

A Modern Tragedy

No one understood why the Nazareth girls (Nazareth's the semi-snooty private academy they'd just graduated from) chose to rent out in Barnacle Point, a swampy rundown town across three rickety bridges nearly falling into the back bay, a good two or three miles from the beach, the boardwalk, their jobs in Wildwood. The girls had to peddle almost half an hour, each way, on a one-lane road in their waitress and chambermaid and Raging Waters uniforms, their bikinis on off days. The bug bites up and down their tanned legs were proof of the muck they rode through. And the smell: one thing was the salty, sulfury scent of the seashore (that was all part of the experience), but this place felt like it had once been part of the bay itself, washed over with filthy water years and years back, and never really recovered.

But by mid-June, their motive became clearer. When houses in Wildwood were being raided—paddy wagons picking up house-loads of under-age drinkers or “noise violators,”—it was crickets, literally, out in Barnacle. Mosquitos and the trashy odor of the bay, flooded roads

they sometimes had to walk their bikes through were still their biggest issues. And by early July, they looked like the geniuses some of their SAT scores suggested they might be. Eviction notices began appearing in doors of Wildwood houses; some kids even up and left on their own: too poor from the court costs or citation payments, too scared of a trip to real jail if arrested, again, without having paid fines that accumulated each week they went unpaid. One house—a place with a few kids from Bishop’s Barth’s baseball team—was even deemed an active crime scene, caution tape draped across the entrance, shut down by a court order of sorts: an altercation between a cop and underage drinker who, so the story went, “resisted arrest” when he attempted to get up off a chair to go find a copy of their lease, then “assaulted an officer” while they struggled to restrain him. A Philly news station carried the story. Franky Cahill (the charged “offender”) even lost his partial baseball scholarship to some D3 school up near the Poconos.

The houses that remained, houses like EJ Garafolo’s Twenty-Fifth Street bungalow, dilapidated places still full of what seemed now the worst age to be in this shore resort—young adults just under the legal drinking age, teenagers too scared to show their fake IDs to the big bouncers at the entrances to bars—these houses became like homes in Nazi-occupied nations: the doors were always locked, texting a must before visitors could even think of knocking, an escape route mapped-out in the event an uninvited knock, that hard cop-knock, would come as they were quietly, “illegally,” drinking.

Many of these places, the spared ones, took in evicted friends, kids with jobs who couldn’t afford to leave, go back to the city and start their summer from scratch. (Who had a phone bill; who had to help parents pay for the first semester of college—pay for books and

food plans; who wasn't brave enough to tell Mom and Dad that he or she had been evicted from a house Mom and Dad had financed . . .) "Refugee" was a popular word that summer and, as a joke, this is what EJ and his roommates, the Dumbrowski brothers, twins born six minutes apart, called their rent-free tenants who occupied the tiny room (the refugee camp) behind the kitchen—a den? a kitchenette? basically an entryway with moldy green carpet and an unlevel floor—where the "weekenders" had stayed before they too bailed on their summer.

Kev Germscheid and Brendan McShane—EJ's teammates from baseball—were refugees. And Tara McGlone, EJ's mom's best friend's daughter and the object of both of the Dumbrowski's affection. Jerry Ellis, a twenty-one-year-old "laid off" roofer and neighborhood idiot, promised to buy them beer—whenever they wanted—if he could crash there. His nickname was SUG. He was fat and never shut up, didn't seem to care that SUG was an acronym for Smells Unbelievably Gross. They let him sleep on the porch.

Certainly, the girls from Barnacle Point, the Nazareth girls who hadn't been arrested or served with papers, cited for as much as a noise violation, couldn't have planned it quite like this: to be the last place left to host those YOLO throw downs—beer pong and flip-cup, sex behind doors that didn't lock, were kept closed by pushing an old bureau or dresser up against it—the partying the girls envisioned for their senior summer. (No one used "YOLO" in forever, but, to be funny, *they* did; friends since freshman year, this was maybe their last summer together.) But then again, their version of a YOLO summer didn't include getting arrested and losing scholarships when LaSalle and Lehigh and Villanova got wind.

EJ's girlfriend was a Nazareth girl, a Barnacle girl. And EJ was constantly over there—he slept in Barnacle as much as he didn't, picked Brooke up for dates, for her job at Samuel's

Pancake House, sat on the back deck with her roommates when she was getting ready—and this made it *his* job to explain, in the nicest way possible, how the hopes of the summer rested on their shoulders. He'd give them rides into Wildwood, show up baring gifts of beer or Twisted Tea, sandwiches from Russo's, a pizza from Mack's or Sam's. His roommates had even told him to tell the girls that they, the boys and Tara, would pay for all the alcohol (SUG Ellis was at their beck and call), would even put up a cash deposit . . . in case something happened at a party—but it wouldn't, EJ would always remind them—did Barnacle even have a police department? But the girls kept telling him no—people'd be stealing their shit, using their beds . . . “Plus,” Reagan Fitzpatrick was saying, “you guys can just jump out the windows, but the second a cop comes here and there's beer, weed, whatever, *we*—whoever's on the lease—*we're* all locked up!”

Brooke wasn't as worried. Jean Madeline Cosmetology Institute likely cared if their future students were arrested for drinking as much as Community College did about a kid like EJ, a kid who'd sit in the back of classes, hungover, in sweatpants and a backwards hat, only there so he could keep playing baseball, something his dad had to help talk him into that spring. “Being a kid ends sooner than it's supposed to, pal. Go play ball—have fun. Keep your job at the caterer and I'll help you out with some extra cash,” he'd said more than once when Police and Fire exams, apprenticeships for skilled trades programs came up. “You'll make your mother happy, too. Win-win.”

So no, EJ didn't have dorms or an adult-type job to look forward to. He had this—his senior summer. It was always at the front of his mind. All those dark days—his parents fighting

over money, over him, shift after shift of doing dishes alone with his thoughts—each of those days was one day closer to the summer, the shore house.

Yet there he was now, still washing dishes (he'd gotten a job at a bayside restaurant on Rio Grande): it was almost August, and the summer, the way EJ envisioned it, had never really started.

"They'll eventually give," Brooke was telling EJ one night after some long and sweaty house-to-themselves sex in Barnacle. He lay on his back and listened. Brooke could tell the girls were getting tired of looking at each other's faces, not seeing any of the boys they'd wanted to be hanging with. "I just don't get why you care though, Eaj—it's gonna be *you* who's stuck driving everyone's lazy asses. You think Dumb and Dumber are taking bikes out here? Or SUG—ha! Could you see his fat ass pedaling over bridges? Oh, they'll buy your beer—lucky you. Guess that means they think you're driving them back too. I'm stealing your keys the second you get here."

EJ's car wasn't meant to shuttle around drunk kids, take them places to get drunker. Other than work, a few rainy-day getaways, dates to Cape May or Stone Harbor, the car was meant to get him back home, twice a month, to meet with the psychiatrist who'd prescribed the Luvox—a promise he'd made his dad the February morning the surprise eighteenth birthday present was parked out front, Big Ed thinking his boy needed something special after EJ's mom had remarried that fall. "This is only to get back to see Dr. Patel, OK? That was the only way your mom would agree to this shore house thing. I told her you're an adult now and that you work

too hard at the caterer to not do what you want with your earnings. Gotta promise me though, OK, pal—gotta promise me one, you won't miss an appointment and two—now listen to me, pal—promise, *promise me* you won't even think about *ever* getting behind the wheel after even a sip of booze." And EJ promised as he climbed into the '91 Mercury Cougar, an oldie, sure, a bit beaten-in, but *his*—a really big deal for a kid from Ferndale Heights with a cop dad and a mom who made minimum wage teaching part-time tumbling at the rec center; he could certainly follow some simple rules, any rules really, that came with a car. *His* car!

But after a while, as it usually goes, the rules began being bent. Gliding through stop signs, speeding through yellow lights, a left hand sliding off the wheel and dangling out into the breeze of those first few warmer days in early spring. And then the real recklessness. On weekend nights he and Brooke weren't using the backseat to do "everything but," prepping for prom, the Cougar was loaded with three times it's legal limit, friends' limbs literally hanging out the windows, a kid or two even wedged in the trunk if need be, cologne always having been sprayed, seats washed down before EJ had gotten back home.

By graduation, the car was a legend. It even had a Facebook page—*DOB: 1991; Sex: Female; Interests: Taking young men for the best rides of their lives*. Friends were "tagged" or "checked in" when the Cougar was taking them to a keg in the woods, a party too far by foot, Jersey nudie bars with eighteen-and-up admittance. And when EJ walked in the house whacked out of his mind, his dad wasn't awake to witness any slurring, stumbling, his boy's breath a mix of Big Red and whichever cheap beer they'd gotten SUG to buy. Big Ed would wake near noon the next morning and only then ask EJ questions, no way to prove the answers were total bull. Ed Garafolo Sr. had his own issues: for years his wife had been sneaking around, fucking one of

his childhood buddies, a guy he was playing shuffleboard and darts with the winter he'd caught his wife cheating. And then, what seemed like only months after he found out about the affair, she was living with Bill Arnoldy in a suburban single not only bigger than her old house, his house, but bigger than Big Ed's and his connected neighbor's twin homes *combined*. And he, the guy whose heart had just been trampled on, a guy who went out five days a week for twenty-seven years and worked in some of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city, the *country*, to put EJ through twelve years of Catholic school, rushing home to coach teams or meet his wife and kid at the swim club, carnivals, Phillies and Sixers games, pictures with Santa, the Easter Bunny—a guy who did it the way he was supposed to, the way *his* dad did, had to endure *this*, witness another nightmare, when Joanne and Bill picked up EJ on weekends, when they came, together as a family, to watch EJ's baseball games. And on top of all that—because of all that—his only child, EJ, had put him through a second hell. From EJ's freshman to junior year, Big Ed, his ex-wife sitting much closer than he liked, was constantly in conferences with coaches and teachers and archaic priests, trying to talk them out of throwing EJ off of this team or that club, even from being expelled from school once (EJ had completely given up on his studies, stopped listening, respecting teachers and coaches), a man in his late forties, Big Ed, having to blame himself, *his* mistakes, explain to strangers what had happened with him and his ex in order to save his son. "Please," he'd said at least a half-dozen times, "please don't make my son pay for his parents' mistakes." Only after what felt like hundreds of rides to therapy, long trips to see a shrink five Turnpike exits into the suburbs (EJ refused to go anywhere someone might spot him going to a "mental doctor")—not till then, finally, when the correct medication was determined did EJ's life, and in turn his father's, begin to resemble normalcy.

But two years it took! Thousands of dollars, an early retirement, screaming matches in parking lots, over the phone with an ex-wife getting more oblivious by the minute—how could she think her opinions counted, were worth two shits anymore? The hate he had for that cunt, the pain she brought him—brought them! It made sense that Big Ed now drank himself to sleep most nights, was soothing, medicating, himself every evening with Miller High Life, lying there on the couch, long passed out, when his inebriated son tiptoed past.

It was the first week of August when Brooke's prediction came true and the Barnacle girls finally caved. Two of them were moving into their dorms that next week and the whole summer felt, literally, like one big bike ride. *The End of the World Party* they were calling it. Why the fuck not. YOLO!

EJ's crew was one of a few house loads heading to Barnacle. And after SUG came out of the liquor store with a random girl in high-waisted shorts, the Cougar's number now at eight, they were on their way, *finally*, to Barnacle Point.

Tara, likely knowing there'd be wandering arms and legs brushing up against her in the back, had called shotgun, was DJ'ing from an iPhone mounted to the dash; the rest were piled in the back, haphazardly, like a family might load an umbrella and chairs, boogie boards, for a day the beach. Natty Ices were cracking open once they crossed Park Boulevard, approached the smallest of the three bridges, where houses and restaurants, lights everywhere gave way to bait and tackle shops, broken-down marinas with warped wooden docks that always made EJ

think of somewhere down south, the bayou or something, though a school trip to D.C. was as far south he'd ever been from Philly.

It was only the third time EJ was making this drive after sundown. You had no real choice but to turn on the high beams once into the second leg. Lighting out there was so scarce that the moon, the stars, the last of the lightening bugs were the lone overhead illumination. Forty feet of visibility was about all a driver had to go on. And the curving, twisting road, the pitch-black Mud Creek Basin on both sides dwindled perception to less than half that. Tara had to twice shout out—"Stop!" "Eaj!"—when EJ flew through stop signs that would appear in his peripherals just as they were passing them. To be funny, McShane, a little guy, always loud, hanging over the center console started yelling "Stop!" near EJ's ear, even when there wasn't a stop sign, and EJ would slam on the breaks, the keg banging around in the trunk, Kev Germscheid's machine gun laugh firing off louder than one Lumineers' or Mumford & Sons song after the next.

Tara didn't think it was quite as funny. The way she kept turning and telling McShane to "stop-puuhh" in her raspy little voice must have made him think she *was* amused, that she was flirting. So he didn't stop.

And neither did Tara.

Tara's type—the pretty-but-fun girl the more girly-girls were jealous of, the soccer player unintimidated by boarding in a house with a bunch of boys—her type sometimes physically struck guys to really get their attention. (Every male recipient of these no doubt cherished her smack or shoulder punch, a kick to the ass if they were lucky). And as she reached back to smack McShane, the car hit an uneven pit that Route 9 seemed riddled with, jolting

Tara into the driver and knocking EJ's hand from the wheel, the curb they then hopped throwing him across the front seat while the car rolled down an embankment, reeds smacking the windshield at the foot of the third bridge.

There are many movie scenes like this. Where a little light magically appears, bright enough to show the occupants in an organized panic as they realize what has happened, the vehicle having fallen into water: taking off seat belts and rolling down windows, as the car slowly sinks, water seeps in. These scenes can have you holding your breathe, forgetting about the actors and stage lights and the snack or beverage in your hand. But no matter how well done, how riveting these Hollywood productions, it's not how it happens. What happens, what happened, is blinding black water on you before you even get your bearings again, before you can even think, recover, resituate your body from the tumble and dive the car had just taken. Utter panic sets in. A back seat of seven flailing, for two, not four, handles and window switches the Cougar came equipped with. Voices swallowed. No stage lights. The bodies that big SUG Ellis was sprawled over were never even given the chance to hold their breath.

Tara flew back with the rest of them, one minute playing DJ, taking requests, flirting?, short- and long-term hopes and desires floating around in her still-developing frontal lobes, and the next being in the worst claustrophobic nightmare she'd ever fathomed. Pin the tail on the donkey isn't easy; now imagine fourteen arms and feet, a big human centipede, in a backseat the size of a closet—all of those appendages wildly thrashing as if their lives depended on it—blindly trying to find freedom, a back-door handle that didn't exist, all while bereft of the one thing that ushers our every move: air. If this happened fifty times, if fifty coupes stuffed with teens had rolled down an embankment into twenty-five feet of black water, all fifty likely end

the same: at least seven drowning, dead, inside a car too submerged in the muddy basin for divers to even pull the bodies prior to the big display, hundreds watching—crowds pouring into Barnacle like never before—news stations from Philly, from New York City, from Baltimore, cameras pointing at the big crane lifting out the Cougar and the seven still inside. If EJ hadn't been thrown sideways, wound up wedged against the passenger door where he knew to find the obscure, lower-than-normal position Mercury had situated their interior door handles in this specific model—if all that didn't fall into place, had he been knocked cold the way many driver's might have, EJ could have ended up as unlucky as the others, though the predicament he now found himself seemed anything but lucky.

Dillon O'Connor Hope this POS dies a little every day knowing these kid's parents lost children b/c of him!

👍 13

Lisa Flite What a scumbag lyer.

👍❤️😞 2

Jackie Renzi Take an Uber!

👍 8

Vince Guldin Says a chick was up front. Bet she was givin him head.

👍😂 7

Rob Bonino How does no one get out alive when they didn't even crash into anything?

👍 3

Kev Michael How'd no one get out? That's maybe 15 feet deep there. Did they even sink to the button? Watch this video. Takes cars a long ass time to sink.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMF6HLFHkak>

👍 7

Brianna McCormick Hope these parents file civil suites.

👍❤️ 4 2

Kev Michael Love how it says "A breathalyzer as well as a blood test showed the driver was not impaired; however, Garafolo admitted having had a few beers . . ."

👍❤️😞 2 9

Ty Caffey HAHHA He wasn't drunk b/c of being in the

water four three hours “sobering up” while he claims he was going up and down to try to save his friends. SMH!

👍❤️ 6

Kev Michael Guess he was “keeping afloat” his chances of avoiding 8 charges of vehicular man slaughter while sobering up in the bay.

👍🙄😏 3 3

Lisa Flite What a POS!

👍 4

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Ryno Burke Typical politicians. No guardrails, yet they are arresting kids down there for everything under the sun and hoarding the cash #draintheswamp

👍❤️ 9

Joe Crawley Yup. And how bout the boardwalk. 3 bucks for a slice of pizza... yet no money for guard rails?

Ken DeMichele WTF you talkin about?

😏 1

Joe Crawley WTF my talkin about? Do you even know me bro???

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Mary Pat Engelhardt Thoughts and prayers with these families.

Karen Dubek 🙏

Cynthia Newell 🙏🙏🙏

Jill Breslin 🙏

Larry Fortunato 🙏🙏🙏

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Drew Cirillo My cousin knew this EJ kid. Huge pill head.

👍 4

Ty Caffey Son of a Cop. Makes sense!

👍😏 8

Alex Leonard OMFG! What a fucking coward. Teddy Kennedy Jr.

👍❤️😏 2 7

The next comment was a shared meme that had been posted on the Cougar’s Facebook page that spring, the same image that was everywhere on social media since the accident, a picture, a joke, from a guy in EJ’s crew: EJ behind the wheel, bodies so jammed in that heads and asses and feet were outside the car, EJ’s left arm hanging out the window, an open beer can in his hand. “*DUI MOBILE!*” was across the photo.

That was where EJ stopped and closed his laptop, laid it on the nightstand and tried to sleep. The glow-in-the-dark stars were still stuck to the ceiling after all these years; it was his special place, long ago it seemed now, to direct his prayers on nights his parents' fights made sleep, sweet dreams, seem impossible. He'd never imagined anything—anything—could make him wish to be back in *that* time of his life. The pain, though, would be gone soon. EJ knew this. He had to stick to the plan, be patient, wait until he'd spoken with every family.

In the week since the accident, EJ had only been in contact with three of the families. Mr. and Mrs. Dumbrowski pulled chairs beside EJ's hospital bed, prayed with him. Seeing Mr. D., who drove an F-150 and was constantly covered in paint and spackle, seeing a guy like that cry was when EJ stopped trying to imagine a normal life, a life where Brooke could one day look at him, kiss him without thinking of what he'd done.

That same night, late, EJ woke to a guy he'd never laid eyes on. He was in the middle of a dream—a world where none of this was real—when this strange man's hands were suddenly around his neck. "She's dead," the man said. "Dead!" Nurses were screaming. A monitor on wheels had toppled and lay across the bed like a fallen tree. The sling for EJ's broken clavicle had been pushed up and hung half off and tangled, was strapped around the man's ear, momentarily attaching EJ and the stranger. If not for Dad being at EJ's bedside, having been asleep in the plastic pull-out couch, the man may have killed EJ on their first and only encounter, just as it had gone with EJ and the man's daughter—the girl with the high-waisted shorts—who'd made the worst mistake of her life by following SUG Ellis into EJ's car.

His Aunt Debbie called on the ride home from the hospital. Tara's mom. EJ had fallen asleep in the passenger seat. They were crossing the Walt Whitman Bridge, the stadiums

straight ahead, the Philly skyline out to the right, when Dad woke him, told him who it was, and handed over his phone. EJ never imagined that just saying hello could be so hard.

They were only a few blocks from their street when the call ended and EJ told his Dad to pull over, that he had to throw up. But he didn't throw up. He cried. With his head hung out the door, he sobbed in the lot of the Presbyterian church that hosted the afterschool fist fights in grade school, where kids cheered, made jokes. Fights were fun for everyone but the people fighting. SUG Ellis had fought there as much as anyone.

The lot was empty now, just EJ and his dad and an idled Chevy that for years had sounded like it was nearing the end. Big Ed had gotten out and around to EJ's side when the crying wouldn't stop, and he too was crying, Big Ed, trembling, crouched in front of his son, hugging his boy, EJ smelling the skin of his father in a way he hadn't since being a boy, four or five, crossing the beach in Dad's arms so the sand didn't burn his feet.

Days went by. No other parents reached out or returned EJ's calls.

"Send letters for now," Dad suggested one day, peeking into EJ's bedroom, as if knowing exactly where his son's mind was.

Dad didn't mention, thank God, how EJ was still in bed at 4 p.m. Or joke about the messy room, the mound of dirty clothes he used to always call Mount Washington. Only: "How's the collarbone feelin', pal?"

Just looking at Dad, locking eyes for that less-than-a-second, had become so hard. It made EJ think of looking at his mom right after the separation, after knowing Mr. Arnoldy's dick had been inside her.

A thumbs-up, a nod was all EJ could muster: the collarbone was better.

So with Barkley, his twelve-year-old German shepherd, curled at his feet, EJ spent that first week home, hours a day, in the little cove in their dining room where the family computer, the Epson printer had been since EJ could remember. He'd have the letters finished and mailed before the funerals (he was still uncertain of the schedules and which ones he'd skip per his dad's advice, which ones he'd sit in the back at, away from any possible problems).

He wrote two other letters as well. One to Brooke. Hers by hand. They'd been pen pals in seventh grade, when they first started "dating," back when his parents monitored his BlackBerry and found a shot of Brooke's boobs EJ just couldn't part ways with.

"Remember when we use to write?" he wrote to open her letter. "How many twelve-year-olds would be brave enough to 'smuggle' nude pics thru letters we passed at school?"

On the day after the final funeral, he'd hold the letters up to Dad. With a bag full of pills snapped behind his shorts, he'd take one last look at a man who'd been his hero, more selfless, loyal than any one person could ever be. "Gonna go the mailbox." And he'd head for the door, stop and bend beneath the dining room table to give Barkley the best belly rub he'd ever gotten. Dad might offer a ride. He might worry about his boy being out alone. It—EJ—was the biggest story in the city, the region—even made the national news. *The Wildwood DUI Mobile*. "I need to stretch this shoulder out," he'd say, and Dad would understand, let him go—the mailbox was only a block and Dad would be glad to see EJ getting some fresh air and exercise.

But EJ wouldn't be heading for the Corson Street mailbox, the closest mailbox, the one the Garafolos always used. No. He'd cut through the side driveway at the end of his block, behind the shops on the avenue, smelling the smells he'd smelled countless times—a stickball or football or street-hockey game, bombing cars with the tomatoes from Mrs. O'Keefe's

garden, a summer night on his bike, the breeze in his face, the world at his feet, the days when *Mom* and *Dad* and *divorce* weren't inseparably connected.

"Dear the two greatest parents any kid could get," his last letter started—it was a three-page, stapled-together letter, one letter for both parents, telling them, through example after example, how much he loved them, how sorry he was, how none of this, *nothing*, was their fault. "What a great, great world you guys gave me . . ."

He'd stop at 7-Eleven. In seventh grade, he'd carved a declaration in wet cement right out front there ("B&E 4Ever"). He even referenced this in Brooke's letter, as one of the many reasons she was the love of his life, the only girl he could ever envision a life with.

"I cemented our love for ALL of Ferndale to see. I even knew THEN!" he wrote at the start of the closing paragraph. In P.S. he added one last sentence above a taped photo, a picture from her prom, the two of them sitting on one of those giant chairs, her promise soon to be coming true. "You were my only reason to wake up when my house no longer felt like a home . . . You gave me so much hope . . . I love you."

He'd walk to the back fridge by way of the second aisle—the candy aisle: Swedish Fish, Gobstoppers, Now and Laters he used to buy with the change he'd "steal" from Dad's bureau, when the fighting had gotten so bad that Dad was too distracted to notice missing quarters amongst the nickels, dimes, and pennies inside his coffee can.

He'd pay for his drink and nod goodbye to the owner, the Pakistani guy who tolerated him and his friends for years and years. *Thanks*, he'd say. *Have a good one, Mr. Seth*. And he'd leave, through those ding-donging doors that says a customer has come or gone, keeping his head down in case a face he knew was parked or pulling up.

He wouldn't drop the letters in the mailbox at Materly and Allendale or the one on Grandmom's corner. No, he knew what he'd do: take one last tour, see the neighborhood via Ferndale Avenue—the pizza place he and his buddies bought their slices, the Italian restaurant they'd run in to steal tooth picks from the hostess station, just to get a thrill, where sometimes the owner would chase them with his rolling pin that, after some years, had become a machete. He'd pass Mickey Finn's, where Dad would watch games, play darts and shuffleboard, where EJ played pinball behind the guys, where Dad had once picked him up, hoisted him on his shoulders and sprinted out front when a Sixers win, Vince Carter's last-second miss, took them to Eastern Conference Finals. He'd pass Epiphany of our Lord, his grade school, imagining the empty school yard was filled with his past, the girl who stood out amongst the sea of cloned plaid jumpers and gray golf shirts—that nervous high that overtook him every single time he spotted her in a crowd—the girl who in his high school years was always vibrating in his pocket, vibrating to remind him she loved him or missed him or just say *Hey*.

“P.P.S. You're the only girl I'd ever wanted to love—and this is what I want you to think when you think of me.”

He'd cross an always busy Dunston Avenue like he was legging out a grounder, sprint across just as the oncoming cars had gotten a green (he loved to run like this, knowing he could out accelerate the cars). He'd drop the letters in the mailbox by the Burger King, the one beside the car lot with the dead-end alleyway no one but he and Brooke ever seemed to wander down, where they'd meet, late, after his weekend work shifts, her Mademoiselle perfume, her shampooed curls mixing with the smells of an autumn and a spring and a winter air, the summer nights like this, where they'd kiss and kiss and kiss.