

## Visiting Hours

I was her only living relative left in San Francisco. So I tell myself I am right to visit my sister Patty at the Veterans Affairs hospital during her second course of electroshock therapy. Part of me makes the trip out of curiosity. I have never been to Fort Miley, but I have passed its grim white facade many times. A caricature of an insane asylum, it sits at the entrance to Point Lobos, a lonely headland, wooded and windswept, just south of the Golden Gate Bridge. It is also the last stop on the 38 Geary, which I ride to get there that rainy winter night in 2009.

The bus winds up the driveway and comes to a stop under the orange safety lights of the entrance. As it pulls away, I hurry through a pair of sliding doors into the psych ward that looks—to my disappointment—like any other hospital, littered with clipboards and tissue boxes that dispense blue rubber gloves. The reception is dominated by a circular nurse's station, where there is no

nurse to be seen. But at the counter, propped up on her elbows, looking every bit at home, is my sister Patty.

“What are you doing there?” I ask.

“Looking for my buddy,” she replies. She seems unsurprised to see me, though I had not called ahead.

“Who’s your buddy?” I ask.

“The nurse. I think her name’s Carol. I bet she went outside to smoke. She’s always smoking. Like you.”

“I quit,” I say.

“Good. It’s disgusting.”

She is wearing a light pink sweatshirt, pressed and clean, provided by the hospital. She looks like an orderly, until she turns to face me, and I see the spots where the technicians matted down her hair with petroleum jelly before attaching the electrodes.

“How are things?” I ask.

“They’re alright,” she says, “I’m just tired.” As if to illustrate the point she jaws into an extended yawn.

Patty is a Marine. I often refer to her as my Marine sister, so completely has the military saturated her demeanor. That same soldier’s stoicism makes her prone to understatement, especially in matters of mental well-being.

"You sure you're alright?" I ask.

"Yeah, man," she sneers, "You think I'm lying or something?"

"Of course not, Patty."

"Hey, you wanna a popsicle?" she asks.

Patty left for the Marines when I was eleven. My voice had yet to break. When I answered the phone, people mistook me for our sister Eileen. For years after, whenever she was home on leave, Patty talked to me like I was still that kid. It irked me when I was a teenager, coming—as it did—from someone I saw as reckless and childlike herself. But tonight, as she reaches into the nurse's freezer and produces two steamy cherry popsicles, I find it endearing.

"Thanks," I say, taking one from her.

"Looks like Carol isn't coming," she says, slurping on a chunk of red ice, "Wanna hang out in my room?"

"Sure," I say, and follow her into the ward.

By the time she was a teenager, Patty led a life that was decidedly adult. Her comings and goings were always off our radar. When she occasionally sat down to dinner, it was as if she were only popping in and just as soon expected somewhere else. She was never, ever still.

Once, when she was seventeen and I was seven, the phone rang in our kitchen. The man on the other end said his name was Sterling and that he was a friend of hers. He sounded relieved that it was me who answered.

“How you been, little guy?” He spoke smoothly, like a late-night DJ, or a snake.

“I don’t know who you are,” I told him.

He clicked his tongue and purred.

“C’mon now, Junior. You remember Sterling. We were buds back in the day.”

“No one calls me Junior anymore,” I said.

“I used to take you on my motorcycle,” he said, “and we’d go get ice cream.”

I told him Patty wasn’t home and that, yeah, I’d tell her he called. My other sister Eileen, who was a year younger than Patty, had been listening the entire time. She tiptoed up behind me as I hung up and tapped me on the shoulder.

“Who was that?” she asked.

“Some guy called Sterling,” I said, “He said he’s gonna call back tomorrow.”

And when he did call the next day, Eileen picked up. I listened from the living room, out of sight, as she let him believe that she was me and that the she-who-was-me sure did remember all those nonexistent motorcycle rides to imaginary ice cream shops. For a second I was convinced that the she-who-was-me really *was* me, that is, until the Eileen-who-was-Eileen returned and told Sterling-who-was-Sterling who she really was and that *if you come near this house again I will call the police, and if they don't get here fast enough, my linebacker boyfriend and his seven Samoan cousins will pound you to mincemeat.*

Years later Eileen explained that Sterling was Patty's old boyfriend, who was in his early twenties when he started seeing our sister, who was twelve at the time. For a few tumultuous years, the two stayed together, at least as together as was possible in a configuration that amounted to little more than statutory rape. She recalled a night, during one of their many fights, when Sterling made twelve-year-old Patty get off the back of his motorcycle on El Camino Real, somewhere in Redwood City, forcing that same twelve-year-old, in her nylon jacket and flip-flops, to hitch-hike the roughly twenty-five miles back to 224 Kavanaugh Way. He never called the house again.

At the VA hospital, Patty has her own room. It is tiny and too brightly-lit. The ceiling is unnecessarily high, like a mini-cathedral.

"What's with the lights?" I ask.

“I dunno,” she says, “They think if they make ‘em bright enough, people won’t off themselves.”

We chuckle at that, still slurping on our popsicles.

“Well, at least you get your own room,” I say.

“The few and the proud,” she says and snorts.

Patty enlisted in the Marine Corps to pump the brakes on a young life charging into oncoming traffic. She turned eighteen in 1982 and found a job at SFO shortly thereafter. She worked the counter for ABC Limousines, whose small army of chauffeurs were mostly Arab men with adopted American names like Jack or Mike. They were men of easy masculinity who bathed in Jōvan Musk and spoke English with only the slightest accent. They shaved their strong chins baby smooth in the morning, but sported five-o’clock shadows by midday. They waved their arms wildly while speaking. They wore impeccable suits. They all dealt cocaine.

A few of them were in love with Patty. One of them, Rich, came around a lot. He was older than the rest, somewhere in his early forties. He loved kids, and had such a natural way with them that I wonder now if he did not have some of his own somewhere. Once, when picking Patty up for work, he took me and the MacAdams twins for a ride in his long white limousine. We bounced around the passenger compartment like heated atoms. Rich opened the moonroof and the

three of us popped out, arms outstretched into capital Ts. Our subdivided neighborhood looked so paint-peeled and ramshackle from up there.

The few kids out on the streets stared dumbly as we passed, with the exception of the older Black boys on Inverness Drive who rode their bikes in circles, menthol cigarettes balanced expertly between their lips. Rich pumped the radio louder. "It's Like That" by Run-D.M.C. was playing. The boys stopped to regard us. Their leader nodded to me in what I quietly hoped was a sign of recognition. I nodded back, understanding—for the very first time—that everything can be bought.

As part of Patty's in-patient treatment at Fort Miley she will submit to a total of six electrically induced seizures over a period of two weeks, three of which have already been administered when I visit her there.

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

"I dunno," she says, "They put me to sleep."

"How many volts do they give you?"

"I dunno."

"Well how do they decide how many?"

"They guess," she says.

"They can't just guess," I say.

“They take your height and weight and they guess” she says, done with that thread of the day’s business, and instead looks out her window at the rainy wet blackness of Point Lobos.

“I bet it took a lot to knock you out,” I say.

Around the time Rich the Limo Driver started coming around—maybe because he started coming around—I made myself into Patty’s archivist, much as I had done for my sister Eileen and my brother Paul, being—as I was—a young boy with an excess of unstructured spare time and an unrelenting fascination with the lives of my teenage siblings.

Paul’s life was straightforward, hung as it was with models of World War II fighter jets and stacked with neat columns of sci-fi novels, many of a dystopian slant, mostly written by Robert A. Heinlein. I remember running my index finger along the pulp paperback spine of *Have Space Suit—Will Travel*, wondering how it was a space suit could have agency, and where it would travel if it did.

Eileen’s life was tidy, but her room still had its secrets. In the bottom drawer of her dresser, under a tangle of bras, was a plastic compact that snapped open to reveal concentric circles of pastel birth control pills, and underneath that same dresser was an assortment of *Cosmopolitan* magazines. The centerfold of the April 1972 issue featured Burt Reynolds naked on a bearskin rug, smiling

devilishly, a lit cigarillo clenched between his teeth. I studied it every day while she was away at high school.

The secrets in Patty's room were not interested in being kept. There were marijuana roaches crushed out in the rocks around her philodendron. Yellow slips from Planned Parenthood indicating the results of pregnancy tests. Parking tickets and pay stubs. All exhibits in evidence to a life becoming increasingly foreign to the rest of us of 224 Kavanaugh Way. Over time, the weed butts gave way to tiny zip lock bags, too small to store anything legal. Missives from Planned Parenthood were replaced by every conceivable form of contraception. When she took the job at the airport, clothes and bags and shoes were strewn everywhere, except in the closet meant to contain them. From this chaos, Patty emerged six nights a week, the portrait of front desk professionalism, often wearing the rabbit fur coat that Rich had given her for Christmas.

"I heard Paul came to visit," I say, back at Fort Miley.

"Did he?" Patty says.

"Yeah, he came on Monday."

"I don't remember," she says.

"What about Aunt Diane?" I ask, "She came later that day."

"John, I can't remember shit right now."

"Do you remember your old boyfriend Rich?" I ask.

"I remember he wasn't my boyfriend," she says.

"Who was he then?" I ask.

"Just a guy," she says.

I wonder if Rich was just a guy to me. He won me over the day took he us on that Popemobile ride around Westview. After that I could intuit when his limo was coming down Kavanaugh Way. I would fly down our driveway to greet it. Rich always maintained his adult tone when talking to children. He would squat in his suit to meet my gaze with his own. And when Patty appeared from her room, late like always, he beamed.

"Look how beautiful, your sister," he said, hugging me to his side.

"Knock it off," Patty told him, "We gotta go."

She marched down the driveway in the white silk blouse and black pencil skirt that were her uniform, clicking in time on low-slung, red leather heels. Rich rushed to open the passenger door. Before getting in himself, he tousled my hair and took my ears in his hands. He rubbed them between his thumb and forefinger, like he was checking the quality of fabric, before producing two shiny quarters.

Her seat adjusted, my sister commandeered the rearview mirror to check her make-up as Rich pulled away from the curb. Patty did not ride in the back of limos. She did not like to be driven at all, being an expert driver herself. Rich

waved to me on the sidewalk. I waved back, silver coins in hand, and watched them disappear down Kavanaugh Way.

“I thought Rich was cool at first,” I tell Patty in her room at Fort Miley.

“A lotta people are cool at first,” she says.

“Did you guys ever date?” I ask.

“Nah,” she says, “We fooled around a couple times.”

“Was he married?” I ask.

“I don’t think so,” Patty says, “But he had girls all over. He was good in bed.”

I gnaw on what is left of my popsicle stick.

“What made you think of him anyway?” she asks me.

“I dunno,” I say, “I think I had a crush on him.”

“Good thing one of us did,” she says.

The last time I saw Rich I was eleven. It was summertime, I know, because Paul and I were up way past midnight watching the HBO that he had descrambled by attaching a shiny metal tube the size of a tampon to the back of our cable box. I had nodded off in the middle of the men-in-prison classic, *Midnight Express*, and my brother nudged me awake in the middle of my favorite part: the shower scene.

“Wake the fuck up,” he said.

Something was going on outside. At the window we watched as Rich attempted to nose his limo into our narrow driveway. He eventually put it in park, but kept the motor running, its back half still out in the street. He bumbled out and tiptoed to our front door. We heard a muffled tap-tap-tap, like he was knocking with his fist in a blanket. Paul answered.

“Come boys,” Rich whispered, “It’s your sister.”

He led us outside and opened the back of the limo. There, splayed out and unresponsive, was Patty, still in her white blouse and pencil skirt. She was wearing a red leather jacket with lots of snaps and buckles, one like Michael Jackson wore. It matched her pumps exactly.

Rich flipped a switch that flooded the interior with a harsh yellow light. Our sister did not react. He pushed past us and lifted her up by the armpits.

“Boys, please,” he said, motioning to her legs.

Paul positioned himself under her left leg and I moved in under the right. On Rich’s count of three, we hoisted her body, like a loosely rolled carpet, from the back of the limo and into the house. Patty roused herself midway.

“The fuck’s going on?” she said with surprising clarity. Her eyes were half-shut and struggling to focus. After a moment they landed on me.

“The fuck’s Daryl doing here?” she demanded, struggling to free her leg from my grip. Daryl was a friend of my brother. His father had kicked him out

several months back. Since then he had been secretly living in the toolshed in our backyard.

“Leggo of me, Daryl,” she slurred, freeing her leg from my grasp.

“John, please.” Rich signaled for me to open her bedroom door. I quickly cleared the detritus of her adult life from the bedspread. Rich and my brother set the body down, heels and all, and I pulled the covers over her.

“Get the fuck outta here, Daryl,” she said to me, “Dad’s gonna see you.” (Our father was the only person in our family who was not aware that Daryl was secretly living in the toolshed.)

“Should we wake up Mom?” I asked Paul.

“Nah,” he said, annoyed, “She’ll sleep it off.”

He walked back to the living room and shut the door on our now empty driveway. Rich and his white stretch limo were long gone. I stayed with Patty a moment more. I left when she started to snore. Leaving her room, I saw the rabbit fur coat slung over a chair in the corner. There was a charred patch on the lapel about the size of a carrot. Getting ready earlier that night, she had absently set down her curling iron down on it.

Back at Fort Miley I ask if she is sleeping okay.

“All I do is sleep,” she says, “with all the pills and shit they give me.”

“I’ve been sleeping a lot, too,” I say.

"That's 'cause you're depressed," she says.

"I think it's 'cause I like to sleep," I counter.

"You still taking your pills?" she asks.

"Nope," I say.

"Why not?" she asks.

"Cause they were making me apathetic," I say.

"What's that mean?" she asks.

"It means I didn't care if I fell off a cliff or not."

"Then find another doctor," she says.

"Sure," I say, "Maybe I'll talk to yours when he comes to zap you."

"You think that's funny, but you should," she said, "Little shit."

The Saturday morning after Rich dropped my sister off, I woke up too late to watch cartoons, so I fixed myself a bowl of cereal and sat down to watch *American Bandstand*. At every commercial break, Patty emerged from her room, made her way to the toilet, and retched. By the closing credits of *Soul Train*, she was just dry-heaving. I had just switched off the TV when she yelled for me to get her some orange juice.

When I ignored her, she said, "I'll give you fifty cents."

A minute later I set the glass down next to her bed.

"There's change in the music box," she said.

On the lid of the box were two white children dressed like hobos. When I opened it, the miniature tinkling of "If I Were a Rich Man" floated up. I fished out two quarters.

"Close the door behind you, okay?" she said.

Several months later, Patty burst into the living room and told my mother, Paul, and myself that she had an announcement. She was holding a rolled-up red t-shirt over her head. She told us she had just come back from the recruiting center in Daly City where she had enlisted in the United States Marines Corps. With that she unfurled the t-shirt to reveal a cartoon rendering of Chesty, their mascot bulldog. Above his stubborn mug were the words "Death Before Dishonor" in bright yellow lettering. She shook out the t-shirt and shimmied her shoulders a little, uncharacteristically pleased with herself. Paul moved in closer to inspect Chesty.

My mother cupped her elbow with one hand and her chin with the other. Golden hour sunlight was streaming through our living room window onto the smooth but thin skin over her cheekbones, bringing to the fore both her advancing age and her undiminished beauty. She regarded her daughter with worry, but her voice was calm and equanimous.

"Are you sure that's what you wanna do, Patty?"

But in the months that followed my sister was undeterred by the arguments of her closest friends and family. I hear that same stubborn note in her voice when I ask her to tell me what the worst part is about her current internment at the VA hospital.

“It’s boring,” she says.

“What’s boring about it?” I ask.

“Everything,” she says, “I could use a drink.”

“You stopped drinking years ago,” I say.

And she had. Just like that. No twelve-step program, no group therapy. Not one complaint or relapse. No explanation other than that she was sick of hangovers.

“I ain’t gonna start drinking,” she says, “I’m just bored.”

“Do you remember when you left for the Marines?” I ask her.

“I can’t remember anything right now” she says.

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” I say, “At least for now.”

Six weeks after her enlistment, Patty was screened for adequate physical and mental fitness. The Marines found no civil convictions and—somehow—no evidence of significant drug use. She was successfully processed and ready for boot camp in South Carolina. The morning they came for her, my brother kicked my mattress from his bottom bunk until I was awake.

“Patty’s leaving,” he said.

I blinked at the red digits of our LED clock. It was 5:00 a.m. In the living room—where no one had thought to turn on a lamp—we bumped into the furniture and each other. The only light came from the kitchen, where our mom was making Lemon Zinger tea, and from the top of the stairs where Eileen was in her bathrobe pacing back and forth. Suddenly there were two quiet, but authoritative knocks at the door. Our father—full of childlike giddiness—answered.

Behind that door was an officer, tall and Black, in his finest dress blues. Everything about him was rectangular: the peaked cap, the epaulettes, his jaw. It was still dark outside and, with the streetlight behind him, it was impossible for us to see the intent in his face. He reached out his hand to our father, who was as supplicant as a Labrador puppy and ready to please anyone in a Marine uniform, the branch of the military that, despite having discharged him twenty years earlier for being mentally unfit, he still saw as his own. He nearly shook the man’s arm off as he smiled stupidly and yanked him into our living room.

The officer was diplomacy embodied. His manner was easy, but girded by formality. His laughter warm, but never familiar. Even his handsomeness was somehow neutral. I stood beside him, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, wondering how we had gotten here. It was 5:15 in the morning and Patty had a

green duffel bag at her feet. Her hair was short. Eileen had convinced her to cut it before the Marines butchered it. Our mother was at the bottom of the stairs trying to coax Eileen, now sobbing and distraught, to come down and say goodbye. But these were matters that should have been addressed weeks ago, matters that required a preparedness of which my family was historically incapable. None of this was the officer's concern. He was not there to answer questions. He was there to collect his charge.

Eileen never came down. The officer took his leave and escorted Patty to a hardtop black sedan with no government markings. He held the back door open and shut it conclusively behind her. He himself sat in the passenger seat. A lower-ranking soldier was at the wheel. Patty buckled her seat belt. I could barely make out her face, but from what I saw she looked quietly confident and—oddest of all—obedient. She fixed her gaze forward as the car pulled away and she was driven to her next station.

Back at Fort Miley I ask her if she knows that the Marines almost zapped our dad there once too.

"Who told you that?" she asks.

"Aunt Diane," I say, "It was after he lost it in Korea."

"Why didn't they?" she asks.

“His mom stopped them. She marched down here in her house dress. They had him all wrapped up in wet sheets.”

Patty splits her popsicle stick into two jagged pieces.

“Anyway,” I say, “Grandma put a stop to it. Lucky Dad, I guess.”

“I dunno,” she says, “It might’ve helped him.”

Ten years from that morning she left for the Marines, Patty turned up at my apartment in San Francisco with a default boyfriend and a 750 ml bottle of Jim Beam bourbon whiskey. I was living in a run-down Edwardian in the Lower Haight with four roommates, one of whom, Josh, answered the door that evening. He yelled up the stairs that my sister was there. I leaned over the railing, my shoulder-length hair nearly obscuring my face.

“Oh hey, Patty. What are you doing here?”

“Just checking in on everybody,” she said, before sending the boyfriend to the corner store for a 2-liter bottle of Coke and a bag of ice.

We set up in Josh’s room, Patty and the boyfriend on the futon, while he and I sat cross-legged on the floor in front of them. That Patty showed up unannounced was not unheard of. Our mother had died two years earlier, and since then my siblings and I struggled to see each other. Patty had become a Corporal and was constantly moving between bases. Eileen, Paul, and I all lived in San Francisco, though that proximity did little to foster togetherness. We

usually met up impromptu, when Patty was on leave, at places with little ceremony: hofbraus on Van Ness or diners in the Sunset, eateries to which we had no attachment, dimly lit places where we were less likely to recognize the features in each other's faces that reminded us of our mother. That night in 1993 Patty had just returned from the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Somalia. My roommate Josh, who did not come from a military family, was intrigued.

"What was your job?" he asked my sister.

"Driving a Humvee," she said, mixing a drink with her index finger. She took a small sip of bourbon directly from the bottle before replacing the cap.

"They don't like women drivers," she told him, "They don't like women at all. They call us WMs. But I won 'em over." She chuckled at this and took another slug. "Seriously, I just know how to drive. You'd be surprised how many guys don't know how to fucking drive."

Someone, maybe Eileen, had told me she was going to Somalia and later someone else, maybe Aunt Diane, said she saw a picture of her there in *Time* magazine. I came across it standing in line at the supermarket. In the photograph she is sitting on an army green sea sack in a small circle of soldiers, an M-16 between her legs. Her hands are casually grasping the rifle. Her fingernails are short and neatly manicured, albeit without polish. Her face is in profile. She is

looking up at someone, maybe a commanding officer. If you did not know her, you would think she is listening at attention. She is actually about to laugh.

“There weren’t a lot of women around,” she said, when I asked about the photo, “So reporters kept taking pictures of us. It was annoying to be honest.”

Patty did not dwell on being a woman Marine. It was rare enough in 1983 when she signed up, and ten years on, to be a woman of rank in the Somalian capital was unheard of.

Even at Fort Miley, she is the only female patient in the psych ward.

“Did you see that report the Pentagon put out?” I ask her.

“Nope,” she replies, “What’d it say?”

“It says sexual assault in the military is off the charts.”

“That’s not new,” she says, “Those girls are just reporting it now.”

She was inspecting her fingernails, still in good shape after a week of electroshock therapy.

“Shit, when I went in, if you were a WM, you knew you were gonna get messed with at some point. You just accepted it.”

I stop short of asking her if she is one of those messed-with WMs. I am unsure if I want to know, unlike my roommate Josh in 1993, who would not be sated until he had every detail.

“Where’d you drive the Humvee?” he asked her.

“Between bases,” Patty said, rattling the ice in her glass. Sitting on that low futon, the boyfriend looked twice her size, like a bodyguard she kept around for conversation more than protection. It struck me that my big sister, despite her towering personality, was actually petite.

“What was Mogadishu like?” asked Josh.

“It was a trip,” she told him, “Mostly I took officers to other bases. America was in charge and so we had to coordinate with the other countries.”

“Was it scary?” he asked.

“Sometimes,” she said, “ But mostly it was sad. There were these gangs of little kids. Like nine or ten years old. They’d run right in front of the convoy. They figured out that we wouldn’t run them over. We could fire into the air, but they figured that out too. Gunshots didn’t phase them anymore. They’d ambush you and crawl all over your vehicle. One time one of them came right up and snatched my sunglasses off my face. Poor fuckers.”

Those last two words seemed to remind her how tired she was. Her gaze wandered over the textbooks and computer in Josh’s otherwise empty room as she slowly crunched an ice cube.

“What were the other bases like?” Josh asked.

“All sorta the same,” she shrugged, “Just different uniforms. But I liked the French. They had better food and they were always trying to feed you. They like women.”

At that I thought how all her life my sister had been surrounded by men—boyfriends and chauffeurs, French foot soldiers, pedophiles—all of whom I think wanted her more on account of her apparent disinterest, while she, for her part, was just looking for an equal. Or maybe just a guy who knew how to fucking drive.

“Did you see anything hardcore?” Josh asked.

“Do you need another drink?” I asked.

“I think maybe that’s enough,” the boyfriend said.

“Why?” Patty said, without looking at him, “I ain’t driving.” She handed me her glass and turned to Josh.

“They got these things called rules of engagement,” she said to him, “Like, when I said we could only fire in the air. That’s an American rule. But other countries have their own rules. We’re all supposed to be the UN, but that’s not how it works. Like the French, I was at their base one day and this Somalian kid comes walking out of nowhere and he’s heading right for their entry gates, but the French don’t fuck around. They have a one-hundred-meters rule.”

“What does that mean?” asked Josh.

“That means you have to identify yourself before you move ahead. If you get closer than one hundred meters and don’t identify, they shoot your ass.”

“Shit,” said Josh.

“So this kid,” Patty continued, “is just a kid. He’s real skinny and he’s wearing old clothes, and you can see he’s not armed, probably just looking for food. He’s like twelve. And these knuckleheads I’m with, they get on the speaker and start yelling at him in French, and the kid keeps coming, and I start fighting with them and I try to get the horn off them, ‘cause I’m like, look, he doesn’t speak French, gimme the horn and I’ll talk to him in English, but their rules are their rules, it’s not like the U.S., and I don’t have any rank there, and the next thing I know, pop.”

“Pop what?” asked Josh.

“Pop they shot him,” said Patty, “He came within a hundred meters. Only took one shot. The guy was a sharpshooter. Had his rifle trained on him the whole time and the kid was moving slow. Probably just looking for food. But that’s their rules.”

Josh and I sat silent for a moment, imagining the emaciated black body, barely pubescent, falling forward in the dirt.

“I stopped going to their base after that,” Patty said.

When my sister left, Josh gave her a hug goodbye, which I knew was appropriate but still found unsettling. Hugging was something we never mastered. I nodded to her as she headed down the stairs. My big sister saluted me in kind.

“I saw your kids on Saturday,” I tell her back at Fort Miley.

“Yeah? How are they?” she asks.

“Johnny’s good. He likes it at Eileen’s,” I say.

“Yeah? What about Ava?” she asks.

“Fine, I guess. How can you tell how babies feel?” I ask.

Patty shrugs.

My sister is not at Fort Miley against her will. She checked herself in seven days earlier, admitting to thoughts of a suicidal and infanticidal nature. Her treating psychologist said she was most likely suffering from postpartum depression, though I suspect her condition might also have to do with the death of our father four years earlier. Patty was attached to him in a way that Eileen and Paul and I never understood. He was in his late sixties when, after three suicide attempts in as many years, he finally landed himself unresponsive in the ICU at the VA hospital in La Jolla, California, where we made the decision to unplug him.

His doctor led us into a beige conference room to have the talk. After he explained our father's condition and asked what we wanted to do, Eileen and Paul and I looked to Patty. She looked right back, and her expression clearly said, *Please, for once, pretend to care. Please don't make me kill him by myself.*

So we went around the table with reasons why our father's life was no longer worth living.

Eileen said: "He loved football, and now he can't watch football."

Paul said: "He was really into the Catholic thing, and now he can't go to church."

I went last and said: "Well, he swam every day and that's all done."

When the Filipina nurse switched off the monitors that were chirping loudly in response to our father's dropping vitals, Patty was the only person crying, sobbing in fact. Paul stood with his arms folded over his chest, looking on intently. Eileen was panicky, wanting to comfort our sister, but unsure of how to go about it.

And I was fascinated. I had never seen a human being die, and my father, even in his sixties, and despite his mental instability, had stayed physically robust. As life left him, he just looked like he was sleeping. He even started to snore. When he drew his last breath, Eileen and Paul and I looked expectantly to Patty, who turned away from us and hugged the nurse.

Back at Fort Miley, my sister yawns.

“Ok, sis. I better head out,” I say.

“Alright then, homeboy,” she says.

We walk back to the nurse’s station where Nurse Carol has returned to her post.

“What’s up, Sgt. O’Rourke?” she says to my sister, “Who’s this handsome man?”

Patty’s face lights up. For a second I see that twelve-year-old girl before she was abandoned on El Camino and forced to hitchhike home.

“This is my little bro,” she says, smiling, “He’s the smart one in the family. We call him the Professor.”

“Well how about that?” says Nurse Carol, “Now you know you’re not supposed to have the Professor or any other visitor in your room.”

“No shit?” says Patty, feigning shock.

“And visiting hours ended about ten minutes ago.”

“I’m sorry, Carol,” Patty says with sincerity, “Could you buzz my brother out?”

“You betcha, Sgt. O’Rourke.”

I do admire her, my Marine sister, despite her intransigence when her mind is made up, something that—as the years go on—I recognize in myself. She

sees clearly when her demons become a danger to herself and to those she loves. And unlike our hapless father, she does everything in her power to dispatch with them. I do not know how to tell her any of this.

At the exit I give her a hug that does not last one second too long.

"I'll come by again soon," I tell her.

"Come by whenever," Patty says, pointing to the spots on her head where earlier that day the electrodes were attached, "I won't remember anyway."