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## I | Prologue

### *Eliza Wants to Know*

Eliza wants to know about all kinds of sex.

“So what’s your take on oral, Mom?” she asks. “Giving and receiving,” she adds, climbing onto a stool at the kitchen counter.

Eliza is thirteen now. She’s taking Health as a science in her seventh grade year, in a program for 210 allegedly gifted children at a local public school.

“Do old people have sex?” she wants to know. “No, no, Mom, not like you and Dad, I mean *old* people,” she clarifies.

She wonders when, if ever, she will have a boyfriend and when, if ever, I think it will be appropriate for her to have sex.

“Don’t worry,” she comforts me, having confided that a girl in her PE class *might* be pregnant, “I know I’m not ready yet. But just tell me, Mom, when did you first *kiss* a boy anyway?”

Eliza wants to know, wants to know, wants to know.

Eliza reads the headlines in the *New York Times* most mornings with her orange juice and cinnamon toast. She reminds me

over and over that she is more capable than I give her credit for—more mature, more deserving—and she daydreams about her own cell phone and her own car and colleges in cities clear across the continent.

“Did you ever smoke cigarettes, Mom?” she asks. “Did you ever smoke pot? Do you believe in marijuana for medicinal purposes? How do you feel about the death penalty? How do you feel about the Israeli settlements? We’re democrats, right?”

Eliza scoffs when I warn or explain, suggest or advise. “I know, I know,” she interrupts, and “I’m not dumb, Mom,” she insists, and “You’re overprotective,” she says on a sigh.

I remind her every so often we live in a big, dangerous city and it continues to be my job to take care of her to the best of my ability, at least for the time being. Eliza knows the world isn’t safe. She knows about war and famine and poverty and crime. She knows that thousands of children lost parents when the World Trade Towers collapsed; but she doesn’t know, she doesn’t *yet* know, that her own grandfather was murdered nearly six years ago, and I am not ready to tell her.

Jake, on the other hand—who is ten—needs not to know. He’d prefer us to stay upstairs until he falls asleep at night, rather than going down to bed ourselves.

“What worries you, sweetie?” I ask when I kiss him good night in the dark.

“Oh, you know, Mom,” he says, “the usual. Kidnapping and robbery.”

As much as Eliza needs the truth under most circumstances, that’s how badly Jake needs to believe he is safe. He dreams about terrorists, about dark caves and abducted children. We assure him again and again that there are more good people than bad and that nothing will happen to anyone he loves.

Whether his fears are age appropriate I cannot say for sure. But I remember when I was a kid, asking my mother to prom-

ise me she would not die. “I promise,” she said, and I wonder now, was she as uncomfortable making that sort of promise as she should have been? As I should be when I promise my son the very same thing? Because it’s disconcertingly easy for me to shake off the doubt, the discomfort. For one thing, this is what my boy needs to hear, and for another, I believe what I say. How naïve, how arrogant, how foolish to tempt fate, to pretend even for a moment I can predict with any kind of certainty I will live to be old. But even knowing that the Towers came down, that we anticipate the *Big One* in Southern California every day, that breast cancer claims friends and neighbors with terrifying regularity, that there’s a fatality on the freeway during every rush hour, that my own father was kidnapped and killed with a pocketknife—even so and in spite of all that—I intend to live practically forever, and any other conclusion is unimaginable, unacceptable as far as I’m concerned.

What is this utter denial of the facts, of the news, of my own mortality? Is this optimism? Is it part of my essentially American sense of entitlement? Should I be reading up on Buddhism and other eastern methodologies? In any case, it seems to go hand in hand with my unwillingness to accept that life could turn out to be anything less than wonderful—my indignation in the face of disappointment—my swallowing of turbulence and tragedy, and my faith in impossibly complete recovery after the fact. Nobody tells us when we’re children that life is difficult and unfair. Instead we middle-class American kids were told that we could be anything we wanted to be, do anything we wanted to do. And we tell our own children the same. And sad as we are, scarred and uncertain as we are, we believe what we tell them. As a generation, as a culture, we’re certifiable. We ought to be locked away.

“Mom,” says Eliza, peeling the pink from under her nose, pressing it into the lump of Bazooka and sticking the whole

disgusting wad back in the side of her mouth, “remember when Pop took us to the penny candy store and bought Jake the grape bubblegum you said he couldn’t have?”

“Remember Pop took us on the golf cart and he let us drive?”

“Remember how Pop spun us so fast on the tire swing? Remember when he let us swim in our clothes?”

“I can’t remember,” Jake complains. “Even when I look at his picture, Mom, I can’t remember Pop.”

“Do him, Mom,” Eliza prods. “Do him for us.”

They say the voice is the first thing you lose—the first thing you forget—but I can hear him in my head, no problem, I remember his inflection, even better the tone, perhaps because it isn’t so far from my own? It’s true, I do my father well. The timbre of my voice is higher, of course, but I weigh it down, I find his cadence, I say:

“C’mon, let’s pitch pennies, hey, hey, that’s not the way you do it! You can’t cry, you have to be a good sport, yeah, there you go, that’s the way, you’re a winner! A winner!”

They collapse with laughter, and Jake spills his juice.

For the longest time after my father’s death, Eliza would blanch when I brought him up. “Don’t talk about Pop, Mom,” she’d plead. “Mom, please don’t talk about Pop, I don’t want you to cry.”

I was determined, though. We had to talk about him, I reasoned, and crying was a good thing. I explained that if we didn’t talk about him, we’d start to forget. And if talking about him made us sad, well then, that was perfectly okay. Crying isn’t bad. Missing somebody isn’t bad. Trying to catalogue everything you remember about someone you love isn’t bad. And, of course, with time, I mentioned him less frequently, and after a while, when I did talk about him, I didn’t choke up in the old way. Eventually I could say something like, “Pop

would have loved to see you play basketball,” or “Gosh, you look like Pop today,” or “Pop would have laughed, Pop would have thought, Pop would have said . . .” and nobody would so much as blink.

It’s not so much that I must tell my children what happened to my father, as that I must not keep them in the dark for too long. I must not *not* tell them. So how to explain to the loves of my life the truth of what happened to their grandfather? When do I say it? How do I insist that we hold up our heads and expect the best of people in spite of this terrible thing? How do I make them understand why I waited so long? How do I know when I have waited long enough? What to expect from Eliza and Jake, who cannot possibly remember very much about the man? Will they cry? Will they be fascinated? Repulsed? Or is it possible they will be largely unaffected?

I imagine it this way: I will sit them down at the kitchen table one morning. One weekend morning. Better to have this sort of discussion in bright light with a whole day stretched out before us, when we don’t have to rush out to school or work at the crack of dawn.

I will come upstairs shortly after breakfast holding the large brown file with the torn clasp where I have stashed all the newspaper articles and condolence letters and court transcripts from September, 1997, through October, 1998, when the killers were sentenced. I will have organized the lot by then, put the papers in some sort of order—chronological, emotional—that will make sense to first-time readers. And I will ask my children to sit for a while with me, with us, before we all get on with our Saturday activities. Fred, my husband, is adamant that we tell them together when the time is right. Yes, the murdered man was *my* father. But they are *our* children, and he wants to be present and involved in this potentially traumatic exchange.

“I want to talk to you about Pop,” I will say.

And when I say it this time, in this formal way in this formal setting with a fat, overstuffed portfolio on the table in front of me, the children will be intrigued, expectant; they will know something big is up. My stomach will churn, my heart will beat faster, maybe I will start to perspire and my hair will curl up behind my ears and at the back of my neck. I will hold tight to my package, pressing it closed at the top, wanting to reveal my evidence in my own time at my own discretion, wanting to choose which pieces, which articles, which letters to give them, which to read aloud and what and where to edit.

I will tell them the basics first. Gently, in a neutral, modulated tone. I will try not to be dramatic.

“You remember when Pop died,” I will say. “You were too young to understand, but you’re old enough now, mature enough, to hear what really happened.

“Pop went to work one day,” I will begin.

## 2 | The Contents of the File

Letters of condolence.

Assorted obituaries.

My eulogy from the memorial service, handwritten on lined yellow paper.

Photographs taken from the top of the dresser inside my father's closet.

Eleven letters from my father.

Nine postcards from my father.

Transcripts of court proceedings.

Newspaper clippings, yellow with age, and copies of clippings, faded, barely legible on glossy fax paper, slippery to the touch:

“Millionaire developer is missing.” *The Bergen Record*.

“Into Thin Air.” *The New York Post*.

“Ex-Republican Fund-Raiser Is Reportedly Missing.” *The New York Times*.

“New Jersey mogul disappears after withdrawing 20G.” *The Star Ledger*.

“The way Gross vanished leaves FBI at a loss.” *The Star Ledger*.

“FBI says kidnapping possible in vanishing of N.J. millionaire.” *The Record*.

“Missing tycoon’s car found.” *The New York Post*.

“BMW’s a dead-end in search for tycoon.” *The Star Ledger*.

“3 Youths Accused of Killing New Jersey Restaurateur.”  
*The New York Times*.

“Businessman’s Killing Is Called Afterthought.” *The New York Times*.

“Gross fired slaying suspect, source says.” *The Record*.

“Gross’ last day: memories and regrets.” *The Record*.

### 3 | The Last Visit

May, 1997.

“Don’t pick me up, I’m renting a car,” said my father and sure enough he pulled into my driveway at dusk, wearing his favorite hat—straw, wide-brimmed, worse for wear—a rumpled blazer, khakis wrinkled from his afternoon flight, and a pink polo shirt with a coffee stain just under the strip of buttons. He put his clubs down across the coffee table and picked up the telephone to call his morning golf date, awkwardly hugging both grandchildren with one arm until he settled the phone between his ear and his shoulder.

I take credit for the mint on his pillow, but it was a friend’s idea. I complained to her that he’d apparently come to play golf and not to see the kids at all. Join us for T-ball Saturday morning? Barbecue with us Sunday afternoon? No, no, impossible, golfing here, golfing there.

“How is it,” I asked as I poured his coffee the second morning, “how can it be that you didn’t bring gifts for my children?” I was so angry I couldn’t look at him.

He gazed at me over the top of the newspaper.

“Oh,” he said, going back to the headlines.

“Do me a favor,” I said, “get them something, pick up something in the pro shop, okay?”

That night he came home with a plastic bag full of refrigerator magnets—painted porcelain fruits and vegetables, grapes, peppers, corn, tomatoes, cauliflower, cabbages—and the children fought for them like candy.

“You couldn’t find a T-shirt? A key ring with a golf ball on the chain?”

The kids whooped over the magnets as though they were real toys, while I stewed in resentment. How dare he bring them refrigerator magnets? How dare they be so delighted just because that’s what he brought?

“Did you find the mint on your pillow?” I asked the next morning.

He nodded and gulped his coffee.

“Very funny,” he told the sports section, and he ate the oatmeal I made for him—with low-fat milk and raisins—in three large spoonfuls. The spoon shook a little in his trembling fingers (his Achilles’ heel, you should have seen his signature on a check), then he pushed the bowl aside.

I still have the magnets. Some have fallen and broken in half, and a few must be buried in dust bunnies behind the fridge, but I have most of them, holding up carpool schedules, receipts, invitations, finger paintings and old photographs on three sides of my enormous side-by-side refrigerator/freezer. I’m glad now that he didn’t come home with plastic golf balls or miniature clubs.

On the morning of the last day of the last visit, he and I walked down Princeton Avenue, our street, and took the stairs at the end of Baxter up to the top of Kite Hill. Just over the rise we entered Elysian Park, half walking, half jogging the four-mile loop.

The mustard was in full bloom, cascading fountains of tiny