2017

Wearing Bare Feet

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Wearing Bare Feet

A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

J.P. Schlottman

2017
We hereby recommend that the thesis of J.P. Schlottman, titled *Wearing Bare Feet*, be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Accepted

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Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences
Abstract

*Wearing Bare Feet* is a linked collection of wry short stories about a family of three on fictional Eel Island, three miles off the coast of Maine, an island that revolves around lobstering, tourism, billionaire movie stars, department store heirs, jewelry store heiresses, people who houseclean for snowbirds ... and the old, rich and entitled summer people who come back from Florida for the annual Fourth of July Parade, and then die. Because it is easier to die there. It is why the 13-mile-long "rock off America" has more ambulances per capita than anywhere else in New England.

It also has a lot of guys who just smoke skunk weed that's happened to fall off the sterns of fishing boats, drink 16-ounce Bud tallboys in brown glass only (cans are for pussies), cut grass and plow snow. And play with their dump trucks.

Acknowledgements

This book is for Becky Schnur, she who makes everything possible, and, of course, for Ava Schlottman, who had to live through the writing of it, and did so with her customary grace.

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Wearing Bare Feet is a linked collection of short stories about a fictional family of three on Eel Island, three miles off the coast of Maine, an island that revolves around lobstering, tourism, billionaire movie stars, department store heirs, jewelry store heiresses, people who house clean for snowbirds, and the old, rich and entitled people who just come back here from Florida for the annual Fourth of July Parade, and then die. Because it is easier to die here. It is why this 13-mile-long rock has more ambulances per capita than anywhere else in New England.

It also has a lot of guys who just smoke skunk weed that's happened to fall off the sterns of fishing boats, drink 16-ounce Bud tallboys in brown glass only (cans are for wimps), cut grass and plow snow.

And play with their dump trucks.

There are women, too.

Interpret that as you may.

In summer, in season, the island's population swells from 600 to over 1,200, due to the myriad imported house guests, the maids, the butlers, the cooks, the gardeners, the personal trainers, the butchers, the bakers and the candlestick makers, all of whom take that 20-minute ferry ride from what the islanders call America, to what they also call Paradise Island.

This collection is culled from the 55 short stories I've written, most more humorous, if darkly so, than my usual work, over the two years since returning from my

Pete Dexter said in an interview: "I've always loved stories. If you're patient enough there are more people than you'd ever guess that have stories. It wasn't deliberate but that's what my stuff's always been about: It's about stories." (Bleth, Deadspin, 29 Apr. 2013)

Me, too.

I first met the writer Kevin Barry in Ireland in the summer of 2017. I'd been intrigued by him because he got Pete Hamill to write a blurb for the book jacket of his first novel, City of Bohane.

Barry told me one night over dinner in Dingle, Ireland: "You need to take those good bits — probably something from family, from home. But it takes years of circling around to write things that are tough for you to write. As Graham Greene said, "Writers need to have some ice in their veins."

It turns out that isn’t exactly what Greene wrote. Instead, Barry probably was thinking of: “There is a splinter of ice in the heart of a writer,” from Greene’s A Sort of Life, which was published in 1971.

A lifetime of writing for me and either version resonates.

It took me a while for the cubes to freeze.

There's a bit of a lot of people I've encountered in these stories. Some more than others.

If they recognize themselves, I may never eat lunch in this town again.
I went to graduate school to learn the craft of fiction, after spending two decades as a newspaper sports columnist in Philadelphia and New York. What I learned was the value of taking one's time, rewriting and trying to accept edits. I also believe I learned, or maybe just re-learned, the clue of collaboration.

It remains something with which I struggle. This is the curse of being my father’s son. I believed that I knew everything, about everything. He did, too. It took me nearly six decades to learn the error of my ways.

Sadly, he never did.

I have been particularly influenced in my fiction writing by the likes of Dexter, Robert B. Parker, Carl Hiaasen, Dennis Lehane, and Barry.

There also is a little bit of the late Frank McCourt somewhere in this collection; you may find it. I hope so. That probably comes from me being a cranky Irish Catholic writer and former altar boy who also spent more than a few days teaching, coaching and cooking in public schools.

Yes, I said "cooking."

Ever make turkey gravy for 200 people?

I have.

I also used to go to the Super Bowl, almost got carjacked and shot in a parking lot in Atlanta at the National League baseball playoffs, had my pal former heavyweight champion Larry Holmes bleed on my computer ringside at Caesar's Palace.

We won't get into the memoir about my trips to India quite yet.

Perhaps, someday, should I live long enough, you may come across that, too.
Any contemporary Maine writer must begin with Stephen King, whether one particularly likes horror or not. An early piece of any graduate program includes the study of a craft book — a book about the art of writing itself. For me, the obvious choice was a second reading of King's *On Writing*.

King writes like a reporter. Like a journalist. Because he began his adult writing career as one. I suppose this is among the reasons why *On Writing* rings true to me. If I had to write a thesis statement for this annotation, it would be: Less is always more. From this book, I came away with validation in terms of the spare style in which I write. As well as another confirmation of what I learned early on as a journalist:

One of King’s major things involves the usage of the word “said.” It always should be "said." Not told, replied, cried, shrieked or screamed. If you write well enough, that emotion already should be conveyed.

Likewise, this also spoke to my personal style: There is nothing wrong about writing what King calls an "easy book." (King, Ch. 4)

“Easy books contain lots of short paragraphs — including dialogue — paragraphs that may only be a word or two long — and lots of white space.” (King, Ch. 4)

That's the way I write; it's the way I like to read.

"This is by no means bad writing. “Frags" can work beautifully to streamline narration, create clear images and create tension, as well as to vary the prose line. Purists hate to hear that and will deny it to their dying breath. But it's true.” (King, Ch. 4)

“The single-sentence paragraph more closely resembles talk than writing, and that's good. Writing is seduction. Good talk is part of seduction. If not so, why do so many couples who start the evening at dinner wind up in bed?” (King, Ch. 4)
Although I've stumbled into the realm of short fiction and even dabbled in poetry, my desire always has been to create recurring characters and follow them through their adventures, through their imagined lives. This is where Parker hooked me, via the TV series *Spenser: For Hire*, starring Robert Urich. A show so good it encouraged me to read the books. I've read all 39 in the series at least three times apiece.

As with King, Parker had no problem with brevity. This, as a newspaper columnist, probably was another attraction to me in terms of Parker's work. But I have to say, while *The Godwulf Manuscript* may have been Parker's thesis, well, it's pretty clear that it was his first novel. Still, his talents were readily apparent: finely drawn characters and snappy dialogue. Things I believe to be, to slip into baseball vernacular, in my wheelhouse.

What is interesting to me about *Godwulf* is how different it is from Parker's latter works. The paragraphs are much longer in his thesis of a novel. There is much less of the short, staccato bantering that eventually drew me into the series. Still, the dialogue already is excellent. And it shows examples of the flippant wit for which Parker became famous. The problem, however, is that if you're not engaged in the character, the book does not stand the test of time. You read this book and you think, "Patty Hearst?" I was old enough when I read it to figure out where Parker was going. But if my daughter, who was born in 2001 tried to read it? No clue.

*Godwulf* is a novel for which you really need to have patience. For it fairly plods along, until Parker finally hits his groove — the one he’d continue to slam out of the park for 30-plus years:
“Okay,” (Spenser) said. “I’ll go see her. How about a retainer? Forbes telling me how indigent you all were has me nervous.”

“One will come to you in the mail from the comptroller. A week’s worth in advance.”

“Sold,” I said.

I gave him back the file and the picture.

“Don’t you want it?”

“I’ll remember,” I said.

We shook hands.

I left. (Parker, Godwulf, Ch. 1)

Simple, but elegant writing like that made me want to write fiction, back when I was a scribe, writing about boxing, writing about people trying to knock off each other's block.

"I left."

Really, what more else is there to say?

"I left."

This is why I always have been a fan of Parker's latter minimalist style, and have learned from it, both in terms of being a columnist and in my fiction.

"I left."

In context, just a beautiful sentence.

Sometimes, less definitely is more.

Dexter was a newspaper columnist in Philadelphia, where I worked as a columnist, too. And while I also hung out with heavyweight boxers, I never got beaten to
a pulp by mobsters. Nor have I yet sold anything I've written to HBO. Much less to Hollywood.

In the beginning the stories were long and colored, but as he grew old and his eyes clouded, the stories were told in only a few words, and she came to understand that all the colors had fallen away from him, leaving only the moments. A woman who performed tricks in the air, an animal pulling a boat under water, dead children who spoke in bones. A man who loved bottles.

(Dexter, Ch. 1)

There are a lot of commas. But the description is vivid. What I like about that third-person narrator passage, though, is what Dexter writes about aging and stories getting shorter as a result.

One of the assorted problems with writing a thesis is that you really don’t want to write a thesis. You'd rather just go out into the backyard and hit a bucket of golf balls into the sea, in order take out your frustrations on something that doesn’t involve computers and printers. Which brings me to Hiaasen's golf book, *The Downhill Lie*, his chronicle of returning to the sport at the age of 53.

As a newspaper columnist at *The Miami Herald*, Hiaasen developed a uniquely quirky style — equal parts humorist (like his old colleague Dave Barry), naturalist, and champion of justice for the downtrodden, neglected and oppressed. Together, it made him one of this country's finest fiction writers. But this golf book, essentially a memoir, distills his talents into a creative non-fiction piece of self-flagellating hilarity.

The thing is, when Hiaasen writes non-fiction and delves into his own life, particularly when he begins to talk about his relationship with his second wife, I can
relate. Now, I only plan to have one wife. But I understand Hiaasen's dark humor. I think some of mine comes from reading him, from Dexter, and from Dan Jenkins and from Dave Kindred. Sportswriters all, to one degree or another.

Today’s the day—my wife’s first lesson. Afterwards she calls from the car to say she had a grand time, which catches me off guard.

‘I was using a pitching wedge,’ she reports proudly.

‘That’s great. It’s very important around the greens.’

‘What’s a green?’ she says.

Me, thinking: One step at a time.

‘Did you schedule another lesson?’ I ask.

Although I love spending time with Fenia, Lupica’s right—the golf course can be dangerous territory for a marriage. The last thing a struggling hacker needs is a spouse who wants to learn the game, and the last thing a beginner needs is advice from a spouse who’s a struggling hacker. Delicacy and reserve—not my strong suits—will be necessary to ensure that the conjugal relationship survives

(Hiaasen, Ch. 21)

If you're a writer and you read that, and you're serious about your craft, you cannot help but think: Wow. I really do stink. I ought to go back to being a caddy.

The other thing about Hiaasen is that he always touches upon the apparently inherent insanity that is in writers, may we be newspaper columnists or novelists or poets, that thing that makes us the most socially retarded, introverted and people-hating people in the world, yet still decide to interview the entire world on a daily basis.

So why do it then?
Because we needed the money.

No matter how poorly I’ve scored (in round of golf), I still haven’t tossed any $80 Cutter and Bucks in the Dumpster at the end of a day. During rocky stretches I’ve switched hats, tees, ball markers, gloves, bandannas, spikes and even sunglasses, but high-end wardrobe I cannot bring myself to jettison. Unlike my fishing clothes, golf duds aren’t cheap. Another factor is marital harmony—because many of my shirts were presents from my wife, I’m reluctant to start throwing them away on an impulse for fear of being branded as ungrateful and possibly nuts. (Hiaasen, Ch. 23)

Throughout this journey, I’ve been compared more than once to Lehane. Poor Dennis.

The thing about Lehane is that his characters are real. They speak like real people. The dialogue is gorgeous. He writes the way people speak. And there are drugs and ferries, too. I’ve got both of those where I live.

Not long after KL got back from Afghanistan and she met up with him, he scored off this cop who’d been part of the Lafayette Raiders bust. This cop had known someone who’d served over there with KL, someone who hadn’t made it back, and he sold the shit to KL for 40 percent of the street value, called it his ‘yellow ribbon’ price, supporting the troops and shit. KL turned that package over in one night, and the next day they took the ferry to Provincetown. (Lehane, Ch. 4)

As I stumbled along in my studies, I came upon this review of Barry's first novel, City of Bohane, in The New York Times by Hamill, who wrote:

City of Bohane, the extraordinary first novel by the Irish writer Kevin Barry, is full of marvels. They are all literary marvels, of course: marvels of language,
invention, surprise. Savage brutality is here, but so is laughter. And humanity.


I thought then: I need to meet this Barry guy. So I took Aer Lingus to Ireland. The thing that struck me so much was how although an *Irish* writer, Barry admits he has been very influenced by American television. Shows like *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*. Shows I loved. These influences shine through brightly in his *Dark Lies the Island* collection.

We also discussed the value of writing early, writing alone, beginning while still half asleep and making sure the coffee isn't strong, lest you lose that weird, almost dreamlike state where things just sort of pop up out of the foggy morning sky.

The semester's journey began out of Logan, to Shannon, where our first stop was to visit the Frank McCourt Museum in Limerick, housed in the same building where he, barefoot, attended elementary school. The museum curator was terrific. But there only was one other person there on that rainy morning.

Turned out it was one of my classmates from across the pond in Camden, Maine.

One of the things I was doing in Ireland was presenting a brief lecture on McCourt. I think there is a large bit of McCourt in every Irish Catholic former altar boy writer of a certain age. Perhaps of any age. In the introduction to McCourt’s *Angela's Ashes*, Thomas Cahill writes:

“Give the man (McCourt) a Prix de Rome, a Croix de Guerre, a Pulitzer, a Nobel, a Templeton—and while you’re at it pull him another Guinness!” (Cahill qtd. in McCourt, Angela’s Ashes, Blurb)

I continue to wonder why so much Irish literature is imbibed with imbiment?
I had to read McCourt's *Teacher Man* for a previous residency. In addition to the fact that I adored the language, I was inspired to learn a bit more about McCourt himself. For instance, the fact that he was well into his 60's before he smashed into fame.

Oddly, I often find the things I like best in McCourt's books are early on. I suppose that is the old journalist in me. I was taught: Don't bury the lede. But sometimes, the nuggets I find in these books weren't even written by McCourt himself. Consider this, as from the introduction to *Angela's Ashes*, where Jeanette Walls writes:

‘Ah, a fellow sufferer,’ Frank McCourt said when we first met. ‘Let us share our epics of woe.’ We were appearing together on a panel and I had been so nervous about meeting him—the great Frank McCourt, the legendary storyteller, the author of the Pulitzer Prize–winning bestseller *Angela’s Ashes*—that I had barely slept. He noticed how flustered I was and it seemed to amuse him. ‘It is true that I am a great man,’ he said, winking at me. ‘I know this because people ask my opinion on all manner of subjects of which I know nothing.’

If you were lucky enough to meet Frank McCourt, the smart thing to do was to shut up and listen. Listen to the music. To the magic. Because Frank McCourt’s spoken words were, incredibly, every bit as exquisite as the words he wrote. And it was all the more extraordinary because, for the most part, Frank McCourt complained. He complained about everything, about drunken Irishmen and pompous priests and pious nuns, about bullying schoolmasters and long-legged Episcopalians, about the way New Yorkers said ‘stoopid,’ about euphemisms and platitudes, about the fungus that grew inside his soggy childhood house in Limerick, about such ironies of fame as growing up hungry and then being invited
to write for *Gourmet* magazine. ‘Have ya read Angela's Ashes,’ he asked the 
editor? ‘As a child, I thought a balanced diet was bread and tea, a solid and a 
liquid. (Jeanette Wall qtd.in McCourt, *Angela’s Ashes*, Introduction)

But here is what really led me to fall in love with McCourt, as a writer who has taught and 
coached in public schools. This, from his *Teacher Man*:

> On the first day of my teaching career, I was almost fired for eating the sandwich 
of a high school boy. On the second day I was almost fired for mentioning the 
possibility of friendship with a sheep. Otherwise, there was nothing remarkable 
about my thirty years in the high school classrooms of New York City. I often 
doubted if I should be there at all. At the end I wondered how I lasted that long.

(McCourt, Teacher Man, Ch.1)

The problem of the sandwich started when a boy named Petey called out, Anyone wan’ a 
baloney sandwich? (McCourt, Teacher Man, Ch. 1)

As McCourt tells it, the other students mocked Petey for the baloney sandwich. A 
scuffle ensued and Petey threw the sandwich on the classroom floor. McCourt continues:

> They had to recognize I was boss, that I was tough, that I’d take none of their 
shite. The sandwich, in wax paper, lay halfway out of the bag and the aroma told 
me was more to this than baloney. I picked it up and slid it from its wrapping. It 
was not any ordinary sandwich where meat is slapped between slices of tasteless 
white American bread. This bread was dark and thick, baked by an Italian mother 
in Brooklyn, bread firm enough to hold slices of a rich baloney, layered with 
slices of tomato, onions and peppers, drizzled with olive oil and charged with a
tongue-dazzling relish. I ate the sandwich. It was my first act of classroom management. (McCourt, Teacher Man, Ch. 1)

I tried classroom management in a previous life.

It's more fun to just read and write, even if there isn’t a free sandwich involved.
Part I

Smells Like Death
“Two bags of weed in the trunk,” my father-in-law's caretaker Big Tommy texted me on that dank, grey June morning in Maine, while I was at my new oncologist.

The hot one. The TV doctor. Like the chick on ER, back in the day. When Clooney and Denzel were sniffing after her on NBC.

Big mouth, perfect teeth. Only no spiral perm on mine.

A shame. A damn shame. Because that just would've completed the whole hot doctor Halloween costume: the spiral perm, even while wearing those nasty aquamarine scrubs and all. Even with those chalky latex gloves. Even with the dangling stethoscope, while grabbing my balls, all in the name of science.

And yet, my previous oncologist, the short but sweet one, had gotten her license pulled for getting herself OxyContin for two years on some other doctor's scrip pad that she allegedly stole.

She may have been a dwarf. Or at least she was "height-challenged." Isn't that the PC term?

Which left me with the TV doctor, who had to be about 5-11.

Height. It's something you notice right away when you used to be a ballplayer.

Or when you used to be a cop.

Christ, this is beginning to sound like an episode of The Sopranos.

Maybe it is?

Except?

WELCOME TO VACATIONLAND.
WELCOME TO MAINE.

It used to say that on the white license plates the prisoners hammered out at the old state prison in Thomaston, right? But, you know, whatever . . .

I'm waiting for the latest round of my blood work to be done when I get another text from Big Tommy:

"Four bags of weed now."

"Where?"

"All in the trunk."

"When is he leaving?"

"Tomorrow. Reservation on the first boat."

The brunette doctor came back into the treatment room, but I waved her off, as politely as I could, and I said in a low voice: "Could you come back in a minute. Please?"

She nodded and turned on her heels. Well, flats, actually, this being a hospital, a cancer center and all. Oncologists don't wear high heels.

I texted back to Tommy: "Is he going straight to Jersey?"

"No."

"Huh?"

"Overnight in Newton for your niece's high school graduation. Remember?"

Actually, I had not. These sort of things tended to happen to me more of late — and especially when I had to visit the cancer center in Augusta. Two 20-minute ferry rides and an 80-mile round trip drive, alone, from Travolta Island (as I'd come to call it, after having eaten Raisinets and watching Disney movies projected on the side of a barn,
with his actress wife) always with the potential to be told that you're dying again. You aren't real clear-headed in those circumstances.

"So when is he getting to Jersey?" I texted Big Tommy back when I got to the parking lot of the Amato's, across from the Federal Building. The pizza sucked, but I was listening to Little Steven. Loud. So I didn't particularly care. And I was wearing a Yankees cap. Just to piss off the locals.

Of course, I used to play for them.

The Yankees. Not the locals.

I also carry a Glock.

Long story.

Got shot twice. Got cancer.

Did you know that one in four people who've had cancer still experience PTSD six years after surgery?

What if you’ve had cancer and been shot twice? Does that raise the crazy bar to eighteen years?


"Gotta go, Tom. I'll text you when I get back to the island."

Tommy got the text. Because it soon said "Delivered," on the screen of my iPhone.

Tommy couldn't see me roll my eyes.
So I got home. I'd brought sushi. And so I fed Lisa and Theresa and collapsed into bed, the Sox on the radio and Roger Clemens doing color? I wasn't drinking, but still thought I must be hallucinating somehow.

And after one, single, quiet day, after which I was told I still wasn't dying, the phone rang early Tuesday morning. The alarm clock across Liv's pillow on her bedside table read: 2:37 AM. I grabbed for the shitty black Motorola cordless phone on mine.

Lisa shot up and said: "Who's dead?"

Because when does anyone ever get a phone call at 2:37 AM if someone isn't dead?

"Vic, it's Tommy."

"What?" I mumbled through the fog of my disturbed sleep. In the, uh, fog. The moon was but a hazy crescent over almost-invisible Penobscot Bay.

"We have a little problem, Boss," Tommy said.

"Huh?"

"There's someone who'd like to talk to you."

"Me? Where? Now? I'm in bed. I was asleep!"

"I'm going to transfer him to you."

"Transfer? Transfer? Tommy, you can't program a fucking VCR, Tommy!"

"Hold on, Boss. He'll be right on the line."

"Boss? Boss? I'm the underboss. And only when the Boss is in Florida. Now . . . ."

Clicking and hissing, over the exceedingly bad land line connection that runs undersea from the mainland in Lincolnville to the island: And then:
"Good morning, sir, this is Colonel Joe Roberts of the New Jersey State Police. Am I speaking to Vic Torino on Eel Island, Maine?"

"You are, sir," I said, jerking my hand at Lisa, a right thumb, toward the kitchen and mouthing, "Go make coffee."

"What may I help you with, Colonel?"

"Well, I'm afraid it's your father-in-law, Mr. Torino . . . Hey, I saw you hit that walk-homer off against the O's in . . . ."

"In '93."

"Yeah, August '93. Thanks."

"What about my father-in-law?"

"Well, he's in custody, Vic."

"Olivia," I whispered, covering the phone, "where's the fucking coffee?"

"Well, it's like this, Vic. May I call you Vic?"

"Who the hell are you, Columbo? You do realize I'm the chief of police up here right?"

"Well, sir . . . ."

"I thought we were going by Vic now."

"Of course, sir . . . I mean, Vic. Sir . . .

"And you realize I am ex-NYPD?"

"Of course, everyone down here remembers you, sir . . . er, Vic."

"Then let's cut the bullshit."
"Well, the thing is . . . Vic, your father-in-law Milton was going about 80 southbound after mile post 97.2. And it was quite late. He was alone. And he seemed . . . exhausted."

"Well, you said it was . . . what, when was this, exactly?"

"Slightly after 1 AM, Vic."

"Where's he at now, Columbo? By the way, you got a raincoat on?"

"East Jersey State. Rahway . . . But we got him a nice private suite. Because of your . . . um, history. But it ain't no Holiday Inn, in no fashion. If you know what I mean. So my advice to you is to get him out. Now."

"Was he intoxicated?"

"No, sir . . ., er, Vic. He didn't blow anything on the highway. He's just old. No one that age should be driving from Maine to the Jersey Shore, all alone, in the middle of the night."

Lisa handed Vic the black coffee, climbed back into bed and started playing TriviaCrack on her iPad, with Theresa's boyfriend, who, for some reason, was still awake in the middle of the night. The kid's boyfriend had a hell of a slider, though.

A righty. Fortunately, he's a Lefty, politically.

So, anyway, between getting shot in New York, twice, and between my crazy blood relatives who constantly asked me for cash, between my own-ass blood on Bronx sidewalks, my failed baseball career, between that and this and all of that?

"Let's go slowly with this," I said, in the voice I used when I tried to sound neither commandeering nor condescending. "What the fuck is going on?"

"Well, your father-in-law, Vic, is behind bars in Rahway."
Sorry, I couldn't help but sigh.

"Why?" I asked again.

"He was driving over the speed limit."

"It's the New Jersey Turnpike, for chrissakes! We both know that. And he's 81 years old."

"So why in the hell, Vic, is he out speeding in the middle of the night?"

"Going to see his girlfriend in Sea Isle City."

"Didn't you just tell me he's 81?"

"Yeah, so?"

I signaled Lisa for another cup of coffee.

"Well, Mr. Torino," he said, switching back to the formal vernacular.

"You also may call me Chief."

This retort completely flummoxed him.

"Sir . . . er, Vic . . . um, Chief?"

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Well, the thing is? The Nissan Sentra smelled like death."

I got out of bed and started getting dressed.

"What's going on?" Lisa asked.

"I need to get to Jersey."

"What???? Why? Now?"

"Your dad's in jail."

Big Tommy drove me down to the dock. I'd quickly hired a water taxi to the mainland, a Joe's Cab to the airport in Owl's Head and a charter flight to Newark. That's
the deal when you live in a place that revolves around cash from rich tourists. You have the cash, you can make anything happen. Fast. Even in the middle of the night.

Maybe especially in the middle of the night.

I was at Rahway, inside, by 5 AM. A sleepy looking guard in two shades of blue brought my father-in-law into the visitor's room. I could see through the streaked and clouded Plexiglas that he still was in his street clothes, albeit handcuffed.

"Milton, what did you do now?"

"I didn't do nothing, Vic. I swear."

"I thought Jews weren't supposed to swear."

"We're not supposed to eat shellfish, either. Or work with I-talians. So shoot me."

"I can't. They wouldn't let me bring in my gun."

"Listen, Vic, I'm really sorry . . . ."

"Just tell me what happened, Milt," I said, sighing again, locking my hands together behind my head and leaning back in my chair. Yep, just like the old days. Interrogating a suspect.

Well, except the suspect, so to speak, usually wasn't my father-in-law.

"OK, OK. So maybe I was driving a little too fast. Big whup."

"The Nissan smelled like shit. He said it smelled like death. The trooper got suspicious. It was the middle of the night in Jersey, Milt."

"I didn't have no dead body. You know I ain't done shit like that in years! Years!"

"I know, Milt. But the smell . . . ."

" Granted, the car did smell bad. Guilty as charged."
"And there was your cellphone. It was open and on, in your lap, and he saw the last text to you from Tommy."

"Huh?"

"I believe it said: "I hope the four bags of weed aren't making the car smell too bad.""

"Oh, for Pete's . . ."

"Milton, what the hell were you thinking? Speeding in New Jersey with four garbage bags of dead seaweed in your car."

"Hey, Vicki needs it for her garden! Makes great freaking mulch."

"That's why God invented this place called Home Depot," I said.

"Hey, why buy it if you can get it for free?"

"There is that."

"What? This kid pulled me over, he don't know from seaweed? They do have seaweed in Jersey, if I recall."

"Right, but they thought you had weed-weed. And maybe a dead body in the trunk. It was the New Jersey Turnpike in the middle of the night. And you were speeding."

"Victor Joseph Torino, my favorite son-in-law . . ."

"I'm your only son-in-law, Milt."

"Do I look like a trained killer to you, Vic?"

"Only a retired one."

I was tired and getting very hungry.
"You've lived in Maine for 20 years now, Milt. Why do you still have a girlfriend in Jersey?"

"Eh," Milton said, in that rasp of a too-many-cigarettes, too-many-bourbons and too much listening-to-Sinatra late-at-night voice. "Old habits die hard. And I still like my redheads."

I was expecting his next question to be how soon I could get him out. Instead Milton said:

"Hey, I'm gonna get them four Hefty bags of weed back, right? Or else I'm in a shitload of trouble with Vicki."

"You're already in a shitload of trouble with me, pal. Father-in-law or no: You're already in a shitload of trouble with me. Capiche?"

Which was when my cellphone buzzed. It was a text from Big Tommy:

"Is the weed safe?"
This is my barroom story.

This is the one I've told in pubs and kitchens all over the world. Usually over a Guinness pint, hand-drawn, preferably. Should I be so lucky.

Everybody who drinks beer needs at least one story like this.

What did they used to call them? Shaggy dog stories? I can't remember. There has been a lot of Guinness consumed, on many continents. Lots of Guinness. Not too many brain cells left. But we do what we can. And remember what we might.

Thank goodness I didn't smoke weed. I wouldn't be remembering a damn thing at this age. But that's neither here nor there. This is the all-time classic. This is the Snake Story.

As Liv says: "This is the story you dine out on, dear."

And I say: "Yes, I do, babe. Yes, I do."

Actually, it was the story I drank out on, while eating bad nachos in multiple countries, in many mediocre chain hotels, while sitting in their darkened bars, chatting with absolute strangers. But, hey, anyway . . .

It does help, in terms of the believability factor, should the story one writes actually happen to be true.

This story is.

But I have to admit: This also is the story that if Liv hears it one more time, I'm going to get a cast-iron skillet upside the head.

So I'm writing it instead.
Of course there was beer involved. Why wouldn't there have been?

This is the story of the beer refrigerator and the giant snake.

Now, maybe the snake wasn't that big. OK. I'm a city boy. There were those . . . well, relatively little garter snakes? Isn't that what they call them? The ones I'd run over with the John Deere on the mainland, back in the days when I still was cutting grass?

Not remotely the same snake.

This green thing hissed at me. It had some weird-ass diamond pattern on its back. And it had that scary pink reptile tongue.

And it was in my basement.

I'm going back to my roots as a journalist and I am going to tell this story in an easily understood, linear fashion. So here is how it all began:

Liv was getting ready for bed. This remained a complicated process that involved the removal of makeup, flossing, brushing, and so on. ETA to bed? 30 minutes.

Probably enough time for a beer. Right?

Keep in mind that, despite the replacement and thousands of dollars to a guy who since had gone bankrupt, the double garage doors in the basement were far from airtight.


So Liv is upstairs in the bathroom. The kid's asleep. And I walk down the creaky wooden stairs to the beer refrigerator.

And there's a freaking live snake on the basement floor in front of it.

OK, so this is one of those moments in life when I revealed myself to be both a city boy and a wimp.
Apparently, the snake was as freaked out as I was. Because for 10 minutes, he
did not move.

Or was it a she?

I do not know much about snake genders.

"Um, Liv? LIV!"

"What?"

"Liv, there's a snake in the basement!"

"Huh?"

"Yeah, a snake. And it's alive."

"OK," said Liv, who grew up in Maine and really isn't rattled by anything but
mice.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Well, it probably came in to eat the mice," she said.

"But what about my beer? I just wanted a damn beer."

"Here's what you do," Liv said, in her red plaid flannel pajamas and holding her
toothbrush in her right hand. "Go out to the garage and get the shovel. Use the shovel to
put the snake back outside. Grab a box and scoop it into that."

"But you already had me break down all the cardboard and take it to the dump
yesterday. I don't think we have a box."

I tromped back downstairs, went out across the driveway to the garage in the
dark and grabbed the shovel.

No box.
I went back down to the basement, with the shovel. The good news was, the snake hadn't moved.

The bad news?

You ever try to get a live snake to stay onto a shovel?

Yeah. No.

To say that this operation went poorly would not be an exaggeration.

So I hadn't gotten that beer. I was clear headed. And so I was thinking to myself:

What happens at 4 AM, when Liv walks down the basement with her IPad, her iPhone, a bottle of Poland Springs . . . and screams.

Because there is a large, live snake en route to the exercise bike.

I guess what sort of, kind of happened . . .

You might call it decapitation.

There was a lot of snake blood on the basement floor.

"You did what?"

"Just sort of happened, Liv."

"You just happened to beat a snake to death in the middle of the night?"

"It was in front of the beer refrigerator. And I didn't want you to scream and wake me up when you went to exercise at 4 AM."

"There is something seriously wrong with you. I'm calling my mother."

Liv's mother did not speak to me for a month.

Now, we'd always gotten along splendidly — for 25 years, in fact. Except for the time Liv's mom flew the plane down and showed up in my house with this crazy wolf dog.
She is an animal lover. I am, too. In fact, since that episode with the plane and her now dearly departed dog, I have had dogs. Four and a half, actually.

Well, maybe four and a quarter.

The one who was certifiably nuts went to live in a fine home with someone else.

But, yeah, this is the woman who watches my kid, makes cheesecake for my birthday, invites me for New England boiled dinner on St. Patrick's Day (her daughter won't go; hates the smell of cabbage).

But I apparently crossed the line this time.

"How could you do that? Kill a snake," Liv's mother said.

"Uh, it was in my basement and it would've interrupted my sleep when your daughter screamed at 4 AM."

It did sort of look like something from an episode of CSI when I was done.


This must be why they created bleach.

Don't ever try to get a live snake onto a shovel when all you want is a cold beer.
You turn grey.

You turn white.

Then your hair falls out. Almost completely.

It makes life difficult, because it is bad form to wear hats at dinner. Especially in fancy restaurants.

That aren't Kosher.

I went to New York. I bought two fedoras. To get me out of the skull caps I'd been wearing for two years.

I went to New Orleans. I found a haberdashery, on Royal Street, where I bought two newsboy caps.

I purchased the first, a kind of tweed thing, at my wife's suggestion.

She said I looked good.

I thought maybe I'd get lucky if I bought it.

So I did.

And I did.

But I also purchased a maroon one, because I thought it would go with an outfit I had.

And, yes, I did, in fact, as I walked with her, holding hands, toward Canal Street, think:

What in the hell is wrong with you? Now, you're visiting strange cities . . . to buy oddly colored hats?
But what are you gonna do?

This is after you get cancer and the nice Jewish surgeon lady from Pittsburgh carves out half of your left thigh and then you get acne like you're a fucking teenager.

Your wife tells you to go buy Clearasil at the supermarket.

Your reply to her is: "Bite me."

And then your wife says: "Well, you can't shave your head."

"Why, Liv?"

"Because your head is a fucked-up shape."

"What? Huh?"

"I love you, Sweetie," Liv says. "But your head looks like a goddamned cantalope. Do not ever — I repeat, ever — shave your head."

I'm grabbing an iced tea out of the refrigerator. Ella is at school. It is Passover. The tea probably, technically, shouldn't even have been in there. But for me, it's pretty much a liquid diet during these eight days, while I atone for somebody else's sins. Or some shit. Maybe mine? Liquids and a couple pieces of string cheese.

The Kosher salami repeats on me.

All salami repeats on me now.

On the bright side?


I usually drop about 10.

"So I can't shave my head, like your brother?"

Liv gets her second cup of coffee, looks at me, shakes her blonde hair and just says:
"No."

"Why?"

"I have to get to work," Liv says.

"Wait, wait, wait! Why is my head a fucked-up shape?"

"It just is," Liv says. "Not you're fault."

"Just born that way?"

"I guess," she says, pouring the half and half into the mug. "Just don't shave your fucking head."

I went to the living room, got my IPad and went to the burgundy leather sofa from Wanamaker's, the one we bought in Philadelphia, before they went out of business 25 years ago, the one that doubles as my lazy ass office in this house. And I was going to try writing a story. About something. But Prince had died, Percy Sledge died . . . And then I got a message that my professor's dad had died, too.

I am getting old.

I cannot keep dealing with death.

Daily death.

Unless there is beer involved.

Or I move to New Orleans.

Where I know a bar on Bourbon Street that is open 24 hours a day.
The screen door slammed.

"How'd it go?" I asked Ella.

"Good," she said.

Ella was going to be 15. Some days, that was as good as it got.

It was a little better today.

Probably had to do with getting paid $12 an hour.

"I saw Chef Jonny at the beach," Ella said.

"You were at the beach?"

"Thelonius likes the beach."

It was Ella's first day on the first job of her life: Two weeks of minding a 3-year-old for six hours a day.

Having never changed a diaper in her life.

I'd kept my cell ready at hand, in case of emergency.

"He eats so fast, Papa. And so much!"

"Really?"

"He ate a sandwich in, like, 30 seconds! And an entire bag of my kind of popcorn!"

"The microwave stuff?"

"Yeah."

"The microwave stuff that I bought for you?"

"Yeah, Papa."
"Fill out an expense voucher."

"What's an expense voucher, Papa?"

I think I may have shaken my head. I seem to do that more as the parent of a teenager. It beats yelling, which, I learned, serves no purpose.

"Yeah," Ella said. "That popcorn. And then he started asking for crackers!"

"Whose crackers?"

"Mine," Ella said.

"Wait a minute. So you're babysitting the kid, but I'm buying food?"

"Well. . . ."

"I have a suggestion."

"What, Papa?"

"Start packing fruit. He'll stop eating really fast."

I'd been home listening to the pre-game show for Night 3 of the Democratic National Convention. Trying to write. And trying to watch the dog who was dying, but wasn't dead yet.

Everywhere I turned, it seemed, someone was saying "Donald Trump." Which, to many of us, had become to sound eerily like "Heil Hitler."

I hadn't known that Woody Guthrie had rented from Trump's father Fred in the 1950's.

Let's just say that Woody wasn't a big Trump fan, either.

Hmm. Does that make me some sort of American folk hero, too, according to the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon Rule?

The Six Degrees of Woody Guthrie?
Wow. I hated Trump 30 years ago when I was getting paid to write about him . . .

This is what happens when you are alone on an island in 90-degree heat, without air conditioning, without a pool, waiting for a ferry.

It's almost like an out-of-body experience. You're so hot, there's no telling what may pop into your mind.

Even if there isn't an open beer . . .

The guy in charge of the ferry line, a real mensch, a sweetheart, his name is Jerry.

Of course I call him Ferry Jerry. Of course I do.

He comes up and I make some smart-assed remark about the annoyance of spending six hot hours in the summer, when it is not snowing, to take the dying dog to the vet.

Just then, some idiot from Quebec — who apparently does not realize that we are in line for the 1 and have been waiting in the heat with barking, panting dogs in our cars for nearly two hours, drives around us and parks at the front of the line.

Jerry ejects him.

Then Jerry stops at my car. I have the window down.

"You believe that?"

"Yep," Jerry said. "Let me tell you a quick story."

I was all ears. The summer ferry stories always were the best. And further proof that, I'd become fond of saying: You can't make this shit up.

"Now," Jerry said, sounding like he's at the convention.

He did not say: "My fellow Americans . . ."
I strangely wished he had.

"Now," Jerry said, "this dude in a white Escalade pulls in, cuts the line, old guy, right? Foggy morning. Wife is old, too. Blue hair."

"Right, right," I said.

"So the foghorn blows as I'm punching their tickets, and the broad says: "Is that the ferry?" "No, ma'am," I said, "that's the train." And then I walked to the next car."

"Did you tell her about the tunnel under the bay?"

"No," Jerry said, with a twinkle in his eye. "I thought that might've been over the top."

This was not Bowdoin. This was not Yale. I was not at school. I was in a hot car with a dying dog and watching insanity.

My arm still hurt like a sonofabitch.

My writer friend who played center field at Georgia Tech, every time, me being the pompous (my late mother preferred calling me "arrogant") ass that I am mentioned Yale, said friend would punch me in the arm.

I made the mistake of telling this to my friend Sis, as all of the couples were sitting around drinking and playing Cards Against Humanity and . . . I guess Yale kinda came up.

Sis hauled off and socked me, leaving a bruise the approximate size and shape of New Haven on my bicep.

To say that it was an interesting month would be to understate.

Your kid gets her first job. People punch you. Everyone keeps saying "Donald Trump, Donald Trump." Sort of like "Charlie Manson, Charlie Manson."
And your wife and your mother-in-law are trying to decide whether the best place to land if the general election goes horribly wrong is Costa Rica, Dominica or New Zealand.

Because your daughter is brown. Very brown. Very beautiful. And so Trump scares the piss out of you all, on her behalf.

The problem is, to emigrate, one needs a job. Which requires having a skill. Somehow, I don't really think "old, retired newspaper columnist" is going to work . . .

"Do you think they have McDonald's in New Zealand, Ella?" I ask my daughter.

"I think so, Papa."

"Good, because Jonny taught me how to flip burgers that year I worked at school."

"You could Google it, Papa. McDonald's. In New Zealand."

"Go clean your room."

The phone rang and I considered not answering, assuming it was another automated call from some state out west, another call asking me whether I believed marijuana should be legalized in Maine. Will I vote for or against it in November?

"Hello?"

"Hi, Oscar," Liv said. "Is it hot there?"

"What do you think?"

"Hot. Here, too."

"But you are in an air-conditioned car."

"True," Liv said. "How'd it go?"
"Let's just say Ella learned how to change diapers."

I eventually hung up and called Ella into my home office. Also known as my bedroom.

"So it went OK with Thelonius?"

"Yeah," Ella said. "Much better than when Meggie watched him yesterday."

"What happened?"

"She'd never changed a diaper before, either."

"Yeah?"

"And she called her mom who was working on the mainland at 2 o'clock screaming, "Code Brown! Code Brown!!"

I sighed. But otherwise kept my mouth shut. Which is unusual for me.

"But you figured out the diaper situation?"

"Yep," Ella said.

"There are instructions on the side of the box, you know," I said.

"Nah, didn't need 'em. You just lift the kid up by his ankles and shove the diaper under his ass."

Which was when I had two thoughts:

Can one emigrate to New Zealand if the only person in the entire family with an actual skill is going to be 15? The actual skill being changing shitty diapers?

Writing doesn't count. Because it doesn't pay.

But who in the hell names their kid Thelonius?
The Miracle of Refrigeration

The day when my daughter was trying to learn how to ride a bike was the day my father-in-law Henry found the Bud Light.

It was in his old refrigerator, which certainly dated to the '40's. It was in his garage, and he'd decided to evacuate or excavate it, the old refrigerator, that is, while Ella was trying to figure out a bicycle, hopefully without breaking any bones on his asphalt driveway. The cleaning kept him from having to potentially watch her fall on her head.

No, I got to worry that one my ownself.

This is not to be confused with the tale of Henry's freezer. The one that smelled like hell and contained either a dead body or at least a toddler's arm. We'll get to that.

Anyway, I was bored. Standing around, watching someone try to learn how to ride a bike, whether you love them or not, is sort of like watching someone paint a bathroom. So I thought I'd go see what Henry was doing. I was headed in that direction, up the blacktop. The kid had wanted to ride on a reasonably flat surface. So we went through the woods. To grandfather's house, we went.

And she's riding. She's improving. She hasn't fallen on her head — or even skinned her knee. This, I believe, is what they call progress.

"Good morning, Henry. How you doing?"

"My stomach doesn't feel so well again," he said.

Henry has Crohns. We think.

But it was the case of beer that Henry had in his arms that caught my attention.
My father-in-law seldom drinks beer. Only on special occasions, or when I shame him into it. Or when he's up from Florida and can get one of those giant bottles of Newcastle Brown Ale at the store. It can be a nice after-dinner drink. Occasionally. Especially if he's had to deal with us for four hours at Saturday family dinner.

Anyway, we're in his driveway, when he says: "Hey, Oscar, come look at this!"

Holy Christ.

I immediately notice that this was about four Bud Light labels ago. Where the hell did this come . . .

"Look," he says, "it's from your wedding!"

Now, I have been married to this man's daughter for 25 years. And he did buy the liquor for the wedding. As well as the beer. Yet there is something slightly disturbing that he has had this beer in his refrigerator for so long.

And I know, because of that ubiquitous born-on date on the bottom of the can:

April 12, 1992.

This was 2013.

We were married on August 22, 1993, same day the Dead played at the University of Oregon.

All things considered, the marriage did, indeed, trump the concert.

But the old food. At Henry's. I'm just saying . . .

My father-in-law will be 80 in December. He's a sharp, smart and well-dressed man. But there are issues with food.

He once announced proudly that he had just eaten a container of cottage cheese that only had been in the refrigerator for six months.
Refrigeration is a miraculous thing, until 60 years later, it all goes spectacularly wrong.

I was in my house the other day when his caretaker Roy knocked on the side door.

"We may have a little issue, Oscar," he said.

I put down the teacup and gestured him toward a dining room chair. I may have sighed.

"What now, Roy?"

"Liv's dad's freezer died."

"Oh, shit."

"Yeah," he said. "I walked into the garage and it smelled like an episode of the CSI."

"Does CSI smell? I don't ever get that coming through my TV."

I picked up the tea again.

"That bad, huh?" I continued. I shouldn't have been giving Roy shit. He was just doing his job.

"Real bad," Roy said. "Really, really bad."

My father-in-law was going to be in Florida for another month, so this was another of those things that was going to fall upon me. Ain't like Liv was going to deal with it. She had a real job. I was just writing fiction.

"What did you do?" I asked Roy.

I may have sighed again, too.

"Well," Roy began. "It smelled like death."

"OK."
"There was a ton of shit in there."

"I understand, Roy," I said, doing my best David Caruso.

"Roy? Roy? What is the crux of the problem, Roy?"

"What's a 'crux,' Boss?"

"I am not your boss, Roy. Roy? Henry is your boss, Roy. I am just married to his daughter."

"But . . ."

I cut him off and it wasn't even mid-sentence.

"Roy? What's the problem, exactly?"

"The bottom of the freezer, Boss."

"Stop calling me, Boss, Roy. I only write you occasional checks, Roy."

Roy took off his Patriots cap, since he suddenly realized he was in my dining room. Staring at his feet, he said: "Yes, sir."

"What's the problem, Roy?"

"Well, I found something."

"What something? A dead body? What?"

Roy shuffled his feet, hat in hand. For whatever reason, he didn't want to look me in the eye.

"Spaghetti sauce, sir. In Mason jars."

"And?"

"I recognized your mother-in-law's handwriting. From when she used to write my checks."
"OK," I said. "There's more to this isn't there, Roy? What is it that you aren't
telling me, Roy?"

Roy shuffled a bit more.

"Hey, you have any coffee?" Roy asked, because I often did.

"Roy?"

"I bundled up everything and took it all to the transfer station."

"And?"

"The spaghetti sauce. Homemade!"

The tea was gone. Roy was at the table with a half-cup of coffee he'd warmed in
my microwave.

Dropping all pretense, kicking down that wall between employee and winter
supervisor, Roy finally just said:

"Dude, the shit was from 1989!"

I had to get up to make another cup of tea. Were I still drinking, this would've
called for Irish coffee.

"Roy," I said, my back to him, me at the stove, boiling water. "Roy, what are you
trying to say?"

Roy finally looked up, shook his head and looked me in the eye. Again, we had
dropped all employee-employer pretense.

"Oscar," Roy said.

"Yes, Roy."

"How long have your in-laws been divorced."

"Since 1990, Roy."
"And Henry had homemade spaghetti sauce in the bottom of his freezer that Sara made in 1989? You don't find that . . . odd?"

"I do, Roy. I do. Maybe he kept it as a memento."

"Or maybe he just forgot about it," I said.

"Maybe."

"You know he doesn't eat pasta," I said.

"True. But you also realize, Oscar, that Henry thinks yogurt that is six months past its pull date is perfectly fine."

"So long as the curds haven't turned green."

"It's yogurt," Roy said. "They'd turn orange."

The water had boiled and I dropped a couple of bags of Lipton into the teacup and swirled the water, as I'd seen someone once do in a movie I can't remember.

I can't remember much.

Evidently, Henry can't, either.

"So, it's all gone?"

"Yes," Roy said.

"Sorry about that."

"All part of the job."

About twenty minutes later, Liv got back from her daily walk to her mother's house and asked after my morning. And so I told her.

"You know," Liv said, "I don't think Dad actually has Crohn's. I think he has chronic food poisoning."
Part II

I Am A Rock
Lobsters for Love

The white plastic Hamilton Marine buckets with a dozen-plus lobster covered in seaweed to keep them cool, in case I wasn't home, left under the maple tree, so they didn't die before I could cook them, started showing up in my dooryard once word got around that I'd thrown the lying, cheating island doctor out of our rental house and onto his rental ass.

That didn't take long.

My latest project was the new Maine tourist/summer person staple: Lobster Mac and Cheese.

The key thing was, you needed not just Gruyere, but also Fontina.

You ever try to get Fontina on an island?

I'd always been the pretty brunette. Not exactly Mensa material, OK? Yeah. I get that. Still, I probably shouldn't have been surprised when I became the beneficiary of this lobsterman, Terry, the latest beneficiary of his version of the Widows and Orphans Fund, just like the cops have.

Out here, it's the Widows and Orphans and . . . Divorcees Fund. And what they receive is free lobster.

Terry liked to call his program: Lobsters for Love.

Use your imagination.

"Hey, you get 'em, Meredith?"

"Oh, I got 'em, Terry," I'd say as I came out of the post office and across the parking lot during island coffee break, when everyone went to the market for good coffee in bad paper cups. "Thank you."
"It's my pleasure," and he'd smile.

And I'd think: Maybe, maybe not.

Anyway, I knew that they knew, that I knew, that they only came to my disheveled household summer bakery, out of which I also did my catering, the one with flour all over the hardwood floor, was to look at my boobs.

And maybe my big blue Irish eyes?

But I accommodated them.

It wasn't about the chocolate chip cookies, although the island men all claimed those were very good as well.

The writer from Philadelphia, the ex-Yankee, the lobsterman and this weird-ass clown who used to be a hedge fund manager who called himself — no shit — Uncle Fun. All on folding chairs, in this microscopic home kitchen, watching me bake in a tank top and a flimsy apron.

Uncle Fun tried to grope me one hot afternoon during an anniversary party on the writer’s deck, in full view of my then-husband.

That would've been Husband No. 4

We don't speak of Three.

No one ever speaks of Three.

In the abridged version of myself, I only was married three times.

So far.

No one other than No. 4 and Oscar, no one else knew that Three even existed.

And that was only because of a slip of the tongue, on someone's part.

Knock it off. I didn't mean it that way.
And no one but No. 4 and Oscar knew that this was the third set of tits. But, hey.

... Well, actually, Vic, the ex-Yankee-turned-cop, also did because he knew what
the fake ones felt like, if only from a friendly hug.

Never hug a guy who played in the bigs.

They... well, they spent a lotta time on the road, so to speak. Like rockers.

Like the guys I used to know, when I was, like, 17. But ballers, they get paid way better,
at least early on, from the fucking outset. If you can hit a curveball at 18, that's the sort of
dude you want to glom onto.

But these ballers, they got used to spending postgames in Montreal at Chez Paris.
Or, in Tampa, across from Steinbrenner's hotel, at the Tanga Lounge.

So, anyway, it wasn't the first time I'd had a guy try to stick his hand up... whatever. It wasn't the first time this had happened to me publicly, I'm just saying.

But on a deck, on Eel Island, in summer, while I'm catering? And No. 4 looks on
stupidly... and does nothing?

I'm a fucking caterer now. And I went to baking school.

There were no poles involved on this sunny August afternoon in Maine.

Anyway, the writer, Oscar, throttled Uncle Fun, on that deck, in front of Uncle Fun's passive wife, then carried him out with the help of Terry the Lobsterman, and dumped him into the bed of an idling red Chevy pickup of recent vintage. And drove Fun's drunken ass home.

I have to admit I was a little bit horrified when Oscar knocked the guy cold.
Of course, I also was horrified that the equally passive No. 4 went into the kitchen for another Crab Rangoon. And ignored the whole thing.

He just walked away.

I suppose I should've realized it right then.

Six months later, we were divorced.

The CSI star who summered here, he didn't do shit, either. He simply waited until it was over and then wanted to know if he'd still get his daily lemon squares on time tomorrow.

Of course, he was about 5-6 in real life anyway, so, he would've been of no use.

The camera makes you smaller.

Meanwhile, a bandful of gentlemen and one excellent female piano player played swing, Sinatra, standards. There was no Sugar Hill Gang.

But my chicken didn't taste like wood, so, really, that didn't matter.

It otherwise was a beautiful 20th anniversary party on the deck for these three couples — one married on exactly the same day as Oscar and Olivia, all those years ago. At which point these couples did not even know each other.

Things change.

"Did you remember the ice?" Liv said. I overheard.

"Of course, babe," Oscar said. "I'm doing this for you, you realize? I'm paying attention. I'm dotting the i's."

"But it's August, and you have all these old fuckers playing on an unshaded deck," Liv said.
"This is why some deity created Life Flight," Oscar said, "to land it on your 20-acre lot, Sweetie Pie. Short chopper ride to Lewiston. You know, um . . . ."

"Why are you always such a dick?"

"Covered sports for 20 years," Oscar said, and I saw him shrug. "Learned at the feet of the misogynist masters."

I walked away, quietly, but quickly, to restock the deviled eggs.

Their anniversary party ended without heart attacks or strokes by ancient musicians. They were on that island deck the next morning, having black coffee, in the full sun, with the view of the ocean, attempting to navigate the social schedule for the rest of their fancy Eel Island Summer. To put up appearances. It was the day after the party. I was over to clean up. And the phone rang.

Olivia leapt up to grab the phone.

"It's for you, Oscar," she said.

They were on speakerphone, as a result of being on the deck.

"Good morning," Seamus said.

"Good morning," Oscar replied.

"We got a little problem."

"What?"

"Terry's in Intensive Care at Waldo General."

Oscar's coffee mug dropped to the glass tabletop and shattered. My jaw dropped. And Olivia just looked toward me, as usual, shooting daggers through her eyes.

I was convinced Olivia believed that my plan was to make her sweet, successful writer Number 5. And that was while I was still married to Number 4.
I had lived on many islands, with Four. The original idea was to take photos of all of them — the islands, not the husbands — and do a photo book. So many islands out there. But I got sidetracked. Really, I did.

Especially once someone helpfully informed me that Four was catting around.

Then maybe I did, a little, too.

That's another thing about islands: No shortage of people willing to pick up the landline (cells don't work too well on these rocks) to inform you that your kid is smoking weed or that your husband is fucking a teenaged soda jerk.

Soda jerkess?

So once his ass was on the lawn and his clothes were falling out of the second-floor window onto the lawn on top of him, and he finally stood up and started to put them into a large Amazon box from the dog food that we had to mail order, he took the last ferry off the island. Me saying that I hoped I'd never see him again.

And that's when Terry came a calling.

A sniffing.

I'm not really sure what happened. Not exactly. It wasn't the best of times. But I got a lot of lobster. It helped my business. And he was a sweet, sweet man who deserved some sympathy himself.

Which brings me back to the phone call.

"What happened?"

Oscar was eating my cheese Danish, in one of those folding chairs.

"Terry crawled to the wheel," Oscar said, talking with his mouth full, "the rusty metal chain from the trap still around his leg."
Oscar sipped at the tepid coffee and continued:

"Terry knew there was something seriously wrong, of course. Very, really, seriously wrong. About to pass out from the pain wrong . . . Because there was this bone, see, and it was poking out of his skin. So, yeah, OK, broken leg, right? Only it was a slightly bigger deal than that: Compound fracture. No weight on the leg for 18 months. Sixteen hours of surgery."

"And?"

"And no health insurance," Oscar said.

There are a few key points that need to be made about being a lobsterman off the coast of Maine.

Well, about being a fisherman off the coast of . . . anywhere.

Never go out alone. Whether it is a beautiful day or not.

Lobster boats have a captain and a sternman, who is the one who does the heavy lifting and also makes sure the captain doesn't get himself killed. By being out on the water alone.

Especially when your daughter, your pride and joy, is just about headed off to Louisiana for college and, well, now times were tough. Because Terry couldn't fish.

Maybe he'd never fish again.

Here are five things that people who don't live on an island do not understand about lobstering:

Every year is a bad year — the new, shiny, giant pickup truck in the dooryard excepted . . .

No health insurance, as I kind of mentioned.
Life jackets are for pussies. No one wears life jackets on lobster boats. Except for pussies.

Sunscreen also equals pussy.

Sometimes, if the fishing is good, even if your sternman is unavailable, you go out anyway, alone. Because it's a very seasonal and very cash business.

So out you go.

Terry had crawled toward the steering wheel. He was neither a small man, nor particularly fit. He was flat on his considerable stomach, but he managed to grab the wheel with one hand. But he couldn't reach the radio. So he steered the boat while prone. And he got back to the dock.

It seems that his trying to jam the bones back together with his strong hands helped to a degree.

All the while, once he got into the harbor, Terry occasionally would let go of the wheel and wave.

It's one of those odd things about New England island life: Everyone waves. When driving, especially, but also while walking, boating, you name it.

This time, Terry's wave was meant to mean this one simple thing: "Help!"

But everyone who noticed thought he just was giving the typical island hello.

While apparently not noticing that people don't normally pilot lobster boats while lying on their belly.

Ironically or fortuitously or whatever, it was Terry's niece who noticed the arm coming up strangely, waving, over the bow, the rest of his body invisible on the floor of the boat.
"Why are we doing this?" Oscar asked.

"Because you know damn well," Liv said, "that Terry would give anyone anything, even the shirt off his back."

I kind of stifled a chuckle as I cleaned up the party residue.

"But why in the hell did he go out by himself?"

"Because the shedders are coming in," Liv said.

"But . . ."

"It's a cash business," Olivia reminded Oscar.

Once they were done making the Greek pasta salad to take to the fundraiser, Oscar went down the store, saying he was going to buy a Powerball ticket.

"If I win," Oscar said before he left, "the first thing I'll do is buy this damn place a swimming pool, hire lifeguards and make sure every kid on Eel knows how to swim. And try to figure out a way to make sure people don't ever lobster alone. Then no more Greek pasta salad ever will have to be made. Or eaten.

The door slammed. I did not want to be in this kitchen alone with Olivia, not in her kitchen. Not even a little. Not even just until Oscar got back from the store.

I untied my apron, hung it on a hook in the laundry room down the hall and said goodbye. And fairly jumped into my car.

I'd made a lot of mistakes in my life, mostly with men. But I had survived.

I knew when to say when.

I was a survivor.

I knew when I had met my match.

Olivia scared the hell out of me.
No way was I going out on a boat by myself without my sternman.

If you know what I mean.
The 15 pickups of assorted vintage and damage snaked almost single file north up Main Road, multi-colored and dented, as the self-appointed townsmen went to take their Sunday coffee. The sky was grey. Heavy, low storm clouds. There was nothing else open at 10 AM in January on this frigid, windswept island three miles off the coast of Maine. So they assembled as usual at Stevie's store.

But what with the trucks, it looked as if it could've been a funeral procession, slowly passing through the drifting, blowing snow, through the sea smoke, one by one, over the two-lane, black-icy asphalt. Except for the crusty lobster pots in the beds of about half the pickups, either brand-new, shiny, huge and owned by a lobsterman claiming poverty as usual, or smashed, stove in and owned by someone who needed a new optometrist and a couple less Buds before lunch.

Hell, even a lazy sternman would have taken out those traps if someone actually had died. To make the funeral procession look decent. They do the same thing here for the Fourth of July parade; toss the unset traps into their dooryards because it's a holiday, which, coupled with the volunteer fire department's chicken BBQ and the annual fireworks off the point at 9 PM when the fog lifts, that is the extent of social life on the island in summer for the island help — caretakers, landscapers, groundskeepers, cooks, wait staff. I could go on.

But we were a long way from summer. It was January. And so, it was Basketball Island.
"I can't believe he quit," a white-haired old man with a wispy beard and wire-rimmed glasses named Chip said. "How could he quit? He missed the damned championship last year four freaking points! Do you remember how long it's been since this island won a championship! In fucking anything? And this is island basketball, for Christ's sake!"

"Yeah, why'd he walk away, anyway," the syncophant on the end of the battered wooden bench asked. They called him Red, because his face always was. His real name was Wallace. "I heard he kifed sneakers and selling them on the EBay."

It was then that a large man entered the now-overfilled little dining enclave at the store, carrying his paper cup of coffee, steam rising from the open, lidless top.

He probably was 60, tall, fit, still had a full head of coarse black hair. And quite the reputation as a cocksman.

They called him the Mayor behind his back. To his face, he was Butch. And he ruled, or at least ran, Sunday Morning Coffee: No Women Allowed. Although women certainly got discussed at the all-male island klatch.

Everyone and everything got discussed.

That's the price you paid for living on an island.

"Why'd he walk away, Butch?" Red whined. "We coulda been good this season. Real good. If we had a real coach."

Butch sat down on the mottled bench in the spot that had been provided for him. It was imperceptible; he walked in with his coffee and everyone squirmed in various directions to open a spot so he could sit, right there in the middle. All of them looking at
their feet; no one acknowledging that they'd actually moved at all. And yet it was like the parting of the Red Sea.

Butch sipped at his coffee, took a deep breath and then looked up at his constituents, all 15 of them. The tough guys on the island. The big shots. The ones who thought they knew everything about everything.

"He didn't walk away," Butch said, quietly. "He ran."

There was silence in the hutch, the 15 men staring into their paper cups.

"So he's a pussy then? A quitter," Red said finally.

Butch sighed, eyed the room, left to right and it was an epiphany. Jesus Christ, he thought, I've been here since I climbed out of the womb. This island. This place. My home. But these guys, I've known most of 'em all my life. These guys are fucking idiots. How in the hell did it work out that I woke up one Sunday morning, 60 years old, to discover that I, me, Butch Graves, was the smartest bastard in the entire room?

"Ran, huh? OK," Chip said.

"Fuck, yeah, he ran," Butch replied. "And you want to know why?"

"I already know why," Red said. "Because Mike Leavy is a fucking pussy. That's why. Can't stand a little criticism. So he took his ball and he ran home. Pussy."

Butch got up for a second coffee and almost turned right and headed out the door to his truck. But he knew what they said behind his back; he knew they called him the Mayor. And with that unofficial title bestowed upon him by the nitwits who congregated at the store for their coffee — those who either didn't attend church or have Sunday morning sex with their wives, and that pretty much covered almost every man in town over 40 — he felt some small responsibility.
He really hoped he could turn a few of them in Mike Leavy's direction. Maybe even just one. Because it wasn't Mike's decision to leave. Walk, run, it really didn't matter. Mike Leavy quit coaching high school basketball to get the hell away from the likes of them. Leavy wanted to get as far away as fast as he could, to put this island in his rearview mirror and never look back.

Butch understood. He'd been there. He'd coached here, too. And the fact of the matter was, it was a hell of a lot easier coaching on this rock if you were born and raised. You wash up on shore someday with your degree and your new teaching contract, ink not dry, and it doesn't matter if you were one hell of a basketball coach on flatland. What the islanders liked to call "America." Out here, on the rock, your won-loss record didn't matter. Out here, you're only as good as your DNA.

"Why did Mike walk away? He didn't want to deal with you fucks. He's forgotten more about basketball than you'll ever know," Butch said, stood, crumpled his paper cup and threw it in the direction of the beige Tupperware trash can in the corner.

He'd apologize to Stevie, the owner, in the morning. When he came back. Divorced men didn't make their own coffee. They just drove to the store. So he'd definitely be back tomorrow. Which is why it didn't make sense to piss off Stevie. Whether you were the Mayor or not.

Butch banged through the door and started the black Ford truck. It was a football Sunday. The Patriots were playing at 3. AFC title game.

His day had to improve. Right?

Right?

Fuck it.
Where the hell did he put that church key, Butch wondered, as he headed from the refrigerator to his couch?

Dumb-ass motherfuckers.

What was it that Erasmus said:

In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king?

Doesn't mean the one-eyed king is happy.

Where the hell was that church key?
Three Old Men Walk into a Brothel

They were playing bridge. The sailing coach, the ex-spy, the semi-retired financier, plus the younger one, the one who knew every decent clam flat. The clammer. Or as Oscar called him, with extreme reverence: The King of Clams.

It was Friday. Bridge Day for men on the island. The women played on Mondays. Or at least they did until they all started dying off.

Oscar didn't play bridge. Bridge was too much like math. It felt like homework. But he'd run the occasional errand for his friends because Ella was at school, Liv was working on the mainland and what in the hell else did he have to do? Write another story?

The natural solution to the lack of bridge players would've been to go co-ed. But that was too simple. The men wanted to tell their ribald stories. No girls allowed.

So that's the thing you need to understand, that bridge isn't just about cards for the men. Between hands, over coffee (because none of the older three drank anymore), they solve the problems of the world.

"Did you hear that Garry is selling the bookstore?" the ex-spy asked.

"Aw, hell, that thing's been on the market for a year," the sailing coach said.

"We should buy it," said the financier.

"And do what with it?" the sailing coach said.

The ex-spy was shuffling the deck of cards. They were in his house on the point with ocean views on three sides. He wasn't the oldest one in the room, but he was close.
And he bitched about his taxes. A lot. He looked up suddenly and said: "It's been a long time since this island had a pub. That place would be perfect."

"Good lord, Seamus, you haven't had a drop in 20 years," the sailing coach said.

"And we're all too old to run a bar. Well, except for Lawrence here. He's got the bulk. But he'd probably drink the profits."

Larry the Clamman (yes, he lobsters too, and Larry the Lobster was a children's book, right? Oscar always cracked up when they called him that.) just laughed. He was only pushing 50, yet glad to be included in Friday Elder Statemen's Bridge. He was a hell of a card player, a wizard at math and honored that these pillars of island society had deemed him worthy of their company.

"Let's do it," the financier said. "Let's buy it."

"But who's going to run it?" the sailing coach said.

"Let's get Oscar," the ex-spy Seamus said. "He'll do anything."

"He does seem to have that tendency," the sailing coach said.

"He's a pushover," Larry said, finally speaking. "I know he wouldn't rip us off. And he needs something to do. He can't keep with this writing shit; there's no money in it. Plus, I happen to know he's good with his fists. And with a baseball bat."

"How do you happen to know that?" the financier asked.

"Don't worry about it," Larry said. "Trust me. But I will say that his dad was a cop in Philadelphia. You think he didn't learn anything?"

They played another hand and then three of them got up to refill their coffee cups. Larry went out to his pickup, the one with the cab on the back, and rummaged around for something. Presumably, a Budweiser.
When they reconvened, the sailing coach said: "What about the place next door?"

"The old restaurant, you mean," Seamus said. "What about it?"

"It doesn't have any running water," the financier said. "Remember when that clown from away didn't drain the pipes and they all burst? Why do you think it's been empty all these years?"

Now, the financier also was from "away." But "away," on an island off the coast of Maine, seems to expire after you've been there about 20 years. In the mind of those from "away," at least. If you were born and raised there, that's a different story in terms of how you view people like the financier. Once from away, always from away. That's how people like Larry viewed it. But he let it slide. He was a couple of Buds into the lunch hour. And he really liked playing cards.

"What we really need to do," the sailing coach said, "is buy that, too."

"For what?" Larry asked, because he was becoming more communicative, but, truthfully, did not have the cash to play their reindeer games.

"What this island truly needs," the sailing coach said, "is a brothel."

"What the hell are you talking about," Seamus said.

"Think about it," the sailing coach said. "A brothel next to a bar, on an island that doesn't even have a restaurant or a movie theater. There's nothing to do here. This is a brilliant business plan!"

"Well, who in the hell is going to run that operation?" the financier asked. "Is Oscar going to run that, too?"

"Maybe we'd better ask him first," Seamus said.

"Hey," Larry said, "have you guys considered the fact that prostitution is illegal?"
"Yeah, like anyone ever gets arrested for anything over here," the sailing coach said, rolling his eyes.

"This, I think, would be kind of hard to miss," Larry said.

"Besides," Seamus said, "Oscar never would get involved in a scheme like this. Son of a cop. No fucking way. We'll need to find someone else."

"To run the brothel," the sailing coach said.

"To run the brothel."

"You know," Seamus said, "in the same way you don't want a guy who drinks to run a bar, you don't want a guy who fucks to run a brothel."

"Well . . ." the financier said, sounding like Thurston Howell III.

"Hey, I'm just saying," said Seamus, cutting him off.

"Here's what we do," the sailing coach said. "We hire a homosexual as our madam!"

"Wait," the financier said, "why not a lesbian?"

"Bad idea," Seamus said.

"What do you mean?" the financier asked.

"You hire a lesbian as your madam in a brothel," Seamus said, "it's like giving a straight woman a Whitman's Sampler. Didn't you ever read any of the Spenser books? I thought you morons were all Ivy Leaguers! No offense, Larry."

"None taken."

"Don't forget," Seamus said, "I didn't go Ivy, either."

"And to shoot people," the sailing coach said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," said the financier from Manhattan. "We know, we know, we know."

Larry rolled his eyes and went out to his truck again for a few minutes. He'd called Oscar and asked a major favor: He was flat out of beer. But Larry really wanted to play cards and not have the old guys get pissed because he left to go to the market for more Bud.

Oscar met him in the driveway with a 12-pack. Larry handed him a $20 and said: "Keep the change."

"What are you clowns up to today, anyway?" Oscar asked.

"You don't wanna know."

"Of course I do," Oscar said. "You know me; I want to know everything."

Larry sighed. "Fine," he said. "Come on in. I know Seamus won't mind. He knows you can keep your mouth shut."

They entered the living room, where Oscar said his greetings. Seamus was reshuffling the deck. Larry sat down and slightly slurred, maybe because he'd just chugged another one: "I have to be honest. I love you guys. But this is probably the stupidest idea that I have ever heard. Open a brothel? Here?"

"Why?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's a brilliant business plan!"

Larry sighed again: "Who in the hell is going to pay for it on this island? The chicks give it away for free."
Oscar rolled his eyes. He tried not to shake his head.

He wasn't sure he actually pulled it off, the not shaking.

How in the hell, Oscar thought, did I ever get involved with this crew?
I Am a Rock; I Am an Island (A.K.A. Just Add Rope)

We don't actually call it the booze cruise. No one does. And yet, as Bill Belichick would say about anything: It is what it is.

It is what it is.

There are nights when I go to the mainland to meet Liv for dinner when she's finished work. There are four restaurants within walking distance of the float where the water taxi docks. Take that boat over to the mainland, and we take it back to the island together, the two of us, hand in hand, arm in arm, maybe even an arm around a shoulder in the twilight?

The ride back in the dark is not quite as amusing as the ride over in the gloaming. See, I've gotten to know this crew of workmen, a crew that works only at one specific place. Well, wait: Work people? Workpeople? Is that a word? How do you spell it?

Six guys and a woman. Good people. Good workers, too, from what I understand. Carpenters, electricians, handymen. The woman, Jane, is the interior painter. The rumor is that the wife of the dude they work for wanted the house done in eight different shades of white. I didn't realize that was possible.

I know the captain of the boat, too. I used to be pretty tight with his divorcee of a girlfriend. Not anymore. But that, as they say, is a story for another time.

It is what it is.

The workers bring beer. I bring beer, too. I only have one. But the single and the good conversation usually make for a speedy 15-minute commute.
I was tired; I'd already been to the mainland and back, taking the dogs to the vet. But Liv wanted to go out to dinner on her way over here and so I finally decided: What the hell? Suck it up. Your wife of 25 years asks you multiple times to meet her for dinner?

Go.

So I did.

And it's still reasonably light at that time of the early evening in March, in Maine, even if the weather doesn't exactly resemble the spring that the calendar claims it is supposed to be. Less chance of hitting a deer with the minivan.

And it's a pleasant boat trip, no chop, no whitecaps, the impending storm not arriving until after midnight.

I'd picked up this leftover summer shandy, kind of a lemon-flavored pilsner. Because I always brought beer when I jumped onto their run. But they already had a cooler filled with Belgian ale and the cool guy whose name I always forget, maybe it's Ben, said: "No. Have one of these."

It was good and we all, captain excepted, nursed one across the bay.

The United States Coast Guard does not particularly like to find that the captain of a ship is crocked. Just a little something I picked up from having spent two decades on boats.

So we're bullshitting as usual. And I start telling them about what had happened at noon.
I'm sitting, waiting for the ferry and this boat pulls into the slip. I look and think to myself: "Oh, no. They didn't take the big boat out for service already, did they? With no notice?"

Which was when I realized that although the white bridge resembled that of the North Haven, no, this was not the backup ferry. This was a barge.

And then this huge tractor trailer shows up and begins backing onto it.

I'm parked in the ferry line behind the island propane truck, so I really can't see why this gigantic truck is backing onto a barge. And I was too tired to get out and be my usual nosy self and try to figure it out.

"Oh, that was for the maple tree," Bill said as we sipped our beers. "The fully grown maple tree they shipped up from this place in the Bronx."

"You're shitting me?"

"Nope."

"Ain't no trees in Maine?"

"Wait," Bill said, "it's gets better. Did you see the barge yesterday?"

"I did not."

"It was the same tractor trailer. And on it was the biggest boulder I've ever seen."

"Headed to the same property?"

"Yep."

"Who in the hell imports rocks? I have rocks here he can buy. Hell, I have rocks he can have for free. Get 'em out of my way."

"Well, this guy does import them," Bill said. "He buys 'em. This huge one was from off some mountain in New Hampshire. So it gets to the property and they're using
the crane they have down there, right? And they drop the damn thing and it breaks in half."

"You have got to be kidding me."

"Nope."

I take a sip. We're getting close to shore now.

"You know," I said, "I saw that same truck the other day, but it seemed to be headed in the wrong direction. It was headed north, past my house. Had three smaller rocks on it."

"Yeah," Bill said, "those were some of the rejects."

"Huh?"

"The rocks he buys on the mainland that he doesn't like the looks of, after he pays for them and pays to bring them across, he has them go throw them up to Allen's gravel pit, up past you."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute: He buys rocks. From the mainland. Although he lives on a rock. On an island "of" rocks. Hires a boat for $600. Brings them over on a tractor trailer that costs, what? Then decides he doesn't like the looks of them and throws them in the pit up island?"

"Yep," Bill said.

"Maybe I'll have that second beer after all."

"Mine or yours?"

"What the hell. Yours. I'll live dangerously. But I thought we only were supposed to have cans on the boat."

Bill laughed and stroked his goatee.
"Live dangerously," he said.

He opened the battered white cooler that had gotten a lot of use, grabbed a bottle and said: "Hey, Wally, throw me that church key."

The bottle opener went flying through the air.

Imported rocks. . .

Was this an April Fools joke?

Once the third person on this little sea cruise assured me it was not, I believed.

"So it's true, Jane?" I yelled from one side of the passenger compartment to the other, over the roar of the twin Volvo engines. "About the rocks?"

They always talk about tall, willowy blondes. Never tall, willowy redheads. And yet, there was Jane.

"Bill never lies," Jane said, and winked at him.

Bill handed me the bottle with his left hand, the one with the wedding ring. And I just sat there, shaking my head, staring at the wake of our boat from the blue foam bench seat, seeing the mainland in the distance, knowing that soon, I'd be away from crazy. If only for a couple of hours.

The laughing about the rocks was over and what you ended up with was nine working-class people on a boat, eight drinking beer, all of whom didn't understand stupid. And never would.

Imported rocks. . .

And trees from the Bronx. Big-ass, fully grown trees that it'll take four to six workers to plant.

And eight shades of white paint.
Some people have more money than sense.
Part III

Canine Decline
Wearing Bare Feet

Oscar always was told that you cannot be a parent and also a friend to your child.

Things change. A bit.

The friends thing probably true when the kid is, like, eight.

The wife, or partner, ideally, should be the best friend. The best man or woman in the whatever-gender wedding, ideally, should be the best friend, even after a quarter century.

But what about the daughter, who suddenly is about to begin driving lessons?

The one whose diapers you used to change . . . last week?

Wasn't it last week?

Seemed like it was . . .

The drama in this story revolves around Oscar waking up one day, one summer, on their island, at the beach house, to the smell of . . .

Garbage?

Dog shit?

Oh, hell! Fried eggs! Again?

Actually, there was dog shit as well. In the hallway, on the dark hardwood floor, in the gloaming.

Oscar stepped in it, while, as his daughter Ella always said, he was "wearing bare feet."

Wearing bare feet.

The key thing is that Ella had Googled a website, from which she learned 12 different ways to make eggs.

Perhaps, like Papa, she would be a part-time chef?
But Señor had not made it outside again. He had tried. But it just was not going well. His back end was failing. As was his hearing. His vision — as when he twice now had smashed through the sliding screen door that leads to the back deck. But there was no yelling at him. No use. No kicking him; no punching.

They just picked up the shit, flushed it . . . And scrubbed the floor.

He was their beloved dog of 14.

Actually he was his dog, Oscar’s.

And he still loved food. And he still was gentle and kind. He was on heavy drugs, and Oscar realized that every time he went away to school, there always was that chance that when he returned, Señor would be history.

So, Saffron, the lab, slept with their daughter, Ella, in her bed. And Señor, well, one day . . .

Well, it was very weird.

"Liv, why's he sleeping in our bedroom every night now?"

"I don't know, Oscar. I guess because he knows he's fucking incontinent. I think he's embarrassed that he can't make it to the door," Liv said.

"So he jangles his dog tags?"

"Yes."

"And then head butts the door until we wake up?"

"Yes, Oscar," Liv said.

"Don't they make, like, Depends for Dogs?"

"Shut the fuck up, Oscar."

Oscar always had wanted an old dog.
What he didn't want was his wife cleaning up shit every morning at 4 AM.

Be careful what you wish for . . .

It wasn't fried eggs that Oscar smelled.

Nor was it fried eggs that he stepped in . . .
Oscar was at grad school.

Oscar's daughter Ella called him on the cell phone right after breakfast, for 46 minutes, before he had to race across the Bowdoin quad to his first class of the humid, oppressive, box-fan, no air-conditioning morning.

It was 45 minutes until Ella got to the point.

The phone rang and he thought it was Liv.

Nope. It was Ella. Who doesn't sleep.

"Hi."

"Good morning, Sweetie," Oscar said.

"Hello, Papa," Ella said, strangely, oddly, formally.

Do we need more adverbs?

Probably not.

"Papa?"

"Yes, Ella?"

"There's something . . ."

"What?"

". . . that I need to tell you."

"What? You need cash? What? What? What? I'm sorry, Sweetie, but if I don't get to class on time, I flunk out. And all of this money we've spent on tuition has been a waste."

What?"

"Mama just had your dog killed."
"What?"

"Yes," Ella said

"Señor?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he is 14, Papa, and keeps shitting the floor and Mama said she can't keep getting up at 3 AM to put him outside to shit when you are at college."

"So she had my dog killed," Oscar said.

"Yes."

"OK, then."

Oscar sighed and tried to wrap his head around what his daughter just told him.

He always feared that he'd go away to school some time to discover that his beloved, carpet-shitting, deaf, German Shepherd would be no more.

But he didn't see it coming now, despite the $700 of drugs a month the family was pumping into him.

"Mama said it was time," Ella said.

 Fucking Liv, Oscar thought. They talked three times a day while he was gone. She didn't tell him this? This? That she killed his dog?

Oscar hung up. He went to his professor, who seemed to be a perfectly reasonable and rational woman.

"Anita," Oscar said. "My wife just had to put down my dog."

"How old was he?"
"He was 14," Oscar said. "But he had some weird fucking foot cancer . . . Oh, pardon my language."

"No need to apologize," Anita said.

"OK, so my fucking wife had him put to sleep yesterday. I just found out from my fucking daughter. After I had fucking breakfast. When Ella called me on the fucking phone."

"Just go," Anita said. "Go. You've done your work here. You're going to be useless today, anyway."

"Thank you, Professor," Oscar said.

And he ran back to the dorm, and he packed, and he threw everything into the shitty 10-year-old Honda Odyssey minivan, checked out of the hotel, drove two hours to Lincolnville and took the ferry back to the island.

Twenty minutes across Penobscot Bay on the boat, then 10 minutes in the shitty van home.

Oscar walked into the house.

The yellow lab raced over and jumped on him, probably thinking that Oscar was dead and that she, Saffron, never was going to see him again.

Which would mean far fewer dog biscuits. Because Liv was much more judicious.

Could this really be true? That's what Oscar thought once he got the lab off him.

His dog. His dog of 14 years. His personal dog? And Liv had him killed while he was away. And she didn't tell him?

Oscar walked through the silent, hot, humid, August house.

His dog was asleep in the den.
Señor slept a lot now.

But his chest was going up and down, up and down, up and down.

He was not dead.

He was not dead yet.

Then a door slammed and Ella came out of her bedroom and said:

"I was just kidding, Papa."
Box of Dog

New England islands are made of cardboard, I've come to realize, after 10 years of living three miles off the coast of Maine.

After the life and eventual death of that Jeff Bezos, AKA: That King of Cardboard?

Nothing will change now.

That cardboard that fills your basement? That cardboard that comes to inhabit your entire basement, if you happen to be fortunate enough to have that basement. That cardboard that comes to your house daily, in that old, dented green and white van, in that plane that is filled with that cardboard?

Cardboard boxes that are flown over from the mainland in that battered Cessna — which occasionally crashes, but that is another story, for another time — unto Eel Island's tiny airport, where that cardboard is unloaded. And then delivered. House to house. Day after each summer day. So much cardboard that, in high season, that plane sometimes flies twice.

Unless that plane crashes.

But, again: That is another story, for another time.


Cardboard. It fills your beach house. It just does. It fills your basement like rabbits in heat. Does cardboard multiply? Does that explain the odd noises that I'd hear
through the floor vents of my bedroom in the middle of the night? Does cardboard mate?
That is something I've been studying. At that point, that answer was trending toward
"yes."

That cardboard supposedly goes to the dump on Mondays when the caretaker —
he, who, cuts that grass, plows that snow, shovels out your ass when your wife has to take
that water taxi across a choppy Penobscot Bay for work in Augusta at 5:55 AM, because
she still has a real job . . .

It really hit me that summer when I decided to take up golf and needed left-
handed clubs. That cardboard glut.

But, you know, sometimes, in a blizzard, it does help to have that big, damn
Amazon box in that Basement From Hell.

Because, sometimes, things leave this island in cardboard as well.

Olivia, my wife, the theatre major, was the first to mention it to the extended
family the next morning. Before we even got to the breakfast table, she'd brought it up to
me alone.

I thought she was being dramatic. Typically dramatic. Theatre major, right?
Actress.

We just were waking up and she turned to me, across the pillows and said: "Did
you hear it, Oscar?"

"Hear whatttt," I replied, grogilly, her alarm clock that sounds like DefCon One
signaling either that it was time for her to go exercise in the basement at 4 AM, or else it
was just GLOBAL THERMONUCLEAR WAR, having just awakened me from what
little sound sleep I'd gotten at the six end of what had been a another day from Hell.
Should one believe in Hell.

But that, too, is another story, for another time.

The house on Eel Island had dark, hardwood floors. And Señor, the 14-year-old German Shepherd — my dog, the one who followed me everywhere, every day I was home, since before we even had our daughter Ella, was pacing the halls again. Click, click, click. Click, click, click. That's all we heard. Or, at least, it's all I heard. Liv, who always claimed she didn't snore, had sounded like a tugboat early in the night. She complained gently, politely, on those nights when she decided I must either have sleep apnea . . . or was about to die in my sleep. But on this particular evening, it was the dog pacing, restlessly, even before the Matthew Broderick alarm went off.

Now, I am not a particularly patient man. And I'd added frequent insomnia to my bag of tricks, another wonderful advantage of getting off the Jameson. Another benefit of the aging process. There is nothing quite like going to bed at 8 PM and waking up at 11:39 PM — and wondering what the fuck you're going to do until that damn alarm goes off at 4 AM.

Great time to sit in the living room, in the dark, and write, ain't it?

Actually, no. It's not.

My shrink says these are the dangerous hours. And it is true that in the old days, I'd probably have 2-3 Guinness, maybe four . . . and then fall back to sleep around 4. And sleep the sleep of the dead until about noon.

No, instead, I am lying awake for hours, listening to the click-click-clicking of the restless, dying dog.
"Come back to bed, Oscar," Liv said, because while that damned clock always goes off at 4 AM, that doesn't necessarily mean she gets up at 4 AM. Is she working at this, the demented beach house, today? Is she off? Is she walking eight miles to her mother's and return? Or is this one of those ungodly mornings when she needs a ride to the water taxi, so that she may drive 40 miles to work in her actual office within spitting distance of the tarnished copper dome of the state capitol?

Hell if I knew.

All I knew was, I was wide awake.

Did I mention the blizzard yet? I think not.

Ok, this seems like the right time.

Epic. Biggest blizzard to hit this Maine island in about 60 years. It started the previous afternoon. And it kept going. And going. And eventually, what with the 70-mph winds out of the southwest, the ferry was inoperable, all the power lines were down, and there was — no shit — three feet of snow.

And this just happened to be the day that Señor decided to meet his maker.

Now, he'd had two kinds of cancer and we knew Señor's back legs were failing. And the cancers, well, one was melanoma. And my vet of two decades, the lithe waif, she knew that I'd had melanoma, too. And so, when it came time to break the news, she brought in a second veterinarian and a second vet tech. Because nobody knew exactly how I was going to react.

I took the news stoically. I'd be damned if I was going to cry in front of Dr. Lithe.

So we, as a family, decided: Hey, he's going to be 14. Oldest dog we've ever had. What are we going to do? Cut off his leg? Put him on doggy chemo?
No. We'd wait. He still seemed happy, if lumpy. And he never, ever had been off his feed. Nor had he made himself scarce, going outside and hiding, alone, under the deck, the way the Husky did when she was dying of breast cancer, probably in tremendous pain, and we were too young, too stupid to know.

Señor couldn't get up on our bed anymore. He found other reasonably comfortable places to sleep. He slept a lot. But old dogs do. And on this snowy, blustery morning, he was sleeping on a rug by the front door, facing the ocean.

He'd been fine at breakfast. He ate, he went out, he came back in and he went back to sleep.

And then, at 10 AM, a weird time for him, he asked to go out again.

Olivia was working from home. It was a snow day, so Ella was home, too.

I put Señor outside as he requested, by standing at the sliding door.

Twenty minutes later, as Liv typed away at the dining room table, I asked: "Did you bring in the dog?"

"No," she said. "Didn't you?"

We found him covered in this ridiculously heavy snow, at the foot of the stairs leading up to the back deck. Had he fallen, trying to make it up? Or did something happen that made it so he couldn't make it up?

We'll never know.

We carried him in through the blizzard. He died inside on that rug by the front door. And it was fucking horrible. One of the three-worst 20 minutes of my life. The four of us, huddled together on the floor — me, Liv, Ella and the dying dog, shaking and confused, but clearly knowing that his time had come.
And it had.

Which is when things got even trickier, grief aside.

What in the hell do you do with 80 pounds of dead pet in your living room on an island in the middle of a blizzard when the ferry isn't running, there's no electricity and vet is closed even if you could get to the mainland?

Of course, you call your father-in-law’s caretaker.

Now, usually, Roy, the caretaker, just cuts grass, weeds the driveway with this bizarre propane torch that he has, plows the driveway, takes the trash to the dump. But these were special circumstances. So I dialed the phone that actually worked for a change. #islandlife

"Roy, Señor died."

"Oh, shit," he said.

"He's on the living room floor."

"Oh, shit."

"How do I handle this?"

"Hmm . . . Do you have some sort of blanket?"

"Well, I guess," I said.

"Wrap him up in that."

"And do what?"

"Stick him in the snow until the ferry runs."

"I can't do that! That's what that moron told me when the kid low-bridged me in the CYO finals for St. Theresa's in the eighth grade and I broke my ankle. "Stick it in the snow until the ambulance gets here," the dude told me. No. Just . . . no."
"Never mind," Roy said. "I'll be right over."

It was probably only about five minutes before Roy knocked on the side door, carrying an old blanket. He walked in, saw Liv, Ella and Señor on the floor and said once again: "Oh, shit."

Everyone was crying. Except Señor. Because he was dead.

"We can't just leave him here for two days or whatever," I said. "And I can't carry him myself," my own cancer having taken me down to one operational leg, so to speak.

"And we can't just put him in the snow," Liv piped in, sobbing. "What if something gets at his body in the night?"

Which was when Roy came up with the brilliant idea that gets him the big bucks.

"You still have all that cardboard in the basement?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Those big Amazon boxes?"

"I think there's a couple."

"Let's get one. Put him in that. And we'll put him in your van."

"Won't that make the van smell?"

"You see how far it is below freezing in this shit? It won't smell at all."

"Oh, Jesus Christ!" Liv said, and got up and ran out of the room.

"Your car is a piece of shit, anyway," Roy whispered once Liv was out of earshot.

"That's why we all call it the Filthmobile."

"Shut up, Ella. Go downstairs and get the biggest box you can find."

In short order, we had Señor in the box and Roy helped me carry it to the van, where we covered it with that blanket.
The ferry began running the following morning, but everything still was a mess.

I'd called Dr. Lithe, who was vacationing in Costa Rica. She alerted her partner that I was inbound with a box of dog.

When I got to the veterinarian's office, I went inside, visibly shaken, only to be told by the tech that the "easiest" thing would be for me to take the only marginally plowed driveway down to the back door, so we wouldn't have to carry the dead dog too far.

In a fucking front-wheel drive minivan.

Yes, of course, I got stuck in the snow and Dr. Lithe's partner had to pull me out and back up the hill onto Route 1 using his pickup truck and a tow rope. Somehow, I don't think they teach you that in vet school at Penn.

"Well," Liv always said later, "Señor certainly went out in a blaze of glory."

That, he did.

And the moral of the story is: Don't ever let your dog die in a blizzard when you live on an island.

But always make sure you have plenty of cardboard, just in case.
Part IV

Mexican Hat
Taco Bell Tears

It wasn't open.

The black sign on the door said in big red letters:

CLOSED.

The asphalt parking lot across Route 1 from the suddenly reopened Denny's was vacant. Empty lot.

And this was the only Taco Bell within a 40-mile radius of the island — not counting the three-mile ferry ride. Not to mention the $27.50 round trip fare for her minivan to cross Penobscot Bay in the heavy morning fog.

The Taco Bell shared a pre-fab and a single drive-through window with a KFC. You know, one of those windows where they put your change in an aluminum cup and you have to dig it out with your fingers?

Yeah. It's why I keep Purell in the car.

I'm old enough to remember when Kentucky Fried Chicken was called Gino's. . .

But, anyway, she had traveled several miles — miles, I tell you — to go to the Walmart. In Thomaston.

For paper goods.

And Doritos.

Oh, and for Pop Tarts . . .

When she was done shopping for all of that healthy goodness, what she really wanted was just a bean burrito.

Beans only.
No meat.

Just one bean burrito.

Her name was Sharon and she just had called her husband Tim, who was punching out tickets in the ferry terminal on the island.

I was sitting on the wooden bench. Alone. Olivia was reading a book on her iPad in the car, in line. I'd gotten hot and decided to get out and go inside the terminal. And maybe have a conversation.

No one knew I was sitting in there. I was in a corner. I came in through the side door. And Tom and the other dude were too preoccupied with the phone call to notice me.

I'd developed a proficiency to close heavy steel doors very, very quietly. That's what happens when you regularly ride a 40-year-old ferry to the mainland, sit in old terminals, and don't want to lose a finger.

"Eel Island Ferry Terminal, this is Tim."

Bit of a pause.

"OK, OK, why are you crying?"

Tim covered the mouthpiece of the cheap-ass, old-style landline phone that used to be white but now was sort of a dirty, germy beige and whispered to the dude: "Sharon's crying."

The question was why. Why?

Now, normally, when it comes to me telling a story, I always use the word "said." That's how I was schooled.

But in this case "sobbed" probably works better.
And I'm not exactly short and small. But Tim could kick my ass with one hand. Or actually one foot. He used to fly fighter jets. But he's a sweetheart, if you don't treat him like a dick or a servant or someone who is just a person with no name who is beneath you during the summer season, darling.

So I probably ought not to be telling this story. Because I may end up swimming with the fishes.

Or, in this case, the lobsters.

But what the hell . . .

"OK, OK, I get it. I get it, Sharon," Tim said.

He covered the phone again and said to the dude: "She's crying because the Taco Bell is closed."

The dude looked mystified, shook his head and said: "What's the big deal? It's a fucking Taco Bell. Why's it closed?"

"Hell if I know," Tim said. "Says she wanted a bean burrito."

"Plenty of places in Rockland to get a better burrito than the Taco Bell anyway," said the dude, whose name I still didn't know.

"She wanted Taco Bell. Do you understand? She wanted Taco Bell!"

Tim uncovered the mouthpiece on the receiver and said: "Listen, Sharon, this isn't a big deal. Just get a fucking Whopper with cheese. Or something."

I actually could hear the sobs, even though Tim wasn't on speakerphone.

"I'm really sorry, sweetie," Tim said, "but I think it's going to be all right . . . OK? . . . OK. Yes . . . I love you, too . . . Yeah . . . Bye."

99
Which was the point at which Tim realized I was sitting in the terminal. That it wasn't just him and the dude.

"You didn't hear any of that, did you, Oscar?"

"Only every word," I said.

"Jesus Christ, my wife needs to get a life," Tim said.

"And this phone call to you was all about the only local Taco Bell being closed?"

"Yep," Tim said. "See what I have to live with?"

"This probably also explains the fighter jets, the motorcycles and the obvious death wish," I said.

"Fuck you, Oscar," Tim said. "The boat's coming in. Do you need a goddamn ticket? Or not?"
Stealth Bacon

Oscar got up and wrote another story:

Three Old Men Walk into a Brothel . . .

That was the title.

Inspiration is where one finds it, correct?

Oscar had very interesting friends.

And interesting family.

On this particular day, though, Oscar was thinking about writing this short story:

One Lapsed Jesuit Walks into a Koshered Kitchen at Passover . . .

That bacon cheeseburger in the car tomorrow, the day before Seder? The day before matzo and gefilte fish for eight nights?

That's going to taste like The Last Supper.

A bacon cheeseburger.

Maybe two.

Milk and meat.

Together.

Reunited.

Like Ashford and Simpson.

Didn't it turn out that he beat her? Shame. They always sounded so good together.

Oh, sorry. Got distracted . . .

Bacon.

Pork.
Cheese.

Not a Jew. Oscar certainly was not.

But he was related to many actual Jews who do eat bacon. Whether in their homes or in restaurants, where their parents give them a pass.

But we're not gonna go there.

We'll write about that next year, when we discuss Passover legumes and the virtues of being Sephardic.

Anyway . . .

Oscar was not an a actual Jew, but he played one on TV, so to speak.

So he did things like cook shellfish on Shabbat.

Why?

Because he was Oscar.

Because he could.

And because he was subversive and he didn't give a shit.

Were there a g-d, Oscar never would've had cancer. Good husband, good father . . . and he ends up with half a thigh, huh?

One bacon cheeseburger.

Maybe two.

With fries?

Cooked in bacon grease.

Yeah.

Now, we're getting somewhere.

But where?
Wendy's?
McDonald's?
Ar-fucking-bees?
Oh, lord . . .

It's a nitrate withdrawal nightmare at 3 AM.

"You'd better not kiss me with that mouth!" Liv had said to him the day before.

"Even if you eat that bacon in the minivan and don't bring it into the house!"

Hmm . . .

"OK," Oscar said. "Good night," and he rolled over to listen, via his one good ear, to the ending of NCIS: Providence. Or whatever the hell this spinoff was called. NCIS:
Memphis, maybe? New Orleans?

Clandestine bacon, in Oscar's dreams.

Stealth bacon.

Secret bacon.

Dancing bacon. Like at those matinees when he was a kid on Saturday afternoon.

Dancing bacon cartoons at intermission.

Kevin Bacon?

Yeah, um, no.

Oscar liked chicks.

But he also liked bacon.

"But it smells," Liv said.

"Yeah, it smells like bacon."

He just decided to go to sleep.
"May I help you?" said the scratchy voice coming through the takeout speaker the next morning.

"I'll have three double bacon cheeseburgers," Oscar said.

"You want fries with that?"

"Yeah."

"You can supersize that for a dollar more!"

"Yeah. OK. And give me an extra large strawberry shake."

"Will that complete your order?"

"Oh, that completes my order, baby," Oscar said. "And once I complete this order, I'm headed to ICU . . . ."

"But look on the bright side," Oscar continued, leaning out the van window and leaning toward the stupid menu speaker thing.

"Sir?"

"After I eat this, I'm never going to have to eat matzo for the rest of my life."
Bad Quesadilla

The word of the day is untenable.

This is directed toward my wife.

Twenty-five years. Twenty-five fucking years.

And I still have this horseshit, 40-year-old, "reconditioned" Electrolux canister vacuum cleaner.

And she wonders why I don't want to clean the house?

The cord falls out of the head. (That sort of sounds like the snake dying at, or from, its head. Which is it? I can't remember. That's another story. The Snake Story, as we call it in this family. Also known as: Why My Mother-in-Law Hates Me. That's the actual title. But, anyway . . . )

So you're vacuuming the house, right? And the damned cord falls out about every . . . OK, maybe 40 seconds, right?

Why in the hell do I sound like Denis Leary?

So, it's about 70 degrees, mid-afternoon, the first hot day in Maine since . . . hell, last September?

I'm in Maine. Not Canada. Eh?

Long story.

Don't worry; it gets longer.

So I'm looking in my suitcase, the one that I sort of casually tossed onto the family room floor, the one that I took to New Orleans. I'm looking for shorts. Because it is so fucking hot, even with the sliding doors open to the screens and the hornets coming
in from . . . somewhere? I'm dying in here. Dying. I have to get out of these black jeans. There are 2-3 more first-floor rooms to go, today. I already did 7/8's of the steps heading upstairs to our room, that we use on occasion, and up to Ella's.

But here is the problem. Other than the ancient Electrolux falling part? Well, and the whole me not wanting to clean the house, period, thing?

We shall not mention the dead flies again.

This is what happens when one has two houses.

Wow, do I sound like a privileged asshole?

Well, at least, I recognize that I do.

Wife lives here two or three days a week. Me and Ella, we're on the island, full time, where I was the high school athletic director and basketball coach, because that's where Ella goes to school. And it's a good school. A very good school. And public. And so, relatively, cheap, property taxes aside.

Here's the problem: Liv, my wife, wants to sell this mainland house. I support that. And not just because of the dead flies. Or the shitty vacuum. Although I'm no longer completely sold on the idea that an island with a year-round population of 600 ultimately is where I want to land. And die. Like everybody else does here.

They carted my 84-year-old neighbor off on a special ferry run last night. And being the heartless bastard that I am, I'm thinking: This is what I have to look forward to?

I'm 52. I had cancer. Sometimes, I do need to go to the doctor. And with a 14-year-old daughter, single parenting several days a week, yeah, there are dentists and orthodontists and you name it. The ferry, no matter how reliable, no matter how nice the
MSFS workers, it sucks. If you have given up your Gilligan's Island Dream and have decided to have a "normal," "mainland" life?

The problem, of course, is when your wife has decided that she wants to retire to Fantasy Island.

And you're thinking: Four years until Ella is in college. Four years. Just four more years . . .

Remember, before we had kids, we were going to move to Hilton Head and I was going to buy a set of left-handed clubs?

Hasta la vista, Liv. Vaya con dios.

I'm taking my talents to . . .

Habana.

I know how to flip burgers. Did it for a year. I can do it anywhere.

Even Cuba.

Even if the meat is mutton.

"Cuba," Seamus said when he called from Quantico, before my ill-fated attempt at dining out. "Habana?"

"Yup."

"Why?"

"Why not? My old friend Susan's cousin just bought a 12-cab taxi company down there."

"Are you shitting me?"

"No, Seamus. I am not shitting you. You should know by now that I never shit you. About anything."
"But . . ."

"But what? I took Spanish for 12 years. And I know how to drive."

"Yeah, but . . . you're kind of . . . pink. You don't think there will be . . . oh, hell if I know how to put it . . . resentment?"

"Seamus, the dude who bought the company is from Haverhill. He's another Irishman, even pinker than me. Pinker than both of us combined."

"Oscar," Seamus said, "how in the fuck are you going to drive a cab in a place you've never been?"

I grabbed a Corona from the fridge.

"Seamus, did we or did we not both work, in some fashion, for the government? Did we or did we not?"

"Yes, we did, Oscar."

"So what makes you think I haven't spent any time in Habana?"

Seamus had no answer to that. We weren't supposed to discuss places we'd been posted, even amongst ourselves. He told me he was making fish chowder for dinner and hung up.

All I really wanted was a cheese omelet. But the day was breaking bad.

Instead, what I got was a horrific quesadilla that was supposed to have had ground beef. Instead, it was a chopped-up hamburger that clearly was meant for another diner's order.

It was brutal.

I ate a quarter, boxed the rest and brought it home for Ella.

After a regatta, famished, Ella will eat anything.
She certainly is not Mikey. After a regatta, she does not hate everything.

But it's the only time, after sailing or basketball, when the barriers, the Berlin
Wall of food, come tumbling down.

After a sporting event, Ella would eat shit on a shingle.

If you don't know what shit on a shingle is, Google it. Or move to Pennsylvania.

Being a house husband for two debacles — I meant, two "decades" — is not as
much fun as men with real jobs might imagine. You are at everyone's beck and call. If
someone is in trouble, they call you. Because they know you're probably around. But you
still have to do the cleaning, the cooking, the shopping, the driving of pre-driver's license-
aged children. And so on.

All I wanted was a fucking breakfast.

Daughter gone. "Hey, let's go out to eat," I said at 8 AM, while Liv was down in
the basement on the treadmill.

"We have to go to the dump first," she said.

Long story short?

I never did get that breakfast.

Instead, I got a bad lunch.

I got that horseshit quesadilla.

And they brought my cole slaw for dessert.

This isn't one of those "Be careful what you wish for" stories.

No. That's about telling your wife that you someday would like to have a dog who
lives to 14 (very bad idea).

No.
This is a "Be careful where you move" story.

Because if you are 20 miles inland from the ocean in Maine, the food sucks ass.

And in keeping with this, please, don't even try to eat Chinese food where all of the waitresses are fat white women.

I'm just trying to be helpful.

Befriend lobstersmen, get bugs for the off-the-boat price, which is cheaper than the hamburger I wanted in that damn quesadilla.

And live happily ever after.

Until you drive to Montreal, abandon the minivan in the Pierre Trudeau Airport parking lot or whatever the fuck it's called, and buy that ticket to Habana?

Eh?

Sketchy Canadian passport.

Ain't that what them fuckers who play that iced hockey all the time say? That iced hockey?

Eh?

Eh?

Ain't no iced hockey in Habana.

No iced coffee, either.

But there will be soon. Very soon.

Casinos, too.

Soon.

Eh?

I'm working on my accent.
"Iced" hockey. Eh?

When I went overseas after 9/11, to pick up Ella, I pretended to be Canadian. Even had the black Team Canada "iced" hockey cap.

It just seemed safer that way, pretending to be a Canadian iced hockey player, when everyone in the world hated Americans.

Eh?

I’m thinking it could work in Cuba, too.

Or, at least, it maybe could help me get there?

No.

It will.

It definitely will.
Dropped him with a long combination.

Three left jabs to get him out of my face. Right hook. Then a right uppercut to the chin that put his fat ass in the rocky island sand.

Think I broke my left hand again, though.

"What was it you wanted to talk with me about again, asshole? Because the way I see it, you're already puking up your guts."

I kicked him in the neck. And he retched again.

On his hands and knees, he shook his head and sniffed back in as much snot as he could handle, once his mouth closed.

"So here's how this goes: I can cut off your gonads with the garden tool in my back pocket," I said.

(Which I, indeed, did have, thanks to my shit side job as an island caretaker. Which means I cut grass for heiresses.)

"See?"

"Or I can just shoot you in the face with this," I said, hauling out the black Glock from under my forest green L.L. Bean woodman's jacket. "Do you have a preference, Shithead? Oh, I meant Father Shithead. Sorry about that. My mistake."

Father Shithead threw up again.

Ooh, that smell . . .

"Make sure none of that gets on my Bean boots," I said. "They're hard to find in my size."
"Now, you ever touch another kid I know, or even one I don't know but I find out that you have touched, you won't get a choice. And you won't see it coming. Remember that as you try to go to sleep tonight. If you get to go to sleep tonight. So pick your poison. Which would you prefer this evening?"

It had been a while since I'd seen a grown-ass man piss his pants. It certainly wasn't the first time I'd seen it. But it had been a while. And he was wearing khakis, so it was not pretty.

Through the smell of urine, I realized I had scared the hell of him. But I had no solid evidence. Nothing I could take to the Waldo County DA. Still, I felt the need to settle up for what I was reasonably sure that he had done to that little kid.

I ripped the Roman collar off his throat, spit on it twice and flung it into the ocean.

"You're a sick bastard," I said, thinking, like hell this was the only one?

He was crying now, face all puffy and pink. And I knew that the begging and pleading was right around the corner.

"Please, no, please," he said. "In the name of the Father . . . I loved those kids."

"Yeah. You did. A little too much."

The best place to do stuff like this, wet work, is where it's . . . well, wet. It has to do with disposal. Like when the minister, when his dog's dead body, the dog with the broken neck, washed up on the shore and he told the Chief of Police: "Well, I don't know."

Did I mention that I'm the Chief of Police over here, chief of a force of one? What an interesting island.
But the minister and the Catholic priest were different stories. I think the Protestant dog just died. I don't believe the dead dog got raped.

Combination plate, like at a Chinese restaurant. One out of Column A, one out of Column B. Actually, one out of Column B and one out of Column G. Father Shithead was a certified freak.

So here I was, in the dark, at the beach, the very full moon shining down, making the ocean twinkle, always such a beautiful sight. But I was thinking about having been an altar boy and all the bullshit in the vestibule that I had seen, drunk priests at 6 AM, behind the altar, in the place where we got dressed.

Fuck it.

I pulled the trigger, shot him in the left temple, threw the 9 into the water as far as I could and went home for dinner.

Best throw I'd made since I played for the Yanks.

Who'd ever find out?

Hell, as I said, I was the Chief of Police.

And I knew that the world was a better place with this idiot out of it.

I just hoped no one called 911 about the dead body on the shore until after my dessert.

Christ, there were days I missed hitting a baseball.
"I admit, Your Honor, that the meth was a mistake. A big mistake.

"But what are you gonna do? Huh? If the guy across the street is making it in his double-wide. . .

"You know, you're just being friendly, a good neighbor, dropping over for a drink once in a while, when the yellow bus is gone and the kids are at school.

"What the hell? A drink is a drink. The hour might've been inappropriate, but, like they say: No harm, no foul. Right?"

Except it didn't quite work out that way.

Meth? Making it himself? Homegrown, sort of? Like Neil Young sings about?

Except for the fact that what Neil sings about is, essentially, farming green leafy products. Not potentially burning down the entire neighborhood and half the island, while everyone sleeps all afternoon and their teeth fall out?

I guess it is slightly different.

But one time, huh? One fucking time.

Had to try it, right? I mean, come on. I smoked hashish when I was in 11th grade. I was baked to the gills that summer when I played a basketball game on an asphalt court and scored 72 points.

That is not an exaggeration.

I really did score 72 points in a game, as a high school student, playing against college kids who kinda, sorta all had scholarships.

And I wasn't freaking Wilt Chamberlain. I was 6-foot-2.
Now, let me qualify something else:

Substances occasionally have been an issue. Admittedly. On the other hand, turning down a free sample? Even if it's crystal meth? Even if you know it probably is a very, very bad idea? But you've never tried it before, right?

Shit, wouldn't that almost kind of be like not taking free lobster from the fisherman who lives next to the meth cook?

Free is free.

Free sample. Sort of like going to Morse's Sauerkraut in Waldoboro, before those nice people from Seattle sold it and it began to suck. There always used to be free cheddar cheese. Cut up. With toothpicks. In the hope that people wouldn't stick their grubby, old, touristy, leaf-peeping hands into the bowl of aged Vermont Cabot and, then, worse, having decided that it really was very good, sticking a slimy paw back into the nasty plastic container for another piece.

Free sample.

Thank god I'd not lost all of my faculties yet at this late age. It really was a one-time-only deal. Like when they get the shipment of Crocs at the discount store, the shipment that falls off the truck. Which only happens once a year. Conveniently right before beach season.

The shit made me vomit. I got nothing out of it. I would've better off sticking with the Narragansett pounders.

Live and learn, right? At least I never turned into a drug addict. I sort of sensed that my father, the cop, wouldn't have been too thrilled with that.

So that wasn't the immediate problem.
The immediate problem was the frame-up.

No one on this tiny island three miles off the coast of Maine locks their doors. And even if they do, they always leave one, somewhere, open, in case they forget their keys. Or in case they're stuck on the mainland because the boat has broken down and their teenage kid is at school, gets sick and needs to come home early.

Hell, my mother-in-law still leaves her keys on the seat of her car when she goes off and is parked at the freaking ferry terminal. Just in case someone may need to move her vehicle. Very old school move.

But it normally isn't an issue.

Unless you've pissed off someone and they decide to plant drugs in your house and use a burner to call the Waldo County Sheriff with an anonymous tip.

"I guess I should've stayed off the top of his girlfriend, Your Honor," I said. "But the drugs are not mine. I didn't plan any of this. I mean, OK, we both had our pants down, but, you know . . . ."

"So you just sort of fell on her," Judge Abrams said.

"Well, I . . . ."

My lawyer, a tall, regal-looking man with gray hair leaned over to me in the courtroom while I stood at the defense table and whispered into my left ear:

"Larry, just shut the fuck up."
Part V

A Lad Insane
My late Irish Catholic mother, the big brunette from County Cork, God rest her soul, in the name of the Father, and of the Son (Me? Unlikely). And the Holy Ghost.

And all of that other shit . . .

Mother told me that I was the most arrogant person she'd ever met in her 73 years on Earth.

She ought to know.

She raised me.

When my father lost one of his jobs while I was a junior in high school, Mom sent away and I got a free pair of tube socks in the mail that said ARMY on them in bright green letters.

Cannon fodder.Yep. I could've been a soldier. Sounded like a great plan for someone at the top of his class.

There have been few times in my life when I have been so pissed as the day that manila padded mailer arrived.

But this was before all of that. This dates to when she told me that becoming an altar boy would be a great career move.

"You'll make money," My mother said. "It's better than a paper route."

Money for . . . nothing? Priests for free?

Well, not exactly.

You ever seen "Spotlight?"
"They pay for weddings," she said. "And funerals! They pay even more for funerals."

"Why, Mom? That doesn't make any sense."

"Do you know what grief is, Son?"

I was in seventh grade and was a pretty decent student, an avid reader and usually took the dictionary into the bathroom so I could look up dirty words.

"Yes, Mom. I know what grief is. But this still doesn't make any sense. Why would an altar boy get more cash for a funeral than a wedding?"

The big brunette who was my mother just sighed and looked at me, shaking her head, as if I were a lost cause at 13.

"Because when a relative dies," she said, with some exasperation, "no one thinks straight. No one is in their right mind. People do stupid . . . stuff."

"Like pay altar boys."

"Exactly like pay altar boys. It's good money," she said, raising the tea cup with the Tetley bag still in it to her lips.

Now, don't judge a cookie before it's covered . . .

Or crumbled?

Or whatever the hell it was that Mom used to say. What was that supposed to mean?

"Don't take any wooden nickels."

No, wait, that was my paternal grandmother who said that. Now, she was a real fucking case.
On the other hand, they all were fucking nuts. Beer at 9 AM while Nana sat in her fur hat and fur coat a half hour before we needed to go anywhere, awaiting her ride.

If you had told me I'd live until 52 without spending time in an asylum, smoking crack or blowing all of my money on whores, I would've said you were nuts.


Yeah, lapsed Irish Catholic writer. I suppose I come by that honestly.

But, you know, it isn't illegal, as long as you aren't behind the wheel. . .

When I was in high school, New Jersey, the Land of Springsteen and Chris Christie, was right across the bridge from Easton. The coin of the realm was a properly faked driver's license. This was back in the days before photo IDs. This was back when licenses were on shitty beige cardstock and anyone with Whiteout, a decent typewriter and a little talent could turn that into a nice little summer job, a cottage industry of illegality.

Of course, the drinking age in New Jersey at that point was 18. So it wasn't that hard to pass. Especially, as a man, if you didn't shave. Or happened to be a young woman with big eyes who was trying to get served at a liquor store in Pohatcong where the proprietor was a lech.

Personally, the beer parties we'd walk to down at Saucon Creek, now those suited me more — well, except for it being pretty much stag. But we took care of that later. We'd get lit, then show up on our girlfriends' lawns and Brando them: "Stella! Stella!" (We were just smart enough not to Cusack them and arrive with a boombox.)

Anyway, that's what Genesee Cream Ale was made for.
Truthfully, I always thought it tasted of burnt leaves. But it did the trick. We'd dump it in the "crick," as we called it, because we were too cheap to buy ice and a 16 year old wheeling a large plastic cooler through the middle of town, in the gloaming, would have been a really stupid 16 year old. The waters of the Saucon kept it reasonably cool.

A couple of beers and we were off, headed to parts unknown — or known only to ourselves. And, of course, even in this day before texting and email, to our girlfriends. They knew we'd show up eventually. This is why bedroom windows and cellar doors were created.

The beer courage made us forget that their fathers might gun down our drunken asses. Or, worse, at that age, for us, call our parents late on a Friday night.

She was very tall, blonde, ice blue eyes and looked Scandinavian. Her parents both were teachers. And she was not, at that age, what one would call a sophisticated drinker. What she preferred was sloe gin. What she really liked was a sloe gin fizz.

Sloe gin was her baby. I thought it tasted like Chloraseptic. But it worked. And so off to Pohatcong me and the boys went.

There was Southern Comfort, too. And drugs. A lot of drugs. But you had to hitch a ride out to the suburbs to get weed, and especially hash. We were the townies, low rent. Beer from Jersey and a stolen car, the Bethlehem Steel plant smelling like the back end of an incontinent dog's ass.

That is something I learned only later in life. Dogs eat shit and fart.

The Genesee sucked, but the chick was hot.

And no one at the rectory ever put the moves on me.
I wonder sometimes what that says? That I didn't have to fight for my virtue.

I've decided it was because I was 6-foot-5.
Edna Million in a Drop Dead Suit

The house really was on fire, but my child was not alone.

She was at her grandmother's on the day my childhood burned to the ground.

I'd just come back to collect Ella and have dinner there with my inlaws.

Diplomas, baseball cards, books, Tom Waits CDs. Things I'd neglected to collect before me, the lapsed Jesuit, to his mother's clandestine disdain, married the pretty, smart Jewish writer and moved to a Maine island.

"There's a phone call for you, Oscar," my mother-in-law Evelyn said, as I stood in her backyard, drinking a celebratory beer on an unseasonably warm April day and watching the three dogs — two mine — shit and then eat it.

Evelyn's dog did not do that. He was well mannered. He preferred dog food.

Despite all that, I'm thinking: I'm getting a beach house. This is one of the greatest days of my life.

It was the day when our modular home was being delivered. Our beach house. It was rather complicated. And I'd largely orchestrated it. It had to do with two house pieces that later, that next week, would have to be joined. It had to do with hiring a barge and a crane and whether or not the dirt road from the landing to the actual street could handle such heavy things, to make safe passage to Main Road during mud season.

And flatbed trucks, too. Had to get them as well.

And watching the pieces of my new house dangle precariously from crane to truck, and me, thinking, at least part of this new house is going to end up in Penobscot Bay...
We never expected to actually live here. In this house. On this island. But the fates conspired.

It is a very long story.

So, yeah, celebratory beer in Evelyn's backyard, on a warm day when they didn't manage to drop the beach house into the ocean — and I was feeling pretty proud of myself for accomplishing something difficult, something completely out of my wheelhouse.

What you need to understand is that I am Irish. And one of the phrases with which I grew up is "stepping on your glad."

One of the others is: "It's a great life you don't weaken."

Experienced both of those, thank you very much.

My parents stepped on my glad all the time after I married. Especially on holidays. My mother called me arrogant on Christmas Day. My father went nuclear on Thanksgiving one year, when we were having a houseful of guests. About money, of course. And my sister still owes us thirty grand. But hey. . .

I never did tell any of them that I'd had cancer.

They probably would've screwed that up, too.

Are you familiar with the phrase: "Could fuck up a free lunch?"

"The apartment burned down, Oscar," my mother said over the phone, via the crappy, scratchy connection.

I wasn't sure I'd heard her right.

"Huh?"

"It burned down, Oscar. Everything's gone."
To say that I wasn't really sure how to react would be an understatement.

I went into Evelyn's garage to get another beer, while pacing around, still on the phone. It was a beautiful late afternoon.

Or, at least, it had been.

"What happened?"

"Apparently, Oscar, the nurse in the apartment above us was taking a bath while smoking a cigarette, fell asleep . . . and everything went POOF!"

"Everything?"

"Everything," my late mother said.

"Is everyone OK?"

"Yes, we all got out," my late mother said. "But everything's gone."

"Are you sure my sister wasn't involved in this somehow?"

I still don't know. I've never gone for the police report, although I could get it.

I still don't know.

And I suspect I never will.

Unless I call this cop I know very well.

But I'm thinking that maybe I just really don't want to know at all.
One day, if you're lucky, you wake up twice.

The anesthesia has worn off.

Your actual day having begun at, what, 4 AM? The ride to the hospital. No food after the end of an old Jerry Orbach Law and Order rerun the night before at the Ramada. No water after 10 PM.

It's the next morning and your big black ass is hanging out of a jonnycoat and you're on your side, on a glorified gurney.


Thank God for health insurance.

If you believe in God.

Or health insurance.

There is this older anesthesiologist, clearly a Brooklyn Jew, so we spoke the same language. We'd talked hoops as he put me under, assuring me that we'd continue the conversation in a few short minutes.

The last thing you remember him saying was that the only place in the world where Kobe was better than Michael Jordan was in Harold's dreams.

And in Kobe's, too.

I guess Harold was a damn good anesthesiologist.

Now, I knew I had a mole. And I knew it didn’t look... what's the word I'm looking for here? Right.
It may have been bleeding a little bit, but, hey, when you are a reasonably — reasonably fit man of a certain age — you just put your head down and you can plow your way through anything right.

Well, except for death. And cancer.

They tend to be dealbreakers.

On the other hand, I really had no plans, nor interest in dying at 50. There were a couple things I still thought I needed to do.

Marisa Tomei, for example. But, you know, I was realistic and, yes, I realized i probably wasn't going to get to do everything.

Particularly if I died.

So I broke down and went to the doctor.

There were tests and on the day they told me that I had melanoma, I fell on my head in the presence of two close female friends.

I seem to have a knack for falling on my head. Even more so now, having the balance of a three-legged horse.

The fall was a stressful blur, as I — as we — made arrangements for my little visit to Portland. Halloween used to be my wife's favorite holiday. I'm guessing it isn't anymore.

I had her drive me. I spent the entire trip with my blue knit hat pulled down over my eyes, moaning in the passenger seat of the Honda. Woe was me . . .

And then a familiar little blonde is standing at my side, my right side, because all of the assorted pokes and pricks and IV lines in my left arm.

The lights are very bright.
As I come out of the haze, there may have been a moment where I thought I was in Korea and Hawkeye Pierced — no, wait, Hawkeye PIERCE — and John Boy. . .

No, wait: Not John Boy. Trapped John; they're both staring down at me, wearing those stupid white surgical masks that Japanese tourists wore in the early '90's, when they all thought they were going to get SARS on that KLM jet airliner from Amsterdam to Detroit.


Yeah, he was there, too.

And Harry Morgan. R.I.P.

Jesus Christ, what did they shoot through my veins?

And the light. Those lights! Where the hell am I?

And who are these non blondes?

"You'll be just fine, Mr. Smiff," the dude with the doily on his head, the white smock and the stethoscope dangling from from his scrawny pale neck said. "Is that how you pronounce it? "Smiff?"

Was that really a doily on his head? A dashiki? No, wait: A burka. Did men wear burkas? What in the hell were those things called?

I motioned toward what I assumed to be a nurse. There was long red hair in a bun. My eyes weren't focusing. It looked like a woman.


They looked at me as if I had two heads.

"Water," I mumbled again. "Please."
The thing with red hair turned, walked across to a sink and handed me a white Styrofoam cup. Through the hole in the opaque snap-on lid was a white bendy straw.

"I can't," I said. "I just can't."

"Why not?" asked the dude with the doily, the one who kept calling me Smiff."

"My name is Smith," I said, feeling as if I finally was coming to my senses. "S-M-I-T-H. Oscar Smith."

"Thank you, Mr. Smith," said the big, red-headed thing with the name tag I now could see that read "Bridgette."

"What about the water?" I said, looking at my bruised left hand, the one with the IV stuffed into it.

"It's right here," she said, thrusting it toward me.

"But I can't drink that."

"Why?"

"Bendy straw," I said.

"Bendy straw?"

"Bendy straw."

"What's a bendy straw?"

I remember sighing and then pointing at the ribbed top of the white straw.

"Do you see how it bends?"

"Yes," Bridgette replied.

"When I was three, my father was on a police motorcycle and got hit by a car," I said, my voice raspy, throat parched. "I didn't see him for three years because he was in a
hospital. And when I finally did get to see him, they gave me water in a Styrofoam cup with a bendy straw."

Bridgette, who, by this point, now looked more like a woman that a man in a fright wig dressed up for Halloween . . .

Let's just say she had the bedside manner of Hulk Hogan.

"So?"

"May I have a glass of water, please? Minus a bendy straw?"

Zhivago or whatever the hell his name was continued to stand there stupidly next to Rachett . . . er, I mean Bridgette.

All I'd wanted was a glass of water, no Styrofoam, without a bendy straw.

Worst resort ever.
The guy in the wheelchair with one leg.

That's the first thing we saw.

One leg. Only one leg.

This did not exactly inspire confidence.

The elevator at Maine Medical Center took us up three floors from the dark concrete parking garage. It always was dark. We got off and there was a bathroom on the right. Wasn't that a Creedence song? No, that's "Bad Moon on the Rise."

What I did instead of using the bathroom was try to get back onto the elevator, try to hit the down button as quickly as physically possible, with a bleeding thigh, just to escape. Escape. Leaving my wife to do . . . whatever.

Enjoy the rest of her life with Husband No. 2?

I was so fucking out of there. After I took the 180-degree turn, I ran toward that elevator like Houston Motherfucking McTear . . .

I really didn't think a tiny 5-foot-2 woman could execute that sort of NFL-style tackle. Not to mention dragging me away from the lift, the one that I was using to escape, all by herself.

But she grabbed my left bicep with two hands and said: "No. You are going to do this. You just are. Now."

She knew how much I hated anything medical.

Especially hospitals.

But I had melanoma. In my leg.
Probably the last thing I needed to see right then, upon arrival, was a man who only had one.

Two nights before, we were at our house on the mainland. Two nights before my surgery. I don't remember what we ate, but my wife and daughter were doing dishes and I was doing my usual half-assed stab at putting away leftovers, when I noticed that my daughter was being even more half-assed than me and really not helping her mother.

This was the evening before I drove my daughter to her grandmother's house on the island. I watched my mother-in-law's dog for a month every winter, while she cruised the Caribbean. But I still hated dropping my kid on her. Not her job to watch my child. Hers were grown and raised.

Now, I'd given this a lot of thought. Probably too much. But I didn't want to freak out a 13-year-old girl. And so, with my wife's blessing, I told her nothing.

Until I freaked out.

The dining room table was littered with dirty plates, nasty silverware, and my daughter was standing in the kitchen, pontificating about the Golden State Warriors. The apple really does not fall far from the basketball-coaching tree. Nature versus nurture? Sometimes, it's amazing how an adopted child morphs into a miniature version of one's ownself.

Did I mention the freaking out?

Fifty years old and I'd never had an operation. Couple of ankle sprains from basketball, some requiring plaster casts. Broken left wrist playing football, when I was a running back and some punk tripped me when I was 50 yards from the end zone, but in the clear. I was totally gone. Would've been six points.
If he hadn't tripped me.

But none of this shit matters.

It's all about the fucking dishwasher.

So, we're in the kitchen. And my daughter is standing around and not clearing the table.

And so: The Memorable, Legendary, Family Freak Out:

"Sweetie, I could die in two days! I have cancer! Load the fucking dishwasher!"

At least, this is how my wife remembers it. I'm reasonably sure I was drunk.

I really did think I was going to die on the operating table.

But anyway, we ended up in a Hilton in Portland the night before my surgery.

Have you ever had Cancer Sex?

Well, I hope you don't.

Or maybe I do.

I also hope that you never, ever have I-Think-I-May-Die-Tomorrow Sex.

On the other hand . . .

I learned about this from a friend of my wife, who lives on the other side of the country. Gorgeous, stacked and can sing like hell. She makes Pat Benatar sound like a fraud.

Now, she may have had a little health scare. When you get to be our age, really, who doesn't?

She's the one who informed us about the reality of Cancer Sex.

It was kind of, um, good?
Then there was the hospital and the wait and the drugs, after which, following my surgery, I was so loopy, my wife says it was the kindest I'd been in 20 years.

"Hi, babe! I love you," is how she recalls it.

What I remember is 20 minutes later, when I said to wife: "Get me the fuck out of here; I want a bacon cheeseburger."

You know what really sucks? When they take out the lymph nodes in your groin, in order to make sure the cancer has not spread? And it hadn't. Which was good. But if they take out your nodes, your ankle swells up. Daily. So you spend the rest of your life in a $700 recliner with your left foot elevated above your heart.

This is after you get to stop wearing the black stockings.

There is a place in Portland. It is called A Special Place. (You probably think I made this up.) I took my daughter with me because I wanted her to meet my surgeon and I thought: How long could it possibly take, to fit a surgical sock?

It wasn't crowded, because apparently no one had a mastectomy that morning. That's the other thing this store specialized it; breast cancer bras,

So my daughter sat in a straightbacked wooden chair in the hall, while a wheezing octogenarian crawled around on the floor, trying to measure my bleeding thigh for a glorified pair of pantyhose.

It was a great afternoon.

I didn't feel like Joe Namath. And I never did get lunch.

Six months later, another stack of grubby dishes were on the dining room table. It's like Santayana said: Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it.

I do not forget. Anything. My wife says I'm like an elephant.
OK. I'll accept that.

Yet here I am, in that same damned kitchen, with the same damned dirty plates.

Post cancer.

So I tell my daughter, gently but pointedly, to scrub them off with the brush and put them in the dishwasher.

She was almost 15 by then.

She looked at me and said exactly this:

"You told me you were going to die. Why didn't you die?"
Me and Jorge Down by the Schoolyard

Jorge was in Maine, sitting in my living room, in the burgundy wingback I'd purchased at the Macy's in Herald Square, after one of Nick's Thanksgiving Day parades.

It was December, so I was not on the island. I had been alone, in this big, shambling house on the mainland, the one with the five bathrooms, the one with the seven TVs. Heavy snow swirled in the moonlight out the bay window. And the wind began to howl, rattling the panes.

But I was alone no more.

Nick had not yet arrived. He'd gotten hung up over the North Atlantic on the St. Nick 1. But he'd graciously lent to Jorge the St. Nick 2. They went way back, Jorge and Nick.

The St. Nick 2 had taxied to the gate in my dooryard.

It was time for a new fleet, but President-elect Hump was fighting with Boeing over the cost of new sleighs. He thought there had to be a better deal — or else someone was going to get fired. Hump was favoring Sukhoi over Boeing. This probably was the only thing upon which Jorge and Hump agreed, being that Sukhoi Aeronautical was a joint Italian-Russian venture.

Jorge's cell rang.

"Hey, it's Nick."

"I know, my son."

"Listen, Your Holiness . . ."
"Oh, shut up, Nick," he said, with that accent of Spanish, Italian and . . . well, a mix of every accent you ever would've heard in the history of the world. Who the hell knew? He sounded like Placido Domingo being interviewed on NPR.

"But, but . . . Pontiff . . . ," Nick stammered.

"You call me Your Holiness or Pontiff one more time? No soup for you," Jorge said.

Jorge chuckled. Everyone knew he had a sense of humor, unlike that ex-Soup Nazi, Benny.

"Hey, Nick, you ever watch Seinfeld?"

"It's not syndicated on the North Pole. No cable. And we can't stream. Our Internet up there sucks."

"Now, now, my son. We do not use words like "suck."

"Why the hell not?"

"Hell. Now, that's another story, for another time," Jorge said. "Hey, Oscar, you have any of that good beer that the Benedictine monks brew?"

"We don't have any monks in Maine, Your . . . er, I mean, Jorge. But I do have some Geary's. Pale Ale. Brewed in Portland. By white bikers with tats. It's good. You want one?"

"Yes, please, my son. And is there any way we can get a decent pizza around here? I'm sure you've heard that I sneak across the border into Rome in disguise for a decent pie?"

"You just turned 80, Jorge," Nick said, finally figuring out that he was on speakerphone. "Hi, Oscar. You sure you oughta to be eating pizza, Jorge?"
"Eh, I'm 80, you just said so yourself, my son. So who the hell cares?"

"Wait a minute: I thought you said Hell was a topic for another conversation," Nick said.

"I'm the freaking Pope. I can say whatever the hell I want. You can't. But who the hell cares?"

"Speaking of disguises," I piped in, "no disguise tonight. You're still sitting there in your fish mitre. I could hang it up for you if you'd like."

"No, no, but thank you, my son," Jorge said. "I don't know how long I'll be here. We just stopped because Air Traffic Control said there was too much Santa traffic along the East Coast . . . Well, and to pay you a visit, of course."

"You can leave your hat on," Oscar said, with a reverent nod.

"Nick, you still on the line?" Jorge asked.

"I am."

""Nick, calling in from Gander International; Nick, you're on the air." Christ, I feel like Larry King."

"Isn't that taking the Lord's name in vain?" I said, piping in once more.

"Christ or Larry King? How many times do I have to tell you guys? I'm the freaking Pope!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Nick said. "'I can say whatever I want." He always says that, Oscar."

"Listen, Nick, I was about to call you anyway. Thanks for letting me use the St. Nick 2. And for the use of the flying Christmas moose. Those animals, they are just amaz-. . . ."
"They are deer, Jorge," Nick said. "Not moose. Flying deer. Reindeer, in fact, specially bred in Finland. I import them."

"You can't just breed them on the North Pole?"

"Nope. We tried. Those Mrs. Kringle tried out in the backyard? Sort of flew like an Airbus, you know, when you end up with dead animals and a ton of scattered presents on a runway on Tenerife on Christmas Eve."

"Hmm . . .," Jorge said, as I handed him an uncapped beer. "I'll have to talk to the Boss about that. I can have Mary put that on the agenda for my next meeting with Him. Right after we discuss climate change, is what I'm thinking. Now, I suppose both of you — or at least Oscar — wonder why I asked for this conference call."

"The thought had crossed my mind," Nick said. "Especially since it's my busiest work night of the year."

"It is your "only" work night of the year, my son. You're the laziest SOB I know."

I began to laugh, but quickly covered my mouth.

"And you, Oscar," Jorge continued, turning toward me. "You wrote me, I sent you a blessed Mass card from the Vatican . . . and you wrote back. So I figured you were serious. Thought this would be a good way station for me on this very special night. I usually don't fly in the dark, as you know, Nick. But tonight? Tonight? It's my busiest night of the year, too. And how often do Christmas Eve and Hanukkah happen at exactly the same time?"

"Rarely," I muttered, getting uncomfortable.
"Well, you're a lapsed Catholic who's married to a Jewess. I thought you'd be a good moderator. And I also figured I'd better get out of Europe," Jorge said. "Make sure everyone plays together nicely. Try to help keep the peace on this holy night."

"I think that was a terrific idea."

"Don't blow smoke up my ass, Nick."

"Ass? Can a sitting Pope say "ass?" I said, quietly. I wasn't quite sure where this whole thing was going. And I still had presents to wrap before my daughter Ella awoke.

"What in the hell else do you think was in that manger in Bethlehem? You think it was just cows and three jewel thieves masquerading as spice merchants? Let me ask you a question: They write anything in the Bible about a security detail? Their "people" were just going to let three "kings" go off across the desert with no bodyguards and no GPS? They were bandits! Bloody hell!"

Nick sighed. "There you go with the Hell thing again," he said. "Twice, actually."

"That's enough, Nick. Keep in mind that you failed me."

"Failed? Failed you how?"

"Hanukkah Harry was supposed to be here, too," Jorge said. "It was going to our own little Camp David. Or maybe even Camp Da-veed."

Jorge was laughing his ass off at his own little joke.

"Oscar, I got time for one more," Jorge said after looking at his silver Timex.

"This Geary's ain't bad."

"I have to get back to work," Nick said.
"Sure, sure, I understand," Jorge said. "Listen, thanks again, Nick. This Rudolph, I think he needs a new bulb, though. I did notice you gave me the B-team — all the old farts like us: Rudolph, Donner, Bluetooth . . ."

"It's Blitzen, not Bluetooth," Nick said. "But you're welcome."

"And I did think the security detail of elves in mini-mitre was a nice touch," Jorge said. "Elves weigh far less than Swiss Guards, which is of significance when one is on a loaner flying sleigh across the Atlantic, through wind and heavy snow."

I slid slightly forward on my wingback. "Pope," he said.

"Don't call me Pope."

"OK, Mr. Pope."

"Oscar . . ."

"Dr. Pope?"

"Oscar, knock it the hell off!"

"There we go with the Hell thing again," Nick said.

"All right, Jorge, would you please answer one question for me?"

"Of course, my son."

"Well, this has been bothering me all night," I began. "You're in Maine. It's Christmas Eve. It's 10:17 PM in the east. Midnight Mass at the Basilica is at . . . well, midnight . . ."

"My son?"

"How in the hell do you get back to Vatican City in time to say Midnight Mass, on a freaking sleigh with a platoon of senile flying reindeer?"
"Hell, again," said Nick, who really should've been getting back to work. There were a lot of red-brick chimneys to shimmer down, and many more homemade cookies to scarf, which, of course, made the chimneys more difficult with each passing year.


Jorge chuckled again and then said drolly:

"It's already tomorrow in the Vatican. You Americans only get to see me on tape-delay.

"Well, except for you, Oscar. You are one of my special projects. Thank you for letting me drink the rest of your beer. The stores are closed tomorrow. You've nothing to worry about now until Boxing Day."

Nick said goodbye and broke the connection. Jorge stood up, shook my hand, put his left hand on my right shoulder, made the Sign of the Cross with his right and said:

"Bless you, my son."

Just then, one of the elf details hustled in with a hat box big enough for a mitre, followed by another mini-mitred elf who handed Jorge what looked suspiciously like a yarmulke.

"Sorry to destroy the illusion," Jorge said, "but fish mitres just do not work in sleighs. They're open air, you know. The mitre turns into a flying airplane. Don't want to blind any other pilots."

Jorge turned toward the door and then there was a tremendous racket. What the . . . hell?

It took me several moments to realize it was my alarm clock.

Detox is . . . hell.
This was the second time that I called the police.

On myself, I mean.

It was another waking dream. And it was repetitive. Over the course of at least a week.

Until that point, that night, when I dialed 911.

On myself.

Again.

My father, the ex-Philadelphia cop, well, he wasn't in his right mind.

Nor am I, sometimes, apparently.

I knew that much, at least.

I had been reading a lot, quite a lot, while not writing as much as I should've, three miles off the coast of Maine. And so I suspected some of this stemmed somehow, in some way, from that.

The reading, the not writing, which had been supplanted by cooking, shopping for birthday presents and watching my generation's Watergate on CNN.

There is something about when one's health suddenly fails, at the point after which doctors have assured and reassured that you are completely fine . . .

It is at that point when one begins to believe that, perhaps, like the rest of his blood relatives, maybe he truly is insane, just like all rest.

And I was not drinking.

Which I maintain was a large part of the problem.
No one else agrees on that score.

Hey, I know what I know. You know?

No. You probably don't.

The first time it happened, a Monday night. I was asleep. Duh.

Duh? Well, I thought I was sound asleep.

The last thing I remembered was my daughter's then-best friend, sleeping on the floor at the foot of my bed. My daughter was on the floor on the other side of my bed. And all of a sudden, they were gone.

There was yelling. And by the time I scrambled to my feet, the girls were racing through the woods, headed north, up island, in the dark. In pursuit of . . . what?

I saw my daughter's friend, the second one through the bramble and brush, her nightgown flipping out behind her as they both raced through the darkness. Chasing . . . what?

It was all very Blair Witch Project, this vivid, waking dream.

I called and I called. No response. I'd lost the kids. Lost two kids, on my watch.

So I did what I was taught to do when I was a child: Call the police. They'll help — and probably will bring firefighters, too.

The response time was excellent.

The problem was, my daughter's friend wasn't at our house. And my daughter was asleep in her bed.

As you might imagine, this episode was a little hard to explain.

"Have you been drinking, sir?" the Director of Public Safety asked.

"No. I've been going cold turkey."
"Well, that may explain it," he said. "This sort of thing sometimes happens when you're detoxing."

I filed away that information, went back to bed and tried to think nothing of it.

And then it happened again.

Only this time, it also involved sleepwalking.

Fun.

Just what I always wanted to be: a character out of a black and white film.

I was in bed. In the dark. It was the clinching game of the NBA finals. Golden State versus Cleveland. I was listening to it on the radio, having no TVs in what originally was supposed to be just a beach house.

Now, it seems, a spooky beach house.

My wife was on the mainland, because she had to go to her office that next morning. So it was just me in bed on that, ha, dark and stormy June night.

I fell asleep.

The next thing I remember, I was walking through the door of the Community Center. It was strangely . . . not dark, but dim and hazy. I asked someone the deal, Larry, I think, and he said: "Power's out," shrugged and turned his attention back to the big screen.

That was the idea: Go watch the end of the game on TV. That's why I was there.

"Why's the game still on then?"

"Generator," Larry said, making it clear he wanted me to shut the hell up.

I found my way home in the dimness to a cheap white couch. It was unoccupied and I collapsed into right corner.
I guess I fell asleep. Because all of a sudden, it was the fourth quarter. And the picture was really, really bad, as if we had lost the satellite and were watching via rabbit ears.

"What happened to the signal, Larry?"

He'd been over the yardarm since the sun went over it, but now he already was over tomorrow's yardarm, too.

"I dunno. Something snapped," Larry slurred.

I decided to check out the room to the left. Another big-ass TV. Same bad-ass signal.

Found another sofa. Saw the usual pack of indistinguishable young brunettes through the gloaming, through the haze. It almost was as if there was one of those smoke machines blowing, the kind you only see at concerts by heavy metal hair bands on reunion tours.

Looking around, over my left shoulder, I noticed Butch, nursing the island's native vegetable, a Budweiser.

"Yo, Butch, what's up with this signal? The picture's terrible!"

"Hell if I know," Butch said in his customary baritone. "But, fuck this, I'm headed home."

I sat for a few more minutes, then decided to follow suit, remembering, suddenly, that my daughter was home alone. Asleep, I presumed, but alone. Yet I really wasn't supposed to be here, anyway.
Standing up, I glanced at the Stepfords and patted my right jacket pocket for my car keys. Hmm . . . no keys. Wait, didn't I leave my favorite blanket on the sofa? Yes. I grabbed it, but still couldn't find my keys.

Which was when I realized I also couldn't find my phone.

It must be in the car, I thought, after searching through the entire Center, which sort of seemed like the Hotel California in that old Eagles song might look.

Except I couldn't find the car.

It took forever, but it was down at the far southeastern end of the parking lot. The keys were in the ignition — which was weird, because if you leave the keys in the ignition of a Honda, the battery dies. So I never did that.

Still, there was the problem of the missing wallet, which doubled as the case for my phone. So I had to ask one of the Stepfords to borrow hers, since the Center technically was closed for the day, so I couldn't use one of its landlines.

She handed me her cell. I put my elbows on the counter and dialed . . . wait for it, wait for it.

Of course.

I dialed 911.

Then I looked down and the wallet was right in front of my face.

"Waldo County Dispatch. Can you please tell me the number you're calling from?"

"Uh, well, um, I thought I'd lost my wallet, but I found it and so, I'm sorry. Never mind. False alarm."

And I hung up and got out of there as quickly as I could. But I drove home slowly through the dark, through the storm, primarily so I didn't hit any deer.
For some inexplicable reason, I parked across the street, in the driveway of our dead neighbor's unoccupied house.

I suddenly woke up and realized that, having done so, I had better move the car. So I grabbed the keys, looked both ways, trotted across the road and backed the car to its normal resting place. And I went back to bed.

It's unclear how long I'd been back in bed before I noticed something strange outside the bedroom window. It looked as if someone with a flashlight was peering in.

Maybe two flashlights.

Hell, now I heard two voices.

"Is he in there?"

"Ayuh," I heard the second voice say.

What the . . .

I got up and went to the side door in my pajamas.

Knock, knock. It was my now good friend, the Director of Public Safety.

"You OK, Oscar?"

"Well, yeah, but I was asleep."

And that's when I noticed both the police car and the ambulance.

"We got a call that someone called 911 about a lost wallet at the Community Center."

"Oh, yeah . . . That was me. But I told them I found it, so never mind."

"This was at the Center, you said?"

"Yeah, I was down there watching the game and I panicked and borrowed someone's phone and called 911. But I told them I found it."
"The problem is, the call to 911 came from here."

"What? But I was at the Center."

"Then why'd the 911 call come off this landline, Oscar?"

We were standing in the doorway. He was outside, I was in. He was in full uniform. I was wearing pajama bottoms and a Black Keys T-shirt. There was an ambulance driver, but I couldn't see which island person that was through the misted-over windshield. He or she did not get out of the bus.

"Oscar, is this the same as what happened last time?"

"No!"

"If I go over and touch the hood of that car, is it going to be warm?"

"Well, I . . . ."

He did just that, walked back across the driveway, looked me straight in the eye and said: "It's cold."

He sighed and said: "Do you think maybe you ought to ride over to the hospital, Oscar?"

"No. Why? Of course not."

"Because now, this has happened twice."

"I'm fine. Really."

He sighed again. "The only way we can make this go away is if I call your wife."

"Go ahead," I said. But this time, it was me doing the sighing.

"What number should I use?"

I gave it to him, thinking, how in the hell am I going to explain this one, the phone call from the town cop that wakes her up at 1 AM?
He eventually put me on the phone with her. She asked if I was OK. I said yes.

"Do you need me to hire a boat and come over there?"

"No," I said.

"OK, but you're alright?"

"Yes."

"What the hell do you think happened, Oscar?"

"The cold medicine."

"Huh?"

"The cold medicine," I said, "and my allergies were bothering so I took a couple of those, too."

"A couple!"

"Well, yeah, I mean, one didn't seem to be working, so . . . ."

"Jesus, Oscar."

"You don't have to call me Jesus. Just Oscar is fine."

It was her turn to sigh.

"Go back to bed, asshole. Stay in bed. Lock the door. And no more sleepwalking or whatever the hell this is."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, and one more thing?"

"What?"

"Please stop calling 911."

Where does the dream end and reality resume?

I'll leave that up to you.
Bibliography


