EPILOGUE / *David Borofka*

WHAT AM I TO SAY about two brothers whose wives have argued, who are thus forced by their immediate loyalties not to speak to one another? Or the surgeon in love with the deftness of his hands, the choreography of his fingers, and who has been forced by illness to set his scalpel aside? Or the woman who refuses to act on her own desires because she is attracted to a married man, one who represents moral integrity and uprightness of heart? What can I do but repeat the usual clichés: that life is indeed a garden of pain, that men and women are born for trouble and heartache. That the world which seems to lie before us like a land so various, so beautiful, so new, etc., etc., is in reality a smoking landfill?

Let us say instead, that one hot June morning, the dew at five-thirty already burned away, Len Farrington returns from his daily run sweaty and happy, illuminated by the sunrise and pleased by his own virtue, to find his brother with whom he has not spoken in a year-and-a-half, sitting on the bench to his front porch.

"Frog," his brother says, using a nickname he hasn't heard since his childhood. "How you can sweat like that, I'll never know."

His older brother Max, pudgy and uncomfortably Episcopalian in his short-sleeved black shirt and white collar, is the very image and picture of grief. His forehead is creased by anxiety, his eyes are clouded. Ever since he and Max stopped talking out of deference to Sylvia and Patrice, he has intuitively known that Max's life is nothing he would trade for. He knows that Max and Sylvia are miserable, their lives circumscribed by her cycle of anti-depressants and sleeping pills. He knows that Max harbors resentment toward his parishioners for their savage and selfish complaints, their dull needs, springing from loneliness and dread. He once envied Max his sense of calling; he does so no longer.

"Sweat's a blessing," he says now, using his brother's jargon. He chooses to ignore the recent history that hangs between them. Instead he focuses on the bright front of his white house, the gleam of newly painted black shutters. "After a run, I've drained all the poisons out of my soul. No offense."

His brother visibly winces at the word "soul," as if he doesn't possess the qualifications for its utterance. *Fuck him,* Len thinks.

Fuck him and his black shirts of depression, his white collar of propriety. Anger radiates through his whole body like heat. He cannot know that Max only winces whenever the language of his trade reminds him of his own shortcomings. He cannot know that even now Max is thinking that Leonard Farrington, independent insurance agent representing all lines of life, homeowner and auto, the Frog Man of their childhood now thirty years in the past, so named for his refusal to touch their slimy green bodies and his general refusal to dirty himself, would have made the better priest.

"Maybe I shouldn't be here," Max says, looking to the pale, flat sky, his round face gone gray in dawn's twilight. "But I need to tell someone."

"Tell who what?"

It is here that Max buries his head, with its few pale threads of sandy-colored hair, into his hands, groaning from a well of despair. "I'm in love." This last syllable of misery still hangs in the rising heat of the morning when Patrice steps outside onto the porch for the morning paper.

"Love," she sniffs, her eyes still smudged by last night's mascara, "the most highly overrated thing on God's green earth." She pulls her flowered housecoat more tightly around herself, picks up the paper, and snaps free the rubber band with a whack that echoes along the quiet street like pistol fire. She steps inside the house again, leaving in her wake nothing, not a word, not a greeting, not a single acknowledgment of her brother-in-law.

"Maybe I shouldn't be here," Max says again. "It was a bad idea."

"No, no, you're here. After all this time. And now you're in..." Len sighs. "Maxie, you're forty-three years old."

"And in love. Again. Fat and stupid and terminal with love."

"And married. Still."

"Yes."

"And Sylvia."

"I'm not in love with Sylvia."

He says this with such utter seriousness, such Episcopalian gravity, such obvious adolescent misery mingled with joy that Lennie can't help but laugh. If he knew how pitiful he looked, how pleased with himself, he would be mortified. This is not the first time that old Maxie, resonant with rectitude, has listened to the dictates of his hormones rather than the doctrines of his church. He has known his share of organists and secretaries, of

the bored and the lonely. But now, this affair of the heart has left him so fragile that this morning he was nearly driven to his knees by the sight of a young woman riding in the bed of a pickup truck. In the glossy heft of her auburn hair, he could see, he was sure, all the promises of eternal life. In matters of yearning, he has the emotional stability of a fourteen-year-old.

"So," Len finally asks, "who is it?"

"No one you know. A woman named Virginia."

"You want to come in?" Len asks.

Max shakes his head. A failed counseling partnership has left Patrice and Syliva—the sisters-in-law, registered marriage-family therapists—embittered, and their anger extends to their respective families. Office furniture now decorates both houses. Three feet from Len and Patrice's front door, a cherrywood roll-top stands accusingly. A couch, upholstered in industrial-grade fabric, faces Max's fireplace.

"No," he says, "I better not."

"Come on." Len pulls his brother's arm. "Patrice won't mind. Have some breakfast."

"No." Max's face brightens for a moment. "Let me buy you breakfast." He names the coffee shop on the corner. "A brother can buy his brother breakfast, right?"

Doubtful now, Len checks his black runner's watch. "I've got an eight-thirty meeting." He checks the watch again. "Oh hell, I'll cancel the meeting. But I've got to shower."

"I'll get us a table. Eggs sunny side up, hash browns, rye toast?"

Len shakes his head. His brother has named his breakfast from the past, as if from a time capsule. "Oatmeal. Half a grapefruit."

"That's not a-"

Len raises a hand before Max can go further. "My cholesterol's at 215, my blood pressure's a little high. I'm forty-one years old, and I'm trying not to fall apart. You get to do the funerals, but I have to write the checks."

"Okay, oatmeal. Half a grapefruit. How about some prune juice? Maybe some Geritol? A Maalox and Metamucil shake? A hair shirt to every fifth unhappy customer."

"Get out of here, I'll meet you." He steps through the doorway into darkness.

After the door closes, Max waits for just a minute on the front porch. The sky is cloudless, a dome shaded from black to azure to aquamarine. Bands of pink and red outline the mountains in the east. By noon it will be nearly white, a furnace. This isn't an

easy land to live in, he thinks, putting on sunglasses against the dawn.

Patrice stands in front of the bathroom mirror, outlining her lips. She wears one towel like a turban, another as a wrap. It strikes Len that the probability of him standing his brother up could be measured by the thickness of terrycloth and gym shorts. When he turns the tap for his shower, Patrice also turns: "Do you mind not doing that while I'm here?" she asks. "It's steamy enough as it is."

So he goes to the shower built into one corner of the garage, cursing the cold cement under his feet. The water begins hot then peters out to lukewarm while he is mid-shampoo. Patrice, he thinks, wiping soap from his eyes. Goddammit. Goddammit to hell. Ever since the collapse of their office and her estrangement from Sylvia, Patrice has been a different person. She took a state job, issuing counseling and prenatal care information to teenagers who look at her with bemused and barely tolerant expressions. She hates them. They remind her too clearly of how fine the line is between success and failure. Patrice now speaks of retirement as her career objective; her résumé has become a ticket to old age. As the cold water drains off his legs, Len once again feels a surge of anger that his money must be used to pay loans for a business that no longer exists. He has an urge to chop the roll-top desk into kindling.

She is dressing when, irked and shivering, Len enters their bedroom. From behind he can discern only the barest outline of the woman he married seventeen years ago. He imagines that he hears his son and daughter begin to stir. They are the children that he and Patrice never bothered to conceive except as jokes, images of misfortune they've avoided. When the toilet clogs, they blame it on the girl, the second child they never had. Could real children have made life worse than this? he wonders. Or has the joke been on them?

His life could be worse. His work is routine, his material needs are met. His neighbors are decent and, in a pinch, generous. Although abstracted and unsatisfied, his wife says she loves him. But there are those unpredictable moments when a voice breathes the word "Tahiti" in his ear, when he imagines himself as Gauguin. Why, he wonders for the umpteenth time, does his brother the priest seem to understand matters of sex and desire better than he does?

In such a mood he watches as Patrice packs her brassiere.

"Don't watch," she says. "It ain't pretty." She shrugs into a blouse, steps into a jumper, choosing clothes as cover for her multitude of sins.

"So how is Max?" she adds. "And how is the poor bastard's wife?"

By chance Max meets a parishioner in the parking lot of Gaylord's. Dr. Klinefelter has been retired for seven years, ever since he diagnosed himself as suffering from multiple sclerosis. The disease has worked quickly. He walks now with twin canes in a jerking, spasmodic hitch-hop gait. His hands resemble talons, his mouth twitches between words. Dr. Klinefelter has attended St. James's, Max's parish, for thirty years—since long before Max was on the scene—and Max measures his Sundays by Klinefelter's lurchings, as if the older man's debility were a barometer of his own unrest. He counts the doctor's illness as one complaint that is entirely verifiable, distinguishing him in this regard from the dozens of other complaints he so often hears.

"Don't eat the hash," the doctor grunts as he settles himself into the booth by the door. It's an old joke—they first met when Max had food poisoning. "Try the waffle," the doctor advises. "Safer."

"The waffle it is."

The doctor places his hand on Max's arm. "I have a riddle for you, Father. How can Paul consider the Law to be an agent of death, when it is by the Law that sin is made known and the Grace of God is made both necessary and manifest? Is the Law then not an agent of life by virtue of its role as the causation of Grace?"

Max smiles. "You're more argument than I can handle."

He knows that Klinefelter will be unsatisfied without an answer, but Max has no intention of debating Paul's Letter to the Romans. Max gently refuses the doctor's offer to share his booth. Klinefelter is widowed and childless, lonely as well as crippled. Any other morning, Max would be glad to eat breakfast with him. His mind is as sharp as a scalpel, and he is a devoted, albeit untrained, student of theology.

"You be good, Father Farrington," the doctor says, "or I'll open you up."

He makes a slicing motion with his shaking right hand. "Good-

ness," Max says, fully aware of all the attendant ironies, "is a vocational risk."

Actually, Max's conscience has been buried for months. He has not allowed himself to think about the ramifications for himself or for Sylvia; he is still thinking only of his desire rather than its consequences.

He goes to the bathroom to wash his hands. In the one stall another man is on his knees. He is throwing up in great shuddering heaves.

"Are you all right?" Max calls. "Is there something I can do?"

"No, no," the other man sings out—cheerfully, Max thinks—before another surge hits him. "I need to get to work anyway."

Leaving this unexplained, the other man rises and throws the bolt on the stall door. He holds the metal frame as if to steady himself. Flecks of vomit dot his shirt, his sport coat looks slept in, and the whites of his eyes have turned muddy as swamp water. He exudes the odor of alcoholic decay.

"You're okay?" Max says. He is more than willing to play the part of the good Samaritan.

"Tip top," the other man says. "Absolutely."

He aims for the sinks, and Max moves out of his way.

"If you're sure," Max says.

"Of course. Absolutely. Sorry you had to witness that." He buries his head in the sink and opens the valve wide. Spray jets everywhere.

"It's quite all right," Max hears himself say.

This courtly graciousness has become a little strange, and he edges out of the bathroom, flagging down a waitress before he sinks into his own booth. He gives his brother's meager order as well as his own, then stops her with a hand on her arm. "Do you know that man?" He tilts his head toward the bathroom door from which the other man has just now emerged, his hair sticking up in wet, unruly spikes.

The girl wrinkles her nose. "All this week, he comes in at five. We draw straws." Her face darkens. "He's never a problem though," she says. "He didn't ask you for money, did he?"

"No."

"Cause if he asked you for money, we'd ask him to leave, but if he didn't ask you for money, then we generally let them stay. Unless the smell gets too bad or something, or if they start making dirty jokes to old women or kids."

"I just wondered."

He sits down to wait for Len. His brother has surprised him. While he knows there is no love lost between Sylvia and Patrice, he expected greater shock from Lennie, his puritan brother. Moral outrage. Judgment. Castigation.

As if to solve his problem, the sun frees itself fully from the rim of mountains to the east, and its full potency pours through the plate glass window next to the booths. The harsh light has the force of a fist and Max first turns his head away. So this is the answer, this stark exposure. Max turns back toward the glare and thinks, *Give me your worst, go ahead,* until the waitresses come by, lowering blinds, pivoting louvres.

As it happens, Len is not the first to meet Max. Virginia has beaten him to it. She called his home only to hear Sylvia's sleep-thick, pill-disfigured voice; she disguised her own hoping to sound like an elderly church member, but Sylvia evidently doesn't care. She doesn't know where her husband is, he could be anywhere, she says. It is obvious that she only wants this bothersome caller to go away. She called St. James's and listened to a recorded message announcing the times of worship. Then she called the number just above Max's in the phone book, his brother's, a longshot at best but there it was: Patrice, much more cheerful and accommodating than Sylvia, told her about Gaylord's.

When Len enters the coffee shop, he first sees Max's worried look, and then Max stands, a polite gesture that he doesn't understand until he sees the glossy dark hair in the seat opposite Max's.

"Lennie," Max says, looking at the other tables, glad that there are not too many others here besides Klinefelter—an older woman with a grandson, both eating pancakes, two men at the counter, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, the drunk from the bathroom, his hands tentatively raising a glass of water to his lips. Max nervously shifts from foot to foot, hands restlessly jingling his change in the pocket of his standard, diocese-issue pants. "I'd like you to meet Virginia. Virginia, my brother Lennie Farrington."

Her eyes are red, and Lennie is struck by these twin facts: first, that this woman is so young and beautiful, and second, that his brother could mean enough to such a woman to cause her to shed tears.

In fact she has just told Max that this will never work. They were fools ever to think it would. In the first place, she has

realized that she loves him *because* he's a minister; she's attracted to men—she knows this now—who represent stability and order, the sanctity and meaning of human life.

"Don't you see," she has just said, "if I get any further involved with you, I'll start being the cause of evil in the world?" When she said this, her nostrils quivered as if she were about to cry, and it was all Max could do not to leap across the table, force her down onto the vinyl flat, and tell her in the language of sex that she had it all wrong, he was neither stable nor pure, she couldn't begin to corrupt him. But would saying that undo the attraction all the more certainly? He could feel a headache beginning to bloom behind his eyelids.

"And truthfully," she added, "I think I just may be nutty about the uniform. You know, the vestments, all that brocade. The Eucharist at Passiontide." And here she began to cry.

Which was when Lennie entered, to shake her warm hand, to marvel at this young woman's presence, to feel the pulse beating steadily at her wrist, to wonder all over again what she could possibly see in this fat, confused older brother of his who once again is the perfect picture of misery caused, Len can see it now, by the pure pain of loss. He feels sorry for Max. He can't help it, even as he is relieved that such a messy situation might be so easily resolved.

They are each given a moment of reprieve when the waitress comes with their orders. Virginia sniffles, says she must go. Max says, No, wait. And to his brother, he says: "We met at the movie theater, did I tell you that? At *The Fisher King*?"

"No," Lennie says, "I hadn't heard that."

"Isn't that right?" Max says to Virginia.

"I have to go."

The waitress has placed Lennie's breakfast in front of Max; Max's plate has landed in front of Lennie—scrambled eggs, sausage links, hash browns, a biscuit and gravy. Intent on the byplay in front of him, he puts a sausage in his mouth without thinking, and is in the act of swallowing when the taste of pork grease hits him. When he tries to spit it out, it happens. The piece of pork makes the ride over the top of his dumb, half-asleep glottis and wedges itself into his airway like a cork—*thunk*!—the sound of suction audible in his own ears.

"No, please," Max is saying. "Stay a little longer. We need to talk."

"No." She's crying again, dabbing at her eyes with a paper napkin.

"I'll call you, then."

"Please don't"

"I need you. I haven't talked to my brother for years, but here we are—I had to tell him about you. You're good for me."

His mention of Lennie reminds them that this is a scene with an audience, but when they look at him everything else is forgotten. His face is red, nearly bursting. Soft squeaking noises come from his wide-open mouth. His hands are at his throat. This has come as such a surprise that Lennie has had no chance to panic or thrash around. His body is rigid with confusion and puzzlement. In front of him are Max and his maybe-maybe-not girlfriend, and their faces begin to twist and run; he cannot get a fix on color or shape.

"Doctor Klinefelter!" Max is screaming from somewhere far off. "My brother! Look!"

The doctor rises slowly to his feet, pushes himself forward on his canes. "Heimlich," the old man says. "Do the Heimlich."

Max dimly remembers descriptions from television and magazines. He pulls his brother to his feet, his fists underneath Lennie's breastbone. His efforts are spasms of anxiety. Lennie squeaks, his face the color of wine. Max feels tears of failure falling onto his brother's shoulders. He has wasted his own life on riddles and tootsies, tootsies and riddles, and by the queerest sense of divine fairness it is his brother who is going to die.

Doctor Klinefelter fumbles in his large pockets, extracts a silver penknife. "Hold him good," he says, pulling the stiff blade free.

It is the one thing Lennie sees, the bright bead of light from the silver blade as it erratically moves toward the hollow of his throat. He does not review his life, nor does he think with fond regret of Patrice. He does not ask forgiveness for his often uncharitable spirit. He only has room in his consciousness for the bright silver blade and the bright pinpoint of light that burns his eyes.

"Hold him now," the doctor says.

"Oh God, oh God," Max says, then yells to Virginia: "Call 9-1-1."

Then Lennie feels his legs go out from him. Has his brother dropped him? If he could just get some air, he would cry, he knows it. For his pain, for the unfairness, for the fact that Maxie the minister, his oversexed, irresponsible older brother, is the one who will get to live! And now other arms are around his ribs.

Max has not dropped Lennie. The drunk from the bathroom has shouldered the doctor and his knife aside and pushed Max

into Virginia's lap. He takes a large sour breath and jerks so hard that Lennie's ribs crack. The sausage flies across the room in a weightless arc, a lazy pop fly through a clear summer's day.

Lennie comes to in the sour draft of his rescuer. As his eyes clear, he believes that God looks like Christopher Lloyd undersea, that he has died only to be revived into an odor of piss and rotten shellfish. Max is holding one of Lennie's hands in both of his own and crying. "Oh, dear sweet Jesus," he says over and over again, a strange mantra for this most professional of Episcopalians. "Oh, dear sweet Jesus, it was all my fault."

"Let him have his air," Doctor Klinefelter says, his tone critical of the stranger, who, although ignorant and unwitting, has succeeded where sobriety and knowledge failed.

The man from the bathroom stalls stands. The color drains from his face, he looks like he's about to faint, but he edges backward, surrendering himself into the waiting lap of an empty booth, and the critical moment passes.

Others now cluster quietly around their little group. The waitress has come with water. A Vietnamese busboy flaps his apron, working a breeze.

Virginia quietly leaves. She touches Max's shoulder with two fingers, leaving him with her blessing, although at this moment she is forgotten. He will, she knows, think of her later.

For now though, Max cries. Lennie breathes. Breathing, for the moment, is sufficient. The front door opens, admitting a gust of sunlight and a large, startled trucker. All these people on the floor, he must think, what is he walking into here? The door closes.

"The Frog Man," Lennie croaks, patting his brother's arm, "the Frog Man lives."

Grace caroms around the room with the velocity of a hockey puck.

What am I to say to such things? That this is a small story after all? I suppose it is, I can't call it otherwise, even with its few moments of danger and risk. It would not even make a credible subplot for an hour-long courtroom drama. Two brothers, their wives, the young naive lover who comes to her senses, the aging doctor, the purple, bloated face of the virtuous victim. The improbable savior, a drunken *deus ex machina*. How can we believe it? What *am* I to say?

That on an early June morning I had just sat down at a booth in

Gaylord's coffee shop unsteadily holding a water glass to my lips when a man began to choke? That I had most recently knelt down, my head inside a toilet bowl, vomit burning my esophagus? That my week's odyssey had begun when my wife and daughter and son packed our station wagon with the barest essentials, saying enough is too much, before driving west into the harsh central California sun? That I had begun to believe that our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting, and that the dreams of this life are nightmares only?

I could say that, I suppose. But then I could just as easily claim that I am Lennie or Max, or Doctor Klinefelter or Virginia, for that matter. That these multiple lives are merely fractions of one life. I could say that in the moment when I fell backwards into the booth at Gaylord's, my vision blurred by strange clarity and the fluttering of some ethereal curtain, I saw in those figures before me my own life revealed, my own apocalypse, an uncovering, a lifting of a veil. I could say that. Absolutely....

Yet why not say what happened? That and merely that.

That in those dark hours before our early dawns, I would wake to hear the sounds of our house: my wife, her back to me, muttering in her sleep, confused even in her slumber over what was to be done with me—with my rages, my silences, my criticisms, my depressions, my sarcasm, my self-loathing; my daughter turning over, restless in the rush of change that was overtaking her; my son crying out against the terrors of the darkness. I would wake to the distress of these sounds, stripped of any capacity for compassion, overwhelmed only by the fact that I could no longer remember the slightly fetid taste of a particular girl's skin. A Gypsy girl with orange hair who made her living by vandalizing parking meters and duping unwary tourists. A girl so exotic to me now that she might as well have been a native of some south Pacific island. One who made me believe, at the age of nineteen, that the future was indeed limitless, that no wrong choice could not be undone.

Some days before they left, my daughter asked me what it would take, since I was so obviously miserable, for God to forgive me. She is twelve, theologically precocious, with a penchant for Socratic irony. The lines above the bridge of her nose are clear signs of her resentment toward me. Arguing with her is a debate with the Grand Inquisitor; I lost without speaking a word. How could I begin to explain to her what it means to be forty-two years old, to read the next thirty years as if they had already been written, to be choked by the twin pains of longing and regret?

That such pains, no matter how clichéd, can drive weak souls into the arms of willing accomplices, and souls weaker still into the passive madness of bitter daydreams? That to forgive oneself, and thereby embrace the forgiveness of God, would require—for the sake of virtue—some forfeiture of dream and desire?

In the room above our garage, the windows face east, and during the summer there is not a morning that is not clear. The sunrise above the Sierras is magnificent, the sky gradually lightening, the red glow of morning throwing the dark mountains into stark relief. These days, since my unconscious act of heroism and surrender last spring, I am awake to see the daily miracle of rebirth and admonition; it washes me with its tides of honesty and grace, and I am reminded that long before my family left, I had already orphaned myself with yearning and self-indulgent woe.

In the sunrise, for a small time I become them all. I know their lives intimately, projections of my own failure, my own pain: Max and Lennie, Patrice and Sylvia, Doctor Klinefelter and Virginia, my departed family, the cretin on the bathroom floor whom I no longer claim. They are mine, after all, my responsibility, my children, adopted without their knowledge or consent; I pray for them to understand that in a choice between inevitable evils, the noble embrace the greater hurt.

What am I to say to such things?

That in this land of light and shadow and make-believe, the dream may school the dreamer?

Oh yes.

And that the character that is my own—poor passing fact if ever there was one—may find within that dream the breath that will let him live?

Yes.

Yes.

Absolutely.

Yes.

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