

Part 1: I'LL BE BACK

Chapter 1: Ellie: Out of the Trap

It's not a dream. It is a real-life scene from my life in hell, spiraling me down into the middle-of-the-night blues.

The floor of the helicopter is metal, but it is alive and restless. Jarring movements bounce me up and down on knife-sharp edges. I'm barely conscious and yet painfully aware. Soldiers, slapping at each other, laughing, pushing, the engulfing sound of engines as the helicopter rises, the vertigo as it veers to one side and continues to ascend. Men yelling at each other. I can't understand a word. Wind, howling. Cries and moans from behind. Hands zip-tied, cutting into my wrists, I slide my feet around. I see the women. Crouched or sitting curled into balls against the far wall of the flying machine. Men all around us, pointing, laughing, owning us. Wind, gusting from the wide side door. Open, like a predator's mouth. A man crouches behind me, duck-walks to one, then another crying woman. Grabs this small old one, forces her up. In a flash, her long, wrinkled peasant dress is ripped off. She is naked. Bruised all over, blood bruises, she is in pain as he drags her, holds her hands high so she is wheeling her feet in the air, then hitting ground, then in the air, then hitting, then thrown to the men by the door. Wait! The door, open, because they have her out, out the door, hanging, screams from behind me, the other women seeing this. The helicopter veers, almost pitching a man out. He grabs a stanchion, laughs, points down. It's all blue down there... ocean! Ocean! They lift the woman back in, stand her up, pat her like a pet, smiling. Then a kick. This massive kick from one man as the other lets go and she is wheeling out, wheeling out and gone, down towards the blue, her screams fading away, laughter as a man yells "Go!" Her wrinkled dress is tossed after her, waving wildly in the airstream. Silence from the other women, then frantic cries of disbelief. I am panting, out of control, my heart racing. Blood running into my one good eye. I understand now. I am about to die.

Fear jolts me half-awake; the nightmare recedes into the fog of night and I feel a moment of relief. I look out the window as pre-dawn fades into morning light. The helicopter has disappeared. But the middle-of-the-night blues hold me in a vise.

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At nine a.m. sharp, on edge and discouraged, I entered MaryAnn's office for my final counseling session. I looked around at my therapy home for the past five years: the couch

in the chic living room, French doors leading to the small backyard, the open kitchen just beyond the seating area. I wanted to remember this place, this apartment masquerading as an office. Not a transactional space where horrible things were discussed. More like Grammy's old house if she had a degree from FIT. I loved the place, but hated that five years later I still needed therapy. Nothing had changed for me. It was simpler for MaryAnn; she had a sabbatical. For me? I had nightmares.

My therapist walked in, came right to me and hugged me. "Ellie!" I tried not to pull away. Hugging was once an easy thing, an afterthought or an impulse. I wondered now how many of the people I hugged were cringing inside.

She patted my back. "Have a seat."

I sat at my end of the couch, unsure what this last meeting would entail.

MaryAnn was not a perky person, but today she was trying. "It's an exciting time for you. To move on."

"I'm not ready."

"Ellie, we've talked about this. You don't question the trauma you suffered. You know who you were before."

I didn't answer that, but yes, I had more memories of that as time goes on.

"When you are not distracted, you know where you want to go. Back to your life. Help me out here."

I fought back. "Is this therapy for you or for me?"

She sighed, her cheery façade taking a hit. "Okay. Since you ask, probably for me. I know you're angry, but the sabbatical is... I need it. Over these years, I wake up at night, feeling for you. The things you went through are inconceivable, yet they occur. This is the great contradiction of our lives. How can these things happen if there is a God?"

The helicopter, I'd told her that one. I sat on the couch afterward, heart racing, drenched in sweat, shivering as she brought me a wet washcloth, a glass of water. I hadn't even noticed it affected her. *She woke up at night?*

She continued. "I have a responsibility to myself to take some time and space and see how I can more peacefully live with what I hear." She was looking straight at me with an even gaze, as if we were discussing the weather.

I was stunned. "I'm sorry." *How could I not have realized—*

Her voice was firm. "No apologies. Ellie, I'm going to break some rules."

I was dizzy. Rules were all I had left.

"You need to try harder to come back, to let go of what happened to you. Especially if you want to stay in your marriage. Do you understand that Philip is no longer the man who came and saved you, that he might be in worse shape than you?" She stared me down, then continued. "There are only a few more obstacles for you, things we haven't been able

to get to. You have more stories hidden inside. These stories have power, they are holding you back. You need to find them, let them out.”

“I don’t know where they are.” It surprised me that I even admitted they existed, these shadow memories.

“They hide beyond the village. You have to let the village go.”

Let it go? The village was so different from the General’s militia camp. Farm workers lived there, the *trabajadores*, and other men, mostly old or wounded. Women, the mothers and wives and children of fighters in the militia. The village was peaceful, hidden away from the conflict. The General sent me there, maybe because he trusted me, felt for me. No chains at night, and few rules during the day. It was a community, and I was part of it. I remember the way the way the old men stroked my arm when I would help care for them with Father Ben in the *enfermería*; the old ladies would check in on me and bring me a *tamale*. People in the village thought I was a saint. *Santa Leonora*. The village made me feel forgiveness.

A saint can forgive. I can forgive the General. I can even forgive Philip, for the sin of saving me. I still can’t forgive myself.

MaryAnn watched me struggle. “The village is a hiding place for you and from you. Let the village go, you may find the stories.” She looked carefully at me. “Only, of course, if you want to return home.”

She wrote on a small pad. Another prescription? “I know you won’t move to another therapist, even though you should and you have my recommendations. You might consider another solution. I have no personal knowledge of this, but I know the doctor and I know people who have worked with him. The irony is this is sourced from the Colombian jungles. Here.” She handed it to me. “It’s one path, you might discover others, if you look. Perhaps it’s the looking that is important.”

Ayahuasca. The word looked like it came from Beyond.

MaryAnn watched me stare at the paper. “This is not an approved form of treatment, but it is being used for trauma, for men. Medically, you’ve been denied a PTSD diagnosis because you’re a woman.” It frustrated her just to say this. “And you’ve been in analysis now for years.” She smiled, sat back, suddenly at ease. “You know all my tricks. Ellie, you’re brilliant. Take over. Analyze the experience. Write down even more about the time you spent with the General. Set goals.” She pointed at the slip of paper. “Understand what you need to do. If you want your life.”

She looked at her watch, hugged me one final time. “You’re brave. Thank you for sharing your story with me.”

I wanted to call out that I hadn’t shared everything, not everything. But she was gone. I sat for one final moment in that deceptively peaceful living room, then left. I walked to my apartment, not really seeing the neighborhood, the brownstones, the glorious fall leaves.

Is this the day? Do I want my life, if I still have one? Do I want to get beyond the Beyond?

* * *

I sat on the wood floor in my tiny studio on the Upper West Side and stared at the open notebook next to me. Analyze the experience. Set goals. Sounds easy, but it's not.

When I came back from Beyond, I said I needed my own space. They got this small studio for me, just upstairs from my husband and son, but separate. Philip got me a small sofa and a bed. I asked for a smaller one.

I stayed inside for a long time, trying to feel safe. More recently, I trained myself to get outside, find safety on longer walks, with stops at the Korean grocer and time alone in the park. Philip came into my space more often, bringing *change*, he would joke. His visits meant I had to be careful. Not all change was good. A while ago I had this feeling about dirt. Back in Beyond, I lived on a dirt floor. I mean, it was the ground, flattened. I missed that, the timelessness of dirt: here so long ago, here so long after me. But the dirt I brought into the apartment didn't work the same way. It piled up on the wood floor, it spread out everywhere. Philip was so quiet when he saw it. The dirt wasn't the change he wanted to bring.

But he kept trying. He showed me the plans to cut a hole in the floor, build a stairway. "It will still be your room, but we'll be connected." Chris watched me when Philip talked about it. My son had what I call his hopeful look. I found this frustrating—*he can be hopeful, just don't ask me to be hopeful*. Part of me was still in the village because it was safe. Before the village, in the militia camp, I was hurt, scared and so angry. I screamed at the General once. I don't know why. He had no reaction, like he'd heard that all his life. He reached over next to his blackboard, handed me a magazine. It was about gardens. *Jardines de los Ricos*. I stopped screaming. He told his men not to touch me. I remembered this as a visual fragment. An empty blue sea, an empty sky. Then a voice. "*No tocar*." Almost biblical. Made me think of God and Adam in the Sistine Chapel. *No tocar*. I had this terrible thought. What was I there for, if *no tocar*? And was there, was there, *tocar* that I couldn't recall?

The General had shown me a map, I can't remember why. The map was of this giant empty zone, spread through the middle of Colombia. Called Meta. In Greek it means "beyond." It was beyond the beyond. No towns, no roads. He told me, "This is your world. You walk from one end to the other. But you don't make the whole walk. You die here, or here. Or here."

I looked at the map for a long time. Could I learn something, anything, that would help me? *Help me do what?* What I most strongly remember is that I wouldn't even try to escape. I was passive, terrified, a total loss.

The General watched me without judgment. He was sometimes gentle. He didn't rape me. He didn't kill Philip. I can't hate the General. I can hate myself.

Is that crazy? And by that I mean, is that madness?

I stared at the notebook, pages with fragments of sentences: *tocar*, map, *Meta*, *Jardines*, hate. It was all heavy with emotion. I needed something simple, a list of goals. My pen hovered over the paper.

Remember before.

Remember the time before I was caught by the Scullers, before my imprisonment, my plane flights, the helicopter, the militia camp. Trying to get back to before was like trying to retrace a path in a woods deeply buried in snow; the Scullers like wolves, yellow eyes gleaming through pines as I tried not to panic.

* * *

Scullers. Pain. Planes. Copters. Chains. Gods that don't exist, help me find the good things, way back in time. Columbia is a college, not a prison. My love with Philip is more than just *tocar*. Our time in our loft downtown, the gritty magic of New York. Sunsets over Malibu, pregnant and dreaming of the future. Our son. Our son. I have so little time. Philip wants to be with me. With. *Meta* also means "with." He wants to cut a hole in my floor, but I can't be with anyone or anything, it doesn't feel real. There's only one moment that feels real. That feels like it is part of me. It's my dream of the village.

It strikes me then: a religious conversion, an epiphany: The Village is a dream that is trying to be real. Dreams shouldn't be real; we have life for that.

"It feels so real and it's not!" I say it out loud. Like breaking a spell. As I yell this, in my confined, safe living space, the village begins to waver and fade, the people walking away from me, away from their *Santa*. The village, now empty, becomes what it truly is, a facade like a Western movie set.

New sounds intrude, tearing at the quiet. Distant, then stronger, the sounds of helicopters slapping at the air. Other memories, shapeless for now, buzz around my head, like the relentless flies in the mud zone. Have I made a mistake? Pushing my village, my only protection, away from me? Will I lose my mind? The helicopters are close now, thwack, thwack, thwack, bringing the muffled screams of women; people scurrying for shelter. The past unspools in a mad ribbon. The General, *no tocar*. The Scullers, pure evil like off-the-scale radiation. The warehouse, black hole at the entrance to Hades. The copter, a woman flung from its wide-open door under the ear-splitting blades. Thwack Thwack Thwack. Image Image Image. Flick Flick Flick. Pain Pain Pain. Trap Trap Trap.

I must leave the village. I can't afford to stay. The cost is even more time in hell.

Where will I go? What's beyond the village? What are the stories hiding out there? Will I find them now? Will they set me free? Is this the day?

I scribble one more goal.

Get out of the trap.

Chapter 2: Philip: You Can't Always Get What You Want

The bland conference room at the Bureau's New York office was full of the misdeeds of the past: audacious crimes described in hushed tones, risky plans formulated to take the Most Wanted down. For me, the room was still filled with mind-boggling information coming over the static-filled speakerphone on the table. Voices from Bogota, somewhere I'd barely heard of, telling me that my wife could be alive, held hostage in the Colombian outback. Cautionary retorts from people in this room, blunt in their warnings: It was a scam. After three years, my wife was almost certainly dead and my son needed me at home. The message was clear. *Give up.*

That was 1987, five years ago, and I still remembered that meeting every time I entered this room. Back then, I went South with a capital S, I felt I had no choice. It was indeed a scam, but way out there in Colombia's Meta zone, the General changed his mind and allowed me to live, sent me to the village where he was holding my wife. Still alive.

She had been imprisoned nearly three years in the Colombian outback, three years of isolation and abuse almost impossible to imagine. Believe me, I tried. For all the victorious feelings of bringing her home on Earth Day, 1987, the five years since that day had been draining for her—and for those around her as well.

Five years, 1987 to 1992. Prime years for us, with a child entering teen-hood, promising career opportunities, life choices that include the word “together.” But no. Instead, for five years we struggled to break free of a spider's web of trauma, isolation and injury.

Our expectations of a happy ending struggled as well, and over the past two years, withered on the vine. After all this time, no one fully understood what Ellie was going through, not even the professionals. The closest condition I'd researched was PTSD, limited as a practical concern to male soldiers. For women, hysteria was the diagnosis of choice. Ellie hadn't had a moment of hysteria in her life.

Of course, these five years weren't just about my wife. Making it all about her avoided the truth about me. Somewhere along this journey, I stopped believing. In what, I didn't even know. *My marriage? My job? Myself?*

The conference room was silent and neutral. Although I felt the past every time I sat here, there was nothing more left for me, just the residue of the meeting that sent me south and the sour taste of the quasi-life that followed.

“We have the audio/visual working now.” Charles patted me on the shoulder, sensing that perhaps I was too quiet... again.

My weak-ass joke in reply: “At least something’s working.”

Charles chuckled politely but his expression said something very different: *Get it together.*

The forensics specialist cleared his throat and clicked the projector remote. “Focus on these blow-ups we have, starting here. We’re able to magnify some of the interesting aspects of the contents.”

Interesting aspects? These were graphic and troubling porn images, sent to us as a clue to an ongoing commercial sex ring operating who knew where.

Click click click. “These are all shots of a computer monitor. Here and here we can see the header and the edges of the monitor. And at the bottom of each screen is a time imprint, military format. The timer appears to be active and running, winding down. In the last photo, there is an additional icon on the screen. An exclamation point inside a triangle, normally used as a cautionary signal.”

“How many women in all these?”

“One woman, different angles in this one timed sequence. The angles are standard nude porn poses.”

“If you say so.”

He stared at me, clearly not liking what I said. “I wouldn’t know. We have an expert.”

Charles sighed. “Philip doesn’t mean anything.”

It hurt to look at these pictures. I envisioned Ellie, of course, all that she had gone through.

I tried to make up. “Sorry. So the timer, the caution symbol, could these be added later or are they authentic?”

“The text on the images is authentic to the photographed item, meaning the timer comes from the computer screen, as does the caution symbol.”

“And the timer? The warning? What do they mean?”

“It reminds our guy of working with Bloomberg; he was there in the mid-80s, after they introduced a system of live financial sales over computer connections. He wonders if the timer is winding down a sale.”

“Of what?”

The guy pointed to the image. “Her.”

Charles and I walked down the HQ hallway to our small offices. Sober, notably because of the images but also because of the short messages that have come to us over the past months: *CondoGate not over. Is Sanders still looking? It’s bigger now, much bigger*

And days ago: *It’s been active all along look for sex is.* Just the fragment of a sentence, and we couldn’t figure out what was missing.

“Sex is?” Charles kept trying to make these words mean something. And it wasn’t just the confusing message that bothered him. “The source doesn’t reach out to Lonnie, well-known head of the New York office. He doesn’t reach out to me, the head of the CondoGate team. Calls you out. Why?”

I had no idea.

“Must be about your personal involvements in CondoGate, but what part of CondoGate, that’s key.”

The massive scandal featured supposedly upstanding leaders of New York City’s real estate sector. Unearthed in 1985 thanks to research done by my wife that eventually landed her in a cage in Colombia, CondoGate was big crime, and it got bigger as we dug into it.

For me, it was—yes—personal, especially the early years. My Ellie, professional name Eleanor Bigelow, died in a plane crash coming home from New York, where she was filming her documentary, *Lost on the Streets*. A senseless family tragedy, except it wasn’t. Questions arose. As the crash site was processed, she remained unidentified. And the terrible, hurtful bureaucratic work we must do to sweep up after a human life exposed puzzles, contradictions, more questions.

One thing became clear: Eleanor Bigelow wasn’t on the plane. The past, the web of facts and fiction that I wanted to think of as the bedrock under my feet, broke down and fell apart. My life was one big question mark. Had I been happily married? Was my wife a good person or bad? Was I good or bad? My mistakes made it all worse. Drugs, because, well, stress and depression.

All the while, like the Little Scandal that Could, CondoGate kept unravelling as we pulled at loose strings. Charles liked to list it on his fingers, like I was a grade school student requiring repetition. “The real estate fraud, malicious and illegal use of gentrification to empty buildings and neighborhoods, the extortionate acts against tenants and small building owners. Assaults, bribery. Digging into the scope and methods of the Sculler cocaine operations. Tying it to the government, for God’s sake, to Iran-Contra. Limited confessions from some of the partners. Discreet resignations in city government. Oh, death of the principals, the Scullers, of course. It’s a lot.”

When he spoke all I heard was Ellie, Ellie, Ellie. Until we came to the Scullers. Then it was death, death, death.

“And now the porn operation.”

This final part of CondoGate remained a stubborn mystery. So many clues and hints that something major was going on. We’d witnessed films being made, snuff films among them. Found video tapes in mailing cartons, not yet addressed. We’d seen the kids floating around in the West Side area we called Sculler Zone, waiting for what some would call employment. Found a fully professional photography/film studio in a slum building the Scullers owned. And we knew about at least one planeload of trafficked Nicaraguan

women and girls, including the young lady now living in our building, Carina. All but two of those women, Carina and her sister Luz, unaccounted for. Luz almost certainly dead. Clues like a trail of blood.

But in terms of incriminating records, client lists, all the paperwork that could be analyzed, used as evidence? No records. No witnesses. No clients. No nothing. How big a porn ring? What kind of operation—images or bodies, media or full-on physical trafficking?

The trail of blood ended in the middle of nowhere. The porn operation turned into the one that got away. But this year, just as we were shutting down the team, a series of notes came to us. Telling us that we had missed something, telling us, in a way that we found deeply upsetting, that some kind of major ring was still active, under our noses. Somehow tied to CondoGate and the Scullers.

See? No need for 8x10s, incriminating mailings. Go online, did you not get that? Go online, look at database companies. That message was sent with the photos, by someone clearly irritated at our lack of progress.

I kept saying the word. “Online?” We were clueless in this arena and we knew it, did not even have enough knowledge to be dangerous.

I said it again. “Online? What does that even mean, ‘look at the database companies?’”

I was speaking to myself, but Charles answered. “The IT guy that checked out the photos said it might mean that the Scullers communicated with their pornography clients through computer connections. Untraceable. Our people say that capabilities exist now, but what about back then? They’re not so sure.”

“Our people? The FBI has become some kind of technology genius?”

“You’ll be meeting this person, Phil, so you can ask her yourself.”

“One person? A woman, she’s an FBI staffer?”

“Philip! The glass-half-full view is that we have a possible breakthrough on the last part of CondoGate, the part where we’ve been shut out completely. Jesus, go home, clear your head.” Charles had had me up to here.

I went home. But home had its own challenges.

* * *

Chris comes into the bedroom as I’m finishing shaving, washing, cleaning up. He sits on the bed, stares at the floor, picture of a moody pre-teen. His earphones dangle loosely from his neck; his Walkman is taking a break in the other room.

Sometimes, at moments like these, I see the little boy who came into this room eight years ago, wanting to talk to his dead mother. Certain that I had some special channel to her and doubting that she had actually died in AmAir Flight 232, the plane spread in small

metal pieces across the high Arizona desert. Because, after all, I called out her name in the middle of the night. If I was speaking to her, why couldn't he?

I see that child, sitting on the bed, his feet dangling, not yet touching the floor. He was preternaturally sensitive because he had to be to survive. Now I see this twelve-year-old, and I wonder what's changed for him. How did he make it through? How did the pieces of his life come together? How did he survive the constant whiplash as new information came in, turning everything we believed into lies? How did he deal when the threats rained down, forcing us to run and keep running?

Of course, way back then he was not just sensitive, and he was not just resilient. *He was right.* Ellie hadn't died on the plane. That was only the first of so many crucial reversals of the past.

Chris is uncomfortable, tense. I don't know why. Then he speaks.

"Will it happen again?"

How often can I be shocked when I shouldn't be shocked?

I don't even get to reply before he repeats with more force, "I feel like it will happen again."

"Your mom is not in danger now. I'm not in danger now." I reached out to hug him, but he stepped back.

"Have you heard her say she wants to be back in that village?"

"That's private. She's processing."

"In the village? Where she was a prisoner?"

"We need to let her have her feelings."

"You went there. We were so scared. You asked me if you could go. You said you might not come back."

It's true. It was incredibly brave that he had agreed to let me go when I confessed what a difficult situation we faced.

"I didn't hear from you for more than a week, Dad."

Also true, no phone booths in the Colombian jungle, no electricity, barely any food because I was a prisoner on my way to a planned execution.

"I thought you were dead."

I still don't know why I'm not dead. The General could have killed me. But I lived, and experienced one of the most alive moments imaginable. It still rolled through my mind, that moment when I found my wife, a damaged angel in a tiny village infirmary. I thought it was the beginning of something new and amazing.

"Chris, it's only been five years."

"It's like time has stopped. You and Mom, you're just waiting for something bad. Like you're frozen."

Is that fair? I remember being told by the trauma specialists in Maryland: When you think it's been too long, double the time, then double it again. I've done that now at least twice.

"There've been good moments, Chris." *I list them to myself at night, like prayers.*

He just shakes his head. "And what about you, you go around muttering."

"Sorry." I realize I whisper this.

Chris is so frustrated. He walks out, yelling "I'm not a kid. I live here. I can see it. Lose my mom and dad. Both of you. Not just mom. Both of you. Get it, dad?"

I look after him, ashamed. Twelve years old, and normalcy is only some place he's heard about.

How can I change this? I immediately imagine some kind of payback, an eye for an eye. One of MaryAnn's zingers from a past therapy session comes back to me: "Maybe think of what you want, instead of who you want to kill?"

I sit with paper, making a list of what I want, leaving out who I want to kill. Good idea, especially for a lawman.

1. *Ellie back. Having Ellie back? All the way? Of course that's it!*

I try it out on my watery Star Wars image of MaryAnn. She looks as if I haven't found the Force.

What else can all this be about? Me? When I think that, it kicks in, it just explodes in my mind. Of course. *It is about me. Not about anyone else.*

2. *I want me back.*

Ellie is still a shadow of herself, but now I've faded. When I went to Colombia and found her, I felt whole. I had a quest. I risked everything. I won. We won. We came back. Since then, Ellie has continued to struggle through all the things that happened to her, and that's not just understandable, that's required. Me? I've simply lost my way. No excuses.

And Chris has had to bear that. Warning me about danger, just now, like a parent warning a child.

We all had this unbelievable moment of victory. Ellie coming back from the dead. It has settled, slowly but inexorably, into a muddy stall.

I've not only lost my way. I've lost my belief. I'm looking for a way out. From all this. From my life. The life I went to hell and back for.

Back to the list:

1. *I want Ellie back*

2. *I want me back.*

3. *I want to get our life back...*

4. *Or leave.*

It is the fourth point that's new, and that one terrifies me.

Chapter 3: Chris: Can I Make It Better?

I'm listening to U2. I listen to it a lot. It's the best. It's about love, how we are all family. For me, that's two figures flying. Someday, I'll add another. It's just the one song I listen to, called "One." I replay the tape over and over. It's about love, but not always happy love. It's also about how we get caught in these whirlpools where we just go 'round and 'round.

I'm drawing circles while I listen. It's my way of staying out of the whirlpool.

When I stop drawing, I pick up *Lord of the Flies*. I'm partway through. The librarian suggested it to me. She said she knows I'm reading beyond my grade, says I should read this. She called me voracious. I looked it up, I thought it was going to mean lonely. The librarian said something about how bad people can be, how we need to be careful of them. I was a little worried about her. It's like she was talking about what happened to Mom.

I'm not sure Dad or Mom know that I know; I got Aunt Eileen to tell me. She said, "You should know that something happened. It's why things are the way they are." My aunt is always very matter-of-fact when she gives bad news. That was a while ago, it feels like a long time ago. Everybody stopped talking. It's like people are being very careful. Like in school, you are very careful with the bullies.

Eileen says you have to be tough. She told me, "You know the saying, Chris, when you swim with the sharks, dot dot dot..."

"That's a saying, when you swim with the sharks dot dot dot?"

"Not the dot dot dot. That's when you're looking at the saying, not saying it."

"But it's still a saying when you do that, even though you're not saying it?"

"Yes."

See, Eileen understands how I think better than a lot of people. "The saying means you need to be tough if you're around the tough guys."

What I think about bullies is the same: I should beat them up so they will stop being bullies. But it takes a lot of work, and it might turn out different than you think. What if one of them cried? What if they beat you up instead? Maybe you should leave them alone, walk around them at school so they don't have a reason to start bullying. What happened to Mom is like a bully. You got to be careful around it. You don't want to wake it up.

What happened to Mom is like *Lord of the Flies*.

I'm also reading *Lord of the Rings*. It's like a balance. One is about a bunch of good people with one really bad one. The other is a bunch of bad kids. Maybe there's one good one.

The last time we hung around, Aunt Eileen asked me if we could read something together. We were lazing on beanbag chairs. I said okay, what about *Lord of the Rings*? We could have restarted *Lord of the Flies*, but I thought it was a little embarrassing, the way the boys act in it? It's not an ad for boys.

She was like "Huh? *Lord of the...*?"

"You've read it?"

"Actually, no."

I understood. Eileen was very work-oriented. "Maybe you'd rather read a real estate guide or some kind of business stuff?"

She cracked up. "I love you can be so funny. In a mature kind of way. Are you that funny with other people?"

"Hmmm. Not really."

She looked like she shouldn't have asked. "Too bad for them. Okay, *Lord of the Rings*. Isn't it an opera?"

I shook my head. "There's elves, trolls, hobbits, and a ring. You want more, you got to read it."

"Oh, no. Trolls?" She sighed. "What if it's scary? Is it even scarier to read it out loud together?"

I shrugged, a little surprised at her. Scared? Eileen?

We came up with a compromise. We'd read certain chapters together, I'd choose them. And we'd read the rest separately, but we'd always know where we were in the book.

I clarified. "Books. There are three books. We could be reading for years."

"Jesus. Like a prison sentence?"

Eileen is pretty funny when she isn't tough. Like now, she goes for ice cream and comes back with two spoons. We're close, I never would've guessed that would happen, but I have to say, with my mom upstairs and my dad doing whatever he's doing, it's good. I'm lucky. I have my place, my safe space. My desk. The beanbag chairs I use a lot. Dad's old lava lamp is undeniably cool. I have some stuff on the walls, photographs and also things I cut out. Newspapers, magazines, scissors. I like cutting things out. You get rid of what you don't need. You keep what's important. Friends? I'm working on that. Aunt Eileen? Yes!

I feel guilty about all this good stuff. I should be figuring out how to make things better for Mom and Dad, but nothing seems to work.

"You don't get out enough." The lady in 2B said that to me, in our lobby. The lobby smells of disinfectant. There's this kind that Jesus, our super, uses, and you know right

away when he's been wiping things down. I mean, you really know. Mrs. Porschky, she has her own smell. Standing in the lobby and standing near her, the combination made me dizzy. I kind of shook my head, what did she mean? She said I'm getting *plumpy*. "You were always a pretty boy! Get out more!" It's like I'm picking up all these things going on around me and they are staying on me, making me *plumpy*.

It could be like pod people. I wasn't even supposed to watch that, I was supposed to watch this old movie, *The Parent Trap*. Dad wasn't even sure about that one. We used to watch *Godzilla*, no problem. Now *Parent Trap* is a question. Really? I'm twelve. It was two for one night; I watched both. Pod people said that when people show up they may not be the same. Also, my questions about vegetables turned out to be right. In the other one, there's these twins, one raised by one parent, one by the other. The parents are divorced, so the kids never see each other. It's supposed to be funny. I have questions about that.

Can I make it better for Mom and Dad? I don't know.

I don't really understand "One." I like when Bono kind of screeches at the end and it's soft, you know? He says "One love, we get to share it. Leaves you, baby, if you don't care for it." The leaving thing again.

My dad used to think about songs all the time. I wasn't sure why. Then I got my Walkman. I could hear the words better, and I didn't just listen to the music. The words were sometimes strange. Not like with "Here Comes the Sun" or the Elvis Presley songs Eileen plays sometimes, but later on, songs that were written close to now. I don't know, maybe things are more complicated now? Like I said about "One," sometimes I don't know what Bono wants to say. Is he staying or is he leaving? Is it getting better or not?

I nominated "One" to be played in drawing class; the teacher made our playlist like an election. It got so many votes! I never won anything before. The girl drawing near me, she said she liked Bono, asked do I listen to the rest of the record. I didn't want to disappoint her, so I nodded. She looked at my drawings and kind of invited me to look at hers. They're unicorns, but they're more like unicorns becoming girls. She certainly knows how to draw bodies. My figures don't really seem to be one sex or the other, except the dress. I use a triangle, it may seem too simple to her because...breasts. I wonder about asking her over to draw, but there are complications. I skipped a grade this year. I was going to be in sixth. I didn't find out I skipped until school started. My parents said they were surprised. Dad and I sat with my teacher and the principal, but nothing changed. Now I'm the youngest one, I kind of stand out. Some kids think I'm too smart. Some kids barely talk to me, and my friends from back in sixth grade think I'm strange. The thing is, the good thing is that the girl, Sara, the one who talked to me? I'm in her math class, and also drawing. Maybe we could be friends? I mean, not yet, but someday?

"Our House" is another song on my list. It's like "One," is it staying or leaving? I tried using the steps that I use for drawing, from class. What is it? Where is it? What is the shape

like? What is the light like? I try to use that on all my songs. "Our House" sounds like a happy family in a happy, busy house, the kind of family I had when I was little. Then there's these strange, off-key moments. "Is" becomes "was." Mom is always tired. People suddenly need to leave. But the horns keep playing either way, the beat stays the same. Like the music doesn't matter, or covers things up, right? The strange stuff, it's spoken very quickly or even whispered. Then we're back to the good "Our House," which is the beat and the horns. That's interesting to me, maybe I can figure out how to have music cover all the strange stuff at home. I could play it when I have Sara over, maybe some afternoon when Dad is in the office and I would ask Mom not to come down or bang on the floor. Eileen could be here in the living room. Horns, bass, drums. Hit it!

That could help, a lot! But it won't stop it from happening again. It feels like that's up to me. And I don't know how I can make it better.

