

I woke up with a wicked migraine. Exhausted from a late night poker game, I wanted to stay in bed, but the sharp spike of pain in my right temple drove me like a jonesing junkie to the bathroom. I searched behind the blinding mirrors of the medicine cabinet for my miraculous pink migraine pills, only to find an empty bottle. I wanted to scream. And I *would* have, if I hadn't feared my mother's overreaction. Without the pink pills the headache would hang around all day like a swarthy contractor, prodding, poking, hammering.

It wouldn't kill me; it hadn't killed me before. But it wouldn't make me any stronger.

I took two of my mother's codeine painkillers, though I knew that codeine sometimes worsened a migraine. Seeing as though nothing else in the medicine cabinet would help, I had little choice. After splashing my face with cold water, I walked back to my bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed, massaging my temples and breathing deeply. I don't know how long I sat there, kneading and moaning, but the headache only got worse. It was terrible: coming in dark metallic waves, screeching and ticking like sheared tin; and even though the sunlight filling the room seared my eyes, I kept them open—the pain only worsened when I closed them. When I closed my eyes I felt as though I might die.

I went down to the kitchen. Even so early in the morning, in her powder-blue housecoat, my mother stood at the stove stirring a pot with a wooden spoon. When wasn't she standing at the stove, stirring a pot? She wiped her forehead with her forearm and waved the spoon.

"What is it, Roy?"

"Ma, I got a headache like you wouldn't believe."

"Take an espresso with lemon rind. That works for me."

"It's a bad one, Ma. I'm out of pills."

"Try the espresso."

"You think?"

"Trust me on this."

But my mother understood nothing of migraines. She suffered from many things, but not migraines. She kept stirring the pot. She didn't care. Whatever she stirred smelled strongly of garlic. This exacerbated the pain. Garlic disagreed with me. My mother didn't care; she used garlic in every dish she cooked, copiously, in every single recipe except her lemon cake. And even her lemon cake, after being cut with one of her knives, tasted of garlic.

"So do you want an espresso or not?"

"Nah, don't bother. I'm heading out. I've gotta take Johnny to the dentist."

"Are you bringing him by after?"

"I don't know if we'll have time, Ma."

"Bring him by for a plate of pasta. His mother feeds him nothing but hot dogs and French fries every day. The boy needs to eat some good food. Bring him over. I never get to see my own grandson anymore. What's the matter with the world when a grandmother can't feed her own grandson a plate of pasta? He loves my pasta."

I didn't think he'd have much appetite after the dentist. "Okay, Ma. We'll see how the time is. You know how Lucy gets when I bring him here without making arrangements."

"Yeah, yeah." My mother waved her hand over the pot and inhaled the fumes.

Last time I brought the kid over to my mother's without telling Lucy she called the police. That's how she was—she cut me no slack. I guess she cut me enough slack when we were together. My being a gambler made her uneasy. But that's how I made my living. I had money in the bank and owed no one anything. I liked the action too much to ever get rich, but I did okay. I stayed away from foolish sporting wagers, controlled myself at casinos and high-stakes card games. I was known as The Rock to my poker-playing fraternity: solid, never reckless, always angling the percentages. That was me. When I was younger I took risks, put myself on the line. As I said, I liked the action, the adrenaline rush. But over time I learned to control my appetite, to take it in small doses. Like a seasoned junky I never pushed the envelope. I knew my limits: one of the benefits of experience. And it's not as if I could have promised Lucy I'd change.

I didn't choose my profession. It chose me. I was born with that sixth sense that all professional gamblers possess. Because of it I could always make a dollar plying my trade. My mother asked few questions. She knew I always carried a wad in my pocket, paid my bills, dressed well, drove a nice car, respected her, and she needed no further elaboration. But try explaining that to someone like Lucy. This is my trade, my craft. Don't you see? I can't do anything else; I couldn't cut it in the straight world even if I tried. But Lucy didn't buy that for a second.

Lucy and I never married; she disagreed with my lifestyle and with my attitude toward certain things, like how I wanted my son raised. For instance: I insisted on getting him baptized even though I never practiced any religion. Lucy thought it was hypocritical. I thought it was a safety bet.

There were other concerns, other points of departure, and not just about the gambling or the boy. Lucy and my mother didn't get along. Often I found myself caught in their crossfire, or forced to take sides. And how do you side against your mother? Lucy thought me disloyal, and I received no merit points for the loyalty I showed my mother.

Every day with Lucy became a bigger drag, a bigger bore: the bickering and fighting intensified, got nasty. She even got physical a few times. I mean, Lucy had issues, sure. She took her shots at me, scratched up my face and so forth; no big deal. What was I supposed to do, hit her back? I'm sure that's what she would have liked. It was easy for Lucy to pack up her things and the boy and leave me cold.

That was two years ago. No use contesting custody; Lucy was a good mother. And I had a criminal record, a dubious work history. Unlikely to be granted any paternal rights. I wound up selling the bungalow we were living in for a good price, and moved back in with my mother.

"Roy, I'm going to say this once and only once ..."

Oh no, I thought. Another lecture. Another nugget of wisdom. Another reproach. Another complaint. It never ended. My headache barked at me and I felt faint. I gripped the edge of the kitchen counter and braced myself.

My mother leaned close. She reeked of garlic and sweat. Her black eyes gleamed. She smiled. "I know you don't want to hear what I have to say," she said quietly. "You're a grown man. But Johnny, your son, my grandson—you don't want this kid to grow up like a welfare case. His mother's a drug addict."

"Ma, she's not a drug addict. And nobody's going on welfare."

My mother shook her head and stirred the pot again.

True, Lucy liked her blow, and she smoked marijuana daily. Then again, she had picked up those habits from me. In the end I cleaned up my act for health reasons, but Lucy wasn't there yet. Was I concerned for the boy? Well, yes, to some extent. But Lucy still seemed under control. If I sensed she was losing it I'd do what I had to do. But she loved that little guy more than life itself, I was convinced, and I was willing to cut her some slack, if only for his sake. Every kid needs his mother, I thought, glancing at my own, as she tasted from her wooden spoon. When I was a child she often disciplined me with a spoon just like the one she sipped from. I smiled, imagining myself taking a wooden spoon to my son in this day and age.

My migraine flared, forcing my right eye shut, squeezing out a tear. Hot and dry pain extended from my temple down into my neck. I staggered into the living room. My mother hadn't changed a thing since my father passed away: the worn Persian carpet, French provincial furniture, a heavy mahogany sideboard burdened with burnished silver, the black marble clock on the dull black mantelpiece. Except for a religious calendar that hung on the wall, the room looked the same as it did thirty years ago, when my father was alive.

The April sun tried to illuminate the room, but brown velvet curtains absorbed whatever light filtered through the dust-streaked windows. They needed to be cleaned but I lacked the courage to do the job myself. I glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. I had to get moving. I shut my eyes briefly, feeling a strange euphoria every time the pulsating throb of the headache hit the high point of pain and then fell off. The codeine wasn't working. I resigned myself to the pain's ebb and flow, hoping that my son wouldn't suffer as a result. Then again, it might have done him some good to see his father hurting.

My mother called from the kitchen.

"What is it?" I cried.

She stepped into the living room wiping her red hands on her apron. "Roy, please bring Johnny over. It hurts my heart not to see him more often. I'm not getting any younger."

"I'll do my best, Ma."

She went back into the kitchen.

I sat in the car for a while before I pulled out of the drive. My son lived with his mother downtown in a small apartment building. I paid the rent and gave Lucy money for the boy, as well as spending money for herself. He lacked nothing, as far as I could see. He was always clean, well-dressed, though maybe too skinny.

The day was splendid: blue sky, a few wispy clouds, the sun beaming. Johnny needed some work done to his gums. I'd had problems with my gums when I was his age. Some of the baby teeth don't let go.

He was waiting in the apartment lobby, dressed in a smart navy coat and cuffed denims. He held a small electronic game in his pale hands and scarcely looked up at me. What was I expecting? A hug, a kiss, some light in the boy's eyes? Maybe too much. I gave his shoulder a squeeze. He shrugged me off, scowling, reminding me of his mother. Staring at the boy in the gloomy lobby, fixated on his beeping game, I wondered what he had inherited from me, from my side of the family. I recognized the black hair and eyes of my grandmother, my mother, my aunts and uncles, and myself. But his fair, delicate, almost feline face belonged to his mother, and he was small, smaller than I was at his age. He could have easily been someone else's kid.

"Johnny, aren't you glad to see your daddy?"

"I have to go to the dentist."

"That's right. And I'm taking you there. How are your gums doing?"

He bared his small white teeth; the gums looked like raspberry jam. Poor kid. My mother used to make me gargle with warm salted water when my gums bled. Back in those days taking me to a dentist never crossed her mind. As a result, all my teeth fell out before I turned forty. I never got used to the dentures. And they aged me by at least ten years. People thought I was the boy's grandfather. Lucy encouraged this error. Dr. Horn, the dentist, for instance. I had taken Johnny to him on one other occasion for a general check-up. Afterwards he told me that my grandson was a charming lad, and looked exactly like my daughter Lucy. I didn't correct him.

"Are you winning?" I asked Johnny.

He frowned and shrugged.

"Well, if you're not winning you must be losing."

Again he shrugged. I decided to leave it at that. A seven-year-old's mind seemed impenetrable. A coconut's worth of milky waters. Nothing would solidify in there for years. And yet I wanted to be chummy with the boy. I wanted to know him. I recognized that my break with his mother had stressed and saddened him. Nothing direct: he never once asked if we were reuniting; he never cried. Perhaps he understood that no matter how Lucy and I felt about each other, we loved him and would always care for him. In the car, he fussed with the seatbelt and whined about it being too tight. "It's not too tight," I told him.

He held his breath. I thought he'd grown out of this trick. His face reddened, his cheeks and eyes bulged. He was willful, a trait inherited from both parents. As a toddler, he sometimes held his breath until he fainted. It was incredible, frightening. I mean, that takes some will. I wondered if he would hold his breath now until he fainted. His face darkened.

"Johnny, stop it. Johnny, if you don't stop it, I'll take you straight to the hospital."

He abruptly exhaled then sucked in enough fresh air to scream, "No!"

"You don't like the hospital, do you?" I had him there. A year ago he'd gone in for a tonsillectomy and had not forgotten the experience.

"Daddy, don't take me to the hospital."

"Promise to be good."

"I promise."

Not that the dentist would be a walk in the park. I gazed at him with pity. He unlatched the seatbelt. My pity vanished.

"What are you doing, Johnny?"

"It's too tight."

"Next time I'll bring the baby seat, okay. Would you like that?"

He tried not to laugh but his face broke up and he bent over. The kid had a sense of humour, something he didn't inherit from his mom.

"It's not funny," I heard myself say in a fatherly voice, but I couldn't help but smile as he shook with laughter. I pulled over to the curb. "Enough," I said, grabbing the seatbelt and loosening it some. "Now behave yourself, little man, or I will take you to the hospital."

"No! Please don't take me there. They hurt me there."

“Well then, behave yourself.”

He said nothing.

For a second I thought he was going to cry but he didn't cry easily, not this kid. Sometimes he faked it to get his way, but unlike my mother who turned into a sap the minute his eyes got moist, Lucy wouldn't tolerate tears. She knew that when he was really hurt or afraid he tightened up and didn't cry. He didn't cry before or after the botched tonsillectomy, though he admitted it hurt a lot. The doctors had fucked up his throat and he spent a week in hospital unable to speak or swallow. Lucy almost lost her mind. Johnny came around in time with no aftereffects, other than a compounded fragility, but all that suffering had been unnecessary and meaningless.

I figured I'd better stop it with the talk about bringing him to a hospital. The experience had traumatized him, and here I was shoving it in his face. And for what? I should have fixed his seatbelt when he first mentioned it, but I didn't want to come off as a softie. Always that internal battle raging. I didn't want to be as hard on him as my father had been with me, but then again I didn't want to be doing cartwheels for the kid. I didn't want to jump up like a jack-in-the-box every time he sniffled. He was already soft.

I switched on the radio, asked the boy what his mother was doing. He said she was sleeping. She slept a lot. Soft classical music poured from the speakers. It served as perfect, calming wallpaper. I wanted to ask Johnny if his mother was bringing anyone around, a male friend, but I figured the boy would tell me on his own, if and when it happened. But maybe I was wrong about this. Not that it mattered. I no longer loved Lucy. She had her own life to live.

Johnny played the game again. Maybe one day the refinement of that particular skill set would bring him success, but I doubted it. Maybe he'd become a gambler like his old man. I had to laugh at this. I touched the boy's head but his focus was total, fierce. Maybe he'd get lucky and find something in this life worthy of that intensity, something that wouldn't let him down.

A red pickup truck with big chrome wheels cut in front of us and came to a dead stop, forcing me to slam on my brakes. Johnny jerked forward but the seatbelt snapped him back. The headache I had briefly put aside returned, snapping at my right eye and driving a black nail into my neck. It hit me so hard I failed to honk my horn and just sat there stunned and weak. The pickup truck roared ahead.

“Are you okay?” I asked Johnny.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“The person driving that truck is a goof.”

Johnny glanced at me.

“That's right, son. A goof. Doesn't care about a thing. Just does whatever. Not nice. Don't ever do that when you learn how to drive. Don't be a goof. Promise me you won't ever drive like that person is driving.”

“I promise,” Johnny smiled, working the game again with his thumbs.

I must have blipped out for a minute, my mind blunted by the headache. I was thinking of the two women I'd been dating: Phyllis and Lisa—both too much like Lucy for comfort. I kept bouncing back and forth between the pair, trying to decide on one or the other. Phyllis looked so much like Lucy my mother thought she was her sister.

The traffic came to an abrupt halt again and I reacted late, hitting the brakes hard. The car screeched and swerved to a stop. I smelled burnt rubber. I felt like an

imbecile. Violins whined away on the radio and pierced my ears like needles. I switched the dial off so violently I cracked something in the digital panel. Johnny looked at me, wide-eyed.

"It's okay," I told him.

He waited a beat before continuing with his game.

We got to Dr. Horn's office in good time. Only two other people sat in the waiting room: a rheumy-looking youth with black locks, dirt-encrusted jeans, his face buried in an issue of *Sports Illustrated*. He didn't look like a sports fan. Across from him sat a middle-aged woman in a periwinkle outfit with a swelling in her right cheek. She looked at me with familiarity. Her eyes averred unspeakable pain. Johnny resumed playing his game and I picked up a dated *Time* magazine. None of the news was new anymore. I glanced at the receptionist, a fleshy young woman of about twenty with red hair and dimples, and she smiled. This smile didn't cure my headache, but it made me feel good. Sometimes a smile was almost enough. Lucy stopped smiling at me when her pregnancy test came back positive. I'm convinced that a smile now and then might have kept us together. But maybe not.

I tried to give Johnny a little pep talk before he went in but the kid wouldn't look up from the game. When the receptionist called his name he played deaf, and when I shook his shoulder he shot me a mean little look that surprised me. I was taken aback. I snatched the game from him and he went up, grumbling and dragging his feet. I had half a mind to boot him in the ass. Maybe I deserved the kid's indifference for not being a dutiful father. Lucy encouraged me to do more with him but my work, being what it was, kept me running high and low. And I didn't think that spending more time with Johnny would have made much of a difference. The kid and I were strangers to each other. If not for the hair and the eyes I would have sworn he wasn't mine. But he was mine, all right. A chip off the old block. I just had to do more to reinforce that. He was just a kid after all, plastic, malleable, waiting to be moulded. And so it went in my aching head.

I regretted feeling that momentary wave of hatred for my son. He'd done nothing to deserve it. I thought about him on the dentist's chair, maybe writhing in pain, maybe crying out for me. I doubted that. Dr. Horn had a way with kids.

The receptionist smiled at me. I smiled back. I was old enough to be her father, and also old enough to know when a female didn't mind my presence. Sadly, I had my hands full. I flipped back through the dated *Time* magazine and nothing had changed.

Dr. Horn accompanied Johnny out from the back. He looked clownish with his freckles, frizzy orange hair and male pattern-baldness. Maybe that's why kids tolerated him.

I shook his moist hand.

"I've written out a prescription for a rinse," he said. "The gums look worse than they are. He won't need surgery. He's a brave little boy," he said, patting Johnny on the head.

"Yes he is. Thank you."

"I'd like to see him again in a couple of weeks."

"Sure thing."

"And how is your daughter?" he asked.

"She's fine," I said. "Just fine."

"Send her my regards."

In the car I asked Johnny how it had gone and he shrugged. I handed him his game and he started playing. My head continued pounding. I thought I'd just drop him off at Lucy's and be done with it. But then I thought, why not visit my mother?

"You want to see grandma?"

Johnny's face lit up.

"We'll go only if you promise not to tell your mother."

This took the air out of his sails. It was a promise he couldn't keep. I'd have to deal with Lucy; there was no way around it. I shouldn't have been encouraging duplicity. I drove to my mother's place and the kid jumped out of the car and flew up the porch like a monkey. My mother waited behind the door. She looked ecstatic. She took the boy in her arms, folding him into her breast. I lit up a smoke before I went in. My mother forbade me from smoking in the house, and I tried not to do it around the kid. I'd tried quitting, but I enjoyed smoking almost as much as I enjoyed gambling.

When I went into the house I found the two of them in the kitchen, grinding espresso beans in my mother's old wooden mill. She had Johnny turning the little crank for all he was worth. His face shone. My mother hardly looked at me; she was so focused on the boy. It should have been one of those tender, tiny moments of grace when everything in the universe seemed harmonious and right—watching my mother and my son enjoying each other's company. It was all so pure and so simple. I should have felt my heart bursting; I should have felt light and full of love. But all I could think about was my fucking headache and the call I'd have to make to Lucy.