

The Necklace (Unedited)

Adam Kern

“Tell them we can’t do it, we can’t! If we get caught this time, we lose everything,” my mother said in Italian as I listened to their conversation through the thin plaster of my bedroom wall.

“It’s only an administrative position, we won’t be handling it or interacting with the client base. It’s perfectly safe,” my father tried reassuring her. It was odd for them to fight in private, usually, they argued loudly in the living room or in the kitchen; their heated voices carrying in waves throughout the small house. Later that day when I walked past my parents’ bedroom, I heard my mother crying softly to herself. I knew better than to ask her why.

The dynamic in my childhood home was strange at times but for the most part not different than any other family on our block. We lived in a working-class mainly Italian suburb on the outskirts of Philadelphia. It wasn’t a wealthy neighborhood, but it wasn’t destitute like the areas on the south side of Philly where people lived in graffiti-spattered tenements of decaying red brick. Our house stood on a narrow lot that didn’t have much in the way of a yard or a driveway; just a thin strip of crabgrass along the front of the house and a gravel driveway between our house and the neighbors just wide enough to fit our old station wagon with the side mirrors folded in. I had a lot of pleasant memories in that neighborhood of playing baseball in the street with the other kids at dusk or racing bikes through the park with my friend Ramone. My father left for work early in the morning and came back late in the evening, weary and non-conversational. My mother would serve him dinner in the living room where he would sit alone in front of the TV as the rest of us ate silently in the kitchen. Sometimes he remained in that chair late into the night or the early hours of the morning, his eyes glazed and vacant as he watched the dancing shapes on the television. My father, like many of the parents on our street, had a strict way of seeing over his household.

I remember when I was ten years old I stole a gold necklace from a jewelry store. I hid it in a drawer under a stack of my folded t-shirts in the bedroom I shared with my younger brother Clint. I wore it around the room a few times when no one was home and studied myself in the mirror with it on. I liked the way I looked with the gold hanging around my neck and the feel of the cool metal on my flesh. I imagined myself with bigger muscles, a less scrawny neck, and a squarer jaw. I pretended I was one of the tough kids. The ones with greased hair and tattoos. The ones who leaned on the waxed hoods of their expensive cars beside the corner mart and played loud music as they sipped malt liquor from the bottle and smoked unfiltered cigarettes. After my fantasy had concluded for the day, I would tuck the necklace back into its hiding place and straighten the shirts around it to avoid suspicion. After a week, I came home from school and it was gone. I began to panic and ran into the den where my brother Clint was watching staticky cartoons on our old box television set. He was wearing only a pair of striped boxers and eating fistfuls of cereal from the box. “Where is it?” I demanded.

“I haven’t touched anything, Linus,” he retorted. I felt something inside me crumble as I realized my mother must’ve found it when she was doing laundry. I went back to our room and closed the door. I leaned my head back against the wood and closed my eyes. I didn’t move from that position until I heard the sounds of my father coming in from work. There was a clink as he dropped his keys into the ceramic bowl by the entryway. His heavy footsteps made their way to the kitchen and there was a brief murmuring of indistinct conversation between him and my mother. I couldn’t hear a word of what they had said but a few minutes later the door I leaned against budged gently and I stood up. My father entered a second later with the gold chain dangling from his short calloused fingers. “Is this yours?” he asked calmly. He was a large man of pure Sicilian stock. His skin was a dark bronze and didn’t freckle in the sun. His figure was imposing, yet soft and wide around the belt region and his thick arms were covered in charcoal-colored hairs. I straightened my back as if I was a soldier standing at attention. “I..I..don’t,” the words bubbled out of me.

“Where did you take this from?” he asked again calmly. I tried to think of a way to configure the words to avoid responsibility for what I had done but what ended up coming out was.

“It was Clint, he stole it!” I blurted. My father marched out of the room and returned a second later hauling Clint by the arm. Clint’s face was already red, streams of clear fluid had begun to leak from his eyes and nose.

“No, no Papa I didn’t steal it, I swear!” he screamed desperately as my father unhitched the belt from his pants. I felt something between guilt and relief in the second before my father reached for me and wrenched my whole body forward by the arm. I was in shock as the metal buckle struck me hard across the back. Me and Clint wailed uncontrollably as the belt came down across our bodies again and again with a meaty thwack sound. After he felt we had both been thoroughly punished he left the room; our bodies were both covered in U-shaped welts. After an hour or so my mother called us for dinner. The three of us silently ate our canned ravioli and sipped milk from drugstore glasses as we listened to the old TV yammer away in the living room. After dinner, I helped my mom wash dishes in the kitchen as she smoked a cigarette at the window. Every so often she tipped the ashes into the sink where they mixed with the grimy froth of the dishwater. No words were exchanged between us for the remainder of the night.

Later that evening, after I had brushed my teeth and done my schoolwork, I went back to the kitchen and filled a cup from the tap. My father sat on a kitchen chair by the propped-open back door. He sipped Jack from a crystalline rock glass that I had only ever seen used by him to drink Jack. “Goodnight Dad,” I said dutifully and turned to go to bed.

“Wait, come here a second, Linus.” I felt myself tense up, the purple and green welts on my body still throbbed dully under the thin fabric of my pajamas. As I approached a thin breeze

came in from the back door and ruffled his thinning black and silver hair. "Linus, you understand your mother and I aren't wealthy people?" he said.

"Yes, I understand that," I replied.

"I thought you did. You're a smart kid." He breathed in deeply. "I'm sorry I hit you, I didn't want to. If you or Clint ever have a little boy, you'll understand how hard it is to do but it's for their own good so they can grow up to be good men." I nodded as he continued. "I know sometimes things are harder for us and that you and your brother don't always have the nicest clothes or the fanciest toys. I know what it's like. I was a young man when I came to this country with your grandma and uncles. We had practically nothing, just two suitcases between the five of us." I could tell by the loose pronunciation of his syllables that he was probably on his fourth or fifth belt of Jack and he was pouring himself out to me more than he had intended but I stayed silent and transfixed. "I've worked all my life. First I worked in a sawmill and then a brickyard. After that ended, I bounced around a lot of construction jobs but no matter how much I did there was never enough work." He took a long swallow from his glass and stared out at the place where our small backyard abruptly ended in a crumbling cinder block wall. "The work your mother and I do, the work that pays for the dinner you ate tonight, your school clothes, and your toys, is against the law. If we were ever caught we could go to prison and you boys would be sent to live somewhere else. The life we all share would be over. We do those things for you and your brother in the hopes that you'll never have to do them for your kids. Do you understand that?" He reached out and squeezed my shoulder gently with his paw of a hand. "Yeah, I understand, and I won't do it again. I do well at school, and so does Clint," I reassured him. My father smiled at this. His smile was odd; his teeth were all different sizes and some stood at awkward slanted angles in his mouth.

"Well keep at it. Maybe you'll be living in one of those houses on the west end when you're my age" He patted my back hard. "Alright, get to bed".

The move to Texas was officially announced to us a few weeks before school ended and by June that summer, boxes of our belongings had begun to crowd our narrow hallways. The situation hadn't been discussed much since we had left the dinner table that night. Rather it had been begrudgingly accepted as we all digested the decision in our way. Our house gradually emptied of our belongings and the framed black and white photos of our great-grandparents in Sicily were sealed in bubble wrap and stowed away safely in cardboard boxes. I milled around the neighborhood for the last few days as if in a dream. I said goodbye to friends and played baseball in the street and football at the park. Ramone and I raced around the neighborhood on our bikes, our bare chests shiny with sweat. We passed places that I knew I would never see again and if I ever did return, they would seem different to me somehow as if I was looking at them through someone else's eyes. We stopped for a soda outside the corner store and sat down on the brick steps to sip the sweet liquid as the sun warmed the concrete step under us. One of

the older kids, Mikey Wallace, and his girlfriend Alexandra Rossetti rode by in a black Camaro. It had recently had a wax finish and its hubcaps shone to an almost silvery hue. Mikey was a high school dropout with a full-time job at a local lumber yard. The labor had made his body hard and muscular. As they rode past, I tried to picture myself being his age sitting in the front seat of a Camaro alongside some dark-haired girl. My thoughts then drifted to where my life would be at that age but struggled to find anything concrete. Although I couldn't place what it was I knew the end of something significant was coming although I was not prepared for how brash an awakening adulthood had in store for me.

For a reason I don't know, I can only remember our drive to Texas in a series of snapshots preserved in my mind. One was of our wood-paneled station wagon parked on the street out front of our old house in Philadelphia. The roof and the interior of the car were piled high with boxes and suitcases containing all the odds and ends of our lives in Philadelphia. The next was of me perched on the seat in between a set of musty oak drawers that my mother had refused to leave behind and a stack of cardboard boxes containing the pots and pans from our kitchen which frequently shifted and clattered with the motions of the car. The third snapshot was of my mother and father standing out front of a gas station somewhere in Oklahoma. It was a novelty tourist trap place, a tall concrete cone painted to look like a teepee. My parents were almost comically mismatched in their appearance. My mother was nearly bone thin. She wore a pair of pink plastic sunglasses and the desert wind had pressed her white sundress flat against her ribs and pulled gently at her dark hair. My father stood beside her. The girth of his body nearly exceeded the confines of his clothes and a sliver of abdomen was visible between his belt and the place where his shirt ended. He stands there with his odd-sloped smile, his eye is squinting in the glare. The next and final snapshot was our new home, a squat brown brick house with dusty windows and a yard filled with scrub grass and bits of broken bottles.

My father walked into the house, the aged floorboards creaking and sighing under his weight. My mother followed behind him, her eyes drifting between the cracks in the drywall and the swirls of mildew and discoloration on the ceiling tiles. Her thin mouth hardened into a pink line as she folded her thin pale arms across her chest. My brother and I looked at each other, "bigger than in Philly," I said to him as we walked through the kitchen. I opened the screen door beside the stove and walked out into the backyard which was largely as underwhelming as the front except for live oak which hovered at the edge of the property. A worn tire hung from one of the tree's limbs by a frayed rope. My parents sat together on the stairs of the unfurnished back porch and watched me and my brother take turns pushing each other. Clint sat on top of the tire as I pushed him, his legs kicking upwards every time the tire was thrust higher into the air.

"Linus, that's too high!" my mother yelled to me and I slowed down the rate of my pushing. If someone happened to see us in those few minutes in the backyard we would have

looked like a normal family doing normal things. My sneakers dragged on the strip of beaten earth below the swing.

Our life in Texas was largely the same as it was in Philadelphia. It was hotter and there were a lot more kids who wore jeans and cowboy boots to school. I made some friends at my new school although their personalities paled in comparison to the friends I had had in Philadelphia. Things went on similar to the way they had back home. I studied hard in school and even played JV football in the fall. My father would come home from his new job often late into the night and collapse onto the leather couch, his clothes stained yellow with sweat. Late at night, I would hear the hollow clanging of the refrigerator door as he retrieved the saran-wrapped plate my mother had left out for him. One night I awoke to a scream followed by sobbing. "Who did this?" my mother cried in Italian. I felt the translucent hairs on my neck rise. I slipped out of bed and crept into the hallway enough to see that the light was on in the kitchen where my father stood shirtless at the sink scrubbing furiously at something on his body. The hot water steamed upwards from the sink and reddened his hands as he rubbed his skin nearly raw. My mother stood beside him in her pink bathrobe and sobbed loudly into her opened hands. He stood back from the sink and let the pink water drip off his hands onto the laminate tile.

"Marina, It's under control" he stated. He made a motion as if to comfort her but decided against it. He wiped his hands dry on a dish towel "Quiet, or you'll wake the boys." My mother stifled her crying enough that he was able to speak. "I didn't kill anyone, just someone was compromising our operation and we needed them to talk, there was no other option."

"You said it was an administrative role!" she yelled as she grabbed the turpentine and gauze from a drawer. "I miss our life in Philadelphia, we were poor but we were stable," she said. "This, this can't go on." For a moment my father looked as if he might agree with her. I imagined in an instant all the changes in our lives suddenly reversed and we pulled back into the driveway of our house in Philly, all our furniture and belongings exactly where they had always been. The image was shattered when my father spoke to her this time in gruff English.

"And where am I supposed to go, Marina, do you think people with pasts like ours can get good jobs? That we can just go somewhere and be someone else? I have given everything, everything I have ever had for this family," his voice was grave and loud enough that it could have been heard had I remained in bed. "You want to neuter me? Make me a man who can't provide for his family? I hate what I do but I'm going to do this every day until I die," he turned and faced the place where I was hiding and I bolted for the bed. I threw the quilt over my head and lay there breathing heavily into the dense fabric. I heard the sighing of the aged floorboards as my father looked into the room he stood there for a moment. I held my breath as he stood there for a moment silently. Finally, he moved from the doorframe and I heard his footfalls growing quieter as they drew further away.

A couple of months later my mother picked me up after football practice. The Texas heat had been particularly veracious that day and my body was covered in a layer of dried sweat. I leaned over and picked some of the stray blades of grass off the white cotton of my socks as the blast of the air conditioning stung my skin. Storm clouds that had gradually been building overhead, began to pour down onto the parched red soil and empty field. The rain came down in sheets washing away the layers of red dust that had collected on the unwashed windshield over the previous weeks. My mother didn't look at me as I climbed in. She remained mostly silent for the majority of the car ride only offering simple responses to my recollections of that day's practice.

The storm had taken out the power and the house felt dark and empty without the chatter of the television to warm it. I went into the upstairs bathroom and peeled off my clothes by the light of a battery-powered lantern we kept under the sink. In the dim electric light, I admired myself in the mirror. I had put on a decent bit of muscle from football and a line of dark stubble had begun to emerge above my lip. I looked only vaguely like the kid who had moved from Philly five months prior. I showered quickly and changed into fresh clothes. When I went downstairs and entered the kitchen there was no hint of dinner simmering on the stove and my mother and Clint sat at the kitchen table silently. I sat down with them. "Your father was arrested today Linus," my mother said. I was silent unsure of how to react. I think some part of me had already accepted that it was likely to end this way.

"What happened?" I asked. I figured knowing was easier than not. My mother just shook her head. She looked older than I had ever remembered her being, her eyes sunken and tired. Her hair no longer sleek and black was beginning to run with small streaks of silver and lay in brittle stacks atop her head.

"He shot two men over a couple of grams of coke," she said. I sat up straight in my chair my spine ridged against the varnished cherry wood of the chair. I thought back to the night my parents had discovered the necklace and the words my father had shared with me as we sat looking out at the few fireflies winking in our small underwatered grass. *"We do it with the hopes that you'll never have to do them for your kids."* I felt as if I was going to choke and stood up from the table. My mother grabbed for me trying to prevent me from leaving but I wrenched free of her grasp. I felt the tears rising inside me, hot and searing. "Linus, listen to me" The thin veil of her American accent had begun to falter. The first tear fell and she slapped me hard across the face, the sharp curve of her nail biting into the skin of my cheek. I reached up and felt my face, the nail had not cut deep enough to draw blood.

The air of the prison visitation room was dense with the smell of sweat and cigarette smoke. When they brought my father in, he looked older than I had ever seen him. His hair had

nearly all turned gray or fallen off. He seemed sickly and had lost a lot of weight, although some clumps of fat on his arms and neck had stubbornly refused to leave. His orange prison slippers shuffled across the concrete floor accompanied by the rattle of the shackles that joined his feet. He sat down on the stool across from me. The stainless steel table between us felt as if it may as well have been a million miles away. He waited until the guard had taken the handcuffs off before he spoke. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"Busy, I have a job at a bank now."

He coughed weakly. "Yeah, your brother told me. He also told me I have a granddaughter I've never met." I nodded. If it had been at a different time in his life, maybe he would've said more, told me that I wasn't as good a son as my brother that I was a coward for visiting now when he was practically fading before my eyes. But instead, he just said, "You finally made it. Living in a fancy house on the West End. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, Dad," I said, although the words seemed hollow as they came from my mouth. We spent the rest of the time reminiscing over the happier memories and talking about the simple pleasures of this world. And when our hour was over, we shared a brief hug and I left, knowing it would be the last time I would see him.

I thought of the day when he had punished me for stealing the gold necklace and the conversation we had had after, as we watched the sun sink over the gray shingle roofs of our neighborhood. I had listened in awe of his every word. I thought of the stories he would tell us before bed or over dinner about our Sicilian ancestors and how they had repeatedly defied the odds, defeating enemies many times their size through sheer strength, wit, and perseverance, and in the process built the greatest civilizations the world had ever seen. People who had created cities so magnificent that people still traveled from around the world just to gaze at their bones of bleached marble and faded mosaics. I awoke that night longing for a squat house I hadn't seen in years, the rooms of my current house seemed too big and impersonal as if I lived in the empty halls of some cold palace. I longed for the feel of the wind on my bare chest and the taste of dry spit in my mouth. My legs tired, but pumping with undeterred power as I drove down the pedals of the bike. The sun gleamed off the wet skin of Ramone's taught brown back. I never could catch him; he was too fast.

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The dynamic in my childhood home was strange at times, but for the most part not different from any other family on our block. We lived in a working-class, mainly Italian suburb on the outskirts of Philadelphia. It wasn’t a wealthy neighborhood, but it wasn’t destitute like the areas on the south side of Philly where people lived in graffiti-spattered tenements of decaying red brick. Our house stood on a narrow lot with a thin strip of crabgrass along the front of the house and a gravel driveway between our house and the neighbors—just wide enough to fit our old station wagon with the side mirrors folded in.

I had pleasant memories playing baseball in the street with the other kids or racing bikes through the park with my friend, Ramone. My father left for work early in the morning and came back late in the evening, weary and non-conversational. My mother would serve him dinner in the living room, where he would sit alone in front of the TV as the rest of us ate silently in the kitchen. Sometimes, he remained in that chair late into the night or early hours of the morning, his eyes glazed and vacant as he watched the dancing shapes on the television. My father, like many of the parents on our street, had a strict way of overseeing his household.

I remember when I was ten years old, I stole a gold necklace from a jewelry store. I hid it in a drawer under a stack of t-shirts in the bedroom I shared with my younger brother, Clint. I wore it around the room a few times when no one was home and studied myself in the mirror with it. I liked the way I looked with the gold hanging around my neck and the feel of the cool metal on my skin. I imagined myself with bigger muscles, a less scrawny neck, and a square jaw. I pretended I was one of the tough kids: the ones with greased hair and tattoos, who leaned on the waxed hoods of their expensive cars beside the corner mart and played loud music as they sipped malt liquor from the bottle and smoked unfiltered cigarettes. After my daydream, I would tuck the necklace back into its hiding place and straighten the shirts around it to avoid suspicion. A week later, I came home from school, and it was gone. I panicked and ran into the den where Clint was watching staticky cartoons on our old box television set. He was wearing only a pair of striped boxers and eating fistfuls of cereal from the box. “Where is it?” I demanded.

“I haven’t touched anything, Linus,” he said. I felt something inside me crumbling as I realized my mother must’ve found it when she was doing laundry. I went back to our room and closed the door. I leaned my head back against the wood and closed my eyes. I didn’t move from that position until I heard my father coming in from work. There was a clink as he dropped his

keys into the ceramic bowl by the entryway. His heavy footsteps made their way to the kitchen, and there was a brief murmuring of indistinct conversation between him and my mother. I couldn't hear a word of what they had said, but a few minutes later, the door I leaned against budged gently and I stood up. My father entered a second later with the gold chain dangling from his short, calloused fingers. "Is this yours?" he asked calmly. He was a large man of pure Sicilian stock. His skin was dark bronze and didn't freckle in the sun. His figure was imposing yet soft and wide around the belt region, and his thick arms were covered in charcoal-colored hairs. I straightened my back as if I were a soldier standing at attention. "I... I... don't," the words bubbled out of me.

"Where did you take this from?" he asked again calmly. I tried to think of a way to configure the words to avoid responsibility for what I had done, but what ended up coming out was:

"It was Clint! He stole it!" I blurted. My father marched out of the room and returned a second later hauling Clint by the arm. Clint's face was already red, streams of clear fluid had begun to leak from his eyes and nose.

"No, no, Papa I didn't steal it, I swear!" he screamed desperately as my father unhitched the belt from his pants. I felt something between guilt and relief in the second before my father reached for me and wrenched my whole body forward by the arm. I was in shock as the metal buckle struck me hard across the back. Clint and I wailed uncontrollably as the belt came down across our bodies repeatedly with a meaty thwack sound. After he felt we had both been thoroughly punished, he left the room; our bodies were both covered in U-shaped welts. After an hour or so, my mother called us for dinner. The three of us silently ate our canned ravioli and sipped milk from drugstore glasses as we listened to the old TV yammer away. After dinner, I helped my mom wash dishes in the kitchen as she smoked a cigarette at the window. No words were exchanged between us for the remainder of the night.

Later that evening, after I had brushed my teeth and done my schoolwork, I went back to the kitchen and filled a cup from the tap. My father sat on a kitchen chair by the propped-open back door. He sipped Jack from a crystalline rock glass that I had only ever seen used by him to drink Jack. "Goodnight Dad," I said dutifully and turned to go to bed.

"Wait, come here a second, Linus."

I felt myself tense up; the purple and green welts on my body still throbbed dully under the thin fabric of my pajamas. As I approached, a thin breeze came in from the back door and ruffled his thinning black and silver hair. "Linus, you understand your mother and I aren't wealthy people?" he said.

"Yes, I understand that," I replied.

"I thought you did. You're a smart kid." He breathed in deeply. "I'm sorry I hit you; I didn't want to. If you or Clint ever have a little boy, you'll understand how hard it is to do, but it's for their own good, so they can grow up to be good men." I nodded as he continued, "I know sometimes things are harder for us and that you and your brother don't always have the nicest clothes or the fanciest toys. I know what it's like. I was a young man when I came to this country

with your grandma and uncles. We had practically nothing—just two suitcases between the five of us.”

I could tell by the loose pronunciation of his syllables that he was on his fourth or fifth belt of Jack and he was pouring himself out to me more than he had intended, but I stayed silent and transfixed. “I’ve worked all my life. First I worked in a sawmill and then a brickyard. After that ended, I bounced around a lot of construction jobs, but no matter how much I did, there was never enough work.” He took a long swallow from his glass and stared out at the place where our small backyard abruptly ended in a crumbling cinder block wall. “The work your mother and I do, the work that pays for the dinner you ate tonight, your school clothes, and your toys, is against the law. If we were ever caught, we could go to prison and you boys would be sent to live somewhere else. The life we all share would be over. We do those things for you and your brother in the hopes that you’ll never have to do them for your kids. Do you understand that?” He reached out and squeezed my shoulder gently with his paw of a hand.

“Yeah, I understand, and I won’t do it again. I do well at school, and so does Clint,” I reassured him. My father smiled at this. His smile was odd; his teeth were all different sizes, and some stood at awkward slanted angles in his mouth.

“Well, keep at it. Maybe you’ll be living in one of those houses on the west end when you’re my age.” He patted my back hard. “Alright, get to bed”.

The move to Texas was announced to us a few weeks before school ended, and by June, boxes of our belongings had begun to crowd our narrow hallways. The situation hadn’t been discussed much since we had left the dinner table that night. Rather, it had been begrudgingly accepted as we all digested the decision in our own ways. Our house gradually emptied of our belongings; the framed black and white photos of our great-grandparents in Sicily were sealed in bubble wrap and stowed away safely in cardboard boxes.

I milled around the neighborhood for the last few days as if in a dream. I said goodbye to friends and played baseball in the street and football at the park. Ramone and I raced around the neighborhood on our bikes, our bare chests shiny with sweat. We passed places that I knew I would never see again and, if I ever did return, would seem different to me somehow, as if I was looking at them through someone else’s eyes.

We stopped for a soda outside the corner store and sat down on the steps. One of the older kids, Mikey Wallace, and his girlfriend, Alexandra Rossetti, rode by in a black Camaro. As they rode past, I tried to picture myself being his age sitting in a Camaro alongside some dark-haired girl. My thoughts then drifted to where my life would be at that age but struggled to find anything concrete. Although I couldn’t place what it was, I knew the end of something significant was coming; although, I was not prepared for how brash an awakening adulthood had in store for me.

For a reason I don’t know, I can only remember our drive to Texas in a series of snapshots preserved in my mind. One was of our wood-paneled station wagon parked on the street out front of our old house in Philadelphia. The roof and the interior of the car were piled high with boxes and suitcases containing all the odds and ends of our lives in Philadelphia. The

next was of me perched on the seat in between a set of musty, oak drawers that my mother refused to leave behind and a stack of cardboard boxes containing the pots and pans from our kitchen, which frequently shifted and clattered with the motions of the car.

The third snapshot was of my mother and father standing out front of a gas station somewhere in Oklahoma. It was a novelty tourist trap with a tall, concrete cone painted to look like a teepee. My parents were comically mismatched in their appearance. My mother was nearly bone thin. She wore a pair of pink, plastic sunglasses, and the desert wind pressed her white sundress flat against her ribs and gently pulled at her dark hair.

My father stood beside her. The girth of his body nearly exceeded the confines of his clothes, and a sliver of abdomen was visible between his belt and the place where his shirt ended. He stood there with his odd-sloped smile, his eyes squinting in the glare. The next and final snapshot was our new home, a squat brown brick house with dusty windows and a yard filled with scrub grass and bits of broken bottles.

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"Bigger than in Philly," I said to him as we walked through the kitchen. I opened the screen door beside the stove and walked out into the backyard, which was as underwhelming as the front except for live oak which hovered at the edge of the property. A worn tire hung from one of the tree's limbs by a frayed rope. My parents sat together on the stairs of the unfurnished back porch and watched my brother and me take turns pushing each other. Clint sat on top of the tire as I pushed him, his legs kicking upwards every time the tire was thrust higher into the air.

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"*Who did this,*" my mother cried in Italian. I felt the hair on my neck rise. I slipped out of bed and crept into the hallway enough to see that the light was on in the kitchen, where my father stood shirtless at the sink scrubbing furiously at something on his body. The hot water steamed upwards from the sink and reddened his hands as he rubbed his skin nearly raw. My mother stood beside him and sobbed into her hands. He stood back from the sink and let the pink water drip onto the tile.

“Marina, it’s under control,” he stated. He made a motion as if to comfort her but decided against it. He wiped his hands dry on a dish towel. “Quiet, or you’ll wake the boys.” My mother stifled her crying enough that he was able to speak. “I didn’t kill anyone. Just someone was messing with our operation, and we needed them to talk.”

“You said it was an administrative role!” she yelled as she grabbed the turpentine and gauze from a drawer. “I miss our life in Philadelphia; we were poor, but we were good,” she said. “This—this can’t go on.” For a moment, my father looked as if he might agree with her. I imagined in an instant all the changes in our lives suddenly reversed and we pulled back into the driveway of our house in Philly, all our furniture and belongings exactly where they had always been. The image was shattered when my father spoke to her, this time in gruff English.

“And where am I supposed to go, Marina? Do you think people with pasts like ours can get good jobs or that we can just go somewhere and be someone else? I have given everything—*everything* I have for this family,” his voice was loud enough that it could have been heard had I remained in bed. “You want to make me a man who can’t provide for his family? You know I hate what I do, but I’m going to do this every day until I die.” He turned to where I was hiding, and I bolted back to bed. I threw the quilt over my head and lay there heaving. I heard the creaking of the floorboards as my father came into the room. He stood there for a moment. I held my breath. Finally, he moved from the doorframe, and I heard his footsteps growing quieter as they drew further away.

A couple of months later, my mother picked me up from football practice. The Texas heat had been particularly brutal that day; my body was covered in a layer of dried sweat. I leaned over and picked the blades of grass off my socks as the blast of the air conditioning stung my skin. Storm clouds had gradually been building overhead and began to pour down onto the parched, red soil and empty field. The rain came down in sheets, washing away the layers of red dust that had collected on the windshield over the previous weeks. My mother didn’t look at me as I climbed in. She remained silent for most of the car ride, only offering simple responses to my description of the day’s practice.

The storm had taken out the power, and the house fell dark and empty without the hum of the television to warm it. I went into the upstairs bathroom and peeled off my clothes in the light of a lantern we kept under the sink. In the light, I admired myself in the mirror. I had put on a decent bit of muscle from football, and dark stubble had begun to emerge above my lip. I barely resembled the kid who had moved from Philly five months ago. I showered quickly and changed into fresh clothes. When I went downstairs and entered the kitchen, there was no hint of dinner simmering on the stove. My mother and Clint sat at the kitchen table silently. I sat down with them. “Your father was arrested today, Linus,” my mother said. I was silent, unsure of how to react. I think some part of me had already accepted that it was likely to end this way.

“What happened?” I asked. I figured knowing was easier than not. My mother just shook her head. She looked older than I had ever remembered her being, her eyes sunken and tired.

“He shot two men over a couple of grams of coke,” she said. I sat up straight in my chair, my spine ridged against the varnished cherry wood of the chair. I thought back to the night my

parents had discovered the necklace and the words my father had shared with me as we sat looking out at the few fireflies winking in our small yard.

We do it with the hopes that you'll never have to do them for your kids.

I felt as if I was going to choke and stood up from the table. My mother grabbed for me, trying to prevent me from leaving, but I wrenched free. I felt the tears rising inside me, hot and searing.

"Linus, listen to me." The thin veil of her American accent had begun to falter. The first tear fell, and she slapped me hard across the face, the sharp curve of her nail biting into the skin of my cheek. I reached up and felt my face, the nail had not cut deep enough to draw blood.

...

The air of the prison visitation room was dense with the smell of sweat and cigarette smoke. When they brought my father in, he looked older than I had ever seen him. His hair had all turned gray or fallen off. He seemed sickly and skinny, although some clumps of fat on his arms and neck had stubbornly refused to leave. His orange prison slippers shuffled across the concrete floor accompanied by the rattle of the shackles that joined his feet. He sat down on the stool across from me. The stainless-steel table between us felt as if it may as well have been a million miles away. He waited until the guard had taken the handcuffs off before he spoke. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"Busy. I have a job at a bank now."

He coughed weakly. "Yeah, your brother told me. He also told me I have a granddaughter I've never met." I nodded. He just said, "You finally made it. Living in a fancy house on the West End. I'm proud of you."

"Thank you, Dad," I said, although the words seemed hollow as they came out of my mouth. We spent the rest of the time reminiscing over the happier memories and talking about the simple pleasures of this world. When our hour was over, we shared a brief hug, and I left, knowing it would be the last time I would see him.

I thought of the day when he punished me for stealing the necklace and the conversation we had after; we watched the sun sink over the gray shingle roofs of our neighborhood. I awoke that night longing for a squat house I hadn't seen in years, for the rooms of my current house seemed too big and impersonal. I longed for the feeling of the wind on my bare chest, the taste of dry spit in my mouth, and the feeling of undeterred power as I drove down the pedals of my bike.

Editor's Notes to Adam:

- First and foremost, thank you for submitting this fun and nostalgic story! This mafia-esque tale felt fresh among the other submissions. This is the last year I will be reviewing your work for this magazine, but I wish you all the best and can't wait to see what you'll publish in the future.
- I encourage you to expand this story. I sense that you spent a lot of time in this world, for you convey all its life into the text. Some details unfortunately end up getting lost or feeling unnecessary when a story must be condensed to fit the magazine. Expanding this into a novel-sized work would afford the audience the space to immerse themselves as deeply as you want.
- Detail placement: There are a lot of details, and I see how it may feel natural to set a scene with them, but these can act as road blocks in a narrative. I instead challenge you to weave the details *in* the narrative. For example, Linus can describe his driveway as he returns home from a long day of work rather than it being described on its own.
- Some paragraphs were separated to visually indicate different topics and dialogue; this helps readers with digesting the content.
- Voice: There are some instances in which your voice breaks through the page and pulls us out of the story. Linus is a kid from an Italian family who lives on the south side of Philly; I don't know if he would describe the Texas heat as "veracious," so I changed it to "brutal." There are some other instances of this (referring to houses as "tenements of decaying red brick.") Remember, this isn't you telling the story, it's Linus---you are his humble transcriber.
- Added the centered ellipses as a visual break to establish a time skip.
- I edited the ending, and all of the story for that matter, with the intention of trying to preserve as much of your voice as possible. However, Ramone is only mentioned twice before being brought up in the ending. I believe the edited ending works better since it is more centered on the narrator and his nostalgia by virtue of *not* mentioning Ramone.
- There are some word choices and minute details that could be nixed, but I left them for the reason stated in the bullet above.
- The door is always open to sit down and discuss editing decisions/feedback in further detail!