

# Prologue: Ariana

## *How to Change Your Name*

1924, New York City

You want to change your name? If you want to change your name, wipe that kitschy smile off your stupid face. You cannot be happy. What is this, a musical? You must struggle to speak proper English beyond niceties and prattle like “How do you do?” and “One pound of flour, please.” You must rot with loneliness. You must wish you had not come to the city and met so many crows squawking in a dead language that only ghosts can understand. You must despise the female gossip at the market and the nods from tallit-wrapped men on your way there. And you must hate New York. You must hate the gray-smog city that is not your home and you must dream of a place that is beautiful and where you will be free. A place like California.

You must be like Ariana Fuchs. She was unhappy. Even the curls of black hair that sprung out from her headscarf were unhappy. Unhappy loneliness rusted the edges of her words and rotted their cores, so when she spoke, she felt like a monkey trying to communicate with men, a baboon yodeling at the country club.

Now that is tsores. Gebrenteh tsores.

Unhappiness. And without it your name will never change.

You must also have an ugly name. Changing a name is difficult and requires much determining, so if your name is not considerably ugly you do not stand a chance. If your name is Bradshaw do not even think about it. If your name is Adams or Williams, not worth it. If your name is Elliot or McCarthy or

even O'Connor I would recommend against it, although some O'Connors are unhappy.

Take *Fuchs*. You do not think this is an ugly name? This is not a good name, even in the Old World. It means fox, or someone sly or cunning, or a vile man with beet-red hair. It reeks of German, although her husband was born in what is today Soviet Estonia. You must look at the name in the English letters and have convincing that there is something squirming like a snake or leech or poisonous centipede. You must look at the Latin letters and see something overcompensating and desperate in the length or the brevity, the consecutive vowels or the clashing consonants. You must see history stamped into that name! When you pay the water bill and see the printed letters you must shudder with rage. This name, a name that is taken down on a 1908 census by a seventy-seven year old graybeard on a mule in Kopu, Estonia, and added to a list by the sheriff and his deputy. This name that is your husband's name when he is chopping wood in the forest during the Russian festival, and he sees smoke rising over his village, his precious village wherein lived every man whose sage whiskers he kissed and every woman who gave his family eggs. He must chop the wood and rend the bark and drink his own tears like they are wine.

An ugly name becomes uglier if you have an object that reminds you of the ugly history stamped into all ugly names. Like a small purse or a tattered book, or like the Spanish leather bracelet that your father kept in a box along with the Talmud he received on his thirteenth birthday. This history can be controversial, because it involves not only Hashem (adonai ehad) but also Jesús y el Espirito Santo of the Spanish Gentiles who had it made, and glittering Inti and shadowed Urcaguay, from whose Incan mountains the gold was mined. It is better when history leaks from this Spanish bracelet strung with a gold coin that has carved into it a gray spear and the black letters "CALIFORNIA", and it is best when this bracelet is known to have saved your family from many pogroms. Then you cannot forget your ugly history, and you will be all the wiser for it.

For history spills from an ugly name. History is water, blood, and wine. Life demands it, but if you find it all around you it is certain that you have perished.

Drink history and suck on its shadows. The Russians know you are a Jew because they watched from the shadows when your mother walked into a bakery to buy apple cake for Yom Teruah. Every day they are knocking on your windows and throwing stones at them to see if you are still alive. The Russians with the axes, the Greeks with their clubs, the Slavs with their stones, demolishing your world. They hang your mother in the street and strip her naked and whip her body so that flesh hangs down in tzitzit. Your father puts the bracelet on your wrist, and it glows faintly like a star and you and your brother run to Reb Shmuel who puts you in a train car to Vilna with the chickens. They squawk all through the night and your hearing will never be the same. You vomit many times and your brother clutches the bracelet and your wrist as if his life depends on it, and it does.

But only fools believe that history is trauma. This is not zikkaron. Save the yizkor for when your name is changed and your brain consists of tube televisions and air conditioning units. You must remember, but you must also understand. Understand that the sticks and stones of the Slavs and the leaden pipes of the Greeks were symbols of protest against the slavery of capital, and that the Czarists put the blame on to the Psychoanalysts and Jewish bankers, away from themselves, the leeches that slurped Odessa and the sweeping plain dry. Sense the slurping of history and the regurgitating in the vomit, on the train car, on the bare fields, in the winter rain.

But whether or not you vomited on the train car, on the bare fields, in the winter rain, if you want to change your name you must have an irrepressible will to live *more*. You must love to make life greater than what it is. Use art, use romance, use science, use God. Jump off cliffs and climb mountains, dance, dance, dance, and dance! All of the vomiting that comes with history may take the joy out of you for years, but in the long run, you must be irrepressible. A little girl in Odessa, you danced. A young woman in Vilna, no longer. You did not dance there and nor in New York. But after fifty years of never dancing, your son Leonard will take you out in Los Angeles, and after dancing there you never stop.

Vilde khayeh! Rebittsen! Yefayfeyeh! The joy! You dance all night! You dance your son to sleepy eyes and a softly rising chest as if he is again an

infant. You have control over your body. Your limbs and bones belong to you and you alone. Let freedom titter like a golden bird caged within you, and master the corporeal realm that surges with expressing, your expressing, you, sister, beautiful you.

When you go to change your name, this bird eggs you on. A name escaped from history. How freeing it will be! This bird's tittering rejects your husband's protests. He says you annoy him when you are angry? Be angrier! You are not angry enough! Destroy history! Change your name! How freeing it will be! How beautiful! How much like California!

Your husband does not want to change his name, but that is not the spirit of living more. It is not that you do not love him. You love his loyalty and his tenderness, his faith and the way he bears the factory smoke and iron loads of Canal Street, and the way he tells your children stories about Estonian castles and villages of snow. You love your husband, but you know that he is wrong. When you wish to change your husband's family name and he is of disagreement, some inner pintl comes in handy.

Last but not least, you must utilize the formally established process for the changing of names. Yes, yes, you must not forget the process. There must be government bureaus. There must be papers, a broker. You must ask your rebbe where to go and he must advise against it, saying a name-change is for spite alone and not worthwhile. So you must walk two hours in Manhattan in search of a building on a map to find it closed on Sunday.

Closed on Sunday? The goyim are bananas. Because now you must be waiting for Easter to pass but in the meantime, practice your English. You must be understood. You must not sound like a mongoose cantillating. "I am here to change my name. How do I change my name?" Practice the words! They are the difference between life and death. Practice them, you khamer! "I am here to change my name. How do I change my name?" Lign in drerd un bakn beygl! Practice while you hang laundry, while you cook dinner, while you pray and while you are making love on Tuesday once a month. "I am here to change my name. How do I change my name?"

Go to the designated building and perform your English for an old Welshman with ruddy cheeks. By a miracle he understands you. The problem is that you

can't understand *him*. But he repeats himself enough times and you realize he can do bopkis. If this is not heartbreaking, I do not know what is. He can do beans for you! Albany can mail you the paperwork and you can mail Albany and Albany can mail you back and it can take six months. You cannot wait six months. You must feel the violent pangs of despair begin a pogrom in your heart and your America. You must realize that you cannot survive in America as a Fuchs, and you cannot go back to Ukraine, you cannot be like your cousin who was not fertile in America, so she went back to Ukraine to have five children, because it is 1924 and Ukraine does not exist anymore. Maybe you should die.

You idiot! Ignoramus! Kadokhes! Fopdoodle! You should not die! All you must do is walk outside and meet the man who changes everything. But this man is not a man. He is a cowboy.

Walk outside where the cowboy waits. He is tough and leathery and chews tobacco. He wears boots and a hat and draws near to you, glittering like a snake. He tells you he can change your name because he has an "in" at Albany and was traveling there himself. He tells you he can be doing the documenting, so you will not need to read English that you cannot read. You cannot imagine better luck. All he wants is an ounce of gold.

Do not do it! I beg of you, do not do it. No one will believe an unlikely story like this one, so it may as well be untrue. But it is not untrue. You have an ounce of gold on your person, an old and beautiful ounce on a bracelet and inscribed with the word "CALIFORNIA." You hesitate for a moment, because you used to dream about moving to the land of mysterious black letters, where you might find guardian amulets of Spanish gold, and give one to each of your children. This moment of hesitating is infinite times too short. You think you cannot pass up this chance. But you can! Oh, do not do it, sister! Do not change your name!

You do.

You hand over the bracelet, and the man tips his hat at you, smiles, and wanders off.

On May 8th, 1924, just three days later, your surname becomes "Stern." And my bloody story begins.

## The Delaware Water Gap, Part One

“**F**uck!” Becca cried. “Fuck!” She couldn’t stop saying it. “Fuck!” She said it twenty times. “Fuck fuck!” Fifty. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck!” She pounded the dashboard and pumped the accelerator. “FUCK!” Rain blasted over, under, around us, and the poor Volkswagen hummed, growled, and coughed. I could tell we were stuck—the water was too deep. If we had only gotten past the dip in the road before the bridge we might’ve made it. Instead, we were stuck at the Delaware River, three thousand miles from home and drowning in the leftovers of Hurricane Katrina.

Is that too crude? Is this how I should really begin? Is this really how it ends? Not with a bang or with a whimper, but a fuck?

Let’s try again.

Once upon a time, on August 31, 2005, my sister and I almost died in the Delaware River. We’d been listening to the news, so we thought we knew everything there was to know about Katrina. Cuba was underwater, New Orleans was apocalyptic, Mississippi a bloody, stormy sea. But it’s one thing to hear about Katrina and another to meet her up close and personal, and the sky turns black and dumps oceans on you and your car gets stuck in a flash flood at the Delaware Water Gap. Becca was freaking out. I tried to stay cool.

“So,” I said loudly, “what are our options?”

She gave me the hell-glance. I call it the hell-glance because it’s worse than a death-glare. It happens in about half a second, but the fury in her eyes could

torture a thousand sinners for a thousand years. Her pupils blew up to fill her eyes and she grew a quick pair of horns.

“We have no options!” she screeched. “We’re trapped! Matt, we’re dead!”

It was a grim analysis. I didn’t feel dead, not yet. Our car was stuck on the road in four inches of floodwater. If the water got any higher, it would carry us off into the river to serve as skinny offerings to the Storm Gods. We could jump out. We’d be standing on the highway, water thrashing down around us, no idea where to go, on the wrong coast in the wrong time zone and at least a hundred miles from our destination. But we *might* survive, so it was a chance worth taking.

The water rose and the car could swim off at any moment. We needed to go.

I flung the door open. A belch of rain and wind slapped me and slammed the door in my face. I tried again with the same result.

“What are you doing?” Becca cried.

“We need to get out of the car, or we’ll definitely die.”

Becca’s eyes widened. She seemed to see the logic in it. She glanced towards the trunk, at our suitcases—*her* suitcase, for that matter, which surely had some prized possession worth remembrance. I thought about mine but couldn’t remember what was in it.

“Come out my side so we can stay together.” Becca grabbed my arm and pulled me and I scrambled over on to her lap. Before I could calculate the proper angle for evacuation, she kicked open the door so hard I wouldn’t be surprised if it came off its hinges. The door hung ajar and in a sudden jerk the car began to slide in the water. I tasted something sour and cold and the wind was tearing at my eyes. Holding on to each other we jumped out of the car.

We landed in dirty water to my knees. “For the trees,” Becca shouted but I couldn’t see any trees. She grabbed my wrist and we slushed our bodies off the road as water splattered and doused us. I thought about how in all his years of travel, something like this probably happened to Grampa Andy, but he made it out okay, for the most part, at least until he got old. I was young. I couldn’t afford to die.

We charged for the tree line that only Becca could see. My body waterlogged and I felt like I was dragging another person along with me. Becca squeezed

my hand and a flash of lightning split the sky in a violet scar. Wind hit us like a brick and I gasped as it knocked my breath away. I realized I was lying on my back in the cold water, no longer attached to my sister.

“Becca!” Swirling claws of rain swiped at the sky, scrambling up, where, where?—Becca was kneeling in the water, her arms tangled around a branch. I grabbed her. “Are you okay?”

Blasting rain bellowed out her meager response. Then she said: “Matt—what can we do? Where can we even go?”

I looked around. I couldn’t see shit. It was all gray, all storm. “Away from the river,” I said. “That’s all I know.”

She pulled in a deep breath and took my hand again.

A violent gust of wind whipped another branch at us and we dove out of the way and in our frantic leaping, shielding our faces from the flurry of twigs like angry bees, I found my body sinking in water much deeper than before. I reached for Becca and pulled her closer as my legs pumped and cycled through water. “What’s happening?” I cried.

In the sky, gray monsters duked it out with swords of flaming white. “We’re in the river!” Becca shouted, treading hard, pulling me with her. She heaved for an invisible shore as arrows of twigs spiked at our heads. “We must’ve gotten turned around!”

I kicked but the turbulence above and below sapped all of my energy. There’s no way Becca could keep this up. Falling rain leapt and dived like flying falling fish and filled my eyes and ears and there was only water, water, water. I held my breath and prepared to go under, prepared to die.

All the while, a tiny window in my mind floated images and memories like a magic movie screen. George Yoshida and the desert fence, Salvador Mancuso and the boiling earth, Janet Perkins and the devil’s breath. What had started off as a road trip seized control of my life and brought me to the limit.

Or maybe this is all wrong. Maybe I need to go back a little further.



## Chestnut Creek

**O**n June 5, 2005, Grampa Andy died. The news didn't come in until two days later and they were unable to recover his body from the wreckage. I remember Becca being pretty upset back when Grampa Leo died, but I don't think I understood the meaning of death then. So this was my first significant experience with death.

Death is a strange motherfucker. Some people walk into its arms, like a mother and child reunion. Others run from it until the bitter end, tripping over roots and getting swallowed up by the formless void. Others are ambivalent. Life? Death? They're codependent, a cycle. One and the same. I figure Grampa Andy was in this final category. There's no way he believed in God. His faith was probably one of those intellectual, mystic mix-ups with a tablespoon of Kumbaya. That's not to say he wasn't serious about the result—Grampa Andy was the type of man that had a philosophy and stuck to it. I doubt he feared death at all. Otherwise, he wouldn't have gone sky-diving sixty-two times, hang-gliding a dozen more. He always said he gave himself an extra dozen years by quitting BASE jumping when he was forty. His secrets to good health?

“I follow Ben Franklin and Chinese medicine,” he once said to Becca and me on a ski lift. “Never wake up after 6:00. That gives you time in your day to exercise and eat healthy. Besides that, ginseng, jumping jacks, and a good, clear sense of hierarchy should be enough to get you and me to eighty-three.”

He didn't make it quite that far, but when you're as adventurous as he was,

seventy-five isn't half-bad.

Grampa Andy isn't my real grandfather. He's my mom's uncle. But he became more or less grandfather 2.0 after Grampa Leo died seven years ago. Grampa Andy was the grandpa every kid wishes he had. He took us skiing and rafting and to national parks. He gave us coins and candy from all over the world. He made kickass tacos because he lived in Mexico City for a dozen years. Meanwhile, I had barely left the state of California. And he was the one who got me and Becca started on our road trip in the first place.

I was out at track and Becca was at lacrosse, which she attended when she wasn't too busy planning the anarchist revolution, and when we came home Mom had this grave look on her face. For a second I thought my SAT scores had come in so I tried to bolt, but she called after me.

"Something happened," she said.

"Okay," I said, hopping impatiently in the doorway. Becca was unpacking her bag, one item at a time. She's a methodical one. Packed and unpacked her backpack every day. She made herself lunch too, even though seniors are allowed to go out in town. She liked her backpack. She was attached to *things* in a way that I could never understand. Not like knick-knacks you buy at Disney World-things—the girl lives low-waste—but *things* in a deeper sense. Objects and ideas have meanings to her beyond the thing in itself—they're metaphors, symbols, metonyms, zeugmas, onomatopoeias, the whole nine yards. This trait is hard to explain because I don't get it myself. Rather, I don't get my sister at all.

"Uncle Andy passed away two days ago. We just heard."

At first it didn't register. Grampa Andy dying seemed generally unlikely. There's no way he'd die of a heart attack, or of cancer, or in his sleep, all the usual ways grandparents die. It would have to be a car crash or a terrorist attack. Maybe he was murdered. Got into a fist-fight in Mongolia, and due to the unfortunate circumstance that his opponent was an ex-KGB Russian ninja motherfucker, ended up headless in a ditch.

"Two days ago? How did he die?" Becca asked.

"It was a train crash," Mom said. "In Kazakhstan, his train derailed. He was headed skiing."

Well, it wasn't a mafia fistfight, but I could live with it. At least his last moments had some excitement. I could picture it: Grampa Andy, in his brown leather jacket and skinny silver tie, staring out the train window. Green mountains capped with snow survey him from a distance as he surveys back. A moment of recognition. Then the train begins to quake. He stands. A flash. A screech! The steel caterpillar and all its limbs leap and Grampa Andy's feet leave the ground and his tie shoots out like a chameleon's tongue. His eyes widen with profound curiosity: *What happens now?* But before he can finish the proverbial train of thought the train itself smashes and implodes to smoking rubble.

It was an appealing story. The adventure-crazed traveler goes out on his ultimate and maddest journey into the belly of Asia, towards the glistening slopes of the Ural mountains, only to die unfulfilled and glorious.

Becca and I were silent. We had spent a lot of time with him over the last few years.

"Will there be a funeral?" Becca asked.

"I hope so."

"You hope so?"

"Well, you know Andy. It's not like him to want a funeral, so we'll have to check his will. I'm sure he wanted a cremation, but since they can't find his body..."

"They can't find his body?" I asked. This news upset me. My feelings about the whole incident began to shift. At first I felt glad that he could go out with a bang. But his vanished body made me feel a little queasy. He was eradicated from the Earth, without even a corpse to show for his existence.

"Apparently it was quite a crash," Mom said. She walked over to me and put her arm around my shoulders. "I know you were close. This is really terrible to hear."

"Why can't they find his body?"

"We don't know. There must be a lot of debris—"

My hands started to jitter and I pulled away from Mom. "Why? No, that's stupid. What, was he literally obliterated in the crash or something?"

Mom looked at me and shook her head. "We don't know."

Fuck that, I thought, and left. I leapt up the steps two at a time and went to my room and shut the door.

I felt like punching something. I knew Grampa Andy had made promises to me, though I couldn't remember any of them—probably to go skiing somewhere, rafting somewhere. He was my ticket out of this life, out of banality. He was the only person who didn't care that my grades weren't as good as Becca's. I was angry that the promises had shattered, and even angrier that I couldn't remember what they were. I was upset that his life had ended the way it had. I hated myself for thinking it was good to die like that. Who wants to die in the agony of a splintering train? No, better to die in bed surrounded by loved ones. And all those feelings came before the significance of death began to settle down on me like snow. What does it mean to die? To vanish from the earth? The body and the self dissolve and survive only through memories carried by the living. But the living too will one day die, and their memories in turn dissolve. Certain artifacts like photographs can weather many lives, but they're shells without accompanying memories of the living, and memory is so unreliable! I needed to keep my memories of him, stuff them in my pockets. I needed to spread Grampa Andy around. Shake his dust all over the world. I was already forgetting what he looked like. A sharp nose. Sharp as a pocket-knife. But when I tried to imagine a nose as sharp as a pocket-knife, the picture wasn't quite right.

I sat on my bed, thinking. I went on my computer. Glanced past the news. I thought about making a MySpace post for Grampa Andy, something I had seen other people in my school do for their grandparents when they died. Write a nice memorial post, add a few photos. Consolation would flood in through comments and in school the next few days. But making it public seemed wrong. It would take the events out of my own hands and throw them into cyberspace, and who knows what happens out there? But I had to tell *someone*. I settled for messaging Christine and Chelsea on AIM.

"I need to tell u something..." I typed and sent it twice. While I waited for a reply I looked out the window. Where did the details of the world go? I could only see the vaguest outline of my neighborhood: a street, some trees, houses. It didn't look like anything in particular. Had I gone blind? Had my life always

looked this way? Our neighborhood was just houses and trees and people doing their jobs so they could add pools to their backyards. I stared at the bug trapped in the window screen, a tiny gnat, twitching translucent wings against the black crosshatch. As I watched it, its body began to swell, engorge, feed on the wire. I watched it grow until it was a monstrous bug as big as the earth, and then I felt safe, and like I didn't need to cry.

I got replies. Christine was first: "What is it??" Chelsea second: "Wat, r u ok". I announced solemnly to them that my grandfather had died.

I suppose I ought to explain who Christine and Chelsea are. Christine and I had been "together" for some four months now, but it wasn't official, and I had the silliest crush on Chelsea, so I was hitting her up too, though she ignored me a lot. But Christine, my first love! I'm thankful to Christine for a lot. She was my first kiss outside of one of those middle-school dares, and we planned to lose our virginity to each other sometime this summer. We were both too weird about it so we hadn't gotten the words out, "Let's fuck." But we'd done pretty much everything else.

The point: Christine is the bomb. Her dad wanted her to be a doctor about as much as mine wanted me to be a lawyer. That's how we started talking, Jew jokes and Asian jokes, quipped about ourselves to the other, although I didn't really consider myself Jewish, just my parents are. It turned out that Christine was a badass, and with Grampa Andy as the prototype, I always take an interest in a proven badass. She taught me how to skateboard, how to roll a blunt (even though neither of us like weed that much, she rolls for her friends, and don't tell me that isn't badass). I taught her how to ski and lie to your parents. We had a hell of a time doing anything and everything together last winter break. We were pretty weird. Sometimes we skated over to the dump, looking at all the creepy and sad shit people throw away. I made lists to share with Becca and get her all riled up about capitalism. Christine is the first person who looked me in the eyes, and the time she said she cared about me at the beach when it was cold I cried uncontrollably. We just needed to get over the whole sex thing.

Christine was faster to respond than Chelsea, so I messaged her. I could never juggle two conversations at once, slinging messages left and right like a

lot of my classmates.

Christine suggested I ask my parents if she could come over for dinner, but something about the idea made me feel uncomfortable. Maybe it was too soon. Then I realized the person I really should've told—Will. But Will and I would see each other tomorrow anyways. He played guitar and wrote music, and I was helping him record his songs.

I'm not sure what Becca was up to. Becca had just broken up with her boyfriend, a big hairy hilarious Jew named Aaron, one of those end of high school breakups. I wondered if she would turn to him about Grampa Andy. I was under the impression that they hadn't ended things badly.

I went downstairs. "Mom, where's Becca?" Mom was at her laptop.

"Is she not in her room?"

"Uh, I don't know."

"Well then."

Back upstairs, to Becca's room. I knocked. No answer. I opened the door. She wasn't there.

Weird, I thought. She couldn't have gone out to see friends because I saw the car in the driveway, so she had to be nearby. I zipped downstairs and went outside.

The day was strangely chilly, the sky a gray cloth. Slick, damp breeze. Becca wasn't in our backyard, some grass with three tall pine trees and a hammock. She must've walked somewhere. But where?

As far as I know she didn't have any friends in the neighborhood. I could think of just one place that she could've gone. It came to me in a cloudy memory—the place she went when Grampa Leo died.

I walked down the street, itching with *déjà vu*. Seven years ago I had led a college kid down this way—an older neighborhood kid who was helping Mom look for Becca. Becca had run off for a whole twenty-four hours after Grampa Leo died. Mom was scared shitless. Little did she know it was all a big game. Becca was running away to 'Japan' so she could go be with Kaori, our half-Japanese cousin that we met when we went to visit Uncle Larry the previous summer. I could remember everything—an eleven-year old Becca insisting to me that Kaori had saved her from a ghost at a magic shrine, me believing

her, promising to not tell Mom and Dad where she was going, the well in our neighbor's backyard, now a fantastic underground tunnel bound for Japan, full of ghosts and demons. I kept the promise, at first, until the college kid, named Jonathan Stein, who I now know had been kicked out of college for too many suicide attempts, convinced me to bring him to Becca. We climbed down into the well. I was happy to betray Becca's trust because I was all upset that she had run off without me. I walked Jonathan down this street. It looked the same, here and there, then and now, exactly the same, even though that couldn't possibly be true. Then and now I crossed my neighbor's yard, past a grove of trees, branches heavy with crabapples, into a mini wilderness of brush that descended into a ravine. Then and now, at the bottom I saw the stone outline of an old well, a circle of stone surrounded by tall weeds and spiny bushes. Becca was sitting on the well, on top of the rocks. She noticed me and looked away.

I took a peek inside the well. It was all filled up with dirt. Weird. Back then, the well descended some twenty feet deep into a cavern. The tunnel at the bottom of the well that Becca thought went all the way to Japan—surely it didn't go more than fifty yards, but I could've sworn it *existed*. I remember looking for Grampa Leo's ghost and seeing so many horrifying faces, beautiful and grotesque, laughing and groaning, screaming and whispering, but never his face, only faces that I'd never seen before and never saw again. But there was neither tunnel nor well. Only the crumpled outline of something long ago collapsed. Had the well been real? The tunnel? I sat down beside Becca. She looked at me with foggy hazel eyes and a dull expression.

"You remember this place?" she asked.

"Kinda," I said. "I remember that you used to come over here. It came back to me—when you ran away from home after Grampa Leo died. You're not running away to Japan, are you?"

She didn't laugh. That was a bad sign. "Not this time," she said.

"You're upset."

She made a face at me. "Shame on me for feeling something. We spent so much time with him. I had a feeling he'd die in such a stupid way. It's wrong."

"You're right. I was just surprised you ran off here."

She sighed. "Give me a break, Matt. I wanted a breather."

"No, you're right. With Grampa Andy acting as our dad, we should be mourning."

"Oh shut up, Dad's around. It's his job."

I didn't think I was entirely wrong. I spent more time with Grampa Andy in the last six years than with my own dad in all sixteen.

"Hey," I said. "Didn't there used to be an actual well here? I swear, when I came to try and find you I remember climbing down a ladder into the well..."

Becca glanced at me and looked back at her own knees. She shrugged. She must've forgotten.

"I wonder if he left us anything in his will," I said.

Becca gave me an exasperated look. I know, I'm not up to her moral standards, but Becca is a remarkably moral person.

We sat on the stones for a while. Becca was probably remembering Grampa Andy, his face, his words, his deeds, while I all I could do was think about how the hell I got it into my head that there had been a well and underground tunnel here when all I could see now was dirt and some dandelions.

"Do you ever have dreams?"

Becca suddenly asked me.

"Dreams?" I said. "Nope. Never had one."

"Fuck you," she said. "Not ordinary dreams. Strange dreams." She tugged at her hair, like she was trying to wake up from one now. "Dreams that feel just as real—or even more real—than regular life. Dreams that you remember perfectly in the morning."

Breaking news: my sister is a lunatic. "Have you?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. She looked up at me. "You can go now."

"It's called lucid dreaming, genius." I stood up and shrugged. "Just trying to spend time with my big sister."

"We can hang out this summer," she said. "I was thinking about a road trip. There's so much that I want to see, and I better do it before I go to school in California for four more years."

"That'd be fun," I said. "Where?"

"Maybe Seattle. Maybe Utah." Oh sister, just wait till we end up in Ohio.



I stood. “I look forward to the day when we can spend such time together. I shall henceforth take my leave.”

She snorted and I left her to her grieving. Becca is always full of deep and complicated feelings I’m incapable of understanding. I knew whatever she was feeling was different from whatever I was feeling, and an overwhelming desire to know how she felt suddenly struck me. But I was stuck in me. What a ridiculous and frustrating limitation. Me, me, it has to be all about *me*. And what was *I* feeling, anyways? I was feeling the world change. Without Grampa Andy, the Earth darkened, emptied, became dangerous. It lost one of its liveliest souls. I was also feeling something like pain, but it wasn’t despair. As I walked back home, I started to think about how Grampa Andy might continue to live through me. I had to do something. I had to change something about my stupid life to follow in his lead. I remembered one time when he said something like, “They always say look before you leap. Think before you act. I disagree. Now, I’m not saying jump off a cliff without looking over the edge, but I see no reason action and thought can’t happen at the same time. That’s not so much to save time as to get you deeper into things, into the thick of them. Think too much and you’ll never get anywhere. Don’t finish every thought to its conclusion, don’t keep things closed. If you start doing and thinking and thinking and doing, you just might find yourself in unexpected, beautiful places.”

I don’t remember him saying *all* of that, but if I had to sum up his life philosophy, I’d say that quote does the job. And it was up to me to follow his wisdom. No more waiting for Mom’s permission. No more sticking around in this plastic town. No more deference to Becca’s pointless politics. No more reading newspapers and encyclopedias, keeping track of all the world’s murders and suicides. No more dreaming—seize the day! As if I had any dreams in the first place, besides wondering whether the anarchist revolution would come along with some new Nintendo games.

Just a few days later, I went to Grampa Andy’s funeral, and discovered that a lot of what I knew about him was wrong. So here, on the threshold, the brink, a mild June evening, before the funeral, before the road trip, before Cowboy Jim and Kaori and everything else, I will allow myself to meander

home with a childish vision of my great-uncle shining in my mind. It's not that Grampa Andy turned out to be a bad guy. The story was just a hell of a lot more complicated than expected.

Let's fast-forward one week. One week, in which I broke down in front of Christine because she just wouldn't stop talking about how much I *really loved* Grampa Andy; in which Becca and I skipped a few days of school and then showed up frantically trying to catch up; in which Will and I had the unfortunate experience of catching Becca sliding into third base with Aaron on the hammock; a week in which the mysterious mild fog yielded to California sunshine.