

PROLOGUE

CRIP'S WORLD

There's this painting. A very famous painting. My mother, not exactly an Art History major at Vassar, saw it in a magazine while she was getting her hair done at Delores Antonelli's unlicensed basement hair salon. She tore out the page—probably coughed while she did it so as not to alert any of the neighbor ladies to her thievery—and brought it home. She taped it to the corner of her dressing table mirror and it became her golden calf, the symbol of everything beautiful that she didn't have.

The guy who painted it was born in a town about an hour from Chester called Chadds Ford. The painter's father was a painter, as was his father before him. They're painters from way back. The Wyeths. Landscapes, portraits. Nice, horsey stuff to go along with their nice, horsey money. I learned about them at college, a fact I never mentioned to my mother because she would have let me know I was putting on airs and who the hell did I think I was anyway.

This painting, the one my mother loves so much, depicts what, at first glance, is a young woman sitting on a hillside. The wind is lifting her hair, her legs stretch out behind her, and she seems to be caught in a moment of frozen desire. She clings to the tall grass as if the earth were spinning too quickly beneath her and reaches for a white frame house set atop a hill. Her face is hidden, and the hill and house rise in the distance.

I can't, in all good faith, disagree with my mom. It's a really nice painting.

Except it's a lie. The woman in the painting isn't longing or desiring or anything fancy like that. She was a local shut-in who lived alone in that little frame house on top of that hill. She was paralyzed from the waist down and got around by dragging herself wherever she needed

to go. Just drag, drag, drag. She was digging her arms into the dirt, yanking, lurching, and doing it over and over again until she dragged her dead weight all the way home. Once there, she'd lugged herself around some more—from the sofa, to the table, to the stove, to the bathroom, and on and on and on. You couldn't see her hands in the painting. I bet they were pretty nasty. Maybe she couldn't afford a wheelchair. But if I were her and some famous rich guy wanted to paint my picture, I'd make sure as hell I got at least a motorized scooter in the bargain.

And that's the other thing. He *did* paint her face. A full-on portrait in fact. And she looked like someone hit her with a cast-iron frying pan. I'm not trying to be mean, but this woman was unattractive by anyone's standard. But no one rips *that* painting out of a magazine and sticks it on their dressing table mirror, do they? Nobody wants the truth.

So, there you have it, a paraplegic with a face like a naked mole rat pulling herself around rural Pennsylvania on her hands and elbows. Maybe the painter did it on purpose, just to fool people like my mother who want so much to believe in something tender and romantic. When really, it's just about something broken.

FROZEN

Someone was dead. I knew it. Otherwise, why was the phone ringing at 5:38 on a Saturday morning? A phone call before 7 a.m. meant someone was dead. Everybody knows that. At least everyone in my family does.

My eyes were gluey and dry. I'd forgotten to remove my contacts before passing out the night before. Everything in the room—bed, walls, dresser, mirror, the cranky, mopey oak just outside my bedroom window—undulated towards me, floating away and flooding in again like a thick liquid. My stomach lurched and I shuddered as my feet hit the cold floor. How could the floor be so cold in the middle of May? *Because Wisconsin is a Siberian hellscape!!!* Patrick said it at once a day between November and April. Sure, he was exaggerating. But not by much.

I sprinted into the living room and saw him lying there, sprawled on the puke-green couch we'd christened Jabba the Hut. He was still dressed in his Friday night best—at least from the waist up as far as I could see—my pale pink comforter swaddling his muscled frame. Looked like it had been a long night out with the boys. And yet he still managed, somehow, to look chronically fabulous.

He didn't budge as I grabbed the receiver and choked out a gravelly "Hello?"

I knew instantly. From the sound of the breathing. My mother.

She always spent the first few seconds of any phone call sounding like she'd just run the anchor leg of the Olympic 4 x 100 meter relay. How she produced this aerobic effect was never clear to me, but it lent a whiff of urgency to each word she uttered.

"Angela," she said.

It could have been a question, or it could have been a command. I never really knew with my Mom so I just waited obediently for instructions.

The tight, insistent timbre of her voice cut through my nausea.

“He’s gone,” she said.

“What? What are you—?”

She cut me off, making that *hhhhutttttt* sound that had always stopped me cold. She sounded like a quarterback hiking the football or a Sumo wrestler entering the dohyō.

“I don’t need any drama right now, Angela. Do you hear me?”

“I’m sorry, I—but you said he’s gone and I don’t know—”

Another Sumo burst, louder this time. I shrank into the sheet that I’d dragged with me from bed, pulling it tightly around my body, flattening my breasts into barely discernible lumps.

“Your father, Angela. He’s in the hospital.”

What hospital? Why was he in the hospital? Questions raced through my head but nothing came out my mouth. My eyelids struggled to slide over the crust in my eyes and my teeth smashed together as I chided myself to not wailing or shouting or whatever it was a grown-ass adult was supposed to do. I froze--my default—and hated myself for it.

Then a tiny sliver of my brain ignited.

“Wait. You said he’s gone, but you said in the hospital, what—?”

“He gone. Dead. In the hospital. All of it. The full catastrophe. We lost him.”

Lose Phil Zachinski? How is that even possible? Like losing the Alps. Or a Cadillac. Or your front steps. You don’t just lose these things.

“Jesus Christ what--?!”

“Please Angela, I do *not* want to hear that gutter mouth of yours. It’s like women smoking in public. I can’t bear it.”

My mind flashed to Joan Crawford as *Mildred Pierce*, alone at a seaside bar after killing her ex, the light and shadow telling the story of what happens when a woman goes hard.

“But you said he-“

“They thought they got it all. Obviously, they were incorrect.”

“You *told* me-”

“Don’t take that tone with me. That’s what they said. But you never know really, do you? The family’s always the last to find out.”

She sighed a wounded sigh.

“He turned yellow. Like a lemon, Angela,” she sputtered.

Later, after the funeral, Mom showed me a picture a nurse had taken of the two of them. The tumor had spread, blocking a bile duct, turning his eyes and skin yellow. She wasn’t lying. He really did look like a Meyer lemon wrapped in a blue sear sucker robe. *It’s the last picture of him*, she would say, pressing it into my hand. At that moment I knew what it must have felt like to receive a pox-infested blanket from one of the passengers on the Mayflower. You wanna act all polite and grateful, but you know in your gut that it’s poison.

“Angela?”

“Yeah...I’m...I’m here.”

“Well, don’t sound so surprised, dear. We all knew this was coming.”

“Um, yeah. I mean, I know but--“

“Sooner or later, we all knew. Just so happened it was sooner”

I heard the corners of her mouth turn straight down in disapproval. Was there a wrong way to learn that your father had died? Cuz clearly that's where I was landing.

"I know, but things seemed—"

Exasperation seeped into my mother's voice.

"Things can seem however you want them to seem, Angela. If wishes were horses. But that doesn't change the facts. This is how life happens to you, dear."

She paused a second, then added, "No doubt, I'm not far behind."

Mom always said that when a family member died, like God was playing Whac-A-Mole and she'd gracefully accepted her soon-to-be fateful encounter with the big black mallet. I'd heard it enough times to know my cue—*Oh, no Mom, not you, not for years*—but couldn't muster the strength. Something in my chest was whirring uselessly, like a rocket trying to take off from a launchpad already engulfed in flames.

"Well, we *did* know, Angela."

I swallowed hard, trying to loosen whatever was biting at the back of my throat. I didn't want this. Any of it. I didn't want my mother sighing on the other end of the line. I didn't want my father in some hospital morgue drawer, shoved away like something rotting and forgotten. I wanted to be back in my bed, feeling my skin still raw and alive from the woman I'd fucked just hours before. I wanted what every daughter who failed to be the daughter she was supposed to be wanted—to be left alone, to not be eaten alive, to escape the desperate feeling of always belonging to some else. I wanted the edges of my desire to be the only thing that needed tending. I wanted out.

"Hello? Angela!! Are you there?!"

“Sorry, Mom, sorry. Yeah, I’m here. I’m here.”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“I’m sorry I--.”

“Honestly, Angela, where’s your head?”

I didn’t have any answer for that.

“I asked you when you could get here?”

“Let me call work and check on my vacation days—“

“Again with the loonies?”

Loonies was Mom’s name for patients I cared for at Great Lakes Area Mental Hospital. To her, mental illness was an indication of weak character and performative self-pity. She had little patience for, as she put it, “that kind of behavior.” Whenever I mentioned work my mom would spit and hiss like an old radiator. I didn’t share her views on mental health, but I knew better than to say that out loud. My mother didn’t take well to disagreement, especially from her daughters.

The patients at “GLAM”—as it was affectionately coined by the locals—liked me and I liked the work. I related more easily to them than I did to most people, and after dropping out of grad school it didn’t seem like such a bad gig. I was a glorified babysitter—checking hourly vitals, convincing the schizophrenic patients their broccoli wasn’t talking to them, and running fast when someone got hold of a sharp and threatened to cut themselves. On my occasional Saturday morning shift I got to referee throwdowns over what we’d watch on the TV in the day room. It was often a battle royale between *Pee Wee’s Playhouse* or *Soul Train*. *Soul Train* usually prevailed, a fact for which I was consistently grateful. And was it really *so* outlandish to

imagine that an unsolicited cruciferous vegetable was trying to have a word with you? I was in no place to judge these folks. God knows I'd seen weirder things at my family's dinner table.

My job at the GLAM also allowed me the one thing I craved most—a semi-permanent holding pattern. If nothing was happening then nothing was happening. What's a girl to do? My life was one big forlorn shrug, a fact I'd grown used to and found surprisingly soothing.

"I'm pretty sure I have some time coming," I said, knowing I'd want to confer with Patrick on all the details first.

"Well, Angela. Call me when you know."

"Yeah, OK. I mean, it's a lot. I don't know what to—"

"No Angela it's not a lot. It's a part of life. Something you'll realize if you ever decide to grow up, quit that job and—"

"Did'ya call Mary?" I interjected, not wanting to hear the end of that sentence.

"Of course not. I didn't want to upset Lizzie. What little girl wants to hear that her grandfather has passed away? I called you first."

Lucky me. Even though Mary was the older sister and lived just five doors down, I'd always commanded my mother's most persistent attentions. I was her favorite, but not in a good way. It didn't feel like love exactly, but that's what she called it and I wasn't about to argue. Her obvious preferences were confusing, like an itch I couldn't scratch. I asked her about it once, in the forthright way only a four-year-old can. We were shopping for a new pair of summer shoes in Spears Department Store in downtown Chester, surrounded by boxes of white and navy blue Keds, the only colors my mother would tolerate.

I just came out and asked her.

“Why do you love me more than Mary? Cuz you can get her new Keds instead of me. I don’t mind.”

My Mom’s face froze for a second and her lips began to form a note of protest. Then, as if realizing some lies are just too big, she said, “Because you’re smarter and prettier. And don’t ever ask me that again.” When we were older and I was finally gone, I confessed the exchange to Mary one night after too much tequila. I felt I’d betrayed her somehow. With my new navy blue Keds.

“Don’t be stupid, Ang,” Mary said, “I couldn’t handle being her emotional crash test dummy, not if you paid me. I was such a disappointment that she mostly left me alone. You, I’m sorry to say, got the short end of that stick.”

But now I wasn’t four and I wasn’t sitting on the floor in the shoe department of Spears. I was twenty-nine, listening to my mother breathing into the phone and to myself breathing back, sinking into what felt not so much like loss—though I knew that would come—but an oppressive uselessness, unable to come up with a plan, a response, or even a way to be. If my choices were fight, flight or freeze I was all in on door number three. My body floated above me, even though I stared down and saw my feet planted squarely on the floor. I wasn’t even sure how my body still existed in a world without my father. Not because I loved him so much. I didn’t. And not because I hated him. I didn’t feel that either. But because he was what I knew, he was certain. A declarative statement, a stop sign, a fact not up for debate.

“So, there you have it,” Mom said, punctuating the sentence with a heavy sigh.

“There you have it,” she repeated, “Your father is dead, and, honestly, I don’t know *where* to start.”

I stood there, one long unfinished, sentence, and reached down and pulled a stray thread from my top sheet toga. A corner of fabric began to unravel, and I imagined what it would feel like to keep pulling until everything was gone. I know Mom was trying to sound sad, but more than anything she sounded annoyed by the long to-do list that her husband's death presented. I tried not to think about whether I liked my mother. It was like asking a soldier if he liked war. There's no like or dislike. There's only survival.

“Let me talk to work. I'll call later, OK?”

“Do that Angela. And remember, this isn't about you.”

She hung up before I had a chance to respond. I stood there, my hand still cradling the receiver, when Patrick burst from his pink cocoon.

“Who called? Jesus, Mary and fucking Joseph, what the *fuck*? Has no one heard of manners?”

Though he'd not endured the years of Catholic school that I had, Patrick's Irish Catholic mother had clearly influenced his language.

His muscles flexed as he teetered into an upright sitting position. That was no small feat, as Patrick was a wall of a man, with a chest and arms that looked to be carved from marble. He had a sensuously narrow waist, thighs like sides of beef and, on top of all that lean, hard sinew was the most exquisite skin I'd ever seen. When we first met I asked him his secret. *Ivory Soap, twice a day*, he said. *And I NEVER leave the house without lotion. White folks can get away with it, but you can't just walk around with chalky-ass skin when you're Black. Folks'll think you're trash. That's what my Daddy taught me.*

“Calm down, sweetie,” I said, “It's ok.”

His muscles slackened and he exhaled.

I dragged myself over to the couch and jammed my butt down beside him, displacing his sculpted left shoulder and nestling into the couch's cushions. I loved that couch and took in its smell—a combination of licorice, cherry pipe tobacco and that Calvin Klein cologne that was big in '83. Patrick and I rescued it from a dumpster when we first arrived in Madison seven years before and it was our home base, our mothership. Sitting on that couch with him was as close as I'd ever come to feeling truly safe.

“So who was it?”

“I don't want to talk about it,” I mumbled.

“Yeah. That's not happenin'. Tell me.”

“My mom.”

Patrick's eyes widened.

“Fuck Ang,” he said, looking at me with basset hound eyes, “who died?”

Patrick didn't wait for an answer, he just wound his arms around me and crushed me with a hug. Feeling his skin, his strength and the history we shared released something frozen inside of me and I let it come. And Patrick—because he was Patrick—just sat quietly and just let me do it.

“Short sequoia,” I said, using Patrick's nickname for my Dad.

“On no, what? I thought he was—”

“So did I. But I guess he wasn't.”

“Jesus”

He paused, running his hand along the length of my arm.

“This is gonna be a fucking nightmare. You know that, right?” he said.

I nodded in the affirmative, wiping the snot from my nose with an edge of the top sheet.

“It’s OK princess.” Only Patrick could pull that name off without irony. I’d never been a princess but somehow, with him, it worked.

“We’ll deal,” he said.

“I just—.”

“Remember, your mom loves me. I’m the queen of misdirection. She won’t even notice you. I’ll pull rabbits out of hats. I’m a class A buffer.”

His eyes took in the length of my crumpled body as I finally gave myself over to muffled sobs.

“Why do you look like Plato?” he asked.

“Oh, I was with—”

I motioned towards the bedroom vaguely.

“She’s still here? I woulda thought—”

“I must have crashed hard. You know I never let them stay if I can help it.”

“Do you need—?”

“I’ll handle it.”

I padded down the hall back to my bedroom and stood in the doorway, my vision still blurry, forcing my eyes to focus on the first thing I could discern. It was a woman’s arm, soft and pink, like the inside of a conch shell. The sheets rose and fell as she snored quietly, almost delicately. When I realized I was matching my breath with hers I immediately stopped. I didn’t want to welcome any complications.

What was her name? Not that it mattered. But women had expectations. Like expecting you to remember their name.

As her arm came into focus I saw the angel in a grass hula skirt tattooed on her left shoulder. Jesus. Was there anyone left on earth who *didn't* have a goddamn tattoo? I stared back at the angel—a voluptuous, dark-haired siren with ample hips that seemed to sway languorously back and forth to the tune of *Tiny Bubbles*. The hula angel was strumming a ukulele. I circled round the bed and checked her other arm. Yup. A devil, equally zaftig, in the same grass skirt get up.

Sally. Maybe that was it. Or Stephanie. It could be Skyler. Christ, *Skyler*. Who thinks up these names? Super white people were so goddamn weird. Yeah. It was definitely something WASPY. I was sure about that.

I loathe to tangle with even a cartoon devil—once a Catholic, always a Catholic—so I returned to the other side of the bed and poked a finger into the Angel's belly.

“Hey. Wake up,” I said.

Hula WASP didn't budge. She was some sleeper, this one.

Just then she startled me with a moan, followed by a snort snore, and finished up with then an incoherent grunt as she flipped onto her back like a spent puppy. Her straight, blond hair followed as she turned, tapping out a sound on the pillow like raindrops skittering across a tin roof. A few stray strands lingered across her face. Her breath blew them away, then drew them in again. I loved looking at women, touching, smelling and tasting them. But when I opened my mouth and started talking things went always went sideways. So, for a moment, I just let myself stare.

But then the moment was over. I wanted her gone. No muss, no fuss, no explanations. Just gone. I didn't need to explain to her what had just happened. She was just someone I fucked. Someone I'd never see again. Someone who could never understand how impossible it was that he was dead.

I rubbed my eyes hard and felt the pain in my throat flood back, twice as sharp as before. I tried again to swallow it away, but it sank into my center and held there, boring through me like high-speed, steel drill.

Was he really, *actually*, dead-as-a-doornail dead?

Dad was no stranger to death. He'd lost a sister to rheumatic fever and a brother to gangrene. My uncle—defying his mother and sneaking out to play in his good Sunday clothes—fell and cut his leg on a playground see-saw. Afraid of my Grandma's legendary wrath he hid the wound until it was too late.

"He didn't die from gangrene," Dad explained, "He died cuz he was scared of your fuckin' grandma."

Dad knew how to handle death, how to invite it in, shoot the shit, make nice. But he also careful to never, *ever* turn his back on it. Did he slip up, let down his guard? What would he have told me in those last moments, what would he have revealed, what doors could he have opened or shut? He was so bad at lying. And even worse at telling the truth. I tried to imagine the thoughts in his head.

I poked at Hula WASP again, harder this time, and finally she opened her eyes. I didn't give her a chance to argue as I hustled her out the door. She'd buttoned her blouse wrong, but I assumed she'd figure it out before she got to her desk. As she left she slipped me a business

card. I pressed my ear up against the heavy oak door like a spy, listening to her footsteps fall on the steps, down one flight and then another until the front door shut slammed shut. I shuffled back to the bedroom and collapsed face down on the bed. I could still smell her—salt and some kind of fancy flower . I breathed it in, turning my head to the window. The sky was cold and quiet in a way that only a Midwestern sky can be. Crows sat in twos and threes, scolding each other from their respective branches. The stillness of Wisconsin mornings still amazed me, the way they lingered all through the day.

I tried to force myself to imagine my father dead, but my mind resisted. He was relentlessly present, like a song playing in my head over and over. I rolled over and opened my hand. Hula WASP's business card was crumpled inside. *Sidney Buchanan, Junior Research Analyst, Butcher & Singer*. Sidney, *that* was it! On the back, in the neatest script I'd ever seen, was a note. *Call me, 567-6694. Sidney*. I guess stock analysts were getting tattoos these days. Rich white folks never ceased to amaze me. I tore the card into tiny pieces with meticulous precision and threw them into the air. They rained down on my face like snow.

THE VOICE OF GOD

The first time it happened I was six years old.

The phone thing I mean.

I couldn't even remember who'd died but the phone rang in the same angry, insistent way then too. My mother didn't even have breakfast on the table, so it must have been the ass crack of dawn. Whatever Mom was cooking—eggs and scrapple, oatmeal, potato pancakes under a blanket of sour cream— was hot and ready by 7:30 a.m. Sharp. My father expected nothing less. He said the Zachinskis were like an army, travelling best on a full stomach.

My belly was definitely empty when that shrill bell cut through the moist morning air. My parents had never bothered to upgrade to the soft, chirping ringtones that were all the rage in the late 1970s. Change was not something they readily embraced, whether it was out of pure stubbornness or practical thrift. Instead, they stuck with the same sinister black, wall-mounted rotary behemoth that looked to have been installed during the Harding administration and sounded like a prison alarm. When the phone rang that morning, the whole house rang right along with it. My sister and I laid in our twin beds and held our collective breath, unwilling to even imagine picking up the receiver and becoming the unfortunate harbinger of death.

Not Dad though. He took it upon himself to alert us, using our rowhouse's ductwork as a kind of poor man's intercom. By the fifth ring, he threw open the bathroom door, bent down—thick, white bath towel around his waist and a mask of white cream covering half his face—and screamed into the heat register, "Someone pick up the goddamn phone and find out

who's dead for fuck's sake!" His baritone boomed and rattled, its echo hanging in the air. It was years before I could imagine the voice of God sounding like anything else.

In stillness my father might have been short sequoia, but in motion he had the efficiency and functional elegance of a WW II Howitzer. It wasn't pretty, but it sure got the job done. Intent on a given task, Dad would hunch into a haunted convict posture as if worried that something sinister might sneak up on him from behind. Readiness was in every muscle, every glance and twitch. His salt-and-pepper hair was streaked with red that was only visible when he stood in the sunlight, a remnant of his father and his father's father. Once, he tried to grow a mustache and it emerged from his lip a deep, shocking ginger red. His lips were thin and disappeared into his mouth like he was trying to keep a secret. His chin, while not weak, could have been stronger and his nose was an elongated question mark emerging between sad and angry eyes. They sweetened a little when he laughed, but just a little. His gut was soft, though not big, and his shoulders and arms were knots of sinew and protruding bone. The overall effect was soft and rocklike, gnarled and smooth.

He was a kind of beautiful mess.

"I can't believe Short Sequoia is gone," Patrick said.

"Can you book the flight? I'll give you my credit card. You meet me at the Army Navy in an hour?"

"Army Navy?"

"My Dad's dead. I need a grenade."

"Fuck."

"Fuck indeed."

“You OK?”

“Please,” I said.

“I won’t even ask. See you there.”

“By the way. What did you—or rather—who did you do last night? Please tell me it wasn’t Frodo.” I said.

Frodo was my nickname for Todd, a nasty little queen that Patrick has been consorting with on and off.

“He may live under a bridge, but he has a very talented mouth. Poor thing won’t be walking right for days.”

“Thanks for the details.”

“You asked.”

Patrick picked up Todd at the AA meeting sponsored by the Gay and Lesbian Center. Although he enjoyed a fair bit of recreational drug use, Patrick wasn’t an addict. He did occasionally attend meetings though, just to see if anything new, good looking, or wealthy was cycling through the system.

I dragged myself to the bathroom, showered until my skin turned red, and dressed in my softest 501s with my lavender Fat Albert Mush Mouth t-shirt.

I reached the bus stop just as the #36 was pulling away from the curb. In Wisconsin, public services were delivered with a cruel, Germanic efficiency that favored the strong and uncomplaining. I’d seen buses pull away from old folks with walkers even as they hobbled and clanked and scraped the concrete with their tennis ball-shod contraptions to desperately to catch

up. I spent the next 18 minutes stamping my feet and watching a young mother with pink leg warmers and dead eyes push her infant up and down the street.

When I arrived at the Army Navy, Patrick was already there, scrutinizing a grenade that he held gingerly at arm's length between his thumb and forefinger.