

Chapter 1

LAH-DI-DAH

Life is for the living, so maybe it's a good time to die. You pass someone on crutches or in a wheelchair at a mall and never really notice them. The invisibility of disability. I never want to be invisible. "Bury me deep beneath the sea, where people are free." This was the first line of a poem I wrote in high school. I never finished the poem. Actually, I never finished anything in life—until a few years ago. I'm a stream-of-consciousness writer, which means if I began seventeen times, I would tell that many different stories.

I need to tell my story and how I wound up at this strange day in my life. On one hand, I'm just middle of the road and class. On the other, I've been gifted. I've journeyed through a life of haunting spirituality and ridiculous happenings you can't make up. There have been many pieces in my life, scattered like a jigsaw puzzle on a game board in my mother's Newark kitchen. In her home, there was never a room that belonged to my father.

My agenda today begins with a bag of sand in the basement. It's not beige beach sand, but gritty, steel-gray granules. I cut open the bag, fill an empty nonfat milk container, and stare around the unfinished basement at boxes of old vinyl records, apothecary bottles, Life magazines, and a nonworking sewing machine. Resonating with me are Sylvia Plath's words, "Dying is an art, like everything else."

Jersey Shore, here I come. Heading there in late spring, Route 18 is traffic free. Destination is Belmar, epicenter of the Jersey Shore, where I was conceived in the attic of a long-gone hotel. My mother told me that story six months before she passed. When I met Belmar's mayor at a party a few years ago, I told him why I liked his town.

At the drawbridge over the Shark River leading into Belmar, just off Ocean Avenue, is the jetty that may've been witness to ships sailing to the Second World War. When I was ten, I discovered its meditative appeal and spent carefree summer hours dreaming, wishing, and hoping, perched on craggy boulders that smelled like decaying fish. Not a year has gone by when I haven't spent time on the jetty, snow or tropical storms notwithstanding. In a brisk northwest wind, I stand at the jetty tip, ocean spraying me, and dispatch the milk carton sand to the wind. The need to watch the sand blow in the wind to my possible infinity keeps me there until the carton is empty. I could almost hear Donovan's "Catch the Wind."

I sit down on my favorite boulder. Ocean mist from waves crashing against boulders slaps my face—a good slap of inspiration. I stretch my right foot and take a perspective picture of a white vintage sneaker against the jetty, horizon, and sky. Who knew that picture would one day become this book cover? It is a good day so far; I am gifted to see things as they might be.

Facebook notifications and email were checked. Social media allows me to also keep a visual surveillance (lurking) on certain dormant relationships. I inhale deeply, squint at the sun overhead, and see a seagull scoring something to eat. I'm not alone anymore; a fisherman and a woman carrying a pail plant themselves too close. Always afraid of a fish hook catching me in the eye, I walk into the sand and sit on a tree stump polished smooth from time, surf, and wind. Another deep inhalation before my phone call.

"Hi. You'll never guess—unless . . . But then again, you probably will."

"Wow, it is you. When I woke up this morning, you were the furthest thing from my mind. Why and how? It's been a few years."

I clear my throat; it was shutting down with nerves and parched oral epithelium. I need to be relaxed. "I know it's been a while. Shall I tell you that you've been on my mind? How are you, by the way? Where are you? Hopefully close to the ocean, because that's where I am."

"I don't care why you're calling. I think it's a good thing. If I remember, you said you'd be back one day. I moved to a small apartment in Ocean Grove. Are you near?"

I am so near; it is eighteen minutes to the front porch. I love when the door opens before a knock: a sign of desire, anticipation, and imagination. We hug, push away to take ourselves into visual digestion, and hug again, marveling at how well we both look. We reminisce back a few years, our last time together: a fast-food dinner. We didn't know each other long before that, first meeting at McLoone's in Asbury Park on a Tuesday music night.

With the day I've had and decisions I've made, I just want raw sex. I don't care about positions or protocols. Guilt is finally dead. I comment on the wine glasses and open bottle of merlot on the night table. It's funny—virtual strangers in the night, taking off clothes, staring at lumpy, sagging bodies a distance from their prime, and thinking nothing of it. It's all about pure, matter-of-fact sex. No sweet nothings, promises, or appointments for return engagements.

I have to go. It has been a good two hours. A little washcloth refresh in the bathroom. A kiss at the front door. I turn around, wave, and suddenly know where I have to go next.

The SurfWind is a Jersey Shore institution for hot dogs, cheese fries, and all the relish you want. I need everything on their menu now—or at least one side of the menu. It's been a long time, 1975, since I've masticated a hot dog: real beef with pastel-colored nitrites. It's been a

lifetime since I last consumed a four-legged animal. Perhaps my hormonal pathways are activated by the craving for nitrates.

It is time for another phone call. Maybe dessert and more sex in Livingston.

Forty minutes north on the parkway, up Mount Pleasant Avenue (a perfect name for a street) to a Livingston diner, I purchase two large black and white cookies. My friend likes those cookies; I like the 1960s Psychology Today game, Blacks & Whites, better. Strangely, the condo door opens as I arrive. I throw the bagged cookies into waiting arms, then a hug. I explained my place in the universe on the drive up, so we just go to bed. Cookies and coincidentally more merlot are just fine for me afterwards. Why do so many remote souls in my social media connections know to fun me with merlot? Have I been that obvious?

I refresh with another washcloth, then say goodbye. You get to a point in life, like standing at the end of a jetty, when human communication and fornication become an emotional routine. Best now to quote Annie Hall, "Lah-di-dah."

How did I arrive at this day? It's a wonderful life—or was? Should I start this memoir on the day when I rolled over six times in a Volkswagen and should've been as crushed to death as the car, except a spirit took over the steering wheel? Or should I start with my father's facial expression after the birth of his firstborn—me?