

Monument

I didn't see it happen, just my brother Adam suddenly flat on his stomach, Steven Lasky's knee in his back, Jimmy Ianelli's enormous hands on the back of his head, trying to push his face into the open manhole. It was the manhole they had dragged the cover from a few minutes earlier so they could try to retrieve Jimmy's keys, which had fallen through the grate during a game of keep away, a game Adam had not even started—I know because I was watching, it was Steven who first grabbed the keys, Steven who now had his knees in my brother's back and was saying "Go fish, shithead," while Jimmy tried to wrestle Adam's head through the manhole opening and Adam twisted in his grip, yelling "Get the fuck off me!" again and again, cries that were alternately clear when his head was above ground and muffled when he was yelling into the sewer, his voice echoing in the mossy chamber that led to the tunnels full of rainwater and rats and garbage and the flushings of every toilet in New York City as I stood on the dirt not two feet away and could not say a word. Jimmy Ianelli had one mammoth arm hooked around Adam's shoulders now and was steering his head through the hole with the other, grunting "You dropped them, Levine, you find them: *I want my fucking keys.*"

"How am I supposed to get your keys if you're holding my arms down, asshole?"

“That’s your problem,” Jimmy said, pushing Adam’s neck down harder.
“Wanna go for a swim?”

I watched my brother’s head disappear again and stood there paralyzed, the way it was in my dreams when I couldn’t stop my mother from getting into the elevator I knew was going to crash to the bottom of the shaft, when I couldn’t stop the guy with the gun from shooting my father, when I knew the man with the knife who was dragging me into the alley was going to kill me, but I couldn’t wake myself up to save anyone’s life, not even my own.

They let Adam up again, his face smeared with dirt now. I didn’t know if the water on his face came from the sewer or was tears or if the dirt was from the walls of the sewer or just from the ground, though it was black, blacker than the dirt on which I stood, black as the tar Adam was lying on and his tormenters were crouching on and the manhole was sunk into, but it wasn’t tar, it was whatever foul substance clung to the walls and the bottom of the sewer.

In some other part of my brain—the part that had not cemented my feet to the ground beneath them so that I now stood open-mouthed, squinting against the glare off the Hudson at three boys writing and flailing around an open manhole on Riverside Drive—I imagined myself inching backwards up the hill for a running start, then planting a mighty kick in the small of Jimmy’s back, so hard it would make him let go of Adam, from surprise if not from pain or fear. Then Adam would throw off Steven and we would run up the hill to our apartment building and Jimmy could drown

himself in the sewer I he wanted his keys so badly. I imagined this happening but remained rooted to the spot, looking from Adam and Steven and Jimmy to our building less than a block away, where, if my father would just look out the living room window, he'd see what I was seeing and come down and stop it. Except I knew he wouldn't, because he was in the bedroom putting up brackets for a new set of shelves.

"You know, Levine," Jimmy said. "You stink. You need a bath." He looked at me. "Hey Dara, don't you think your brother needs a bath?"

"He needs you to leave him alone," I said to the grass.

"Nah," Jimmy said. He moved to push Adam's head into the hole again. "He needs a bath."

"Jimmy," Steven said. "It's not going to work. We need a net or something."

"All I need is my keys," Jimmy said. "Where the fuck am I gonna get a net?"

"We have one," I said quickly. I pictured my father's long-handled net dangling from the ceiling of his closet, next to the green rubber hip boots I was sure were part of a monster when I was younger. The net was the monster's head. I started to cry.

"Aw, now they're both crying," Jimmy said.

"You'll be crying too when your ass gets kicked for losing your keys," Adam said from the ground.

"Levine," Jimmy said, "I am tired of hearing your voice." He turned to Steven. "Are you tired of hearing his voice?"

“Yeah,” Steven said uncertainly.

“Hold his head,” Jimmy ordered. Steven moved behind Adam and got him in a chokehold while Jimmy started picking up everything in sight—grass, twigs, dirt, candy wrappers, cigarette butts. I stepped back in disbelief as Jimmy shoved this all in Adam’s mouth. Adam was coughing and spitting and jerking his head wildly, but Steven held on and Jimmy kept shoveling things down his throat. I was twisting with Adam, every muscle clenched, holding my breath and tossing my head—until I realized I was moving. I was moving. One foot was off the ground. In the split second before I bolted I knew why I hadn’t done it before: I was afraid that if I left they would do something worse. I thought that as long as I was still there nothing really bad would happen. But now I knew, as I tried to get Adam to look at me and then saw that he was keeping his eyes screwed shut against the dirt Jimmy kept throwing at him, that this was something worse. Adam was gagging and thrashing his legs all over the place and my being there was not making any difference. I turned and ran.

They wouldn’t chase me, I guessed, because they’d have to let Adam up to do it. I tore up the grassy hill, the marble stairs that were part of the Fireman’s Monument at the end of our block, across the street without looking for cars, and into the lobby where the elevator was on eight so I ran up the five flights of stairs two and three at a time to arrive, leaning on our doorbell, panting and thinking *Daddy Daddy Daddy Daddy Daddy open the door*. My father came to the door with a hammer in his hand. When he saw my face he didn’t say a word, didn’t stop to tell my mother he was leaving,

he just ran with me to the stairs. "They're beating up Adam," I managed between breaths. "They're making him eat garbage. They're trying to put his head in the sewer." My father was almost a flight ahead of me now, but I caught up with him in the lobby, when he realized he was still carrying his hammer and dropped it on a chair.

We could see them as soon as we got out the door. They were up at the monument now, but we kept running, as though Adam were still in immediate danger, although apparently he wasn't. He sat on the back of a park bench at the foot of the stairs, sniffing, his face pale and filthy, his lips and tongue working, searching out little pieces of whatever was still in his mouth and spitting them out. He wouldn't look up, and neither did Jimmy, who stood about halfway up the marble stairs, leaning against the stone wall that formed one side of the monument. Steven slouched on the far end of the bench Adam was on.

My father stood in front of Adam. "Are you all right?"

Adam nodded. "They're the ones who are in trouble." He looked at Jimmy and Steven. I couldn't figure out why they were still there, unless they had threatened Adam with more of the same if he said anything. But *I* had told, as they had to know I would. Maybe they had just figured out there was no place to go. My father knew their names, their parents, where they lived, where they went to school. He would have found them.

My father put his hands on his hips. "What happened here?" he asked.

"These morons tried to kill me," Adam said. "That's what happened."

My father repeated his question, looking at Jimmy and Steven. "I said, what happened here?"

"He dropped my keys down the sewer," Jimmy said.

"So you put his head in the sewer and made him eat dirt."

Silence. And in that silence I began to breathe normally again. It was over. Adam was not going to choke to death and Jimmy and Steven were not going to make me watch while he did it. My father was here. We were all right now.

But my father wasn't leaving.

"I asked you a question," he said, moving up the stairs until he was standing on the same step as Jimmy. "Did you put my son's head in the sewer and make him eat dirt?" He pronounced each word slowly, as if he were talking to someone hard of hearing, or someone he thought wasn't very smart. The muscles in his neck were jumping.

"We were just fooling around," Jimmy mumbled.

"You were just fooling around," my father repeated. "You were just fooling around." He sounded like a machine. "Well suppose you and I just fool around," my father said, his fist shooting forward, grabbing Jimmy Ianelli by the collar of his polo shirt. He backed Jimmy up against the stone wall. "Like this?" my father said, leaning on Jimmy's chest. "Is this how you were fooling around?" Jimmy swallowed. I looked at Adam, who looked back at me for the first time since Jimmy's keys went down the sewer. My father had never raised a hand to either of us. And now he had Jimmy Ianelli squashed up against the wall so he could barely breathe. He had Jimmy's

collar in one hand and his other palm on Jimmy's chest. My father looked like he wanted to put Jimmy through that stone wall. He could do it, too, or something close enough. He had held the Golden Gloves city title when he was in high school; Adam had the trophy on his bookshelf. I looked over at Adam again. There was some color back in his face, and he was watching this scene with interest.

My father looked like he was playing Statue. His face was deep red and his neck muscles were still twitching but otherwise he seemed frozen in place: both knees bent, one foot slightly ahead of the other on the marble step, the fist into which Jimmy Ianelli's collar was clenched white at the knuckles and the palm against Jimmy's chest rigid as stone. My father was using all of his willpower to keep from hitting Jimmy Ianelli, and I wasn't sure it was enough. He wanted to hurt Jimmy. He wanted to make him pay. He wanted to smash Jimmy's head into that stone wall. I didn't know then that Adam had almost died of salmonella when he was three years old, some rare strain the hospital couldn't identify until Adam had run a fever of 105 for six days and was literally sweating to death, shaking with fever and hallucinations so persistent that he didn't even know his parents were in the room, watching him burn and sweat his way to total dehydration. He got it the doctors thought, from sucking on his mittens or eating dirty snow. Now someone had made him eat dirt again.

I didn't know any of that. I just knew that my father wanted to spread Jimmy all over the paved brick we were standing on and that he was coming closer to doing it every second that passed. I thought of Kevin Whalen, of

what his blood had looked like, spreading a dark stain on the bricks after he fell off this same wall that Jimmy was backed up against, ending up in a body cast for months. I looked at Adam. His eyes were wide: anxious, expectant, eager, like he was watching an exciting scene in some movie. Jimmy was the pale one now. His face was the color of the stone wall behind him. My father still held his frozen pose. It was like we were all under a spell, except I wasn't.

I stepped up and touched my father's sleeve. He turned his head. His eyes were bullets of hate. It was the hate he felt for Jimmy, but now he was looking at me. My father's veins pounded beneath my fingertips. I felt the muscles of his forearm, hard as bone. I didn't know this man. The fury in his eyes could have burned right through the marble steps on which we stood. I saw the man with the gun there, and the man who severed the elevator cables. I saw Kevin Whalen lying on the ground. I saw the man with the knife in the alley. I touched my tongue to the roof of my mouth and I said "No."

After a moment my father shrugged my hand off his arm. He flexed his fingers on Jimmy Ianelli's chest. "Okay," he said softly, dropping his right hand. He straightened up, still holding Jimmy's collar balled up in his left fist. "Okay." He let out a long breath, then opened his fist so abruptly that Jimmy stumbled down a couple of steps before regaining his balance. My father faced me then, and he looked like himself again, except he looked very tired, almost old. In the time it took for me to blink he had moved to

Adam, put an arm around his shoulders. "Come on," he said, steering Adam up the stairs. "Let's go home."

We left the monument. My father and brother walked ahead. My father said something about calling the doctor just in case Adam had swallowed anything that could be really dangerous. "I didn't swallow anything," Adam said. "I'm fine." In the lobby of our building, I saw my father's hammer on the chair by the front door. I picked it up, tapping its head lightly against my palm. I liked the weight of it in my hands. I pressed my fingertips against the edges of the claw, testing its sharpness.

"Let's go, Dara," my father called. "The elevator's here."

"I'm taking the stairs," I said. Climbing, I slapped the hammer into my palm again and again. I liked the sound I made against my skin. For each flight I slapped a little harder, trying to see how far I could go before it really hurt. When I got to our front door, my palm was red and stinging.