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The Tiki King

It's Sunday again, errand day, which means dad puts his cell phone in his sweatpants pocket, and off we go to the hot-tub supply store or Radio Shack. We get stuck behind a slow '80s Monte Carlo on Olive Avenue. That's when dad says he's figured it out: "Burbank is full of old men with no place to go."

Last week dad said Burbank was Hollywood's ugly stepsister, a plain-Jane town with pancake-flat streets, not many curves, and hills in all the wrong places. When I replied, "Yeah . . . so?" Dad said, "Yeah . . . so?" except his voice was nasal and whiney and supposed to sound like mine, but it didn't.

We drive by the Safari Inn, a '50s era motor lodge with a huge neon sign of a yellow tribal shield and spear. Palm trees and stucco buildings line the rest of the block. The Safari Inn stands out like some crazy abandoned movie set, like it belongs in a bad Elvis flick.

When dad starts talking again, I daydream about entering the sixth grade at Valley Alternative, a magnet school near my mom's office in Van Nuys. It's June, so I've got nothing to do all day but watch satellite TV, play Final Fantasy, and run errands with my parents. Mostly I think about girls. Sometimes I daydream about what it feels like to be in love. To kiss a girl. To look intensely into another person's eyes and somehow care about them. Except I don't know a single girl worth caring about.

"You know," dad says. And I can already hear what's next: Dad's figured something else out. "Burbank isn't even Apple Pie America anymore. It used to be Apple Pie, if you know what that means."

I know what it means but can't bring myself to respond. All I want to say is "I know all about Apple Pie America, dad. I know it's Joe DiMaggio and Superman comics and backyard barbecues and the American flag on the moon. In other words, it's a lot of stuff I don't really care about."

We're stopped at a red light and our turn signal blinks eight times before dad says, "Burbank is more like chess pie. Your grandma used to make chess pie each Christmas. You know what chess pie is?"

"No."

"It's all the brown custard you get in pecan pie but none of the nuts." The light turns green. Then dad says, "Hollywood has all the nuts."

"Tsss," I say and shake my head.

"Tsss," he replies and shakes his head.

In my bedroom there's a huge poster-sized

aerial photograph of Burbank. I found it the last day of elementary school in Mrs. Garcia's garbage can. It's black-and-white on thick paper that's yellow around the edges. A razor-thin font below the photo says "Burbank, Ca. 1961." The year my mother was born. I like the way the streets line up straight and squared at right angles, except Olive, which cuts a crazy slant all the way through Burbank. And I like how the homes look like Monopoly houses, like I could pick them up and crunch them with my back teeth. But what I like most, more than anything else, is how Burbank makes sense from up high more than it does from down below.

The next weekend, mom and I run errands in Toluca Lake, a community next to Burbank that looks like a crappy town from the '50s. The first thing you see in Toluca Lake is a giant baby-faced Bob's Big Boy statue holding a hamburger up high on a plate. All the storefronts have canopies with the store's name on them. Some places have old neon signs, the kind they flash in lame movie montages when small-town characters in '50s films arrive in the Big City to start their new life. Except none of it is exciting like the movies make it out to be. It's all boring stuff like Papoos Hot Dog Show and Patsy's restaurant.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm back in Kansas," mom says. We're at a stoplight on Riverside Drive. "Everything is so bland and practical. Not that the Midwest is bland, really. It has its charms."

Mom's an insurance adjuster, which means she works a lot of overtime and holes herself up in the home office most weekends. During the week, I'm not allowed to stay home alone, so I have to hang out in her cubicle until summer camp starts. She sits next to a woman who wears too much perfume and makes personal phone calls to a man named Pookie.

After driving through Toluca Lake, mom takes me to a dry cleaner's in Studio City that has a wall plastered with 8 ½ by 11 headshots. When I was five years old, I first noticed headshots in restaurants along Ventura Boulevard. One day when I saw headshots at the car wash on Alameda, I asked dad, "Who are all these people?" We were standing in the hallway with long windows where you watch your car get washed. Behind us was a wall covered in photos. In front of us, black plastic strips slapped suds on our SUV. Dad turned to look at the headshots behind him. "All these people," dad said, "they're all idiots. That's who they are." But it turned out they were just actors, not idiots.

Inside the dry cleaner's, there are so many photographs that there are headshots on top of headshots, and they're all actors I've never heard of. Sandy Smith. John Treedle. Valerie Newman. Most of them are just the face of some person who's either smiling or looking artificially serious. I scan the walls expecting to see my own face, the face of an aspiring star, even though I don't aspire to be anything at all. Instead I only see faces of happy women with fluffed '80s hair alongside men who don't smile at all.

A couple of years ago I was in our garage and found a box of headshots of mom, except it wasn't mom. She had this other name, this other

life. Her name was Julie instead of Jane. And her last name was Aster instead of Aronis. She looked like a toothpaste ad—broad smile, straight hair, bright eyes. Trees filled the background of the shot. I kept staring at the picture of this innocent pretty girl with long caramel-blond hair, repeating the name in my head. Julie Aster. Julie Aster. After a while I put the picture back because it felt like I was looking at my mom's dead twin, as if Julie Aster were some girl that nobody wanted to talk about, this secret person we kept tucked away in a box.

My mother's hair isn't caramel blond anymore. It's dirty blond or dishwater blond, one of those ugly blond colors from a bottle of Clairol. While my mother is pulling out her checkbook to pay for the dry cleaning, I scan dozens of pictures on the wall for Julie Aster. I'm pretty sure she isn't there.

About once a month dad gets me in the car to run errands, and we end up driving by his childhood home in Burbank, a few miles north of our current home, close to a bunch of electrical transmission towers by the airport. All the streets are flat, just like our own neighborhood. Dad always drives real slow with one hand on the steering wheel while he looks out at the homes. And dad is always seeing something that I don't see, 'cause sometimes he gets real pissed off. "Look at that," he'll say. "They haven't mowed the lawn in three weeks. Nobody takes care of their shit anymore." Then he'll speed off, hitting the accelerator too hard, and he'll stay angry for the rest of the day.

"Dad," I once told him, "You don't live there anymore." He didn't answer, so I said, "Dad, you've got a family of your own."

So today when he takes me to his old house, he says, "Look. Look at that." A "For Sale" sign sits in front. It's a white stucco Monopoly house with an oil-stained driveway, just like every other house on the block. Small. Ordinary. For a moment I think no one special or particularly smart could have ever lived there.

Dad pulls over to the curb and parks.

"What're we doing?" I ask.

"We're gonna check things out."

I get out of the car and follow dad around the side of the house to a wooden gate leading to the backyard. Dad reaches over the top of the gate, fiddles around, and unlatches it. Inside there's an empty pool and a small patio with salmon-toned concrete. No grass. No landscaping rocks. Instead of grass, the edge of the house is landscaped with green spiky ice plants that are wet inside like cactus. I break off a spike of ice plant and write "Nobody lives here" on the hot concrete. Cinderblock walls border the yard; one has a nasty crack that looks like the letter *Z* patched over with white cement.

Dad goes to a window and cups his hands around his eyes to see inside. He waves me over to look into the house. I see a crappy-looking room with wood paneling and a rug that's pulled up to show the grainy hardwood underneath.

"I bet they want three-quarters of a million," he says. "And my old man bought this place for ten grand." He turns and walks down the kiddy

steps of the drained pool into the deep end. The lining of the pool is robin's-egg blue. Dad looks like a freaky hatchling down there, standing in a half-shell in his sweat pants and sunglasses, looking up at me like I'm supposed to feel whatever it is that he feels—something for the house, something for the pool. But it just feels like a stranger's backyard to me.

"Son of a bitch," dad says. He shakes his head like there's something going on in his brain that I don't really want to know about.

When he sits down on top of the leaves at the bottom, I say, "Dad, you're gonna get dirty."

"Tsss," he replies. And then he says, "I almost drowned in this pool."

"So?" I say.

"I almost drowned," he repeats.

"So?" I say again. "What's your point?"

"That's exactly my point," he replies.

He stands up, brushes off the leaves, then climbs the deep end's ladder until he's standing across the pool from me with his hands on his hips.

"Right here where I'm standing my old man had a giant tiki statue, and all the landscaping along the walls was filled with palms and tropical plants. And at night, my old man would come out here after work, turn on some tribal drum music, light some tiki torches, and sit back on a lawn chair drinking Mai Tais, not saying a damn word. He'd just sit stony and silent each night. The rest of us would be inside watching *Gomer Pyle*, and he'd sit under the patio umbrella with a hand to his brow, staring out at the pool."

"Dad?"

"Yeah."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I played along. I brought him drinks in plastic cups shaped like coconuts. I got him Hawaiian shirts for Father's Day." Then he looks at me and says, "You know what the problem with you is? You don't know how to play along."

I suck in my cheeks, insulted, but I don't know why I should feel insulted, 'cause I don't even know what playing along means in this situation. Am I supposed to jump into the empty pool? Supposed to break into the house?

"Humor me a little," dad says. "Can't you at least do that for your old man?"

"I don't know what you want."

"Act like you care."

"I *am* acting like I care."

"Then you're a shitty actor," he says.

"Whatever," I reply and kick around some leaves on the patio.

Dad paces around the pool and says, "Every weekend, my old man became the Tiki King of Burbank. But on weekdays he was one of these button-up types who worked over at Lockheed Aircraft and wore horn-rimmed glasses and looked like all those guys in the control room at NASA in the '60s. Like the guys that put Neil Armstrong on the moon."

Dad puts one foot up on the diving board and grabs the aluminum handrails.

"You know what we did on weekends? My old man would drag me and your Uncle Mike to a store called Akron that had all this tacky Polyne-

sian crap, and that was our big family outing, going to Akron and shopping for bamboo furniture and ashtrays shaped like conch shells."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he replies. "All right. Let's get out of here."

When we get home, dad comes up to my room where I'm sitting on the floor and makes me stop playing Final Fantasy to shove a photograph in my hand.

"See?" he says.

It's an old-timey black-and-white picture with a fluted edge, a picture of grandpa wearing a skinny black tie and a short-sleeved white business shirt and black horn-rimmed glasses. His hair is dark and combed back. And he's resting his right elbow on an evil-looking wood man with a mouth shaped like a sideways 8 that's screaming and has little carved round teeth. Behind him, I can see the pool and a few bamboo torches that aren't lit. And there's a patio chair with someone sitting in it, but you can only see legs crossed at the ankle. A woman's legs. She's wearing heavy black shoes with a chunky heel and a skirt just at the knee. For some reason, I can't stop looking at those legs.

"Can I have it?" I ask.

"Why?" Dad's drinking a Coke. He takes a sip then looks over the top of the glass.

"Just because."

"What're you gonna do with it?"

"I'll put it up on my wall."

He looks over at my map of Burbank. "Why?"

"I don't know," I say.

"I don't think you should have it."

But he doesn't take it back. So I keep it anyway. Just because.

Sometimes when I'm watching old movies on weekends, I see a girl in the background who looks like Julie Aster. She's sitting in a high school cafeteria with her shiny caramel hair down the length of her back, shyly eating a sandwich. The next week she's the girl on a college campus who walks toward the screen and looks out through the camera straight at me like she's about to say something important, but just when she opens her mouth to speak, she turns her face away. One time I saw her in that old movie *The Paper Chase*, so I sat there reading the credits at the end of the movie, searching for her name, but it wasn't there.

I keep Julie Aster's headshot in the top drawer of my desk, not on my wall with the map of Burbank and photo of grandpa. On the back of the headshot, Julie appears in a series of small photos. In one she's holding a daisy and wearing bell-bottom jeans. When I first found the box of headshots, I thought she was in her mid-twenties, but now I think she might have been closer to my age, maybe fifteen or sixteen, some girl I might have met thirty years ago in Apple Pie America, a girl off a Greyhound bus from Kansas, a girl in a pink bikini at the pool of the Safari Inn. Maybe even a girl who was waiting for Elvis.

When I close my eyes, sometimes I want to run away with Julie Aster. I want her to push the hair from my ear and whisper, "Let's hop on a

bus and go." The possibilities are endless because Julie Aster is adventurous. She's not afraid to stare straight at the camera, not afraid to hold my gaze. Except Julie Aster is also my mother, and I don't want to go anywhere with mom. And the truth of the matter is that there's not really anywhere to go.

The next weekend dad drags me around Burbank to run errands. We go to Pep Boys with the cartoon faces of Manny, Moe, and Jack on the top of the building. Then we drive to Toluca Lake, and I sit in the car while dad goes across the street to The Money Tree. When I ask if The Money Tree is a bar, dad says, "No, it's a joint. Burbank is full of joints. Not bars."

He makes me wait in the car for twenty minutes without the radio, so I sit there playing my GameBoy until he finally comes out.

When we get home, mom has taken a break from the computer and is in the kitchen drinking a glass of water.

"So where'd you two go?" she asks.

"Some joint," I say.

Mom raises an eyebrow. "What kind of joint?"

"Some money joint."

"Oh."

The next weekend dad says we have errands to run, but all we do is drive back to his parents' house and park. Now the sign says, "Price Reduced."

This time dad gets out of the SUV and tries the front door. It's locked. A key box is hanging from the knob. "Son of a bitch," he says. He gets out his cell phone and calls Uncle Mike in Florida, and I just stand there on the oil-stained driveway looking up at a basketball hoop that dad and Uncle Mike might have played ball at. There's an old '70s photo of dad with Uncle Mike on top of our entertainment center. Uncle Mike's got his arm around dad like they're best friends back home from the war. Instead of wearing dog tags, they're both shirtless and wearing gold chains around their necks. Dad has this bushy brown mustache and sideburns and a head of curly hair. He looks way too toned and tan. Now dad is heavy with no mustache, and he wears sweatsuits every weekend but never works out.

Dad is still on the phone, so I roam the tree-lined sidewalk. When I look down the block, all the homes look the same to me, the way they look from my aerial map, homes side by side and back to back with little concrete patios and kidney shaped pools fenced off with brick walls you can't see in the photo, but you know they're there. All the neighborhoods are cut into grids as if God decided the world should be like this, linear and cloned, like the end of that book *A Wrinkle in Time* when the characters enter an alternate universe where there's a neighborhood of identical houses, and all these kids stand in all the driveways bouncing balls in sync. Somewhere inside an aerial shot of Burbank, I'm one of those kids who's supposed to be in sync. Except I don't even own a ball.

When dad gets off the phone, he starts prowl-

ing around the house. He walks to the shrubs under the picture window and digs. "Look what an idiot your Uncle Mike is," he says and holds up a fake rock. Inside the rock is a house key from twenty years ago, maybe more.

"It won't work," I say.

"Shut up. It'll work."

He goes to the door, and I can't believe it, but it works.

"See?" he says. "You stay out here. Holler if anyone's coming."

He shuts the door behind him. It's the kind of door with three little rectangular windows lined up like steps near the top. I have to stand on my tiptoes to see inside. I hear dad get back on the phone with Uncle Mike. He sounds mad.

When dad comes back out, I ask, "What'd you see in there?"

"Nothing."

"Were you looking for something you'd left behind?"

"Yeah."

"Did you find it?"

He says, "No," then puts his hand over his mouth and chin like he doesn't want me to read his lips while he thinks out loud.

We get back in the SUV, and dad's still got his hand over his mouth. He looks at the basketball hoop in the driveway. Finally he looks at me and says, "We should play basketball sometime."

"I hate sports," I say.

"How could you hate sports?"

I shrug my shoulders. "What's so great about baseball or basketball? I don't get it." The truth is that I'd always faked liking sports. I faked it when we played flag football. I faked it the year I was in little league. Basically I'd been faking it all for years.

"Kids are supposed to like sports. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Nothing's wrong with me," I say. "I'm normal like everyone else."

On weekdays, I'm stuck with mom at work. Some days mom gets busy, so she puts me in a lunchroom with a long table and microwave. Ladies from the office go in and out with cups of coffee and bags of popcorn. I sit there with my GameBoy. Sometimes I bring a book.

Today two of the office ladies come into the lunchroom together while I'm reading the *Los Angeles Times*. Except I'm not really reading it. I'm just flipping the pages looking for comics like *Ballard Street* and *Bliss*. One of the office ladies says to me, "Hey kid, you seem real mature for your age." There are thirty people who work in mom's office. Some of them talk to me, know my name, ask about school or what I'm reading. Some don't. Instead they ignore me like I'm not even there. This office lady is one of the people who always ignores me. She's blond with big front teeth and drinks her coffee with lots of powdered creamer. Her friend must be new. I've never seen her before.

"How old are you, anyway?" the friend asks. She's wearing a blue skirt that hikes above her bare knees, and I can see the goose bumps on her legs.

"None of your business," I say and feel myself smile inside, 'cause I'm just starting to realize there are a lot of people in this world that I don't like, and these office ladies, they're just the beginning.

"Come on. How old are you?" the friend asks.

"Don't talk to him," the blond with big teeth says. "He's a smart ass. Probably takes after his dad."

"Shut up!" I say.

"No. You shut up!" says the blond with big teeth.

Now I'm in trouble big. They're gonna tell mom. But by the end of the day, if they've told her, mom never says a thing.

Dad's a tax analyst for Chevron. He commutes to work in El Segundo. An hour and a half each way. He gets home after eight p.m. if traffic is bad, then watches HBO or sports. Tonight, after dad's settled in, he takes control of the TV that I've been watching and flips the channels until he gets to a show called *Kojak*. The opening credits are running.

"Dad. Change it," I say. "I don't want to watch some stupid old show."

"I've worked my ass off all day, and you won't let me watch a little *Kojak*?"

"Can't you watch something else?"

Dad gets this serious look, and I know I'm in for something.

"Don't change the channel," he says and goes into the kitchen. I hear him dump ice into a glass. He opens a can of Coke, and the ice jingles before he walks back into the living room.

"Did I ever tell you about the year your Uncle Mike decided to be Kojak for Halloween?" he asks when he sits down.

I thought I'd heard all of dad's stupid Uncle Mike stories, but this one I've never heard.

He grabs the remote and mutes the TV. "When your Uncle Mike was sixteen, he shaved his head bald and sucked on lollipops and walked around saying, 'Who loves ya, baby?' 'cause that was Kojak's line. 'Who loves ya, baby?' You following me so far?"

"Yeah."

"So anyway. After Halloween, the whole thing backfired. Mike got food poisoning. Lost a lot of weight. His hair didn't come back in right away. Then everyone thought he had cancer. For a month, friends would walk up to him at Gilbert's Five-and-Dime saying, 'Oh my god! Oh my god! When did you start chemotherapy?'"

I start to laugh. Uncle Mike is a big guy now. Over two hundred pounds. He's this rich developer who lives in Orlando, Florida.

"Don't laugh. This isn't a funny story. You know the saddest part of this story? It was your grandma who had cancer, and nobody knew it. Your grandma . . . my mom. Well Mom used to smoke Virginia Slims and sell Avon to old ladies in the neighborhood. She'd wear this green eye shadow and cruise around in her El Dorado with a cigarette hanging from her lips." Then dad turns to me and says, "Me and your Uncle Mike, we didn't get Mom. With our old man, we tried

to understand what he was going through. But with Mom . . . well . . ."

He looks at me hard at the end of his story and says, "What's the matter? Aren't you gonna ask me, 'What's your point?'"

"No."

"Why not?"

"'Cause I get it, dad. I get it."

He shakes his head like he doesn't believe me. It's like he's disgusted.

"What'd I do now?"

He presses his lips together and says, "Never mind." Then he un-mutes the TV to watch *Kojak*.

"What?" I ask. "What'd I do?" I'm beginning to get mad. No matter what I say or do, it's always the wrong thing.

"Idiot," dad says. "Your Uncle Mike was an idiot."

I sit there with my arms folded, not saying anything.

Lately when dad and I run errands on the weekend, he says we're going one place, but we end up somewhere else. Trips to the post office become trips to his old house. Last week a trip to Rite Aid became a trip to The Blarney Stone. Today we take a trip to Vons supermarket that becomes a trip to The Money Tree. He leaves me alone in the car. The sun's beating through the SUV window onto the green plastic dashboard. Both windows are rolled down. There's a hair salon a few doorways from The Money Tree and women come and go.

I forgot my GameBoy and after twenty minutes, I can't take it anymore. I lean over the driver's seat and yell out the window, "Dad!" I'm hoping he'll hear me through the joint's open door. "Dad!" I yell. But nothing happens.

That's when I get the bright idea of getting out of the car and going in. After crossing the street, I walk over to the open door. "Dad?" I say and stand there blocking the sunlight.

Inside there's a bar on the right and red vinyl booths on the left. Dad is the only guy in the joint. Just him and the bartender. Dad's sitting on a barstool with a can of Coke in front of him. I wait for one of them to notice me. I feel like a giant standing there. All five feet of me seems to tower over the joint and cast a long shadow down the red carpet.

Finally the bartender looks over and says, "Hey kid, come on in." He waves me over with his arm.

The only light inside is coming in through the door. The air smells like stale cigarette smoke, and I feel like I've traveled back to some shady Frank Sinatra era. I pull out a barstool by dad, but just as I sit I get this bad feeling. Dad still hasn't turned to look at me when the bartender puts a bowl of shelled peanuts on the bar. The bartender looks at dad, as if waiting for a cue, before saying, "Alright kid, name your poison."

"Gin and tonic," I reply.

He starts making a drink, tossing ice in a glass. Then he works below the bar and sprays the soda sprayer. The whole time dad's not doing anything. He's just sitting there with his elbow

on the bar and his hand on his forehead like he's sick. The bartender gives me my drink with a wedge of lime on the side.

"To your health," he says. Then he rests both hands wide apart on the bar, arms open. His posture makes me think of a priest, like I'm supposed to fess up to something I did. Except I'd be fessing up to doing nothing.

"Your old man here is on the wagon," the bartender says.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means he stopped drinking three months ago."

"I'm not an alcoholic. That's not what this is about," dad says, but he's still not looking at me. He's taken his hand off his forehead and looks beyond the bartender. "I'm just not gonna drink anymore. That's all."

"If you're not an alcoholic, but you need to stop drinking, then what are you?" I ask.

Bottles of Beefeater and Smirnoff sit against a gold-veined mirror behind the bar. Dad stares out at his reflection between the bottles and sucks his teeth. "I'm bored," he finally says.

When he turns to look at me, I can see lines around his eyes that appear deeper in the dim light. I'm not sure what to say. My dad is bored. It doesn't really seem as bad as he's making it out.

"Well I'm bored too," I say.

"I know," he says. "I know."

"Maybe we should get a dog," I say.

"We've already got a cat."

"We could go on vacation. We could go to Hawaii."

"We can't afford it. We've got too much debt."

I take the first sip of my drink, and it's so bitter that I almost spit it out. It tastes like tonic and 7-Up.

"I'm not just bored," dad says. "I'm indifferent. I feel nothing. I have no passion. Stan, what are you passionate about?"

The bartender smiles. "Jazz," he says. "And my wife."

"What does it feel like?"

"Hell, I don't know. It just feels good."

Dad's got me thinking: What if I have no passion? I've already spent my life driving in circles, waiting for something big. What's gonna become of me when I'm fifty years old and that big thing never happens? It scares me, and I take another sip of gin and tonic.

"What about you, kid?" dad asks me. "What are you passionate about?"

"I'm only eleven," I say.

"You think that's an excuse? *I'm only eleven*," he mimics me in a high nasal way that doesn't sound like my voice at all, as if he's reminding me that I'm still a kid. Except he rubs it in my face, and it doesn't really seem fair. "Well you've got another thing coming, 'cause I was eleven once too." His voice has that ugly edge to it, the same edge it gets when he comes home from a bad day at work. "*I'm only eleven*. Is that all you can say?" Dad throws his money down and pushes away from the bar. "Well you know what? I've had enough of eleven. Sooner or later, you have to grow up." He drains the last of his Coke and

looks over at me, his face pulled down with anger.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I ask.

"I'm not looking at you like anything."

I swallow hard, and he's still looking at me, his facial expression like grandpa's tiki statue.

"What did I do?"

"It's what you always do," he says. "Always the same fuckin' thing."

I hop down from the barstool. "Fine," I say. "Can we go now?"

"No, I'm not done. Sit the fuck down and wait like you're supposed to."

"All I ever do is wait." I can feel my face getting red as I stand there.

Dad's grimace deepens, and he says, "Sit the fuck down!" Now his voice is fire hot.

I'm standing on the red carpet, and the sunlight from the open door is hitting my arm like a sideways spotlight. I can see my own shadow casting down through the bar. And I can tell by the way my shadow is getting long that the angle of the sun is getting lower, going down.

And I'm about to sit when I realize that I don't have to. I can say *No* if I want. None of it really matters. No one really cares. Nothing has consequences.

So I take two steps back and say it. I say *No.* Except I say *No* in the worst possible way: I tell my dad to fuck off. And you know what? It feels good in a bad kind of way. Liberating. "Fuck off." When I say it, I feel it too. I feel something ugly curl inside of me, like a huge worm that's been coiling in my chest has finally woken up.

Outside the door people walk by. A motorcycle drives down the street. If I were looking at this bar from up high, it would actually look all right. Safe and distant. Just a boxy little building. Nothing I couldn't crunch with my own back teeth. But inside the air is thick. And dad's face is a giant twisted fist. His nose curls down like a beat-up boxer. He gets off his bar stool and takes three steps toward me in slow motion. Then he stops and looks at me hard. "Mr. Fuck You can find his own ride home," he says and jabs me in the chest with his index finger.

"Fine," I say. My heart is pounding, and I can still feel the spot between my ribs where his index finger poked me.

Jabbing me again, he says, "I'm gonna be just like you from now on."

"Good," I say. "Great!"

"'Cause I don't give a shit about anything," he says as he stomps past me. "I don't give a fuck." Now he's standing in the doorway with his arms folded in front of him.

"Just go," I say like I don't care at all. "Get out."

The bartender is staring at me. I can tell he's waiting for me to stop dad, but I'm not about to budge. We both watch him leave the bar. And it's the weirdest feeling in the world watching dad go to the SUV. I watch him drive off, leaving me inside the bar alone with the long shadows.

"Well . . ." the bartender says, his voice rising. And I say, "Yeah . . ." except my voice drops.

"Shhhh . . ." he says, like he's about to say *shit.* "You wanna call your mom?" he asks.

"Sure," I say, 'cause I mean, can it get any worse? What's worse than being eleven years old and having your mom pick you up from a bar?

"He's been jerking me around all week," I say to the bartender, shaking my head, then drinking my gin and tonic.

The bartender puts a black phone in front of me. It's an old-timey phone with a round dial and an earpiece that attaches to a spiral cord. I'm not even sure if I know how to use it.

"Here," the bartender says. He takes the earpiece off the cradle and shows me how to hold it. I can figure out how to dial on my own.

"Mom?" I say when she finally says hello. Her voice is sleepy like she's been working on the computer all afternoon. "Dad and I got into a fight."

"Oh yeah?" she says, and I can hear things in her voice that I definitely do not like.

"Can you pick me up?"

"Yeah . . . sure." Again, she's got this thing in her voice where she drags out the *yeah* too long. It's like she's almost laughing at me.

"I'm at a joint called The Money Tree on Riverside Drive."

"Is that what they're calling The Money Tree these days? A joint?"

"Yeah," I say. "A joint."

Thirty minutes later, mom walks into the bar wearing jeans and a sleeveless blouse. Her hair is pulled into a loose-knotted bun with strands softly falling out from the back. She looks single when she sits on the barstool beside me. I'm pretending to watch a Dodgers game on TV. She orders a merlot, looks at her watch, and we sit there, not talking. I can feel her presence tapping her fingernail against the bar. And I can smell her papaya shampoo. Suddenly I feel like the type of loser in a bar who wants to talk to a woman but can't, like some lame TV character that makes bad jokes and embarrasses himself. When I look at the side of mom's face, she's looking up at the baseball game and Vin Scully has just announced a third strike. For an instant I can tell that once upon a time, mom was beautiful—like Julie Aster—and that somewhere along the line, probably because she had me, she's grown less and less beautiful over the years.

"What?" she asks, then looks over at me kind of angry, and I can't tell if she's joking or serious.

"Nuthin'," I say.

"Right. I bet it was nuthin'." She shakes her head, looks back at the TV. The bartender puts her merlot in front of her, and she takes a long drink.

I want her to be my mom and take me back to that place where we were a family that did fun things. Instead she says, "So . . . you and your dad got into a bar fight?"

"Sort of."

She nods. "Had he been drinking?"

"No."

She nods again, then says, "Your cat's gone missing."

"Yeah?" I say.

"Yeah." Then she tilts the glass to her lips

again, and I think that any minute now some man is going to enter the bar and whisper in her ear, "Let's hop on a bus and go." And that maybe she'll leave me here forever. I get this image in my head of living the rest of my life in a bar, just a kid condemned to wash highball glasses and sleep on vinyl booths with cigarette burns on the seats. I want to tell her that I don't want her to go away. But how do you say something that isn't even real in the first place?

She finishes her merlot and finally looks at me, and I see now that her mind has been elsewhere, just off in a world I know nothing about.

When we get home, dad's still not there. Which is a relief. It gives me time to get out and look for the cat in the neighborhood. Half the homes on our street have new owners who work for Burbank Studios or Warner Brothers or Universal or NBC. None of them have kids I can play with. It's not like five years ago when my best friend lived two homes away. I don't feel comfortable knocking on doors because the Cardinelli family is gone and the Martinez family is gone. There are six "For Sale" signs up and down the block. Some of the signs say "Foreclosed."

"Kitty," I call out, but I'm not feeling what I'm supposed to feel, not what I felt when our cat Ringo went missing six years ago. Then I cried and cried and mom held my hand and walked the neighborhood with me. Tears ran down my face, and Mrs. Alberty and the two Cardinelli boys came out of their homes. People stopped and talked to us and promised they'd search for Ringo. Now it's just me looking for a cat with no name, a cat I don't even care about, a cat dad probably backed over with his SUV. But I have to go through the motions 'cause it seems like the right thing to do. So I walk up and down the block, feigning emotions for a cat I don't love, hoping a neighbor who's never met me will open a door and invite me in.

I don't go home until I think dad's had enough time to cool off. It's dusk outside when I walk into the living room. Mom's upstairs on the computer. I go into the kitchen for a glass of water and through the window over the sink I see dad in the hot tub. Our yard is small. The hot tub is pushed against a cement-block wall. Dad's eyes are shut, and his arms are stretched over the rim of the tub. Then he opens his eyes and glares at me, and it's one of those looks I'll carry around for months, a look that says I'm the bad guy in his life, as if I've always been the bad guy, and he's just now figured it out. But from where I'm standing, I'm just a normal kid. Bubbles percolate around him like boiling water, and it all puts an image of a backwards fairy tale into my head where the kids put their parents in a soup pot and boil them until their flesh falls off the bones. And then the kids eat the soup, but it doesn't make them full. So they keep eating and eating until their parents are gone.

A few days later it's the Fourth of July. Which feels wrong, 'cause it's a Wednesday but feels like a Saturday. Mom and dad both have the day off. Dad is watching a Dodgers game, and mom is

upstairs working. Before dusk, mom finally comes down from her office and says, "Let's go see fireworks. Just you and me."

We drive through the Valley, past the glitzy restaurants and shops of Ventura Boulevard. Mom cruises up the hills to Mulholland Drive where she pulls over at an unmarked lookout point. We sit there, above the San Fernando Valley, looking at the world through our windshield. From high up, you can watch an entire string of stoplights, miles of them, turn from green to yellow to red. They all change in unison, which you can't tell from down below, where it all feels chaotic and random, like the lights change whenever they want. From up here, everything looks orderly and predictable, the way God would want things to look.

"It looks just like it used to look when I was young," mom says. So we sit there, watching the grid of lights and twinkling Valley below. Our home is down there somewhere by one of those faraway-looking stoplights. And we're up here like the kings of the city with nothing to do but look down.

Mom takes off her seat belt and starts talking. "I used to come up here with boys who drove their parents' convertibles," she says, "and we'd sit and talk about our futures with so much optimism. And sometimes we would kiss, but it was innocent, not dirty or sexual. Just kind of sweet."

I look away. My eyes fall on her bare legs where her skirt rests above her knee. The idea of mom kissing boys puts a bad image in my mind.

Out of the blue she says, "Give me a kiss," just like when I was a little kid and she'd turn toward me at a stoplight, move my bangs out of my eyes, and say, "Kiss me."

But I'm not a little kid anymore and say, "Mom. That's weird."

"I don't mean it in a weird way. Just give me a kiss. Right here." She taps a hollow spot on her cheek. "C'mon . . . it won't kill you to give your mother a kiss."

I'm about to say, "No," but she looks so disappointed that I lean over the stick shift to kiss her. Half of me is afraid she'll turn her mouth and force me to kiss her on the lips, afraid that her whole face will turn toward mine and her eyes will be open and that we'll have to face each other like that—too close, too intimate—that we'll have to connect lips and stare into each other's eyes. Julie Aster's eyes. Eyes that won't look away.

But she doesn't even look toward me when I pucker against her cheek. I can smell her lipstick as I pull away. It's the kind of awkward kiss that's full of forced familiarity, like the kisses I give my Great Aunt Louise at Christmas when I thank her for a new sweater.

"Gee," mom says, touching the spot where I'd kissed her. "Is that it?"

"I guess so."

"Thanks," she says, but her *thanks* is as fake as my kiss. And when I look at the side of her face, she looks just like the office ladies she works with.

When I turn toward the flat streets of the Valley, all the lights change in unison from green to yellow to red. We sit and watch, saying nothing, just waiting for the fireworks to begin.