

## STRING THEORY

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One day in late August, my father has a heart attack inside the Sistine Chapel. Fifteen minutes before, we stand beneath the vaulted marble and domes, the place where Michelangelo, going blind, rippled his soul's graffiti across the ceiling. My mother is going on about how much dust lingers inside the Pope's address.

“Right now, as we speak, dust is settling everywhere, getting a free ride,” she says, looking around.

“Try not to think about it,” I say.

“This place is an amusement park for dust,” she says.

For my mother, dust is a messenger from the underworld. At night, in our Roman hotel, she lies awake, imagining it settling on her houseplants back in Wisconsin.

“We're here to see art, Mother,” I say.

She studies the guards wearing their white gloves. It's some kind of proof. The room is alive with tourists. A man wearing a T-shirt advertising antifreeze is snapping pictures beside us.

“My allergies won't survive Italy!” Mother carols. She has a rare ability to combine epic complaint with up-beat enthusiasm.

I crane up at God's extended finger. From behind, I hear my father and my brother, Edgar, discussing particle physics. My father is a quark theorist of small renown, and my brother is getting his Ph.D. in physics at MIT. They haven't stopped since London.

“...String Theory is a wolf in lamb's clothing,” my father says.

“No, Dad, come on. It’s elegant enough to be true. Unified field theory is like yesterday’s mail. You can’t cling to it anymore.”

They catch up to us.

“Not to hurry anybody, but I’m about to sneeze a hurricane in here,” Mother says.

My mother has a Ph.D. in passive aggression. For the last three weeks we’ve shuttled her in a rental car, sneezing and wheezing, through the Italian countryside. She’s spent the whole time with the windows up, naming the Tuscan palette—ocher, terracotta, umber, burnt sienna. She knows colors. Our house in Wisconsin is painted slate and oyster, a ruby trim—a Victorian restoration down to the high windows and lathe work. “Hey, family, look at the ceiling,” my father says.

The celestial clouds are windswept; the hand of Adam is so perfectly proportioned that I feel my hands coming out of my pockets, as if I want to raise one in the air in comparison.

“I am so hung over,” my brother says. “How ‘bout you, English?” Edgar calls me *English* as a derogatory term. I’m an English major at the University of Wisconsin, but he means the word to indicate a whole divide, to be shorthand for the realm that he and my father call ‘fuzzy symbol land.’

“I’m not too bad, considering,” I say.

He and I holed up at a sleazy discotheque last night. We were the only men not wearing leather jackets. Edgar smoked a cigar and introduced himself to women as Chad, the engineer.

“This is not my body. Somebody made a mistake,” he says.

“Drink water,” I tell him. “Hydrate.”

“Distract dad. If he engages me anymore about the super-symmetric field I’m going to kill him and stuff him in the crypt.”

“We need to get them both to the hotel for their naps.”

My father—sporting a furious, German philosopher’s beard, and a blue short-sleeve shirt frayed at the collar—gawks up at the ceiling. “This guy thought God was real,” he says.

“God might be real,” Edgar says. He can’t agree with anything my father says, that’s their pact.

“God is another name for coherence,” my father says.

“You’re breaking up, Dad.” Edgar turns to me and says, “Nathan, I think I’m dying.”

“Hold tight,” I say.

Edgar leans against a marble pillar, a column that extends clear to the angels up above us. “I need a blood transfusion,” he says.

Then my mother sneezes. A volley eight deep. Instinctively, people give her a wide berth. The antifreeze man gives up saying ‘bless you’ and ‘gah-zoon-tight’ after the fifth sneeze. No one in my family has blessed my mother’s sneezes in a decade—they’ve become like distant barks from a neighborhood dog.

“Should we wander over to St. Paul’s?” she asks, all sinuses.

“More of the same, I suspect,” my father says.

“I’d like to see my pillow right about now,” Edgar says.

“No. Look at us. We’ll brave this,” Mother says, sniffing. “Gather up your senses and let’s march through another floor of artwork.”

“Adam and God. Their hands come close, but don’t quite touch,” my father says. “It’s like the subatomic fabric. You know a glass never really rests on a table. Nothing ever touches and such-like.”

“I may have shingles,” Edgar says to nobody in particular. “When I’m this hung over I become aware of my nose hairs.”

We mill in the great room. My father has no history of heart disease. Twice a year he makes a pilgrimage to the Stanford Linear Accelerator—a two-mile stretch of metal casing where electrons stream at the speed of light and pulverize molecules of gold and hydrogen. This is the closest he comes to violence, to blood sport. Right now he’s got his hands in his pockets, shuffling with his head down. He’s a man more impressed by possibility than beauty.

“The problem with String Theory,” he says to Edgar, “is it doesn’t explain who’s holding the string. Little worms undulating in the subatomic murk. No. Unified Field Theory is the better horse. It can explain our thoughts in terms of energy and information.”

“Please explain,” Edgar says, his eyes suddenly pinched.

“Right now I’m thinking about cheese sandwiches and mesons and whether your mother is going to sneeze us awake all night. Are these my thoughts? Where do they come from if the entire universe is really just a mind thinking about itself? The universe has intention.”

Edgar says, “Dad, I don’t think that a single, unifying force in the universe explains why your mind does what it does.”

“Does the Pope really live here?” I ask.

“Of course,” Mother says. She’s a lapsed Catholic, but ever since we arrived in Rome we have, inadvertently, deferred to her on all matters papal.

“He lives in some kind of underground bunker,” Edgar suggests.

“What I’m saying is that we’re really just waves of energy and light. A matrix of cosmic background noise...” my father is saying now.

Edgar and I watch as an Italian woman—voluptuous, a cryptic mouth like she’s in a constant state of arousal or disgust, walks past us. A sea of citrus perfume.

“She’s a Botticelli,” I say.

“Now that’s a wave of light,” Edgar says.

Apparently, my father is still talking. Something about our minds not being our own.

“I wish to God my head was not my own,” Edgar says.

“Don’t talk about God in here,” my mother says. She’s looking around the Sistine Chapel like someone intending to buy real estate—deadpanning the plinth of a column, the cornering and joints of the ceiling.

“Sometimes I wonder if anybody in this family besides me is remotely normal,” I say.

“Nobody besides me is looking at the ceiling anymore. Dad, look up.”

My father looks up, waves, then looks at me and shrugs.

“What do you see?” I ask.

“Celestial propaganda.”

“Can we leave now?” Edgar says.

“Not until we see the run of the place,” Mother says.

She leads us out into a passageway shot with afternoon light. The corridor is windowed against a Roman tableau—the crossweave of brickwork streets and alleys, the mopeds, determined as assassins, the crumbling buildings, corniced and pillared, that look like they’re made from pumice. The first sign of chest pain arrives. My father, one hand against the window, the other over his heart, complains of indigestion.

“The primavera is playing havoc on me. It’s like opera in my stomach.”

“Ritz crackers for the rest of the trip, at least until Paris,” my mother says.

“Between the two of you, with dad’s acid reflux and your allergies to this fine little planet of ours, we could be the bubble family. Isaac Newton died a virgin. Good science can come of isolation,” Edgar says.

Somewhere outside a church bell chimes—the confident sound of bronze.

“I thought you were hung over,” I say to him.

“I’m a double agent.” He play-punches me in the arm, a little too hard.

We walk some more. Mother leads us along the tall windows, past the sculptures and the coralline hues of medieval tapestries. It smells like floor wax and old wood.

“Smells like a boathouse in here,” my father says, a little too loudly.

A man with cufflinks glances at him.

Edgar trails behind me; I can hear his breathing.

My father stops in the middle of the corridor and turns, raising his index finger, about to make a point. He lowers his finger, then, as if it’s an afterthought, calls back to my brother, “Matter and anti-matter collide and what happens, Edgar?”

My brother moans from the rear, “They cancel each other out.”

“Sure as a balanced checkbook.”

“And?” Edgar says.

“Yet, we happen upon anti-matter quite frequently in the subatomic parking lot. How does String Theory account for this?”

“I don’t know.”

“It can’t. When the Big Bang happened there should have been a net result of zero. Non-existence was supposed to happen. Anti-matter should have nullified matter and we shouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“The non-existence of this conversation would be a relief,” I say. Edgar winks at me, brightening.

Edgar says, “Dad, my blood sugar is not up for this line of reasoning.”

“Look at that gilded crucifix,” my mother gasps.

“A little gaudy,” I say. It’s the size of a wardrobe.

“Somewhere, anti-matter is hiding. Death, for example, may simply be a bathtub full of anti-matter. It’s waiting out there in the unified field.”

“Jesus,” Edgar says, “I can hear my blood moving. What are you saying?”

My father says, “They’ve been trying to solve the anti-matter conundrum for millennia. It’s called religion.”

“You’ll get us killed,” I say.

My father is so far into his quantum rant that the only thing that will appease him is the conversion of my brother’s will, or, some hours from now, sleep. At this point, my father clutches his chest for the second time. His mouth bitters.

“Are you all right?” Mother asks. Her voice comes down in pitch, edges into the octave of concern.

“I think so,” he says, a little breathy.

Edgar says, “Let’s make a beeline for the Sistine again. I think there’s a shortcut to an exit. This is where Ikea got their design principles. You can’t get out anywhere without doing the loop.”

We move back in that direction, against the flow of awed tourists; a family defying the current. Back in the room where heaven is pinned against the ceiling, where matter is created from the void, we stand, looking for exits.

“Which way is out?” my father asks.

“Edgar knows the way,” my mother says.

Edgar looks around. People spill into the chapel, concealing the escape routes.

“I never noticed...” my father says, craning up.

“What?” Edgar asks.

“Look where God is creating Adam. What’s that over his left shoulder?”

“A woman,” I say.

“Eve,” my mother says.

“I thought the source material says Adam was created first,” my father says.

“The Bible,” I offer.

“Maybe Michelangelo was a feminist,” Edgar says.

“If Eve can sit behind God before she’s created, then sure as hell anti-matter can—”

He swoons—there’s no other word for it. What stops his head from smashing into the marble floor is my brother’s shoe, a penny-loafer, its coppery eye bright and new. The white-gloved guards come alive. Bursts of choppy Italian, the sound of hard-rubber heels.

“For heaven’s sake,” my mother says, a little unfortunately.

Edgar kneels beside him. I don’t seem to be able to move. My father’s eyes are closed. The guards are sealing the room now and I imagine there are doctors being rushed to the scene, papal physicians whose pedigree is beyond compare. Edgar is calling out my father’s name and checking his pulse. A guard listens for breath. My mother is staring down at him, clutching her own heart; her mouth forms a gothic arch.

Two of the guards begin CPR, pulling apart my father’s shirt. I can’t remember the last time I’ve seen his bare chest. I don’t seem to be able to move my legs into a kneeling position.

Edgar is yelling, asking my father to wake the hell up. My family has disappeared. We've switched itineraries with some folks from Ohio; maybe it's the antifreeze man who's supposed to snuff it beneath the stardome. The universe falters all the time. This moment is all wrong for an atheist; it seems wasted. Just as I manage to get on the ground, my hands paralyzed in my pockets, my father's breath returns. He's been gone for less than thirty seconds. He coughs and promptly throws up. The guards turn him on his side just as small puddle of bile flows onto the marble. A doctor dressed in the uniform of the Swiss Guard arrives on the scene and asks us to give the *victim* some *espacio* to breathe. Death in Italy seems fabled, operatic, not a detail of my father's biography.

We back away. We can't look at each other because, as my father would have it, the Uncertainty Principle is still asserting itself—we're caught in a matrix of possibilities, rats in a maze, waiting to see which pathway is going to win. I've learned physics despite myself. Edgar is the first to break the silence.

"What was that?" he asks.

"Did he just die for a minute?" I ask.

"He looked extremely dead to me," Edgar says.

Mother ignores us, squinting through the ring of guards, into the sanctum where the dress-uniformed physician low-tones to my father. The insistent shriek of an ambulance comes from outside. There's going to be a hospital visit, a ride in an ambulance; the universe isn't neutral, I think, it's out to get us. Paramedics arrive and trot across the floor, pushing a gurney. My mother asserts herself back into the fold of officials. She stands beside the doctor and there's a rapid exchange of head nods—the lingua franca of post-trauma. My father's eyes stare up at the ceiling, appalled.

The hospital is shiny and modern—burnished steel and glass. It's been designed to shun Rome, to shun history. My father spends a few hours in the emergency room, shoulder-to-shoulder with stroke victims and car accident survivors. He acts as if he doesn't understand what goes on in hospitals: reclined on his neat bed, O-mouthed at the sight of a head wound. Later, they move him to a ward where he is to spend the night under observation.

“The tragedy of modern physics is that the body thinks it's real,” he says.

“Be quiet,” my mother warns.

“You scared us,” Edgar says.

I hold the metal bedrail, staring at my father.

“They're sending in another mechanic. The heart guy. What's to know about the human heart? Designed like a basement sump pump. Big deal,” my father says.

Edgar says, “You know, they've done studies to prove how a patient's attitude affects the immune system.”

“Neuropeptides, that's the secret,” my father says. “Brain opium.”

My mother holds his hand.

“My head's a little tender,” Father says.

“You hit it on my shoe,” Edgar says. “Think yourself lucky.”

“You need to sleep. Boys, let's let your father sleep,” Mother says.

My mother ushers us out into the white-lit corridor. For a moment we stand in silence, listening to the siphoned air in the elevator shafts, the muted talk at the nurse stations.

“You two can run back to the hotel if you want,” Mother says.

“No, we'll stay,” Edgar says.

“Fine,” Mother says. “I’m going to go find his doctor.” We watch as she walks down the corridor, her handbag tucked under one arm, her walk suggesting relief and fatigue; the march of the one-minute widow.

We sleep in plastic chairs around his bed. At one point I wake and see my brother standing next to the heart-monitoring machine, watching the green scintilla worms its way across the black screen.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“One thing’s for sure, this little incident cured my hang over.”

“You can’t sleep?” I ask. I look over at our mother whose head is slumped against her chest.

“Everyone has a number,” Edgar says.

“What?”

“A number, a half-life. Total number of heartbeats. Average of 450 beats per hour for x number of years and then you come upon it. He just discovered that his number is finite.”

“Are you drunk?” I ask.

“No. But I’m very hungry. You want to find some food?”

I nod and we head out into the streets. Outside, the sky hangs low and close. It’s the hour of bakers and the streets are quiet. A lone police car prowls the emptiness. We walk towards the river, looking for food. We troll the empty streets, hungry, not talking. Nothing. After half an hour we give up.

“Fuck it, let’s go to a bar. A bowl of peanuts, pretzels. Who cares?” Edgar says. “Why don’t they at least have a diner? What kind of civilization forgets to serve eggs at three am?”

“I agree.”

“Yes, and I don’t see them sending rockets to the moon, either, little brother.” Edgar clips me on the shoulder.

We find a bar that is set above an upscale shoe store. At the top of a long, narrow staircase is a smoky room with pinball machines and a dozen clients, all men. A young, pretty woman wipes tables and brings out drinks. We take a table near the pinball machines and she comes over to us.

“Two beers and a bowl of something edible,” Edgar says, making no attempt at Italian.

In perfect English, the woman says, “We also have food. Hamburgers, French fries, pasta.”

Edgar’s eyes almost brim. “My God! Did you hear that? They have food. Okay, okay. I need a cheeseburger. Hold the onions, generous on the cheese.”

The woman nods and looks at me.

“Fries,” I say. “And ketchup.”

Edgar looks up at the woman. “They should build a shrine with your name on it.”

“Why’s that?”

“This food may save my life.”

She smiles warily—a jaded barmaid’s smile—and heads for the bar.

Edgar says, “Nathan, I’m feeling strangely invigorated. You want to play pinball? A little vector geometry with metal balls?”

“No thanks.”

He looks around. “No pool table. Typical.” He starts playing with the salt and pepper shakers. “He was close.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean, he did go. Make no mistake. Our father died today. There will be repercussions...a change in diet, regular checkups, he might start wearing colorful ties or socks...”

The woman arrives with our beer—two sorry-looking pints with thick heads.

“It’s okay, I can climb down to the beer from here,” Edgar says to the waitress.

The woman smiles, this time unexpectedly.

“Where are you from?” she asks.

“Us? Wisconsin,” Edgar says.

“Dairy,” she says dismissively.

“We prefer to call it the bovine lactation industry,” Edgar says. “I’m Edgar and this is my kid brother, Nathan.”

“Hello kid brother,” she says.

“I’m actually a junior in college,” I say. “Edgar thinks I’m still twelve.”

“I’ll go check on your meals,” she says, leaving.

Edgar watches her return to the bar—her ass swaggering through a pair of faded denim jeans. “Death does strange things to us. It’s not about the dying, Nathan. It’s about us, the living. They don’t care. They pass along like clouds. It’s us. People eat like pigs at wakes. You know why? Because they’re so fucking happy it wasn’t them.” He drinks his beer in four long sips. “Look at this foam,” he adds. “A little stratosphere of foamy hops. What do you think of our waitress?”

“Pretty.”

“Damn right, pretty. There’s a moment after I haven’t had sex with a woman in six months where I think the act itself might destroy me. It’s like the sheer force of two colliding bodies might render me speechless.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I say.

“Hey, I was twenty-four when I lost mine. Consider the years of masturbation as a form of Zen worship—the relationship of form to emptiness. I need another drink.”

“Mother’s worried sick,” I say.

“That’s what she does. Her niche in evolution is dust control and the expansion of worry. Jesus, I’m already drunk, how wonderful.”

“Hold steady.”

“I’m contemplating smoking a cigar,” Edgar says.

“Don’t start with that. Last night you got drunk and walked around like the fucking great Gatsby.”

“What did I do?” Edgar asks.

“You told somebody you had designed Golden Gate Bridge.”

“Wow,” he says. Then he adds, “Alcohol does that to me. My blood chemistry changes and I think bridges and smoking jackets.”

Our food arrives and Edgar orders two more beers and a shot of whiskey. He makes no small talk this time.

“Now, Nathan, next time she comes to our table I will be friendly again. See, I’m trying to demonstrate basic principles of generating interest from a woman.”

“You haven’t had a girlfriend in two years,” I say, picking up a French fry.

“Technically, that’s true. But that is intentional. Physics research and endorphins are a bad combination.”

“Our father had a heart attack today and you’re trying to pick up women.”

“You make it sound like a mystery. Could you imagine our father trying to pick up a woman? I think when he and mother have sex he thinks about hip-curve coefficients.”

“I don’t want to hear this, okay? Don’t get drunk if you’re going to be an asshole.”

“Hey, hey, I didn’t see you haul-ass in there today. You stood like a fucking statue while his heart stopped.”

“I didn’t know what was happening.”

A long silence falls over the table. The woman comes back with our drinks.

Edgar says, “This is the best cheeseburger I’ve ever had. The cheese is a little aged for my liking, but that’s okay. It’s really quite wonderful.”

“Glad you like it,” she says.

“Where are you from?” Edgar asks.

“New York. My uncle owns this bar. I’m back for the summer.”

“We’re here studying heart disease among particle physicists. Really untapped territory. Today our father had a heart attack inside the Sistine Chapel.”

“You’re kidding?”

“No,” I say.

“Is he okay?” she asks.

“Yes.”

“You’ve had quite a day, then,” she says. She smiles mildly. In the amber light of the bar her hair is honey-colored.

Edgar does his shot of whiskey and opens his mouth in the after-shock. Then he says to the waitress, “If I asked for your phone number in Roman numerals would you give it to me?”

“I don’t know Roman numerals,” she says, “sorry.”

“Very well constructed rejection. It’s a clear *no* without being obtuse or rude. My rejoinder, if I had one, would be to ask for your digits in some other mathematical notation...decimalized, Arabic, reduced to prime factors...”

“I’m sorry to hear about your father,” she says, walking away.

Edgar looks down at his empty shot glass.

“Why did you do that?” I ask.

“Because I’m doomed, Nathan. Doomed as a dog that chases cars.”

“Eat your hamburger.”

“Yes, Mother.”

He resumes eating. Mid-chew he looks at me. “Who do you think is going to die first, you or me?”

“What the hell kind of question is that?”

“Apparently, a rather interesting one.”

“I don’t care,” I say.

“That’s our Nathan. Family fence-sitter. Dad and I could be arguing about the nature of fucking light in the universe and you don’t take sides. Your side is silence or feigned interest.

*Light, oh, yes I have noticed that phenomenon in the mornings.”*

“All right. Bait me. You. You will die first.”

“Why?”

“It’s obvious. You’re self-destructive,” I say.

“Good answer. But, I think you’re going to die first, little brother.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t have any anger. Anger keeps people alive long enough to get even.”

I watch my brother devour his hamburger, some of its contents spilling onto his plate.

“Really, all things considered, a fine hamburger. How are the fries?” he asks.

“Not bad.”

“Did I upset you?”

“What makes you think that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe that death-stare you gave me a second ago. Like you wanted to punch me in the teeth.”

“I’m tired. It’s been a hell of a day. We should go back to the hospital.”

“Remember when we were kids and I used to break all your toys. You never defended them. I dropped your model airplanes from the roof and smashed them into a thousand pieces. You would just pick them up and keep the pieces in a shoebox. I wonder why you did that?”

I turn my plate in a half-circle. “Dad used to say you wanted to know about the insides of things. He never punished you. He always stuck up for you.”

“He loves to argue with me but he’s always thought I was his genetic endowment. He picks on me, I pick on you. The purpose of a family is to teach us how to handle weapons. But, Nathan, seriously, you have always been as big as me. You could have beaten the crap out of me.”

“I admired you. You were my big brother. Star student at St. Ignatius.”

“Jesuits. They fuck with your head. Why does an atheist physicist send his sons to Jesuit school? To be a prick, that’s why.”

“Celibacy breeds good science. He always said that.”

Edgar looks down at his empty plate. He’s even eaten the slice of orange that came as a garnish. “Let’s go,” he says. He puts a stack of lire on the table and waves at the barmaid. We’re descending the narrow staircase now and I hear Edgar behind me, gliding his knuckles along the wall. Out in the street, the sun has started to come up—lightening the pumiced facades, yellowing the cornices.

“This light is eight minutes old,” Edgar says.

“Yeah.”

“You don’t care do you?”

“What? About how long it takes sunlight to reach the earth? No, not really.”

Edgar jams his hands into his pockets. “What do you care about, Nathan?”

I keep walking; we need to head east, into the brightening.

“Nathan, what do you care about?”

“I don’t want to talk anymore, all right?”

Edgar steps onto the curbside. The rumble of a garbage truck comes from behind us.

“You want to close the conversation, fine.”

We walk a little further then Edgar puts his hand on my shoulder.

“What?”

“Can you punch me in the stomach?”

“What?”

“One punch.”

“Fuck you,” I say.

“Just once.”

“No, I’m not going to punch you.”

“Please.” He brings his hands out of his pockets and drops them by his side.

“What’s that going to do?” I ask.

“Short of sex with that barmaid, this is it, my last attempt at a good nap later in the day. I’m drunk enough that it’ll be kind of numb—a dull little telegram from the world of sobriety.”

“Edgar, I am not going to punch you.”

“Then I’ll punch *you*.”

“Fuck you.”

“No. I need this.”

“What? This is something you do at MIT? You and your fagot physics friends punch each other?”

“See, a little anger. It’s in there. You hit me or I’ll hit you.”

I walk ahead, leaving my brother standing with one foot on the curbstone. He walks behind me and grabs me by the wrist.

“Please, Nathan. I swear to God we won’t tell anybody. You punch me in the stomach so it won’t show. Keep away from the ribs and kidneys.”

“You’ve really given this some thought. The physics of the thing.”

Edgar grabs both my arms and pushes me against the brick wall behind us. I can smell beer and meat on his breath.

“Little brother, I love you. But you are destined for a life of mediocrity. You’re going to end up writing criticism of poetry that’s about fruit. That’s not real life. Real life is invisible.”

“Fuck off, Edgar. I mean it. You’re pushing me.”

“One punch.”

“Fuck it. Fine. Lean against the wall.”

“There’s no give if I lean against the wall. I need to be able to double over. Now, keep your fingertips flat against the palm and roll them tight to make the fist.”

“I know how to fucking punch.”

“Do you? You ever been in a fight?”

“No.”

“So, then. Maiden voyage. This is exciting. You excited?”

Edgar steps away from the wall and I look up and down the street. Everything is empty, quiet. He puts his hands behind his back and waits.

“You want to close your eyes?” I ask.

“Not a chance,” he says. “Come on, my drunkenness is slipping away.”

I look at his stomach, the slight crest of his ribs. The truth is I don’t really know how to punch. I decide on something that resembles an uppercut. I swing my fist towards his gut and simultaneously take hold of his shoulder. I guide him onto it and he gives out a sound like a man easing into a hot bath.

“What the fuck was that?” he says. “I want to feel it.”

I punch him again, this time straight on, low, above the waistline. His breath gives out and he doubles, nodding emphatically, agreeing with this course of action. Something in the nodding head. Unexpectedly, I land another fist to the back of his head and I feel the slight give of his skull. I know physics: impact increases relative to acceleration. Newton’s laws apply just as much to fist fights as to planetary motion. Edgar, crouching low, places one hand on the pavement and another on the back of his head. He looks up at me, but says nothing. I can feel

my hands shaking and the sting of my knuckles. I feel as if I want to run somewhere. For no apparent reason, I wonder if the woman at the bar would have given *me* her number.

“Ow, Jesus Fuck! Thought you’d add one of your own? I get to hit you one.”

“No.”

“Fair is fair.”

I level my eyes at Edgar. “You are not going to punch me.”

I turn and begin walking in the direction of the hospital. I know, in his state, that Edgar is capable of launching one from behind me, but I keep walking and nothing happens. He follows me, ten paces behind, all the way to the hospital. We come inside. The hospital fluorescence is so white it makes my eyes hurt. We get into the elevator and go to my father’s floor. Edgar still has his hands clenched by his side. Neither of us speak. In my father’s room my parents are both asleep, their faces washed by the green light of the heart machine. Edgar walks into the room first and stands by my father’s bed. I stand holding the bedrail. My brother looks up at the heart machine.

“There’ll need to be an adjustment made to his number,” he says.

“Don’t,” I say.

“Don’t what? All I’m saying is that we need to subtract thirty seconds from the ledger, from the total. For that matter, that punch to my head probably added twenty heartbeats to my number.”

“Maybe there is no fixed number, Edgar. Maybe it changes based on our actions.”

“Novel theory.” Edgar looks down at my father. “Where did he go, Nathan?”

“He died.”

“What did he see? Did he look up at the ceiling and think, *hey, I’m in heaven. God is real.* Or did he remember that he doesn’t believe in God and the clouds and angels just disappeared?”

“He probably doesn’t remember,” I say. “Keep your voice down, you’ll wake them up.”

“Oh, he remembers. Took a little bath in the unified field, didn’t you old man?”

“Stop it. I’m serious.”

“I mean, was there a white light communion?” Edgar asks. “Or just the feel of the marble and the fear, *my God, I’m really dead, what now?*” Edgar begins shaking my father’s shoulders.

“Leave him. Edgar, I swear to God I will kill you.” I begin moving towards his side of the bed. Edgar continues to shake my father who slowly emerges from sleep. His eyes open but he’s still in the undertow of drugs, tethered to an opiate dream. My father smiles and murmurs, “the white horse gallops through the town...”

“Tell us,” Edgar says.

“Let him sleep,” I say.

Edgar shakes one last time and says, “Dad, Dad, wake up, it’s your sons. We have a question for you.”

I push Edgar so hard he reels backwards and fails to catch himself. He topples into the plastic chairs and lands on his back, hard. I’m surprised at my strength and at how good it feels to see my brother fall. My parents jolt awake and look at me, then at Edgar. I’m not used to being the center of attention and I don’t meet their faces. I deadlock on Edgar who stares up at me, puzzled, but also grateful that sometimes the universe conspires to say no.