

Long Island Resurrection

“Dotty, have a Coke,” Frank says, proffering a can with hopeful eyes. He is the father.

Will glares at the ham on the table as if it’s not Easter dinner, but a pig’s fat ass, lain before him as an obscenity, a balloon of flatulence, a divine joke. A moment later the flesh sits not on the platter, but between the lips of the other dinner guests, sometimes dropping back to their plates, but more often making it to their teeth, which chew the ham in a fashion not so efficient to be called machine-like, but

not quite so wild to be called animalistic. These guests are neither machines nor animals, nor guests at all. They're Tom's family.

"I said I don't want a God damned soda," says Dotty, the mother. "Get it through your skull. And stop acting like an ass." She smiles at Will. That wilted, knowing smile that abdicates all responsibility for her remarks whenever they're directed toward her husband.

"Patricia! How about a Coke?" Frank says. Pink chunks accompany the words into his daughter's face.

"This is the third time you've asked me, Daddy. I don't want a Coke." Patricia has a large mass of black hair, a scrumptious feast for the half-dozen plastic clamps she's placed in it to create the illusion of orderliness.

"Will! Have a Coke," Frank says. Tom winces as Will deliberates.

"Okay." Will takes it. The table falls silent. Patricia stops chewing mid-mouthful. One of her hair clamps comes loose and dangles against her ear.

Will drinks his soda and stares at Tom with a sudden gust of gratitude. He's grateful that Tom brought this outrageous family into his life. This family that lives in one of those small towns trying desperately to appear nestled in the heart of Long Island. But nothing is nestled in anything on Long Island, Will has always thought. Instead, raised ranches and malls are devoured by an earth cavity that sucks away any breeze or color or sound that might be perceived as something like *character*. Will has come to admire Tom's escape from such a vacuum, to have found his place in New England where not just houses and shops, but dogs and squirrels and even diseases *are* nestled.

"How's work going?" Dotty asks. Despite a voice that naturally shrieks, she always sounds gentle and polite when addressing Will.

Will dislikes talking about his work. He works for a pharmaceutical company, but he's not a scientist. He's involved with marketing, but not sales or advertising. He's used to over-explaining his job, but in this house he's speaking to distracted children. Except for Dotty. Dotty not only understands what he does all day, but frequently e-mails him articles as relevant as the ones his boss circulates.

"Chip read something about those depression drugs the other day," Patricia says with pride. "He says that people have tried to commit suicide after taking them."

"That's true," Will says. "But it's very rare." He wants to ask if her husband read the actual article, as opposed to the headline, but that would be mean-spirited, and nothing in this house deserves that. Tom conceals his smile with his water glass. His presence is the quietest, the wisest – that of a happy observer. Dinners in this house have always been this way.

"The doctor has Kay on one of those now," Dotty says as she stabs a carrot on her plate.

The utterance of this name slows the chewing around the table. Kay is Dotty's mother, who lies in bed fifteen feet below them in the basement apartment, struggling for breath. She's watched over by a hospice nurse who comes twice a day, once in the morning and once at dinnertime, so Dotty can rest from her duties and spend time upstairs, even though her current expression says that, had she the courage, she'd be outside, or down the street, or at the library, or just about anywhere that's far away from this feast in front of her. But she'll never be far away. She leaves the house only once a week, for grocery shopping at Waldbaum's, panic attacks her convenient excuse. Her home is her confinement; that's how it's always been. Just as Tom has always been her reason for staying alive. The reason she fought breast cancer and won. The reason she got sober. The reason she rises from her body's imprint in the mattress every morning, bangs on Frank's bedroom door to get him up and out and earning a paycheck, lets the dog out, watches the TV, and stays awake past eight o'clock in the evening. And now she has cancer in her basement and that's another reason for her not to be dead.

"Speaking of work!" Frank shovels peas into his mouth like a crane. "Yesterday I had to book four cruises before lunch. All on the same liner. And they were all booked up, but clients were screaming in my ear, so I had to beg more than anyone should ever have to beg. But I got them on. And do you think a single client thanked me? Nah, they didn't."

Will pretends to gasp in disgust. "Well, let's hope the boat sinks," he says. The table erupts into cackles. One of Patricia's hair clamps drops into the mashed potatoes. She yanks it out without a word, and passes the bowl to Frank for fourths. Will notices one of her rings, in the shape of Mickey Mouse ears. It's her wedding ring.

"Don't joke about that," Frank cautions."

"Did Mom tell you what happened to me at work the other night?" Patricia asks her father.

"No," he replies. "What?"

"You know how the LIU kids get all wasted and come to the drive-through and I can hardly understand what they're ordering? Well, this one group of kids placed their order, and I could tell they were drunk, but they were talking real slow and I could make out every word. One of them ordered a Happy Meal, which should have tipped me off because who orders a Happy Meal at one o'clock in the morning?"

Tom winks at Will, then stares attentively at his sister as she narrates. He's not faking. He is genuinely interested in his sister's meager life. Hanging on the wall behind him is a framed black and white photo of a handsome and long dead great-uncle, whom Dotty has frequently cited as Tom's mirror image in every way. His name was Ernest, and he was an intelligent man, a restaurant owner, and an exception to the unpleasantness of Dotty's family heritage.

"So they drive around and I hand the driver two bags of burgers and fries, plus the Happy Meal, plus a shake and a couple of Cokes. I hand them their change, say thank you and everything. Then I go back to my headphones."

Dotty is shaking her head, trying not to laugh at what's coming, which makes Tom grin, which in turn makes Will grin. He's had a fit of laughter pent up since dinner was served. This may be his chance.

“And then I hear a horn honking so I go back to the window and the driver hands me the Happy Meal saying it’s the wrong kind. So, like a dummy, I apologize to him, and then I hear these girls laughing in the back seat and then the car takes off and I can hear the tires squealing. And then, like an idiot, I open the Happy Meal. And it’s filled with puke!”

Frank is the only one who doesn’t break into hysterics, not out of fatherly affection, Will assumes, but because he only likes to laugh at his own jokes.

When Dotty covers her face with her hands, Will notices how tightly her bracelets squeeze her wrists. Reddened flesh juts out from beneath their metal clutch. She’s bound.

Shoveling continues. Dotty holds her grey-mopped head up with one hand. She barely eats, watching her plate. Tom remains quiet. He sits at the head of the table, detached from the others, but noticing every breath, every motion. Frank gobbles the mass that remains on his plate. Patricia sits motionless except for her nose, which rises to identify something in the air. She straightens her back and squints with all her might. She’s getting closer. It’s a test of her olfactory skills, and a process of elimination. She reaches her conclusion with a triumphant exclamation. “Dad, you pig!”

“What?” Frank’s eyes widen, feigning innocence. The infected air reaches Dotty.

“Frank!” Dotty cries, rising from the table with her plate. There will be no dessert now.

“I’m sorry!” Frank shouts after her.

Tom follows his mother into the kitchen. When the odor reaches Will, he feels an aching disgust combined with a disbelieving joy. How could this not have been rehearsed? He smiles brightly to be basking in the honesty of these people as he crumples his napkin and rises to his feet. He holds his breath until he reaches the kitchen, where the air is clean and the pig is left behind.

Later, Will washes and Dotty dries. Frank and Patricia are upstairs watching football. Tom has gone downstairs to keep his dying grandmother company.

“Kay used to call him the Zoologist,” Dotty says.

“Zoologist?”

“He spent hours in the woods. He’d collect plants and insects and he’d try to save anything he found that was injured. Even a wilting flower.”

“Once, I took him down to the shore to buy lobster for dinner. It was a treat for the kids. Tommy must have been seven or eight, so this was back when I was bopping around town without a care in the world. As I was paying for my ten pounds of lobster, there was a fisherman a few yards away, whacking something against the dock. Something wiggling in his hand like a snake. Come to find out, it was an...oh, there’s the Alzheimer’s...”

“An eel?” Will says.

“An eel,” Dotty sighs. “He was beating this eel to death. You should’ve heard our little Tommy when he finally figured out what was happening. He raced over and screamed at the man to stop. He’d never left my side before, but something got into him that day. Of course, the fisherman thought it was sweet, so he stopped whacking it for Tommy’s sake. But you’ve never seen a little boy so upset.”

Dotty’s eyes look tired. Her skin is pale, her teeth neglected. But despite her decline, she radiates warmth when she wants to, or from certain angles in certain light.

“When did you know Tommy was gay?” Will asks. It’s a new question.

Dotty laughs. “Before the eel incident.”

“So young? He never told me.”

“He was in my bedroom. We were watching *Little House on the Prairie*.”

Will laughs and he knows his laughter pleases her.

“We were just lying on my bed and all of a sudden he got up and walked to the television screen and pointed at the image of Michael Landon, who was baling hay without his shirt on. Tom turned and said, *Mommy, I want to kiss Mr. Ingalls*. Like he was disturbed by it and he just wanted me to know.”

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When the dishes are washed, Dotty and Will sit at the table. She drags an ashtray over. It’s filled with barely smoked cigarettes. She lights one up and extinguishes it after two long puffs. She does this a half-dozen more times during the conversation.

They talk for a long time about Tom’s childhood, his fights with his sister, the time he told Dotty he was sick, and how she became two different people for years afterward: the calm, supportive mother when Tom was around and the hysterical drunk in his absence. She tells Will about the day she took her last drink. It was Thanksgiving, Tom was home from Cape Cod and some of his old high school friends were visiting. As she prepared coffee in the kitchen, she heard them in the living room discussing their plans for graduate school or better jobs or starting their own businesses. The baritone of Tom’s voice usually made the ceiling vibrate in a way only Dotty could detect, but it had gone silent during this conversation, his long-term plans made irrelevant by AIDS. She might have cried for the thousandth time. Instead she never drank again.

The memories end in silence and a pondering of all that has been said. Will hears the roar of the football game from upstairs. He nods a silent thank-you to Dotty and takes a sip of his coffee, listening for memories that are stored in the walls of this house.

The front door rattles, introducing something that Dotty omitted from their journey into the past. With a bang, the Omission fills the house. Dotty and Will rise from the table. Frank and Patricia race downstairs. Before anyone reaches the foyer, a voice cries out: “Anyone home?” It’s a husky male voice, and it’s followed by Frank’s cry of “Jimmy!”

The older brother. Whose six-year absence from this house Tom once described as *for the best*. And whose very existence the neighbors – and at certain moments, Dotty herself – had finally, miraculously forgotten. Will never asked many questions about Jimmy, but once heard Tom comforting Dotty on the phone when she'd just learned that Jimmy's name was on the sex offender lists.

Dotty reaches the foyer, Will following behind. He catches a glimpse of the brother. He's enormous and round and covered with hair, and he's dressed in a bright red sweat suit that must be visible from space. He's not alone. Two police officers accompany him. His wrists are handcuffed in front of him.

Frank gives Jimmy a bear hug. Dotty follows suit, with slightly less enthusiasm. Patricia lingers on the staircase. She is excitable, but cautious, as if looking at an ex-boyfriend who scorned her.

"We weren't expecting you until eight," Dotty says to the officers.

Jimmy's eyes land on Will. He bounces forward, like a beach ball, to shake Will's hand, nearly stumbling on the chains connecting his ankles. "Twice in one year, it makes you wonder," says the convict, shaking his head and prompting a confused squint from Will.

Jimmy shuffles back to his parents, chains dragging along the floorboards like a ghost in the attic. Will retreats to the dining table. He wipes his hand on a napkin.

"Can he see her now?" one of the officers asks.

"Of course," Dotty says. "She's in the apartment downstairs."

"Twenty minutes is the limit, ma'am," says the second officer. He's much older, with a gray mustache, dark eyes and a strong, wide body.

"The entrance is around the back," Dotty says, snagging keys off the strawberry-shaped key rack. In silence the family members grab their coats and follow her through the house and outside.

Will stays upstairs. He is not immediate family. He's only met Kay once. When she was still above ground.

He scans his surroundings. The family room comprises a sofa and stuffed chairs with patchwork upholstery. A collection of owl figurines in an antique display cabinet. Framed photos of Tom, fewer of Patricia, none of Jimmy. White paint peeling off of the ceiling.

He hears the descending clicks of toenails. Bonita, the anti-social Pomeranian, dances downstairs. She's surprised to find Will, but licks his pork-scented fingers anyway. Then she pounces onto the sofa, stands facing him as if ready to play, her tail stirring the air. Will can't help but laugh. When he reaches to pet her, she leaps from the sofa and out of the room.

Will follows her into the kitchen where her front paws stretch for the countertop, her nose tormented by the remains of the feast. Will pulls off a slice of ham and dangles it. She squeaks, but her paws can't

reach, so Will drops it between her tiny teeth, where it disappears instantly. The dog scurries out of the kitchen and down the hall to another room. Will follows her to what they call the *formal* living room.

Clear plastic wraps the furniture, even over its already torn and faded fabric. Evening sunrays theoretically brighten the room, but can barely penetrate the dirty window panes and lace curtains. The wallpaper is gold, red and white, with angels handing each other torches. The crown molding ends prematurely in one corner, and in another it fights violently with the wallpaper's edges.

Bonita hops onto the back of the couch and stares at a curio cabinet filled with Disney figurines, ceramic dolls and a few more owls. A light inside the cabinet brings attention to a small wooden pedestal, perhaps six inches tall and six inches wide, which holds up a framed photo of Tom leaning against a blue Mustang. He looks healthy, tanned, wide-shouldered, sporting a white baseball cap. Will brightens at the sight of Tom's smile. Next to the pedestal is another frame. It holds an aged newspaper clipping.

Thomas J. Soluzzi, 29, of Provincetown, MA, died Oct. 26 from a prolonged illness. He was born in Queens, NY, a son of Frank and Dorothy (Clendenin) Soluzzi, and received a B.A. degree in social work from C.W. Post. He had been a travel agent with the Auto Club of New York before relocating to Massachusetts to share his life with William Becker, his partner. He enjoyed movies, travel, and the company of his friends and family.

The house is suddenly dark. Will feels something pouring back into his heart. It's happening again.

He hurries back to the kitchen. The ham is still on the counter. In the family room, the owls stare at him. He stops to listen. To the air, to the walls. Silence. He returns to the living room. Bonita is still propped on the back of the sofa, her stare undistracted from Tom's shrine. Nothing has changed. Will stands in the center of the house. He calls Tom's name. Of course there's no response. There's been no response for six months. Tears sprout in his eyes for the billionth time. He can't keep doing this to himself.

Will grabs his jacket and heads to the back door. Outside, he jumps off the stoop onto a concrete patio. The orange evening sky glares at him through dying trees on the horizon. The sun is screaming goodbye without sound. He finds another door just below the bay windows. It's unlocked. He pulls it open and walks inside a musty basement.

A linoleum floor. A dripping bathroom sink. Cedar cabinets over-stuffed with dusty linens, boxes and clothes. Windows, like tiny glass boxes abutting the ceiling, veiled by weeds on the other side. This is where an old woman would come to die.

In the kitchen, Frank leans against an avocado refrigerator, staring boyishly down at his sneakers. The police officers stand on either side of the closed bedroom door, guarding the entrance instinctively, acting useful. Patricia welcomes Will with a smile. She walks to him and touches his forearm, looking into his eyes with kindness, like she knows he's been torturing himself. Maybe she keeps a ghost of her own. She whispers that everything is okay, shifts her eyes toward the bedroom door, then back to Will. She is trying to comfort him, but also to warn him.

Seated in a corner, a young nurse sits with her head in her hands, her black hair tied in a ponytail with a bright blue butterfly. She has separated herself from the family, out of either courtesy or indifference, and is busy typing on her phone.

Will places his ear against the bedroom door. He hears pained breathing on the other side. The younger officer studies Will's expression, awaits his intentions.

"What if he escapes?" Will asks softly. The officer doesn't respond. Maybe the words never left Will's mind.

Will turns the fake brass doorknob and pushes. The door is hollow and warped and sticky in the door jamb, so his entrance is graceless. Inside, the room is dark except for a tiny nightstand lamp, which shines on prescription bottles and a box of rubber gloves. Jimmy kneels beside the bed, staring silently at the skinny frame of an old woman beneath a sheet. Her eyes are closed, perhaps no longer able to distinguish between sleep and death. Will recognizes the nose from the photo upstairs. It curves slightly upward at the tip. Her chest rises slowly and infrequently. Breathing has become an afterthought; Will's seen this before. The dying are all the same, tied to their beds.

Dotty stands behind the hairy red ball with her hands on its shoulders. Will can't move his glance away from this sight. Jimmy's explosive, unkempt hair falls like string onto his mother's comforting fingers. His red jumpsuit, even in the darkness, screams *Look at me! I've raped two women, sold drugs to kids. Pay attention to me!*

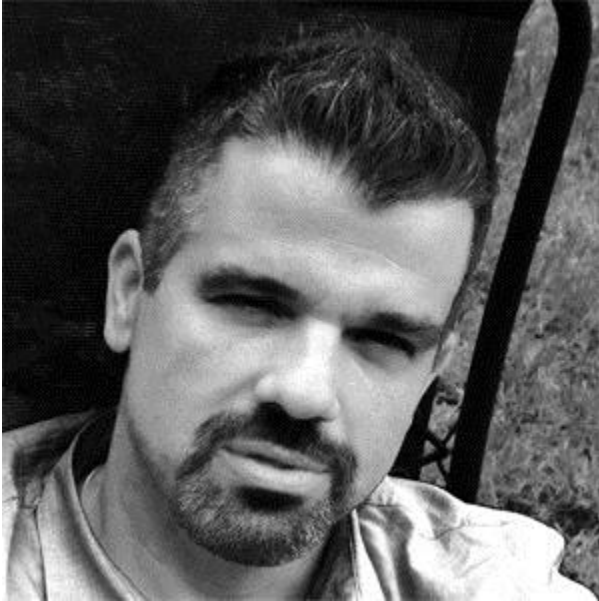
Jimmy is fatter now than the last time he knelt beside a deathbed. It was last fall and the air was crisp in Provincetown. They all stood and chatted on the front porch. Jimmy boasted about learning computers in prison. He had also become the top chef. Frank labeled him a "Renaissance man" with pride. They spoke excitedly about how well he was spending his time up the river, how he'd get out with so many new skills that employers would fight over him. Better than college, Frank said. And free. Even the police officer – there was only one that time – laughed. Patricia nodded agreeably, reflexively, as Jimmy winked at her. She kept looking at her watch. Dotty stood just inside the screen door, listening carefully for groans or cries or any sounds of anguish from the spare bedroom where Will had installed Tom's hospital bed.

Kay groans for Dotty, who removes one hand from Jimmy and pats her mother's arm. As Dotty reassures Kay of her presence, she glances around the bedroom until her eyes meet Will's stare. Her expression is tinged with shame, or so Will thinks. She is comforting the criminal in his time of need. Or maybe it's Dotty's time of need. Her life ended six months ago in Provincetown when she lost the one reason for enduring. She has been a shell, brittle and useless, waiting to vanish. But she's still here. She can't will herself dead. She has no choice but to fall in love with the other son.

A moment later Jimmy stands, wipes his eyes and turns to leave the bedroom. When he sees Will, he stops. His fat smile hangs loosely, misplaced. He raises his arms, and Will knows this is the point of no return. Jimmy leans in and lowers his handcuffs against Will's backside. He is enormous and pulpy. His dirty hair comes to rest on Will's neck. Will feels the stinking moisture of his sweat suit and hears a hungry gurgle snaking around inside the massive belly. Will could help this man, feed his hunger. He

could come to care for him in spite of his offenses. He could transfer his devotion to the brother. If Dotty can survive this way, then maybe Will can too.

“I’m up for parole in eight months,” Jimmy whispers into Will’s ear, his eyes wet and hopeful. “I’ll be home soon.”



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