1

YOU BE THE JUDGE.

It was reported in the *New York Mirror* that a City cop had stopped his car when he saw a woman trying to change a tire on the other side of the road, yelled over the top of the partially opened window that he was going to give her assistance, opened the door, swiveled his body out and then, well, was crushed by a car that sped by, ripping the door clear off the hinges and dragging him underneath; when I heard the news, I mouthed, *Say good fucking farewell to Ike deVenezia*.

He'd been driving at night in a violent rainstorm on Crotona Avenue. He'd just gone through the park, and ironically was approaching 176th Street in the Tremont section of The Bronx.

"The Good Samaritan," Dr. Silverman—my court-appointed shrink—said hopefully.

"The ironies of appearances," I said.

"Acknowledging a charitable act doesn't imply succumbing to praise for someone whom you otherwise disdain," she said. "You didn't feel *any* compassion when he was killed? Especially under the circumstances?"

"Did I wish that the man I'd called my father for twenty-three years would die or suffer? Of course not. Look, let's just say that we wore different uniforms."

He was laid to rest at Mount Judah Cemetery in Ridgewood, Queens, on a very chilly December 27th in 1955.

After the graveside ceremony, we went back to his house in Tremont. This was only the second time in my life I'd seen my brother formally dressed; it was an outfit so inconsistent with his station in life—a dark blue, double-breasted suit with a thin pinstripe, a white-on-white button-down shirt, and red challis tie—he stood out more because of this costume than he did as the older son of the deceased.

We couldn't fit more than a dozen inside his place, so the cops and my father's cronies from the social club on Arthur Avenue gathered in the front yard, in the street, or in the narrow, cracked cement driveway between the houses, blowing on their hands, rubbing their opposite arms. They snaked their way in to pay respects to my mother, who nodded formally as each one passed. She never took any of their hands. Swirls of blue uniforms and black suits rippled through the house, then cascaded down the front stoop, flushed away, never to be seen again.

Ike had been 6'2" and weighed 220 or 230. He was imposing without being handsome. But I have to be honest, he wasn't ugly either. Just a normal-looking guy. His presence, however, was larger than life. With his height and his muscles fitting the uniform like the perfect silhouette of a mannequin, people would shy away from him, and when he entered a store or a room, things got quiet. Mr. Amodio was convinced that the guys stealing stuff from his grocery store would unload their pockets and re-deposit the pinched goods back on the shelves if they caught a glimpse of my father walking down an aisle. What my mother had seen in him was beyond me until I got older and realized that a steady paycheck and respect in the community wasn't a bad bargain; although, if she'd been brought up in a different era, she might've pulled up stakes and taken me upstate and changed our names so he couldn't find us. But who knows if that's true—it's like speculating on what presidents would've done if they hadn't died in office or what movies Hollywood stars would've made had they been able to stay off the bottle.

Dr. Silverman wanted to know more about the relationship between my parents.

"My mother could never penetrate the walls that he constructed; frankly, I don't know if any woman could've. Under the circumstances, she held up pretty well considering she'd suffered through the catastrophe of finding out what he'd been involved with all those years. They said in the papers that she must've known—you can't live with someone embroiled in those kinds of shenanigans and not be aware—but I can tell you, flat out, that until it all started to unravel after he died, it was news to her. Oh, for sure she knew he was what they call a *nogoodnik* judging by the guys he hung around with—you saw them, hiding their faces behind papers or fedoras, pulled down low over their foreheads as they went into court. She suspected he was more of a Willie Sutton kind of guy. You know the story: he robbed banks with guns that weren't loaded because he didn't want to hurt anyone, as opposed to Pretty Boy Floyd, who not only robbed banks but also machine-gunned cops to death. So, she assumed the late nights with his drinking pals at the Italian clubs on Arthur Avenue and the poker games in the back of Irish pubs might've included a little dice game, some betting on races, playing pool and darts, drinking contests, that kind of thing. She told my grandmother that he likely fixed a ticket here and there, clubbed the occasional hoodlum a little too hard during an arrest, and threatened a few witnesses—standard things in the force. She knew he wasn't on the take, that's for sure, given how we'd lived. There was this thing with girls, however. Women. There was one a few years after they were married that apparently went on for a while. A couple of years anyway. After that, my mother figured it was just a series of one-night stands. She could usually tell: the alcohol and the too-elaborate excuses for his lateness or forgetfulness. I have to say, through it all, she never fell apart."

"Until you were charged."

Dr. S. had a point.

She'd seen the transcript of what I wrote and read to the judge, the allocution prior to sentencing, after all the evidence had been presented.

> The truth is, as you know, I turned myself in. I am guilty of everything you have been told, but it was not for glory, revenge, or reward.

> I did not benefit in any way. You may ask if there had been another way to handle it. An anonymous tip, perhaps? What if I had just kept my mouth shut? Was I being a martyr? These are legitimate questions worth considering. What it all boils down to is that I did what I thought was right. I did not think about the consequences, and I have no regrets. I will live with what I did. I only request that when you take everything under advisement, please ask yourself who the guilty party is here, who is really responsible for all of this mayhem, and how we—those of us here in this courtroom and the others who will read about it on the subway or watch it on the news—are going to make sure the things that caused me to do this do not happen again. That is the crux of the issue. That is what is at stake. Your Honor, although there will be some who revel in my downfall, those are the same people who will triumph if the merry-go-round stops with me and fails to bring the real culprits to justice. Thank you.

I resisted the suggestion of my lawyer to ask for forgiveness or otherwise bring God into it. "The judge is Irish Catholic," he said, "and a little repentance may be very beneficial to you; it'd be easier for him to give absolution."

That wasn't exactly the means to get me to come around to his way of thinking.

After my deal, there was another plea arrangement followed by a trial that dominated the headlines of the New York tabloids for weeks.

I pleaded guilty to a Class A misdemeanor, but the judge refrained from making any scathing remarks during the sentencing. He stuck primarily to '*the law is the law*.' My attorney told me later that, privately, the judge wished me well. I wasn't surprised, considering I'd been sentenced to only three to six months at Alden, twenty miles east of Buffalo, with the proviso that upon release I begin regular visits with a therapist, in addition to reporting to a parole officer. They let me out after three months for exemplary behavior.

No one in Alden thought of himself as a criminal. Technically, we all were, as we'd each broken some law or another, but this was the place where they sent the misfits who'd been too stupid to come clean about what they

knew of some criminal enterprise or another, or were there for convictions such as conspiracy, perjury, bribery, or embezzlement. Nothing violent. Many of these guys would sit around in the common room or dining hall and commiserate with each other, telling stories that showed them in the best possible light, and occasionally plotting revenge on those who'd testified against them, knowing full well that this was all false bravado. They'd return to their homes and families, reeking of contrition, embarrassment weighing down on them so heavily that they'd appear to physically shrink in front of friends and relatives.

We had room to walk around, there were places where we could play ping pong and watch TV, and radios were played softly in our cells, purposefully kept low to avoid annoying anyone else. We got used to our lives having been reduced to occupying undersized spaces, which for me, wasn't so different from where I'd grown up. Our place in Tremont was small, about 1,000 square feet, with the three postage-stamp-sized bedrooms on the second floor. Eric and I shared what was called a Jack and Jill bathroom, but through high school it was mine, as my brother (only my mother and I called him by his real name, everyone else called him Bud) was older and out of the house at seventeen when he finished school. We had a screened porch in the back that was an illegal add-on, my father's pals having been enlisted to help. The floor planks warped, the screens never quite sealed correctly, and the cement posts cracked—things I noticed only when I left the house for good. The backyard was a misnomer, as there was little grass. It was mostly dirt and hardscrabble wild bushes that thrive in urban areas where sunlight is intermittent and water is brackish, containing oil, diesel, and other debris from the nearby tracks. Separating the yard from the railroad bed was a six-foot-high, chain-link, fenced-in area closed off with a bicycle lock attached to a gate. Inside this area was junk that other cops brought over—the detritus from storerooms that they couldn't pawn but wouldn't give up on either.

The noise from the New York Central was ever-present, and when the diesels were hauling freight at night, the fumes permeated the house and rattled the floorboards incessantly. Occasionally, I'd hoist myself up through a movable cover in the ceiling in the bathroom, which led to a crawl space from which the previous tenant had punched through to the roof. Once,

when I was nine, on an oppressively hot night, I scrambled up to the roof and was about to go to sleep when I heard some muffled noises in the back yard. Peering over the edge of the roof, I saw two men unlock the gate on the fence, dig near an old refrigerator, place a duffel bag into the hole, cover it up with dirt and stones, and leave after relocking the gate, having not spoken a word. I was tempted to go outside and check on what I'd witnessed but thought better of it in case the men returned with another load to hide. I said nothing to anyone. For the next two nights, I resolved to dig up what had been buried there. Then I'd chicken out, settling for daydreams about what treasures might be found. On the third night, my curiosity overwhelmed my good sensibility. I scaled the fence and dug carefully into the ground, trying to make as little disruption as possible to the surface. The grave was shallow. After digging only a foot or so, I felt the duffel bag, undid the zipper, peered in, and saw that the blue bag was filled to the brim with bills—tens, twenties, and hundreds. None of the bills were banded or paperclipped. It was all loose. I stuck my arm into the bag as far as it could go and still didn't reach the other end. I couldn't imagine how much money was inside. I looked around. I was alone. My first instinct was to zip it, cover it up, and go back inside. After a minute, I did precisely that, but only after scooping as many hundreds and twenties into my underpants as I could. I walked gingerly to the fence, then realized that the money would fall out when I climbed it, so I threaded the bills through the openings of the fence, scaled the fence again, and ran inside to get something big enough to hold my haul. The laundry bag was big enough, but my mother would find it in the morning. A shoebox that held my stamps was too small, and anyway, where would I put the stamps? I started to panic. Then I thought of the perfect hiding place. I retrieved Alanphant from the chair where he'd kept a watchful eye on me since I was six years old. I kissed him, and told him it was all being done for a good cause. I took out my Swiss Army knife from a drawer, sliced into the stuffed animal's back, removed most of the padding, and replaced it with the money I'd stolen from the hole out back. I reminded myself to stitch up Alanphant in the morning. Then I went to sleep.

✦

IN 1939, MY MOTHER TOOK ME and my grandmother to the World's Fair in Flushing Meadows Park in Queens. They were most interested in gawking at the 600-foot-high Trylon, the extraordinarily huge Perisphere, and the nearly 1000-foot-long Helicline, a staircase that connected these monumental structures: the three centerpieces of The World of Tomorrow. I, on the other hand, was mesmerized by the cows on the automatic rotating milking machine platform and was especially excited to see Elsie herself, in the flesh, a symbol that hooked me to Borden's milk for the rest of my childhood. The Futurama exhibit contained a 1/3-mile ride suspended over a future America, where you could look down upon many thousands of models of what life would be like in 1960. Being six, I was particularly enchanted by the hawkers of games of chance and food, the barkers who'd offer free eats and prizes—inducements to lighten adults' wallets for their kids. Passing by one of these stations, I was struck by the sight of an enormous stuffed animal, almost my height—a mass of gray fabric with a long stringy tail, giant floppy ears, an elongated snout, and two immense tusks jutting out from its lips. I stopped in my tracks. I had to have it. Even at that young age, I knew not to make demands or to carry on in such a way as to annoy my mother. I made a beeline to grandma. I pointed to the animal and suggested that it would be a nice gift for my brother, who was at school and couldn't join us.

"Which one?" Grandma asked, seeing right through my ruse.

I pointed.

"The big gray elephant?" Grandma asked.

"Yes, the Ellenphant!" I exclaimed.

My mother and grandma looked at me to see if I was making a joke.

"Now, how can you refuse a kid who's in love with an Ellenphant?" said the man behind the counter.

Needless to say, they bought it for me. After caressing it for the hour and a half it took to get home via the Flushing Line, the 42nd Street Shuttle, and the Number 5, I placed Ellenphant on my bed. When I showed my new prized possession to my brother, he said, "It's not Ellenphant, you dipshit. It's Alanphant." At least that's the way I heard it. Even when I eventually learned the correct pronunciation, he was Alanphant to me—my steadfast friend who never divulged the secret he kept inside for years:

That I was a thief.

✦

OCCASIONALLY, I'D GO UP on the roof with my brother during the day. One time, the landlord spotted us and shouted at us to get the hell down. Eric configured his right hand into a gun, pointed it at the dumpy guy and said, "Go fuck yourself." To me, he said, "I'm not afraid of a *guinea* named Pappalardo who owns a beauty parlor."

My brother had nicknames for his friends: "Nappy" Nate, "Paddy" Sean, and "Caramba" Carlos. Having said this, I can tell you that Eric wasn't a bigot. He got as well as he gave from these very same guys: sometimes "ric-dick" or "e-prick"; he took no offense. Actually, I kind of think he was proud of it, as he was the ringleader of these swells who all grew up around us and whose ambition was first to apprentice to the *goombahs, hooligans*, and *gamberros* who controlled the streets and then to replace them. In our neighborhood, we called hoods *rocks*, and Eric was the most polished stone in the community. He was the spitting image of our old man by the time he was eighteen. They had the same coal-brown eyes. Eric was just a little bit shorter, but his muscular arms and thick neck advertised his toughness. Coupled with black hair exaggeratedly swirled into a giant curl that hung down between his eyebrows, he wasn't someone to challenge; you didn't talk back to him. He bought a 1937 brown Dodge coupe with his craps winnings when he was sixteen and drove it around Tremont with the radio blaring to enhance his stature with friends and foes alike. The rumble of the muffler served as a magnet, attracting the sisters and female friends of wannabe hoods. Driving around our neighborhood with a cutie nestled up against him got nods and winks from the old men on their stoops, who undoubtedly fantasized that they could've taken Eric's place back in the day, regardless of how unlikely that would've been. I've noticed that the older a guy gets, the greater his proclivity to see himself in a magnified role when he revisits his past—a harmless invention that helps him get through a day of chronic physical aches and mental anguishes.

MY BROTHER WOULD YELL at me for the most inconsequential things despite my mother's protestations. He'd respond by laughing, swiping

something she'd made in the kitchen, and stomping out, shoveling whatever he'd grabbed into his mouth and continuing his rant until the front door slammed and he was drowned out by the sounds of cars or the train. It could've been dead of winter, but my mother's face would be on fire, reflecting an anger that couldn't ever be suppressed.

Eric was a bully. And a jerk. He'd trip me, knock me off my bicycle, break my pencils, hide my scrapbooks, steal my stamps, short sheet my bed, take my change, spill ink on my homework, give me noogies, and embarrass me in front of my friends by revealing intimacies. It was endless. I lived in fear. There wasn't much I could do except stew about it. And tell my mother. As I got older, I didn't run to her as often. The very last time I did, it was with a specific purpose. It was winter. All the kids on the block would have snowball fights, and although I was always on my brother's side, I had the urge to cold-cock him with one when he wasn't looking. But I never did. Eric's specialty was to create two kinds of snowballs: small, hard-packed ones dosed with a coating of water which turned them into ice balls and ones shaped around a stone.

I was walking home from my Hebrew lessons on one of the coldest days of the year, in a snowstorm, after the sun was down, the only light coming from the occasional bulb over a front door, when I saw a group of more than a dozen boys engaged in what I can only describe as a snowball fight that simulated a street brawl. It was intense. I didn't want to get involved, so I circumvented the attack zone, walking behind the house adjacent to ours to sneak up to our back door. Next to the milk box, I noticed Eric's stash of snowballs—the ones with the stones inside of them. It was time. I picked one up and walked back around the house, peeking out from behind the corner that faced the street. I saw Eric. He didn't see me. I let loose with the hardest throw I'd ever attempted. It missed Eric but slammed into the face of a kid he was fighting, who went down as if he'd been hit by an uppercut from Rocky Marciano. He screamed. I withdrew to the back of the house, unseen, opened the side door, and showed my mother Eric's stack of stone-filled snowballs.

The upshot? The kid was taken to the hospital with a broken nose and two busted teeth. Eric was booked as a juvenile delinquent the next day and taken to Juvie Hall, where he spent the rest of the school year. The parents

of the injured kid spread the word in the neighborhood that they'd seek retribution but were persuaded otherwise after a woman named Donatella delivered a cash-fat envelope to their house. My father's version of discipline to Eric was to instruct him never to make snowballs with stones inside of them again. My mother was so frustrated with both of them that she packed me up and went to her mother's house in Pelham Bay, where we stayed until the end of the Christmas vacation.

That was my revenge. I never hesitated in betraying my brother and tricking my mother. I succeeded in getting my brother punished for something he didn't do. I was a liar and a manipulator in addition to being a thief. I had no guilt. None. My mother praised me for showing her the evidence that allowed her to turn in my own brother. She gave me a hug, rubbed my back, and cooed, "You're such a good, honest boy."

Alanphant and snowballs were the most memorable things I could recall from my childhood.

When I mentioned these things to Dr. S., she said, "You know, Jay, some memories can take on a different characteristic each time they're recalled."

I was thinking: *She has a point here—pay attention*.

She continued. "Details can be subjected to a withering cross on the witness stand of memory, and you can't be expected to provide an identical answer to multiple questioners because you can be probed under very different sets of circumstances and at times far removed from the event."

I couldn't tell if this was her fancy, clinical way of saying she didn't always believe every word of my stories but was with me in gist.

"It's said that our memories play tricks on us as if they're distinct from us—a second party that's been granted a dispensation from our primary remembrances with no recriminations or ill will. So, do we suffer a penalty if we're flagged with a minor memory infraction even if there's no harm to third parties? Does it matter if we paraphrase what someone said even though we report it in quotes as if it were a verbatim transcription? What if we leave things out by omission or commission? Aren't we then editorializing instead of reporting? And what do we make of diaries or other notes written down immediately after an event? Aren't we a little too eager to accept these words as actual records instead of critically assessing them

while keeping in mind the author's slant, which may put him or her in a more favorable light than otherwise might've been the case?" She ruffled through her notes. "In your situation, though, the details you shared with the police, your attorney, your friends, and me have always been essentially the same."

Yes, I had experience on the wrong side of a cross examination, so I knew what she was talking about. As I sat there listening to her, my mind wandered back to the plea agreement that was the root cause of why I was in her office. When the DA and my attorney gave their summations to the judge, they gave slightly different versions of what I'd done, but both statements stuck to basically the same set of facts. I didn't dispute the events or the timeline. My attorney argued that the *intent* of what I'd done wasn't criminal and that, in fact, I'd been trying to prevent a crime from taking place.

Dr. Silverman was right. Recalling my day in court, I saw the judge, prosecutor, and those in the peanut gallery—especially the stringers and photographers from the papers. Their sensational headlines would compete for attention at the newsstands, promising a main course of murder with a side dish of corruption of the high muckety-mucks. The reporters would seize on any seeming inconsistency in my testimony to paint me in an unfavorable light, thereby casting doubt on the guilt of the defendants.

"I'm doing my best to tell it all to you exactly as it happened," I said to Dr. S.

"I appreciate that, because I only know what I've read in the papers or seen on the news."

"What good would it do me to lie to you now? I've done my time. The facts are the facts. But you're right; if I were to tell you the same set of facts six months from now, I might not use the same words, and I might tell them with a different style or add a little color here and there, but the substance would be the same, that I can tell you for sure, one hundred percent," I replied with satisfaction.

"It's as if you're writing a memoir with me, Jay, a fusion of memory and imagination, thematic reflection and good old-fashioned storytelling that details pivotal events and emotional incidents into scenes."

In just a couple of minutes, she'd managed to help me rebuild the feeling of confidence that had been lost to me since before this whole episode

began. I left her office with the same feeling I had when I'd walk into Coogan's and notice a woman stealing a glance at me, careful not to let her date notice. I'm taller than my old man and my brother and don't have their Charles Atlas physiques, but at forty pounds lighter, I cut a pretty svelte figure. I have my mother's slim build and light blue eyes that mesh well with what she likes to call my thick, ginger hair. I keep it short, with a beard of equal length, having cut both after my maternal grandmother remarked to all at a Thanksgiving dinner that I looked like a golem, as if she'd seen one herself, so there was no need to deny her certitude.

Dr. Leah Silverman was a babe, pure and simple. I could tell from the diplomas on the wall that she was ten years older than I, but if I hadn't seen the dates, I would've assumed she was my age. She was about 5'6" and had short, black hair cut in the Audrey Hepburn style, as opposed to the Lauren Bacall look, which was all the rage with the girls from The Bronx, who admired the queen of film noir even more, knowing she'd grown up in our neighborhood as Betty Joan Perske.

Despite the fact that she got paid a pittance by the state to deal with ex-cons like me, she gave it her all as if I were one of her posh clients. I'd occasionally see them in the lobby of her building, pretending they were there waiting for a friend instead of biding their time before spinning jaded versions of events to their shrink—about issues that guys like me would find trivial or absurd. I mean, if I told any of those nervous Nellies *my* stories, they'd dump a brick and would run out without wiping themselves.

I have to tell you, Dr. S. was the part of the judge's requirement that I liked. I had to see her once a week for three months after I was released, so I arranged for it to immediately follow the visit with my parole officer, a good-enough, chain-smoking, near-to-retirement Irish guy with a brogue so thick I had to follow his lips to make sure I got what he was saying. He was as bored with his job as I was with the repetitive nature of the checklist of questions he asked. I always showed up on time and didn't give him any crap. The last thing I wanted was for him to send in a report that might trigger the judge to send me back to the can. The word that had me shit-scared was *recidivism*, which had been pounded into me by my lawyer, who'd taken the case as a favor to a rich, Jewish client who arranged for him to defend me on account of my being a fellow member of the tribe.

Yeah, I'm a Bronx Jew from a working-class family. I'd go with my mother to Kabbalat Shabbat services on Friday nights (I can't remember my father or brother ever going with us). She bought me books on Jews and Jewish history for my birthdays. I even had a mezuzah on my bedroom door. I studied with Rabbi Leviev, the furthest thing from a caricature of a Hebrew teacher you could imagine. He was smart, had a wonderful sense of humor, and told stories of Bible figures, assuming their identities as a way to make this unfamiliar language understandable. I don't shy away from saying that I looked forward to Hebrew school.

My father was a *dago*-Jew, more Italian than Heeb. deVenezia, from the original ghetto. Orphaned, which may explain his lust for acceptance by those in power and his rage when he beat the shit out of me. Or maybe not. Let's face it, I'm not the shrink. He was the only Jew in the orphanage with a hundred Catholic kids, and it was his good fortune that he had the physical characteristics to stand up for himself. At twelve, he pried a crucifix off one of the walls and used it to pound the daylights out of a kid four years older who'd taunted him in front of the others on account of his circumcised dick. That night, so he said, he got rid of Isaac and became Ike—the self-described Ike the Kike. How's that for balls?

How my mother put up with him is beyond me. Her family came from Krasnaiya Sloboda in Azerbaijan, one of the so-called Mountain Jews of whom it was said that they'd stopped at the base of the mountain, gazed up, and prayed to God that they wouldn't have to climb it. Instead, they endured passage on a horse-drawn cart that took weeks to get to Odessa, where they got on a tramp steamer that eventually took them to the Promised Land: The Bronx, New York.

Here's how they met: My old man had just graduated from the academy and was a patrolman in the 44th precinct in The Bronx, close to Yankee Stadium on 161st Street. He was initially assigned to look out for fare jumpers on the platform of the Number 4 train at 167th Street and then to position himself near the pizza shops and bars on the blocks next to the Stadium to be within earshot of some owner who'd rush into the street after someone who'd skipped out on his tab. One look at Ike the Kike and the jig was usually up. He'd stand there, stropping his billy club, and if that didn't deter the guy, my father would holler at the top of his lungs that a

slice wasn't worth a bullet in the back, which would always get the guy to stop. Invariably, this would result in Ike getting a lifetime pass for food and beer, no questions asked. It was after witnessing one of these events that my maternal Uncle Mikhail (known as Mickey) introduced Ike to his sister. For the record, although Mickey said he was a witness, it's also possible, probably even likely, that he was the *schmuck* who stole the pie. At any rate, my mother and father first met outside the six-story limestone and brick apartment where my grandparents had escaped to freedom, surrounded by their Bukhori-speaking neighbors in Pelham Bay, gratified that they could melt in peace into the American pot. Or so they thought.

IT'S EASY TO UNDERSTAND how my father was attracted to my mother. With lightly colored olive skin, luminescent hair that seemed to catch the light and encompass her head like a faint halo, deep set blue eyes, high cheekbones, and a smile that beckoned both men and women, she was most frequently characterized as exotic, a descriptive that was a conversation starter, especially for those who'd never encountered anyone who didn't have conventional looks.

When my father wanted to put on the charm, he could do so with the best of them, and that he did to woo my mother. She was shy with those she didn't know well, but on the dance floor, she imagined herself in a Busby Berkeley dance routine from the musical *A Connecticut Yankee*, wearing an elaborate costume when she and Ike would whirl around at a Sunday afternoon synagogue dance. After my father's funeral, she told me that those hours when they danced were the happiest of her life, when Ike shed both his cop clothes and demeanor to simply enjoy her presence. They married in 1928. Eric was born the next year. They moved to the house in Tremont that overlooked the train tracks, six blocks east of the Grand Concourse and a few blocks west of Tremont Park. There, during the day, women with their children roamed the playground, fields, and rock outcroppings. The night belonged to the Italian men who played chess and checkers, smoked cigars, drank high-alcohol Marsala wine, and started speaking in dialect when a stranger entered the park.

It was rumored that Vincent Impellitteri, the future mayor, would meet at night in the park with Tommy Lucchese, the boss of his namesake crime family, and stroll among the players, dispensing goodwill in the form of twenty dollar bills—deposits that would pay loyalty interest in the form of votes and *omertà*. The echoes of those meetings were heard all the way up to the sidewalk tables outside of the *pasticcerias* and the *panetterias* on Arthur Avenue, where the *vecchios* would sit, sip, and snarl the days away. Only later did I find out that the park was also the place where my father and brother had a rendezvous in the middle of the night with Robert Moses, who wielded the most power in New York despite never having held an elected office. You could say that it was inevitable that this park where I used a Spaldeen to play stickball, handball, punchball, and a version of stoopball against the rocks was where all the narratives of my origin story really converged. For better or for worse.

You be the judge.