Eulogy by Jason McMonagle

**IT WAS 2003.** I was twenty-five and living in New York City, every bit the concrete jungle I’d been told. Skyscrapers crested above the clouds. Yellow cabs rolled down the streets like a pride of lions racing across the savannah. Steam billowed up from sidewalk grates, hinting at whole worlds below the pavement. New York was dangerous and exhilarating. It was adventure.

“You don’t actually live in New York,” my older brother Sean had said on the phone after I moved there. “You live in Hoboken.”

“It’s just as well.” I defended the one-square-mile city in New Jersey where I’d landed. “It’s cheaper and just a puddle jump across the Hudson.”

I’d heard a tourist say the same thing on Garden Street at a quaint little restaurant called the Dining Room, where I waited tables. It was eight blocks from the apartment I shared with a friend from college, a dancer who’d traded in her ballet shoes for bare feet and a drum at an African dance company.

“That doesn’t even make sense,” Sean said. “You don’t jump the river. You go underneath it.”

“Oh, Sean. It’s just something a person with character says. You really must get out of Florida from time to time.”

I’d gotten myself out a year after I’d earned a bachelor’s degree in theater from Florida State University. Sean, on the other hand, couldn’t even get out of my parents’ house. He was twenty-eight and comfortable as ever living in his childhood room. He’d even updated it with blue-marbled wallpaper and a bedroom set that my mother called French Country. Besides sharing a house, my parents and Sean also shared the opinion that there was no reason for him to be on his own. My mom and dad liked having Sean around. He’d learned to cook great meals like beef Wellington and had perfected desserts like white chocolate crème brûlée. He’d make dinners a few nights a week for my parents. My mother gloated about him, “Seared scallops on Tuesday and chicken piccata on Friday.”

My brother had also developed a solid work ethic. He was dedicated to his jobs, whether he was driving eighteen-wheelers and delivering furniture all over the United States or, as in his current profession, selling used cars at a dealership in Fort Myers. Besides keeping a job, the other grown-up thing he’d done was get married, which led to the smartest thing he’d ever done—get divorced. His ex-wife reminded me of the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz.* She had a chilling cackle and despised small children so much she’d make off-the-cuff remarks about running them over with her Jeep Cherokee. I never let on to her that I didn’t like her. Marrying Sean came with obstacles, like having to share a home with his mother and father and explaining his horrendous jail tattoos to her own mom. I’d lost count over the years of how many times Sean had landed himself in jail. Once for allegedly stealing money from the safe of a produce factory where he’d worked the graveyard shift, another time for stealing credit cards out of the wallet of one of his girlfriend’s fathers, and again for selling crack or smoking it or both. Each time he’d have to do more than an evening in jail, he’d come home with a crooked marijuana leaf on his thigh or a rolled joint on his left shoulder blade.

So I gave her a break. She wasn’t all bad. She was the reason there had been a wedding a few years back. Sean had stood at the front of Unity Church in his sleek tuxedo. I was next to him in mine. Our patent-leather shoes shined in the spotlights above. There were sweat beads on Sean’s forehead when I’d handed him the ring from my vest pocket. My mother was eager in the front pew. She was in a claret dress with a giant corsage, next to my father, teary-eyed, in a tuxedo. It had all been so normal. Sean was getting married like other men his age. When he said, “I do,” it sounded like he meant it. As if he had also said, “I do want to move out of my parents’ house. I do want to invest in my 401(k). I do want to have children and host Fourth of July barbeques.” It was the most hopeful I’d ever been for him.

Our relationship even began to resemble that of adults—friendly. Sean stopped pantsing me in public and never peed on me again, and I, as often as I could manage, resisted pointing out that he shared the same address as my parents. Over the years, I’d even come to appreciate my brother’s general distaste for decorum, and once I stopped being the target, had the distance to see that his cutting remarks could be clever. After I moved to New York, I missed him.

I missed a lot of things, especially all the confidence I had about my talent before I’d arrived. I’d become slightly less of a performer over the years. I was still an attention hog but in a less tap-dancing-hey-look-at-me kind of way. The high school boys and college frat guys had made me weary of drawing attention to myself. Getting on a stage and under a spotlight had begun to feel foreign. Not a stroll-through-Tuscany. More like dodging missiles in Bosnia. I wasn’t going to any auditions, even though I’d tell my parents otherwise. “Yeah, Mom, I’ve got another audition on Friday for a face cream.” I’d still pick up *Backstage* magazine each week and circle all the auditions for lead actors, supporting roles, extras and walk-on parts, but I could never muster the courage to compete for the role. Instead, I’d just stare at all the black circles I’d marked around casting calls on the page and feel like the worst kind of failure—the kind who’s too scared to try.

I did manage to get one meeting with an agent named Dick Russo who was a friend of a friend of this guy Juan who I waited tables with. Juan was from Puerto Rico, an actor who always talked like he was onstage and made a point of ending each thought with a punchline. “I don’t know this Dick guy, but you need an agent. What do you have to lose besides your gut?”

Dick had a small one-room office on Twenty-Second Street. The walls in the building vibrated, and the hallway smelled like fried egg noodles from the Thai restaurant downstairs. A few minutes after I’d arrived, Dick passed on me as a new client, saying, “I don’t represent character actors.”

“Thank you,” I said, confused by why’d he’d think of me as a character actor.

That night at work, I found out what he meant.

“It means you’re fat,” Juan said while the two of us filled tiny ramekins with butter. Juan had my same squishy shape and doe-like features. “Get used to playing large talking animals and fun uncles.”

“I want to be the star,” I said.

It was the truth. But I was beginning to understand a more powerful truth: I was too fat, too gay, too average to ever be the star.

“The star, huh?” Juan said and motioned for me to turn around so that he could tighten my apron. “How original.”

After that, the little confidence I’d brought with me to New York dwindled away. One afternoon I called my brother, distressed. “It’s much harder than I expected. Everyone here is so talented and thin.”

“Do the directors give you any feedback after you audition?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “They just send me away.”

I was too embarrassed to tell Sean that I hadn’t made it to a single casting call.

“Maybe you’re in the wrong place,” Sean said. “Isn’t New York more of a theater town? Hollywood is where you want to break into film.”

“Of course I know that, Sean,” I said into the phone. “Getting on Broadway makes me legit. If I can do it, LA directors will treat me like I’m the next Meryl Streep.”

Another lie. California was as far from Florida as Iraq or Fiji. New York City was in the same time zone. It was a short flight from Naples, Florida—a Julia Roberts movie and two glasses of wine away.

“Don’t you actors workshop on the weekends for this kind of stuff?” Sean asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Can’t you take a class where you drink hot water with lemon and learn to turn your painful life of rejection into art?”

I was shocked that I hadn’t thought of it myself. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this, Sean, but you might be right.”

The next day I found a studio in the Village holding tryouts for a summer acting workshop. It cost more than $2,000 and the teacher, a man named Dan, who had a manicured beard, admitted only thirteen students, so I knew it was for serious artists ready to do in-depth work. An actor was even quoted on the brochure: “Dan pulled the leading man out of me. Within weeks of the workshop, I finally got my break.”

On the day of the audition, Dan sat behind a table in a black turtleneck and pants so tight they could have been leggings. After I performed a thirty-second monologue from the *Devil and Daniel Webster,* he tapped his fingers over the top of his notebook and said, “Have you any training at all?”

“Of course,” I said. “I studied at FSU.”

“Ah, yes,” he continued in that elitist tone of the New York theater world. “Another legend bred in Tallahassee.”

“Wait a minute.” I marched over. “Just because I’m fat and from Florida does not mean I can’t be the lead.”

He snickered and waved me close. “Are you a Nell Carter?”

“What?” I asked.

“Nell Carter would audition for roles written for petite white women. She’d show up and the directors would sneer at her. Then she’d blow the roof off with her voice.”

“And?”

“And they’d rewrite the part for a large black woman.”

I stared at him and hoped he might say something inspiring. How this class would give me those kinds of chops. Or that he saw a little of Nell Carter in me. He continued, “If a person has got *it,* he can be anything in this town. Fat. Gay. Even Republican. So I’ll ask again. Are you a Nell Carter?”

“Not exactly.” I looked at the ground. At one time I’d hoped my tragic recording of “Jump” back at Knott’s Berry Farm was merely the clumsy first attempt of a developing and gifted singer. I’d heard Michael Jordan wasn’t good enough for his high school basketball team, and I was sure my singing voice would mature. It never did. I could act fine (though Dan might disagree), but I couldn’t sing. My voice plateaued at clunky and out of tune. I said to Dan, “I can’t exactly carry a tune, but I have charisma. I’m more of a Tom Cruise than a Nell Carter.”

He looked out behind me and cleared his throat. “Next.”

I wanted to jump over the table and strangle him, but I knew he was right. I didn’t have *it.* I left that posh studio in the Village and made a promise to myself: Dan would be the last person ever to humiliate me. I’d never audition again.

I called Sean on my way to work that evening on the phone he’d sent for my twenty-fifth birthday three weeks earlier. A penned note attached: “No phone bill for a year.”

“Why don’t you come back home?” Sean asked on the phone. The solution was obvious to him.

“I can’t come home,” I said. “I have to figure out what to do if I’m not an actor.”

“That is a problem.” Sean chuckled. “What to do with a theater degree?”

“A hell of a lot more than you’ll do with no degree,” I said back coldly.

“Tell me, Jason. It’s said that if you can make it in New York, you can make it anywhere. But what if you can’t make it there? Does that mean you can’t make it anywhere?”

“You know what, Sean?” I screamed into the phone, taking my wrath against Dan and all of New York out on him. “Fuck off.”

I hung up and went to work.

**After my dinner shift,** I ended up in a dark bar near my apartment on Second Street. I took a stool in the corner, next to the computer card game, and ordered one Scotch—an intellectual’s drink—to blend in with the other flies hunched over the cherrywood bar. They were quiet types with dark hats and wiry facial hair. The Scotch was fine but didn’t slide down as easy as the six or seven much-preferred Chardonnays after. They were poured the way my mom loved them—over ice.

“Doesn’t it water down the wine?” I once asked.

“Yes,” she’d said and seemed pleased by it.

By 1:00 a.m. I’d been scribbling in my notebook for two hours and had added to a story I’d been writing for months about a character who was a lot like me but without love handles and with nicer abs. The words ran onto the page with surprising ease.

“The sea, in its enormity, consumed my soul.” I’d shared some of what I’d written with my mother a few weeks before.

“Is it a poem?” she’d asked.

“No.” I’d flipped the page of my notebook. “It’s a book. The working title is *Unto Eternity.*”

She hadn’t offered an opinion on its quality, and I hadn’t asked for one. It didn’t matter if the book was good. Working on it each night had kept me from feeling like an out-of-work actor drunk at a bar. With a notepad and pen, I wasn’t a loser. I was a writer at my office.

At 2:00 a.m. Joe the bartender flipped the lights on and scooted me and the others out with a gruff but endearing announcement: “Go the fuck home.”

On the short walk to my flat, I could have called Sean to apologize for hanging up on him that afternoon. He would have been out on the lanai smoking a Newport. I bet he would have laughed the whole thing off. “It’s okay, dude. I’ve been told to fuck off for lesser things.”

I didn’t. Those were the days when time seemed infinite, a resource to use or take for granted as I wished.

**The next afternoon,** I was in Midtown and coaxed inside Bryant Park Café by a chalkboard sign: Happy Hour All Day. The cool and softly lit bar was alive with rowdy men watching sports. Golden draft beer glowed from their mugs, and Bruce Springsteen played behind them.

“What’s your special?” I sat at a table and asked the waitress. “I’m celebrating.”

“What?” she asked, a dark line drawn around her lips.

“A new life,” I said and tried to appear proud rather than lost. “A new me.”

“Five-dollar margaritas. Strawberry or lime.”

“Strawberry,” I said.

When she put it in front of me, I wondered why I’d ordered it. I had hated tequila since I’d gotten drunk on it my senior year of high school. I’d been mortified after a couple of boys on the diving team had called me Shamu, so Sean took me to the beach with a bottle of Dueno Tequila. The moon was like a torch over the Gulf of Mexico. After three shots, I grabbed a cigarette from the pack wedged into the sand between us.

I lit it. The cool menthol tasted the way old men smelled, but I kept on.

Sean stared out at the water, and then lit up as if he’d just figured out an equation. “You need to learn how to tell people to fuck off.”

“I can do that,” I said, charged up by the tequila. “Fuck off.”

“No. That’s just saying the words.” He put out his cigarette in the sand. “Telling someone to fuck off is different.”

“How?”

“You use everything you got. Your body, your eyes, and your voice.” He stood, pushed his shoulders back, tucked his chin down, and said each word like it was its own sentence: “Fuck. Off.”

“Wow.” I marveled at how he’d said it. Not fast. Not slow. The perfect tempo. His body was brooding, his voice deep and powerful. I stumbled up, tensed my shoulders, widened my eyes, and growled, “Fuck off.”

It was then, in that Midtown bar, that I remembered I had planned to call Sean that morning to apologize. Before I could dial his number, *Dad* flashed on the screen of my cell phone. Later, I would think how bizarre the timing was. I picked up the phone. “Jason McMonagle’s office.”

“It’s Dad,” he said sternly. “Where are you?”

“I’m at a bookstore. Is Sean with you?”

“No, he . . .” my father paused. “There’s been an accident.”

“An accident? Did he crash my Rodeo? Let me talk to him.” Sean had lost his car in his divorce. I’d left him mine when I’d moved to Hoboken. “You won’t need it in the city,” he’d said with such conviction that I hadn’t bothered to ask how he knew such a thing. I loved that Rodeo. Electric blue with silver lining. A manual transmission that helped me feel tough, macho, even.

“It was a serious accident,” my father said.

The men around me talked louder all of a sudden, nearly shouting. I stood and covered my other ear to keep their voices out. “Speak up, Dad.”

“Jason,” he said. “Sean died.”

In the background I heard my mother. “Tom, you were supposed to say Sean didn’t make it. It’s less jarring.”

The clock above the liquor well said 4:30.

“What time did this happen?” I asked.

“This morning, ten or eleven o’clock,” my father said.

“That was hours ago,” I said, furious that the day had misled me into thinking it was just another Monday. Why hadn’t I felt something? There should have been a sign, a gust of wind that smelled like his cigarettes or anything that could have signaled that he was gone.

My father said, “A helicopter tried to get him to the hospital.”

“A helicopter?” I asked and wished I didn’t want to know more. A story came with images, but I couldn’t stop myself. “What happened?”

“He flipped the car on the highway and was thrown from it,” my father said. “No one else was hurt.”

I saw it then: the Rodeo spinning in the air and crashing down against the pavement. Broken glass fountained out in all directions. Shredded Newport cigarettes like confetti on the ground. Sirens wailed in the background behind the slice of helicopter blades. Sean dead on the ground, fifty feet from the car. His ear, red with blood.

“I’ll do the eulogy,” I heard myself say, hoping that a mind full of words and sentences might keep away other images. Bloodier ones.

“What?” my father asked.

“The eulogy. I’ll give it,” I said and thought of how my conversation with Sean had ended the night before. Before I could stop myself, I snorted with laughter.

“Jason?” my father asked.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was just thinking of how I’ll start the eulogy.”

He listened to me go on about it and said, “It’s okay. We’re all in shock.”

My mother had grabbed the phone. “Are you all right?”

“Well, my brother just died. I’ve been better,” I said and laughed so hard I couldn’t stop. I walked out of the bar, my cheek warm and sweaty against the phone. A man in Dockers glided by. Then a woman in a pencil skirt and white Nikes. They moved slowly, like huge fish in an aquarium, watching me laugh. I pulled myself together and said, “It’s just the last thing I said to Sean was fuck off. Wouldn’t that be a funny way to start his eulogy, to say that?”

“Oh, Jason,” she said. “They’re just words. Your brother knew you loved him.”

“I know that, Mom,” I snapped. “I don’t feel bad. It’s hysterical. The perfect way to start a eulogy, really.”

“Okay,” she said. “It’s an interesting tone for that kind of affair.”

“That’s why Sean would love it. It’s unexpected.” I saw him behind the steering wheel, a lit Newport hanging off his lip and the wind crashing against his face. I asked, “Was he sober?”

“I think so.”

“That’s good,” I said.

It would have been tragic otherwise.

**Fourteen hours later** I was waiting outside the Fort Myers Airport with my luggage at my feet, sweating and foggy headed, though I’d slept solidly the night before. No dreams or tossing about. I’d closed my eyes, and everything had turned black. When I woke up to catch the plane, there was a haze over everything: the garden beyond the kitchen window, my suitcase packed by the door, my own reflection in the mirror.

My father pulled his Trooper up to the curb, my mother in the passenger seat. I watched her and my dad watch me, each of us looking for cracks in the others. My mother climbed out of the car and onto the curb, taking concentrated breaths with her hand to her chest as she came to me. More weight had piled on her body over the years. She’d given up tennis—she’d had a fairly aggressive backhand—and her evening workouts at the YMCA, where she’d pedal a stationary bike at a moderate speed for thirty minutes. Her lungs couldn’t handle the physical activity anymore. One doctor became three or four different specialists. They called her asthma restrictive lung disease, a medical oddity since my mother had never touched a cigarette, except, as she admitted, once or twice when she was a teenager and out drinking strawberry wine with her best friend, Barbara.

Where extra weight on another woman might slow her down or dampen her confidence, my mother just covered it with more colorful, printed clothes and vibrant makeup. As she grew and took up more space, she made use of every extra inch. On this day she wore a violet blouse and capris that matched her lipstick, a gladiator who would lead my father and me through the battle ahead. I relaxed as she put her arms around me, her large body a shield against the pain of the day. I’d gotten myself from New York to Florida. I’d made decisions on what shirts I might need and shoes, flip-flops for sure, and decided to take Delta rather than American for the flight down. Everything else could be left for her. I didn’t even need to know how to act. I’d just watch her, then do the same thing.

My mother put her arms around me without saying a word. I liked that, an invitation to say simple things for now and let the harder words lurk behind them for a bit. I whispered, “I don’t have a sports coat.”

“It’s 95 degrees. You don’t need one.” She still hugged me. “Did you bring your suit pants?”

“I did,” I said.

“I’ll press them for you.” She rubbed my back. “We’ll get you a new tie tomorrow.”

My father was behind her, quiet too, still trim and athletic. The remaining hair on the bottom half of his head and his beard had turned white. After my mother pulled away, he hugged me, squeezing me for longer than usual. Then he took my roller to the back of the SUV. I asked, “How are you, Dad?”

He couldn’t answer, but I didn’t need him to.

I sat in the back seat behind my mother for the thirty-minute drive south to Naples. Palmettos and palm trees flashed outside the window on the highway beside us, one giant brush stroke of green that went on for miles and miles. My mother’s hair was auburn now with blonde highlights. “When did you change your hair?”

She flipped down the vanity and primped the sides with her fingers. “Two weeks ago. You like?”

“I do.”

“We may need to have a closed casket for the viewing,” she said, signaling it was time to speak of more pressing things. “Sean’s face was bruised.”

I imagined his face, dark purple and swollen. “You saw him?”

“I did,” she said, and then switched to her teacher’s voice. “We have a lot to do. We’ll go to the funeral home now to pick out the casket for the viewing, then the urn. Sean will be cremated, of course.”

This made sense. Burned away rather than boxed up forever. I asked, “Then what?”

“Visit the florist to pick out flower arrangements,” she said. “We need to make sure that they match the coffin lining. And I want a theme for the funeral.”

“What about a rock concert?” I asked.

“That’s not it,” she said. “Keep thinking.”

She went on with her list as if she were an activities director for Carnival Cruise:

• Go to Costco and buy shrimp cocktail and raspberry Danish for out-of-town guests.
• Call people and give the date and time of the funeral.
• Write the obituary.

My father kept his eyes locked ahead, choosing the hypnotic reel of the highway over the to-do list. I liked planning with my mother. Each bullet point was an instruction on time, a map of how to make it to the next moment.

“I’d like to play Aerosmith at the wake,” I said.

“Hmm.” My mother tapped her finger over her mouth. “That should be fine. Softly, of course.”

“Only loud enough that the guests can hear it faintly,” I said and pressed my hand into the empty leather seat next to me.

It was cold.

**The evening before** the funeral was louder than I’d expected. Friends gathered at our house and washed out the solemnness with clinks of their glasses and chatter. With every surface filled with cheese trays and rapidly emptying bottles of white wine, it was hardly different from any other of my mother’s parties. I circled around with bite-size quiches on a ceramic tray.

“How’s acting going in New York?” my father’s friend Pete asked, a man who’d once given Sean and me Rough Riders condoms with an endearing suggestion to “wrap it up, gentlemen.”

“New York? Oh, it’s fine.” I swept by him. “Excuse me for a moment, I need more quiche.”

Women from the Naples High English Department converged on the buffet, smearing spinach-and-artichoke dip over parmesan dill crackers. The Monroeville teachers from Pennsylvania sat on the couch. My mother’s best friend, Prima, was alert in the middle of them in a Laura Ashley jumper with a thin gold belt, following my mother around the room with her eyes all night.

“Stop staring at me, Prima,” my mother said, turning. “It’s annoying.”

A few of Sean’s friends had stopped by briefly, in jean shorts and nicotine stains on their fingers. They were all too shaken to stay long, though my mother tempted them with chilled Budweisers. None of Sean’s exes showed. The one who’d moved to the Bahamas called to tell me that Sean was the best sex she’d ever had. A group of my girlfriends had sneaked in at some point and now dangled their feet in the pool while they shared a cigarette, calling for me every so often to bring out another bottle of Pinot.

“Tell your harem to use an ashtray.” My mother waved to them from inside.

She glided from group to group all night, soothing people’s nerves as if she were a giant quaalude.

“It’s okay to be a wreck,” she said to me after she’d caught me staring off, “but remember to refill people’s drinks.”

At 10:00 p.m. the last guest left, and with him the party atmosphere. The house felt crooked again. My father sat at the kitchen bar next to layered cakes and bouquets of flowers now arranged in vases while my mother scrubbed dried brie from a plate at the sink. I stood close to them, looking out the sliding-glass doors at the back of the house. The pool was a dark lagoon. The sky and the lake beyond it blended into one large blanket of night.

“Do you know what you’ll say tomorrow?” my mother asked me.

I cringed. The *eulogy.* I’d come to my senses and realized the *So I told him to fuck off* introduction might be more difficult to land with a grieving audience than considered originally. But I couldn’t think of anything else. When I’d tried to put something together earlier that day, I’d only achieved mediocrity: Sean was more than my brother, he was my best friend or Sean was born on May 15, 1974, to Tom and Sandy McMonagle. I said, “I haven’t a fucking clue what to write.”

“You could talk about the dash between the date of birth and date of death on a gravestone,” my father said. “What did your brother do with his dash?”

“That sounds like a bumper sticker on a hearse, Dad,” I said.

“Break it into sections.” My mother turned off the faucet and grabbed a dish towel. “Childhood, young adult, and then the last few years. Pick one story from each time. Edit them, of course.”

“Snooze fest,” I said.

My mother put the plate down and walked around the bar. “What do you want to say about him?”

I went through the stories I could tell. There was his brief chunky period in the sixth grade that I considered a high point in my own youth. But if he wasn’t there to roll his eyes when I mentioned his chafed thighs and doughy chest, why say it at all? I said, “I don’t know. I just want it to be great.”

“Sit down.” She pulled out a chair next to my father and then emptied the last of a bottle of Chardonnay into her glass. “Close your eyes and tell me the first thing that comes to mind.”

“Mother.” I sat. “I’m not in the mood for an activity.”

“Just try,” she said. “You’re blocked, is all.”

I closed my eyes.

“Tell me what you see,” she said.

“I see nothing, Obi Wan,” I said, ready to give up.

“Give it a little longer.” She touched my leg. “It’s in there.”

I could see him in his room when he was a kid, his face pressed against his bedroom window as he screamed and pointed outside. He was seven or eight and had been convinced that the devil was in the front yard. “He’s digging a hole,” he’d sounded terrified. He had terrified me.

Then he was nineteen. Our mother had brought him to the doctor because his legs had been aching for days. I’d turned around in the front seat and looked at him squirm and cry, sprawled out in the back. After the appointment, he was as shaken as I’d ever seen him. The doctor had told him what sugar and drugs did to diabetics’ legs. It was rare to see my brother consider how the disease might catch up with him, though he’d had it since he was five. It was only when fear overwhelmed his usual cockiness that I remembered and saw him as a diabetic.

Another image, the Outback Steakhouse. My twenty-second birthday party. Sean was sucking down a Captain Morgan mixed with Diet Coke beside my mother, in a collared top with printed palm fronds, and my father, bald; the toupee had been gone for years by then. There were empty glasses next to full ones and plates smeared with gristle and fat pushed into the center. Sean handed me a birthday card in a yellow envelope, “Jay” scribbled on the front. I blushed as I opened it and saw the chiseled, naked man on the cover. He wore a bow on his wrist.

“Read it,” Sean had demanded.

I flipped it open: *Hope you get a nice package on your birthday.* He’d signed: *If not, you can touch mine. Happy Birthday! Love, Sean.*

I smiled at the memory and opened my eyes. “I’m afraid to give the eulogy tomorrow.”

“Why?” my mother asked.

I took a deep breath. “People think Sean is a screwup. I want them to know him as I do. I want to capture his essence with my words.”

My mother reached across the counter and pulled a yellow legal pad from next to the phone and slid it in front of me. “Start from there.”

**The next morning,** I went to the funeral home ahead of my parents to make sure the flowers looked like a Van Gogh painting, as my mother had instructed the florist. Since his divorce, Sean had developed a fondness for the Dutch painter. The artist’s prints had even found their way into his bedroom in the same frames that had once showcased women in bikinis and, more recently, Cyprus Hill posters decorated with marijuana leaves. It seemed out of character but sweet for a man who still laughed at his own farts and arrived shirtless to the dinner table even when there was company. But because of the rarity of Sean liking something that wasn’t offensive to minors and the elderly, my mother chose Van Gogh as the inspiration for his funeral. She’d even said to the florist, “The arrangements must evoke his work.”

The florist had done a credible job. Explosions of purple salvia, blue spiders, and sunflowers stood on plastic pillars painted to look like stone. But when I saw them beside the coffin, they hardly seemed important anymore. It was an open casket after all. Sean looked like a sculpture, a man who resembled my brother but wasn’t actually him. He was dressed in the same navy-blue DKNY suit that he’d worn for special occasions like weddings and court dates. His hands were cupped over his sternum and he held the cross I’d bought him at the Vatican during a summer semester abroad.

“This was blessed by the pope,” I’d said to him. “Hope it doesn’t burn your skin.”

“How thoughtful,” he’d answered. “It doesn’t even matter anymore that Mom and Dad didn’t send me to Europe too.”

I touched Sean’s face, covered in a thick coat of makeup the color of fake tanner, and leaned in to search for any hints of blue and purple bruises from the accident. He smelled of chemicals instead of the more familiar cigarette smoke.

“You’re breathing on me,” he said.

“Sorry.” I pulled away, startled. “You don’t look like yourself.”

“I was launched fifty feet in the air and hit the ground face-first. Forgive me.”

I winced. “Did it hurt?”

“I’m dead, Jason. What do you think?”

I jerked out of my reverie when the front door opened. My mother came down the aisle in a black dress with bright-yellow sunflowers stitched up the side. Her arms swung. Her violet fingernails flashed back and forth.