

The house was built on stilts into the side of a hill next to the Pacific Ocean. It was all weird and formal at dinner that first night with candlesticks and good china. One wall of the dining room was nothing but enormous windows all cranked wide open. The candles would flicker, and you could hear the sound of waves crashing into the rocks and sea lions yelping somewhere off in the distance. Pretty soon Yolanda brought out a huge, shallow bowl of fish-smelling something, and the twins stood in their chairs and yelled, “Hola, Yola!” They were so close to the open windows I wanted to run around the table to catch them before they tumbled out of sight, but I was paralyzed by the stink in that bowl. The rice was all purple from squid ink, and I could see other squid parts floating around, crustaceans too, all looking at me with beady little eyes and feelers, and legs and claws and tails, and the smell, like something you might take out and dump in the garbage.

“Girls, sit,” said Mrs. Cole. “Don’t do that.”

John Henry’s mom didn’t weigh a hundred pounds. She also never blinked. Her eyes were pegged wide open and lit from behind with batshit crazy.

“So you’re the great Spencer Mazio,” said Mr. Cole from the other end of the table, unfurling a napkin.

“I’m sorry?” I said.

“My son has told us a lot about you, and thank you for venturing far and wide to join us.” He lifted his glass to make a toast. “Better you than me on that drive.”

“Dad,” said John Henry like he was trying to intervene, only it wasn’t clear to me yet what needed stopping.

“What?”

John Henry’s dad had to be at least six inches taller than John Henry. He did triathlons and listened to not a word anyone said.

“Girls, enough,” said Mrs. Cole. “Where do your napkins go?”

“Spencer,” said Maggie. “Did you have a little brother that died? Because John Henry said you had a little brother that died.”

“Maggie,” said Mrs. Cole.

“It’s okay,” I said.

“No, it’s not,” she said. “That is not appropriate conversation for the dinner table.”

“His name was Nathan,” I said, sort of lowering my voice as if only Maggie could hear me.

“What happened to him?” said Maggie, now whispering with me.

“He was sick,” I said. “He was very sick.”

“What’d he have?” said Marcie in the same hushed tone.

“It’s called meningitis,” I said.

“Did he catch it?” said Maggie at full volume. “Can you catch it from germs? Mommy doesn’t let us touch anything with germs.”

“Maggie,” said Mrs. Cole. “That’s enough. Stop it. Right now. I mean it.”

“Anybody want a peanut?” said Marcie.

“Are you tripping on ecstasy, Daddy?” said Maggie.

“Am I tripping on what?” said Mr. Cole.

“Ecstasy,” she said. “I’m tripping on ecstasy.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“John Henry says if you’re really happy, you’re tripping on ecstasy. Spencer has a friend named Jonathon who’s tripping on ecstasy all the time. John Henry said so.”

“He also likes girls,” said Maggie.

“Yeah,” said Marcie. “Lots of ‘em.”

“Spencer does too,” said Maggie with a monumental smile on her face.

Mr. Cole dumped a spoonful of fish parts onto his plate and looked at me funny.

“John Henry tells me you spent the summer working in the insurance industry,” he said.

“It was actually kind of a mistake the way it worked out,” I said. “The job was supposed to be at Morgan Stanley.”

“Ah... investment banking,” he said. “My company just raised seventy-five million dollars in a follow-on Goldman ran. The only thing I saw a banker do was change a semicolon to a comma.”

He ate a shrimp.

“And what is it that you do, Mr. Cole?” I said.

“I’m the general counsel of a biotech. We’re developing therapeutics for cardiovascular disease,” he said as he chewed. “But I suppose you could do worse than investment banking. That was a five-million-dollar comma. I’m spending a fortune on Yale, and my son appears bent on life as a pauper.”

“What’s a pauper?” said Marcie.

“It’s a very poor, pathetic person,” said Mrs. Cole.

“Why do you want to be a pauper, John Henry?” said Marcie.

“I don’t want to be a pauper,” he said. “I want to be a writer.”

“You’re going to law school,” said Mr. Cole.

I remember this one time I found John Henry staring at a pencil sketch hanging in the coatroom of the Berkeley College dining hall. It was a technical sketch of a windmill that showed all its parts and how they worked. I looked at it for a while too, but mostly to figure out why the fuck anybody would give a shit about a windmill. John Henry wrote this whole story about an old windmill lamenting how the world had left it behind and how technology made it lonely. It won some award from the Yale English department.

“Are you gonna write books, John Henry?” said Maggie.

“No,” he said. “I want to be the kind of writer who writes for newspapers.”

“Why would you want to do that, John Henry?”

“Because it’s important to tell the truth when other people do bad things.”

“Maggie,” said Mrs. Cole. “Use your fork.”

“So now you’re the next Bob Woodward,” said Mr. Cole.

“You mean like when Daddy wouldn’t pay Rosalio?” said Maggie. “You said that was bad.”

“Rosalio was the gardener,” said John Henry, looking at me.

“What about when Mommy gave Gigi away because she wouldn’t stop peeing on the carpet?” said Marcie. “Would you write about that, John Henry?”

“Girls, that’s enough,” said Mr. Cole. “Why you would want to write about the things other people do is beyond me. The credit belongs to the man in the arena.”

I started to move the paella around my plate to make it look like I was eating it. I spread it thin in spots, buried a bit underneath the grilled veggies. It was sort of the opposite of packing a lot of luggage in the trunk of your car.

“So John Henry tells me you play baseball,” said Mr. Cole to kill off the silence, only he didn’t let me answer. “I played split end at Stanford.”

“My dad’s a football coach,” I said, but he wasn’t listening.

“Jim Plunkett was my quarterback.”

“Dad,” said John Henry. “Seriously?”

“What?”

“You played with him for one year.”

“We won the Rose Bowl that year.”

“I’m sure Spencer is not interested in any of that,” said Mrs. Cole.

“John Henry could’ve been a ballplayer,” said Mr. Cole. “He just never wanted it. Did you? He was a good second baseman... but he quit. Didn’t help that he never grew. You can thank your mother for that.”

I packed and unpacked the paella—all the way through Mr. Cole’s monologue about the chamber music society and how they were hoping to work out funding for it or something like that. Then he started in about how great La Jolla was and how it had its own zip code, and then he threw his napkin on the table and asked the girls if they wanted to play some music while Yolanda served us funky green ice cream.

“They’re not playing tonight,” said Mrs. Cole.

“Why not?” said Mr. Cole.

“Because it’s almost eight o’clock,” she said.

“I think I’m capable of knowing when they should and should not play.”

“Daddy’s our teacher now,” said Maggie.

“Daddy fired Mrs. Mortimer because me and Maggie got too good,” said Marcie.

“I did not *fire* Mrs. Mortimer.”

“That’s what Mom said,” said Maggie.

“Mom said you had to fire her,” said Marcie. “Mom said you had to fire her because me and Maggie got too good. And you said you were the only one that could teach us.”

“Maggie and I,” said Mrs. Cole. “Maggie and I.”

“Come on, girls,” said Mr. Cole as he stood. “Go get ready.”

The girls scampered off while Mrs. Cole sat there seething. She didn't move while we cleared the table around her. I think she was doing some sort of breathing exercise. I asked Yolanda what to do with the leftover asparagus about five times before I realized she didn't speak a word of English, so I went for the refrigerator and found myself staring at all these Cole family Christmas cards stuck to the door beneath bunny-shaped magnets: *Season's Greetings from Rome! We Wish You a Merry Christmas from a Winter Wonderland!* The one from the year before read *Happy Holidays from Tokyo!* with all the Coles decked out in traditional Japanese attire. John Henry and Mr. Cole were full-on samurai warriors while the girls and Mrs. Cole wore tiny kimonos and were covered in heavy white makeup, and they were all standing in front of a white pagoda with a blue tile roof. John Henry looked miserable.

“We're ready,” said Mr. Cole. “And throw away the leftovers. My wife thinks they harbor bacteria.”

I could hear Marcie warming up on the piano as I dumped the asparagus in the garbage. The light in the living room was dim, with only a floor lamp behind the piano so Marcie could see her sheet music. There was an eerie vibe. I sat down next to John Henry on a long, expensive-looking blue leather couch. Then Maggie showed up with a violin. I didn't know what to expect really. “Mary Had a Little Lamb”? “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”? How good can you be at anything when you're six?

Mr. Cole stood and said something about a sonata in something minor by Beethoven before he started to direct traffic like a symphony conductor without a baton, and then it was like time stopped.

“Yes,” he said as they got going. “Excellent. Yes.”

He wouldn't shut up, but the music eventually shoved Jim Plunkett's split end out of the way. If only you could have seen their faces, those tiny determined faces, experiencing something I couldn't even understand, something otherworldly—unencumbered by all the bullshit that swirled in that house, oblivious to even our ears—and it was so unexpected all I could do was sit back and smile because I think for the first time in my life I could hear what it sounded like to be happy, but then Maggie sneezed, and it all came to a grinding halt.

"I thought you were taking her to see an allergist," said Mr. Cole, looking mildly irritated and in the general direction of Mrs. Cole, who was now standing in the doorway to the dining room with her arms folded across her chest and affirmatively pissed off.

"It's next Tuesday," she said.

"I've been asking you to take care of this for weeks," he said. "They have a recital in eight days."

"She's allergic to dust mites," said Mrs. Cole. "What else do you want me to do? Her appointment is next Tuesday."

"I don't want shots, Daddy," said Maggie as she wiped her nose into her sleeve.

"What shots?" he said.

"Allergy shots," said Marcie. "John Henry told us all about it."

"What did you say to her?" said Mr. Cole.

"I told her about the shots," said John Henry.

"Why?"

"Because she's entitled to know."

"Well, don't just stand there," said Mr. Cole. "Get her something to blow her nose into that's not her shirt."

John Henry grabbed a silk pillow off the couch and threw it to her.

"Blow your nose into that, Maggie," he said. "You shouldn't use your shirt."

“This is the fifth night in a row you’ve had them playing,” said Mrs. Cole. “She’s exhausted. They’re six. It’s eight o’clock at night. We agreed you wouldn’t do this.”

“Wouldn’t do what?” said Mr. Cole, trying to get the pillow away from Maggie before she actually blew her nose into it.

“Don’t be an ass,” said Mrs. Cole. “They shouldn’t be playing. They need to go to bed.”

“We’re the M&M Girls!” screamed Marcie as she leaped off the piano bench and lifted both hands high above her head like she’d stuck the landing of some impossible dismount.

“Maggie,” said Mr. Cole. “Give me the pillow. John Henry wasn’t serious.” Then he looked at Marcie. “You’re what? What did you just say?”

“We’re the M&M Girls.”

“What does that mean? What is she talking about?”

“Spencer says we’re the M&M Girls,” said Marcie. “Roger Maris and Mickey Mouse were the M&M Boys, so we’re the M&M Girls.”

“Mickey Mantle,” said John Henry.

“We’re the M&M Girls!” they shouted together as they broke down into giggles.

“You’re not the M&M Girls,” said Mr. Cole. “Stop saying that.”

“We have discussed this fifty times,” said Mrs. Cole. “You agreed. You agreed you wouldn’t do this.”

“Are you kidding me?” said Mr. Cole. “Are we really going to do this right now?”

“Do what?”

“You’re the one who wanted this,” he said.

“You can’t parade them out whenever you feel like it.”

“I find that amazing given that you have them performing at every one of your little functions like they’re a carnival act.”



“Everyone agrees with me on this.”

“Everyone?” he said. “Who’s everyone? Have you formed a committee to raise our children too? Because I’d love to be on it. Do you think you can pull some strings and get me on it?”

“I doubt it,” she said. “No one can stand you.”

“No yelling, Daddy,” said Maggie. “You promised.”

“I’m not yelling, sweetie. Someone has to point out to your mother that she’s a hypocrite.”

“Alright,” said John Henry. “That’s enough. That’s the end.” He looked at the twins: “Wonder Twin powers.”

“Activate!” screamed the girls.

They bolted down the stairs and out of sight.

“Where are they going?” said Mr. Cole.

“To the Hall of Justice,” said John Henry as he stood. “Tonight’s rehearsal is over.”

The Hall of Justice turned out to be the space between their beds. They’d pull a blanket over the top and make a fort just like Nathan and I used to. John Henry and I climbed under there with a flashlight and sat with them as they played a game of Uno while their parents bombarded each other with *fuck yous* until doors started slamming and finally we heard a car start.

“I think Tolstoy was wrong,” said John Henry.

“About what?” I said, since I had no idea what Tolstoy had to say about anything.

“I don’t think there are any happy families.”