Sagrada Familia

[**BY HOLIDAY REINHORN**](https://www.narrativemagazine.com/authors/holiday-reinhorn)

**MY FATHER** came to visit us in Brooklyn just the one time. We had a dirt-cheap lease on the parlor floor of an old brownstone at DeKalb and Washington that first winter after 9/11–kitty-corner from the park.

“I think the twenty-fourth is the best time for a visit” is what he said to me over the phone. “Those special days around the birth of Christ. We can get Chinese and go to the movies anytime we want without any gentiles crowding up the fucking lines.”

“You’re aware of what just happened with those airplanes around here, though?” I said to him. “With the terrorists and everything? The holidays this year are kind of a wash.” But he said he was coming anyway. “All that horror was only in Manhattan” is what he told me. “Nobody had the balls to touch Brooklyn or Queens.”

I doubted this was something that had occurred to al Qaeda when they planned the attacks, but I didn’t feel up to a response. All I could picture from that day anymore was the dim outline of my husband’s face, blunted under the ash, after he staggered home across the bridge, and the streams of permanently altered individuals wandering up DeKalb Avenue who looked just like him.

“I don’t think you want to remember the city like it is right now,” I said to my father. “It’s like people have their mouths sewn shut. Nobody knows what to do.”

I had no idea how many years it was since my father had actually been back through the old neighborhood, to be honest, and I didn’t ask. I didn’t bring up the house fire with him or the vacant lot in Carroll Gardens that my mother still owned or any of the old court documents either.

The last time I’d been in touch with my father was more than two years earlier, after my husband ran his name through the national database at work and located him. He was renting a one-bedroom month-to-month around the corner from the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee.

“The Chinese place on Atlantic from back in the day isn’t there anymore either, you know,” I told him right before we hung up, but my father said that wasn’t a problem. He’d take care of it, he said. He was “studying up.”

“Studying what?” I asked and there was a pause. “Never mind,” he said. “You’ll see.”

**It was out** of the question for my mother’s cousins to find out he was coming for the holidays, obviously, because they were all blabbermouths and would run straight to her. My brother had been MIA down south for years, and bringing up the topic of my father always made my sister breathe too fast into the phone. After Chanukah was out of the way, I let my mother’s calls go to voice mail and kept the information to myself.

“I’d love to hear what the Department of Corrections has to say about all this,” my husband said when I told him my father could be coming for the holidays. “It’s not often we get to host an arsonist in the house.”

“Not an arsonist, exactly,” I said. “It was never proved.”

“Right,” he said, nodding. “So just a wife beater then?”

“She wasn’t all that innocent herself either, by the way,” I told him. “And I don’t remember it as official beating anyway. She was probably the one who hit him first.”

“Well, that makes perfect sense then, doesn’t it, Maya?” he said the minute I started to walked away. “What a great plan. Let’s invite him right over!”

“It’s thirty-six hours he *might* actually be on these premises, Jimmie,” I said from the other side of the bathroom door. “You should go to a hotel maybe.”

“Oh, really?” I heard him say from what sounded like right through the keyhole. “Should I? That would be an amazing idea!”

And it went back and forth like that a little, until the baby woke up, and I had to agree finally, if he shut his mouth about it, that during the time my father was here, we could pretend he hadn’t just applied for a family work transfer to Delaware without even asking and that he could blow up the air mattress for himself if he wanted to, and put it next to the crib on the floor of our bedroom.

**Through the whole** month of December, I assumed my father would change his mind about returning to the state of New York and cancel at the last minute, but he kept his word that he was coming, and in the middle of the night, just about twelve hours before the little baby Jesus was supposedly born in the manger two thousand years ago, my father arrived in a gypsy cab from JFK with his usual wad of cash, an Advent calendar from Barcelona, and a recipe for spaghetti Bolognese that he got off MasterChef.com. If he noticed Wrennie’s stroller by the front door or any of the toys scattered around, or the fact that my husband and I were tiptoeing through a dark house due to the sleeping grandchild he’d been warned about, he didn’t let on.

“For while I’m in town,” he announced at full volume, tapping a pile of wrinkly one-dollar bills that he dumped from his coat pocket onto the kitchen table before even setting down his bag. “I want us all to go down to the fire station together bright and early like we used to and put this in the boot for Jerry’s Kids.”

“Negatory on the fire stations,” I told him. “They’re like funeral homes right now. Nobody’s going down there unless we give money to the families.”

“I hear you on that one,” my father said, looking back and forth between Jimmie and me. “I hear you. But I say we split it. Any one of you could’ve had muscular dystrophy or a lazy eye like the cousin. Plus, I decided while I’m here I’m going to teach you how to cook.”

“Me?” I said.

“That’s right.”

“That’s funny,” my husband said. “That’s hilarious.” And his mouth was still moving at that point, like maybe he had even more to say on that subject, until he saw my eyes.

“Let me start over,” my husband said, smiling at my father. “I think teaching her to cook would be a great idea.” Then he introduced himself to his father-in-law for the first time, and the two of them shook hands.

“I gotta credit you for opening up my world here a bit, turtledove,” my father said to me, giving my husband a pretend sock in the arm. “I never shook hands willingly with a probation officer before.”

The Advent calendar my father brought had little pictures of the Sagrada Familia from different angles in the basilica, the sculptures of the choir of angel children, and even an antique photo of Antoni Gaudí himself, dressed in a three-piece suit, with a monocle and a Van Dyke beard standing in the first window looking out at us. Since it was almost Christmas anyway, we got beers from the refrigerator and opened the rest of the calendar windows.

“What’s the deal with the Catholic theme, do you think?” my husband said, after my father got up to use the toilet. “You said your mother quit all that.”

“We had Advent calendars when we were little sometimes,” I told him. “It’s just a habit.”

“Well, I think it’s fairly decent of him anyway,” my husband said. “Maybe he wants forgiveness. Was he nice sometimes like this when you were kids?”

“For an arsonist and a wife beater, sure,” I said. “I guess he wasn’t all that bad.”

“Come on,” my husband said, reaching for the belt of my bathrobe and tugging me toward him. “Be sweet, *turtledove.* Come over here and kiss me for just a second,” and he pulled our kitchen chairs up next to each other so our knees were touching through our pajamas. “You’re the one who told me this man was a monster, didn’t you?”

“As a matter of fact I did,” I said, letting him kiss my neck and mouth a few times before scooting my chair back to where it originally was. “So maybe you should take my word for it.”

Our son, Wrennie, was two that Christmas, and when he woke up in the morning, my father gave him a snow-white, child-size electric guitar that ran on AA batteries.

“A replica of the one Elvis had,” he said. “The King.” And he showed Wrennie how to turn it on and the slot on the back where the batteries went in and out and how you could push a button and have it play “Hound Dog” over and over again and “Blue Suede Shoes.”

“My daughter told you about the day the two of us had together in Tennessee, right?” my father asked my husband, after Wrennie finished dragging the guitar by the neck around the living room floor for a while, and my husband assured my father, that yes, I had.

“I took your wife to Graceland for the tour when she was down there,” my father said. “All the bells and whistles.”

“Jimmie’s the one who found your address in the first place,” I said to him.

“You remember how he found you in the system, right?”

“That’s funny,” my father said. “You might have mentioned that.”

Before our visit to the most famous Southern mansion in all of America, I hadn’t so much as laid eyes on my father in more than fourteen years. Until I met my husband, in fact, I had the habit of telling people that he died in a fire, but that was only if they asked.

“This man is your Grandfather Chaim,” I said to Wrennie after he got fussy with the new guitar and dropped it to the floor. “But we call him Hi, okay? For short. *Hi.*”

Wrennie was just starting to talk more in those days, and I lifted him, with his legs kicking, up into my father’s lap. “Your Grandfather Hi,” I said again to our still squirming son, pointing up at my father’s face. “Can you say it? *Hi.*”

“Chee,” Wrennie said, without looking at my father. “Gapa Chee.”

“Perfect,” I told him, clapping, and as always, it felt like his little face was making the sun come out in me. “I like it. Call him Grandpa Cheese.”

“We shouldn’t let him call your father that,” my husband said the first chance he got after Cheese left the room. “It isn’t respectful.”

“Your son is two years old,” I said to him. “Define *respect.*”

“His name is really Grandpa *Chaim,* buddy,” my husband kept making a point of saying to Wrennie at various times over the morning. “Grandpa *Chaim,* okay? Try to call him that,” and Wrennie would nod as if he agreed.

“Maaa Ma,” he’d say and lift his arms to me to be picked up. “Gapa Chee.”

**Then maybe** around noon, about the time of day that the Virgin Mary’s water broke in the Bethlehem stable and the Wise Men were all on their way across the desert following a star, my father was setting out three different meats, a beef stock cube, dried mushrooms, and some truffle oil from his suitcase for the spaghetti Bolognese with my husband as his little volunteer helper, since I had refused.

“Tell me something about yourself I don’t know, turtledove,” my father said to me while he was at the kitchen island slicing up the pancetta with a paring knife that suddenly, in his hands at that moment, looked a lot like the one he had held to our mother’s throat once a long time ago up against the plug-in dishwasher, and he hadn’t taken that knife away until my brother and I got on our knees to beg him by the pant legs, *Please-please-please-don’t-do-it!*

It wasn’t exactly a full-on cooking knife he was using back then after our mother said, *Go-ahead-if-you-want-to-you-son-of-a-bitch-stab-me-stab-me!* The court documents and her police report on the night of the fire described the knife as a red one used for hunting, with different blade options that snapped in and out, but then my husband was repeating my name over and over again like it might have been caught in his throat.

“What?” I said, looking up.

“I don’t think you were listening, Maya,” my husband said. “Your father asked you a question.”

“I heard him,” I said to my husband. But really I was remembering the witness room at the police station on the night after the house burned to the ground and the drawings I had to do for the police therapy person of what the kitchen looked like and who hit whom and what was broken and did I remember if the red light on the coffeepot was on and did I have a memory about whether or not it was plugged in?

“Maya,” my husband said again, but louder this time. “Hey!”

“Hey *what,* Jimmie?” I asked even louder than that. “Jesus!”

And I noticed everybody was staring at me then, except for Wrennie, who was gabbling around with his wooden trucks and forklifts on the floor, singing a song of nonsense words at my feet.

“Well, you’re just a little crazy man, aren’t you?” I said, smiling down at my son joyfully bashing the wheels of his trucks together against the legs of my chair, but all I could really see then was the other outline. Of myself down on the floor with my brother and sister beside me, flat on our faces in Carroll Gardens, and the detective bending down on his hands and knees with his mustachioed face next to mine and the mossy smell of his breath when he called me *little sweetheart* and asked me, *Where are your parents?*

I scooted my chair back and climbed down on the floor with Wrennie so he could race the trucks over the backs of my shoes and legs while I lay on my stomach and watched how he was so happy.

“It doesn’t matter, buddy,” I heard Cheese say to my husband. “She doesn’t have to answer. Just chop what I want when I say so. And make sure she pays attention to what I’m doing over here at the stove.”

“That’s hysterical if you think I’m doing that,” I said to them from down on the floor, staring up at both their faces at the kitchen island through the legs of a chair. “In your dreams.”

And I saw my father make a point of giving my husband the old crony wink before starting in on a beefsteak tomato, goring it perfectly, and right down the center of the hemispheres like he was a brain surgeon.

“Those two chefs over there think they’re so effing smart, don’t they, Wrennie?” I said to my son, pulling the Advent calendar down off the table and setting it up on the floor in front of the two of us like a colored screen to block out the view, even though Wrennie was still too busy with the trucks to give it any real attention. “Have your Grandpa Cheese name five things about this Spanish cathedral and its architect that I don’t know already,” I said to him. “Starting now: Antoni Gaudí quiz—ready? Go!”

“No Gadi,” Wrennie said, pushing the calendar away. “No, Momma. Gampa Chee.”

“Ha!” Cheese said, hooting at Wrennie. “That’s my boy. Tell your mother I’m not playing any guessing games with a research librarian. I don’t want to know about a guy named Gaudí, living on water and lettuce who got buried in some cathedral and had his bones dug up by pirates.”

“You mean anarchists,” I said.

“I don’t care what I mean,” Cheese said. “What I want is dirt. What I want to know,” he said, pointing to my husband, “is the truth I can get from this character over here. I want him to tell me is my daughter still messy like she was in the old days, for instance. I want to know if she still forgets everything all the time and leaves her clothes all over the floor.”

“You must think I’m out of my mind or something,” my husband said to Cheese, holding up both hands like he was at gunpoint. “She never forgets anything.”

“Yeah. I get you, pal,” my father shrugged. “I get you. She’s a Rosen, that’s for sure, but I’m just teasing her anyway. Just having a little fun.”

“I’m sure you are,” my husband said, rattling around in the silverware drawer in what appeared to be a search for a sharper knife to dice Cheese’s carrots and celery. “But no comment anyway.”

“I happen to be an adult sitting over here, you know,” I said to Cheese, watching handfuls of tomatoes and their juices go sliding off his cutting board and into the pot. “And a federal employee. Who cares about my clothes?”

“Obviously not you,” Cheese said, “rolling around on the floor like that! And I’m ribbing you anyway, if you can take a joke! Come on,” he said to my husband, motioning at the refrigerator for another beer. “I want to know from the man of the house. Is she still living like a wild animal in its nest when she’s not running around with her face in a book? And does she still draw all over everything? On the napkins and placemats with her little colored pencils? Little magic reindeer and things?”

“Those were horses, for your information,” I said, and my husband laughed.

“She still does that,” he said to my father. “She does that all the time. She has a sketch pad and draws pictures of everybody. And I think it’s amazing. I told her she should draw in the courtrooms at the trials—I could get her hired anywhere in this country if she’d let me.”

“Jimmie!” I gestured for my husband to please padlock his mouth and light us a cigarette, but he ignored me and instead got another beer for my father, then started messing around in the cutlery drawer again, looking for the bottle opener now, which I knew for a fact had to be in there where I left it last night, right in front of his face.

I walked over to where he was still riffling around and reached past him for the bottle opener in the back left corner behind the silverware, as well as a much sharper knife, and set them both down on the counter in front of him.

“As a matter of fact, I have a career already in the city where I was born, and my husband knows this,” I said to the both of them. “I think we should drop this line of questioning.”

“What line of questioning?” Cheese asked looking between us. “All I’m saying is I always thought my daughter was decent at drawing and that’s it, period. If it was up to me, I think she had a really nice talent.”

“I think that too,” my husband said. “She’s an artist. Just look at everything up on the goddamn walls.”

“I see it,” Cheese said shaking his head at the city view I made from the roof of our building last summer that still had both the towers in it.

“Christ on a crutch. Stop. Both of you.” I lit another cigarette when I was done with the first and held the smoke in for a long time, until my lungs had that stretching, tearing feeling, like they would blow apart one right after the other, then dropped the butts into the empty bottles left out on the table from last night, which I had no intention of clearing.

“Hey!” My father’s hands were wet by now, covered halfway up his arms from the tomato juice, and he was gesturing, I guess, for somebody, a grown-up, to help him keep the chopped garlic and yellow onions on the cutting board safe from Wrennie, who, none of us had noticed until then, happened to be over there pulling on the ties of his grandfather’s chef’s apron.

“SOS!” Cheese said, grabbing for a dish towel by the sink with one hand as he held down the cutting board with the other. “Watch out for the little guy there! He’ll spill it!”

My husband at the refrigerator was much closer to the kitchen island than I was at the table, obviously, but still he gestured for me to go over and handle it. I stayed put exactly where I was and let him go to the rescue. I crossed my arms and sat at the table, watching everything that was unfolding in the kitchen in front of me like it was all a little picture you might see inside the window of an Advent calendar. My mother’s torn blouse and her eyes bugged out, the scream shape of her mouth as my father charged after her out the back door. *If you don’t want to talk to us right now,* the policeman said, *we understand. Maybe, if you want to—you can draw it for us?*

“Thanks, pal,” Cheese said to my husband after he scooped our son up into his arms. “He’s a decisive little character, isn’t he?”

“He’s two years old,” I said to Cheese. “Define *decisive.*”

But my father didn’t seem to be listening. He wiped his hands on one of the dish towels and then, with expertise, tipped the cutting board over the pan, running his hand lightly over the top of all the chunked ingredients as they sprinkled and plopped, sizzling into the hot oil, softer at first and then louder, like some kind of music.

“I do have a question for both of you, though,” Cheese said to my husband as he stirred around the sauté. “Why would you keep this little grandson of mine in Brooklyn anyway? Across the water from a place full of terrorists and lunatics and guns? Can you answer me that?”

“Where else would you expect him to live?” I asked, and I could see my husband set down his knife. “This is his home.” I pulled Wrennie’s high chair over to the table from the window and unsnapped the tray. It wasn’t too dirty, so I wiped it off with the back of my shirt cuff.

“Maya,” my husband said, and I could feel his eyes on the back of my neck, trying to get me turn around, but I didn’t let that happen. Mainly because I was sure his face wouldn’t be all that different from how it was after the towers fell.

When he got into our shower with his suit and shoes still on and his necktie stiff as a crusted rock and how he stood, under the spray with rivers of steely ash pouring off his clothes and said to me from in there, in a voice free of all feeling, that he was taking the three of us and leaving the city and it was final. We were never coming back.

“Still,” Cheese said, as if he hadn’t just experienced the same previous sixty seconds in the room that everybody else did, “what neither of you seem to understand is that we didn’t even need foreign bombers back in my day. If a man walked down this same street after nine at night back in my day, he’d get shot in the face ten times. Have you thought about that? This is such a dangerous borough to live in. So dangerous.”

“We appreciate the news update,” I told my father. “But nobody is making me leave Brooklyn. George Washington’s army camped across the street from here and Walt Whitman had a place on the park. It’s where he wrote *Leaves of Grass,* for Christ’s sake! I can walk to Park Slope, and this apartment is ridiculous. I’m not moving to fucking Delaware.”

“Delaware?” Cheese said. “Who said anything about that? Delaware’s a shithole!”

“Well, thank you very much, Grandpa Cheese,” I said to him. “See? At least we agree about something,” and I focused on getting Wrennie’s bib around his neck, without having very much success at it either, until I felt my husband’s hand on my shoulder.

“Hey, Maya,” I heard him say. “Can you help me out with something for just a minute? Can I talk to you in the other room?”

But at that point Wrennie had started to squirm and fuss so I had to stick him in the booster seat without any bib at all and give him a pile of crackers and juice to keep him busy long enough for me to think straight.

“Come on,” my husband said, tipping his chin toward our bedroom with his hands clasped in the prayer position. “Just a word in there. Please.”

“I think I should stay here for right now, while he eats, actually,” I said, “but you could go in there for a minute if you want.”

“Mamma,” Wrennie said, smiling up at me with half a cracker in his mouth. “Ma ma ma. Ma.”

“Ma,” I said back to Wrennie and kissed the silk whorl of hair on the crown of his head a few times, all the while feeling the shade of his father’s eyes falling on me from behind like the dark shadow of a building.

“And how about you, Grandpa Cheese?” I asked, slipping out from under my husband’s gaze and over to the pile of bay leaves on the kitchen island, which I’d been warned in advance I might be in charge of tossing into the sauce at some point. “Why don’t you tell us something about *you* we don’t know,” and Cheese laughed.

“Not in front of the little kid, though,” he said to me. “You know, *propriety.*”

“The kid has about twenty-seven and a half words,” I said, watching Cheese plop balls of raw, pink beef into the frying pan. “Define *propriety.*”

“I don’t know,” Cheese said, looking between my husband and me. “You sure this guy is okay with it? I’m a guest in his house, after all.”

“It’s my name on the lease, actually,” I said. “But he’s fine with it. Right, Jimmie?”

My husband looked over at my father. “You can tell it, sure,” he said to Cheese. “But have your daughter get me a beer first. And tell her to be nice too.”

“I’m always nice,” I said, and then the two of them broke up laughing together like it was the funniest joke they’d ever heard.

“Good stuff,” Cheese said, clapping his hands. “Here we go. Maya’ll get that beer, won’t you, Maya? Then I can tell you about Dov while all this shit cooks. Maya knows who Dovey was. Her grandfather.”

“I know *of* him,” I said after I put fresh, open bottles in both of their hands. “I mean, I’ve heard of him.”

“Yeah. That guy. Motherfucker,” Cheese said. “Horrible guy, but funny too, and you just loved the shit out of him at the same time, so it was all really confusing. But he was *mean,* you know? You never knew a guy that mean if you crossed him. Neither of you did.”

“I guess we’re lucky, huh, Maya?” my husband said. He pulled a bar stool up next to mine at the kitchen island so our shoulders were touching. “Tell your daughter thanks for the drinks too,” he said to Cheese, clinking his bottle against mine. “She’s a great waitress.”

“You’re awful,” I told him after he pulled me in close and gave me big kiss.

“Seriously. I hate both of you.” But it was in a nicer way.

“Well, you are lucky,” Cheese said, lifting his spatula from the hot meat grease and looking between the two of us. “You both are. Because he was big, Dovey Rosen. Gigantic for a Romanian Jew, anyway. Six foot four. Warmed up with the Boston Celtics shag team in Washington Square when they were at the Garden. Cracked knuckles in the wholesale liquor business on the Lower East Side. But he got out of that when he met Maya’s grandmother Priscilla. They moved off Orchard Street to a decent place on the Island and he was a gem salesman all over Brooklyn and Queens by the time I came along. His first son.

“Dovey was peddling diamonds for the Zell brothers then. Marty Zell, with the big jewelry store in Dix Hills, off the LIE. You know Marty. Remember? You shook his hand.”

“Once or twice,” I said. “You took me into the store to buy something for Gigi once, right?”

Cheese nodded. “Mm-hm. A bracelet for Gigi. How is your sweet old mamma-bear doing these days?”

“She looks younger than you.”

Cheese smiled. “Is she still married to the guy who likes to write restraining orders?”

“That’s right.” I said. “The district court judge.”

“Ugh,” Cheese said, wiping a clean wooden spoon with a dish towel.

“Beautiful old Gigi. All the dogs are still sniffing around that hedge in Carroll Gardens, I bet.”

I stopped drinking mid-sip and my husband froze at the cutting board. The kitchen was silent except for Wrennie sucking on his sippy cup and banging his hands flat on the booster tray.

“You may have forgotten,” I said, “but as I recall, that place in Carroll Gardens burned to the ground. Or maybe you don’t remember?”

“Oh, I remember,” Cheese said. “Yes I do. Especially since she says I’m the one who did it.”

“She?” I asked. “Who do you mean by *she?*”

“You know who I mean.”

“Well. *She* wasn’t the only one who thought that either, by the way.”

My husband gave me a warning look, but I ignored it. I motioned for him to go wipe Wrennie’s face and let him down out of the booster seat. “Check if he’s wet too, please,” I told him as soon as he lifted him out and Wrennie took off running for the back bedroom. “I think he’s wet.”

“I think he’s not,” my husband said over his shoulder on his way into the bedroom. “I think he’s fine, actually, but I’ll go check.”

Cheese was silent for a minute and didn’t turn around to face me. He adjusted the heat, still stirring the pan with the wooden spoon, and in the other room we could both hear Wrennie squealing as he was tickled and my husband laughing.

“You know,” Cheese said finally, “I think by now just about anybody could have torched that house in Carroll Gardens, turtledove, don’t you? Or any *thing.* That house was old. With bad amperage and too many things plugged in. Your mother swilling her coffee all the time, for one thing. And the Christmas light cords. Some things are just a mystery.”

“That’s not exactly what the police thought,” I told him. “But whatever. Maybe you’re right.”

I tossed my cigarette into Wrennie’s juice cup, then went and dumped it in the sink, and the silence after that was wide enough you could drive a plane through it.

It took my father a while to stop fixating on his precious red sauce and go on with the story, but once my husband came back and Wrennie was running the perimeter of the kitchen again in a fresh diaper, he managed to do it.

“So Dovey drove these raw stones around for Marty on the weekends,” Cheese told us in between measuring the cinnamon and the butter and the heavy cream. “Big chunks shipped in from a broker in Antwerp that he sold wholesale back and forth around Queens and all up and down the LIE. Uncut diamonds he carried inside a blue velvet cloth.”

“The people I work with at the DOC would love that,” my husband said. “Old school.” Cheese smiled at him.

“You got that right,” he said, stuffing two garlic cloves into the press with both thumbs. “The oldest school there is. If my mother was tired of me, and didn’t want me around, she’d send me out with Dovey, driving around to houses off some list Marty gave him. This is before your Aunt Dan and Melanie came along and I was the only son. He’d sell five to ten K worth of diamonds like that every weekend. Open them up on a coffee table and people would gather around. In that condition, they were ugly stones, sharp and lumpy, yellow and gray, like a pile of broken teeth off a cadaver, but people bought them. You know the type, Dovey’s type—with big wads of rubber-banded cash. And he was a showman about it too. Like a magic ringmaster at the circus or a hypnotizer. People had to buy from him. The money walked out of their pockets on two legs.”

Cheese drifted off, tasting and tweaking his mixture. The only sound right then was Wrennie plinking and plonking at the plastic strings of his new guitar.

“Hey, you need a break from this?” Cheese said to me, all of a sudden, looking up from the simmering. “From all this talk? You need to go nurse the kid or something?”

“The kid retired from that ages ago,” I said. “He gave it up for Lent.”

“Copy that,” Cheese said, wiping his hands on his apron. “I see your point.”

“Please, go on,” I said, motioning toward the refrigerator for my husband to bring out what was left of the beer. “Continue.”

“Gotcha,” Cheese said, grabbing the new bottle he was handed and taking a long pull before licking the spoon. “This tastes good,” he said, holding the spoon out to me. “You want to come here and experience this? With the beer it’s perfect.”

My husband started to reach over like maybe he wanted a try, but I held up my hand.

“Jimmie, please!” I said. “Don’t hog like that! I want him to keep going.”

“Wow,” Cheese said to my husband, motioning over at me. “You believe this girl’s personality? She’s a masterpiece.”

“That she is,” my husband said, and after the two of them clinked bottles, Cheese winked at me.

“Well, one day right around Christmas,” he said, “I was out with Dovey. I remember it was the holidays because of all the decorations in the yards. Candy canes and Mary and Joseph setups, mangers, et cetera. So, Dovey, he drove me to a gray house up in North Flushing. Some nice, big gentile places out there around Bellerose and Kew Gardens. A nice-size gray house, I remember. Bigger than our house. On the fancy side, with Christmas lights on the eaves and two concrete lions, one on each side of this wide stairway leading up to the door. Two fancy lions, like the ones in front of the fucking Bryant Library, their teeth and tongues out, roaring. I remember I stuck my hand inside one of the mouths and a kid popped up behind me out of the bushes. A kid with big eyes and Indian feathers tied around his head with a leather band you make in the Cub Scouts.

“ ‘Boo, stupid!’ he said to me, and Dovey laughed.

“ ‘Your parents at home, pal?’ Dovey says to this kid. ‘Your mother? Tell them the Zell brothers are here with her order,’ and the kid disappears inside and comes back out with this beauty parlor mother, with her hair done up and a full face on and this nice double string of saltwater pearls. My own mother never had pearls like that.

“ ‘How dare you!’ is what this woman says to Dovey before we can even say hello, and she’s looking back and forth, up and down the street, between Dovey and me.

“ ‘Who do you think you are, at my house, on a Saturday without a call from Marty? I didn’t make any appointment! Who do you think you are to show up here like some half-assed goon, some liar?!’ and the two of them march inside the house, still arguing like that. “Even from the outside, me and the kid with the Indian feathers can hear this ridiculous conversation going on with the volume going up.

“ ‘Why would I book jewelry on a Saturday? she says to Dov. I go to stores for jewelry, not to the Mafia!’ ”

“Are you sure I didn’t tell part of this before?” Cheese said, pinching salt and sugar into the Bolognese and then reaching his hand out to my son’s father for oregano and thyme. “Down at Graceland or something?”

“Stop it,” I said as I watched my husband run over like a good little surgical nurse and place every needed ingredient into my father’s hands. “Look in my eyes. Do I look like someone who has heard this story?”

“Yeah, okay, daughter,” Cheese said and ran his hand over the top of his head, smoothing down the sides of his hair. “Okay. Well, I should’ve told you anyway. I should’ve.”

“Why would you?” I asked. “Did you ever tell Gigi? Does she know it?”

“Ha,” Cheese said. “Touché. Well, this food I’m cooking sure as fuck smells good over here,” he said, patting his leg. “You sure you don’t want to come stand in the chef spot and learn how to feed your family or something useful?”

“Nope,” I said, shaking my head. “I don’t want to learn that.”

“Well, keep an eye on me anyway,” Cheese said. “Watch me, just in case.”

“You’re barking up the wrong tree there,” my husband said to Cheese, but I ignored that statement and pressed on.

“What happened in the fucking story?” I said to my father. “Don’t get senile now, after all this.”

Cheese smiled at my husband. “A demanding one, this little creature, isn’t she? You put up with this?”

My husband nodded. “She’s a beast, I’m telling you,” he said, smiling after I swatted at him. “But I do my best.”

“Well,” Cheese told us. “As I said. Dovey and Angry-Double-Pearls go on arguing in there about death and taxes and the day of the week, whatever. So the kid with the feathers—who’s about eight, maybe, a year or so younger than me—we start playing in the yard. Making things out of leaves. Probably soldiers or Nazis or something. And we’re having so much fun we lose track of where we are. Beaches of Dunkirk or Normandy or probably both, until we get bored and cold and he takes me inside the house and up to his room. Still in our imagination. Still killing and shooting and coming back to life and granting each other life after death as we pass through the living room. And there’s a Christmas tree in there too, I remember that, with popcorn ball decorations on the mantelpiece and pine greens with bows.

“By then Dovey had the stones out on the velvet rag on the coffee table and the lady has shut up enough that she’s listening to his bullshit about the value possibilities, and the investments, and what mineral mine this or that came from and the miner who personally dug this shit out of the earth, et cetera et cetera, because it’s always the *et cetera, et cetera* with that guy.

“ ‘It’s an intimate choice,’ Dovey is saying. ‘The sale of every diamond is personal. Like a fingerprint.’ Blah, blah.

“So that kid and I go upstairs to his room, and we play all the old games you kids of tomorrow don’t care about anymore. Toys that Abe Lincoln played with probably, marbles and Tinker Toys and sock monkeys. Okie-style Erector Sets. Way more toys than me, this kid had, by the way. I played with soup cans and rocks and used toilet paper rolls myself. But halfway through this kid’s toy chest (he actually had that!) a toy chest painted with his own name carved in it. I want to remember the name that was carved in there, but I can’t. Kid or Boy or Devil. Doesn’t matter. What I find in there is a switchblade with a nice red handle. Just a switchblade, right? But it had initials on it. CLR. You may recognize it. My initials. Chaim Leonard Rosen. My switchblade, that I lost, or thought so. The switchblade I got five years ago for Chanukah from my own father who’s selling diamonds right now to the boy’s mother downstairs.

“ ‘That’s my knife,’ I said to this stupid kid. ‘Where’d you get this? It’s mine!’

And he said, ‘None of your beeswax.’ And I said, ‘Oh yes, it is!’ And he said, ‘Nope.’

“Until maybe we were fighting a little. Maybe I held him down for a bit. Until he couldn’t breathe for a second and he gave it to me, finally, the little chicken, and I left him there on the carpet of his room, gasping like that, and marched downstairs, past the adults still talking, with coffee cups in their hands. Dovey sipping away with that *shiksa* from North Flushing.

“ ‘Hey!’ Dovey said as I passed on by. ‘You. Where you headed off in such a head of steam, soldier?’ But I let the door bang shut after me and slammed straight into the backseat of the LeMans.

“A long time I waited in there, until the light changed outside. Until the middle of the afternoon became the end of it. I knew how to do that when I was a kid, waiting for Dovey. I could watch the light in the sky change just a tick every fifteen or so minutes. Until Dovey shows up finally, looking pretty satisfied with himself, and we jack the engine and head out.

“ ‘What’s exactly wrong with you, soldier?’ he asked me about six exits down the turnpike after I was silent that whole time. ‘What in the bejesus is eating you?’ And when I took the switchblade out and tossed it onto the seat between us, and he saw that thing that he gave me on my fifth birthday that belonged to whatever asshole he probably stole it from, just lying there—he kept driving for a while. He went down two or three more exits, I think, before he pulled off into somewhere in Astoria. Someplace with row houses like ours, and we sat there, watching these groups of Christmas carolers on a porch singing ‘Little Town of Bethlehem.’ They were still singing it when Dovey put his hand on the back of my head. Soft. Rubbing my neck.

“ ‘Hey, he said to me. That kid at that house? That’s your brother—your own brother. By blood, for real, and I don’t want to hear another word about it, understand, or I’ll stick that blade of yours somewhere it doesn’t belong.’

“I think Dovey was waiting for me to say something then, but I didn’t. I just looked out the window at the backs of the people singing. I looked at the steam rising out of their mouths with the notes.

“ ‘You understand, soldier?’ Dovey said again. ‘You keep it, this knife. You keep the damn thing. It was a mistake, and you shut up about it. You keep quiet or I’ll break your fingers backward one by one, roger? Do I make myself clear? You and your mother belong to me and that’s forever, you understand. You’re the ones I die for. Just you and just her. Hear me?’

“ ‘I hear you,’ I said but it was in such a small whisper I wasn’t sure it was actually me.

“ ‘Do you?’ he said after a minute, pulling me up against him, and it was the only time I think I ever saw him cry either, like an old man with asthma sobbing over the steering wheel or a bad cough, and I can tell you his face was so smashed looking, like somebody broke it open with a hammer, and I promise you I didn’t want to ever see anything like that ever again.

“ ‘That’s a roger,’ I said to Dovey, finally, ‘I promise,’ but I did make him wait for it a little, until the Christian music stopped outside. ‘It’s all clear,’ I said, ‘but I wanna know who was first. Him or me?’

“And, ha! Dovey let go of me then and laughed good and hard. ‘Little son of a bitch.’ He wiped his eyes and blew his nose into his pocket handkerchief, then cracked his knuckles backward one by one and sighed. ‘Well, that ought to be something you know already, soldier,’ he said. ‘Just by the nature of that fucking question. If you’re the one living under my roof—you’re the first *and* the last, like the Bible says, understand?’

“And that was the end of it, because then he took me out to ice cream at a place where the waiters dressed up like gorillas and hit a gong before they brought your sundae out to you, and he let me eat whatever I wanted, and he gave me a big piece of that day’s cash and I was back in the sun with him again brighter than ever, and that was where I needed to be. No doubt.

“So Big Dov had another family, the bastard, and that’s the way it went, and I just filed it away in the dark place of the brain where you almost forget. So there. And that’s what you make about once upon a time, huh?”

“Jesus, Chaim,” my husband was saying, shaking his head. “That’s a hell of a story. What a terrible thing for a young kid to hear all that anyway, you know? Jesus fucking Christ! I can’t fucking imagine. Can you, Maya?”

“No,” I told him and I was honest about it too, because right then I couldn’t imagine a single thing. I knelt to pick the Advent calendar off the floor and some of Wrennie’s trucks, but it felt like they wouldn’t stay in my hands. Bolts of afternoon light were streaming into the kitchen from the windows, and the glimmering motes inside them were like falling bodies.

“Maya, come on,” Jimmie said. “Jesus. You heard what he just said.”

But it didn’t feel like I *could* hear him, actually. I was more interested in the misty vision of us there around the table the night of the house fire in Carroll Gardens with Gigi twisting her fingers, and all of us at dinner, and her taking off her wedding rings finally, and announcing she was leaving Cheese there in front of all of us for the district court judge, and I saw what happened to my father’s face. Not smashed up like Dovey’s, with a hammer, but more like it was melting. Like all Cheese’s features were liquid all of a sudden and his mouth was bottomless, like an open manhole. And then she was up against the dishwasher with his hand around her throat like that stupid kid in the story, and the blade he held suddenly in my memory now had become bright and red. And I don’t know what was wrong with me exactly not to have remembered enough of the details until this very moment, but the sound she made was like a murder in the opera and all our ears were covered and it took almost all the energy I had right then in fact to not start screaming like that myself.

“Do you have any idea where these people are these days, Chaim, or what?” I heard my husband ask. “Have you ever looked them up? They might still live in Queens.”

“Jimmie, for God’s sake!” I said letting gravity take the pile of Wrennie’s trucks from my hands at last and dump them back onto the floor. “In what universe do you think I want to know anything about who these people are?”

“Maya.”

“No!” I said to my husband. “This was a mistake having him here. A bad one. I can’t believe you let me!” And when I looked up, I noticed Cheese standing there across the kitchen, watching me.

“What are you looking at?” I said to him in a voice that wasn’t that far off from yelling. “You heard what I said. I’m serious.” But Cheese didn’t rise to the occasion like I thought he might’ve. He just bowed his head to look at the bubbling pot of what he made, and I noticed then how shrunken down he seemed and almost meek. Like a 99-cent-store rabbi. It was impossible to look at him standing there and not feel smothered by a shame blanket.

“Why would you tell me this anyway?” I asked my father finally. “You have another family in your back pocket too, is that it? Are we supposed to exchange knives and phone numbers, then choke each other out all over the floor? I don’t care about any of these people!”

“Hey,” my husband said to me, rising from his chair. “Sweetie, Maya. That’s enough. You have to stop.” But Cheese held up a hand.

“No, it’s okay, buddy. She’s okay.” He looked past me over to my husband. “My daughter is one hundred percent right about suspecting that,” he said to him. “There were plenty of female mistakes, obviously, but no other family. I swear it. It was just her and the younger ones up until the end, and I am regretful for what happened. She should know this. Every minute of my whole life. I suffered like hell for it and maybe that’s the solution. Maybe that pain can make her glad.”

But I wasn’t glad. And the only solution I had was to imagine the whole scene backward. Of Gigi telling Cheese she was never leaving him after all, and us climbing out from under the table, and the house at Carroll Gardens during Christmas would still be standing, and the airplanes would fly backward out of the Twin Towers, and the undead people would come up from the pavement, and instead of forcing us to go to Delaware, Jimmie would still be just some regular guy taking the subway home.

**Wrennie was hanging** onto my pants leg by then, pulling on it, whining. So I lifted him up and pressed him against my hip, trying to make him comfortable, but he wouldn’t accept it. He kept writhing, and I knew I wasn’t supposed to think it, but I knew for certain in that moment more than I’d ever known anything that there was nothing I could do for him. Not when the worst thing we had to protect him from was us.

“Hey, friend,” Cheese said to my husband, leaning up against the counter. “I think I might need to sit down for just a second. You think you might take this over for me here at the stove? Can you watch it? I might have to have a cold washcloth or something for my head.”

“Sure,” my husband said, rising up and offering Cheese his stool. “I got this.”

Cheese nodded. “You need a glass of water or something too?”

“Well, I would appreciate that, son-in-law,” my father said. “You’re a good man too. I can’t believe you’re an officer of the law either. Good, good stuff.”

“Will you help me, please?” my husband mouthed at me silently from the sink as he helped Cheese onto the stool. “Do something.”

He kept pantomiming what he must have thought were possible ideas, but all it looked like to me was a crazy bunch of gesturing at the paper towel roll on the wall and the sink.

“Come on,” my husband mouthed again. “Fuck. Just be nice.”

So for lack of a better idea, I went to my father and handed Wrennie to him.

“Here,” I said. “Tell your grandson something about yourself he doesn’t know. Something easy. Go ahead.”

“Ah, now,” Cheese said, smiling down at Wrennie as he propped him on his knee. “This is great kid. Couldn’t even tell you what else. No idea. But I did have a hot-rod column in the Dix Hills newspaper for a while in high school. I bet you didn’t know that about me either.”

“No,” I said to my father on Wrennie’s behalf. “He didn’t. None of us did.”

Wrennie started squirming around in Cheese’s arms, so my husband airlifted him from my father’s lap and set him free to zigzag across the living room. I went to the cupboard then, as I’d been told to do earlier, and got out the bottle of red wine. My job was simply to hand it over to Cheese to put in the sauce at the end, like he’d warned me before the cooking even began, but I felt lightheaded when my father lifted the bottle out of my hands, like I was floating so high now that the flashy red handle on the hunting-style knife with the blades that snapped in and out didn’t bother me anymore, or the cut-glass sound of Gigi’s shrieking, or even the click of the blade disappearing when he snapped it away from the base of her throat.

“Hey,” Cheese said then, holding out the spoon to me after he’d poured in the wine. “Here now, try this. Take a bite and you’ll see. There’s a reason for Italy to exist after all.”

I did take a taste, and it was good. I told him it was and it wasn’t a lie either. The flavors were developing okay, like the heat was put from high to low-medium at the right time, and the sauce was blipping away, even though the kitchen looked like a crime scene and I knew I would be the one to clean it up.

“I know less about cooking now than I did before you got here, by the way,” I told my father as I lit one of his cigarettes. “But thanks.”

That night after dinner, when we were full, Cheese and my husband got out the chess board, and my husband beat him over and over at all the openings and gave him the ass-kicking of a lifetime, actually. Like the man may as well have been playing Bobby Fisher. The Sicilian, the Italian, the King’s Indian, the Four Knights; and Cheese took it like a man. Even the Ruy Lopez, and one time at the end, the Fool’s Mate, but he handled it remarkably well, I have to say. Cheese lost his queen over and over to my husband without saying one word. I don’t remember my father lying down to anybody like that. Not ever. At one point, I almost thought to take my husband aside for a minute and tell him to have mercy.

I even let my husband climb back into the actual bed with me that night too, once Wrennie fell asleep.

“We can’t raise our son in this graveyard anymore, Maya,” he said. “Please, let me get us out of here. *Please.*”

And I told him that I’d think about it, I swore I would, even though we both knew by then, I imagine, as we had from the beginning, that my bones would be buried in Brooklyn like Antoni Gaudí’s were in the Spanish cathedral. No terrorist of any kind would ever be able to dig them out.

**A picture was taken** then too, of Cheese on the front porch on Boxing Day, holding Wrennie in his diaper under the arch of wisteria vines I’d planted with the silhouette of the city in the distance and the piece of empty space at the tip of the island where the towers used to be.

“The next time you see your grandson,” my husband said to my father that day, “he’ll be potty trained.”

“Good on you, buddy,” Cheese said, shaking my husband’s hand at the gate before he left in the cab. “You take care of my daughter for me now, all right? I’ll see you this time next year for another recipe. I’ll teach your small man to cook too. We’ll make this a tradition.”

“Will do,” my husband said to Cheese. “You bet.” But once my husband went inside with Wrennie and the door was safely shut behind them, I told my father the truth. About Jimmie seeing people on that day jumping off the towers and the one body in particular that fell on a parking meter in front of him and stabbed it straight through. There was a lease signed in Delaware already too, I admitted to him, and I didn’t want to go.

“Well, of course you’re going, turtledove,” my father said at the door of the gypsy cab after he kissed my forehead and held both my cheeks in his hands. “Your husband told me everything, and this is a no-brainer. You can’t un-love your family, right?”

“What do you mean he told you everything?” I asked. “When did that happen?”

“When you weren’t looking,” Cheese said. “Promise me you’ll go.”

“Not that it’s any of your business in the slightest, by the way,” I said to my father when he hugged me hard against his chest. “But okay,” I told him. “I promise.”

Except the following December when I called up Cheese to see about the holidays, the number I had for him in Memphis was disconnected.

By then Jimmie was transferred to Wilmington, and we were in a big mess splitting custody, losing the apartment across from the Walt Whitman projects and the Prison Ship Martyrs Monument and the short, easy walk to the G train and the park. There was no forwarding number for my father. But the main thing I would have let him know if I ever could have reached him was that I knew he wasn’t the one who burned down the house in Carroll Gardens for the insurance money. It was only our mother who wanted us to think that. It was just the plugged-in coffee pot and the faulty circuit breaker that started it. And everybody in the state of New York practically, except for the cousins, knew that too.

And if I had him on the phone, I would probably have thanked him too, I guess, for the Advent calendar and the white guitar for Wrennie, and the Bolognese he cooked for us once upon a time, when we were still a family. And the taste it left in all our mouths