right there? What’s a trolley anyway?”

“*Madonn’!* Let’s see, I was going from where we lived, over at 165th and Teller, to Jane Addams High School on Tinton and Union. That was a vocational high school. We dressed like nurses, in starched white uniforms and got inspected every morning—hair, nails, everything. If you had dirty fingernails you got sent home. That’s how serious they were. Now tilt your head to the side. You have a natural wave to your hair. The cut has to go with the wave.”

She stepped away, pulled the hair near my two ears to make sure it was even. She should have put a level on my head; that’s what my father would have done. I loved to watch the green bubble in my father’s level. Haircuts never felt even on my head. My mother pulled my hair to curl under, but the hair stuck outward like a wing off the side of my head.

As soon as I turned five, my mother signed me up for my own library card, and I memorized the route to Westchester Square Public Library. Up