

1 **Flickering Light**
2 **Mishpacha**
3 **Daniel Silverman**

4

5 Although we were recent arrivals to this land of trees and lakes—only a generation since our
6 grandparents sailed across from the Pale to the New York Harbor—evidence of its ancient
7 history was all around us. Thousands upon thousands of years ago, glaciers arrived from the
8 north. They left in their retreat the sedimentary sheepbacks that burst through our wooded
9 hillsides. They colluded with the water to pulverize into gloriously silky sand the deposits that
10 are now our beaches. They left billions of stones strewn through the earth that we dig into
11 when we bury our dead, the awful thud as the rocky soil slips from our shovels and lands on the
12 pine caskets below. That thud, its permanence, its anechoic finality, is the last sound we hear
13 emanating, however indirectly, from our loved ones. We buried my dad in the bitter January of
14 1996, a sudden death. A blizzard had hit that morning, and snow and ice were everywhere, but
15 people came. They came to the shul and they came to the graveside, and they came up to the
16 house for the start of the shiva, the seven-day candle on the dining room sideboard already
17 having begun its burn. I'd arrived the night before on a flight from the west coast, my mom
18 silently hugging me as I came in the door, my brother and aunt and uncle sitting at the kitchen
19 table, stricken. I joined them as my mom heated up a slice of leftover meat loaf for me, and
20 soon after, we said goodnight, and I went into my old bedroom for sleep. And I thought back,
21 and I thought back.

22 Even before we'd get to the shore, you could feel it. The land was flatter, the trees were
23 scrubbier, and the sand—by the curb, and even in people's front yards—lay in wispy patches.
24 We'd usually arrive by mid-morning at my grandparents', just as the sun was approaching its
25 fiercest, and within minutes of our hugs and kisses, I'd have changed into my bathing suit and
26 be noodging my mom to cross Ocean Avenue for the beach and the waves.

27 My grandparents were sometimes ready to join us there, but other times, they'd stay back
28 at the apartment, their spacious two-bedroom on the third floor of a tan brick building with its
29 pair of majestic concrete lions flanking the entrance. Grandma might be in the kitchen preparing
30 a lunch of tuna salad or egg noodles with cottage cheese in her thin summer housecoat,
31 Grandpa maybe watching the game in the den. With its hot and sunny views of the surf, their
32 apartment only had window fans, except in the kitchen where they had a big floor model that
33 both intrigued me and scared me with its impossibly fast moving blade and its loud low rumble,
34 and so temperatures—and tempers—would soar. Since his stroke—we'd been there when he
35 came home from the hospital crying as he walked in the door—my grandfather, a slight and
36 quiet man with wavy white hair and horn rims, had become even more subdued, and even
37 more put-upon by my grandmother. And there'd be fights: my grandmother nagging and
38 ridiculing, my grandfather acquiescing, though with the occasional justified outburst that sadly
39 lacked intensity, lacked conviction. He was old and tired and she was vivacious and demanding,
40 but I didn't understand the dynamic at all back then; I just hated the anger, and it flared every
41 single time. Yes, Bradley Beach was a crazy mix of magical summer fun and scary yelling and
42 screaming, and the biggest yeller and screamer of all was my dad, fuming, outraged, seething at

43 my grandmother's selfishness, her bullying his dad. His anger brewed not only while we were
44 there for our visits, but even a few days before, like a burning aura, simmering, welling, and
45 seizing hold of him. That floor fan, its roar and its rumble, its deadly blade splicing the summer
46 heat into pulsing bits: that was my father down at the shore.

47 But oh, the Second Avenue beach! I'd ride the waves the bigger and more violent the better,
48 or sit at the water's edge lost in a fugue as the silt sluiced and eddied over my legs, or I'd bravely
49 hazard across the burning beach to "The San-Bar" for an ice cream, or venture over to the
50 fearsome black jetty with its menacing boulders, its seaweed, its clinging mussels, its fishy salty
51 stink. My big brother and I would inevitably head up the boards to the main penny arcade for
52 some pinball, a dime a game (the older machines a nickel)—Seven Up, Jive Time, Mibs, Miss-O
53 —or skeeball, whose wonderful wooden balls, mottled and worn from their years of use, I
54 always dreamed of stealing but never figured out how to. In his last years, my grandfather
55 worked at the other boardwalk arcade—the "little arcade" we called it, a bit north, towards
56 Ocean Grove—and would sometimes use his slender metal passkey to give me a free game or
57 two, and he'd cackle in his dry and wheezy way.

58 Come dusk, the family would walk the boards through Methodist Ocean Grove with its
59 immense wooden church dominating the streets of unspoiled Victorian splendor; my father
60 would bitterly grouse about its flouting the constitution because it closed its streets to traffic on
61 Sundays. We had so little money; we might eat at one of the town's hotel cafeterias, broiled
62 fish, macaroni and cheese, boiled vegetables, chocolate pudding, and then we'd pass through
63 the gates of heaven at the whitewashed North End Hotel into Asbury. For me, this was not a
64 casual stroll, not by a long shot. Even the *name* "Asbury" filled me with wonder and excitement;
65 it even *sounded* like a magical land of sugar and flashing lights, Kohr's Custard surfing down my
66 gullet, Criterion salt water taffy sticking in my teeth, the bizarre and jagged splendor of the
67 circular Howard Johnson's building, the little kiosk housing "Portraits by Zad" (whoever Zad was).
68 And the rides, the rides! We'd enter Palace Amusements with its too-scary-to-contemplate fun
69 house, its merry-go-round with the brass rings (*these* I stole), and its Ferris wheel that started
70 indoors and then rose through an opening in the roof to the night sky, each car bearing the
71 name of a Jersey town (Edison, Tom's River, Elizabeth...). And above it all, the giant face of Tillie
72 —Asbury's Howdy Doody-meets-Alfred E. Neuman unofficial mascot—loomed like a creepily
73 beatific cartoon Buddha. We'd walk the incredibly wide zig-zag-slatted boardwalk, passing
74 through wafts of fried fish, of cotton candy, of roasted nuts. I'd gaze upward as the boardwalk
75 entered the echoic and ever-damp interior of The Casino and its bumper cars and its
76 amusements, through the Convention Hall where big kids like maybe even my brother would go
77 to concerts in the evenings (Jefferson Airplane, Grand Funk). Especially, my brother and I loved
78 to ride the Toboggan, its perfectly vertical ascent through the interior of a yellow-painted metal
79 tube, the red track's swirl and swirl down and around its exterior.

80 Yes, this was the shore I remember. And these were my grandma and grandpa who moved
81 from Newark to their summer getaway in Bradley in the early sixties, even before the riots. They
82 raised their sons—my dad and his baby brother ten years his junior—in Weequahic, the row-
83 house neighborhood Roth described to perfection so many times. My dad's cousin and uncle
84 are featured in "Portnoy": my first cousin once-removed, a friend of Philip's brother Sandy, was

85 the one who created quite the neighborhood shanda when he briefly dated a shiksa in high
86 school, and his father, my great uncle, was the hobbyist who in his basement crafted the most
87 delicious flavored syrups for miles around.

88 Both good socialists, my grandparents nonetheless always voted Democrat, as they knew
89 that a vote for the Socialist candidate would be a gift to the Republicans, and I remember as a
90 kid thinking how wise of them that was, at least after my dad explained its rationale to me. My
91 grandfather was a union baker who worked all night and slept all day and so neither my father
92 nor his little brother had any real sense of closeness with him, if, indeed, closeness was even
93 possible: he was a simple and limited man with a ninth-grade education, and possessed of a
94 passive nature, a personality readily dominated by his self-indulgent and fun-loving wife. I loved
95 the way she laughed so easily, even at things I quickly came to know were just silly and
96 immature; the mere mention of “spotted dick” sent her into hysterics, her flabby arms jiggling
97 as I sat on her lap, losing myself in the folds of her fat as she petted my hair. Alas, it was she who
98 pressured my grandfather into leaving Silver’s Bakery in Newark with its famed seeded rye, and
99 to strike out on his own, only to lose his already threadbare shirt when their own bakery failed.
100 Oh the fights, so I was told.

101 It was a mystery how, out of this volatile and hardscrabble household—poor even by
102 Weequahic standards—my dad so readily and so quickly evolved into a genuinely intellectual
103 teenager who read Thomas Wolfe and John Steinbeck with such relish, who swooned at the
104 music of Prokofiev and Debussy, who became a veritable encyclopedia of the movies, who loved
105 drama and took to the stage when he went off to Rutgers. Presumably influenced by his more
106 affluent Weequahic High buddies, it turned out, no, that despite their easy ascent into the
107 professions as my dad was left behind, it was *he* who possessed the intellectual and cultural
108 heft, not they. They told me so. At his funeral.

109 And it was he, dealing with the yelling and the screaming of the selfish mother who insisted
110 on moving house every few years (Mapes Avenue, Renner Avenue...) and the often-invisible
111 father who was so under-realized, yes, he who raised his little brother with such care, who
112 passionately acquainted him with the arts, with the politics of human decency, and guided him
113 into the professions, again, even as he himself was left behind. And it was also he, upon their
114 meeting at Rutgers’ Hillel, who casually and without design charmed and delighted a
115 comfortably middle class girl from Paterson—whose father was a lawyer and a rabbi and a
116 cantor and far higher up the social ladder than his—to the degree that she pursued him until he
117 fell in love with her, and they got married.

118 Then, something changed. Something went quiet in him, slowed down in him, shortly after
119 his college years. It wasn’t the war. Though drafted fresh out of high school, he’d never seen
120 battle; he was only in Japan at the start of the occupation, as an office clerk (“Where other
121 soldiers retreated, we backspaced,” he would joke with us). But still, there was a change, a loss
122 of vitality, of ambition, and he began to put on the weight that plagued him for the remainder
123 of his life. It could have been the slow-building trauma of his troubled childhood home, but we
124 don’t know. Who knew back then? Those critical years of late adolescence—that dangerous
125 period when mental and emotional life begins to ossify, perhaps lurching one into a heretofore
126 alien state of sloth, of depression, and in the most tragic cases, of mental derangement, as

127 loved ones watch helpless—they take their unrelenting toll on so many young innocents. My
128 dad just slowed down, and whether it was depression or something else, we never knew,
129 because, as a very consequence of his change, he came to live an increasingly unexamined life:
130 although his little brother became a psychologist, my father never pursued the psychotherapy
131 he so needed.

132 After the birth of their first son, my parents moved up to the house where I was born. I
133 attended the local nursery school, down the hill and at the northern edge of our little town, a
134 stately house with a surrounding porch and three classrooms on its first floor, the spinster
135 school mistress living upstairs. A French woman would come during the morning period and
136 play with us in the small garden, sitting on the edge of the disused circular concrete planter,
137 knitting woolens while teaching us “Frère Jacques” and “I Got a Girl in Baltimore,” and we’d
138 chase chestnuts fallen to the ground. After lunch, we’d all be put down on cots for our nap, but I
139 wouldn’t sleep, and instead would bother the other kids, until the day I was unceremoniously
140 dispatched to the corner office, and still, all alone, I wouldn’t sleep.

141 One of the closets off the back classroom was filled with dress-up clothes. We all loved
142 poring through the mass of fabric in piles on its floor, extracting a cowboy outfit or a tuxedo
143 jacket to prance around in. I begged my dad to let me bring in his smoking jacket so that I could
144 wear it during dress-up. It was a gift from a boy he had befriended in Tokyo. He told me about
145 how the occupation army mistreated the civilian population so. Soldiers would drive their jeeps
146 up and down Tokyo’s narrow alleys forcing people to squeeze against the buildings as they
147 passed, and they’d take wooden batons, reach out from the jeep, and run them across the walls
148 in a clatter, laughing while hitting any innocent along the way. But my dad, he made friends. The
149 jacket was a satin of deep maroon, embroidered with flowers, and he let me take it to my
150 nursery school, and it never made it back into our house.

151 In those early days, as the leaves were bursting in reds and yellows, we’d take highway rides
152 to the mountains not twenty minutes north of home, and my dad would shoot stills and super-
153 8s of the hills and the lakes. On the way home he’d drive us past the “mothball fleet,” the old
154 ships from the war, still, after all that time, floating in a row along the river. The fleet is now long
155 gone, but still, to this day, come fall, I go up to the mountains, I take pictures, and I remember
156 those chilly autumn times, the anticipation of cider and pumpkin pie come late November.

157 Or he’d drive us down into Jersey, touring old Jewish Newark decimated by the riots, the
158 Weequahic Diner and its renowned cheesecake, his grandparents’ old house on Irving Avenue
159 where the whole clan would gather for festivities, for laughing and dancing and putting on
160 comedy skits, but also for pooling their meager resources to deliver our straggled family from
161 Europe’s genocidal clutches. Their efforts failed because President Roosevelt and his appointed
162 lackeys in the State Department forbade them passage, and our cousins were murdered along
163 with everyone else.

164 He told me the stories he’d heard of our relatives in the Ukraine. Jewish boys, he said, were
165 all conscripted into the Czar’s army, sometimes for life. Some of our uncles and cousins, in their
166 hopes to live as a normal a life a Jew *could* live in the “armpit of the world” as my dad called the
167 Pale of Settlement, chopped off their own right thumbs in order to avoid the draft.

168 And my dad would read to me. He'd sit me on his lap in the living room armchair and read to
169 me:

170
171 The fog comes
172 on little cat feet.

173
174 It sits looking
175 over harbor and city
176 on silent haunches
177 and then moves on.

178
179 And:

180
181 The golf links lie so near the mill
182 That almost every day
183 The laboring children can look out
184 And see the men at play.

185
186 And, "...Of the bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells, bells..." his pulsating recitation, like
187 davening, stirring in my head to this very day.

188 And I played him a song from a record that I loved to listen to over and over again, and he
189 was proud of me:

190
191 A robin sat on a cherry tree
192 Singing a song of chip-chip-chee
193 Along came a man with a dog and a gun
194 And shot the little robin just for fun

195
196 At least that's all the man did say
197 As on the ground the birdie lay
198 With a broken wing and a hole in its side
199 It fluttered and chirped and then it died

200
201 Oh I'd rather be a dog or a cat
202 Or the meanest kind of an old gray rat
203 Than to be the man with the dog and the gun
204 Who shot the little robin just for fun

205
206 He was especially fond of New York's holy Jewish trinity—Rodgers and Hart, Gershwin,
207 Bernstein—and of program music; Sibelius' landscapes, Ibert's seascapes, Holst's spacescapes.
208 This was the soundtrack of my childhood days. I listen to Kijé, and I hear my dad; I listen to The
209 Aquarium, and I hear my dad; I listen to El Salón México, and I hear my dad.

210 And he'd take us to the movies. Not just kiddie-fare and the comedies of Peter Sellers and
211 Mel Brooks and Woody Allen, but real adult dramas during that amazing period when the
212 American auteurs were coming into their heyday. At nine and ten years old I was watching
213 Kubrick, Scorsese, Lumet, and especially Altman, who dazzled my father with his film-craft, his
214 black humor, his cynicism. My mom might complain that his sound was confused and muddy,
215 that his camera wouldn't sit still, but my dad, impatiently but with right on his side, would insist
216 that that was exactly the point, that Altman was creating an immersive experience for his
217 viewers, the multi-tracked voices and roving camera plunging them into the messiness of
218 everyday life. I was thoroughly convinced by his assessment, and I remain so to this day; my
219 own lifelong adoration of Robert Altman is directly attributable to my dad. Indeed, I see many
220 parallels between Altman and my father: the integrity, the through-and-through honesty, and
221 especially, the agonizing intolerance of—and outright disgust toward—those who would be
222 disingenuous; I came to suffer from the same affliction.

223 But those early days of warmth and burgeoning intellectual fealty were sporadic, not
224 pervasive. He was often tired. He'd come home from work and eat dinner with the family and
225 then conk out on the living room couch reading *The New Yorker* or *The New York Review*. And
226 he was gruff, and he was argumentative.

227 As I grew, I came to realize that his was becoming a life unfulfilled. It was my grandmother
228 who, early on, cautioned him that he wasn't bright enough to go to law school. Cruel nonsense!
229 He could easily have been a lawyer for the ACLU, much as one of his closest Weequahic friends
230 had become. He could have continued to act on stage, at least in local theater, even after
231 settling into his suburban workaday life. He could have written on film, as a Rutgers buddy of his
232 had, critic for New York's old *Cue* magazine. He did not. Instead, he entered radio, working for
233 some of New York's pioneering FM outlets, RFM, QXR, BAI, first in programming, then, far less
234 glamorously, in sales. He lost his job at BAI when that station went listener-supported, and
235 jocularly declared himself guilt-free when never sending them money thereafter.

236 But he was bitter, no question, and I surely felt it, his bitterness, nearly every day of my
237 childhood. I'd be watching a sitcom on the TV, and he would come in, ridicule its broad and low-
238 brow humor, its canned laugh track, its cheap and flat lighting, and then walk out. I'd be in
239 absolute thrall at my Zionist summer day camp, and he'd fume at the ethnic particularism of it
240 all. I'd play baseball and basketball with my friends after school during the year and after camp
241 all summer long, and he'd make fun of the priorities of those who would value sports over
242 intellectual pursuits. He'd rail against Nixon with such an unrelenting fury that I almost felt
243 sympathy for the man.

244 And he'd yell and scream and argue with my mom. Although his was a decidedly secular
245 upbringing, he vowed to my mom that he would respect the kashrus of their home, yet still,
246 diet, and so many other things related to observance and its attendant consequences for both
247 day-to-day life and overarching worldview, were constant sources of domestic turmoil, of
248 conflict, of yelling and screaming and fights, that pervaded my childhood years. Yes, he was, at
249 times, a bully. Still, both my brother and I attribute many aspects of our own intellectual
250 successes to having grown up in that remarkably impassioned knock-down-drag-out milieu.

252 And yet, when I was considering joining the Cub Scouts, and later, Little League, he did not
253 outwardly object, despite his hating with his every fiber all they represented: conformity, anti-
254 intellectualism, Republicanism. He worked diligently for the ACLU and even oversaw their local
255 Students' Rights Handbook (hundreds of copies, stapled, folded, their powder-blue covers with
256 his name proudly emblazoned, were stored in cardboard boxes down in the basement), and (as
257 a consequence, if his suspicions were correct) twice—twice!—my dad, despite his meager
258 income, was audited by the IRS during the Nixon years. And when the Nazis were to march in
259 Skokie, he steeled himself to the core of his being and supported their right to do so, because
260 the constitution protects even the most vile speech. And when a relative, in turn, called him a
261 Nazi himself for supporting their protected right to march, he told me he would still greet her at
262 family functions, that he would always be cordial to her, but that he would never step foot in
263 her house again.

264 And we had wonderful guests in our modest suburban home: professors, musicologists,
265 book authors, the aforementioned film critic, visiting up from the city or Jersey. These were my
266 dad's old Weequahic and Rutgers buddies whose professional trajectories took them far past
267 his. I have no idea whether there was some sort of simmering dynamic between the
268 professionals and my dad, or whether my dad silently felt a persistent sting of inferiority; there
269 was certainly no outward evidence at least from my vantage point, as everyone was thoroughly
270 engaged in conversation and laughing and debating and reminiscing at the dinner parties, at the
271 weekend retreats in the Catskills, at the summer barbecues, all seemingly without a care. Once,
272 over the Fourth (I was maybe eight or nine), the daughters of our host—the ACLU lawyer—took
273 me upstairs to their parents' bedroom, and decided they wanted to dress me up in their
274 mother's clothes. They put a dress on me, jewelry, heels, maybe a wig and lipstick I forget, and
275 then took me outside to show our parents, sitting in their lawn chairs. To me it was nothing. I
276 didn't feel shame, or liberation, or anything of portent or import. I was just a kid laughing with
277 some other kids, and that was all. In retrospect I wonder, what did that do to my dad, there, in
278 front of his childhood buddies. I imagine he was thoroughly devastated and mortified that I was
279 his son, and to this day, I cringe in shame. "Did you know your son was a transvestite?" the
280 lawyer asked in humor. Over the years, the prejudices he felt against gay people became
281 devastatingly clear to me in the nasty remarks—though few and far between—he'd make so
282 casually—it was in his culture, in his blood, and maybe even in his genes, for I can maybe
283 understand how our evolutionary biology might have instilled this pernicious bigotry that
284 persisted in my father even through times of social upheaval: the civil rights movement, the
285 women's movement—but far more basically, it was clear to me in his withholding love and
286 affection because he knew what I was.

287 He didn't have such worrisome problems with his first son, who, instead of *playing* with the
288 girls at our gatherings, *flirted* with them, even developing a crush on one. Yes, no doubt, *this*
289 made my dad kvell. It was no secret that my parents were especially proud of my brother—my
290 mother even told me as much, a few times—and as a logical consequence (at least according to
291 my childhood reasoning), this rendered me inferior. My dad took far less interest in the things I
292 loved (baseball, basketball) than those my brother did. But I never regarded my brother as a

293 rival. After all, he was eight years older, and his personality was more developed, and I
294 somehow understood, sure, that their interests were in better alignment than were ours.

295 Years later, tucked away in a basement drawer, I came upon a some sort of questionnaire my
296 dad had filled out long previously, about himself, his family, his interests. I have no idea why he
297 had done this, but it has always struck me as a little bit pathetic, his logging aspects of his
298 personal life like that, for some crooked fly-by-night for-profit outfit to evaluate, or so I imagined
299 at the time (in retrospect, I know there were periods growing up when money was so tight we
300 were genuinely at risk for losing the house, periods when my dad perhaps needed to stoop to
301 any level to protect his family). As I read through it—typed questions and hand-written replies
302 as if he were taking a midterm—it struck me as undignified. He wrote glowingly about my
303 teenage brother, his anti-war activities, his political astuteness, his vegetarianism decided upon
304 at such a young age. As for me, he wrote that I was young and unformed, and mostly just loved
305 baseball. True or not (yes, it was true), I would have thought a father would relish some of the
306 little things that his young boy would do, clever things he'd said, acts of kindness he'd engaged
307 in; the sort of thing that a loving parent would be keen enough to observe, and proud enough
308 to share, even, perhaps, with the shady and disreputable band of thieves I imagined those
309 questionnaire-makers to be. But nothing was forthcoming: I liked baseball, and we all know how
310 my dad felt about organized sports.

311 Honestly, I wasn't jealous at all. To this day, I am pleased that my big brother, in his younger
312 years at least, was so conscientious, so politically aware. But already, in the early days of my
313 youth, my dad was, quite simply, less interested in the life of his younger son than he was his
314 older. It was there in black and white, in that sad questionnaire he'd filled. When I was in my
315 twenties, my brother told me he had been concerned that my dad had, in some ways, neglected
316 me in my childhood, not taking enough interest in my life, not spending enough time with me;
317 an astute observer in his youth my brother was, and he'd even approached our dad about it
318 once when he was a teenager, he told me. My dad assured him that everything was all right,
319 and that there's nothing to be concerned about, and my brother, quite reasonably given his
320 impressionable age, dropped the issue.

321 Maybe it was that Fourth when they dressed me up, or maybe it was other things that he,
322 after all, *did* carefully observe when I was a boy growing up—not flirting with girls, not going on
323 dates, not expressing anything lewd about movie starlets—that he just couldn't fit into his
324 conception of what his son's nature should consist of. Or maybe it was that I sought refuge with
325 my mom so regularly. It was she who gave me my bath, who put me to bed in the evenings, and
326 we'd say our Hebrew prayers. I remember when very young, sometimes actually getting out of
327 my trundle at night, walking into the den where they were reading or watching TV, and telling
328 my mom that I loved her, and she'd reply, "I love you too." But I was silent toward my dad. What
329 did that do to him, I wonder. Was I not expressing enough love for him? My dad would walk in
330 the door after his trudge home from work, and I would bound up to him, not to give him a hug,
331 but to grab the paper from his hands so that I could pore over the box scores.

332 Yes, I was terrible. And our tenor was set, and it became a constant battle of emotional
333 withholding between a father and his son.

334 In college, my best buddy and I would sometimes compare notes on our respective
335 upbringings. While he related nightmare scenarios about his sociopathic father and his mentally
336 ill mother, I would only complain about my mom, detailing the religious observance strictures
337 she'd put on me, and her constant worrying about where I'd been and what I'd been doing. And
338 my friend finally observed, "You know, you hardly ever complain about your father. Don't you
339 have any problems with him too?" In the moment, I simply answered that my dad didn't
340 interfere in my life the way my mother did. That put the matter to rest for the time being, both
341 with my buddy, and within me too; it was as if my father was all but out of the picture. But
342 that's not normal, not one bit normal.

343 It was when my parents came up to school one weekend sophomore year, that we, along
344 with that buddy of mine, went out to eat at a basement Thai restaurant in the city center—we
345 all had a hearty laugh as, on the list of critical accolades the proprietors placed on the menu,
346 they proudly quoted "On the other hand, the service was excellent"—that my friend observed
347 that my personality seemed to embody the very opposite of what my dad presented to the
348 world. After all, I was reserved and soft-spoken, and I kept my anger and my grievances to
349 myself. It's funny, because he really wasn't exposed to all that much that evening. Sure, my dad
350 was gruff and aloof, but his acerbic wit had been on full display, as was his dazzling command of
351 cinematic history, and it was really a pleasant evening out. I suspect that my friend was
352 responding at least as much to my previous descriptions of his personality as he was to my dad's
353 behavior that evening; on rare occasion, I'd casually offer that he could be uncouth, loud,
354 disagreeable, argumentative. So either my friend had caught on to his ways even through my
355 dad's good behavior, or he was, instead, seeing him through my eyes.

356 That was the very first time I'd heard it from others, and it struck me deep. My dad *did* take
357 less interest in me than he did my brother. My dad *did* belittle and ridicule me, and never, not
358 even once I could remember, did he say that he loved me. And my friends' dads, they *were*
359 more loving to them than mine was to me. My friend next door, his father built him a little
360 wood-working table placed right next to his down in the basement, and regularly called him
361 "son", and I was wistfully though not angrily jealous. I once saw an old friend of his, as we were
362 visiting their expansive farmhouse across the river, hold his youngest so affectionately, so
363 tenderly, as we were all just sitting around and casually shmoozing, but it was panic that I felt,
364 not rage: I blamed *myself*. There was something wrong with me. I'm *so* socially awkward, so
365 afraid of the people around me especially men, so hellbent on stifling my feelings and not
366 expressing my affection to the people I love. So of course, this is what I'll get in return, even
367 from my father who, after all, was only human.

368 I went to my school's psychological services and was seen by a woman not yet degreed in
369 clinical psychology (though clearly adept at her chosen vocation), and we came to meet weekly.
370 She told me something quite interesting indeed: while abuse is the most tragic thing a child can
371 endure from a parent, at least it can be pointed to (oftentimes physically). But neglect, while far
372 less traumatic, is an absence; it cannot be as readily isolated and tossed around in one's mind as
373 an object of inquiry and analysis. And this makes neglect, sometimes, the more dogged (if less
374 severe) affliction.

375 And as is so often the case when adolescents hash it out with their first shrink, finally, the
376 anger surfaced. A lengthy period—years, actually—passed during which I felt nothing but
377 bitterness toward my father. It was a bad scene. On my visits home from school, I would ridicule
378 him, I would make fun of him. Once, while visiting with our cousins down in Bethesda, we
379 somehow got on the topic of Australia’s aborigines, and he mused that they might not even be
380 Homo sapiens. We were all sitting in their living room, my mom and dad, my aunt and uncle and
381 my two cousins both of high school age now. I laughed at him. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve
382 ever heard!” Yes, I said that to my father, in front of his brother’s family.

383 As for *my* brother, he was living his life in the city at this point, and so when I visited home
384 from school, it was usually just the three of us, me, my mom, and my dad. There was no
385 question that my dad was on better behavior when others—including my brother—were
386 around, but when it was just us three, he’d act bitterly condescendingly especially to my mom,
387 and it infuriated me.

388 I remembered back when he once smashed a plate on the floor because he was displeased
389 with the dinner my mom prepared, and the shards lay on the kitchen floor all evening until, of
390 course, my mom eventually swept it all up, but I did nothing. And once, on one of those Catskills
391 weekend retreats just the three of us, he threw her to the ground, and I was stunned, but I did
392 done nothing. What was in his head, that he felt license to behave in such ways—toward
393 anyone, let alone his own wife and son—and especially when it was *only* his wife and son who
394 were there? What was it about *us*, as opposed to my brother, that triggered such a wanton
395 disrespect? But I did nothing. Now though, I was getting stronger, and seeing more clearly, and
396 with more anger, the deep rift between my father and me, and I wouldn’t be so passive again.

397 During grad school in Montréal, as I was experiencing one of the periodic depressions that
398 have undulated within me since the onset of adolescence, I called the house and my mom
399 picked up in the kitchen, and my dad picked up from down in the basement where he loved to
400 work on his hobbies (his most recent and most voracious being collecting and organizing
401 videocassettes of movies), and I began filling them in on what I’d been up to lately. “I saw a
402 weird production of *The Crucible*”; “I went to a really good Indian restaurant”; “The new
403 Kurosawa just opened here. Dad, have you seen it?”

404 Silence.

405 “Dad?”

406 Then a rustle, and then, “Yeah, I’m here.”

407 “You put down the phone? You put down the phone!?” I yelled, “Forget it! I’m not gonna
408 talk if you’re on the line! Hang up! I’m not gonna talk to you!”

409 And he hung up.

410 I was not about to give him the benefit of the doubt, like, maybe he had to blow his nose, or
411 reached for something that had fallen on the floor. No, I *knew* that he was just working on his
412 hobby, and that that took precedence over talking with his son, his second son, who had
413 depression. He had gently, silently—*surreptitiously*—put down the receiver.

414 I had been a freak as an adolescent, afraid of my own shadow, scared to death of social
415 interactions, lest others find me out. And to this day, I tend to lapse into social withdrawal
416 rather easily. Even with my closest friends, I sometimes fear that I’m a just a charity case, that

417 when we part company, they close the door behind me, lean their forehead against it, and
418 breath a sigh of relief: thank God he's gone. And also to this day, I cringe with an inner sickness
419 when I think about having let my guard down and having exposed even a little bit of my inner
420 self to them, a laugh, an opinion. But I do try now. I try to act like a normal person, the way, say,
421 someone "on the spectrum" has to learn by rote how to behave appropriately. With
422 acquaintances and even strangers, especially men, I try, however self-consciously; I'll casually
423 mention that I'll be seeing a friend soon, or was just visiting relatives, desperately hoping that I
424 can pull it off, convincing them that I am, after all, a person who could *have* friends, who could
425 see relatives. So much of my craziness comes from the strain of my relationship with my father.
426 It wasn't normal, our relationship—not one bit normal—and I'm still a freak. Yes, my father
427 certainly did quite a number on his second son.

428 And that winter, when I came home for break, finally, after so many years, I told my mom
429 what my brother had said years earlier about my dad's neglect of me, and how I had come to
430 realize that he was absolutely right. I didn't bring up my dad's treatment of her; I was too much
431 into my own shit with him, and now, in retrospect, I know I was being totally self-absorbed. And
432 I told her that I wanted to confront him about it, and she supported me, and so, one icy
433 afternoon with snow on the ground and the house heat turned up (a constant battle between
434 my mother and father: "Turn up the heat!" my dad would say; "Put on a sweater!" my mom
435 would reply), we all sat down, and I, hesitantly and, I suspect, with a fear in my voice, told him
436 that I felt he had always been emotionally neglectful of me. I reminded him of the time, in
437 childhood, when my mom explained to me that he was taking my brother, alone, down to
438 Seaside Heights for a weekend of fun, because he was apparently going through a difficult
439 phase in middle school. I reminded him about being so uninterested in my summer camp
440 singing and theater performances knowing full well how much they meant to me.

441 My father: "Neglect? I didn't provide you enough food? I didn't keep a roof over your
442 head?" My mom and I looked at each other in disbelief. Of course, one might say that with his
443 stunted and impoverished upbringing, with his self-absorbed mother and his absent father, he
444 endured a lot of it himself as a kid, neglect, and so he just didn't have it in him to see things
445 clearly: he was bitter and angry, and maybe had just shut it all down. No. Unacceptable. He
446 should get some goddamn therapy! "That's not what he's talking about!" my mother objected
447 with exasperation.

448 "Okay, you want to go to the shore, just you and me?" He asked, but not as a gesture of
449 reconciliation, not as a way to make amends, but instead, almost confrontationally.

450 "Yes," I replied coldly and equally combatively. This was our tenor.

451 And so, over Christmas week, the two of us took a trip down to Brigantine, where a crazy
452 and wonderful old buddy of his was camped out for the time being. He came from an orthodox
453 family in Atlantic City this buddy, but wholly rejected his staid upbringing for a lifelong wild ride
454 around the planet, living for years in Segovia, where he was ever the life of the party, walking
455 into any one of his many favorite eating or drinking haunts and greeted with warmth and
456 enthusiasm by the host, and by half the house, too. He lived lakeside in Kampala for years as
457 well, making it out by the skin of his teeth when Idi Amin seized control and sent Uganda into its
458 insane spiral. He was completely irresponsible, mooching meals, borrowing money, drinking too

459 much, but could also be startlingly generous, and clever almost beyond belief; a genuine hero to
460 my brother and me. Once with my dad, in Atlantic City on summer break from Rutgers (they had
461 a gig selling ice cream on the beach), he hit on a mischievous little scheme so typical of him:
462 “You see that deli across the street?”—it was an Italian hero shop and soda fountain—“I’m
463 gonna go in and ask for an egg cream. You stay here.” “Why stay here? They’re not gonna have
464 egg creams anyway!” my father protested; there was no way in the world an Italian place way
465 down the shore like that would even know what an egg cream even *was*. “Just wait here. You’ll
466 see.” So he went in, and of course they had no idea what an egg cream was, and so he explained
467 how to mix the seltzer, milk, and chocolate syrup just right, and was served up a reasonable
468 facsimile. When he came back out to the street, he said to my dad, “Now we’ll wait twenty
469 minutes, and then *you* go in, and ask if he could make *you* an egg cream.” And my father
470 laughed in disbelief, but he followed his instructions perfectly, and the guy behind the counter
471 was completely flabbergasted. And to this day, I laugh when I think about it. Yeah, that was him!

472 As for my dad and me, well, I felt ill-at-ease during the entire drive down. The whole
473 scenario was so contrived, so fabricated, so far from the reality that existed between us, and
474 there were awful stretches of silence, just us and the Parkway, for miles on end. Only when we
475 arrived at Brigantine, and settled in with laughs and whiskey and cheese and smoked sable, did I
476 begin to relax, and it was a splendid time.

477 But never, not once, did we broach the subject of the motivation for our weekend excursion,
478 or talk it through even a little bit. This was no reconciliation. This was no new beginning. This
479 was *détente*, and this was our tenor.

480 He grew older, and slower, and heavier still, and yes, he mellowed somewhat. This is the way
481 life often goes, isn’t it? As one gets older? I like to think I had something to do with his makeup’s
482 gentle calming, as we’d have long discussions (sometimes arguments) about the state of the
483 world, because I’d become increasingly confident and articulate in my opinions. While his views
484 on religious doctrine and religious practice never wavered, he did eventually acknowledge that,
485 at least for some people—those not predisposed to authoritarianism and radical conformity—
486 religious ritual and even religious belief might indeed provide a calming succor as they navigate
487 the vicissitudes of life. This was certainly true for my mom, who, while remaining a good atheist
488 to the day she died, nonetheless felt a deep and comforting sense of continuity with the past,
489 and an encouraging hope for our future, by maintaining the outward trappings of Judaism.

490 His left wing politics, too, calmed to a degree. For most of his life, his adherence to liberal
491 causes—support for labor unions, the welfare state, minority rights—would sometimes get
492 trampled by the goosestepping strut of Marxism and its fundamentalist Manicheanism: you’re
493 either part of the solution or part of the problem. My dad, so well-studied in the architecture of
494 a fine drama, had, for most of his life, been nonetheless susceptible to the draconian simplicity
495 inherent to Marxist thought, a politics of the small-minded that, further, mercilessly imbues its
496 adherents with righteous indignation, leaving them bitter and exhausted. How perilous a route
497 for some, navigating the path between liberalism and leftism! In 1968, during the Ocean Hill-
498 Brownsville strike in Brooklyn—precipitated by the district’s firing its Jewish teachers and
499 replacing them with black ones in order to provide a better ethnic fit for its charges—was

500 greeted with justified outrage by my mother the liberal, and with nodding approval by my dad
501 the leftist. They stopped talking to each other for days!

502 But near the end he did mellow, and yes, I like to think I had something to do with that.
503 During my college years and those immediately after, I traveled the world—including the Soviet
504 Union, the Eastern Bloc, and two years in China—and became wholly disabused of my youthful
505 dabblings in practical Marxism. Bringing my concerns back to my father, he now readily
506 acknowledged that Marxism was a lost and misguided cause, and I felt a sense of both relief and
507 triumph.

508 Towards the end of grad school in the early nineties, I sunk into one of my very worst
509 depressions. I was physically ill, and I could barely get out of bed. I called home and my parents
510 picked up. “I think you *hate* me,” I wailed into the phone. “Oh we *love* you!” said my mom. And
511 it took a herculean effort for me to leave my other half back in Montréal and drag myself home
512 for a convalescence. I was struck down by searing headaches all day, and was up all night with
513 burning anxiety. It wasn’t blood, it was bitter coffee coursing through my veins; it wasn’t
514 vitreous humor, it was astringent vinegar filling my eyeballs. My mom fed me small chunks of
515 cantaloupe and urged me to join her for walks around a nearby lake. One day, my dad took me
516 out for a malt because he knew how much I loved them as a kid, and so he thought I could keep
517 it down. Sitting in the ice cream shop, an old-fashioned one in the next town on the river, he
518 spontaneously began telling me about what he termed “the dog hours,” the darkest fears and
519 panics that can hit during the deepest and bleakest hours of the night, three, four in the
520 morning. And so he *did* know depression. He also told me about once, when he was living in the
521 Village shortly after college, he and my mom were at a dinner party when someone made a
522 base anti-gay remark, and he’d been appalled. And so he *did* see the bigotry I’d endured.

523 That winter, after I’d begun my postdoc in California, I was in snow-covered Boston for a
524 conference when I came down with a bad flu, too sick to keep my return flight, or to do much of
525 anything for several days except stay on the couch of the grad students who’d graciously put me
526 up. It was my dad who called the disgusting air carrier and fought tooth and nail with them to
527 change my flight without penalty, and finally, the bastards conceded, although there’d be a long
528 stopover in Newark. Since my conference presentation precluded another trip east that winter
529 (money was still very tight), my parents decided to drive down to the airport to see me, and we
530 had an odd little visit there in the terminal.

531 It was the last time I saw him. A few weeks later, in the middle of the night, I got the call
532 from my sister-in-law. A pulmonary embolism. The doctors said that his weight and his diet and
533 his aversion to exercise all colluded to take a devastating toll on his circulatory system. He was
534 not yet seventy. I called my other half back in Montréal, and then threw up in the kitchen sink. I
535 cried on the flight home, a little boy across the aisle looking at me curiously, in a way that
536 somehow reminded me of the wonderful spaghetti scene in De Sica’s *Bicycle Thief*, just one of
537 so many classic films that I’d first watched with my dad. Clearly, he’d be with me for the long
538 haul.

539 And my life, and the life of my brother, and the life of mom, continued. I secured a tenure-
540 track job back up in my beloved Montréal, and took a flat. I would visit home frequently, more
541 and more often as my mom began to get sick with dementia. But only rarely would we go to the

542 cemetery and leave a stone at my dad's grave, because neither of us felt the need; it feels
543 almost pagan to do such a material thing when my dad is so present within both of us. Still, on
544 both the Hebrew and Gregorian anniversaries of his death, my mom and I lit yahrzeit candles,
545 and I still do, even though he wouldn't care one way or the other.

546 And there were some satisfying ups, and there were many terrible downs as life proceeded
547 apace, and shortly after my mom's death several years ago, I retired early and moved back into
548 the old house, the one I grew up in, the old house in this ancient land of streams and hills and
549 stone-strewn earth, and I have time for myself, waiting—or at least hoping—for my guy to join
550 me as he continues his life up north.

551 A few winters back, I arranged to meet that best college buddy of mine in Bradley for the
552 day. He's been teaching English literature at a tony private academy down in Princeton for
553 decades now, with a wife and a now-grown son who's still "finding himself," as they say. We met
554 at the corner of Ocean and Second, where the old building and its stately lions still stand
555 proudly, though now with a less-than-aesthetically-pleasing newer apartment block obstructing
556 many of its water views.

557 Ah, the shore in the brooding cold! We walked up the boards huddling inward against the
558 slicing wind, me pointing out the remnants of my Bradley childhood on the left, taking in the
559 magnificent scope of the foam-crested flint-and-shale waves crashing portentously into the
560 jetties on the right, their spray rising up, arching, then falling, in what seemed like slow motion;
561 a gale was to brew that evening. Ocean Grove, lovely as ever, has been transformed from a
562 Methodist retreat into a gay resort. It's remarkable how its Victorian splendor, at once stately
563 and flamboyant, so readily lends itself to either community; I like to hope my dad would
564 approve of the change. And Asbury, after decades of corruption, of neglect, of decrepitude—the
565 North End Hotel leveled, the Casino but a husk—was finally showing signs of rebirth:
566 Convention Hall had been restored, and the boardwalk concessions—some cheaply rebuilt,
567 some poorly renovated, none attractive anymore—seemed to be limping back to a modicum of
568 financial solvency, at least during the season.

569 And upon our return to our cars in Bradley, on a whim, I checked to see if the door between
570 the lions was unlocked. It was, and we ventured inside. The lobby, dark and Gothic when I was
571 little, was now light and airy, with a white-tiled floor in place of the old forest green carpet of
572 yore. The stairwell, with its battleship gray steps and wrought iron balusters and polished wood
573 banisters, and its multi-paneled skylight looming above, was just as I remembered it, and I felt a
574 tingly thrill as we ascended to the third floor to peek down to the end of the hall at my
575 grandparents' old door. "I think I'm gonna knock. You mind waiting downstairs? No way they'd
576 let me look around if there are two of us." And he understood.

577 And I really did it: I knocked. And lo and behold the door was opened by a young guy,
578 disheveled and unshaven and seemingly just out of a mid-afternoon slumber looking like
579 Nilsson Schmilsson. With an utmost politeness and a tinge of apology in my voice, I stated my
580 case, and, remarkably, he invited me in for a look around; very nice of him indeed. I stepped
581 through the threshold and back in time, a time when a polished conch shell lay on the entry
582 table that I would hold up to my ear and listen for the ocean, a time when we kids were put to
583 sleep at night on the living room carpet and I'd look up to the ceiling to see a curious bulbous

584 relief, having no idea that it was intended for a lighting fixture that had never been installed.
585 The floor was now down to its exposed hardwood surface, the walls still pleasantly
586 whitewashed. The old toilet, which had a funny little plastic application on the back of its bowl
587 that produced an appealing gurgle of water at the end of its flush, well, that was gone. The
588 kitchen, which used to have ceiling-high glass-faced cupboards and an ancient refrigerator—still
589 called “the icebox”—with a lock handle that was almost too stubborn for me to open (I’d thirst
590 for apple juice wherever I went as a tyke, and everyone knew to keep some on hand if we were
591 to visit, and after downing a glass, I’d go foraging into the fridge for more: “Apple juice! Apple
592 juice! Apple juice!” I’d pant), they were gone too, replaced with wholly nondescript modern
593 appointments. The big floor fan? Well, of course. But not for a second did I think of the passive
594 sadness of my grandfather or the oblivious revelry of my grandmother or the anger burrowed
595 so deeply into my dad. No. it was a pure joy. And I thanked the young guy profusely, probably
596 still too inexperienced in life to fathom what it was that made me so happy, and then my buddy
597 and I each drove our separate ways home to beat the winter winds.

598 I don’t have kids. Unlike so many, I only get to look back, never forward. But as I grow older,
599 it’s the looking back that gives me so much comfort, so much joy. Yes, strange as it may seem,
600 looking back, I love what I see. Living in the old house, the one I grew up in just a short drive to
601 the mountains, only one town from the river, each and every day I feel my dad within me; in the
602 stack of New Yorkers I keep on the living room side table; in my gently winding, every Friday
603 before Shabbos, the eighteenth century English grandfather clock that his Atlantic City chum so
604 generously entrusted to us; in all the old-style movie lobby cards I’ve hung in the basement; in
605 my turning on the TV to scoff at its low-brow sitcoms and their cheap and flat lighting; in my
606 spending hours on end, day after day, organizing my music and movie files the way he did his
607 videocassettes; in the Robert Altman movies I watch over and over again; in the antacids I keep
608 in the nightstand in my parents’ bedroom; in the pleas for money I receive in the mail from the
609 American Civil Liberties Union, from Amnesty International, from the Southern Poverty Law
610 Center, once-great organizations that have lost their way so thoroughly that I like to think my
611 dad would ignore their solicitations as guiltlessly as he’d ignored BAI’s.

612 My dad provided me enough food to eat. He kept a roof over my head. He’s here, churning
613 and fermenting in my viscera, in the bottomless anger and oh-so-righteous indignation that
614 plagues me as I see what’s happening in the world, the Left’s appalling embrace of racist
615 identity politics, the Right’s appalling embrace racist supremacy politics, and the academy’s
616 spiraling into the frightful abyss of illiberalism and antisemitism. As the world heats up, I’m
617 relieved he’s not here to see how far we’ve fallen.