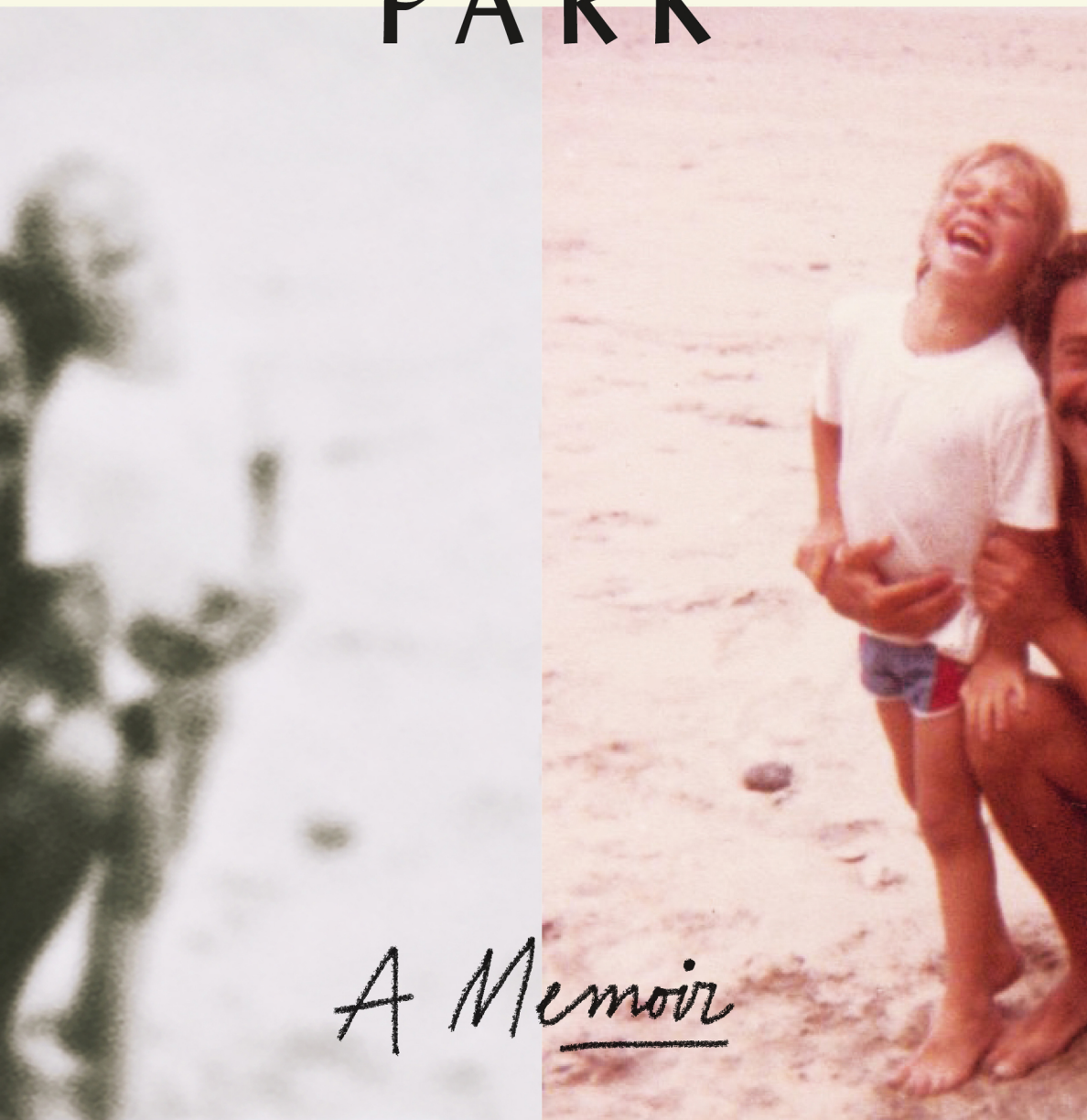


HOLLYWOOD PARK



A Memoir

MIKEL JOLLETT

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This is a work of nonfiction. In a few cases with minor characters, several
different people have been combined into one individual. Also, some names
and/or identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of certain
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Christine.Mykityshyn@celadonbooks.com.

We were never young. We were just too afraid of ourselves. No one told us who we were or what we were or where all our parents went. They would arrive like ghosts, visiting us for a morning, an afternoon. They would sit with us or walk around the grounds, to laugh or cry or toss us in the air while we screamed. Then they'd disappear again, for weeks, for months, for years, leaving us alone with our memories and dreams, our questions and confusion. ...

So begins *Hollywood Park*, Mikel Jollett's remarkable memoir. His story opens in an experimental commune in California, which later morphed into the Church of Synanon, one of the country's most infamous and dangerous cults. Per the leader's mandate, all children, including Jollett and his older brother, were separated from their parents when they were six months old, and handed over to the cult's "School." After spending years in what was essentially an orphanage, Mikel escaped the cult one morning with his mother and older brother. But in many ways, life outside Synanon was even harder and more erratic.

In his raw, poetic and powerful voice, Jollett portrays a childhood filled with abject poverty, trauma, emotional abuse, delinquency and the lure of drugs and alcohol. Raised by a clinically depressed mother, tormented by his angry older brother, subjected to the unpredictability of troubled step-fathers and longing for contact with his father, a former heroin addict and ex-con, Jollett slowly, often painfully, builds a life that leads him to Stanford University and, eventually, to finding his voice as a writer and musician.

Hollywood Park is told at first through the limited perspective of a child, and then broadens as Jollett begins to understand the world around him. Although Mikel Jollett's story is filled with heartbreak, it is ultimately an unforgettable portrayal of love at its fiercest and most loyal.



photo by Dove Shore

Mikel Jollett is the frontman of the indie band The Airborne Toxic Event. Prior to forming the band, Jollett graduated with honors from Stanford University. He was an on-air columnist for NPR's *All Things Considered*, an editor-at-large for *Men's Health* and an editor at *Filter* magazine. His fiction has been published in McSweeney's.

The following excerpt is chapter 15 to 17 of *Hollywood Park*.

CHAPTER 15

THE SCAPEGOAT AND THE SUPERCHILD

The beatings have gotten worse. It used to be mostly wet willies or flat tires or Indian burns, the kind of cruelty with a flashy name you could pass off as a joke. Tony would grab my head and say, “Noogie!” as he scrubbed his knuckle against my scalp until it was raw. The names themselves, “wedgie,” “pantsing,” “charley horse,” seemed to justify the behavior, as if you could rename murder something like “knifey chests” and we’d all have a big laugh.

But it’s gotten worse. Tony will pull my hair and tell me I’m such a “little mama’s boy.” He pins me down and puts his whole weight on my shoulders, letting a strand of thick spit dangle in a string from his mouth while I scream, “Get off!” He lets it nearly touch my face then sucks it back up into his mouth. Sometimes it’s too late and the spit falls into my eye. He holds my hands down so I can’t wipe it. I struggle to break free which only makes him madder. There are endless headlocks. Sometimes he simply trips me when I walk by. I’m not sure why he’s angry but there’s an old grudge hanging over it, something wounded in his voice as he pounds his finger on my chest with my arms pinned under his knees and says, “You’re such a sneaky little kiss ass.”

Mom says he’s dealing with “a lot of anger” because he’s not used to having an authority figure and that he’s going to need to learn to deal with “his issues” soon or he’ll end up going down the “path of addiction” just like his father did. She says this in front of him. She’s always quoting some book or repeating some phrase that sounds like something from

the group therapy she conducts with the prisoners at the Oregon State Hospital.

Tony will get mad and scream, "I'm not your fucking patient!"

But instead of screaming back, Mom will just say he needs to find a "more constructive" way to deal with his anger. This only makes him madder.

After he walks out, Mom will say it's a phase, that he's got too much of his father in him, that they are exactly alike. I know she's right because she knows our feelings better than we do, but it's weird because Dad is funny and nice to me. He never puts me in a headlock or spits in my face while I squirm.

THE BIKE ON the rack at Fred Meyer is a Huffy Pro Thunder with yellow mag wheels, blue rubber tires, and bright yellow handgrips. It's elevated five feet above the others, bathed in bright fluorescent light like a halo. It costs \$150. I know we can't afford it, that we are not the kind of family where a boy gets a new bike every Christmas then rides over the trails behind the school in his brand-new Jordache jeans with the fancy white stitching on the back pocket like my friend Jesse. But when I see it on display at the store, an idea takes hold, the beauty of the thing, the way the space-age yellow paint lights it up beyond all imagining of lesser bikes, of rusty Goodwill Schwinn's and my too-small red mini-Moto that makes my knees hit my elbows when I ride.

Tony sees me looking at it. "You wish."

When I bring it up with Mom, when I patiently explain my plan to save money to buy the \$150 space-age dirt bike which is, after all, only seventy-five allowances, she offers me an extra dollar a week to clean the bathroom, sweep the stairs and mop the kitchen floor. Paul says he'll help me with the project, that I could mow lawns around the neighborhood or collect cans that he'll take to the recycling plant. It seems strange to me there would be money lying around like this, lawns to be mowed and cans in the garbage that could be money in a pocket. But it also seems like an impossibly large amount of money, like \$150 isn't an amount of money that exists in the real world.

When school lets out, I go into the alley behind the house to look for cans. I find some old beer cans in a puddle next to the back of the barn. *Fifteen cents. Good. Only \$149.85 to go.*

I go to the Plaid Pantry on Center Street and look around the dumpsters. There's an empty soda bottle sitting on the ground so I put it in the shopping bag I've tied around the frame of my mini-Moto. I open the lid to the dumpster and smell the sweet, rotting decay of old beer and sandwiches, milk cartons and used soda cups. I have to stand on a milk crate to look inside. The trash is in big black plastic bags. I look around before opening one because I know people will think I'm one of those Child Protective Services kids like the ones we see at the Boys Club who flinch when the basketball comes near them. I tear open a few bags. One has some bottles in it, so I put them into the shopping bag and move on. *Okay, that's a dollar.*

After a couple weeks I don't care who sees me. I don't care what they think. Sometimes it's fun to pretend to be homeless, to be wild like Timothy Manning and his friends, always covered in dirt and ready for a fight. I like the look of pity the old man from Plaid Pantry gives me when he finds me in the alley rooting through the dumpster. He says, "Listen, you can't go in there," like he's talking to an animal. I feel the urge to hiss or bare my fangs or scurry away on all fours.

I walk my mini-Moto around the neighborhood with a plastic bag tied around the frame, and when Derek sees me, he says, "You look like a bag lady! Ha-ha!" He chants, "Mick-ell, you smell, you smell like fuckin' hell!"

Paul says to ignore him because he's just a little shit anyway, and even though he's not supposed to tell me this because it's "anonymous," he says Derek's dad was in the program but disappeared and nobody's seen him for a long time.

When Christmas comes, I have seventy-five dollars of cash, bottle, lawn, and chore money saved in a barrel-shaped piggy bank that Paul keeps at the top of the closet in their bedroom. Grandma and Grandpa send me a check for fifty dollars that's supposed to go to my college fund but Mom says we can put college off this year. Dad and Bonnie send me a check for another thirty-five with a note that says, "For the bike!"

Two days after Christmas, Paul takes me to Fred Meyer and we return at last with one yellow and blue Huffy Pro Thunder dirt bike in the back of his black mini-truck with the camper shell. I crawl into the back to wheel it out, careful not to scrape the new reflective pedals against the black metal truck bed. I bounce the rear tire lightly on the ground and pedal it

up to the top of the hill on Breys Avenue to test it out, riding it down the block like a golden chariot. I feel the hot sweat on the back of my neck go cold in the crisp air as I fly down the street, the wind in my hair, the lightness of the frame, the feeling of escape, of freedom, an endlessness, no road too long, no destination too far. My world expands in front me.

Tony is angry, standing arms folded on the porch when I get back. He says, “Why does he get a new bike?”

“He saved for it. He earned it. That’s how it works.” Paul closes the tailgate, replacing the blanket he keeps in the back just in case he needs a place to sleep.

“But why does he get one and I don’t? I could’ve earned it too.”

“You still can if you want.”

“He’s such a sneaky little shit. I do more chores than him. He doesn’t deserve a bike.”

I ignore him and pedal toward the school.

There is a circular concrete fountain the size of a swimming pool in the center of the wooded park behind Englewood Elementary. In the summer, on the weekends, the pipe that sticks up from the center shoots water ten feet in the air while kids gather under it to run and scream. Tony and I ran through it last year on a hot day, taking our shoes off to jump in. He was nicer then. We were on the same team. Now the fountain is empty and the park quiet, filled with the hush of wind through the needles on the big evergreens. Patches of sunlight cover the ground in yellow splotches as I ride down the dirt trail, jumping over the big knotty roots that cross it. I’m surrounded by the smell of pine and fresh mud. I ride back to the school.

I’m twisting through the hopscotch courts painted on the asphalt, in and out, over the three and around the five, when I see them. Timothy Manning and two older boys, both in dirty T-shirts, tossing a chewed-up green Nerf football in the center of the field. Timothy is skinny and small but carries himself like a much larger boy, his head high and his arms out. I heard he lives in a group home. Though they don’t look related, there’s a resemblance between him and the two boys as they toss the ball between them, a kind of low-hanging weariness to the jaw and the eyes, always a little dirt on the cheeks, alert like a pack of dogs.

They see me.

“Hey, man, nice bike!”

I pretend I can't hear them and study the hard plastic yellow mags on the front tire, which are so much sturdier than the metal spokes on my old red mini-bike.

"I said nice bike. Can I see it?" Timothy Manning walks straight toward me.

"I just got it. It's not broken in yet."

"I don't care. Let me see it. C'mon." He grabs the handlebars. I yank them away and take off toward the back of the big yellow school building. I can hear their footsteps behind me, trying to imagine it like a game of tag, like everyone's just messing around and I'm in on it. I cut through the rear parking lot and make a left into the breezeway between the school and the gym, thinking I can cut back through the park and get away but when I look up, the two boys block my exit in front of me. I stop.

"Don't be such a wimp. We just want to see your bike. You should learn to share." Timothy Manning walks up behind me, pushing me sideways on the concrete. I get up, holding my bike unsteadily as he grabs the seat. I don't know what to do.

Behind the shaggy black hair of the boy in the dirty purple shirt, I see Tony emerge suddenly in the sunlight of the breezeway. I can't believe he's here. There's a cosmic sense of timing to it. My big brother. The sixth grader. He's twice the size of Timothy Manning.

I scream, "That's my brother! Leave me alone!"

Tony has a strange look on his face. A kind of blankness as he walks, arms down as if in some kind of trance, right toward Timothy Manning and me.

"Oh, so you're the big brother? You here to stick up for this little bitch? We're supposed to be scared of you?"

Tony's face reveals nothing. He is calm. He walks in slow motion right up to Timothy Manning and says, "No, I hate that little shit." He picks up my yellow and blue Huffy Pro Thunder that I dug through trash to buy—seventy-five allowances, three thousand aluminum cans—and throws it into the brick wall of the gym. I watch as the handlebars break in half and the bike falls lamely on the red painted concrete. He walks away.

"Haaaaah ha aha ahah ha!" the boys scream. "Your brother hates you! Ha aha! What'd you think? He was gonna help? Whatcha gonna do? Cry? You gonna cry, you little *bitch*? You little *baby*."

There's a kind of cracking, something like a brittle bark that breaks in two while I stare at the bike on the ground and catch the back of my brother's long blond hair as he disappears behind the gym.

I don't understand it. I can't form words or thoughts. My busted bike. My brother who is not on my side. I push through the boys to the corner where I stare at the broken Huff. After a moment, I feel a rock in my back. Then another. I don't move. I don't even mind the rocks. I feel their hands on me as they each push me and walk away. I can't take my eyes off the bike on the ground.

When were we together? Did I imagine that? Did I just imagine we survived something? That we came here to hide? He yells at Mom and she corrects him, telling him to control his temper. She uses those words she uses for the patients she treats at the mental hospital, those soon-to-be ex-con Dope Fiends from the state penitentiary in her "recovery" program. Terms like "borderline," "violent," "impulse control," and "attention deficit." She tells me about them because she tells me too much. She sees it in Tony. She tells me not to tell him but he knows. Of course he does. He sees it in her eyes. He is her science experiment, her personal psychology project. Like an animal in a cage, he's supposed to respond to "positive reinforcement" or the establishment of a "token economy" with "strict boundaries." He's supposed to learn to say the sentence "I'm sorry, Mom, you are right and I am wrong." When what he probably wants to say is, "Where were you? I was alone in that place for *seven years*." I know he thinks I am on her side because of it. Because of the lines I say, the ones she wants to hear about what kind of family we are, what kind of mother she is, the lines I know to repeat since watching Phil nearly die in the street knowing there are worse things and fearing those things more, to be like those family roles that children take on, the ones we read about in the Al-Anon literature for "children in families struggling with addiction" that she leaves around the house. I am the chosen child, the superchild, the one who can fly. Tony is the angry child, the scapegoat, the one who must sink.

But he sees it. He has to. He sees behind the curtain. He's the only one who does. And beyond the script is something else, the desire he has in this moment to destroy my new bike, my cherished and most prized possession, and in doing so, leave me to feel exactly as he does in the world. Alone.

I walk the broken bike home, wobbly and sobbing.

Paul is on the back porch tending to holes in the chicken wire that Pepper dug beneath the makeshift pen he built for her and Mork. He sees me. "What happened?"

I tell him the story. The park, the school, Timothy Manning and the boys from the group home, Tony, my broken bike. Paul is furious, dropping the hammer, spitting the nails in his teeth onto the ground. "He did *what*?"

We go into the kitchen, where Tony sits at the big table. Paul asks him if it's true.

"No. He broke it himself," Tony says. "'Cause he wanted me to get in trouble."

"Why would he do that?"

"Because he's a sneaky little shit. That's why." There is so much hatred in his eyes.

"I don't believe you," Paul says, trying to catch those angry eyes. "He spent months saving for that bike. He wouldn't just break it."

"Yes he would! That's how sneaky he is!"

"He's lying," I scream.

"I know he is." Paul turns to Tony. "He's your *brother*, goddamn it! I just don't understand this. You are going to pay to have it fixed!"

"You can't make me! I won't do it! He made it all up!"

He runs down the stairs with a face full of tears and slams the door to our bedroom. Paul sits with me. He says we'll fix my bike, not to worry. It's just some light damage. I think of Tony and there is a split, a new idea of him emerges in my mind less like a teammate and more like an enemy or a force of nature, innately bad, like a sickness or the rot of an apple. When Mom gets home, she says she's sorry I have to deal with Tony's "impulse issues." I wince, even though I'm angry. Something feels wrong.

She takes away Tony's allowance and tells him she's going to give it to me until the bike is fixed. Tony says, "I don't care! Everyone here hates me! This is unfair! I hate all of you!" He refuses to do his chores. He sulks in his room. He never apologizes. He has made up his mind that this is a war and I am his enemy. But I'm just so sick of the noogies and headlocks, the spit in my eye, and if it's a war he wants, I decide I'm going to give him one.

CHAPTER 16

THE WAY OF ALL GREAT DRUNKS

On the day the crate of chimney sweep tools arrive, the air is crisp with a chill. As I walk down the street at dusk, Breys Avenue smells of burning wood. Fire means warmth and warmth means shelter which matters in a place with cold winters and two hundred days of rain every year. It's a good day to be a chimney sweep. A big white truck parks in front of our house and two men unload the wooden crate the size of a piano which Paul signs for. One by one he removes the tools and places them on the blue tarp: a black circular brush as big as a cat, a series of six-foot iron poles, steel wire brushes attached to a hemp rope, a wooden scraper, a wire-frame fan, a vacuum that looks like a rubber garbage can, and one felt black top hat. Paul puts the top hat on his head, covering his wild patchy black hair. "How do I look?"

"Like a bearded turtle going to a dance," Mom says.

"All those chimneys," Paul says. "Someone's gotta clean 'em." This is his contribution, one that allows him to keep tending to the rabbits, one that doesn't require him to leave the house for some "square nine to five" that he could never hold down because of "all the goddamn holes in the résumé."

Once they are set up with a call service and place an ad in the local yellow pages that reads "Stone Soup Chimney Sweeps" next to an outline of a man in a top hat hanging from a brick chimney, once Paul has read two books about the process and cleaned our chimney with Mom's help and we've heard for weeks about how this "new income" is going to "help out

a lot around here,” a call comes in for a job and we wave goodbye to Paul one Saturday morning after he packs the brushes, poles, vacuum and fan into the truck and drives away with that black top hat on. He’s whistling as he climbs into the front seat. Mom says, “Isn’t it amazing how you can still make a living with wood and fire in this age of jet planes and space travel?”

A few hours later he comes home covered in gray ash, a thick outline around his eyes from his goggles, his hands black from the grime, a noticeable slump in his shoulders. He describes to us a day of standing on a rooftop breathing in dust and scraping brick. “It couldn’t have been that bad,” Mom says. “Didn’t it feel good to be out in the crisp air?”

“I was cold. Here.” He hands her a check with a black thumbprint on it. “I’m going to wash up.” He gets more jobs sweeping chimneys and each time he comes home covered in muck and ash. After a few weeks, he stops wearing the top hat when he goes out. “It makes me look stupid,” he says. He stops watching cartoons with us, just washes up and takes a shower and says, “Well, that wasn’t very fun.”

When he leaves on a drinking binge again, when Mom comes home from work and there are three messages from the answering service from a woman on Thompson Avenue asking what happened to the man from Stone Soup Chimney Sweeps, when Mom’s face goes white and she looks at us while cradling the receiver in her hand and asks, “Did Paul say where he was going,” Tony says, “He didn’t say anything, just packed up the truck and left.” She puts the receiver down. We have cereal for dinner that night because she’s too upset to cook. Tony declares that he’s tired of rabbit and he doesn’t care if we all die if that means we don’t have to eat the disgusting little creatures anymore. Mom is too anxious to fight, which means that she’s right on the edge of getting the depression.

The next morning I’m up at five again taking the frozen water bowls out of the barn, defrosting them with hot water in a pitcher from the kitchen sink, filling their food bowls with pellets from the fifty-pound feed bag at the back of the barn.

Paul parks his truck in front of the house a few nights later. We see him sitting there in the driver’s seat, hunched over the steering wheel. Mom goes outside to talk to him while we wait in the living room. “He was drunk. I told him to go away until he is sober,” she says when she comes

back in. We tell her we don't care that he's drunk and it's better that he's home but she says kids shouldn't see adults "when they're using" because it might be bad for them. Tony says Dad drinks all the time and it's fine and Mom says, "Paul is an alcoholic so it's different. Your dad might be one too but he's a functional alcoholic." Tony says it doesn't matter if he can function or not, it's his house too so we should just let him sleep here since it's below freezing and all he has is his truck. Mom says the truck smells like puke because of the "Duck Pill" Paul takes to make him sick when he drinks as part of his recovery and she doesn't want us seeing him like that. We say we don't care. We just don't want him to freeze to death. She says that sometimes you have to practice "tough love" with people so they can reach "rock bottom" and go to AA. But Paul's already in AA, we say. And what if he dies? Mom says she's powerless over the disease and powerless over his actions. We say yeah but you could let him in the house so he has somewhere warm to sleep.

Every morning I take care of the rabbits and every night Mom checks the answering service to see if Paul took any of the chimney sweeping jobs. Every now and then he takes one. He probably does it drunk which Mom says is dangerous since he's up on rooftops but "at least he's working" because otherwise the business will go under and they'll lose all the money they spent on the equipment. Without Paul's money from chimney sweeping, we're back to "stretching our food dollar," which means scraping the dried-out peanut butter from the bottom of the gallon tub and nothing but bologna and bread with mustard and milk in our lunch pails and defrosted rabbit for dinner every night.

When I get home from school, I see Paul chopping wood with the big orange maul on the block next to the dog pen. He's wearing loose jeans and a dark blue velvet-collared shirt, his scraggly beard longer than usual. There is something off about the way he swings the maul, an unsteadiness that makes him stumble while he laughs to himself. He sees me and asks how school was. I stand a few feet back. He takes stock of his appearance, looking down at the maul swaying in his hands, the mess of his clothes, realizing the trouble he'll be in when he sobers up, laughing to himself in the way of all great drunks.

He is soft and fuzzy and odd and all I can think about is how he must've slept in the cold last night.

To be a drunk is to be a hero in a sad story.

“Can I have a hug?” he blurts out. I give him one, smelling the beer on his clothes, his body sweat and puke. “Thanks. I needed that. Are you guys okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. Mom is sad.”

“I know,” he rubs the back of his head. “It’s getting cold, so I thought I’d chop some wood for you.”

“Thanks,” I say, getting my bike from the back porch.

He pauses. “You know I love you right? I know you’re not my kid but I love you.”

“I know that,” I say because it’s true. “I love you too. I don’t care if you’re drunk.”

He wipes his glasses with the front of his shirt, turns back toward the woodpile, places a knotty stump on it, lifts the maul above his head and brings it down with a thump. The wood goes flying, splintering in all directions. I get on my bike and take off for the afternoon.

He’s gone when I get home and in his place Mom is inspecting the woodpile. “Did you do this?”

“No, Paul was here.”

“I thought maybe he was. Was he drunk?”

“I think so. But he was nice. He can’t help it, you know. He’s sick.”

“I know.”

That night Paul is outside the house again, parked in his truck. The light from the streetlight falls on him and we can see him drinking from a brown paper bag. Mom goes outside and tells him he has to leave. We watch her stand next to the truck with her arms crossed in front of her. Paul gets out and hugs her and they stand there like that for a long time. His arms around her, her arms crossed. He says something then gets back in his truck. Exhaust smoke and steam fill the cold air as he starts the engine and drives away. Mom stands alone for a moment, staring at the ground, then comes back inside.

“It’s bedtime,” she says.

“It’s only seven thirty.”

“I mean for me.” She goes into her room and closes the door behind her. I go to bed at nine thirty, but Tony stays up late watching *The A-Team*. I hear her get up and think she’s about to yell at him for missing his bed-

time but instead the footsteps go into the bathroom where the sink turns on. A few minutes later the footsteps retreat back to the bedroom. When I wake up, Tony is still in the living room, asleep on the couch with the TV on. The house is cold because there is no fire. The sun isn't up yet. I go outside with a flashlight to tend to the rabbits and when I come in, I turn on the stove and fry some eggs to eat with toast. I make a sandwich out of bologna, yellow mustard and wheat bread and put milk in my thermos. I knock on the door to see if Mom is okay. I can hear her crying in her room. "I'm fine, sweetie," she says through the door. "Just go to school."

It's silent outside from the frost and snow as I walk the three blocks to school. Everywhere are frozen windshields and slush-filled curbs, leafless trees shuddering in the wind. The quiet is broken by the crunch of my sneakers on the sidewalk and the swish of my arms against my brown ski jacket, the one with the corduroy shoulders and the tear in the side where the stuffing had fallen out which I'd patched up one morning with Elmer's glue and two pieces of black electrical tape.

WHEN PAUL SOBERS up, he asks Mom to marry him. There's no ring because he can't afford one even though Mom always says she wishes a good man would just "buy her a ring like my dad did for my mom," but there is a big wedding with a sugar-free lemon cheesecake. Mom buys us brand-new Lee jeans which we wear with matching white-collared short-sleeve shirts and brown-and-gray-striped clip-on ties. She has a wreath of flowers in her hair as she walks down the aisle. Les McCarthy is there and so are Frank and Barb and Diane, all the people from the AA campouts. When he came back, Paul said, "I know I need to do better for this family and I will." And this time Mom hardly scolded him, probably because he asked her to marry him, which made up for his leaving.

After the wedding, when we are a family with a capital *F* for "father," legal and everything, Mom tells us that she loves Paul but if he leaves again, she's going to divorce him. We are still in our clip-on ties, eating leftover sugar-free lemon wedding cheesecake. She says he's a good man but he needs to be a better father to us. I know that Tony likes him too. We don't ever think of him as a father. He's more like another brother or maybe just someone who makes Mom easier to handle. When he's home,

we have more money and fewer chores and she isn't locked in her room crying or lying on the floor next to the woodstove with that look that goes on forever.

At the wedding, Les McCarthy said to me, "Isn't it great your mom's getting married? She deserves happiness, don't you think?" I nodded and wondered why everyone always wanted us to be worried about her. I didn't tell him I was just glad that Paul was home so I didn't have to get up at five to deal with the rabbits and Tony wasn't as mean because Paul was bigger than he was and even though he never hit Tony, just being there made it less likely that Mom would fall into the depression or Tony would push me down the stairs when no one was looking.

CHAPTER 17

BROTHERS

Riding my bike on a crisp winter morning—the first sunny day in months after the endless rain ceased, the puddles steaming, the sun appearing like an embarrassed cousin from behind the gray-white clouds—weaving in and out of the cracks in the pavement under the canopy of trees on Eighteenth Street, inside left, outside right, bad luck to hit a crack, I suddenly hear a scream echo out through the neighborhood. There's something desperate about it, something sad, like a dog caught in the axle of a truck. I stop and park my like-new-again yellow and blue Huffy Pro Thunder against the curb to listen. Another scream. There's something familiar about it but I can't place it. I pedal toward the school to investigate out of instinct, the way a cat will lurch at a bird trapped behind glass.

I park my bike at the edge of the field at the school to see, there, in the middle of the baseball diamond, my brother lying sideways on the ground with his arms twisted in front of his chest and his long blond hair falling over a red tear-soaked face. His yellow and white uniform is covered in dirt, untucked in bunches around his stomach. Standing over him with one foot on his back is a tall, thin red-haired boy in a wool-collared brown leather jacket, smiling like a demon at the group of boys who've gathered to watch.

What is it about freckles that makes a boy so mean?

"Say another word!" he yells as he stands on my brother's back. "Anything. Just one word!"

“Stop it!” Tony cries.

The boy kicks him hard in the back, “What’s wrong with you? Don’t you understand English, motherfucker?”

Tony spots me and our eyes lock.

I walk up to the crowd of boys. I don’t know any of them. “What’s happening?”

“We were playing baseball and this kid started mouthing off to Brian saying he sucks at pitching. So then Brian got pissed and decided to kick his ass but the kid won’t fight back. He’s just lying there on the ground.” I learn that Brian is Brian Medford and he is fourteen years old.

“Mick!” Tony screams. “Go get Paul! Hurry!”

“That’s your brother? Hey, kid, c’mere.” Brian Medford smiles at me like he’s inviting me to a carnival game. “You got something to say? ’Cause if you do, I’m gonna make your brother pay.”

“What do you mean?”

Brian Medford kicks Tony in the stomach. Tony makes a retching noise.

“I mean every time you talk, I’m going to hurt your brother.”

“Every time?” He kicks him again.

Tony lets out an awful groan, part cry, part grunt, that sounds like “Ahh-ohh-urgh.”

“Oh, so every time I speak you’re gonna hurt him?” Brian Medford stomps a black Converse high-top right into Tony’s ass.

“Yep.”

A strange feeling comes over me as I realize the potential of the situation. Or maybe it’s more like a feeling is lifted, the feeling of being under his thumb, or his weight, his spit, inside a headlock, watching him ruin another night where we could be sitting in the living room like a F-A-M-I-L-Y listening to Tchaikovsky. I smell the dirt of the field and feel the air on my neck and my arms begin to tingle.

“Anyway, as I was saying,” Brian Medford kicks Tony in the side. It sounds like a mallet hitting a sack of meat. I circle over him, “*Star Wars* is a great movie. Some might say underrated, despite its great success.” Brian Medford stomps on Tony’s chest as he cries. I see his red face in the dirt, his eyes filled with tears, his mouth twisted in anguish and I feel a hatred for this too. For his weakness. For his inability to get up and fight back.

“Fuck you, you piece of shit!” Brian kicks him in the back of the head. “Yeah, mothafucker, what about now? You’re not so fucking tough now are you?” Brian leans down and slaps him in the face in mockery, enjoying himself. “Who’s the fucking pussy *now*?”

“Leave me alone! Stop!” Tony screams through tears, his face covered in dirt, his nose bloody, his hair twisted into patches of brown mud and green grass.

Brian Medford stands over him, a red-haired, freckled goblin smiling and cracking his knuckles. “Your little brother is one cold dude.”

There is a tear in space and time, the laws of nature shifting. I’ve fallen through a hole into a place where I am the one with the power to hurt. I memorize his face all messed up in the dirt. I want to become something bigger than the land itself. *So this is what it’s like to be the one with the power?* It’s shocking to realize it’s in me to be like him. I wonder if it’s in him to be like me. If we didn’t choose ourselves at all but just became what was required of us, like characters following a script.

He sobs under Brian Medford’s shoe. He looks so sad. I try to focus on the anger, the revenge for my bike, but it’s hard to look away from his face, not to wonder if this is what was behind the anger. Maybe he would like to be in my place. Maybe in a different life somewhere we would switch. Maybe I would be the bad son and he would be the good son. I can feel the cruelty of it, like the crack of the baton on the baby bunny’s head, the clubs falling on Phil while he screams in the driveway. It makes me sick and sad. It mutes the colors of the world, turning yellow to gray and green to brown, extinguishing light and creating a dark place inside me.

I wish I could take my brother with me to somewhere new, where we could sit like other brothers do, those kids eating lunches of salami and cheese, peanut butter and jelly, and Frito-Lay potato chips, the feeling that you are protected, that there is enough for everyone, that a boy can close his eyes and sleep knowing someone is going to keep watch instead of the feeling we were both born with, that we know we are alone. Tony has it worse than I do, but I know how he feels because I feel it too. To have to study the faces of the adults, all the adults, who are always different, whose faces change constantly for mysterious reasons beyond our control or imagining, signifying danger or panic, fear or flight. *Which is it going to be tonight?*

“Okay, that’s enough,” I say. “Let’s leave him alone.”

“No,” Brian Medford shakes his head. “It’s not.”

“He’s not even moving. Just go home and we’ll go home.”

“No.” He nudges Tony’s whimpering head on the ground with his toe.

“I’m serious. Leave my brother alone!”

He kicks him again in the back and I feel something snap. “Leave him the fuck alone! That’s my brother! Stop it!” The crowd of boys watching begin to whoop as I lower my head toward Brian Medford. Tony is a baby bunny. Tony is my puppy, Mork. Tony is Mom helpless on the floor of the den. Tony is Paul drunk and lonely, puking in the front of the truck. My big brother who likes pizza and macaroni and cheese, who dances around the apartment in L.A. with me in our matching tighty-whities.

I jump, running at Brian Medford with flailing arms. “Leave him alone! That’s my brother! That’s my brother!” He pushes me down and I get back up. My arms barely reach his chest. It’s like trying to punch a giraffe. He pushes me hard and I fall down into the dirt next to Tony.

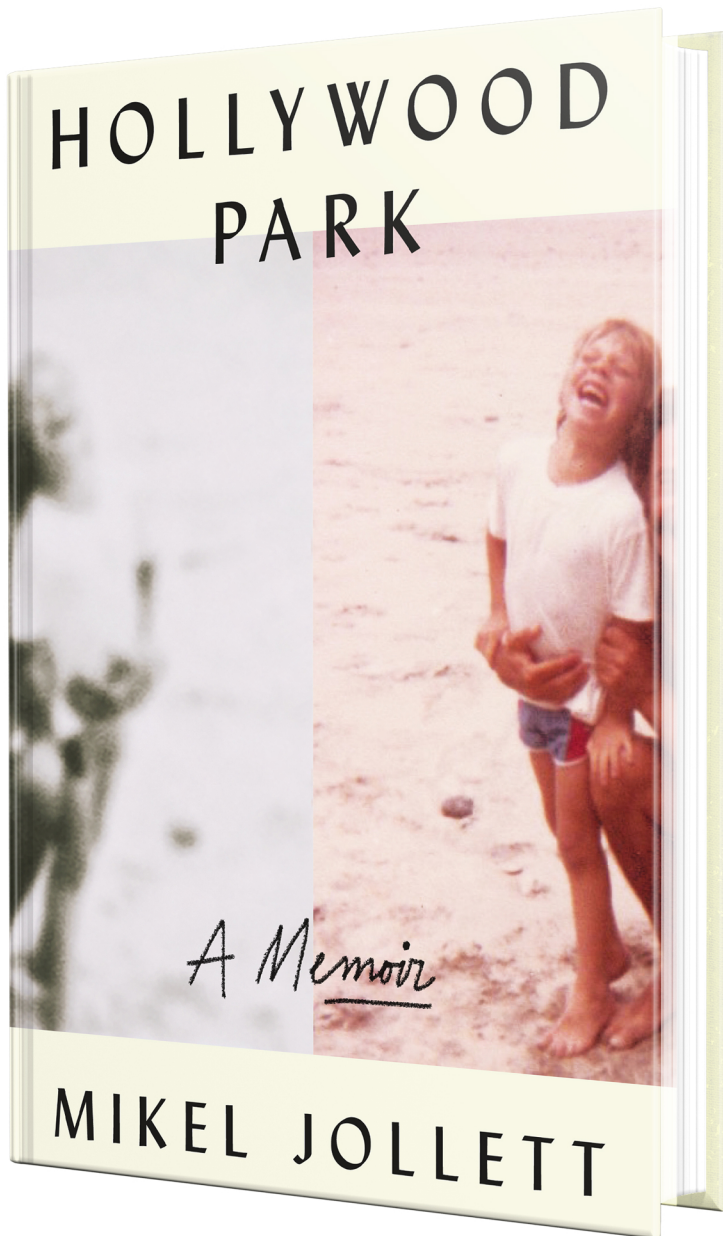
“You guys are crazy.” He spits. He picks up a baseball glove from the ground and walks across the field to leave.

When he’s a safe distance away, Tony gets up. He goes to the fence, crying, bloody. He grabs his bike and yells over his shoulder, “Someday somebody bigger than you is gonna kick your ass! You’ll see!”

I follow him on my bike, trying to keep up. Sad for him and angry for myself. I know we are enemies, allies, guardians, traitors. Brothers.

Head down. Pedaling as hard as I can toward home, the spit still wet on my cheek, the brown dirt on his shoes flying off the pedals as we ride straight through the unlucky cracks on Eighteenth Street, I yell, “Someday you’ll get yours! You’ll see! You can’t hurt him! That’s my brother!”

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