"No one cares about what you think or feel. You're nothing but a little faggot. Fairy! Fairy!"

Saying this my brother Larry held me down on the cement driveway, and his twin Ralph took the BB gun my father bought him for his birthday and shot me in the leg.

I lay on the driveway stunned, disbelieving, as my older brothers ran from the scene of the crime. Everything was in slow motion. My mother slammed open the kitchen door and ran toward me. The apron I gave her for Mother's Day, decorated with tiny roses, flapped in the wind. Her goal was to get to the youngest of her sons. My mother's sturdy body moved with determination as if she were in the pole-vaulting competition in the Olympics. But she didn't appear to get any closer no matter how she persisted. Ma was going through the lightness of air as if were dense, murky. Slowly and deliberately, in her black orthopedic shoes, she tugged at the force of gravity that wished to pull her back and down and away from me. I knew I would grow old and die before she arrived. But Ma persisted against nature's hidden currents. She pushed forward relentlessly toward the object of her desire.

My mother's brown wavy hair tied loosely in a bun on the back of her head began to show fatigue as it bobbed up and down trying to stay whole. Charlie, my dog ran after Ma with his stick thinking good times were ahead.

It was an autumn day. I could hear the colored leaves crumpling under my mother's heavy feet. I could see the leaves falling from the nearly barren trees above. Is this what it was like to die? The senses were alive beyond normal intensity. This attunement to the details of life. The leaves fell at every whim of the wind but like my mother's movements they fell slowly questioning the meaning of time and space.

"What have they done to you?" my ma screamed as I lay face up gazing at the dome of the sky, clutching the side of my leg that was burning up.
Uncle Irv, Aunt Enid, Uncle Sol, and Mr. Cohan, the widower from the east side who were all at my house for dinner came to see what the commotion was.

"Oh my God!" said Aunt Enid. "Call an ambulance, the boy is bleeding."

I was bleeding slightly. Aunt Enid overreacted at the sight of a pinprick of blood. There was really no need to fuss. After my Aunt's heroic attempt to elicit help, she proceeded to get white like the tablecloth she had just hung on our clothesline. My Uncle Sol took her to the nearest bench in our clutter filled lawn. He didn't want the neighbors to see two bodies lying prone on the Richmond's property. "Put her next to the flamingos," I said, hoping someone would hear me. She could use the color.

"Call Dr. Fields," said my Uncle Irv. "Tell him to meet us at the hospital."

Gravity gave up her hold. She let my mother leap over the last hurdle of the race, an old tire that lay forgotten by the garage, to get to me and be at my side. She wept over me as if I were dead. Why don't you call the undertakers? I thought.

"It's a surface wound," said Mr. Cohan. "Nothing to worry about." Mr. Cohan was a butcher. He knew about flesh.


Mr. Cohan removed my mother from my side. It was like peeling old wallpaper off a wall. I was carried into the car to go to Memorial Hospital where Dr. Fields would meet me. Mr. Cohen winked at me.

"It will be okay," he said. "Nothing to lose your cookies over." He glanced at Aunt Enid (her nickname was Cookie, she loved sweets) who looked like she needed smelling salt or her cookies would definitely get lost. Her skin was still unnaturally white as fresh snow. She never made it to the bench and was lying on the olive green grass between the flamingo and the swans.

My mother got in the car and sat next to me. I tried to look at the trees changing colors but all I could hear was my mother shrieking, "I've told them," she yelled for the whole neighborhood, the whole world to hear, "not to play with that gun. How many times, Ritchie did you hear me tell them not to point that gun at anyone, not even a rabbit?"

I tried to concentrate on what she was saying but the pain in my leg was sharp. Every twitch and tingle was magnified hundreds of times by my sensitive nervous system. For years my mother said, "You are the one that feels. God help you."
I felt like I was a witness to these events. I was watching myself. This feeling increased as I heard my mother speak. I knew I would see a white tunnel of light soon and then I'd be gone.

"Well, how many times, Ritchie? How many times?"

Mr. Cohan who was in the front seat said, “Calm down Vera. Calm down. The boy is hurt.”

Dear Mr. Cohan. How he tried to help but my mother never did calm down. My father Miltie was out selling kitchen tables and armoires while my ma was getting more and more hysterical.

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I come from a long line of hysterical people. I'm not proud of it or ashamed. It's one of those traits like brown eyes or scoliosis or musical talent that is hereditary. The hysteria in my family affected me in odd ways. Let me tell you how.

My name is Richard Freeman. I am writing you my up to the moment story from the Rolling Hills Clinic a private psych hospital surrounded by green rolling hills, lakes, and the pastoral beauty of the New Hampshire countryside. I won't tell you the exact location. I don't want any mail. My journey into mental health is costing my parents an arm and a leg, to be more precise hundreds of arms and hundreds of legs. My mother, the one who couldn't calm down when I was ten and was shot by my brothers, just left me at this clinic for the disturbed financially well off.

"It's like you are going to camp, Ritchie. Remember the set of candle holders you made me at Camp Iroquois." My mother was crying. Life used to hold such promise for her. "Ritchie, be a good boy and write home at least once a week."

"Call collect," said Milton Freeman who was standing outside my room hollering his offering. He was unable to look at me. As a child I realized my father was moved by three things, the daily stock reports, his furniture business, and some Vivaldi. That was about it. To see his one and only son (the twins were from my mother's first marriage) the future of the Freeman Empire being locked up in a clinic because the doctor said he had an emotional problem was too much for my father. Cracks were showing in his hard exterior. The hysteria was seeping out of them. He covered it by stuffing his face in a newspaper. He always carried one in his pocket like a kleenex.
"Your father loves you, Ritchie. He feels bad. You should be off to college, not here. Just this morning he said to me, 'Vera, It isn't right, our son is in that place.' He's hurting Ritchie, right here he's hurting (Vera clutched her chest and sat down). I said, ‘Milton, don't worry. Dr. Samuels is the top doctor at the clinic. He worked at Mass General. Ritchie has a problem. He'll get over it. He's a kleptoma…' "

‘Don't say it, Vera. I can't stand to hear it.’ ”

"He loves you. Can't you see that, Ritchie?"

"'He's a kleptomaniac, Milton. You have to face it,' I said. Your father put his hands over his ears. He couldn't bear to hear this about you, Ritchie. See how much he loves you. See the pain you have put him in."

Vera kissed me good-bye. Milton yelled good-bye from the door. They drove down the long tree lined drive away from their son and his problem. I imagined their conversation in the car.

"Vera, all we need to do is leave him there. The doctors will take care of Ritchie. They'll give him pills. It worked for Esther's granddaughter. You know the one who wouldn't go out of the house."

Milton, no response. He turned on The Four Seasons tape. Winter was playing.

******

I stood captive at the exit door to the clinic, the door I could not go out unless my parents signed a paper. I watched Milton and Vera get smaller and smaller. The laws of visual perspective and size coming into play.

I heard a voice say, "Boy your parents are loaded." A scrawny kid of about ten, a boy with bulging eyes surrounded by deep crater like circles, looked at me from his wire-rimmed glasses. He was referring to the 1999 Silver Mercedes my parents had fled in.

"What's your name?" I asked the scrawny kid.

"Jason," he answered.

"How long have you had that thyroid condition?"

"I don't have a thyroid condition," said Jason clutching his throat.

"It's either that or your eyes are popping our of your head because your father and mother are bugs!"

"You promise not to tell anyone I have that problem? I don't want them to think I'm sick."
I laughed, "If you're here, everyone knows you're sick, and besides if your doctor is like mine, he's tested you for everything from mono to the plague. If you're sick, he knows it."

"My doctor doesn't believe crazy people are sick in their bodies. He's thinks my problem is all in my head."

"You can be sick in both places."

"You're a smart kid," said Jason.

"Not smart enough to stay out of this place. What do you think is wrong with you?"

"I know I'm going to die soon," said Jason. "Everyone tells me it won't happen. I'm only ten, but I know I'm going to die soon."

"It must be rough knowing you won't grow up."

"What's so great about being a grownup?" said Jason. "Grownups fight most of the time."

"My parents don't actually fight. My mother, Vera, fights. She goes nuts. She looses control."

"My parents had screaming fights, breaking dishes, the whole hit in the face black eye stuff until my mother died," said Jason.

"I don't like to talk about mothers dying."

"I know what you mean,' said Jason.

"How do you think you'll die, Jason?"

"It will be violent like an earthquake or a drowning at sea. I could be killed by a terrorist bomb like that bomb in New York City. Maybe someone will take me from my bed at night, kidnap me, throw my body in the woods. Then have sex with me."

Jason nervously walked around in circles. "How come you know about thyroids?" he asked. "Is your father a doctor?"

"No, but my mother eyes used to bulge like yours. That's what the doctor told her was wrong. He thought giving her pills would stop her crying but it didn't."

"I don't cry," said Jason.

"You're lucky."

"Why are you twirling a strand of his hair around your finger?" asked Jason.

"It's something I do. My father hates it."

"Why are you here?" asked Jason, slowing his circling pace.

"I'm here because I like to take things that aren't mine. My family, the police, the doctors are making a big deal out of nothing. There's nothing
wrong with me. Look at me. Look at this million-dollar smile. It got me elected as tenth grade class president.”

"Stealing isn't right no matter how good looking you are," said Jason.

"That depends on how you look at it," said Ritchie. "I think everything belongs to everyone. We should be sharing everything."

"What did you take?"

"Different things."

"Like what?"

"Last week I took a pair of jeans from Filenes’s Basement."

"What's the most expensive thing you've taken?" asked Jason as he stopped making circles and walked with me back to my room.

I thought a moment stretching my long arms above my head. The ride from Boston left my legs and arms feeling stiff and cramped.

“I took a small statue from the Egyptian section at the Fine Arts Museum.”

"Wow!" said Jason.

"It wasn't so great. I had to go to jail overnight. I got out only because my parents agreed to bring me here for treatment.”

"Why did you do it?" asked Jason.

"I don't know. Why do you think you are going to die soon?" said Ritchie.

"Because we all are," said Jason.

******

The day before I came to the hospital my mother said, “Ritchie, your father and I need to talk. Go pack a few things. The wool cable sweater will be good and a couple pairs of pants, the ones Enid brought your for your birthday, and remember the toothpaste with the fluoride.”

While packing in my room I heard my parents’ conversation their bedroom was adjacent to mine.

“What did you make such a heavy wool sweater for me? You know I sweat like a pig!” said my father. “My father sweat like a pig. His father sweat like a pig and his great grandfather sweat like a pig! If Ritchie is any kind of man, he’ll sweat like a pig someday! Give him the sweater and see what happens.”

“Miltie,” my mother said changing the subject, “I think it's strange that a kid who has everything would steal. Okay, maybe a pair of jeans is
understandable. He could use them. But an Egyptian statue of a cat with wings!

“Ritchie likes Egyptian Art.”

“How would you know what Ritchie likes? You're never around.”

“I have eyes, Vera. I pay attention. Ritchie has pyramids in his room, small replicas of the great pyramids in Egypt. When he was twelve he did a report on Ancient Egypt. I helped him. I pay attention to our son.”

“That was six years ago. What does Ritchie like now Milton? When was the last time you did anything with him? Don’t bury yourself in that paper as if you are a mole. I can’t hear you. I can’t hear you, Miltie.”

When Milton didn't answer, Vera started, "That's why Ritchie steals. He needs to put jeans and statues and magazines and motorcycles where his father should be!"

“What do you want from me?” my father pleaded.

“Something you can't give,” said Vera. I could hear the sound of her ripping the paper in half.

“Vera, not the business section,” my father said. “Don’t rip the damn business section.”

I decided to put an extra pair of pants in my duffle bag as I swallowed my last Valium.

*****

"Hi Ritchie," said Vera. She called me a week after I was dropped off like an expensive coat to be dry-cleaned at the clinic. "How are you? Are they treating you well? Are you getting enough to eat?"

"Yes, Ma, I'm eating well. The food is not as good as yours."

"You've always been a charmer, Ritchie, with those blue eyes and black curly hair. You know what to say to me to make me feel better. Not like your father who never compliments my food, my clothes, or anything I do."

Does a stone smell like perfume? Does a cat know how to bark? Do oil and water mix? These were a few of the questions my mother threw at me over the years when talking about my unappreciative father. I realized at the age of thirteen that the marriage between my parents was a monetary arrangement. My father earned money. My mother spent it. And what was my job? To make my mother happy. The other kids, the heinous twins, had left home. Who was left? Miltie and me. So I listened like I am doing now. I held the receiver about four inches from my ear as my mother vented. I twirled my black curls around that middle finger. My mother's voice rising and falling like she was singing an aria about life's injustices.
"Are you making any friends?" said Vera.
"I spend time with Jason."
"Isn't a ten year old a little young for you?" said Vera.
"He looks ten but I think he's older then that."
Vera knew what Ritchie meant. She had been older then her age as a child, taking care of her four younger siblings and listening to her mother's worries about money. "Your father is a good man but money runs through his fingers like it flows out of the water faucet, constantly. Let's cook half the roast tonight, save the rest for tomorrow. All the ways her mother economized. Miltie was different with money. It stuck to him like glue.
Vera went back to her high-pitched song.
"The only reason your father married me was because his boss told him, 'Miltie if you want a new bedroom set, get married. I'll give it to you as a wedding present. Find a nice girl. Settle down. I'll give you the set and throw in wall-to-wall carpeting for the whole house. And I'll promote you to assistant manager. Good deal.'
"The next day your father proposed. He couldn't refuse a free bedroom set and a job promotion all at once. He's ruined my life for a bedroom set and a promotion. An ugly French provincial set. The store closed down a year later. What was the good of our marriage? And what he's done to you!" My ma burst into tears.
I'd listened to my mother for eighteen years. She sang the same song different verses all that time. It was someone else's turn to listen. "Ma, I have to go. My doctor wants to see me."
"If he gives you giant pills, like the pills Esther's daughter took, drink plenty of water, two glasses or more. Remember I'm the only one who loves you Ritchie. Mommy loves you. But I can't be there to get the pill out if it gets stuck. Drink the water."
"Got to go. Bye, Ma."

*******

Dr. Samuels was short and square, looking more like a laborer then a man concerned with the workings of the id and superego. He was a psychoanalyst. I had read about shrinks in the human behavior class I took in high school. Today was my first session. Probably the doctors got together to see who needed money for their mortgage payments or who hadn't paid off their kid's student loan. Dr. Samuels was probably the neediest. He got the new crazy.
"Come in, Ritchie. Sit down," he motioned. as I stood in the doorway looking at his office filled with books and leather furniture. There were a
couple of reproductions of Degas's dancers and a bronze statue of a samurai warrior. "Don't worry I won't steal that statue. It's not my taste," I said. Dr. Samuels didn't laugh. I was in trouble.
"I want you to tell me what you think is wrong, Ritchie. Why you take things that aren't yours?"

Jason and I had talked about the best way to answer the doctors. "Never let them know what you are really thinking," said Jason. "They twist your words around. It gets confusing. I told Dr. Samuels I saw an angel in my room at night. The doctor made me take this drug that put me to sleep. He didn't want me to see the angels anymore. He didn't want me to be happy. He didn't want me to dream. Don't let them take things away from you, Ritchie."

I knew Jason was only a kid but he decided to listen to Jason. Those dark circles, that fragile body gave Jason an air of knowing like he was connected to a special plug in the universe. Jason had eyes like the Egyptian statue.

"When a kid is my age he needs things," I smugly replied looking for his reaction.
"Why would you need a statue of an ancient Egyptian God?"
"I liked it," I said.
"I like Degas, the French painter, but I wouldn't go into a museum and steal a painting," said Dr. Samuels.
"Maybe you aren't smart enough to pull it off. No offense."
"You're right about that, and I wouldn't even try. That's the point I'm trying to make. People don't steal unless they have a reason."

This line of questioning went on for about twenty minutes. I didn't give the doctor an answer that pleased him. It felt much like school and home. Every adult wanted the right answer. Life was like a quiz show. I said, "I think you're expecting too much from me. I don't know why I take things. Besides isn't that your job to find out why? You're supposed to be so smart, you worked at Mass General. Did you get fired?"

Dr. Samuels ignored me. "Well, Ritchie, I think we are finally getting somewhere." Jason warned me about puzzling statements. Dr. Samuels had me lie on the couch in the corner of his office. He sat behind me with a legal pad and a blank expression on his face.
"I'm going to say a word, and I want you to say the first word that comes into your mind. Let's start. Grapes."
"Oranges."
"Now, Ritchie, keep saying what comes into your mind from that word."
"Apples, spice, dandelions...."
"Go on."
"Fruit juice, margaritas, left over cream pie, tangos, limes, persimmons."
"Good. Let's try another word. Expect."
"Want, love, everything, time, mother expects me to listen." I rambled on interjecting words that had nothing to do with anything. This free-associating was fun. I watched the pictures fly by in my mind. "Mother, bookcases, chew, airplanes, money, stocks, bonds, parties, complain, explain. "The couch was getting too comfortable. I never let anyone hear the words inside my head. I almost forgot Dr. Samuels was in the room until I heard a faint voice say, ‘I’m leaving now. Don't tell them anything. You'll regret it.’ Then Dr. Samuels said, "Time up for today. Be here tomorrow same time."

That faint voice did not belong to Dr. Samuels. Maybe it did. Those doctors could play all sorts of games to catch patients. I did pretty well today. He didn't catch me. Catch me at what was the problem. I really didn't know what I was hiding from him. I left without a pill which Jason said was always a good sign.

The few kids that were at the clinic ate together in a dinning room that resembled a school cafeteria. The evening after my first session with Dr. Samuels, Jason didn't come to dinner. I knew that he ate in his room when he was having a hard time, but tonight I needed to talk with him, he was the kid who knew the ropes here. After dinner I went to his room.

Three nurses were at the door to his room and would not let me in.
"Ritchie, go back to your room, please."
"Where's Jason?" I asked. "I want to talk with him."
"Ritchie," said one of the nurses, "you can't talk to Jason. He's not here anymore."

"He went home. Funny he didn't tell me he was going. He might have found out while I was talking to the doctor. Did he leave an address?"
"Ritchie, said the nurse gently touching my shoulder, "Jason died about an hour ago."

I looked at the nurse, at the yellow walls, at the ceiling, into the empty room where Jason and I had talked that morning. I started to shake. The nurse hugged me close. "He told me he was going to die. He told everyone. Why didn't anyone listen to him? What's the matter with the
people here? What kind of games are you all playing when you don't listen to a kid?"

"It was unexpected," said another nurse.

"No, it wasn't. He told everyone. No one wanted to listen to him. No one wants to listen to me. I went back to my room. Later that night I heard how Jason died. He took his radio into the shower and he was gone.

*************

Vera came to visit the Sunday after Jason died. She was calm, almost too calm for my mother. My father was busy with a sale at his furniture stores. "He loves you Ritchie. He can't show it. It hurts him to come here. I heard your friend Jason died. I'm sorry. He didn't look too good for a ten year old. Where are his parents? Did they come?"

"His father came. He doesn't have a mother."

"Ritchie, remember you are not sick like Jason. What happened to him won't happen to you. You like to go shopping like your ma."

"Anything can happen to me. Even what happened to Jason. I worry about dying sometimes just like Jason did. What's wrong with me? I don't want to be here. I want out. Help me to get out, please. Help me."

"I promise, Ritchie, I will," said Vera, clutching me to her as she kissed the top of my head, patting down a stray curl with her chin.

"I knew Miltie was not the right husband for me," said Vera, as she threw her arms in the air. "I knew it before I walked down the isle," she added, flailing her arms about like she was ridding her space of unseen buzzing mosquitoes. "I married Miltie for security so you kids could eat as much roast as you wanted. I did it for you kids. Do you believe me, Ritchie?"

I nodded my head.

"I am going to make it right. We are going to talk to Dr. Samuels together. You and I and then your father. I am going to get you out of here, Ritchie. I promise."

"That father of yours is going to see what he has done. Every time he wasn't there for baseball games, parent teacher meetings, birthdays, your Bar Mitzvah, he came late to your Bar Mitzvah! What kind of man is he?" Vera went on like a volcano whose eruption could not be slowed or controlled. My father was a monster.

Walking to Dr. Samuels' office, I looked for something valuable that I could steal from the clinic. When the staff found out I had taken it, I would get a few more months here. It seemed the smartest thing to do.