Frank's Shadow

A Novel

Doug McIntyre

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First Edition

To Robert and Jeffrey McIntyre, a father, a brother.
Geraldine DeFeo and Kathleen Herndon, a mother, a sister.
And Penny Peyser, everything else.

“Fame is a fickle food served upon a
shifting plate . . . Men eat of it and die.”

—Emily Dickinson

“Of all the people you are ever going to meet, you
will know your mother and father the least.”

—Allan Sherman

1

The Last Dance

I see his picture on the TV suspended from the drop ceiling at Logan Airport, Terminal A, Gate 15, the Delta Shuttle. The chyron graphic leaves no doubt: *Francis Albert Sinatra, 1915–1998*. This is the kind of story television hits out of the park.

Unable to hear the eulogistic blabber over the buzz of arriving and departing fliers, I cross closer to the television hoping to hear . . . what? The details of Frank's death? A soundbite of "My Way"? The CNN anchor weep?

This is a biggie. *Frank fuckin' Sinatra!* Last night the whole country was talking about the final episode of *Seinfeld*. Now we're all talking about this.

I'm not surprised Sinatra is dead. The warning signs were there—a collapse on stage in Virginia, forgetting lyrics to songs he'd sung for decades, glassy-eyed photos in the tabloids. I saw it with my own eyes at Radio City Music Hall, April 26, 1994, just a little over four years ago. I still have the stub in a drawer.

I had scored a great seat in the second row, so close I could actually smell the smoke wafting from Sinatra's Camel. I smoked vicariously through Frank the way two generations of men had imagined themselves banging women who were hopelessly out of their league. Yes,

I was stag. The women I know aren't into Frank Sinatra. I'm a musical oddball. At forty, I'm supposed to be listening to The Who, Bowie, Zeppelin, or even the Beatles, right? Instead, I've always been drawn to the music of my father's generation, the songs written by immigrants or the sons of immigrants. Berlin and the Gershwins, Porter and Mercer—the great writers who spoke to the heart, or at least to my heart. Somehow music had turned angry or self-indulgently angst-ridden, and I had enough of that in my life without hearing it on a jukebox.

The Radio City audience guffawed at Don Rickles, a headliner opening for the ultimate headliner. I ducked and weaved in my seat, trying to remain invisible from "Mr. Warmth." While I crave attention, literally dreaming of fame, I would have died if Don Rickles singled me out. Luckily, he spotted an elderly Japanese man three seats over and did kamikaze jokes for five minutes. A brief intermission gave those of us who wanted a drink the chance. I *excuse-me, pardon-me'd* my way over a gauntlet of canes and ladies' handbags as I tried to get to my chair without spilling the eight-dollar whiskey and water I had smuggled in from the lobby bar. I hooked my foot on a plastic hose leading to a portable oxygen tank and apologized to the COPD sufferer.

I felt the tension in the room. These later-vintage Sinatra shows were minefields. Which Sinatra would show up? The listless, disoriented Frank we read about in the *Enquirer*, or the drunken Sinatra still grinding an ax at Lee Mortimer, Dorothy Kilgallen, and Kitty Kelley? Or maybe we'd get avuncular Frank, more grandpa than Rat Packer. And if we were truly lucky, we might even catch him on one of the increasingly rare nights when everything clicked, and, if you shut your eyes, you'd hear The Voice that made women moist and men hard with expectations. The Voice that killed the Big Band Era and opened the door for rock and roll and everything that's come in its wake.

Suddenly, with no timpani roll, no announcement of any kind, the man who needed no introduction received none. Sinatra stepped out of the wings into the light, and the crowd stood and cheered and clapped and shouted like fools. He was our god.

But Frank looked nervous, and nobody wants a nervous god. On this night, it was as if Sinatra himself wasn't sure why he was on stage

rather than seated in the mezzanine with his brother Elks from the New Hyde Park lodge who rode in from Long Island on a charter. Still, he accepted our ovation like a birthright, casually, the way trust fund babies don't sweat a dinner check. Can you imagine being so loved? Your jokes always land; doors are held for you. The hippest restaurants have a table when you want one; your bed is never empty. All of life's sharp edges are rounded off because fame is heaven on earth. When I was a little boy, I had this feeling: that I was destined for greatness, that my life was supposed to have some profound meaning—that I was meant to accomplish something really big.

I still dream.

At the precise moment our cheering reached its peak, Sinatra barked, "Go!" to Frank Junior, his son and conductor. The old warhorse plunged into his opening song, but something was wrong. Frank Sinatra wasn't singing. A croaking vibrato leaked from his famous throat. Worse still, he knew it. He knew it before we did, maybe when he'd gotten up that morning. Small wonder Frank was nervous.

He tried to compensate with motion, dragging one stiff leg behind him, movements that made him look even older than his hard-lived seventy-eight years. *Quasimodo in a tux*, I thought. Not the way I wanted to remember him. I gulped a mouthful of Dewar's, ignoring the judgmental looks of the rule followers who had left their drinks in the lobby. Sinatra went to the well, drawing on sixty years of showbiz tropes, hoping to distract us from the awful truth: He was singing on fumes. His once pitch-perfect pipes were shot. A supernova was imploding before our eyes. It hurt to look, but how could we not? Against our better judgment, we gawked the way we gawk at a flattened raccoon on the highway.

This was our fault. We were the ones still buying the tickets with unrealistic expectations. The ravages of all those late nights, all those tumblers of Jack Daniels, all the broads, smokes, and temper tantrums had collected their pound of flesh. Dean was dead. Sammy was dead. Count Basie was dead. JFK was dead. Ava was dead. Music was dead.

Fans are enablers, so we forgave him. No, that's not right. We loved him even more. We knew, and he knew, this was it, his last

performance in the city that loved him like no other. If Frank Sinatra was only capable of a karaoke version of Frank Sinatra, so be it. His seventy-eight-year-old, flat, creaky voice was not simply forgiven; it was embraced.

Then disaster hit.

He lost the lyric to "Mack the Knife," and the giant teleprompters weren't bringing the words back. He tried to scat his way through. The crowd began to murmur. Six thousand murmurers make a mighty roar. He heard us. Concern became embarrassment. We felt sorry for Frank Sinatra. Even at a hundred bucks a ticket. So, one by one, the murmurs turned to cheers. We cheered Sinatra as he had never been cheered before. We cheered out of pity.

His eyes widened. He was moved by our affection. Or did the out-of-context ovation just add to his confusion? Whatever he was feeling, this is what I felt: neediness, of which I am something of an expert. We cheered Frank Sinatra because this night wasn't about singing; it was about love for the singer. Love for a man we had never met but felt as if we had known our whole lives. And in a way we had. He was a ruin, but so is the Acropolis, and people still marvel at it.

Then something clicked. The lyric returned, and he belted out the last eight bars with gusto and timbre and swagger, and the years fell off him. He stood straighter, taller, moving rhythmically and in perfect sync with the band, who swung even harder. It was the zenith of the evening, maybe of his entire career. I cried.

With the passage of time, I'll probably gild the lily and remember things differently; his pitch will have been perfect, the famous phrasing flawless. But Frank is freshly dead, and the splendor of his failure is still vivid.

My flight is called for the second time. I fight my way down the jetway with the rest of the salmon, plopping in the wrong row twice. I am distracted. My Cape Cod honeymoon has been cut short. My bride has been left to close up the house. Everything went sideways when the phone rang with the news.

My father is dead.

2

The House I Live In

Francis Xavier "Frank" McKenna's passing won't be on TV or the front page of anything. We'll have to pay to get him into the papers, in the back, buried among the racing results and mattress ads. I got the news the way most of us get it, with a phone call in the middle of the night. Nobody calls with good news after dark.

I collected myself and determined to get home as quickly as possible. I should have waited for Kimberly to pack so we could travel together. It's a mistake to leave her to fend for herself. I rented a car to get from Cape Cod to the airport, which means she'll have to drive my car to our place in Somerville, and she hates my car. But I want to go *now*, and Kimberly doesn't do *now*. To make flying as easy as possible, I gave her the number of a travel agent I use to get to conferences on the rare occasions I travel for work. She just has to call me with her flight info so I can pick her up in New York.

The rush is pointless, of course. Whether I get there today or twenty years from today won't change a goddamn thing, I just need to go. Kimberly was still sleeping when the cab picked me up for the ride to Avis in Barnstable.

It's a quick flight from Logan to LaGuardia and a toss-up whether it wouldn't be easier to drive the rental straight to New York. Hassle

or not, I opted for flight, because that's what I always do when things get tough.

I stare blankly at the back of the salesman's head sitting directly in front of me. He is a big man, six-five, maybe taller. He chatters on a cellphone at a dollar a minute hoping to close a deal before they shut the cabin door. His hair is cheaply dyed, one of those over-the-counter shampoo-in jobs that fools no one except himself. I wonder what his story is, this huge man stuffed into a coach seat on his way . . . home? To see clients? What did he dream he'd be, back when that huge body was young and firm, and he had yet to make all the compromises life demands?

I have too many thoughts at once. I'll never hear my father's lilting Irish brogue again. I'll never smell his tobacco breath or hear his cartoonishly loud sneezes, which rattled the dishes in the cabinets. Crazy thoughts. Is Kimberly angry that I left her at the beach house? She said she was okay. And why, only a few weeks after marrying her, am I so happy to get away? I start to sweat. I unbutton my top button and loosen my seat belt. *Not now. Please!* I frisk myself. No pills. I cup my hands to my mouth and take deep breaths like Dr. Pincus said. It's been months since my last panic attack. *Not now! Where are my pills?*

I think about my friend Josh, the Hollywood writer. I don't know why, maybe just to redirect my brain. I've known Josh since childhood, before any mention of him carried the caboose "Hollywood writer." He was just a Jewish kid on my block, part of the Wiffle ball scene. He knew my father, and maybe that's why he popped into my head. Josh is smart and funny and makes ten times what I make writing his imbecilic sitcoms. I remember fighting with him over something terrible his name was on, thirty minutes of clichés and coincidences that murdered credulity. "You can't tell a story without coincidence," said Josh defensively. Maybe he's right. That's not my line of work.

Shallow breaths, Danny. Shallow breaths. I repeat over and over, a therapeutic mantra. A cigarette would help.

I teach history at a small college in New England. Professor Daniel McKenna, PhD, but everyone calls me Danny. I call myself Danny.

Not Dan, never Daniel. I spend my days trying to strip fiction from fact, and immodestly, I'm pretty good at it. But I am stuck with a big fat coincidence that not even Josh would have the balls to write: My father is dead; Frank Sinatra is dead—two Franks—both born on the same day, December 12, 1915, and now eighty-two years later, they have died on the exact same day, May 14, 1998.

You don't have to be a mathematician to calculate the odds of my father dying on the same day as Frank Sinatra; it's simple, one in 365. But in the same year, too? And to be born and die on the same day? Those are Mega Millions jackpot odds. Still, X number of people born in 1915 will undoubtedly die in 1998. Y percent will die in May. Even Sinatra couldn't expect to hog the fourteenth all to himself. It's a matter of probability, an accident of the actuarial tables. But I want it to be more than just the bounce of a ball. I want this coincidence to be profound, something grand, like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams croaking on the same Fourth of July, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. That macabre coincidence made the country gasp in wonder. It was taken as a sign that America had been founded with God's blessing. How could it be anything else? Adams and Jefferson were the polestars of independence—friends, then enemies, and late in life, friends again. They deserved to be united in death as they often were in life. What connection could my father possibly have with Frank Sinatra?

Dad was in our driveway behind the wheel of his car when our forever neighbor, Ed Henning, spotted him. The Mets game was blasting on the radio. My father was deaf in one ear and practically so in the other. When he listened to a ball game, the whole neighborhood listened to the ball game. And he was always listening, a real nut about his Mets.

My father was born in the old country, and in the '60s he bonded with a team that employed pitchers with Irish names like McGraw, McAndrew, and Ryan. It didn't hurt that Rheingold was his favorite beer and the house pour at Shea Stadium. Of course, it had been years since Dad had actually been to a game. "Nothing but a bunch of spoiled millionaires," he'd grumble. Still, he followed the team with

the fidelity of a yellow lab. The Mets are perpetual underdogs. So are the Irish. My father and the New York Mets were made for each other. Yankee fans have no idea how hard life really is.

I take more cupped breaths as the beads of sweat on my forehead merge and form rivulets trickling down my cheeks. The woman on the aisle knows something is wrong.

"Are you okay?" she asks, leaning across the empty middle seat.

"Migraine," I lie.

I close my eyes and keep breathing into my hands. My heart is racing; pain radiates through my jaw and down my left arm to my fingertips.

"It's nothing," I tell myself. But it's something. Suffocating. Embarrassing. It's terrible.

The shelf above the sink! I remember. *I left my pills on the shelf above the sink!*

I hear the jingling little bottles on the beverage cart as a male flight attendant pushes it up the aisle. The clinking bottles prompt a Pavlovian reflex, like the bells on the Good Humor truck when I was nine. The attendant sells a Chardonnay to my row mate. A drink would relax me like my forgotten Ativan. I consider it. I swore off the sauce two years ago, a couple of years after Sinatra's final bow at Radio City, but that was a terrestrial oath. Am I bound to honor a promise made on earth while soaring in the clouds? Drunks think like this.

"Diet Coke, please," I say. "With lots of ice."

My father liked sitting in his car in the driveway. He'd clutch the wheel and remember when he made long-ago drives to the Adirondacks, Montauk, and once all the way to Florida. He could smoke in the car, the house having been ruled out of bounds after ashes from his pipe set fire to the couch and a firefighter broke some of my mother's Hummel figurines, causing her to cry. After that, Dad would sit in the car in the driveway and puff away while waiting for the Mets to blow it. Around the fourth inning, my father saw his final inning. A stroke killed Dad while the San Diego Padres were killing the Mets, taking both ends of a doubleheader, 3-1, 6-2. My mother had warned him, "Someday that team is going to give you a heart attack!" A case can be made.

Ed rapped on the window to shoot the breeze, because that's what

Ed does, anything to avoid talking to Mrs. Henning. But Ed quickly recognized something was wrong. Ladder Company 164 was called, and soon Dad had paramedics pounding on his chest until they were satisfied he was dead. In Little Neck, Queens County, New York, there's always time for one last beating.

The woman in the aisle seat sips her cup of wine while reading *Pelvic Pain and Diagnosis* from a big heavy binder, the kind they hand out at seminars. Is she a doctor? Who else would be reading about pelvic pain? I like that she might be a doctor. If I'm having a heart attack, not a panic attack, she'll know what to do. Still, it's awfully early in the day for a doctor to be drinking. Maybe she's not a doctor. Maybe the pelvic pain she's reading about is her own. Cancer? Now I feel bad for her. I think about ordering a drink to absolve her of whatever guilt she feels for starting so early. But if I have one glass, I'll have every glass. I sip my Diet Coke instead, then go back to panting into my fingers as Narragansett Bay passes under the wing.

We circle for half an hour over eastern Long Island, flying above all those towns in Suffolk County I've never set foot in. A problem at our gate. We turn north toward Block Island, practically back to the Cape, before turning south again. We begin our descent, and there's turbulence. My anxiety rises and falls with each undulation. I make fish-mouth movements with my lips and jaw, hoping to take in enough oxygen to survive. I open the valve on the air vent all the way and aim it at my face, forcing oxygen into my nose and mouth. My row mate ignores my theatrical antics until she can't take it.

"We're landing," she says with relief rather than empathy, happy she'll soon be free from the twitching, gasping ninny one seat over.

Finally, we pass low over an empty Shea Stadium and touch down at LaGuardia. I am exhausted, soaked with sweat, but the crisis has passed. I'm the last one off the plane.

While waiting for my bag, I take in the splendor of the Marine Air Terminal, a neglected temple of aviation that once served as the North American hub for Pan Am's Clipper service to South America and beyond. Gleaming silver flying boats, multi-engined and phallic, rose and settled on the waters of Flushing Bay as well-heeled playboys,

socialites, budding tycoons, and mobsters came and went to exotic ports of call—places with sultry names like São Paulo, Montevideo, Mar del Plata, Caracas, and Cartagena. It was a time when men wore suits and ties and snap-brim hats. Drinks were served in crystal, and your in-flight entertainment was the experience of flight itself. By contrast, I had just spent ninety minutes on a bus with wings.

Kimberly says I live in the past. She's right about that. Is it any wonder I teach history? Is it any wonder I listen to the music of someone else's youth? The present is an incomprehensible jumble, and the future is the future, and I'll worry about that when it gets here. The past is settled. We survived it. I like that. So why am I anxious about going home to my own past? My bag tumbles down the chute and onto the carousel.

The cab ride is uneventful. We make our way over the familiar auto-parts-strewn streets of my childhood. The bumps and muffler scrapes are almost musical, and I enjoy each violent thump and occasional Urdu expletive shouted by my Pakistani chauffeur, prefatory noise before the main event. When I walk through the door of my boyhood home, I'll be awash in sounds—weeping, consolation, commiseration, consternation, and, since it's family, aggravation.

Nothing brings an Irish family together like a good cry. As a race, we've had practice. Our Holocaust, our Trail of Tears, was the Potato Famine. Not a very threatening name for a catastrophe, is it? From 1845 to 1850, one out of every nine Irishmen died a slow, wretched death by starvation. When the potato crop failed, entire villages were left without a single living soul. Families were discovered in their sod huts, emaciated cadavers, often lying on the dirt floor where they had literally dropped dead. But when you say "potato famine," it's nearly impossible to take it seriously. No potatoes? Have the onion rings.

That silly-sounding Potato Famine killed a million men, women, and children while sending five generations into flight, including my father, a boy not yet fourteen, up a gangway in Cobh with his brother, Eamon, who had just turned sixteen. As they shoved off, the two lads stood shoulder to shoulder at the stern and watched their homeland recede, until Cork Harbor and then Ireland herself

was swallowed by the fog and physics. The year was 1929, and the Potato Famine was still robbing my people of its sons and daughters. History wounds everyone.

We make the left off Northern Boulevard, and there it is: 23-10 Little Neck Parkway, on the corner of 44th Avenue, just across the street and downwind of the Scobee Grill, always open, holidays included.

I am home.

Set on a small rise, five steps above the sidewalk, the house is a faded green, a color that seemed weatherworn even when fresh out of the paint bucket. A big dormer faces the street, two windows for Mom and Dad's bedroom, one for the older McKenna boys, Al, and Kevin. A brick chimney runs up the south side, past the attic room my brother Sean still sleeps in. Our house remains unchanged and perhaps unchangeable. My old room is in the back, overlooking our small yard and the garage we share with the Hennings. The lawns and hedges and flower beds are, as always, perfectly manicured but without aesthetic consideration. My father spent twenty-five years as a mow-and-blow gardener for the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Our home was landscaped like a park, a New York City park, which means function trumped beauty. Who will trim the hedges and pull the weeds now?

"Danny!" shouts everyone.

"Danny's here!" hollers Aunt Bridget.

"Hey, Kate, your brainy son is home!" calls Big Aunt Mary to my mother.

I drop my bag and gather Mom in my arms, as my first tears fall. They come again a few minutes later when I pick up Dad's cold pipe from the bowl by the door, touch his reading glasses next to his recliner, and see his ratty slippers on the bathroom floor. These aren't just things; they are appendages. I cry, smelling those smells that are unique to our childhood homes and maybe only detectable to us. I am, by nature, prone to weeping, and now my Irish tears flow freely, willingly, cathartically. Yes, I am home, where I need to be.

The house is thick with visitors, a steady stream filing in every quarter hour. Aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, neighbors, former

neighbors, lodge members, and church people, including two nuns, old friends of my mother's, former teachers of all the McKenna boys back in our St. Anastasia days. The word had spread quickly, phone call by phone call, most hearing the news before I did. I am regaled with the heroic tale of who called whom to call whom to get the number at the Cape, and I suppose the point is to make me feel wanted.

Aloysius McKenna, my eldest brother and Al to everyone, wraps me in a tight bear hug. This surprises me because we are not the hugging kind. "We're orphans," says Al, who likes to make jokes, even if it's a stretch given our mother is still very much alive. Al is nearly ten years my senior. His wife, Beth, follows suit with a hug of her own, while their kids, Gail and Jay, opt for awkward handshakes after being prompted by their mother.

"Did they give you anything to eat on the plane?" asks Mom, because feeding people is her obsession.

"Starving," I tell her, and this makes her happy.

It's hard not to think of food. "The girls"—still called girls well into their seventies—have filled the house with covered platters and are rewarded with the obligatory flattery for their soda breads, au gratin potatoes, glazed hams, sugar cookies, or whatever it is they have mastered and bring to every gathering, joyous or tragic. These are familiar tastes and aromas, the same meals I ate as a kid, as a teenager, as a college boy home for the summer, and now as a recently married man of forty whose father has died. We gorge and drink, Hoffman's Black Cherry for me, the real stuff for everyone else, especially Kevin, the second oldest, who was born with bright red hair and has been angry about it ever since. He's three times the drunk I ever was and still drinks prolifically. Kevin sits close by the wobbly folding table that functions as the bar at all McKenna family shindigs, jumping up whenever anyone needs a drink. One for them, two for himself.

Sean, third in line to the throne, is only fifteen months older than me. Sean should have been my closest brother, but instead he's the mystery McKenna. From toddlerhood on, he's been a spectral presence in our house, like the pictures hanging in the upstairs hallway that have been there forever but none of us could describe if our lives depended

on it. Sean is a slight draft blowing under a door; we know he's here, but that's all. I'm the baby in the family. The "surprise" child.

Fat Tommy Boyle walks in without knocking or ringing the bell, as he always does, practically filling the room by himself. Tommy is immaculately dressed in a coal black suit, white shirt, and tie, with shoes polished like bowling balls. His hair is perpetually swept back and slicked down and nearly as dark as the cloud over my mother's head. Tommy is blood, Mom's cousin, and has been called "Fat Tommy" his entire life, even to his face. I don't know how this makes him feel, and I'm embarrassed to admit I've never given it a second's thought until now. Tommy is one of those big men who is light on his feet, like Jackie Gleason or the delightful Oliver Hardy, a dancer almost. Fat Tommy is greeted warmly, but everyone knows this is more than a condolence call. He's the family undertaker, and this is his time to shine.

Fat Tommy Boyle worked in Great Neck as undertaker Ted Flood's right-hand man until they had a falling out over something no one has ever discussed. A woman? Hard to imagine. Money? Maybe. Some wounds are too deep for gossip. For the past dozen years Fat Tommy has been head man at the Doyle S. O'Connell Funeral Home, conveniently located in Little Neck, less than five hundred feet from our front door. But for how much longer?

Dad and Mom's crowd are the last bastion of Irish, a shrinking pocket of blarney holding down the fort in eastern Queens, surrounded by a tightening noose of Dominicans, Haitians, Puerto Ricans, and especially Koreans. It won't be long before O'Connell's is a Blockbuster or CVS or something else we don't need. Grieving Reeds, Ryans, Fitzpatricks, and Fitzgeralds are yielding to grieving Rodriguezes, Reyes, Dae-Chos, and Ch'ung-hons.

"Fuckin' pan faces," says Kevin, when someone mentions the Koreans. He's already four drinks into his morning. The names might be changing, but the tears are the same in every language. Word is O'Connell Jr. is going to retire, then what? This worries my mother greatly. Catherine Boyle McKenna thinks often of death. Fat Tommy Boyle was the first person she called, ringing him before she called Al at his place in Ossining and hours before she had Kevin call me.

Tommy holds court, recounting his every action from the second he grabbed the phone on the first ring. He was genuinely sorry to hear it was Dad. My father always called Fat Tommy, Tommy, even behind his back. Fat Tommy rolled out of bed and drove like a teenager, running all the yellows and at least one red.

When the cops and firefighters had finished their paperwork, Fat Tommy walked across the street to fetch the hearse. A small cluster of neighbors had gathered along with some of the late-night omelet eaters who had spilled out of the Scobee to see what was up. They watched as Tommy carefully zipped Dad into the body bag and drove him over to the O'Connell loading dock. The gawkers greatly irritated my mother. "No respect," she said. "No respect," she says again when Tommy gets to that part of his story. Having recapped his efforts at the granular level, Tommy turns to me and Al.

"Can you bring Kate over around 4:30?" he asks as he bites into a cruller. "There's stuff to go over. The casket. Flowers. You know."

"Sure," says Al.

"We'll be there," I add gratuitously.

"I gotta squirt," says Tommy, as he angles his girth through the doorway of the narrow downstairs toilet.

The phone in the kitchen rings and keeps ringing. I squeeze my way through a pod of aunts and grab it, expecting Kimberly with her flight information.

"Is Sean home?" asks a male voice.

"Sean!" I bellow over the mob. "For you!" And my brother takes the receiver.

My stomach gurgles. It's two o'clock. Why hasn't she called?

Some of the mourners have long drives and leave early. These are obscure relatives and vague friends of Mom and Dad's, names I have heard all my life but faces I couldn't place if we met on the street. They have stayed just long enough so their departure does not cause tongues to wag.

With their exit, the McKennas, various in-laws, and familial satellites fall into our traditional roles. The girls convene in the kitchen, sorting out chafing dishes, gravy ladles, and Tupperware lids, eyeing

one another as if they're shoplifters. Meanwhile, the older men sit on metal folding chairs borrowed from the neighbors, blowing pipe and cigar smoke out the window, where it mixes with the perpetual cloud of burned ground beef and potatoes wafting from the giant Scobee Grill exhaust fans. They lecture one another on exactly what roads they will take home to beat traffic, each with his own strategy, each convinced the others are assholes if they take the Long Island Expressway instead of the Northern State Parkway, or vice versa.

Technically, I'm still part of the younger crowd, but I can see the handwriting. One of Al's kids is already a teenager. It is both a comfort and unnerving to see how this collation of commiseration has subtly, inexorably morphed into every other family gathering, no different than a birthday party, Easter Sunday, Labor Day barbecue, or baby christening. Had I stayed here like my brothers, I would have eventually taken my place on a folding chair, pontificating on the merits of Greenpoint Avenue to Queens Boulevard as the only sane way to reach the Fifty-Ninth Street Bridge. Even Al, who lives upstate, falls into bitching about the Hutch and Sprain Brook Parkways. An unwatched television in the corner underscores our chewing and smoking and jawboning. The TV yakking fills a rare silence, and a snippet about Frank Sinatra's passing crisscrosses our reveries and requiems for Francis McKenna.

It is unanimously agreed that what happened to Sinatra is a terrible thing. This unanimity quickly dissolves as the old-timers bicker about their favorite Sinatra songs, confusing Perry Como and Nat King Cole hits with Frank's. I hold my tongue, because this isn't the time or place to be a know-it-all, even if I do know it all when it comes to Francis Albert Sinatra.

As the afternoon moves toward evening, Kevin continues to pour himself drinks until he's wobblier than the drinks table itself. When we run out of ice, he volunteers to get another bag, even though we know we won't see him till morning. He leaves to join other drinkers at the Little Neck Inn, the local gin mill that opened in 1909 and burned to the ground in 1981, only to reopen a year later smelling of stale beer and vomit. How do you build a brand-new dive?

Eventually the house clears until it's just us, the inner circle, the blood McKennas: Mom, Al, Sean, Beth, and Gail and Jay.

"We'll deal with the dishes later," says Al, as he tries to herd Mom to her appointment with Fat Tommy.

"I just want to put the salads in the refrigerator," she says, while unspooling two feet of plastic wrap. Fat Tommy will have to wait.

While my mother wraps and stows leftovers, and Beth wipes around the sink with a sponge, I dial Kimberly, first at home, then at the beach house.

No answer.

Why is she doing this? How hard is it to pick up the phone and let me know when she's getting in? I think this but don't say it. "Fuck!" I say out loud.

When the last of the spread is cellophaned and bladders have been emptied, we help Mom down the steps and walk past the barbershop with the pole that no longer spins. We pass a real estate office that used to be a shoe repair/key-grinding shop, but that was years ago. Places come and go so fast today. We cross Northern Boulevard at the corner and enter O'Connell's through the side door. Fat Tommy jumps up from behind his desk and gives my mother a hug and peck, then cuts to the chase.

"Did Frank leave any instructions?" asks Tommy, peering over his half-glasses.

"He has a will," says Mom.

"Anything about what kind of service he preferred?"

"I'm pretty sure he'd prefer he didn't have to have one!" jokes Al, earning a smile from me and a stone face from Fat Tommy, who is not in the joke business. Rather than lightening the mood, Al has embarrassed himself, and he knows it. "I'm Dad's executor," he continues with appropriate solemnity. "There's nothing in writing."

"But you talked with Frank, right, Kate?" asks Tommy.

"Something simple," answers my mother. "A funeral, Tommy. That's all we want." And with that my mother ends her participation in the business side of death.

"Would you like to say a prayer, Mom?" asks Sean.

She nods yes, and Sean escorts her to the small chapel down the hall. Sean is the master of our mother's moods. He watches from the back, as Catherine Boyle McKenna kneels before the tiny altar, blesses herself, and mumbles her prayers while clacking her rosary beads, which haven't been out of her hands since her husband passed.

Beth shushes the kids, who are running up and down the stairs because they're kids, while Fat Tommy pitches me and Al caskets, headstones, floral packages, and all the bells and whistles available from Doyle S. O'Connell, Inc. Al chooses the Trinity Oak model from the Batesville Casket catalog—satin finish, accent beading, and adjustable bed and mattress. We both prefer the Pembroke Cherry, but Tommy says he'd have to get it from the wholesaler in Harrisburg and that could take a week.

Dad will be interred in the family plot at Calvary, that much we know. Calvary is the final resting place for three million Catholic souls, including nearly all my mother's people. It's the gigantic cemetery everyone knows from *The Godfather*, the place where Michael learns Tessio is the rat who sold out the family to Barzini. Our plot is on the other side of the BQE, away from the Corleones, closer to the Expressway, in Section 2, not far from Steve Brodie, the famous bookmaker who, in 1886, claimed he survived a leap off the Brooklyn Bridge, giving birth to the now archaic cop jargon, "Taking a Brodie." Leap or no leap, Brodie did not survive diabetes in 1901.

Once we square everything with Fat Tommy, Al suggests going out for dinner, despite the fridge full of food at home. Twenty minutes later, we squeeze into a booth at Gabel's, an Italian joint in Bayside that serves you-name-it parmesan. Nobody is hungry, not even Al, but we have things to discuss, and when we talk, we eat.

You couldn't make up Gabel's with a government grant. It's been on the Boulevard for, I don't know, forty, fifty years? Gabel's never changes, not the menu, not the waiters, not the paper place mats decorated with colorful illustrations of cocktails that haven't been in vogue since the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution: Gin Rickeys, Rob Roys, Rusty Nails, Singapore Slings, Brandy Alexanders, Whiskey Sours, Grasshoppers, and Stingers. Gabel's is a hangover museum. The fashionable couples

painting the town are long gone. Gone too are the mid-level mobsters who stopped in late for platters of spaghetti and *sugo da tavola*, and, as long as they were there, the cigarette machine money. Gabel's survives now on the survivors, the elderly who eat here out of habit and the occasional stray Korean salesman who tries to move fax paper over plates of clams casino.

Al raises his glass to Dad and in two big swallows drains the one beer a day he allows himself. Marriage and children have civilized Al. In his day, he could pound 'em with the best of us. Now he lives as one of those anomalies whose only addictions are an admirable love for his family and carbohydrates. The world needs more Als. I often wish I wasn't the youngest. By the time I recognized Al's virtues, he had been out on his own for a decade. My mother prays nightly that Kevin will find a woman of character like Al's Beth, hoping the right woman will work a similar miracle for Kevin. No Beth has materialized, because Kevin believes all women are cunts and whores, so that's exactly what he attracts.

A long time ago, when he was nineteen or twenty, Kev came home very drunk—no shock—but very upset, and that was surprising. He told Al he had met a girl at some big disco on the South Shore. She was drunker than Kevin and hanging all over him. When they gave last call, she waved off her friends and told Kev to take her home. In the car she kissed and licked him and pawed his crotch while he felt up her breasts and jammed his fingers between her legs. Bringing a girl back to our house was out of the question, so Kevin drove her to one of those cheap motels on Jericho Turnpike. Kevin told Al she giggled as they tumbled onto the bed. Afterward he drove her all the way out to Riverhead, where she lived. He scribbled our phone number on a matchbook as she fumbled with the door lock.

"Gimme a call," he said.

"I hate you, asshole!" she screamed before slamming the door.

Kevin thought he had gotten lucky. The girl knew she had been raped.

Over dinner Al tells a cluster of funny stories, every one of which we've heard before. Beth does her best to steer him to the matter at

hand, but eventually she lets him have his say. A successful marriage requires enduring the endless retelling of stories. A waiter finally comes, and we order appetizers and get down to business; we have a funeral to produce, pallbearers to cast, hymns to select, a eulogy to write.

My mother perks up when we get to the hymns. She has surprisingly strong opinions and knows all the hymns Dad loved, which is news to the rest of us, because we don't remember Dad ever expressing a preference for any type of music—popular, liturgical, classical, and definitely not those corny Irish things they bellow in bars on St. Patrick's Day. As far as I know, Frank McKenna was agnostic when it came to music, maybe even one of the 3 percent of poor souls who suffer from musical anhedonia, a neurological condition that prevents people from enjoying music of any kind.

And he was deafened, a souvenir of the war. "War is loud," he explained.

I have to constantly remind myself how isolating his deafness must have been. He wore a big clunky hearing aid in his "good" ear that he bitched about constantly. How many of life's simple pleasures did he miss because he never heard them? So Mom selects all the hymns she'd like sung at her funeral, and in a convoluted way, they are the perfect songs for Dad, because every husband's life is easier when his wife is happy, even from the other side.

My mother also surprises us by emphatically rejecting any military component for Dad's service, even though as a Greatest Generation veteran, the army would provide a color guard and bugler to play taps at his interment. "No, no, no!" she snaps. "Your father wouldn't want any of that." And she's got a point.

He was not a flag waver. He never wore his uniform on Veteran's Day or Memorial Day. I'm not sure he even had his old uniform. He never joined the VFW or any veteran's group. "That was then; this is now," he'd say. Frank McKenna was a quintessential Greatest Generation combat veteran, a deflector of glory, unwilling to introduce the poison of war into his home.

When pushed to discuss the army, Dad talked about gathering food, as if World War II had been one big scavenger hunt. The joy

of discovering a smoked ham hidden in a Belgian farmhouse chimney was his stock story. This was an oft-repeated tale and his default response, a crumb to shut up the nosy. When he finished his ham-in-the-chimney saga, the topic of war was closed. Frank McKenna retreated behind his own mental Maginot Line, an unbreachable barrier that forever quarantined his wife and children from his wartime experiences. Naturally, as a historian, I was interested even if the eighteenth century is my sweet spot. I pressed him, practically begging my father to tell me something. Anything. "I can't describe it until I forget a bit more," he said enigmatically.

After some nudging, Mom finally agrees to a flag on his casket, but that's as far as she'll go.

I am the obvious choice to write the eulogy, since I have had many articles published (almost exclusively in academic journals), and my biography of Bushrod Washington, George's able nephew and one of the first justices of the Supreme Court, sold close to five hundred copies. It could have cracked a thousand, but the *New York Times* reviewer called it "adequate," and the History Book Club passed, which is death for a book like mine. Still, I needed a book to secure tenure, and it served that purpose if no other.

As the Draft Danny movement sweeps the McKenna family convention, I take the floor to make a motion. "Why not let each of the sons say a few words?"

I say this in full knowledge it's a terrible idea. Sean will wilt in front of a microphone, and Kevin, being Kevin, will likely drop an f-bomb and make a scene. I pitched this idea mostly as a sop to Al, who likes public speaking and is good at it, having polished his chops at work with PowerPoint presentations and at Rotary Club luncheons that he emcees. But my motion is tabled without a vote, and it's agreed I will do the eulogy, Al will read the Epistle, while Jay, cousin Roger, and my brothers and I will be the pallbearers, even though Kevin is likely to be stiffer than Dad before we get to the cemetery. There's a role for everyone who needs to be included, and nobody has grounds for complaint except my niece Gail, who doesn't understand why her brother gets to carry the casket and a girl can't be a pallbearer.

I accept my assignment with genuine reservations. My attempt to duck Dad's eulogy isn't based on humility; I am the most qualified—that is, if it were a eulogy for anyone other than my father.

Here's what I can't tell them, what I'm ashamed to admit: I have no more idea what to say about Francis McKenna than I would if asked to give the eulogy for the Haitian busboy who is scraping breadcrumbs off our tablecloth with a plastic pocket comb.

Al drops us back at the house and wrangles the kids into the SUV, arms burdened with a CARE package from my mother. Beth carries away enough potato salad, cold cuts, and baked goods for a small city. They blow kisses and begin the long drive to Ossining. True to form, Sean retreats to his attic bedroom without saying a word. He'll spend the rest of the night watching a movie or doing whatever it is he does up there. With Kevin still at the Little Neck Inn, that leaves just Mom and me. We bus the last of the paper plates and plastic cups into the kitchen. We do this in silence, until she asks if I'm spending the night.

"Of course I'm staying," I say with feigned enthusiasm.

"You can sleep in your old room," she says. "I dressed the bed with the good linen."

I nod yes, unable to say no. I was hoping to stay at the Ramada, which is where I usually stay when I come home.

"You're exhausted, Mom. Go to bed. We've got a big day tomorrow," I tell her as I give her a kiss on the top of her head.

"I won't sleep," she says through a yawn.

"You'll sleep."

And with that my mother climbs the stairs to pull on her nightgown, brush her teeth, and scrub her face after completing her first full day of widowhood.

Alone at last, I dial the kitchen phone, carefully reading the beach house number off the slip of paper I had tucked in my wallet. No answer. I dial my place. Our place. No answer. My stomach grumbles. A swig of milk from the carton calms the storm, and I slowly hang up the phone, listening to it ring until the receiver hits the cradle and the connection clicks off.

It's deathly quiet now, literally. My father's passing has changed the acoustics of the house. His absence is palpable, like an amputated limb you keep reaching for. Everything is exactly where it should be, yet there's a vacuum, a vacuum I can feel, which is oxymoronic, but I don't know how else to describe it. I sit on the couch across from his chair. I don't even consider sitting in the big recliner with its exhausted cushions and shot springs. Nobody ever sat in my father's chair, not even the dog, back when we had a dog. It was never explicitly prohibited; he was not that kind of father. It was simply understood that Dad's chair was Dad's chair. We respected this unwritten rule, even Kevin, who respects nothing.

The couch is also past its expiration date, speckled with ancient stains and fabric rubbed smooth from decades of derrieres in corduroy and denim. After today's collation, the coffee table needs Pledge to remove the drink rings and pistachio shells and other schmutz. The shade on the end-table lamp is yellowed with age and slightly cocked to throw light on my mother's lap while she knits. All is as it should be, as it's always been, yet it's completely different.

Upstairs, faintly, I can hear the tap running in the hall bathroom as my mother washes off her makeup and brushes her teeth. Occasionally Sean's footsteps reverberate all the way down from the attic. The carriage clock on the mantel ticks loudly, ten minutes slow by my watch. Who will wind it now that Dad is gone?

I flip open the photo album that had made the rounds earlier in the day and caused much pointing and laughing and reminiscing, which morphed into arguing over muddled names, places, and dates. The usual collection of snapshots tells our family's history, time traveling from sepia to black-and-white to faded 1970s colors and even a few Polaroids. The oldest pictures are from Mom's side of the family, the Boyles: Pappy, Ma Boyle, my mom as a little girl, and, one by one, her four sisters. A formal wedding portrait, the same picture that's been on the mantel for years, and the group shot, a professional black-and-white wedding-party photograph showing the maid of honor, Aunt Mary; the best man, my Uncle Eamon; and four people I do not know. All the men are in uniform, including my father and his brother. As the

youngest, I am the least represented in the album. By the time I arrived in '57, my parents had tired of milestones. The photos end abruptly with my high school graduation. The last dozen pages are empty. Is there anything sadder than a family photo album?

The mantel clock chimes midnight, which means it's ten after. I find a stray M&M on the rug and pop it in my mouth.

I grab my roller bag and start up the stairs, each footfall producing a different creak, some high-pitched, others nautical, like a wooden boat riding at anchor. Why am I winded? Parliament 100s, that's why. I used to take these stairs two at a time. Down the hall, on the right, is the door to my bedroom.

The posters and baseball cards are long gone, but the crucifix is still nailed above the door where it's always been. The globe shading the overhead light has a smudge of paint from when I helped Dad roll the ceiling. That was a long time ago. This was never a big house, not with six of us coming and going and growing. Tonight, it feels extra tiny.

As always, the twin beds are in the only place they fit, on opposite walls with the big cast-iron radiator separating them like a thousand-pound accordion. All the McKennas pronounce radiator "RAD-e-ator," except me. I corrected them once, pointing out it doesn't "RAD-e-ate heat, it RAY-dee-ates" heat, which prompted a pointed "fucking know-it-all" from Kevin, his favorite rejoinder to pretty much everything I ever say. When I was little, I shared this room with Sean, but puberty sent him to the attic, affording me the luxury of a room of my own, another source of resentment for Kevin, who had to bunk with Al. Sean's bed frame didn't fit through the narrow attic opening, so he sleeps on a box spring and mattress on the floor. His empty bed was my roommate. It's still here, waiting for Kimberly, as am I.

While I unpack, a welcome breeze flutters the shade covering the half-opened window, a window forever propped up with a hairbrush, an empty paper towel tube, whatever is handy. Currently, the handle from a broken ice scraper is jammed into the sill. The bedroom needs attention. My father had been a prolific tinkerer, a fixer, until age overtook him, and things started to slide. One Christmas—I had

just gotten out of grad school—I mentioned that the living room rug looked shabby. Dad peered over the top of his *Daily News* and said in that soft voice of his, "'Tis a living room. There's been a lot of living in here." I never mentioned it again.

My old swaybacked desk with the orange drawers is a survivor from my high school years. This was a curbside find. Kevin helped me carry it home. After sanding it down, I painted the scratched-up drawers with a quart of orange enamel I found in the garage. The color is garish, but in the early '70s, what wasn't? There was nothing I could do about the big dip in the middle. Pens and pencils still roll to the center.

I plop down in front of it; my knees scrape the underside. Was it always this low? I open the top drawer and fish through the detritus of my youth: a Jon Matlack rookie card, a plastic comb with bent tines, two calcified Hershey's Kisses, five pennies, a Canadian dime, rubber bands, paper clips, and lots of cheap pens with chewed-up caps. I went through a biting phase. My teeth still fit in the depressions. In the bottom drawer, stacks of old school papers commingle with a tux rental receipt from my junior prom, a book report on *The Grapes of Wrath* lifted verbatim from *CliffsNotes*, and stacks of loose-leaf paper and scribbled-on spiral notebooks with lots of missing pages. I enjoy the archaeology of it all but sitting here makes me conscious of my urgent homework assignment, my father's eulogy. I grab an old notebook and scratch a dried-up pen back to life.

"Francis Xavier McKenna was born in Ireland," I write before crossing it out. "First, let me say on behalf of my entire family, thank you for being with us today." That's better. Welcoming. Graceful. Then for the second time I write, "Francis Xavier McKenna was born in Ireland" and promptly cross it out a second time. I go on in this vein until I surrender and go back to inventorying the desk drawers: some staples, an old pack of Kleenex, one of those tiny screwdrivers to tighten eyeglasses, a Uriah Heep cassette tape (not mine), a ticket stub from a Mets/Expos game in 1979, a business card from a Honda dealership, and a faded photograph of a girl I had a crush on in senior year. We never dated, and I have no idea how I got this picture.

I slide between the stiff linens of my childhood bed and try to read a few pages of John Niven's biography of Martin Van Buren that I brought with me to the Cape. I'm teaching a class this fall on the development of the two-party system, so it's time to bone up on Van Buren. But that overhead light is blinding, like an operating room. How did I ever read in this bed? My thoughts drift from President Van Buren to my father, to my mother softly weeping in her room across the hall, to Al, and Kevin, and even Sean, whom no one ever thinks about. I think about Frank Sinatra and all the events of the past twenty-four hours, of the last forty years. Then I think about my wife. Beautiful Kimberly. Why hasn't she called?

I sleep. Eventually.