TRACES OF LOVE

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a tale of murder

by KIRPAL GORDON

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For Bob Arnold, literary sparring partner

Faded photographs,
Memories from old love letters;
Traces of love, long ago,
That didn't work out right,
Traces of love with you tonight.

---"Traces," words and music by
Buddy Buie, Emory Gordy, Jr. and James P. Cobb

What is well planted cannot be uprooted.
---Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching
Prologue
Mrs. Emilia Messopresti, Narrator

People tell you all kinds of things when you're mute.
And I've been listening all my life.
But now that I can't speak, people tell me their most incredible secrets.
What can I say? I manage a smile, sometimes a yes or no, but that's it.
I've had a stroke or two or three. I've lost actual count. The words are right there on my tongue. They just don't come out. Vascular dementia, they call what I got. But I stopped having anything to do with doctors. After my husband died. Seven years ago, next week, on the thirty-first. A proofreader. A marvelously opinionated individual.
We wrote each other love poetry through our courtship and into our old age. Even while our kids grew up. Words were everywhere back then. Amidst card games, debates, dinners. In every room: books and papers, journals and diaries.
In the absence of words, dust collects. If I write now I can't remember the first part of the sentence when I get near the end. So pardon any mistakes ahead of time. If it weren't for my middle child Joey, I wouldn't be able to do the crossword puzzle in the New York Times either. I like figuring things out. That's what I listen for, the angle.
Eight-six years of listening tells me the words we use mean just what they say. Or just exactly reverse. One or the other. Problem is, when you get to my age, it doesn't matter anyway. Opposing viewpoints all sound alike. So I spend a lot of time away from words, alone, fortifying what's left of my memory. Photographs don't lie.

That's why I pull out my kids' yearbooks.

My three, born a year apart, graduated from the same high school, Our Lady of All Hallows. I was thirty-five when I had my first, but that's another story. Anyway, I flip through the pages, trace my kids' development, better understand how they got where they are today. One is a professor, another looks after me, the third is missing.

Don't ask.

Lately, I find myself looking at the pictures from the class of 1970.

That's Joey and his gang. They had great appetites. And they could talk. The gals just as much as the fellas. That was the last four years of the Sixties, and the kids fought with parents, teachers, priests and draft board. My husband Americo liked to remind them that the Mafia, the Vatican and Uncle Sam are just competing muscle hustling the cash out of working people's pockets. Well, he was Sicilian. He could say those kinds of things, especially to Joey's friends. He had wit and aplomb. He argued the best policy to be in finding out all you can about the people in power. Joey's friends liked him.

I'm a little lost without him.

I guess ever since Tracy's gone I look more closely at the faces involved in her accident. Maybe I should say they stare back at me from the yearbook. Am I looking for clues? I'm not
sure I want to know who's responsible. That's what I mean about being mute: I hear too much. Seven people were with her in our garden that morning, and before evening all seven—separately and unbeknownst to the others—confessed to me of killing her! What can I say? That they're deluded? They were raised Catholic.

It's up to you to figure it out. I saw her body, but I didn't see her expire.

I was next door at the time. In the front room drinking coffee. Trevor helped walk me over. There had been lot of shouting that morning. And unexpected guests. Joey wanted me safe. Who was I to object?

Just so you know, seven voices told seven stories, each poles apart from the next.

Like I say, people mean just what they say or exactly opposite.

Consider this from Ricky Moino: Tracy's death came from a drug dealer she had burned who sent a hit man over who shot her from the second floor bathroom. (I did see someone, a stranger, walk in the front door.) Another version claims, and I won't give names, he not only knew about the hit and failed to protect Tracy in time but that he had watched her get killed in the dealer's backyard in Corona, and that he brought her here to figure out what to do.

The third version mentions no hit man or drug dealer at all, but a quarrel between friends, my son and a fella I won't name who has a history of competing with Joey over everything, women included, tempers flaring, a show of male bravado, accidental crossfire and a stray bullet, boom, dead. Story #4 admits a gun, but only to make clear it was shot not by men seeking to claim her or kill her. It was by her own
hand. And the teller of this story knew suicide was a real possibility. That's why he packed his gun in her purse!

The fifth one said that whether or not a gun went off, she couldn't be sure, the suicide came not from Tracy shooting herself but from throwing herself against that eight-foot-high wall of loosely stacked stone. Only moments before, this narrator joked that the waterfall was a death trap and challenged Tracy to test its merits.

The sixth story mentions a death trap but insists it wasn't in the garden but in her own intersecting webs of lies. Strung out on drugs, having gotten caught in the back yard with one lover's stolen money in another lover's briefcase, she so provoked her furious lovers that one lost control and pushed her into the pit they were building above that waterfall's rock wall. He insists he pushed her slightly. He didn't mean for all the rocks to fall on her. Finally there's just as likely---she being, as she always insisted, fashionable to her death, a high heel wearer in any terrain and the back garden project a wet mess amongst moist stones and moss---nothing to any of it but an accidental slip. Obviously, that last version came from Quinn.

All I know is that she was bloody.

I have a fondness for Agatha Christie. Since it's getting harder to read, I watch her Hercule Poirot solve mysteries on the TV. I like Law & Order, too, but in real life I can't tell a gunshot wound from a nose bleed.

And I didn't get that close to her corpse.

She looked peaceful lying there.

I don't know how Joey's friends disposed of the body. Probably Rickie. He lives, you know, in Jersey. He cleans up other people's messes for a living.
But no cops ever came. Nor ever asked us anything. No one cared that she was dead. Even her mother. I personally didn’t feel that way. I’m not saying I liked her. Or that I thought she was good for Joey. Only that it isn’t right for someone to die that way, no matter how evil she might have been to how many. I’d never met anyone like that. You know, crazy. You could say smoking the free base made her act that way, but you could excuse Hitler, too, for having a frustrating time as an artist.

As for my involvement; all I did was ask Quinn to look into what was up with her and my Joey.

“Why?” he asked me.

“Because I hear arguing,” I told him, “upstairs.”

Now I don’t hear any.

I wish I could figure out the whole story myself. But I’m getting too old.

Better they tell it themselves.
I know things happen.
Things we can't explain. Things that start out singing, but twist into betrayal and wither in bitterness. Yet return in renewal as surely as winter ushers in spring.

That's why murder gets our attention: to caution us, turn turn turn, about a time for every purpose and the many seasons in our nature.

Especially our season to kill, which like our mating season, knows no season at all.

Call it the headlines. What we can't help reading as we sit across subway seats. If only fraternity stole our attention so readily: to celebrate the more humane seasons in our nature. Call it the fine print. What we can't help leaving unread on our busy way.

We've got so many stunning words for killing. A litany. A stun-gun of nuance. Requiring the scrutiny of twelve confused citizens publicly examining the private looniness of the looser screws among us. Those jurors who may have never lived in a commune or a ghetto. I would not call those jurors wrong. Only lacking in experience.

I'm not saying trial by jury is unfair. But beware of the verdict that comes from those whose brush with the wilder side of our (mostly unknown) nature provokes deep and
automatic fears. Fears that, if you look closely, are wired into our skulls on puppet strings, tap dancing to code-word precision: murder, mayhem, manslaughter; momentary madness, premeditation, self-defense; depraved indifference, under the influence of, third rate romance's rendezvous. The prosecutorial baton orchestrates the wake-up words so well we can’t tell justified-revolution-against-oppression from just-more-maniacs-with-automatic-weapons. There in the gun’s sights you decide if it’s homicide, suicide, genocide. As for destiny, I'm part Indio; give the others the third degree. I'm pleading the fifth. Guns are final and life is chaotic.

That's the first problem. And it begets the second: the minute you step into a court of law, you're neck deep in chaotic.

So to avoid the reckless endangerment of complete strangers, unfamiliar with your ethnicity or eccentricity, deciding on your sanity or criminal disposition, you need friends. That matrix beyond family that weaves the community complete. A human circle, a ring of roses: to put up the barn, put out the fire, put down the dead to rest. And that's what this story is all about. What we used to call tribe. And though I won't guarantee anyone else will see it this way, that doesn't make what I see any less tribal or the loyalty it evokes in me any less sweet.

The world is a web of inextricable relatedness, as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., put it. I was only eleven years old when he wrote those words from a jail cell in Birmingham, but that phrase has stayed with me my whole life. Though I haven’t had to await trial where twelve white people would be called on to decide if my brown skin or act of manhood was criminal or Christian, thanks to this tribe I have
come up close and personal with the moral truth of our time expressed by Dr. King. Neighbor to Reinhold Niebuhr. I'm certain that what happens to one of us happens to us all. The early church, whether living in catacombs or upper rooms, facing the lions of the Coliseum or the deserts of Egypt, remains my model for human community. Yes, I was taught to raise myself above my humble beginnings, but there's more to life than personal success. Ask any one of us. Whatever their individual shortcomings might be—and the list is long, and in a couple of cases, so are the rap sheets—the people in this tribe have changed my life for the better. They have certainly helped me distinguish the difference between what's a crime and what's an act of heroism.

Not that there haven't been consequences.
What alternative lifestyle hasn't had its share?

Consequences for us began over thirty years when we rented Exile, an old mansion off Main Street, downtown Flushing, Queens, last stop on the 7 line. Complete with garden and grounds, a wrap-around porch, two floors of bedrooms above a huge kitchen and a library/living room with a basement renown for late night jams, the supposed inspiration for the Rolling Stones album, "Exile on Main Street."

I'm not taking sides on that argument, but when we started that commune, we knew next to nothing. But that didn't stop parents from disowning us, plainclothes cops from infiltrating us, the FBI from creating a file on us. That's the underbelly of the Sixties/Seventies my own kids don't know much about. That summer of love, flowers-in-the-hair crap was the fabrication of reporters living outside the event trying to sell magazines, turning it into a circus. That would never
play in New York. Here it was clear that the powers-that-be didn’t want change. Or us in the neighborhood.

Instead of freaking us out, the pressure drew us together. We didn’t have a common purpose, but with a common enemy, we found a commonality. Fresh out of high school, we were more confused kids than confirmed radicals. We were in college or at our first jobs or back from the war in Southeast Asia or “alternative service” in India, Mexico, Vermont. Working with VISTA, the Peace Corps, the Quakers. We were on the map of many cross-country hitch-hikers. We were listed in The Spiritual Community Handbook. No doubt it’s the height of utopian foolishness now, but back then it felt like the most natural thing in the world to see if we couldn’t create a cheaper, freer, more supportive environment than college dorm, solo apartment or crashing with the folks.

I wasn’t a charter member. I got there because Mierko Radonovic married Athena Pallas, bought his own fruit and vegetable store and moved out. So this guy Quinn advocated for me. Although our age, he was living at this other commune up off Northern Boulevard called The House, run by these Robin Hood hipsters, mostly Jewish, who were five years older than us. Hey, while we were in the eighth grade, they were making small fortunes dealing drugs in Haight-Ashbury. We looked up to these guys. They returned to the neighborhood like drug dealers should; to finance and administer a natural foods co-op, a community restaurant called Quantum Leap and this sprawling Victorian manor that offered classes on their shady back-lawns in Sufi dancing, tea ceremony, zen meditation and macrobiotic living. California dreamin’ in Queens. They also headquartered the draft resisters’ league, but that’s a whole other story. Anyway,
these older guys were Bayside High School softball buddies of Ray, who lived on the same street as Quinn. The House, with its reading program for the elderly and free Yoga classes in Kissena Park, was the first wave of change to hit Queens, and we were a sort of second generation at Exile.

I love my mom and dad and younger brother. I have no complaints about how I was raised. I don't hold it against my folks that they had no interest in science. It's more like, though I was born to them, I belonged in Exile. And thanks to the people who I would later live with in Exile, I won first prize in the New York City Science Fair my sophomore year in '67 for a study I conducted on air and noise pollution. I was so naïve I thought science should not only behave ethically but pave the way for “a better tomorrow” down the road. That, after all, was my own story. For my graduation present from grammar school, my dad scraped up enough money to send me to All Hallows, the new diocesan-run college preparatory. He drove me over, I loved it, and then he continued along the same Long Island Expressway, whose pollution would bring me prizes, to the New York World's Fair held in Flushing Meadows. Hearing that promise of “a better tomorrow through science” from the Du Pont, Ford and General Electric pavilions, I decided then and there to become an environmental scientist. And then it became literally true the day I graduated from that All Hallows, for just down the road from where the World's Fair stood, I continued the same research on a science scholarship at Queens College. Deadly Long Island Expressway connected it all.

But I'm not telling the whole story yet. The promise of “a better tomorrow through science” was much discussed in those salad days. It was a more political time. I may have
initially joined the Science Club because it was the only co-ed activity in a co-institutional school, but I soon fell in love with the debates about Bucky Fuller and Ralph Nader, Gary Snyder and Helen and Scott Nearing, Paolo Soleri and Joseph Needham, Stephen Gaskin of The Farm and Peter Rabbit of Drop City. I was also secretary of the Junior Academy of Science on Fifth Avenue and Sixty-third Street, so I could get them a big check from Manhattan if they would come out to our high school club in Queens. They used to let us attend the Senior Academy activities on technology and human conscience. I got interested in weather, lung cancer, emission control devices, alternatives to fossil fuel and self-sustainable communities.

Anyway, by the time I got to Exile, its huge grounds and vacant lots on two sides made it an ideal laboratory to investigate a better tomorrow. Ten minutes from Queens College, Exile gave me the chance to try out every wacky science experiment in my head, even some of the ones I wouldn’t dare make a report on to the Academy. We designed solar panels, built a geodesic dome and solar-powered car, erected windmills, planted a vineyard, saved an apple orchard, composted everything we could, grew our own food, made our own wine, started the re-cycling of plastic and glass all over the borough.

I have to back up a bit to give a clearer picture of what it was like.

These days the only press those days ever get is when some ex-radical gets picked up for a thirty-year-old crime. So the sound bite for the six o’clock news portrays these fighters-for-social-change as blowing up buildings, chanting slogans, going wild, robbing banks—as if they’re untrustworthy
fugitives fleeing justice, living among us as normal people without our knowledge. It's just cop talk. Now that the weak whose lunch money got stolen are in power, everyone's aghast at reports of the Weathermen, Panthers, Young Lords, bra-burning feminists, priests spilling blood on Selective Service files. You know, like what were they thinking?

Well, we didn’t see them as insane jerks, kooks or Communists; we saw them as our older generation. They'd been to Nam and came back to tell us we were lied to, that we were only another foreign power like China and France before us acting like imperialists, throwing money and threats at them. The people found their mandate of heaven in Ho while we dismembered women and children to increase the official body count of enemy dead. The older generation who stayed home traveled the freedom rides, sat in the sit-ins, planned the ban-the-bomb marches, created the first gay and lesbian coalitions, devised the initial attempts to shut down the war machine and de-colonize our own minds. All that gets celebrated now with weren't-they-wonderful, but we grew up watching them get their heads kicked in on national TV. The witch hunts, the anger, brutality, abuse of power---that was standard operating procedure back then. And all that doing-the-Gandhi was getting them nowhere. No wonder they bugged out, met violence with violence. No working person I ever met thought it was a good idea to get whipped on, arrested, shot or killed.

We learned from their mistakes. Throughout high school we marched with them in New York and in DC. But we felt the Movement, though strong on commitment, lacked fun, charm and the perks of a freer lifestyle. Hey, I should know. I worked in Tallman’s Island Sewage Treatment Plant in
College Point in the summer of '69. My hardened co-workers had refused to participate in a single conversation I tried to have about smarter ways of filtering sludge and not killing off the Atlantic seaboard for fishing. They'd laugh when I told them of two-hundred-year-old turtles confusing a prophylactic with a jellyfish and choking to death. And when they found out I was taking a couple of days off to go to the Woodstock Music and Art Fair up in Bethel, they shunned me as a dreaded hippie-spic weirdo. But when I got back, every single one of these guys asked me the same question, as long as their colleagues weren't around, "Did you find any free love up there?" I had. I told of an older gal frolicking naked in the lake, inviting me in for a swim, of one thing leading to another, and pop went my cherry. That's when I knew if you take the R out of revolution, the people would follow.

You could say that we had every reason to grow up fast. We were facing the draft. None of us at Exile were upper class, and the college students Nixon had gunned down were our own age. Maybe all I am trying to say is that the line between right and wrong was obscured. Or that we had this nutty idea of living outside the law, of believing, as Wallace Stevens put it, "beyond belief."

Here's what I'm getting to: unlike the all-or-nothing older freaks, we cultivated alliances. We "liberated" from our old high school a mimeograph machine, the one we printed our "underground newspaper" on and installed it in the basement at Exile. This was the zeitgeist in a nutshell for us. With Joey's dad proofreading for us, we printed little how-to pamphlets for each project that we managed to get right. By distributing these at the Don't Panic, It's Organic Food Co-op, at
parties at The House and from our own porch and at our music jams, we became well known in the neighborhood.

We said we were students of the scientific method and invited feedback.

That was the secret. It turned out that many we had thought of as “short-haired squares” were fellow travelers. Some read Whitman. Others loved boogie woogie music. Some even meditated. They were no “silent majority” of Spiro Agnew. It’s just that, before us, no one ever asked them their opinion. When we did, they opened up and came over to our house to share information. I will be honest: they insisted we not grow pot on the grounds or spike the punch at the parties. We grew to see what they were saying. They were moms and grandmas, vegetarians and carnivores, nurses and electricians, garbage men and retirees, immigrants and the children of immigrants. Salt of the earth. We trusted them, even though they were over thirty. And they taught us all kinds of things: how to rotate crops, how to raise goats, chickens and a cow, which is illegal inside the city limits, and how to befriend the cops and stop thinking of them as pigs, how to get around restrictive laws. We didn’t know that much. They helped us build a sweat lodge, a gazebo where we held Sunday chess matches, a tea house, a pond we stocked with trout and fished in the summers and skated on in the winters. And a meditation garden of rock and evergreen, which is still there, the only thing left all these years later.

There were sixteen of us going in at least as many directions, and if there was a master of ceremonies among all these “non-leaders,” it was Joey Messopresti, a/k/a Joey Paison. He simply moved the party from his parents’ house a few blocks away. In high school we had gathered there
around his mother’s cooking to discuss the meaning of Bob Dylan songs, hang out with girls or get a late night nosh after boozing it up at the parish dance. Judicious about people, Joey talked our swinging divorcee landlady into a low rent in exchange for home improvements and a monthly bacchanalia for her friends and interior design clients. Was he also providing stud service? We didn’t ask, and he didn’t tell. He would soon become a master craftsman, progressing from set designer and head carpenter for the high school drama club to working for these Lebanese cabinetmakers who taught him exotic inlay and rare woods. There was nothing he couldn’t build well, with or without nails.

And if there was a hard working idealist among us, it was Hermann Lutz. He swam varsity relays with me and Quinn, and he was Joey’s right hand man on the stage crew. He became a student actor in college and a gardener for the nearby golf course in Bayside, a place that “donated” a lot of supplies to Exile. His dad, though not the Social Democrat Joey’s parents were, ran a landscaping outfit that gave us a lot of freebies as well. His former girlfriend from high school Julie Chaumont used to come around a lot. So did his girlfriend of the time, Silvie Van Hoek, an old friend of mine and Quinn’s, who grew up on the water between the Whitestone and Throg Neck Bridges.

But the person who most embodied the renaissance lifestyle of Exile was “Country” Bob Borowski. A gawky kid and a gifted Math major who dropped out of St. Bonaventure’s, he had just enrolled in the Turtle Bay Music School. While he learned carpentry and science, he taught us about Monk and Coltrane, Moondog and Mahler. It was his piano, particularly his Sunday afternoon recitals of Ravel,
Satie and Debussy, that endeared us to the neighborhood. We opened the parlor, Joey cooked, Bob played, locals came and soon our troubles with the authorities ended. He made us legitimate not only with the cops and the neighbors but with The House a few blocks away. Bob took every Yoga class at The House. He soon became the messenger between households, setting up an alternative arts network that brought students, seekers and partiers to both. He also put it in the longest stint as a waiter at Quantum Leap. When Devon Doherty came back from Vietnam a mess, Country Bob got him involved in the Saturday Night Jam Project.

Among the musicians was an NYU film student named Tommie Gunn. The only one of us raised in Manhattan, Tommie was our first celebrity. His photographs of great but-soon-to-be-dead rock stars were already in Rolling Stone and Newsweek. To me, however, he will always be more famous for convincing the private detective who came from Idaho not to report for arrest his seventeen-year-old girlfriend, a Mormon runaway named Heidi Anderson. Maybe it was only a sign of the times, but Tommie melted the edges off of this hard-nosed private eye who loved to play guitar. With a band behind him that wouldn’t quit, he stayed for a week, getting to know Tommie and Heidi pretty intimately. He told her parents Exile was a better environment for their daughter than anything Boise had to offer. Then he quit private eye work.

Be it hindsight or mid-life crisis, lifestyles and work seemed to take a more natural course back then. The question was never: How do you want to make money? It was: What do you want to do in the revolution? Everyone’s career, not just the carpenters, emerged from doing their own thing. When the music jams got too crowded, Rock-a-Day Devon
rented the old Flushing Town Hall and staged them there. He’s doing the same thing now, only his venues are Radio City Music Hall and Madison Square Garden. And there seemed to be more serendipity in the air then as well. We all read and discussed Alan Watts, but Ida Cohen, a tai chi gal who taught herself Chinese, had a satori-like experience while reading of Nature, Man and Woman. So she wrote Watts. He had a deal with Bollingen and invited her to study on his houseboat in Sausalito for the summer. We threw her a big bon voyage party and she went. Now she teaches in China.

Anyway, all this was heady stuff for a Hispanic kid inventing his own program of study on scholarship. I graduated from Queens College and left Exile for the graduate program in Environmental Studies at UC/Santa Cruz, but those commune days made me who I am now. I went from the wildest run of one night stands to meeting Migdalia, the woman I am still happily married to, three children later, settled in the woods of northern New Jersey surrounded by national forest, now the scoutmaster teaching the local troop to be prepared. Nevertheless, I found myself completely unprepared to face the final consequences of that lifestyle: the death throws of those tribal roots.

That began seven years prior when Joey’s father passed away. His mom freaked out, threw away her pills for high blood pressure, arthritis and rheumatism—and then more pills to counteract the side effects of the first pills—and told Joey as she crawled on all fours up the stairs to her bedroom that she had no wish to live any more. So Joey moved back in with her in the little house he grew up in off of Parsons Boulevard.
But I would sooner begin with Quinn who returned to New York to bury his mother in March, around the first day of spring last year. To me he is more at the heart of the story than anyone else for he set into motion the events that resulted in the tragedy to Tracy Lashley, a/k/a Traces of Love. Not that he did anything unkind! If the fate of a bad person is that no one comes looking for you when you're gone, then Tracy Lashley is bad to the bone. Well, maybe I should speak for myself. I'm glad she's not around.

Quinn, on the other hand, is the kind of friend I can't help missing. We go way back to the first day of kindergarten when he convinced Mrs. Terranova not to punish me for turning my broom into a stickball bat. I was an impossible, pent-up kid who craved attention and he was like an intermediary, part kid and part adult, who could soften the harder edges of the authorities under whose care we often trembled. I grew into science and he grew into psychology.

Like flying, he's thrilling or threatening, depending on your point of view.

It wasn't until I saw him standing over his mother laid out up at Gleason's Funeral Home that I understood the price he has paid for his gift. Some people prefer to pin their failures on him, as if it were he, not they, who had shut down or given up on themselves. Like Tracy. I saw her there, too, paying her respects. Amidst the mountains of flowers arranged around the dead body, she flitted and flirted in the sweet suffocation of the sitting room. Mourners sat knee to knee, stood thirty deep until they spilled out the door, down into the basement and into Slagger's, the local gin mill where real Irish wakes take place.
I admit she looked good in her little black dress and smart heels and long tan legs. I just was never all that taken with that make-up, her close-cropped Prince Valiant hair-do, boyish hips, head defiantly empty. She seemed not a woman at all, but eternally puerile, a trust-funded narcissistic brat who never grew up. I'm the only long-standing happily married man in our tribe. And I know from dues. I've spent my life fitting in. After all, my dad is Peruvian (and Quetchua) and my mom is Puerto Rican (and Taino). And it was my dad who showed me that Martin's struggle was our own.

Regarding my involvement in her death, I admit only to this: I'm the son of a janitor. Her Long Island high-class JAPpy-assed lifestyle, with the coke and the yachts and the Hamptons and the trips to the Bahamas seems un-American to me. Plus the fact that she never had to work a day in her life. As for the damage she caused Joey, his mother and our tribe, my calculations don't matter. It's her miscalculation of our tribe that matters, a miscalculation that turned the wheels of doom against her.

I know why she had to go. And the real part Quinn played in that departure.
Ricky tells a great story. It's just a little incomplete.

Where to begin? No one outside his home ever called him by his real name, Ricardo Monez. When his dad discovered how hostile the sound of Spanish could be on his neighbors' ears in Whitestone, he changed his son's name to Richard Monez. In kindergarten Quinn called him Ricky Momo, and the nickname stuck.

By high school, Ricky had blended in seamlessly with the other kids.

Yes, he has a little Indian blood on both sides, but he's not very Native American. By that I mean he's not related to the Algonquin tribes that have lived in and around New York Harbor for the last 2,000 years. His dad's mestizo family emigrated from South America by freighter, glad to get out. They moved to Spanish Harlem in the Forties where his dad met his mom, a light-skinned Puerto Rican seamstress with good hair working in the sweat shops. His dad, whose English has never been good, joined the Army, served in Guadacanal, came home, took a job cleaning toilets. Well, there are a lot of versions of the American dream.

His dad's included getting robbed on 106th Street and Park Avenue, under the elevated Metro North in the old neighborhood on his wedding day in 1950. He took a bullet in
the leg, from which he still limps, though now he's retired in Florida. Odd, though, two years of heavy fighting against the Japanese and not a single scratch. When his wife got pregnant, he decided he would move them out of Harlem, not an easy thing to do. He actually lightened his skin, bribed a real estate agent and bought one of the identical houses built on a square grid at the foot of the newly constructed Bronx-Whitestone Bridge. Odd, too, the modest home he financed on the GI Bill sold last year for $400,000 to a Japanese family even before it could get listed. Were they related to the Japanese warriors he fought against in the Pacific? He didn't ask. They offered cash in a paper bag. Like Mrs. Messopresti used to say, you live long enough, everything comes full circle. I know what she means. My father, who I never saw, didn't make it back from Korea. Not even in a box. I don't blame the Koreans, and I serve them every day at the library in old Whitestone, a neighborhood the Koreans are quietly taking over. They're the only ones who can afford it now! None dare call it real estate.

Anyway, and I'm not taking sides, Ricky never learned Spanish. His parents never spoke it in front of him. They didn't want him falling into "bad habits" or relying on what they were leaving behind. His brief fling with things Hispanic and revolutionary ended badly. Maybe I should back up and say Ricky is a handsome fellow. In high school, as a show of solidarity with la lucha, he wore a beret and his hair a little long. With his Army surplus jacket over his suit and tie for school, he was the spitting image of that famous photo of Che Guevara. The one plastered everywhere in New York after Che was gunned down by Fidel's dogs in Bolivia, '67. So people sought out Ricky's opinion. He had been moved by
Chavez’s *huelga* of grape pickers. One march down Fifth Avenue ended with his meeting the Young Lords. They were poor and Puerto Rican mostly, and Ricky felt sympathy with their cause and a deep stirring of roots. He had this fantastic notion that the Academy of Science would somehow love and befriend the cause, but when he brought them uptown to speak, he was told it wasn’t going to happen. Turned out one of the Lower East Side slum lords that the Young Lords insisted had to go was on the board of directors at the Academy. Wide-eyed Ricky suffered his first identity conflict.

All I mean to point out is that he likes to talk “tribe,” but doesn’t understand boundaries. It doesn’t run in the family; it leaps. That’s why his younger brother Javier, a/k/a Jay (but always called by his nickname Mouse), has had problems with substances. No doubt Ricky failed to mention that or that drugged-out Mouse introduced Joey to Tracy. I’m not blaming Ricky for her death. I was there in that back yard, too. All I am saying is Ricky’s failure to see the bigger picture explains why his version of tribe is all I-Yi-Yi, not we-all-one. As if the social (r)evolution to which he refers were nothing more than an opportunity to build his résumé and get out of the neighborhood.

In any case, his friends, not his family, have always come to his rescue.

Like with his science projects. Joey Paison built the display that housed his results at the science fairs. He also built an addition onto the back of the chemistry lab so Ricky could work. Joey may, with great bravado, suggest it was just a way to get out of a boring class, but he won’t tell you that he had everyone in the Drama Club involved in collecting data for
Ricky. Those straight-laced Brothers of the Sacred Heart weren’t receptive. And when he asked me to photograph the damage to All Hollow, as All Hallows came to be called, how could I refuse? I didn’t care that he forgot to mention me or the Photo Club. And not taking anything away from Ricky, but Quinn was the player he needed behind the scenes. When he began his experiment on the impact of the expressway’s air and noise pollution on our environment, the archdiocese, unbeknownst to any of us, had just sued the contractor who built the school so poorly that it leaked in the rain. Well, Quinn—and I’ll get to him—has a way of finding things out. He showed Ricky the value his research could have in that lawsuit. When its proximity to the expressway’s monstrous wear and tear was connected to why our school’s foundation was cracked, certainly something the contractor ought to have known, big wig Church bureaucrats sought out Ricky. He helped them win the case, which was settled out of court, for a sweet sum. Besides getting voted Most Likely to Succeed by our graduating class, Ricky met the archbishop who showed his appreciation by calling the president at Queens College, which was built by the same contractor down the road on the same expressway. The archdiocese also managed to get Ricky a consulting fee. They must have been very disappointed when he moved to Exile and brought his science professors over to get naked with the hippies.

To Ricky this may have been some kind of counterculture victory, but for his dad, who never set foot on those grounds, it was an ultimate defeat that broke old Julio’s heart. He used to walk over to our house on the water and have a beer with my uncles. He had risked his life defending his newfound nation against Hirohito’s military, trained to kill by
Zen masters. Twenty five years later, to have his scholarly #1 son, the embodiment of his crossover dreams, sitting zazen in a tea house or eating macrobiotic foods from Japan was worse than an insult. It was ultimate betrayal.

As for Exile, if they pulled half the stunts now that they got away with then, they would all be looking at prison sentences. No doubt Ricky didn’t mention that the bearded wild boy Rock-a-Day Devon regularly supplied that commune with the finest Owsley windowpane LDS-25. Well, Ricky is a chemist but not big on certain details. For perspective, here’s another detail: by 1970 New York City was mostly broke, thanks to Mayor Lindsay and the “white flight” to the suburbs. Without much of a tax base, Flushing was pretty deserted. The rent on the old Exile mansion and grounds was only $400 a month, which meant $25 per person, which most could make in a half day. Just for comparison, my nephew now pays $800 a month for a two-room basement apartment on the same block that formerly housed Exile. It was ghetto economics meeting LBJ’s GNP. Throw in sex and the birth control pill, mix in the fear of getting drafted, and the result is Ricky’s so-called counter-culture.

And there are darker sides to that past Ricky may have forgotten. Back in high school, there wasn’t a substance Devon didn’t succeed in abusing. We all drank wine and beer under age, but by the time we got to reefer, Devon had moved from sniffing glue to drinking Carbona. He would inhale the laughing gas in the RediWhip cans when his mother took him with her food shopping! It was scary. He used to come to Whitestone before school to give us rides, but nobody wanted to get in the car with him. And then in the winter of ’69, while he and Ricky and Quinn were after-school porters at S.
Klein's on Main Street, he got popped. The cops actually saved his life. They broke down the door to the toilet stall in the men's room where he sat on the throne stoned on smack, the needle dangling out of his arm. Had he not gotten arrested he would have overdosed. As it was, they rushed him to Flushing General and pumped his stomach. It was a big wake-up call. He cleaned up after that. Quinn, who knew how these things work, lied his fucking head off in the criminal investigation. Needless to say, Devon walked. Six months later he was shooting Viet Cong. Eighteen months after that, he showed up with his guitar at Exile. Though his Irish dad, a cop, temporarily disowned him, Devon got his life back together. He lives a few towns over from Ricky in the North Jersey suburbs.

That's what I mean about incomplete information.

As for my opinion about our generation's revolution, I defer to the answer the Chinese gave Henry Kissinger about the French Revolution: it's too early to tell.

I apologize for a cynical tone. This is how people from Queens talk. And Queens has been playing second fiddle to Manhattan way before Ellis Island ever received its first guests and squeezed them into death-trap tenements. Immigrants unknown to one another, from Armenia and the Black Forest, Ukraine and the South China Sea, Gypsies and Jews, Greeks and Poles, Scandinavians and Turks. Italians south of Rome couldn't even understand the dialect of their own countrymen from Turin, Milan, Venice, Trieste. Broke, indentured, unwanted, their offspring crawled into the outer boroughs with that same doomed sense of territory that caused them to murder each other up and down tiny, rat-maze Manhattan Island, center of the world, and one glorious
ecological paradise before concrete. The history of New York is an old saga about neighborhoods.

Giovanni de Verrazano, sailing into the Narrows, “discovered” this port in 1541? Eliminate the pollution, roads, bridges and skyscrapers, and you’ll see where the Ice Age’s last and most southern glacier melted on Todt Hill in Staten Island, highest point on the Atlantic seaboard. Below, you’ll find a great natural harbor carved by nature where the salty East River connects the Atlantic Ocean to the fresh water Hudson, a river that flows both ways, deep enough to carry almost any cargo all the way up to the St. Lawrence.

Munsee, Canarsie, Mohican and natives from many nations kept trading posts or small villages around the tip of lower Manhattan. Trading goods and ideas have been going on there for centuries. Not only did the Hudson intersect the Delaware so that Indians could travel by river all the way to the West, but fishing was so abundant in New York harbor that there once was enough for everyone. Lobster and oyster beds had long been cultivated by Governor’s Island. The largest council fires took place at the very tip of the isle, Bowling Green, the beginning of the Mohawk Trail (Broadway in English, ending in Albany). That spot was where elders from many nations met and taught the Dutch how to fish and hunt and trap as well as plant corn above what is now Chambers Street. That $24 deal was for a two-year lease of a very small part of the island. Well, Peter Minuet had a habit of going up to any native he could find, the poorer looking the better, show him a deed and have him “sign” it in exchange for wampum. Whether the native’s own tribe “owned” that land was another story. And the Dutch would teach the natives what owning land would look like.
New Amsterdam was the first walled fortress, built along Wall Street, in the New World.

My family traces its ancestry from before Governor William Kieft and the Dutch crossed the East River in 1645 to build Vlissingen (Flushing) Village, an area known for its “little people of the woods,” what the Irish, coming in droves two hundred years later, would call leprechauns. From Newtown Creek (home of the Maspeth tribe and later the county line to Brooklyn) to what George Washington would call (130 years later) Whitestone, that stretch of north Queens held the hunting grounds for the Matinicock Nation. Thirty native families joined forces and moved in with the Dutch, only to be wiped out by smallpox in 1662. But not entirely. Nine months after the epidemic, my mixed blood ancestor emerged from the womb of a pure Dutch mother. And more than any other part of New York’s history, our neighborhood has been a story of cooperation ever since. The Bowne House became the first center of religious tolerance in the New World. Quaker, Dutch Reform, Anglican and Catholic as well as Native American approaches were all respected. That tradition lives on to this day. Right around the corner from Exile, concentrated between Bowne Street and Parsons Boulevard, there are more houses of worship in one place than anywhere else in the world: huge Sunni mosque, tiny Baptist store fronts, Jewish synagogues, Swami Narayen Satsang, First City of Seoul Presbyterian, Sikh gurdawara, Taoist garden, Mormon Tabernacle, Charismatic Kung-fuTzu Fellowship, First Hindu Temple of North America, Christian Science, Nichirin Shosho Buddhist Meditation Center, Jehovah Witness, Taiwanese Evangelical,
the oldest Quaker meeting house in America and even St. Paul Chong Ha Sang Roman Catholic chapel.

Flushing has played host to the real New York, that melting pot of cultures, and my family has never left. They're hunkered in little houses, mostly on waterfront property hidden behind tree-lined Powell's Cove Boulevard, which curves the shore from Flushing Bay in College Point to Little Bay by Fort Totten. Not a single one is rich, and not everyone gets along. But when Grandma Klessing hears about any feud, she calls us all together and says, "White ain't right, red ain't dead, black won't get back and brown won't stay down," meaning we're all of those things already, so what's the point in slandering each other? We've learned to hold our tongues and pitch in. I was raised on the Native notion of stewarding the land, seeking balance and honoring one's elders as well as the concept of the social gospel of Jesus. After all, catholic comes from the Latin for universal. And we've been roamin' ever since.

But we don't have signs on our front lawns that say Hail the Great Manitou. Make a point about Native blood and they'll turn you into a goddam museum. We keep a lower profile. And an open mind. When I started dating Hermann Lutz, my Uncle Joe, an upstate Mohican who worked on the Brooklyn Bridge, took a liking to him. He taught Hermann how to build a sweat lodge over at Exile. When Uncle Joe reported to my family that Exile was friendly to the Old Ways, my mom and aunts drove over with bulbs and seeds and plants and helped them start a garden. Not a single female in my family ever thought much of Hermann, but they'd never permit that to interfere with my involvement with him or with Exile. That's why I say I had the best
upbringing. Though my mom had to work (a tour guide at the Bowne House, where else?), my uncles, aunts and grandma helped raised me. Compared to the other girls in the neighborhood who wore dresses and played with dolls or were forced to learn piano and stay indoors, I was allowed to swim and fish and canoe with my male cousins all along the East River.

I might have been a tomboy, but if I smoked a cigarette or played hooky or stole candy or kissed a boy, my mother found out about it before I could get home. The whole town knew us. We walked everywhere then, rarely got into a car. And my mom was a devout Catholic. Always at church, with the nuns, going to Mass, playing bingo in the church basement. Her favorite priest was Father Donnelly, a mixed Blood, who was the chaplain for the parish Boy Scout troop. When they needed scoutmasters, she got my Canadian-born Uncles Pierre and Gayton to volunteer for the job. So I got to camp out with the boys upstate along the Appalachian Trail and learn the lore of the woods. That’s how I first met Ricky and Quinn. Ricky went on to Eagle Scout, and Quinn went on to deal blackjack in the back room of the Crew’s Rest, the old gin mill where the scout dads raised a few. My family couldn’t understand why Ricky would use us kids to help him earn his merit badges, but they liked Quinn a lot. His father, a sharp shooter in World War 2, became the troop’s instructor in marksmanship. He let me join the Matinicoock Gun Club, junior division, where he taught us how to shoot on Tuesday nights in the old armory, down by Whitestone Pool, which we never went to, preferring the oily waters of the East River. Anyway, the troop had annual outings on my family’s little beach tucked behind the Catholic Youth
Organization, and I took part in all the games and competitions.

In the summer of '66, Ricky, Quinn and I became lifeguards for the Whitestone Yacht Club's beachfront next door. That's where we met Joey Paison, who was already strong as an ox with the look of happy mischief behind big brown eyes. His mother Emilia was the Girl Scout leader at St. Andrew's, so she let me join her troop. She taught me how to sew and knit and made sure I got equivalent Girl Scout merit badges for my Boy Scout activities. I didn't know Hermann until the summer ended and we started high school. I met him at my first swim meet, but it wasn't love at first sight by any means. I'm way too involved with Hermann to give an accurate account of him, his looks or his ludicrous involvement with Tracy Lashley. I'll just mention our similarities. We both were late bloomers and are still sort of shy. In my case, I was tall, skinny and strong, but I didn't start getting breasts or hips until I graduated from high school. He was a runt, the shortest kid in his class. To cover his lack of size, he ran after the big-breasted, extroverted gals in the Drama Club. So we didn't really know one another until Exile. Once we started to have sex, he grew jealous of my friendships with Quinn and Joey. With those two, I feel confident to set the record straight.

Neither one killed Tracy, though I'm sure they'll never stop taking the rap for it. In Joey's case, it's no doubt because of his family. In Quinn's case, well...he was the youth of a thousand summers, a big handsome "dark Irish" kid with jet black hair and a widow's peak, the spitting image of his dad but with a swagger, a gift for gab and his hands in the pie
early on, all charms and smiles with both eyes searching the shadier side of life.
3/Family
Joey Messopresti, Narrator

Joey Paison, King of Party Pleasure.
Joey Boombatz, Lord of Good Times.
Joey Dee-lish, Master of the Bar-Be-Que.
Joey-Joey Joy Boy, Proprietor of the Clubhouse.
I don’t take offense at these nicknames. Why should I?
For starters, they’re said with a smile. People like eating and
drinking and talking and partying at my home. And what do I
have to be defensive about? It’s not like they’re saying wop.

And what the fuck is a wop anyway? In 1900 it was
anyone willing to sign on for labor no one else would do. That
“wop work” became associated with my ancestors is a source
of pride to me. And we’re smarter for it. But what-the-fuck:
I’m more American than Italian anyway. And if you want to
get technical, which my dad loved to do after a glass of vino,
“we’re Sicilian,” this dignified Old World gent would say
when I’d repeat something from school, “we’re not only
Italian. We’re Greek, Spanish, African and French. Every
ruler who ever ruled the Mediterranean rules our blood.”

“We’re a ‘conquered’ island then?” my brother would ask.
“Hardly. We’re a dark-eyed olive skinned woman saying
welcome. Empires come and go. We remain. The marriage
bed for civilizations yet unborn. We’re the bastard best of the
ancient way, blessed by the best of every generation.”
"But what about the Mafia, Pop?" I'd asked, getting back to that crack at school.

"Purely a Sicilian thing."

"Does every group have an underworld?"

"Of course, Joey. Our thing is just more admired. We do everything better."

I came to see what he meant. Our relation to kit and kin, our hearth and heart are warmer, more maternal. We are not confused by any pretense of aristocracy or pure blood. We are the real American experiment, not those WASPs. That's why our arms open where other arms condemn. That's why we don't go off every time some gavone makes a fool of himself. He meant we know what family means.

It took me awhile to learn to see this. I didn't know how other kids had grown up. So many other definitions for "family." But that's what living in Exile showed me.

Take Ricky Momo, for example. After his younger brother Mouse graduated from high school, his parents divorced--a day before their 25th wedding anniversary! Or take Julie. She still comes over to talk with my mom when she has a problem with her therapist! Or take Hermann. He likes to visit, but only if I'm not home. He may think he's ratting me out to my own mother, but he actually turns her stomach. She can't abide snitches.

Dismiss me as an old acid-head, I don't care, but ever since high school this collection of characters has used our home as a sort of meeting place. And some have become more like family members than friends. Like Silvie. We kind of adopted her. She was Nature Girl but shy about sex. My mother used to tell her, "The smallest cog turns the biggest wheel." Well, it was different at my house. We never went in
for that white bread, wanna-be, Leave it to Beaver, spoil-the-
children-type shit. Both my parents came from big families
and adults always outnumbered kids. We weren't doted on;
we were glad to be asked to play handball or pinochle, thrilled
to run to the corner to buy the uncles cigarettes or beer. I
learned to curse from my Aunt Glory, my mom's slutty knock-
out younger sister who stole her boyfriends and ended up
marrying a foul-mouthed sailor.

I won't call my parents revolutionaries, but they were
older than the other kids' parents, and by the standards of the
neighborhood, worldly, less territorial. Hey, I know all about
"Dagos need not apply," but my immigrant grandfather was a
bandleader who toured the American romance circuit, playing
the dance halls in winter and the outdoor rotundas in the
town square in summer. Okay, what do you expect? Italians
with money (figure it out) were the first to hire him. By the
time my dad, the youngest, was born (and all his siblings have
birth certificates from different states), his eldest brother, my
Uncle Vince, was twenty-five, playing in the band, meeting
the families, eyeing the young ladies, already running
bootlegged whisky up to Boston. Ask the Kennedys of
Camelot. Every New Yorker knew better than to think the
Sicilians ran the whole show. Or that there was anything
"organized" about it.

Anyway, after World War II, (almost) everyone turned
legit. Shoes stores, race horses, haberdasheries, a restaurant in
Hell's Kitchen, which three of my uncles ran for thirty years
into their retirement. My brother and I worked there in the
summers. Quinn, too. He wasn't Sicilian, everyone knew that,
but he grasped what the old guys called *fari vagnari u pizzu*
(wetting the beaks), the greed and vanity that rules human
affairs. He looked older, dressed smart, had manners, could keep a secret, could fix a misunderstanding. Never a muscle guy; a force of persuasion. Christ, he was fully grown, six foot, three inches, at fourteen. My mother called him “the rabbi.” He knew how to see all sides of a thing. Most of all, he had what my dad called lontano, the critical distance a real player held the world and everything in it. That’s why my Uncle Vince took him under his wing. He showed Quinn the relationship between the people who paid to build that high school we went to, the stunads from Calabria who built it and the people they were in bed with, the clergy who ran it. Enough said on that.

My dad was a poker player. You don’t think he bought a home, had a wife and raised three kids on a proofreader’s salary? He ran the poker games in the speak-easies, then in the Army during the war, then in an East Side apartment after hours. My mother cooked. Men came and played. My dad would never play anywhere else. He knew all the tricks. He could smell a hustle. He ran a clean game. He liked to invite his co-workers, neighbors and family over on Saturday nights. He was impressed with Quinn’s knowledge of cards and helped him make his first money—not as player but as a dealer of blackjack. Up in Whitestone. At sixteen Quinn was running numbers for his dad. After school and Saturdays. Hey, the Irish have been mobbed up from before Boss Tweed. Sure, his dad had a tit city job working in sewage treatment (that’s how Bicky got hired), but he engaged in a little side work, too. Scary? It’s hardly the black hand when a member of your extended family works at the local precinct, another at the church.
Quinn had something else going for him. I fell in love with Fatima Fara, the girl who lived across the street from him, a Farsi-speaking Parsi cutie from Tehran. She spoke English with a sexy British accent and was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. I met her the summer we were all lifeguards. She helped me get over my Catholic hang-ups about sex. I said, “I want to touch you, but it’s a sin.” She put my hand on her breast, I couldn’t believe it. But her dad Aziz, some embassy flunkie at the UN, didn’t want her dating “a dirty guinea,” as he put it. So Quinn would make nice, tell the old boy all kinds of shit, then bring her over. While he learned about cards, I learned about love. And Fatima loved coming over. She was Zoroastrian but went to Catholic school because that’s how one got ahead. A smartie, she heard all the envious shit from the other kids. But at my house she could relax and be herself.

Ditto for Ricky. My dad always smiled at his nickname (Momo is the actual Baptism name of Sam Giancana). My parents never used the word spic. I wasn’t raised to think that way. When we kids got sick, we went down the block to Doc Williams, a black man my dad befriended and often had over for card games. And Silvie, Devon, Julie, Country Bob—they weren’t just running buddies but a part of our household. Not to single out Hermann, but his folks were the perfect contrast. In high school he used to get under the skin of this Rasputin look-alike named Brother Ernest who beat the actual piss out of him right there in World History class. The principal sent for his parents who clobbered him all over again. By comparison, when Brother Terence punched me in the face during Latin class, I punched him back. Knocked him down. He had asked why no one would answer his question,
so I volunteered it was because he was an uncaring bully who would sooner browbeat us than really listen. Then he proved it. I’m not quite sure why he slugged me; I outweighed him, and thanks to my older brother, I was the better boxer. So when they called my father down to the detention hall, he said, “If any of you draft-dodging pansies posing as clergy ever lay a hand on my son again, I’ll kill you.”

I loved him for that.

So whether we ate mushrooms under the mighty spruce in the back yard while holding hands in a circle and chanting “aum” or someone just needed a place to crash, a shoulder to cry on or a late night snack, my parent’s home got the vote. And so you know, I’m no revolutionary anarchist either. Only carrying on a fun-loving family tradition. So it’s a compliment to be called the King of Party Pleasure. As for Lord of Good Times, I’ll admit that I like to have a drink once in awhile to liven things up. And I love to cook for people. To grow up in a house where one’s mother made everything—from ravioli to rugelah—cast an indelible mark on me. Her folks came over from Napoli and she grew up on the Grand Concourse, then a mix of Jewish and Italian. Her mama died when she was four, so she was raised by the ladies in her building. She learned how to cook, how to counsel and how to laugh at life’s little misfortunes. My professor brother likes to joke that our mother didn’t have much use for Sartre, but if he would have come over, it would have been, “Mangiare.” Her attitude is post-existentialist: as long as there is food, what could be so bad? So when I cook for my friends those aromas from her kitchen guide me better than any recipe. I know that every son of an Italian woman will tell you his mother is the best cook who ever lived. Hey, we never ate anything store-bought
except Italian bread. She made all her own pasta. Every day. Never used anything in a can or a tin except sardines. First thing in the morning, there’s the linguini getting rolled out, the coffee brewing, the gravy slow-cooking. You say it’s too much work; I say it’s love. Anyway, it’s all in the aroma. There is no deeper memory than smell. As for happiness, any poker player will tell you, it’s a full house.

I have to admit up front: I don’t have the same kind of control over the events in this story as I do over my household. Actually, I don’t have that much control over the household either. Which is why I invited Quinn to stay here and help me with a little dirty work. He’s great in the garden. Did I mention Tracy yet? I have every faith that you can figure it out for yourself. Read between the lines. You’re a grown-up. Otherwise, put the fuckin’ book down because this is strictly for-adults-only. As for the jigsaw puzzle all these different points of view will put you through, all I can do is give you my take, and if it doesn’t exactly mesh as nicely as you would like with the others, so be it. I’m telling you ahead of time to trust my version. Here’s a hint: what do people do? They get all up under one another, rub each other’s nerves raw, act out stupid shit and then they pay for it, sometimes with their lives. I’m not pointing fingers, only observing what happens when bad behavior gets in the way of what needs to be done.

So I’m cooking for Quinn. All that Catholic crap at the wake and the Mass and the burial had wiped him out. “She’s in heaven with Jesus,” they told him. He hated that horseshit. How would I know? I was the one who called his ex-girlfriends and his pals “outside the law,” as we say, and drove them over. He didn’t ask, but I knew he couldn’t make it through without some moral support. Who else do you think
would call these people? Hermann? Anyhow, I could tell Quinn was a mess, but I didn’t know the details. Only that his mother’s death was eating him alive.

So I said, “Stick around. You’re Mama Pajama’s favorite, and I’d like your help in finishing the garden and building her a waterfall so she’ll get out of the house a little.”

“We can do that next year, Joey,” he said.

“Quinn, my mother may not make it another year.”

He decided to stay for a couple of days.

And then some wild shit jumped off.
Something was very wrong in Joey’s world.
I knew that the minute I saw him at the wake. Never mind that he lives twenty minutes away and won’t come over. Should I believe him when he tells me he’s never in my neighborhood? We only meet around tragedy.

Quinn, of course, is another story. No one hears from him in years. And then there he is at that morbid Gleason’s Funeral Home. Shows nothing. No tears. No grief. No sorrow. If that’s a man, then I’m a pussy. He doesn’t even say a prayer at the little kneeling rail in front of his dead mother. Twelve years of Catholic school, he doesn’t know how to make the sign of the cross? What happened? He just sits there with those all-seeing eyes, soaking up everything. The guy is so removed, he’s trapped in a prison made from his own calculating nature. Who else would bring ex-convicts, prostitutes and drug dealers to his own mother’s funeral? At least the rest of us, even Joey, would know to keep them home. I wouldn’t be surprised if Quinn invited those low-lifes and come-hither-dressed women just to piss off the Scotch-Irish old timers from his dad’s side.

What a real man should do at these services is console the women in the family---aunt, cousin, niece, sister. Joey and Julie and Ricky know about “no shoulds.” I am German-
American, full blooded, and Quinn's mother was German. I happen to know that if all Quinn thinks he has to do is put on a good show and some old girlfriend will take him home and he'll get laid, then I am sorry for the way he treats the people he claims to love. He should know better. Now I know he's capable of anything. Murder included, though I never thought it would come to that.

Or that I would get involved. Or that he would leverage me! Please, it's my own fault. I used to be in awe of him. Swallowed the bait, hook, line and sinker. What a con man. Even in high school. We all went for it. Thought it was great he could talk our Math teacher out of giving us a quiz. Of course Ricky is still paying Quinn back, for what, I don't know. But when the mighty Quinn rolls into town, it's all red carpet. Everyone jumps. Even street-wise Devon acts like he owes him. It's tough to watch.

Quinn is the laziest person I have ever met. He could have been the best swimmer on our team, but competition, training, diet, regular hours, study, none of it meant anything. He's always had it too easy. The German side—his mother and her family—should have been stronger. Taught him the meaning of real work, not card sharking and hustling. He's all good looks, inside information, golden words. The guys want to be him; the gals want to schtup him. And he could give a fuck. It's all a big joke. I'll tell you this: everyone does his dirty work. And so it is with the godless. Luckily, the rest of us grew up and out of his manipulations. Most, like Ricky and Country Bob, found families—or in my case, the Church—to pull us into something that is really real, not just a hip-sounding excuse to be self-serving and abusive.
Not Joey Paison. God forbid! It's not that he admires Quinn. He doesn't even see the real Quinn. The truth is that he's so ashamed of himself, at his weight and how poorly he treats Tracy, that he can't afford Quinn's disapproval. Not that Quinn would admit to judging anyone! There would be no angle he could work! In fact, Quinn and I, for our own reasons, may be the only ones in the tribe not to have given up on Joey Paison and his drugged-out behavior. But then Quinn, who makes his living preying on helpless strays at the edges of the therapy racket, thrives on emotional trauma. Other people's, that is. Ever restless, living here there and wherever, selling his snake oil, he hasn't seen that much of Joey since the glory days of Exile.

I, on the other hand, have seen Joey Paison fall from bad to worse, and believe me, if anyone would go to the mat for him, it is I. I love him and know him best of all the old gang. We built the stage sets for the high school drama club. We double-dated on Prom Night, he and Fatima Fara, me and Julie. Quinn wouldn't go to a prom. Gott in Himel, that was for the brainwashed. How did he put it, the culturally entranced. And Ricky Momo, though my buddy on the swim team, did go, he ran with an all-Hispanic crowd back then. That was his ludicrous Young Lords phase and he thought of white people, and me most of all, as the enemy! I happen to like Columbus and how he civilized the savages. What are you gonna do? He thinks I'm spellbound by authority because I still obey the Pope. If breaking away from the authority you grew up with is what Quinn and Ricky got from their college scholarships, I'm glad I'm just not that smart.

So I know Joey and I know why his marriage failed. Call me too discrete to bring it up. Let Quinn, Joey, Julie and Silvie
do their all-night circle-jerk shrink-a-thon. I prefer the firehouse and the Stations of the Cross. Look, none of them have regular jobs so regular hours are out the window along with the values of a Christian life. Sue me. I enjoy a regular job, I still remember where I came from and I will always be Joey's friend, no matter how much misery their "do as you please" philosophy causes him. Or how little care he shows the ones who really love him. He wants to be led astray by all that fantastic psychobabble, let him be my guest. I may have not sat at the feet of the famous like the rest of these smart alecks, but I know insincerity when I see it up close.

Over the years I can't count how many of my tools Joey has borrowed and forgotten to return. I know that makes me an uptight kraut and a commune failure! My point is that if he simply wanted to deny his responsibilities to his parents and to his ex-wife Eugenia, okay. But to get the confused and beautiful Tracy Lashley involved in his drug dealing and no-count lifestyle, I do draw the line there. To me, that's not only unconscionable, it's downright evil. And as St. Augustine reminds us, evil isn't really real, only a refusal to acknowledge—and join—the good.

Anyway, what a scene: there's Quinn's relatives looking aghast at his motley, mangy collection of outcasts. Depressing, no. Revealing, yes. Where is their famous counter-culture now? Call my stockbroker. I knew I couldn't stay long.

"Joey," I asked, "is everything okay with your mom?"
"Hermann, relax, would ya?" he said, peeved.
"Joey, is your mother all right?"
"Take off your fuckin' hair shirt."
"I just want a straight answer."
“She’s fine.”
“Joey, are you high right now?”
“What the fuck is this?”
“I’m just asking.”
“Are you gonna make a citizen’s arrest?”

He was in some kind of trouble, and it was out of character for him not to discuss it. With him it’s not just a Sicilian thing, which would be trouble enough. It’s worse. Joey Paison grew up with a relentless need to tell all. Over the years he’s driven everyone nuts, and he has said more than anyone’s share of hurtful things in the name of truth. “Total disclosure” translates to “opportunity to destroy.” Luckily, most of us have been through that, and we recognize that in Joey’s case, he might have outgrown it if he weren’t so taken by Quinn’s mental health group-grope dictums: repression is unhealthy, withholding of information is passive aggression, blah blah blah. Quinn’s not pleased until he twists and turns Marx and Freud into a gospel of anarchy. Christ was a Communist? I don’t get it.

“No, Joey, it’s called concern.”
“Then do a fuckin’ Novena,” he said and walked away.

I wanted to slap his face. But I knew what I had to do. The first thing: check my ego at the door. Maybe I invented the trouble I thought I perceived. Still, if Joey wouldn’t claim responsibility for Mama Pajama, it didn’t mean I would let anything ever happen to her. Not on my watch.

I found Rock-a-Day Devon, separated him from his untroubled young wife.

“Do me a favor and look into the scene Joey’s got going over at his house.”

“Funny you should say that,” Devon said.
“Funny how?”
“I got a call last week from M.R.”
Devon doesn’t mince words. Or beat around the bush.
“M.R.” is code-named because he’s so high up in the drug business that no one wants to use his real name. He is the only real gangster anyone of us know. He’s Devon’s old connection back when he dealt to rock stars. M.R. is the guy Devon introduced to Joey Paison when he quit working in the best cabinet shop in all of New York and blamed it on his bad back.

“No kidding,” I said.
“Joey owes him a ton of money.”
“Why didn’t he tell me?”
“Hermann, nobody ever wants to tell you dick.”
“Oh yeah? Why is that?”
“Cuz ya get the story wrong.”
“Fuck you, too. So what’s gonna happen to Joey?”
“If he don’t start gettin’ it together, find him deep in a world of woe.”
“So are you gonna talk to Joey?” I asked Devon.
“You mean now? No way.”
“Why is that?”
“Come on, Hermann, you can’t tell when someone is high any more?”
“I’ll ask someone else then.”
“Suit yourself. But whatever you do about Joey, lemme know what happens.”
“You won’t help but you want me to keep you informed as to what happens?”
“Yeah, Hermann, that’s what I want. You got a problem with that?”
It was so typically Devon OD! Sometimes I get the feeling that the spirit of the Sixties had no meaning to him whatsoever, only a chance to get high and get babes. And now that he's straight and married, the spirit's over?

"Tracy," I said to her on her way to the little girls' room, "let's have a chat."
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