Hoover

When I think about my childhood and how it steered me down many a weird road, one episode always seems to flash to mind first: the infamous hickey. *Love bites* my dad called them. "Hidin' your love bites with that nirdleneck, huh Casanova? Musta been some birthday party last night." I can still see him lounging back in his La-Z-Boy, that squinty-eyed smile, as I slowly made my way down the stairs that morning, in a turtleneck—in early September. "So, what's his name?" I was accustomed to this, my dad sounding like one of my buddies, laughing at the same shit thirteen-year-old boys laughed at. I was all set to whisper him some name I'd just made up—Amber or Ashley or Britney, the names that guarantee you beauty—when suddenly one of his Sunday morning calls came in and Dad was off spitting out betting lines and over/unders into the cordless, speaking in bookie to one of his regular degenerates.

Dad could care less.

Mom, though, my next stop, twenty or so feet across our puke-colored carpet, humming church hymns in the kitchen, her hair already done for the 12:15 Mass, Mom was a whole other story; Mom was everything that Dad wasn't—Mom was a worrywart and a moral Mary whose extent of a good time was the single glass of champagne she'd imbibe once a year, only begin to sip when the clock struck midnight and Dick Clark reminded her she could let her hair down. Or the Bloody Mary she'd order when the three of us went to Bennigan's or Ponderosa or Steak and Ale on the Boulevard for her birthday celebration. "I'll have a . . . a bloody Mary," Mom would say, whisper, then kind of stare up at the waitress, squinting and pouting with her chin in her hand, head cocked: her I'm-so-naughty face. Two drinks a year. What a carouser that Mom. "We

always thought she'd be a nun, your mother," my pop-pop loved to say like it was the first and not the ten thousandth time he'd made this oddly proud-seeming comment.

Mom and I had exchanged good mornings and I sat there sipping my orange juice—I'd switched out my regular seat for a chair across the table so the blemished side of my neck faced the wall instead of Mom—that's when the spatula she was waiting to flip the pancakes with hit the countertop and Mom, after what seemed like one single glide, an angry ice skater across the little yellow and orange rectangles and squares that was our linoleum floor, was inches from my neck, demanding I turn my head, *goddamnit*, inspecting the damage under our blinding chandelier.

"What in the Christ—"

Mom's curse words often seemed affiliated with God—for Christ's sake, Christ Almighty, Jesus Christ—which looking back doesn't make a lot of sense, though looking back, a masochistic compulsion at this stage of my life, looking back on my childhood, nothing makes much sense. Take Mom and Dad for instance: Mom, an almost-nun; and Dad, the bartending-bookie with more tattoos than Axl Rose. Dad had sleeves of tattoos before that became much a thing to do. Half-sleeves Dad's were, forearms-full: the logos of all four Philly sports teams and the year each had won their given titles—this was the arm he used to wipe my butt that once (just once: he was cursing me and cursing Mom, who wasn't there to hear it—"she wants a kid more than anything in the world but don't wanna teach 'em how to wipe his fuckin' ass!"); on the other arm, the arm he'd use to backhand my head (this he did I only wish just once) was his nickname—Ziggy—inked in red and black, big spidery letters, just below the elbow to just above the wrist, flanked by a devil in a diaper breathing fire and a misshapen shamrock, not green, dark purple, almost brown, probably done by one of his roofer loser buddies. Mom had to tell him to

roll down his goddamn sleeves (sleeves as in shirtsleeves) whenever we went to mass together as a family, a rare occurrence—Christmas, Easter, something to do with my school. (Dad never seemed to know what to do in church; he'd bow his head so much you'd think he'd had some sort of disorder, and countless times he'd start to sit before realizing the rest of the congregation was heading for the kneeler.) This was another eye-popping polar opposite of my parents: religion. Mom not only never missed mass on Sundays but went Monday through Friday too, whereas Dad—well, Dad's Sundays were the busiest day of his "work week." Constantly on the phone. Scribbling into his yellow legal pad. The fall especially: football season. Appraising college bets from the day prior, taking NFL bets from the break of dawn. In the rare case he'd leave the house, he'd always have his beeper clipped to his pants. He sometimes sat at Schillcrest Pub, the corner pisshole he tended bar on weeknights, a dark, sticky cave, where his little "business" was officially born, where it's patrons—guys named Moose and Lurch and Pickles and Dirt—constantly asked if they could have their losing bets "rolled over" and where in a handful of cases disappeared from, for months or more, when they owed Dad big; he'd sit there, Dad, on Sunday mornings, the bar barely open, chewing away on a pen between sips of coffee, the phone from behind the bar brought out by the bartender, Dutch, and situated beside my father like Dad was working a telethon. There were days that Mom and I saw his truck parked in front of the bar on our way to Mass and Mom pretended, every time, she didn't see it. Most Sundays, though, he stayed at the office, the home office, hours spent around the house in mesh shorts and slippers, the constant phone calls, muffled, dull rings, for Dad liked to snap the cordless between his bare hip bone and the elastic band of his tighty-whities (Dad had his own personal landline long before millions of teenage girls did), a phone so powerful, so before its time that Dad could make and take calls from inside the garage or sitting in his truck out front of the house. Mom

would even hand me the phone when Dad wasn't home—some days it rang and rang and the only way to stop it was to pick it and slam it down—and she'd tell me to run over to the Schillcrest and bring this goddamn thing to my father. The little red power-on light and a crisp dial tone would amazingly remain the entire two blocks. Sometimes, walking past my buddy's house at the end of our street, I'd call him and tell him to go to a front window, then give him the middle finger or moon my ass out when he got there—being on a phone while walking down the street was a pretty big deal in those pre-cell days. Dad was proud to own that phone.

"Immaculate reception, huh?" he was fond of saying. Dad loved that stupid thing. It even had a name, the phone—I named it, a pretty proud moment, of the very few in my childhood, a name that had Dad roaring the second I coined it—"Franco Harris" we called it, which Mom never understood, never cared to it seemed, only squinted and shook her head when she heard us refer to it as such—"Youse and your sports stuff."

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"Who in God's name gave that to you?" This was Mom in the kitchen. I wouldn't answer, was ill-prepared to, could only get out a "C'mon, Mom" as I kept twisting my neck and using my hand to cover the area she was trying to further examine. Thankfully, her examination-interrogation was cut short by the smoke detector, over-fried pancakes Mom hurried back and dumped in the sink, her other arm waving around a dish towel till the beeping stopped. She turned and shook the towel—snapped it—my way. "I swear to Christ you—" She sort of peaked out the kitchen entryway at what was either Dad (still barking bookie into Franco Harris) or the closest crucifix in the house, the one above the dining room archway, standing guard over a room we'd actually use maybe twice a year for formal dinners and which otherwise served as the room

before the room in both directions, a cramped space full of junk, a paradoxical mish mash of Mom's shit (a china closet full of knickknacks from the St. Jude Shop) and a table full of Dad's (papers and more papers riddled with bookie scribble).

Facing me again, Mom's voice lowered, but stayed stern. "I'll give you till four *on the nose* to give me a name . . ." (this was when Dad became free on Sundays; under no circumstances could Dad be involved in *any* matter not "work," no exceptions, between 8 a.m. and 4, when the majority of action came through.) ". . . or so help me God, I will call the house of every girl you were with last night." And she would. My body responded to this reality. As I sat there silently—"Never talk back" was one of my mother's family commandments—my brain was talking plenty, talking in tongues, unable yet to calm itself quite enough to start the planning process, the next step after this tragic setback. "You better take some time today to really ask for God's guidance, goddamnit!"

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The shame of my neck wasn't enough to keep us from church of course—neither were blizzards and ice storms and flash floods; Sunday Mass even took precedence over youth sports games, which Dad would protest, to no avail, in those early days, the days he was still convinced I might "come into my own" as an athlete. (By the time I was ten or so, Dad had fully checked out, had handed Mom full control over the parenting side of the family.) I cried the whole ride over. Mom not only made me leave the turtleneck on, but forced me to roll it higher, roll it from its fold. The second we arrived in the Epiphany's parking lot, my head was on a swivel for signs of kids I knew. And the dread of walking through those church doors . . . And not just for me. I saw the nerves all over my mother's face; a similar look as the one she'd wear on nights Dad would say

he was “going out for a few” then still wasn’t home eight hours later. She’d get jumpy. She’d address you with a question or comment then turn in a completely different direction, staring into space, as you began to respond.

“You get back there and dip your Goddamn hand in that Holy Water,” Mom was saying now, as we waited in the vestibule, her eyes, steering clear of mine, staring at the double doors that led into Mass. There was a quiver in her voice; this too was a sign that Mom was scared.

Epiphany of Our Lord is shaped like a cross and Mom had led us, to again avoid potential embarrassment, along the side and over to the left corner where families seldom sat, where the old people paid for prayers in front of the Mary statue before they filed over to what seemed like assigned seats. Even there, though, sitting amongst hairy-eared guys farting as they belted out the high notes of the squeaking hymns, wrinkled grannies in more makeup than actual clowns, whispering so loudly, being shushed even louder—I was still the one, the one being stared down and squinted at, mumbled about, me, the kid dressed like a Kayan woman. Eyes from every which direction zeroed in on me at peace-be-with-you time, geezer heads tilting like dogs, before offering their neighbors a hand of peace; and during Communion procession—I did my best to keep my eyes down on the marble floor so not to witness the rubbernecking of my own neck—the second I looked up, my hands cupped for the priest, even he, this lunatic wearing a dress and handing me Jesus Christ’s “body” in the form of a mass-produced wafer that came on a truck in a plastic bag—even Father O’Hearn, who we’d later learn was quite fond of boys my age, even he had a face full of shock, as if instead of saying “Body of Christ,” he wanted to utter “What the fuck.”

Finally, after this never-ending hell and equally as painful car ride home (Mom’s silent treatment was her highest gear of discipline), finally I was alone in the basement, turtleneck

purged, hidden, stuffed above one of the tiles of the drop ceiling—I didn't know if Mom had gone so nuts that she'd maybe make me wear the thing under my school uniform the next day; being in trouble for sex-type stuff was completely new territory and I had no idea how far she'd go. With less than three hours till my moment of truth (or my moment to lie), I lay on the couch, hoping my Boyz II Men CD could bring me the guidance I was supposed to have gotten from God. After close to an hour of peace, though, activity began to emerge through the ceiling vent. Kitchen drawers were flying open and slamming shut, papers being crinkled. She mumbled to herself, Mom. She was really going through with this. I wanted to run out the laundry room door. We had some numbers in our family phone book and the rest were findable through the white pages or the parents whose numbers we did have. I actually contemplated praying (I was still at the point where I'd sometimes default to prayer in desperate times, dire straits, Hail Mary situations). I didn't, though; didn't pray. Instead, I lay my head back, clunky black dress shoes weighing me down. I stared behind the bar—at Dad's pennants and autograph baseballs, player jerseys in big glass cases; Dad's own high school football jersey hung among them. He had a collection of neon beer signs on the adjacent wall, behind the poker table—his beloved "moo-hogany" poker table, Dad's most precious toy from his bachelor days, that he demanded be put away whenever I had friends coming over. Moving that wooden monstrosity down our claustrophobic hallway and towards the garage, I was never sure where to direct my eyes as we stood across from one another—"Woe, woe, woe, you're a bull in a china shop," Dad almost always said when the thing inevitably banged against the door frame when we flipped it sideways to fit it through. The basement was the one part of the house Dad and I shared. His shuffle bowl table and arcade-style basketball hoop (these I *was* permitted to play with) impressed my friends, even lured some of the popular kids over the house now and again, which

helped earn me membership into the fringe cool crowd. That past summer especially, after a street-hockey or stickball game got cut short by darkness, my basement became the place to be. We'd dim down the main lights and let the buzzing neon, dozens there were—Buds and Bud Lights, the glowing mountains of Busch, the Miller Highlife lady sitting on the moon—create an atmosphere, an electricity, that existed in no other basement in the neighborhood. Years after this, a few weeks before I left for college, Dad told me I could have my pick of whichever neon sign I wanted, to decorate my dorm room. This surprised me, given all the disappointments I'd brought him over the years; but Dad was flying high around that time—I know this only with hindsight—given the divorce had been finalized by then and Dad was leaving as soon as I had officially moved out. (They didn't want to upset me, Mom told me later—I was on a pay phone, using a calling card in the Student Union of Northern Michigan University, staring out at quad full of students, trees whose colors were peaking much earlier than those at home; Mom was crying.) I was Dad's going-away gift—this too hindsight makes quite clear; I guess he wanted to offer a little something in return. I chose the Heineken sign with the trademark red star I knew he liked the least, so not to disappoint him anymore. ("Heineken gives eighty-nine percent of their political donations to the fucking Democrats—Nazi crumbs!") I gave the sign to the kid across the hall.

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Of the ten songs on the famed *Cooleyhighharmony* album, none of them, even my favorite track, which I'd repeated more than once that afternoon, "It's So Hard To Say Goodbye," none of the ten had inspired some fairytale alibi that would make this whole thing up and disappear. I just lay there now, the album over, the clock ticking, my dress shoes *still* on; my eyes wandered for

answers from wall to wall to wall, counting every section in the brown paneling (fifty-four, I knew this by heart), then stopped at the black blotch on the closet door where someone, probably Dad, obliterated a bug with a *TV Guide* or a *Sports Illustrated*, one of the books around our house that only seemed to exist for the purpose of murdering insects. It was then, thinking about bugs and how we kill them simply because they're little and annoy us, how that's been deemed as normal in our world as men choosing to have kids despite hating kids, that's when I finally took my shoes off; I winged one then another across the room, taking aim at the biggest asshole in this whole debacle, the fucker who'd gotten this whole mess started, the hickey giver itself, missing my target like I often did the strike zone in my short-lived career as a little league pitcher. Yep, there's a twist to this story. The hickey giver (or donor, we'll call it a "donor"), the donor was right there, down there with me, leaning against the weight bench I asked for last Christmas just to ingratiate myself with my dad. It wasn't an Ashley or Amber standing there. No, my donor's name was Hoover, tattooed right on its long, fat neck: "Hoover High Performance Swivel XL."

What I did was I suctioned the extension of the vacuum to my neck the night before, after I got home from the party, devastated over a spin the bottle game, rigged of course, where it seemed everyone had a few minutes in a closet or out in the yard behind a bush, everyone but me. The plan (yep, I had a plan—a great one!), the plan was to hide my artificial erotica with a turtleneck and deceptive angles till Monday morning when it would be ripe and ready to make its debut at school, black and blue, some purple (Bobby Dobley, a freshman I played football with, had the most perfect of purple ones). When someone asked I'd simply reply, "Some girl," slyly of course. And when there were follow ups—But who? Where? When? How big were her titties?—I'd describe the blue-eyed blond that I'd finished creating just before the vacuum made

first contact with my neck, a “public school girl” I’d tell them, who I ran into on my walk home from the party, a girl I hoped they’d see just as I did: a cooler version of Stephanie Tanner from *Full House*. The plan, though, this plan, never got off the ground. I’d aimed too high with the vacuum—I knew this the second I did it, like buzzing your hair in the wrong spot, the damage done and nothing you could do but wait.

Idiot! Idiot! Idiot!

I wanted to punch my bathroom mirror the next morning. I needed a fucking scarf! I needed a 103 fever so I could grunt and moan and hide under the covers till my immune system cleared my wounds.

Through the vent now came Dad. He’d been pacing the living room the last hour or so, the butterflies in my belly reawakening each time the floor boards groaned—the Eagles game was nip and tuck into the last two minutes of play (or so it sounded)—and now he was hollering, that tone I knew all too well, a tone, a moan really, that could dictate the happiness of the entire household for as long as Dad decided it would. I knew the reason for these sounds. Something had cost him cash. A correlated parlay or a backdoor touchdown that worked to the advantage of the heavy hometown betters (homer bets) Dad would constantly get, scenarios, dirty words in Dad’s line of work, you begin to grasp living under the same roof as a bookie, scenarios (along with the *stiffs* and *scumbags* and *cocksuckers*—names ironically I’d hear other guys call Dad) that drove Dad back into the roofing business years before the rest of America’s pen-and-paper bookies would be forced into extinction by the internet and legalized gambling. Overall, Dad’s booking years, an attempted escape I can assume now, from the life he’d fallen into with Mom and me, seemed to somehow worsen his life. And these weekends in the red certainly made my world worse—exponentially worse. The instantaneous nausea his tone could bring on in me. I

could picture him mumbling up from his chair ("JesusFuckingChrist" was his go-to, a page out of Mom's book, sort of) after Mom told him, her voice most certainly quivering, that we were going to have a family talk: dealing with Dad was likely even more difficult for Mom, who'd walked, I'll assume, on eggshells for far many more miles than I did back then. But this situation—me, my sinful neck—could not be resolved without my father—this was another of my mother's family commandments: no secrets, no exceptions! When I was eight and crashed the shopping cart into the tomato sauce and dozens of jars shattered into the aisle, Mom told Dad and Dad told me I was a real hammer, a real re-re; or when I pissed myself at the May Procession in fourth grade, Mom told Dad and Dad was sure to ask me why in the hell couldn't I have held it in. ("Pissin' your pants at ten years old . . . Think the running back from Frankford Boy's Club pisses his pants?")

I believe I was dreaming this, lost in a daydream about what Dad, this time, would say upon hearing what I'd done; the nightmarish consequences of my uttering the truth to an angrier-than-ever guy twice my size fresh off of losing whatever amount he just had (his banshee-like pitch made it sound like thousands)—this turned my cramps sharper, had me short of breath, fighting back tears even as Mom's voice, calm now, came from the top of the stairs—"Your father and I are ready to speak with you." Two-plus hours alone in the basement and there I was heading up the stairs without a plan, still deciding, still trying to find a way, figure out a method of making this as painless as possible. Halfway up, I eyeballed the crucifix above the doorway, wedged there between ceiling and smoke detector, the tiniest of the half dozen or so dying Christs Mom had nailed to our walls. Passing beneath Him, I asked the Lord for help; my last-ditch effort before entering the kitchen-courtroom.

To the fully-formed forty-one-year-old I am now, the decision seems rather simple: to tell them, these adults who'd already lived through the trying times of adolescence, that, Hey, I screwed up, wanted some kids to think I was cool and did things with girls. Teaching moment, right? End of story. *Right*? No, not right. What I know now (with a little help from my shrink) is that the dad I had at thirteen is the dad I had from the start; and his way—his macho, manly-man self—was all I ever knew: telling my parents what really happened was as impossible to explain as my love of theatre or gymnastics was, or my dream of being a singer, or how I didn't only hate playing football but the one thrill of it were the cheerleaders, not just looking at them, which, sure, I enjoyed, but watching and hearing what they were doing. I became—or at least I tried like hell to be—who Dad wanted me to be, and straying from that—being the loser who got no girls so needed to be slurped by a vacuum cleaner—that was too frightening to admit, especially on a day Dad had lost a bunch of cash, more frightening, yep, than Mom calling all the girls from the party and by midweek making me the biggest buffoon in the entire school. And that's what happened. Because the Stephanie Tanner story was filled with far too many holes for a cross examiner of my mother's caliber, and because Dad sat there with such anguish in his eyes, as if the hit he'd just taken—it was indeed a backdoor score he'd been irate over—was reminding him of how massive a burden his son was—because of this I took the Fifth, and Mom decided to dial the number of every single girl at the party, making me sit there, just in case, like a defendant waiting to maybe take the stand. And Dad . . . Though Dad sat there for each and every call, was close enough to rare back and give me a matching blemish on my cheek or under my eye, he didn't: he kept his face down into his palm, eyes shut, shaking his partially hidden head ever so slightly when Mom asked a ridiculous question to one of the parents.

"One of these little jezebels is breaking her Ninth Commandment," Mom said after the final call. Here, Dad finally lifted his head, flew up his arms like a referee indicating *touchdown*, then slammed down his hands onto the table: "What the fuck is wrong with youse!"

The bottom line was this: I'd considered the odds, laid my wager, and now, as Dad often said in those days—now that I'd lost—"it was time to pay the piper."

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Apparently the vacuum-hickey trick wasn't *my* invention. All the girls Mom had called must have gotten together that next day (I saw them whispering, whispering and giggling and looking my way at recess and lunch) and come to a consensus: that I'd given the hickey to myself. And just like that the fat kids and the smelly kids and the nose pickers were off the hook and I, "Hoover," was the eighth grade's front page punchline; they even got the brand right. "Hooooover" I'd hear, the drawn out *o's* making it sound like I was being booed, every time I walked into classrooms with the paper bag of recess pretzels (I was unfortunately a pretzel boy that year); Hooooover I heard, with laughs and quips, after being "depantsed" in the school yard—"We just wanted to see if the vacuum went down your pants, too," the assailant, Brendan O'Rourke, that shit stain, said as he backpedaled away and left me there with my pants around my ankles, the standing joke, like Carrie drenched in pig's blood. I had no power, though, super power or higher power or otherwise, to defend myself. Even with the hickey having healed for weeks then months, the nickname remained. *Hoover the loser*, and "What's your girlfriend's name, Anita Hickey?" (I didn't get this till I said it a few times in a row—*Anita Hickey. A-nita Hickey. I need a hickey*.) Frightened there'd be jokes and chants and depantsings, I didn't attend the graduation Dance and instead commenced a summer of hibernation that I hoped—I even

prayed, with everything in me I prayed—would remove Hoover from the front page of ridicule. But Hoover I stayed. The hell of having to explain the name to new friends from high school after they'd gotten word from someone I went to grade school with. The lies I told. How easy they then found out the truth. It really ran the show, that nickname, the reputation it gave me, for years and years. The confidence it stripped. The opportunities I missed. Hoover even followed me to college—I chose the school I did not for its reputable construction management program blah, blah bullshit, which I'd weaseled my parents into believing, but for being twelve hundred miles and two entire states away. "Why is everyone calling you Hoover?" the girl I was seeing my junior year wanted to know when dozens of MySpace "friends" from home were wishing "Hoover" a happy birthday.

A few years later, it was different girl, a different social media platform. "Why did someone post a GIF on your wall of a vacuum cleaner sucking someone's neck?"

I disconnected from social media, permanently, before it really hit its stride.

But there was nowhere to hide. The nickname's still in charge today in many ways. Its prompting—every time I run the vacuum or even see so much as a television ad—continues to give me butterflies and weak knees. And when I think about my twenty-five-year reunion (twenty-seven, actually, thanks to COVID), taking place in Epiphany's gymnasium, a few months from now, the back and forth feeling, to go or not to go, hinges on Hoover more than anything else. I want to be there. It makes all the sense in the world to be there. For one, I live close by. A few years back, I bought a house just along the northern border of the city, one of the pseudo suburbs many of us good Philly Catholics escaped to when our neighborhoods went to shit. I'm not five miles from the house I grew up, where my mother still lives now. In fifteen minutes I can be there to shovel her walk or take her to Mass in the crappy weather that *still*

makes missing inexcusable. (The three Epiphany priests indicted for fucking kids, as well as the accusations, dozens, attached to others' names, wasn't enough, I guess, for Mom to see the light). Mom is Mom. She's happy enough, I think; she's the same in so many ways. She still even has her ceremonial drinks of the year; in fact, she's added a third: a glass of red wine on the anniversary of my father's death. Mom's the reason I'm not a million miles from my childhood. *Close enough to spit to my mom and piss on my father's grave*, I once told one of my many ex-girlfriends while giving her the tour of my then new house, laughing, a line I thought was clever and offered a glimpse into who I am *now* and what might had happened to me *then*: I'm a loyal son who's there for his mother and resents his father, which gave me, I thought, an excuse for lacking in certain relationship departments. I guess it wasn't excuse enough. But hey, who knows, maybe my next girl—*the* girl even—will be there at the reunion, some girl who's strayed far enough from life's proverbial path that she's finally found *her* way. Jen Devlin or Kelly Sharkey. I know there's a good share of divorcees already. I've even been envisioning these encounters: I emerge through a parting Sea of Douchebaggery, cops and fireman, realtors—everyone's a realtor now—giving Bitcoin and crypto tips, a woman's face, shocked, as I greet her with my straight, white smile—"Wow, look at this stud . . ."—before I tell her, humbly of course, only after she's asked, that I'm head of construction management for a well-known company, but also—my true passion I might add—I act in shows at a Playhouse out in Ambler; and with this, I reveal the model male mate: a perfect combo of grit and gay.

Then there's revenge of course. Revenge is reason, too. Revenge can certainly drive a person—the new, better version—to revisit a place, a group of people, that had gotten the best of the lesser you. To show those bullies, and bullies so many of my classmates remain—I know this; I constantly see their carbon copies in the neighborhood I now reside, ex athletes mostly,

adults—bullying their spouses, and their kids, and their kid's umpires and referees; once even, while jogging at dusk through the community park, I ran past a guy with a sleeve of tattoos smacking his little dog's snout, smacking and berating the poor thing, for pooping on the running trail instead of the grass—and this, unlike those other instances of abuse that often go unnoticed in this distorted society, I couldn't walk away from. "I ever see you again," I told him, having stopped my run and turned around, walking back towards him now, my voice quivering like Mom's would, "I'm going to do the exact same thing you just did to her—to you." The tough guy animal abuser wasn't apparently as tough as he wanted his tattoos to make him seem. The coward picked up the Yorkie he'd just knocked around and hightailed in the opposite direction, carrying his furry victim like a football.

And this is who I am today. My pushover days are long behind me. I'm dying to show the Class of '96 this new me—a wealthy and fit single guy with no kids sucking away his time, a guy whose life experience has brought him a confidence and swagger, a guy who doesn't need a bunch of tattoos to show the world how tough he is. I'm proud of this guy; I want the world to meet this guy, meet *me*. I do—truly I do. But to walk through those gymnasium doors . . . I see the scene pretty clearly: being fashionably late, the largest of the crowd gathered by a makeshift bar, when one by one they begin to spot me, their cue to revert right back to the ways of tweenaged brutality. I can hear them. I can't stop hearing them.

"Hooooover."