

# OTHER MEN'S SONS

The April rain had cleared as quickly as it had come, and damp air surged over the check-out counter every time a Pelham Academy boy pushed through the supermarket doors. The boys, ruddy and broad-shouldered, joked up and down the deli counter and waited for corned beef sandwiches made for them by men in green aprons over blue shirts. Even the kid behind the register wore a tie.

“Will that be all, sir?” he asked Paul.

Stopping at the grocery had been a spur-of-the-moment impulse. When Jeremy, his son, had called earlier that day, Paul stunned everyone at the monthly managers meeting. He had to go, he said, he was sorry, he had to leave. Reese, his assistant, could carry on. He had only meant to buy a birthday present for Jeremy, the child of his first marriage, to give to the child of his second marriage, and then get on to St. Bart’s Way where Jeremy was waiting. But there had been the rain, and he’d had to park a block away from the little gift shop. Suddenly, picking up some food seemed like a good idea.

But now everything he’d chosen seemed random: a bag of popcorn, some oranges, a carton of milk, none of it complementing anything else. Before his divorce, he had stopped at the store a couple of times a week, even had an arrangement with the weekend manager — slipping him a fifty every now and then to save a *Times* for after golf, but now nothing seemed to go together.

The wall by the last check-out was lined with every possible distillation of liquor. He remembered Penny, his first wife, once asking him to get ginger ale — Jeremy was sick, again — and coming home, saying, “There’s nothing in that place that doesn’t go with booze, for chrissakes.” And he remembered, too, Jeremy coughing, forgetting to cover his mouth.

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

Paul grabbed a box of chocolate-crowned cookies. Two women were in line behind him. The older with a cake; the other, long-boned like Penny, holding a deli tray. Suppose, Paul thought, both women were to go to the house on St. Bart’s Way. Suppose they were to offer their condolences with their cake and tray, saying, “I’m so sorry about Penny. Tell Jeremy, I’m so sorry about his mother. Tell Jeremy...” He could imagine himself watching them go down the brick walk, hearing them whisper, “That’s him, isn’t it? The ex-husband? How long had they been divorced?”

Four months earlier, Paul had been watching a fresh-faced Wharton grad on the trading floor when Jeremy called.

“Mom’s sick.”

Paul had said nothing. The Wharton grad had just made two hundred thousand dollars in two minutes and here was his own son, at nineteen, calling him at work, like a preschooler panicked over his mother being sick.

“Dad, did you hear me?”

“You said your mother’s sick.”

“Very sick.”

“Has she seen a doctor?” What the hell was he supposed to do? He had been remarried for four years by then; he and Mia had a little girl named Madison.

“She’s been seeing doctors for two weeks. She’s had all the tests. She doesn’t want chemo.”

In the end, it had been that simple. And now here he was, trying to make sense of popcorn and milk. For a second, the signs over the deli counter, the bottles of liquor, even the checkout kid seemed freed from gravity's pull. Paul had to close his eyes and will them down.

When the kid at the check-out asked if he wanted paper or plastic, he could only say, "Yes."

Under the awning of the drug store where he used to buy Jeremy's Ritalin, Paul fished out his phone. The last of the Pelham boys were swinging their lacrosse sticks down the hill, the oldest of them now younger than his own son. Such easy confidence. He saw it radiating from the dewy young necks on the trading floor bent at their Bloomborgs — knew too, Jeremy's chances for such self-assurance were growing dimmer every day.

Paul shifted the groceries and checked his watch, Mia's honeymoon gift, showing the times in London, New York, Tokyo. When he had called earlier, Mia had taken her mother and Madison out shopping — her parents were up from Norfolk for Madison's second birthday. Only her father, Donaldson, had been at the house, watching the early rounds of the Master's. How awkward that had been — telling his current father-in-law that his former wife had died.

Under the awning he got ahold of Mia; her voice sounded tight: "Paul, where are you? I called the office."

"The office? Why?"

"I didn't know where you were. Dad left a note. He said he was going over to the house on St. Bart's Way. I figured what must have happened. I'm—well, I'm sorry. Tell Jeremy, too, I'm sorry. Let me know what I can do."

"Why's your father over there?"

"I don't know. You know how he is." Her father Donaldson was such a wily old coot. A former submarine commander, Paul could never get a handle on him. Whenever they played golf, it was only nine holes; they'd have to invent stories of the back nine to tell their wives — the old boy's heart couldn't take any more. Paul suspected his father-in-law had made an art out of such deception. Once he'd slammed down his drink on the club house table, saying to Paul, "You know, I have trespassed. Mostly in fields of sweet voluptas, but God damn if anyone says I have sinned." Then he'd eyed Paul, daring him to comment.

"I'm going over there as soon as I get Jeremy something to give Madison for her birthday. He asked me to. He said he had promised Penny."

"Would you believe they spelled her name wrong?"

"Whose?"

"Maddy's. On the cake. They spelled her name wrong. I told them specifically two D's, but they still got it wrong."

"I have to get going. Everything's taking so long. He wanted me to get a jacket. I had to get a half dozen for him." "You bought Jeremy a half dozen jackets?"

"He didn't know his size. The tailor gave me a half dozen. He said to let him pick the one he wants and bring the rest back."

"How could Jeremy not know his size?"

"I don't know. He just didn't. I have to go."

"I wasn't going to pay for it."

"For what?"

"The cake. But I thought, why not just ask for half off? So I did. Let me know if there's anything I can do. And don't let Dad eat anything he shouldn't."

The rain had started again, and Paul saw the two women duck their heads as they came out of the grocery. Damn their cakes and trays, the onset of their implacable rituals.

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The gift shop was a cathedral to civility. In that neighborhood, no homecoming, holiday or weekend visit went unobserved. How many Christmases, Mother's Days, and birthdays had he taken Jeremy there, saying "Watch where you're turning, Jeremy. Do you think Mommy'd like that? A mirror with a flower frame like that? Really? Don't you think she'd like this T-shirt with 'Jog to Beat the Jiggle'?" You know how she likes to run." Paul picked out a plush elephant — it had lonely eyes.

He threw the elephant on top of the sports coats in their plastic bags on his back seat and checked his watch again— everything was taking so long — three hours since Jeremy had called. He pressed his speed dial. "Dad, hey."

"Jeremy, listen, I'm sorry. I'm sorry ... it's the rain and all.

I'm on my way."

"It's OK. Donaldson is here."

"What?"

"Donaldson, you know, my step-grandfather. Or maybe I should say my virtual grandfather. Yeah, that's it ... my virtual grandfather. He's here. Or I should say here and gone. Not really gone. Just for pizza."

"Pizza?"

"Yeah, neighbors, people keep bringing stuff. Cakes and stuff. I'm making a list so I can write Thank yous. I know you're supposed to do that. But I don't know. Frankly, some of this food turns my stomach. So Donaldson's gone for pizza.

Double everything."

"I got the jackets. They let me take a half dozen."

"The present for Madison? Did you get that?"

"An elephant. I got her an elephant."

"That's cool. I mean an elephant is sure to be politically correct. Not really indigenous to one continent. Although, with Asian elephants, who knows how long before they're extinct, and then, how politically correct will elephants be?"

Where was it coming from, this manic cadence? These strange synaptic leaps?

"You sound a little tired, Jeremy."

"Well, maybe I'll sleep soon. I slept yesterday some. I don't know... You know what I think, Dad? I think political correctness is like courtly love, an unattainable ideal."

This disarming irony... so suggestive of a dormant intelligence. It had inspired so many parental false hopes.

"I got to go, Dad. Oxygen guy is here."

"Who?"

"Claude. The oxygen guy."

A surgeon's daughter, Penny had stepped onto St. Bart's Way like a homecoming queen, never noticing Paul watch his neighbors compute: "Maggio ... Maggio ... Italian." Since they knew he was Italian, he felt they knew the rest of his history: his father slouched in a chair, the old man's long fingers dangling over a cold can on the floor, never even looking up from the television when Paul told him he'd gotten into Georgetown.

First, the neighbors had offered "Looks like rain, Paul" when he was putting out the trash, and then "Good to see you, Paul," as success came — many on St. Bart's Way had portfolios. And, finally, invitations for drinks on flagstone patios.

But then, there was Jeremy. At first, the boy had played with the neighbors' sons. "Like little fishes," Penny had said, watching them from the sunroom. "They flow across the lawns like a school of fish." But then the others swam ahead, sensing the ocean beyond, readying themselves for it, and Jeremy had stayed behind, entangled in the tentacles of vague disorders ... dyslexia, ADD, ADHD ...

And then there was the divorce, and Paul returning to St. Bart's Way and seeing Jeremy peering out the side panes beside the door. And Penny refusing to come from the kitchen.

Now, on the front porch where he'd once hung the Christmas wreath around the eagle knocker, Paul felt like an interloper again. In the driveway was a white panel truck with "Home Health Services" on its side. No sign of Donaldson's black Lincoln. Paul shifted the sports coats in their plastic bags to the arm carrying the elephant and opened the door.

Jeremy was kneeling before two oxygen tanks, and coils of plastic tubing laced through the living room to the sunroom where a man was disassembling a hospital bed. When the boy flicked his hair back, Paul saw the exhaustion ringing his eyes.

"Dad, hey, I didn't hear you."

"Well, I just let myself in."

"Donaldson's here. He's gone for pizza. We got to disassemble this stuff, or else they'll charge us for another day. Oxygen-guy Claude is here."

"So I see." Everything about the boy seemed exaggerated and oddly detached. When he introduced Claude, he was overeager, almost giddy. Paul watched the health service man's eyes telegraphing, So, you finally got here, you son of a bitch. "What can I do to help?" Paul asked.

"Oh, I guess, we've got things pretty well under control," Claude said. He picked up two pieces of the bed and went to the truck. Jeremy picked up another piece and what looked like an inflatable mattress. Paul stood alone in the living room with the oxygen tanks with their gauges. Had Jeremy been the one checking them? Monitoring them? Had Penny, in her most desperate time, trusted him, their dreamy son, with the last complexities of life? And had she done it so the boy could realize his own strengths?

Paul went into the sunroom and watched his son and Claude loading the truck. The big man slammed the door and hugged Jeremy to him, rocking him from side to side. Paul saw the boy's shoulders convulse. Then stop. Then the boy ducked away, his hair hanging over his eyes, and the truck backed into the street and drove away.

"Donaldson should be here soon," Jeremy said when he came in the front door.

"I got your sport coats and the present for Maddy," Paul said. Jeremy reached in the bag with the elephant, tearing it some, and pulled out the plush toy. He stroked it as if to coax some comfort from it, and Paul felt embarrassed for the childishness of his son's caresses. But said nothing.

"Mom wanted me to be sure to give Madison something. I don't know why. I guess I could have given her one of those." A parade of bears strutted across the sunroom radiator. "People send such stupid stuff."

"You look a little tired, Jeremy."

"I'll catch up later."

"Why don't you try to lie down?"

"No!"

"Okay. It's just that . . ."

"I'm not ready to sleep. I'll sleep when I'm ready." The boy tried on a sport coat. He was all bone and flashing elbows. Like Dad, Paul thought. He remembered his own mother, ramrod straight in the haberdashery, buying a suit for the old man, the second he would ever own, and that the one he would be buried in, and her saying, "Forty-four, long. He's a forty-four long." Even before the boy's arm was through the sleeve, Paul could see the coat was too small.

"This looks great, don't you think, Dad?" he said.

"Like it was made for you, Jer."

"I should have called you, Dad."

"You did, Jer." The boy had phoned regularly at first. Then more frequently, but more erratically — once when Paul and Mia were making love. Another time at four thirty in the morning. Then, suddenly, the calls stopped. Just stopped.

"I should have done what she wanted," the boy said. His hair was hanging over his forehead; Paul couldn't see his eyes.

Donaldson's Lincoln slid to the curb. They watched the old man in his yellow golfing sweater put the pizzas on the car's roof. "I better go help him," said Paul.

"I'll go." The boy thrust the elephant back in the bag, tearing it more.

The sunroom was empty except for a chair, the bears, and a pot with a plastic angel stuck next to a sagging plant. Paul watched the old man and his son get the food, the spit-and-polish naval officer and his son with the cuffs of his jeans soaking up the damp like denim wicks. Jeremy laughed at something Donaldson said as the big man took a bulging paper bag from the backseat. Paul couldn't make out their words, but he wanted to be part of it.

"They'll kill you with their casseroles," Donaldson was saying when they came in. "It's a fact. A friend of mine ... his wife died. So many neighbor ladies fed him so many damn casseroles, he was dead in six months. It's a fact."

When he said "Hey, Paul," Paul felt diminished. Why had the old man come? What did he want? Paul tried to think if he had even ever met Penny. What was he doing here?

The boy took the bag from Donaldson, and Paul saw the old man's brow glistening — his heart?

"Watch the bag," Donaldson said. "It's got subs in it. And keep your hands off the liverwurst. My heart can't take pizza. Burns like hell. The docs say stay away from red meat. But what the hell? They never said anything about gray meat. So I eat all the liverwurst I can lay my hands on. Man, that with a few onions ..."

Carrying the jackets up the stairs, Paul tripped on one of the plastic bags, and the elephant rolled down a few steps. Donaldson caught it, carried it up the stairs, using the banister to hoist his weight.

In Jeremy's room, the old man said, "Hell of a thing, this." Paul thought he meant the room: every surface — the desk, the bookcase, the bureau — all heaped with clothes, CDs, magazines, books. Skis slouched in a corner. And speakers, big as chairs, small as robins' nests. One camera lay on the desk. Another dangled from the headboard. The sheet on the bed, the color of old snow.

But the old man hadn't meant the mess.

"How old was she?" he asked Paul.

The arithmetic of their ages had been one of their omens when he met Penny in the Georgetown library: three years, three months, three days difference between them.

"Fated," they had laughed when they became engaged.

"Forty-five," Paul said to Donaldson. "She was forty-five." But what was that to the old man? Paul watched him taking it all in, the skimpy sheet, the heap of tennis shoes, but there was no judgment in his eyes, only the search for some bittersweet familiar. The old man grunted and scooped up something from behind the lamp; it rattled. When he opened his fist, Paul saw a vial of sleeping pills with Penny's name on it. The old man slipped it into his sweater.

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They sat on the patio and Paul looked out over the lawn slipping into black and remembered another damp evening, remembered trying to mow the lawn and a five-year-old saying, "Let me push, Daddy. Let me push." Jeremy wedging himself in front of Paul so that Paul had to arch his back and could barely control the machine. And Penny at the door in her running shorts — God, such legs — and smiling and not realizing that arching his back was killing Paul, and Jeremy insisting, "Let me do it alone, Let me do it alone, Daddy," and trying to push Paul's hands from the handle, and suddenly, hitting a bump and the handle snapping up, under the boy's chin, splitting it, and Penny glaring at Paul all the way to the emergency room. And all the way home.

And now the boy sat across from him, the cuff of his sport coat dipping into the pizza, and Paul saying nothing. He watched his boy relax into the downy comfort of his third beer, his lips pursing toward the can as tenderly as if it were a woman's mouth. Paul saw Donaldson register the boy's ravaging, then take the vial from his pocket and dump half the pills into his own beer.

"Ever wonder what whales drink?" the old man asked.

“What?” the boy’s interest was piqued, but his eyes refused to acknowledge the pills or how he intended to use them.

“Ever wonder what whales drink? Think about it. With all that water and not a drop of it fresh, what do they drink? They’re mammals like we are, after all.”

Paul, knowing to stay out of it, watched the boy smile, still refusing embarrassment for the vial: “Okay, what do whales drink?”

“Beer.”

“You’re telling me whales drink beer?”

“We’d surface, see. The sub. And there’d be a whale. Well, subs, you know, they’re so cramped sometimes you do anything to relieve tension. They had this game to see who could hit a whale with a beer. The one nearest the blow hole won. Of course the beer had to be open otherwise it wouldn’t do the whale any good.” The old man arced his beer toward a dogwood, iridescent with blooms. Paul saw the challenge in the old man’s eyes as he turned toward Jeremy. Saw the old man’s eyes travel from the half-full vial to the beer cupped in the boy’s fist. The boy dumped the pills into the beer and tossed it toward the blooming tree.

Paul watched the old man gentle his son away from his craving. No embarrassment. No humiliation. He, who had led other men’s sons through the maze of the market, sat and watched a man he knew only through happenstance distract his own son from surpassing sorrow. The game got raucous: Donaldson using a rusty poker from the grill as a golf club; Jeremy, a long-handled barbecue fork as a bat. The cans pinging in the twilight, rousing a neighbor’s dog, and Paul looking around for something of his own to whack away with. But he couldn’t find anything. He considered getting a long-handled spoon, but getting something from the house, well, that would look desperate. Still, they kept playing, cheering their hits, goading each other, until, still empty-handed, Paul saw sweat on Donaldson’s lip.

“Better get those cans up before the neighbors complain. The dogs are all stirred up,” Paul said.

His remark interrupted the boy mid-swing. “You know, she wanted me to call you, Dad.”

“You did, Jer. You called.”

“No. She wanted you to come over.”

“Over here?”

“Yeah. At the end. I think she wanted you to come over. At least I think that’s what she said it.”

“You’re not certain?”

“They gave her a lot of medicine, you know, Dad.”

“Why didn’t you call?”

“What if I had? What the hell would that have proved?”

The boy brushed past and, before he went into the kitchen, threw his fork at the dogwood. Paul stayed outside. From the patio he could see his son through the window, rooting around in the refrigerator. Paul looked at Donaldson, but the old man was picking up beer cans.

When Paul went into the kitchen, the boy was digging into the back of the refrigerator, bottles of soda were toppling over, rolling onto the floor. An orange fell out and went under the table.

Jeremy’s head was nearly knocking into the light above the top shelf. He was shoving aside casseroles and cartons of milk. “Jer,” Paul asked, “what are you doing?”

“Looking, okay? I’m looking for something, okay? I can’t sleep.” He took his head out of the refrigerator. Paul could see that the tag on the sport coat where it had dipped into the pizza was dripping red, but he didn’t say anything.

“Jer . . . .”

“I can’t sleep.”

“Why didn’t you call, Jer?”

“What would that have proved? That you are some great hero? Coming at the last minute?” The boy’s face, his whole lanky body, was contorting. “All it would have proved was that you’re a prize-assed dick. Like I really

need any proof of that. I mean, why didn't you come that time the car got smashed up? Or when the plumbing went and we had to go shit at the neighbors' for three days? Why didn't you come then? You big, come-at-the-last-minute kind of superhero. I didn't call you because I didn't want to. I just didn't want to."

The boy was collapsing against the refrigerator door, but it kept swinging and couldn't support him. The boy's rage, Paul knew, was grief-driven and maybe even what he himself deserved, but still he wanted to hit him, if only to make him stop.

He took a step toward him, but the boy sobbed: "They took all the morphine. And I can't sleep. I had to keep myself awake for so long ... I was afraid I wouldn't hear her. I kept thinking when she was gone the morphine would be mine, but the hospice people took it all. I didn't know they'd do that. I kept thinking that it would help me. But they dumped it out."

Paul went to him and tried to hold him, cursing that he didn't have his father's height, that all he had to offer his son was his own, shorter shoulder.

"It's okay, Jer."

"She wanted me to tell you to come. But I never called, so that's how she went, thinking you didn't come on purpose. I'll never forgive myself for that. Christ, I'll never forgive myself. What am I going to do? I can't sleep." Paul patted and patted the jacket still stiff against his son's bones.

Neither of them had seen the old man come in. He filled the doorway. "Who do you think you are—God?" Paul and his son stared at the old man.

"Well, you're not God, Goddamn it," Donaldson said. "You can't forgive yourself. Nobody can do that ... forgive themselves. That's for God. He's the one who says if we're forgiven or not."

The old man's sweater was garish under the kitchen's florescence.

"Maybe we can forgive each other. I don't know. But forgive ourselves? That's for God. What the hell ... we all do things. But we all do the best we can, too. That's all any of us can... the best we can. We're only human. It's in the Bible — forgive us our sins — that belongs to God."

The boy, still within Paul's arms, grounded himself in humor: "Yeah, and a few minutes ago you were the one telling me whales drink beer."

The old man, too, retreated to joking: "You doubt my word, boy?"

And they volleyed put-downs back and forth until Jeremy went to take a shower.

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Paul looked away as Donaldson slapped his palm on his Lincoln's roof for leverage and lowered himself into it. "God, what a helluva thing," the old man said, nodding toward the house. "And for you, too. You were her husband, once, for Chrissake. Still, for you, people will know. What they'll think? Hell, who knows? Not being able to tell anyone. Now, that was a helluva thing. You know how it goes."

So that was why the old man had come — to warm himself in the afterglow of a secret woman. Paul knew at that moment, whoever she had been, the sheer joy and celebration of her was as alive to the old man as if the woman herself were walking down St. Bart's Way, the streetlights catching her one by one.

"It's so damned hard, you know, life is," the old man went on, struggling with his seatbelt. "Still, you got to ask yourself, what are we given life for if not to live it?" He got the buckle into the slot and closed the door. Paul watched him drive away.

Jeremy was still in the shower when he went back into the house: Paul wanted to tell him he would spend the night. When the boy stood before him, Paul saw it was worse than he had imagined. Not only the boy's ribs, but his hips, too, protested against his flesh. Paul couldn't let the boy think that he had failed his mother, couldn't let him think that because he hadn't called, he deserved every bad thing that would come his way.

He offered this, "Maybe ... "

"What, Dad?"

“Maybe I had it coming. If I had stayed, you wouldn’t have had reason to break your word. I guess that’s mine to live with.”

“What do you say, Dad, that we don’t get into this right now? Whether your great swinging mea culpa is bigger than my great swinging mea culpa. Okay?”

When Paul went to check later, the boy was already asleep, the only ordered thing in the room, the sport coat draped over a chair. Paul tried to close the window over the desk — the April air was too raw for the boy’s wet hair — but he couldn’t get proper leverage — the heap on the desk would crash to the floor. He wished again for his father’s height, but the window was stuck, and his son’s hair had to be cold, and chill would corrode the comfort the boy had earned.

It had been, what—seven, eight years since he’d gone into the bedroom in the front of the house? The rug, the wallpaper, all the same. Only the bed was different. Pushed to the window overlooking the street. Had this been Penny’s last entertainment before the sunroom? Watching neighbors? The children to school? The cleaning women? The mailman? And had the boy been beside her, offering his humor, and Penny letting him know she trusted him, her dreamy son, with her final hours?

Ever since Jeremy called that morning, Paul had had some sense of her close by, some private, forgiving sense of her understanding that he’d never have wanted this ending. That even with all the fighting and bitterness, he had never wanted for there not to be a Penny.

Paul went to the closet where she stored the blankets. There, on the floor, lonely as puppies, were her running shoes — those legs. Still, what had they been against the afternoon he first saw Mia’s delicate fingers dancing on the Bloomberg? — Paul not taking the mouse from her small hand with its pink nails, but covering her hand with his, and saying, “I only want the yen,” although he knew perfectly well where the yen was, and Mia, not looking away from the screen, breathing in his ear, “Is it only the yen you want, Mr. Maggio? Or is it the desire?” And so the race had been won.

Paul picked up one of the shoes and put his hand in, feeling the imprint of toes on a sole he couldn’t see, then he took a blanket and went down the hall. When he spread it over Jeremy, he saw his son’s breathing relax. So, too, did the lids of his eyes, as though no longer fearing the sleep he needed would seep through them and leak into the wakened world.