

# FATHER'S DAY

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*Across America with an Unusual Dad  
and His Extraordinary Son*

BUZZ BISSINGER



AN EAMON DOLAN BOOK  
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# Table of Contents

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[Title Page](#)  
[Table of Contents](#)  
[Copyright](#)  
[Dedication](#)  
[Epigraph](#)  
[Author's Note](#)  
[Zach](#)  
[Bon Voyage](#)  
[Blue Box](#)  
[Is That All There Is?](#)  
[Failure to Forget](#)  
[Embassy Suites!](#)  
[Lost in Milwaukee](#)  
[Cardinals and Cookies](#)  
["It Will Be Okay"](#)  
[I'll Do Anything](#)  
[Scene of the Crime](#)  
[Boobie](#)  
[Mom and Dad](#)  
[Hollywood Blue](#)  
[Viva Las Vegas!](#)  
[Coming into Los Angeles](#)  
[Picture Perfect](#)  
[Zach and Gerry](#)  
[Reality Bites](#)  
[Epilogue](#)  
[Zach's Acknowledgments](#)  
[Buzz's Acknowledgments](#)  
[Sample Chapter from 3 NIGHTS IN AUGUST](#)  
[Buy the Book](#)  
[About the Author](#)

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*To Zach who trusted me with his life  
To Gerry who helped me get through it  
To Ari and Pete who knew I had to write it  
To every parent who knows why*

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*“You should have died, Zach. Do you know that?”*

*“I didn’t.”*

## Author's Note

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*Father's Day* is a memoir, and parts of it must inevitably draw upon my memory alone. But I have tried as much as possible to base it on primary source material. All of my conversations with my son Zach during our road trip were taped; I transcribed the dialogue here verbatim. In order to capture the flow of his speech, in which he barely pauses for breath and merges each sentence or phrase immediately into the next, I present his statements without any punctuation.

In describing Zach's condition, education, and treatment, I relied on well over a thousand pages of medical and school records that I have collected since his birth.

In two chapters, I had to draw on sources other than my own records and memory. In Chapter 4, which deals with the history of premature infants, I relied on a variety of sources, including the following:

*The Machine in the Nursery: Incubator Technology and the Origins of Newborn Intensive Care* by Jeffrey Baker (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

*History and the Care and Feeding of the Premature Infant* by Thomas Cone Jr. (Little Brown and Company, 1985).

"A Patron of the Premies" by A. J. Liebling, *The New Yorker* (June 3, 1939).

*When the Bough Breaks* by Winifred Pinch (University Press of America, 2002).

"Reflections on Errors in Neonatology, Parts 1, 2, 3" by Alex Robertson, *Journal of Perinatology* (2003).

"Incubator-Baby Slide Shows" by William Silverman, *Pediatrics* (August 1979).

"American Characters: Martin Couney" by Richard Snow, *American Heritage* (June/July 1981).

"Baby Incubators, a Clinical Study of the Premature Infant, with Especial [sic] Reference to Incubator Institutions Conducted for Show Purposes" by John Zahorsky (Nabu Public Domain Reprints, 1905).

"2nd Son Born to Kennedys: Has Lung Illness," *New York Times* (August 8, 1963). "Kennedy Infant Dies at Hospital," *New York Times* (August 9, 1963).

*Official Guidebook (to the Chicago) World's Fair 1934*.

In Chapter 5 on savantism, I used these sources:

"On Some of the Mental Affections of Childhood and Youth: Being the Lettsomian Lectures Delivered Before the Medical Society of London in 1887, Together with Other Papers" by J. Langdon Down (Nabu Public Domain Reprints, 1887).

*Bright Splinters of the Mind* by Beate Hermelin (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001).

*The Real Rain Man* by Fran Peek (Harkness Publishing Consultants, 1996).

"Prodigies" by Oliver Sacks, *The New Yorker* (January 9, 1995).

*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* by Oliver Sacks (Touchstone, 1985).

*Mental Deficiency* by A. F. Tredgold (Nabu Public Domain Reprints, 1915).

*Extraordinary People* by Darold Treffert (Ballantine Books, 1989).

*Islands of Genius* by Darold Treffert (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2010).

"The Marvelous Musical Prodigy, Blind Tom, the Negro Pianist," Cornell University Library Digital Collections (circa 1867).

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## Zach

### I

I AM MEETING ZACH AT Brooks Brothers in the sodden, sullen aftermath of Christmas. He has just come from work at the supermarket where he has bagged groceries for four hours with one fifteen-minute break. I cannot imagine my son doing such work at the age of twenty-four. It shames me to think of him placing sweat-drenched jugs of milk into their proper place and learning initially, with the extensive help of a job coach, that the eggs must be placed separately in double plastic bags. He has been doing the same job for four years, and he will do the same job for the rest of his life. My son's professional destiny is paper or plastic.

Except for brief lapses in which he pesters fellow employees like a seven-year-old, following them and calling out their names in a purposely aggravating singsong voice when they are trying to work, Zach does his job well. He limits his conversations with customers, although by nature he is ebullient and friendly. He no longer interjects his views, as he did several years ago when he was working at K-Mart stocking supplies. When a customer asked where to find work gloves, he announced that he found it an odd request: "What do you need gloves for? It's the summer." It defied his sense of logic; gloves are for cold, not hot, and Zach just wanted to make sure the customer understood the order of things.

He is well liked. Female cashiers call him "my guy" and "my baby" and treat him with protectiveness. He calls them by their first names, as if they all served in the trenches of World War II together. But he lacks the dexterity, or maybe the confidence, to handle a register or work the deli section. He fears change, because routine is the GPS that guides him. He orders the same entrée virtually every time we go out for dinner: salmon. He occasionally ventures out into the uncharted territory of a Cajun chicken wrap or even a crab cake, but it is the pink flesh of salmon, even if it is more gray than pink and flaking off in dry chunks, that safely brings him home. He leans back in the La-Z-Boy I once gave him for his birthday and often watches the ten o'clock news on Fox, not because he wants to keep up on current events, but because he takes comfort in seeing the usual television newsmakers like the mayor and the police chief and the indicted city official proclaiming innocence although the payoff money was found inside his pants. He also liked learning the names of the anchors and the weatherman. The world by its nature is chaotic and unpredictable, but Zach always narrows it down to a reliably straight line.

Because of trace brain damage at birth, his comprehension skills at the age of twenty-four are roughly those of an eight- or nine-year-old, although he is quite verbal. He can read, but he doesn't understand many of the sentences. He has basic math skills, although he is still prone to using his fingers. He understands money to a certain degree. Because his mother, Debra, and I encourage independence, he is allowed to use public transportation to go to Philadelphia where his other job is stocking supplies at a law firm, and where his brother lives. The train stops at 8th Street and Market. He is supposed to walk the rest of the way if it is daylight—about seven blocks. But sometimes he sneaks in a cab ride. The fare is ten dollars. He dutifully pays the meter but then he leaves a five-dollar tip, making him a favorite among Philadelphia cabdrivers who otherwise drive in silent misery.

He can't add a hundred plus a hundred, although he does know the result is "a lot," which is close enough when you think about it. He goes to movies, but the action and plot don't filter down to him;

he seizes on images that he has seen before. I took him to see *Spartacus* once, when he was eight, and after a blood-flowing scene at a Roman villa where Kirk Douglas single-handedly kills two million buffed-up soldiers with a plastic knife, he turned to me and said, "Look Dad! A pool!" He has always loved pools. In his early teens, he belonged to a swim club that competed against other clubs. He swam the fifty-yard freestyle. He finished far behind the other contestants, but it didn't matter. He still finished, every stroke like swimming against a frothing high tide. To this day, I don't know how he did it. It is the most monumental athletic feat I have ever seen.

His IQ, which has been measured far too many times, is about 70, with verbal scores in the normal range of 90, but with performance skills of about 50. I love my son deeply, but I do not feel I know him nor do I think I ever will. His mind is not simple. It is limited to a degree that profoundly frustrates me, but it is also inexplicably wondrous at certain moments. I have dedicated my life trying to fathom its inner workings. I can make educated guesses, some of which I think are accurate. I'm not a psychologist or psychiatrist, but I have spent nearly a quarter century trying to pinpoint the best learning and life strategies for Zach, so I am far more confident of my conclusions about him than theirs, some of them so haphazard they might as well have been made during the fourteenth hole on Maui before the convention luau.

It is strange to love someone so much who is still so fundamentally mysterious to you after all these years. *Strange* is a lousy word, meaning nothing. It is the most terrible pain of my life. As much as I try to engage Zach, figure out how to make the flower germinate because there is a seed, I also run. I run out of guilt. I run because he was robbed and I feel I was robbed. I run because of my shame. I am not proud to feel or say this. But I think these things, not all the time, but too many times, which only increases the cycle of my shame. This is *my* child. How can I look at him this way?

Because I do. Because I think we all do when confronted with difference, reality versus expectation, never at peace or even truce.

As his father, I should go to watch him work at the grocery store every now and then. I should offer support and encouragement because he is my son. I did go once. Zach was in one of the aisles on a break, and he didn't know I was there. I saw a coworker approach him. I thought they were friends. It made me feel better. The coworker spoke with rapid excitement.

—Hey, Zach!

—Oh hey Brian!!

—Hey, Zach, you know the woman with the big tits? She wants you, Zach! When you gonna put the move on her?

—Yeah.

—She's waitin' for you, Zach! You better do it soon!

—Okay Brian okay!

Brian knew Zach was different. He knew from the way Zach talked aloud to himself. He knew from the way Zach paced and took in breaths like he was gasping for air. He knew from the sudden tics that sometimes overcame his arms and torso. He knew from the way Zach walked, slightly hunched and Chaplinesque, one foot toward the east and the other toward the west. He knew from the way Zach had difficulty understanding. He preyed on Zach with leering joy. He laughed at Zach and walked away. But that wasn't what hurt me most. What hurt me most was how Zach welcomed the attention. He yearned to please Brian. He yearned for Brian's acceptance, although he did stop short of seeking out the woman with the big tits.

And that still wasn't the most painful part. I should have grabbed Brian by the neck. I just ran.

I am forever running. I am still running from that moment I first saw him through the window of a



hospital operating room on a suffocating August day in Philadelphia in 1983. Doctors and nurses surrounded him in a tight circle. He was a bloody quiver in their hands, born thirteen and a half weeks too soon and weighing one pound and eleven ounces. They held him with their arms high and outstretched almost as if they were offering him as a sacrifice. They held him ever so gently as if he might break into a thousand pieces or just crumble into dust. His skin was almost translucent. His arms could snap in two like a wishbone. His fingers could break like the point of a pencil. His legs were tissue paper. They knew the odds of his survival were very low. I also knew that if he survived, he would not remotely be the son I imagined. Which is a nicer way of saying he would not remotely be the son I wanted. I had little clue about medicine, but it was irrelevant to the obvious: any baby born so many weeks prematurely, with immediate difficulty breathing, looking the way he did like a weightless feather, would suffer long-term effects.

Debra and I were married at the time. She had been on bed rest in the hospital for nearly two months. I was on my way to visit her. It was a Saturday. I was dressed in a polo shirt and shorts and loafers without socks. I'd stopped at a convenience store and bought a can of Diet Coke and a bag of chips. I had no idea she would be in labor by the time I arrived. All I wanted to do was drink that can of Diet Coke and eat those chips as I watched Zach glow with blood in the bright bath of lights in the operating room. I felt like eating because I felt like a stranger. I felt I was just there by coincidence, wandering into the wrong room and seeing through the glass a woman I did not know giving birth. None of this made the slightest sense. None of this matched fatherhood. I didn't feel like crying. I just felt like walking away. And this was only half of what had already happened.

Another bloody quiver had already been taken from the womb by the time I got there. It was Zach's twin brother named Gerry. He weighed three ounces more. He had been born three minutes earlier. Because of those three minutes, and his positioning in the womb, his lungs were more developed than Zach's. He could not breathe on his own, but there was enough oxygen flowing through him initially to protect his brain from harm. Zach's lungs were not developed enough to give his brain the oxygen needed in those crucial first moments.

Brain damage settled like a patchy mist, some places forever abandoned, and yet some places heightened and magnified. Zach would eventually be able to walk and talk. Remarkably, he would suffer no physical side effects from his birth. He loves to communicate in simple snippets, mostly by asking questions. He can be unwittingly funny because he tells only the truth of his feelings. But his IQ places him on the borderline of mental retardation. Why sugarcoat it? My son is mentally retarded.

You can boil an egg in three minutes. You can fetch the morning paper in three minutes. You can empty the dishwasher in three minutes. You can reheat the leftovers in three minutes. You can call for Chinese takeout in three minutes. You can eat Chinese takeout in three minutes. You can determine the very course of a life in three minutes.

It was Gerry who was able to breathe on his own after a month. It was Zach who fought for his life in the neonatal intensive care unit, his tiny chest pumping up and down, never at peace, the frantic pulse of wanting to live and the frantic pulse of not wanting to die, always on supplemental oxygen with the green tube taped across his lips so it would not slip from his nostrils. Gerry who left the hospital after two and a half months plump and mirthy. Zach who stayed there for seven and a half months, intubated dozens of times, which like all medical terms has a clinical beauty to it that purposely hides what it really means—shoving a plastic tube down Zach's trachea into his airways so he could breathe as his tiny body shook with the tearless cries of pain that is equal to that of an adult if not more so. Gerry who made the benchmarks of sitting and standing and walking. Zach who remained tethered to supplemental oxygen for another year and a half after he came home, with the canister always beside the crib and the alarm monitor on in case his breathing and heart rate perilously diminished.

Gerry went to the fine Quaker private high school in the shadow of the Philadelphia Art Museum and then college. Now he was getting his master's degree at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. Zach went to the private school for children with severe educational handicaps and then the self-contained program at the high school where he learned vocational skills and basic hygiene such as remembering to brush his teeth and use deodorant every day. Gerry deserved all of what he got because of his sheer will to live, and Zach deserved none of it despite his sheer will to live.

Debra and I threw a graduation party for Zach after he got his high school diploma, a symbolic milestone since he hadn't fulfilled any of the normal requirements. It was a grand occasion. Nearly a hundred people came from all over the country because he was and always will be truly beloved. I got up from the head table to give a toast. "Today Zach is a high school graduate!" I yelled. The cheers rose into a standing ovation. He received dozens of gifts that night, piled up on a table like a bonfire. He was the epicenter of the galaxy. I wondered if he would ever have a moment like this again since there would be no wedding or birth of a child or golden anniversary. I knew Gerry's future would include all of that. I knew Zach's future would always include bagging groceries.

## II

Zach is already inside Brooks Brothers on Walnut Street in Philadelphia when I get there. He is tired from work. The stacks of shirts and the cold-cut platters of striped and solid ties on circular tables and the racks of khakis and flannels pleated and unpleated and cuffed and uncuffed overwhelm him. He bends down to touch a tie. He has always fixated on ties. When he was a little boy he insisted on picking ones out for his grandfather and uncle, deliberating between one covered with little whales and a classic striped. Later on he asked for ties every Christmas. He has gotten so many, he still has some he has never touched a decade after receiving them. Now, among questions he uses every time to communicate with someone new, he asks whether he wears a tie to work. The other four basic questions he asks in his rote way are: "Where do you live?" "Where do you work?" "Do you drive to work?" "What is your birthday?" He never forgets the answers to these questions. Throughout the year he calls dozens of people, some of whom he hasn't seen in twenty years, to wish them a happy birthday. He is the Birthday King, and many now call him to make sure they haven't missed one that could lead to unwanted trouble. He is always right. They don't even try to remember anymore.

Zach acts like he's happy to see me. Since Zach does not know the meaning of acting, he really does welcome my presence. I am not like him. I have always been terrified of making an ass of myself, hyper-self-conscious, sometimes social but often beset by anxiety and depression and the downside of mild bipolarity: a morning cocktail of Klonopin, Effexor, Wellbutrin, and Lamictal that my wife Lisa makes sure I have taken, terrified of medicated-less consequences.

—Oh hi Dad!

—Hey, Zach. How was work?

—Pretty good.

—Did you bag a lot of groceries?

—I did.

—Did you talk to any customers?

—I didn't know anyone there anyway it was a Friday people I know don't come until Saturday like around two because that's when my shift starts maybe Sunday after church sometimes.

—Remember you are there to work. You can't talk to them very long.

—I know.

—Did you pay attention?

—Yup.

—Did you bug anyone?

—Nope.

—Did you break any eggs?

—Oh Dad . . .

—Are you ready to spend your gift certificates? You have five hundred dollars' worth.

—I'm ready.

—Do you know what you want?

—A tie maybe.

—You have a hundred ties, most of which you have never worn.

—Oh.

—I think you need to get some other things.

—Like what?

—Maybe a sports coat.

—Maybe a sports coat.

—Maybe new pants.

—Maybe new pants.

The smell of the new clothing in Brooks Brothers is aromatherapy. It takes me back to the once-a-year pilgrimage with my father in the 1960s to the flagship store on Madison Avenue and 44th Street in New York to get clothes for school. I can still see the button-down shirts and flannels and khakis we'd chosen piled high on a table. I can remember my father looking at my haul and saying, "Maybe we should throw in a blue blazer." After we threw in a blue blazer another suggestion followed: "Let's just take a little peek at the men's section." So we went to the men's section. "Can I help you with anything?" the salesman always said. "Just looking," my father always said. "Let me know if I can be of help," the salesman always said. "You got it," my father always said. He went through the racks of clothing twice. He made a move to the elevators. "You should get something, Dad!" I always told him. He always returned to a certain jacket on one of the racks. "Let's just see how it fits," he always said. "Of course," the salesman always said. He always bought two. Then he always bought a couple of shirts and a couple of ties and a couple of pairs of socks and a couple of pairs of underwear.

"Well, Buzzer, we had a pretty good day," he always said after we'd left the store and crammed ourselves inside a taxi with all our shopping bags. The one thing he never said was that we were the only two people in the entire world at the moment. But I knew anyway.

I am all too aware of what I am doing with Zach so many years later at Brooks Brothers on Walnut Street. I am trying to dress him into myself when I was a boy with my father. I am trying to make him into something he isn't. Zach tries on a pair of classic gray flannels. I am anxious that they fit him well. He goes to the dressing room.

—Everything okay in there?

—I'm fine.

—How do they look?

—Pretty good.

He comes out of the dressing room. The pants cannot make it over his protruding stomach. The leg billow like the jib of a sailboat in a dead wind. I silently rail against the cruelty of his metabolism that in a few years has made his midsection mushroom after being stick thin throughout his youth. The salesman knows I am trying to dress this man-child in Brooks Brothers from head to toe. He intuits

my need to keep alive some fantasy that my son must have gray flannels because he works as a lawyer or hedge fund trader.

The salesman steps in and tries to deflect the tension of my frustration. He calls Zach “Hey, buddy with familial intimacy. We move to the rack of blazers, five-hundred-dollar coats selling for forty percent off. I pick one out for Zach. The blazer fits Zach in the shoulders but there is no way he’ll ever be able to button it. It is the best we are going to do. My frustration becomes agitation. My agitation becomes bitchy admonishment.

—You eat too much, Zach.

—Okay.

—How many times do you stop for a Kit Kat?

—Sometimes during grocery breaks.

—No more Kit Kats. No more cheese. No more fried foods. Your stomach is getting enormous. It is hard to find you clothes that fit.

—I’m sorry Dad.

—How many times have we told you you need to eat less?

—A lot.

—What has Doctor Runfola told you?

—I need to lose weight.

—Do you know why you need to lose weight?

—Because maybe it’s bad for you?

—Do you know why it’s bad for you?

—Because you kind of look big?

—Eating too much can affect your heart. Also because you have high blood pressure. So no more Kit Kats. You understand? This is serious.

—I’m sorry Dad.

I don’t think he truly understands the medical implications of obesity and high blood pressure. He will try to lose weight because I have told him to and his mother has told him to and his doctor has told him to. But he cannot grasp basic principles of good health. This worries me, but it has nothing to do with why I’m so agitated now. The promise of a new Brooks Brothers wardrobe is just an illusion. What I experienced as a son with my father I will not experience as a father with my son. He is not a hedge fund trader. I should have known that by now. I will never know that by now. I can’t.

We purchase the blazer, which Zach is still wearing. He asks the salesman if they have a pocket square he could put into the breast pocket because that’s what *my uncle wears and maybe it would be nice maybe to look like my uncle yeah yeah Dad don’t you think it would be nice to maybe look like him?*

The salesman finds a pocket square. He slides it into the breast pocket with the peak sticking out. Zach looks regal. He looks transformed. I never knew he noticed such touches. He is not an abstract thinker; he does not pick up on aesthetic details. It is a common blind spot for people like Zach who harbor aspects of autism, although his diagnosis is not nearly as tidy as that. Yet it *was* an abstract aesthetic notion for Zach to see the pocket square in his uncle’s breast pocket and want it for his own as a sartorial touch. It surprises me. It gives me the necessary elixir of hope.

Which is when I first get the idea.

### III

We celebrate shopping success by visiting the Barnes & Noble several blocks up Walnut Street. Zach goes directly to the map section. He always goes there. I have never seen him go anyplace else in a

bookstore.

He picks up a map of Philadelphia, but since he has about a dozen maps of Philadelphia and has memorized virtually every street in the city without trying to memorize them, he moves on. He considers a map of one of the surrounding counties, maybe Montgomery, maybe Delaware, maybe Bucks, but he has plenty of maps from these areas as well, and he feels like traveling. He settles on a map of Kansas City since he has recently met someone from Kansas City. He takes the Kansas City map and unfolds it. He holds it high with one hand as if he's looking for just the right angle of wind so he can fly. He buries his head in the interstices of streets and avenues and parkways and boulevards. He pinpoints the street he is looking for, the address of the person he has met from Kansas City. He looks at it once more, touches it with a finger from his free hand. He will remember it forever after.

I watch at a distance as if I'm observing some otherworldly phenomenon, the pelicanlike presence of him with that one hand held high as if he's barely balancing, his face so deeply buried inside the map that his nose almost touches it. I like that he is unaffected by the thought of how he looks, the idiosyncrasy of it. And since I'm a parent, and all parents live through their children whether they admit to it or not, I probably love most of all that my son, *my son*, can do something that so few can do. Nobody can read a map like Zach does.

I poke about in the adjacent guidebook section. I thumb through Frommer's guides to Turkey and India and Spain. I move to a different section and pick up a book called *1000 Places to See in the United States and Canada Before You Die*. I have been to many of them. I have visited forty-nine of the fifty states. I have driven across the country four times. I love the lonely roads where your thoughts come to you with such clarity, as if you are living in them, touching them. I crave the truck stop junk food, even the whiplike lengths of "beef" jerky that settle in your stomach only after stubborn reluctance. I make peace with the burned coffee and the whitener that becomes more and more popular the deeper you go into the heartland. I find pleasant mystery in the funky off-the-exit-ramp motels whose polyester bedspreads smell of sex and Juicy Fruit and hairspray.

My father taps me on the shoulder again. It's inevitable that thoughts of your own childhood crowd around you as you raise your own children. Still, given the forever horror that happened at the end with my dad, I am surprised he keeps appearing. But he does, prompting me to remember the road trips we once took together.

When I was ten we drove from New York to Hanover and Dartmouth College, where my father had gone to college. In the recollection I carry with me, probably not quite true and yet as true as it should be, there wasn't another car on the road once we hit New Hampshire. Just me and my dad kicking it through the night.

Dartmouth football was in its heyday in the 1960s. He had become a fanatic, and I followed in his wake to show solidarity. If you're bleeding Big Green, Dad, so am I. I always cried when Dartmouth lost to Yale. He put his arm around my shoulder in the pothole of the Yale Bowl and did not say a word, his acknowledgment that any pain is legitimate if you love something. He certified me, even though he knew he had on his hands a clinically oversensitive child who feared too much of the world. It was like the fireworks show every July Fourth on the Jetties Beach in Nantucket where we owned a house. I loved the spectacle but I was terrified by the sound. My father anguished for me and plotted a solution. He brought along two huge pillows that he held over my ears so I wouldn't freak out. I looked ridiculous, but he didn't care. So I didn't either.

It was after midnight as we neared Hanover. "Look, Buzzer," he said, as he pointed to the speedometer. The needle had hit a hundred. It had to be the coolest thing any father anywhere had ever done. Even if he did risk losing control of the car and killing both of us instantly. "Don't tell your mom," he said. My father trusted me with a secret! We were confidantes.

We drove to Saratoga Springs one summer to see the horseraces. The trip had been planned hastily. He had found a motel on the outskirts. There was a reason it was on the outskirts, slowly giving in to dereliction. But the bed in his room had Magic Fingers. It supplied instant amusement as you plunked the quarters into the metal box next to the bed, then felt rolls of pain grinding into your back and wondered who had been clever enough to invent something so worthless that someone still used.

We went to the historic racetrack but the only tickets we could get were in the grandstand. The beautiful people of Saratoga in their silk and ascots and wide-brimmed hats flitted about with languid arrogance in a separate section. I caught occasional glimpses of them. I envied them. I wanted to wear an ascot. I wanted to flit with arrogance. My father sensed it. "They're all a bunch of stuck-up fuckin' assholes," he said. Even more thrilling than going a hundred miles an hour: his first profanity to me.

Many more millions would follow.

At the Barnes & Noble, I continue to thumb through the guidebook. I thought I knew the country, had picked it clean, but there is still so much to see. Zach puts the map of Kansas City back and plucks another one. Enough. I am impatient. It is his bookstore routine, but we have repeated it dozens of times now, and the over and over and over is gnawing at me.

—Zach, you ready to go?

—I'm ready.

—Did you find a map you wanted?

—Yeah.

—What is it?

—A new map of Philadelphia.

—You have a dozen maps of Philadelphia. Why do you need another one?

—I don't know I just do.

We go to leave. We stop. We are like the film *Groundhog Day* except nothing ever changes. Until now.

—Hey, Zach. You and I are going to drive cross-country this summer!

Zach scans his memory.

—Uncle Bobo drove to Texas once he got hit by a deer.

—I'll be more careful than Uncle Bobo.

—It wrecked his car I think.

—Zach, what about the trip?

—Will Gerry go?

—Nope. Just the two of us.

—Oh.

—You don't seem very excited.

—No no no I'm very excited how will we get there?

—We'll rent a car and we'll drive.

—To where?

—To California.

—Hey Dad I have an idea I think you'll really like yeah yeah yeah I think you'll really like it.

—What is it?

—Maybe we can fly.

#### IV

I ask Debra what she thinks. Her optimism was always in direct proportion to my pessimism, so our

marriage lasted the predictable length of about four years. Or maybe three. She is reticent about the trip. ~~She rightly worries about Zach sitting still in a car for long stretches no matter how hard he tries to rein in his body.~~ She also points out that Zach is interested in neither hiking nor walking nor nature nor sightseeing. She and her husband, Paul, and their two children and Zach and Gerry had gone to Yellowstone National Park a few summers earlier. Zach was not only resistant to this journey but angry about it. When a dizzying flurry of bats flew over the trees during a nighttime walk to appreciative “oohs” and “aahs,” he complained, “It’s not even Halloween yet.” In Zach’s mind there is a precise slot for everything, and he balks at any departure from his precision. Bats are for Halloween. Gloves are for winter. Why is it so difficult for everybody to understand that?

Gerry’s response to my idea is typically terse and direct.

—Two weeks in a car with Zach is a very long time.

Zach’s mother frets that Zach will be unbearably uncomfortable. Zach’s brother wonders what Zach and I will talk about. I worry that I’ll be subjecting Zach to something he is doing solely for my sake. Zach wants to fly.

The notion of the trip becomes even more precarious when such typical attractions as the Badlands and Mount Rushmore and Wall Drug and Bryce Canyon and Yosemite and the Pacific Coast Highway must be avoided since I have seen them and Zach has never heard of them and has no interest in ever seeing them even if he did.

If we go at all, I have to figure out a route that has resonance for Zach. That is not so easy. The idea is beginning to seem impulsive and implausible, spawned in a giddy flash on a cold and brittle day. It is maybe a well-meaning notion. More likely it is a selfish one, a father forcing his imprint on his son and creating an experience that becomes memorable only because both parties spend a lifetime unsuccessfully trying to forget it.

I am not going to expose Zach to something he silently hates. But I still think about the trip. I wonder if there is a way to structure it, not to treasure the country’s epic attractions but to give rebirth to his past, go back to the present because of the way his mind works. I still think about the moment on the ground floor of Brooks Brothers in the after-Christmas emptiness when he asked the salesman for a pocket square so he could look like his unfortunately named Uncle Winkie. I always will see it neatly folded into the breast pocket like a church spire.

There was a spark inside Zach at that moment. Maybe it is a spark that rises like a busted firework only to drain thinly back down to earth with a diminishing whistle. Or maybe I waved the surrender flag too long ago on my son, gave in because it was easier to give in.

Zach and I are driving across country.

---

## Bon Voyage

### I

WHEN ZACH WAS YOUNG and still living with Gerry and me during the week so he could attend the specialized private school in the area, I sometimes stood in his room in the dark and watched him sleep. His body teetered to the side, and his mouth curled open. I wished that I could crawl inside him without him ever waking and reach into the marbled matter of the brain to reattach a wire here and a wire there, a couple of broken strands that just needed splicing, red to red, yellow to yellow, blue to blue.

He had his memory that was beyond remarkable. He had his no-nonsense style of interrogation with adults. Whatever else ticked inside him, there was an unlimited hard drive that saved every answer. I saw these give-and-takes as tiny ships of hope on the darkened sea, beacons of promise that would one day spread over the water until you could see the shore. He would make it to the island of normalcy, even though there is no such thing. All it would take was a simple rearranging of those wires. He seemed so impenetrable, but then came moments when he redacted what was important in the world its essence.

—What are you thinking about, Zachary?

—I'm just thinking about things.

—What things?

—Just things.

—Are you okay?

—I'm okay.

—Are you happy?

—I'm happy.

—Do you love me?

—I love you.

—How do you know you love me?

—Because I love you.

—Do you know what love is?

—It's love.

I began to wonder if there was more to my son than I ever knew or wanted to know. Debra and I had hovered over Zach all his life regardless of the freedom we granted him inch by inch. There was no other choice because of his limitations. Do you have your shirt for ShopRite? Did you forget anything? Do you have money? You can walk around the block twice but you have to be home in ten minutes. You can't have dessert. You can have dessert.

We had been appointed his legal guardians for life when he turned twenty-one. That too was a necessity. But we refused to make him a shut-in. He needed to work, whatever the work. Because he was so good at map reading, giving him the freedom to use the transit system became a potentially great opportunity: he craved freedom, we all crave freedom, and this was a way to give it to him.

Debra and I gave him a cell phone and taught him how to use it. I raised hypotheticals with Zach.

—What do you do when a stranger comes up to you?



—You walk away from them?

—That's right. What if they ask for your wallet?

—You give them your wallet.

—What if they ask for your money?

—You keep it because you need the money to get on the train to go downtown?

—No, you give it to them.

—What if I don't have any money I don't carry so much.

—You should always have money. We will give it to you. What else do you do?

—Call you or my stepdad or my mom?

—That's a good idea but the first thing you do is call nine-one-one. That's the police.

—I call nine-one-one.

—Let's practice. I'm a stranger. I come up to you. I ask you if you want to go somewhere or take a ride. What do you do?

—Call nine-one-one.

Perhaps he was ready.

The first trip was nerve-racking, like a baby taking his first steps. Would he wobble and fall? Would he need rescue? But he called when he got to the appointed stop—the corner of 15th and Locust street in downtown Philadelphia. On his own without telling anyone, he started getting on the train a little early. He went to the Reading Terminal Market downtown to get Chinese food where the proprietors knew him because he introduced himself and asked their names. He went to the Barnes & Noble and branched out to maps of foreign countries. He began to meet me for dinner around the city, sitting at the bar sipping a Shirley Temple before I arrived. The only thing missing was a cigarette and a blond with his own patented pickup line: “Hey, baby, when's your birthday?”

Zach had a way of looking at the world that wasn't haphazard or accidental. The more independence he got, the more independence he desired. He loved taking the train to work. There were many people he knew. He always sat next to one of them, firing away with his questions and remembering the answers. They embraced him with understanding and tolerance and delight at his uncensored innocence, except for one man who told Zach after a single trip that he didn't want to sit with him anymore. Perhaps the man was being callous. Or perhaps he was just startled that after more than twenty years of not seeing Zach, my son still recognized him and knew his address. Or wanted to know his birthday. Or the names of the people who swam in his pool, even though Zach had never been to his house. The man liked riding the train alone because it was his quiet time, and Zach's inquisitions ruptured that quiet.

Zach told me he wasn't upset by the reaction. He never said he was upset, although I think he was. In this instance. It confused him why somebody he knew, however tangentially, wouldn't want to talk to him since he was just trying to be friendly. Not all people are the same, I told Zach. Some people just like to be left alone.

—I shouldn't sit with him anymore?

—Zach, you know the answer to that. You shouldn't sit with him anymore.

—What if I see him at the station can I say hi?

—You just need to leave him alone. It isn't that he doesn't like you. It's just that he is busy with other things.

I could feel the wheels of Zach's brain slowly start to produce an answer that made sense to him.

—I guess he's private.

He figured it out. Just like he figured out that love is love.

It appeared that Zach observed tiny decorations of life, carefully storing them away on the hard

drive of his mind and then incorporating them for future use. He had a *valid* sense of logic, even if most people failed to see it. Or maybe all he had on a sustained basis was a determination to find a good restaurant for the next meal to satiate his very expensive gourmand tendencies, no McDonald's in his particular playbook. It was always hard to tell how much of Zach was the result of deliberate effort and how much was just the result of his wiring. Actually it was impossible. He had never expressed himself with deep introspection, and he never would.

All my life I had yearned for conversation with my son. A conversation making him aware of his own reality. I had never told him what had happened when he was born. I never mentioned the term *brain damage*. I never mentioned the reason he went to special schools. Did he know he would never marry or have a family of his own? Did he know what sex was? Did he know who I really was like Gerry did, like my youngest son, Caleb, did?

Why had we never discussed, even in the broadest terms, his long-term future, no matter how wrenching the subject might be? Maybe because I wasn't sure how much he would understand. Or maybe because I couldn't bear to think about it. Because when I did, the same image always appeared.

I am gone and his mother is gone and Zach is old now, in his sixties, stooped and scraggly, his brown eyes more dark and furrowed than ever, his voice raspier than ever when he talks to himself, still doing with dutiful duty what he started forty years ago, bagging groceries. I see him walking the streets, on the way to some group home with his hands in his pockets, warding off the wind. I see his head cocked at that forty-five-degree angle as he talks in his self-chastising way, and passersby edge away because this guy is on the edge. Through windows filled with greasy fingerprints, I see my son sitting on a bed beneath a ceiling lamp spitting out freezing light. I see him quiet on that bed with his hands clasped in front of him. And then I see him talking aloud to himself some more, which no one tries to silence because no one else is there.

## II

I had never told Zach about himself because I thought I was protecting him. I began to think I was not protecting him at all. Zach had to know the truth. Or maybe I felt the time had come for his father to tell him the truth. As long as I concealed Zach from himself the bond between us would never seem right. There would be love, but there would not be complete connection. The truth had also become hard to bear. He deserved to know who he was. He deserved to know who I was.

I couldn't predict how much Zach would understand. While his vocabulary was rapidly expanding, his knowledge of what words meant was not keeping pace. When I tried to give a definition, or more important to explain the ramifications of certain actions in life like the need for good health, he *tried* to understand. I could literally feel him sifting through that hard drive with all those millions of data points. But his thought process was like using any steppingstone he could find to get across the water. The hard drive did not help him with the concept of preventive health, or terrorism, or racism, or civil liberties. He did not know who Osama bin Laden was. He did not know about Islam or the Middle East or the Holocaust or World War II. He had some vague idea of what 9-11 was: he knew something terrible had happened, but when the anniversary came he called to wish me a "happy 9-11!"

Our relationship for most of our lives had been largely predicated on games. He loved goofy hypotheticals of what would happen if he did something I told him he could not do. When I kissed him good night, he invariably asked me if there was a certain word or name he could not say after I turned out the lights.

—What can't I say?

—You can't say Rick Lyman.

—What happens if I say Rick Lyman?

—I will have to come back upstairs.

Dressed in his usual garb of T-shirt and gym shorts, the bedspread and the top sheet kicked down like unwanted rags in preparation for the tickling war we referred to as “cuddies,” he began to giggle. Then giggle some more.

—What happens Dad if you come back upstairs?

—I will have to give you a cuddie.

—No no no.

—Then just don't say Rick Lyman.

—I can't say Rick Lyman?

—You can say anything else but not Rick Lyman.

—Not Rick Lyman?

—What did I just say?

—Not Rick Lyman.

—You can say Rick. You can say Lyman. But not Rick Lyman. Okay?

—Okay.

—Okay?

—Okay.

—Good night, Zach.

—Good night.

—Good night.

—Good night.

In previous lives, we had obviously both appeared in *Waiting for Godot*. And perhaps written it.

I walked down the stairs and waited at the second-floor landing. He was plotting strategy.

—RICK!

I said nothing.

—RICK!!

—I said nothing.

—RICK L!!!!

I said nothing.

—RICK LY!!!!!!

I said nothing.

—RICK LYMAN!!!!!!!!!!!!

I ran back upstairs and banged open the door. Between giggles, he pleaded false innocence.

—Dad come on Dad.

I came closer to the bed.

—What did I tell you NOT to say?

He stood on the mattress in final preparation.

—Dad seriously Dad I need to get to bed.

It was on.

He squirmed with surprising strength, accidentally kicking me in the head and scratching me with his long fingernails. He jumped out of bed and I began chasing him around the room. I threw pillows at him. He threw pillows at me. I got ahold of him and tickled again. He kicked me in the head again. chased him around the room again. I became exhausted and finally had to stop. He seemed exhausted as well. I rolled the top sheet over him and kissed him good night. I shut the door to his room. I went back downstairs into my room. From above I could hear a pulsating drum getting louder and louder.

—Rick Lyman. . . . RICK Lyman. . . . RICK LYMAN! RICK LYMAN!!!

He could have gone on forever. At any time. At any age. But when he turned twenty-one, after

nearly fifteen straight years of doing it, I decided it had to stop. I was ambivalent about giving up this tradition, though. What else could we do together that brought him so much pleasure? But I could no longer stand it anymore. It only reaffirmed our frozenness. Could we not move on to something else? Anything else? Now, when I put him to bed, there were no tickle wars.

—Zach, you're twenty-one now. Not six. This is what six-year-olds do. I can't do it anymore.

—Sorry Dad.

—There is nothing to be sorry about. You're just too old. You're twenty-one. What happens when you are twenty-one?

—You're not supposed to do things like that anymore.

—That's right. Do you understand why?

—I'm twenty-one I'm kinda too old for this now.

I closed the door to his room. I stood right outside. I burst back through the door.

—Just don't say "good night."

It was on again.

I knew it was the one thing he loved about being with me. I was scared of losing it.

If I was going to talk to Zach with a directness and intimacy I had never approached before, the setting itself had to be a place of intimacy. For the past decade he had been living primarily with his mother and her family in New Jersey, half an hour away from my home in Philadelphia. I saw him every weekend and sometimes more. But the longest I had ever spent alone with him was a week. We needed time together. We needed to once again fall in love.

We *needed* to drive across country. No matter how many times I had done it, the road was always fresh. Like a precious inheritance, I wanted to pass that experience on to Zach and have him seize it as much as I did in my own life. My expectations *were* high.

A wise friend tells me I am dooming myself from the start by raising the bar far too high. She tells me to just let the trip flow. She tells me not to go searching for epiphanies and revelations. She tells me to take the natural bends as they come. It is sage advice, and a shield against the deflation of expectations. If you deliberately look for surprises and significance in life, all you find is an old box of cassettes by America and Heart and Peter Frampton you bought when you were alone and very drunk, and nobody else was watching. But I still want to seek out epiphanies and revelations with Zach beyond the only one I've ever had, the day he was born. I so hungered to crack through the surface into his soul and have him do the same with me.

The trip must engage Zach. The passenger seat must be more than torture rack. Scenic attractions are clearly out. Yet I still think initially it should be a trip to expand Zach's horizons and let the wonder of the country at last course through him. Then I recall the experience of Yellowstone. In addition to his fury over the ill-timed bats, he found Old Faithful woefully lacking as a water slide compared to Hershey Park. And there wasn't a taco concession in sight.

Zach is interested in people. It doesn't matter whether he last saw them twenty minutes ago or twenty years ago. The route becomes self-evident. We will travel across country in ten days, stopping at all the places we've lived before or know well—Chicago; Milwaukee; Odessa, Texas; Los Angeles; Branson, Missouri, the evangelical antidote to Las Vegas, is an add-on because I have always wondered what happened to Yakov Smirnoff. The real Las Vegas is on the itinerary as well.

Las Vegas will be the highlight. I am sure of that. By the time we get there a new understanding and bond will have developed between Zach and me. I will speak the truth to him; there will be catharsis. I know Zach gets overwhelmed with too much sensory stimulus. But I am convinced the kinky kinetic kaleidoscope of Las Vegas will dazzle him much like fireworks dazzle him. He won't be able to take

his eyes off the lights that ignite the universe. Zach himself has already taken to Las Vegas. He calls “Vegas,” as if he just joined the Rat Pack.

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No scientific research is required to know that this is, by any ordinary standard, the worst cross-country route ever contemplated. There is literally nothing to see in terms of sights or natural beauty. The hills and mountains of western Pennsylvania have beauty, but the rest is an amalgam of tarmac, concrete, grass, dust, dirt, blown-out little towns with nothing open except the pawnshop, mesquite bushes, bugs smeared against the windshield like frosting. The stretch in particular from Milwaukee to Odessa, which we are probably the first human beings to ever undertake voluntarily, is without redemption.

We sit at the kitchen counter together half a dozen times to plan. Zach needs to be involved in every decision, so that the trip becomes a truly shared experience. Mutual agreement on where to stay. Where we should eat. How many miles we need to drive in a day to keep to our schedule. Where to stop at night in between our primary destinations. I promise Zach that we will try to go to an amusement park every day since he loves speed-of-light rides.

At this, he displays mild interest.

I buy him a new Rand McNally atlas of the United States.

No interest.

I purchase an octagonal gadget from a truck stop that gives the distances between every city in the United States: 1,433 miles from Yakima to Yuma, 876 miles from Vicksburg to Van Horn, 963 miles from Altoona to Albert Lea, 1,315 miles from Milwaukee to Odessa.

Definitely no interest.

I purchase guidebooks of the United States that describe interesting places off the usual path.

Less than no interest.

—Hey, Zach, what about Metropolis?!

—Where is it?

—It’s in Illinois.

—Remember when we went to that basketball game in Illinois in 1991?

—Metropolis is the home of Superman.

—That would be nice.

—Have you ever been to any of the Superman movies?

—My cousin Nick lives in Chicago in Illinois we’re going to see him.

—What about the Superman movies? Have you seen any?

—No not really.

—Do you really want to visit Metropolis?

—I remember the building where you worked in Chicago it was the *Tribune* building and remember Dad I used to go up there sometimes and see Barry Temkin.

—Do you know who Superman is?

—Not really.

—I think maybe we should skip Metropolis.

I ask him what kind of car we should rent.

He suggests a Cadillac.

His mother tells me he’s getting more excited the closer we approach the July departure. I hear him tell people that “I am driving cross-country with my dad.” His acknowledgment encourages me. But Zach’s lack of engagement is worrisome. Perhaps the whole thing *is* too overwhelming for him. Perhaps the divergence from routine *is* just too radical. He seems more distant than ever. But then I figure it out. There is a precise motivation behind Zach’s detachment.

He really does hate being in the car.

He really does want to fly.

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### III

On a Sunday afternoon in the third week of July, the twins and I are standing in the second-floor study of Gerry's apartment. Zach and I are leaving the next day and have come to share an early farewell dinner. On the far wall, held together by yellowed Scotch tape, is a paper map of the United States. I never noticed it before, and I gravitate toward it. Gerry watches from a few steps behind me. He understands better than anyone the tangled stitching of the journey I am about to take with his brother. He knows I am apprehensive. He also knows the importance I have attached to it. He knows me better than anyone, since we lived together from his birth until his graduation from high school. He also knows his brother better than anyone. He understands how tightly Zach clings to the lifeline of his literal landscape, next meal, next train ride, next ice-cream cone, next quesadilla with extra sour cream, next Kit Kat bar if nobody is looking.

I am glad Gerry is here with me. He plays off my overreaching one-liners, chuckling in the right spots like a dutiful laugh track. He is responding to me even though it is Zach's attention I am bidding for. Zach's affect is dulled; he looks far away into some pinpoint of space that only he can see. I believe he does see something, hear something, know something that cannot be touched by others.

—Zach, show the route; where are we going? Where are we now?

He points to New Mexico on the map. It is a strange and uncharacteristic error given his gifts.

—Is that where we are?

—No we're in Pennsylvania.

—Where?

—We're in Philadelphia.

—So where are we going?

Zach traces a tentative line with his forefinger. He speaks each word slowly. He is fearful of making a mistake. His eyes rise up to look at me. Then roll back down.

—I guess we would go out to Pittsburgh . . .

We have been over the route a dozen times, yet it has not sunk in. His look reminds me of the psychological and mental aptitude tests he took when he was young and turned to me in bewilderment trying to make sense of the instructions when it was all a nightmarish blur of square pegs and round holes. He is overwhelmed because he is scared; any step away from the Routine is a frightening leap for him. We normally spend a week in Nantucket with my sister, Annie, every summer. She is kind and loving and hilarious. She talks more than anyone I have ever met, but a lot of it is to offset the fact that I don't talk very much. When we're there, we see the same people, we eat at the same restaurant. He always walks downtown to Kevin Dale's office and drinks a bottle of water. He goes out on Michael O'Mara's boat. He visits Billy Einstein. It is his zone of comfort. It is where he wants to be going now. He will not tell me that. He hates to disappoint me. The day is supposed to be celebratory. *Waiter, shots of tequila for me and my boys here!* Instead, it seems weighted by the heat that presses down. The liquid air reminds me of when the boys were born, the last thing I wanted to be reminded of right now, the last thing I ever want to be reminded of.

We leave the apartment and walk to a restaurant called the New Wave. We sit outside to the dull clatter of silverware and the transit buses headed to downtown Philadelphia in trailing burps of gray exhaust and the speedy gossip of women in unrequited love coping with men who act like broken traffic lights—on again, off again. I order the grilled hanger steak salad. Gerry has the flatbread pizza. Zach has the shredded lamb taco because there is no salmon on the menu. Gerry offers advice to Zach.

—Have a good time. You'll have fun. Don't be against doing new stuff. Sometimes you're hesitant about that. You know what I mean about that?

—What do you mean?

—You like to have your routine. You like to wake up in the morning. Eat breakfast. Read your e-mails. Get ready for work. It'll be different now.

—Yeah.

Silence . . .

Gerry fills the hole with talk about the courses he's taking for his master's degree—school and society, a social studies methods course, student teaching at an inner-city elementary school. Penn has one of the finest schools of education in the country. The work is arduous and sophisticated. I am enormously proud of Gerry. So is Gerry, who never ever thought there would come a day when he would attend an Ivy League school.

I glance over at Zach. How can they be twins? Sometimes I wonder if they are even related. My pride in Gerry tamps down because of the guilt I feel for Zach. The goddamn guilt. The scrap-metal weight shackled to my ankle. It is always there.

—You look lost in thought, Zach.

—Yeah.

—What are you thinking about?

—Nothing.

The food comes. More silence. Forget what Zach and I are going to talk about for *two weeks* in a car. What are we going to talk about for *ten minutes*? Gerry again fills the space.

—Hey, Zach, is that lamb?

—At the July Fourth block party on the Fourth of July they made lamb I sat with Jay he's a member of a golf course.

It is a typical string of non sequiturs connected by disparate strands of memory. The plates are taken away. We wait for the check. I look at the mottled sidewalk and see blotches of blood and vomit and tiny bits of glass. I glance again at Zach. His head is cocked at an angle. He is staring inside his space. We need to get out of here.

We walk back around the corner to Gerry's apartment and go inside to fetch Zach's red suitcase. Then we come back outside. I have my black camera bag with me. I insist that they pose in front of the apartment door for a final picture before we leave. I like to be reminded they still are twins.

In my study is a photograph of Gerry and Zach taken when they were six years old. I was living with my second wife, Sarah, at the time in a suburb of Milwaukee. She took the picture.

They stand in front of the house we rented, wearing black jeans, white socks, and striped shirts, Gerry blue and Zachary green. They are holding each other's hands. Gerry looks straight ahead, and Zachary gazes at Gerry with adoration. They look like what you always hope twins will look like, in the uniqueness of their love.

I try to get them to imitate the posture of the picture taken almost twenty years ago. I am trying to replicate the possibilities that existed then, that moment between the two of them, my belief that it would all somehow work out even though I knew it would not. Zach was beautiful back then, with marble-smooth skin and eyelashes as long as a wedding train. I thought that this beauty would last in eternity and somehow shield him. It was an irrational thought. So what? Any parent who has a child that is different has a right to be irrational. It is how we cope. It is how we pray.

Gerry tells Zach to stand up straight as I fire off photos. He drapes his arm around him. He coos in his ear. Zach bursts with laughter. Their fingers intertwine. Then untangle.

—I'll miss you, Zach.

—I love you.

—Make sure you call me, let me know what you're doing.

—I will.

Zach and I walk back up the steps to the street. Gerry yells.

—AND TRY NEW THINGS!

#### IV

Zach and I go home from Gerry's apartment. We are leaving early tomorrow morning. Zach has packed by himself with economy, tight balls of clothing inserted into his red suitcase and a blue knapsack containing the Fort Knox of all his private possessions. I have packed the opposite, an enormous black soft cloth bag of clothing for different parts of the country. A hanging bag. A computer bag. A camera bag. There is also a green duffel bag that weighs fifty pounds and contains virtually every photo taken of Zach and Gerry from the worst moments to the best. Each night we will pull out a fistful of pictures and Zach will fill in the names and places that I have long forgotten. Another blending experience.

All our bags are neatly in a row by the side door, a joyless line of attention. They are sick of waiting. So am I.

—I think we should go tonight because I'm kind of excited.

—Yeah.

—Just the two of us. Are we going to learn a lot about each other?

—Yeah.

—What are we going to learn?

—A lot.

—What do you think it's going to be like being with me for two weeks?

—Different.

—Different? That's interesting. Why different?

—Because I'll be away from my other family.

—You gonna miss them?

—Yeah I'll probably call them a lot of people want me to call them.

I feel another uptick of self-doubt, but I move on. I grill him to make sure he has everything. He assures me he does. I am tempted to open the suitcase and see for myself. The razor he says he brought particularly concerns me, because the blade is usually two years old and rusted. The shaving cream he says he brought is a tiny can of Gillette Foamy, which I thought was discontinued after World War I. I have no idea where he got it. I let it go. I let all of it go. He does not like being treated like a child, and as much as I can I don't want to treat him like a child; his suitcase is his suitcase.

I go up to his room on the third floor to fetch a pillow and blanket so he can sleep in the minivan I've rented for the trip. To call this space Zach's room is a misnomer. It is simply the place where he sleeps when he stays with me. I should have done more to fill it with his possessions. I'm not sure why I did not, maybe because he never seemed to be here for very long.

I don't turn a light on. I don't want to be reminded of the sterility. A single bed with a drab brown bedspread is wedged into the corner. *Sports Illustrated* etchings of Ted Williams and Eddie Arcaro that came from my own childhood hang on the walls. He has no idea who these men were. The square eye of a television he never watches stares from the back wall. His only remnants lie on top of the chest of drawers. They are business cards from restaurants. Some are from restaurants where he has eaten. Others are from restaurants where he has never eaten but walks in and asks if he can take a car. He keeps all of them in a plastic box. There are hundreds. He has memorized the addresses.



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