

## **Part I.**

# **Introduction**



# 1. Joanna Turnus

I could have confessed to Alexander in the North End, Faneuil Hall, the Seaport District, or even Carson Beach, despite the cool, chilly night; but I chose the Old Post Inn, my grandfather's favorite, where he and I went once a week; our dinners lasting three or four hours, always talking, usually about me, about my struggles, my gender confusion, the latest boys of interest.

Of course my meeting ran late. I texted Alexander several times, but he wasn't answering. Perhaps he was stuck in traffic or forgot about our dinner or had a premonition about my confession and decided to skip out altogether? (And who would blame him if he did?)

I asked the maître d' to look for someone 6'3"; strong, adorable, with sparkling green eyes; a deep tan that would linger well into the winter, and soft, playful brown hair that most women would consider a tad too long, combed straight back, pillowed against his ears, loose strands sometimes taking a life of their own. She immediately replied that Alexander was indeed at the bar, nursing a beer. She complimented my choice in men, which would have thrilled any woman, but knowing how things were and how things might pan out, only increased my despair.

The Inn was just outside Boston, on the Old Post Road, which in colonial times connected Boston and New York. Inside, its cozy, oak-paneled walls were interspersed with tall, stained-glass windows, beautifully etched with colonial travelers: some tired and weary, some smiling, boastful of their travels; most too poor to stop, too embarrassed to glance inside; some sad, as if traveling to a funeral; others exuberant, anxious to celebrate a birthday, an anniversary, the birth of a child.

Alexander was stunning in a black, faintly pinstriped suit that showed off his broad, muscular shoulders. His beautiful green eyes sparkled as he handed me a dozen roses, hinting a smile at my lacy black dress, my shiny red nails, my diamond stud earrings. He wrapped his arm around

me; my head softly on his shoulder—kissing my forehead, whispering that I looked absolutely beautiful.

I wanted this moment to last forever.

As the *maitre d'* escorted us to our booth (the same booth that my grandfather and I sat in for our weekly dinners), complimenting how nice we looked together, I remembered my psychiatrist warning that people like me (his words) should never expect to get married or even have a long-term relationship with someone from the opposite sex, that we should look for happiness elsewhere.

I brushed away a tear, fearful that he was right.

I ordered champagne, wondering if any of the colonial travelers etched in glass were pretending to be someone else to please others, unsure and confused about their gender. But despite a little sadness and apprehension, I saw no doubt, despair, or ambiguity.

The waitress uncorked the champagne bottle, presenting it to Alexander. I watched her meticulously fill each glass, jealous of her confident femininity, jealous that every morning she'd choose something to wear, do her makeup, her hair, never thinking twice about being a woman; no questions asked.

For an appetizer, I ordered clams and linguine (my favorite dish as a little girl), even though it wasn't on the menu; while Alexander ordered the grilled beef medallions peppered with Gonzaga cheese. I also suggested the mushroom soup, the best around.

Alexander agreed, asking our waitress to bring it with the appetizers. He smiled at me, raising his glass. "To a nice dinner!"

We clinked glasses, small-talking about a predicted early frost, the Red Sox missing the playoffs, the upcoming Patriots game against the Jets. As Alexander talked about his work, and I mine, I sipped my champagne, imagining us walking in the rain, on the beach, my head softly on his shoulder.

The waitress delivered our appetizers.

Alexander sliced his bite-size medallions into even smaller bite-size medallions, praising the soup as the best he's ever had. I straightened my silverware, wondering his reaction to what I was about to say, wondering how quickly he would leave, wondering if I'd ever meet someone like him again.

I brushed away a tear, innocently feigning something in my eye.

“You OK?” Alexander asked.

I said I had to pee. Yes, I was nervous and yes, the champagne had made me lightheaded, but I really had to pee. Feeling nauseous, like I was pregnant—how could I be?— I excused myself. I rushed to the restroom, opened the stall and sat down. Alexander and I seemed to be getting back on track and if I confessed, I’d never see him again. But then again, why should I define myself by someone else, and who I’m with?

At the sink I let the water run cold, dabbing my forehead with a cool paper towel, surprised at how pretty and feminine I looked, surprised at how confident I appeared.

“This is the men’s room,” interrupted a stern masculine voice.

I lightly screamed, turning to find a young man, kind of cute, his baritone voice not

matching his youthful appearance, silently inspecting every inch of my body, silently inquiring why I was in the men’s room.

“This is the men’s room? Oh my God! How embarrassing.” I turned off the water, snatched a paper towel and dried my hands. “I’m so sorry. I felt nauseous and rushed in, not even looking.”

The young man smiled at my feminine voice, relieved that I was a woman (at least superficially). But despite my breasts, my body curves, my lacy black dress, my pretty legs; despite my lip gloss, mascara, and shiny red nails, I’m sure he knew that something was dreadfully wrong.

“No problem,” he said. “Can I get you something? An aspirin?”

Admiring his self-possession, I apologized and shuffled back to Alexander, back to the same booth where my grandfather and I ate dinner once a week; feeling like an escaped convict after years on the run, finally caught and forced to confess. For those of us, who as Ovid said, ‘Hover between the sexes,’ we live our lives fearing that we’ll be found out—before we’re ready to confess—no matter how hard we cover up—not that we deceive or lie, but it’s just too visceral—too overwhelming to confess all at once.

“You OK?” Alexander asked as I nestled into the booth.

“I guess I’m not used to the champagne.” I dabbed my eyes with a napkin, imagining us walking in the rain, holding hands, my head softly on his shoulder. But a jarring inner voice warned that I must confess; a threatening, ominous, persistent voice warning that I couldn’t keep

putting this off. Indeed, I couldn't live this lie any longer. "Alexander, there's something I have to say."

The waitress asked for our order.

"We'll have the roasted spit for two," I blurted, without realizing that I could never eat all that boar, steak, venison, and sausage. "I'm sorry, Alexander, I should have asked you."

"That sounds perfect. I was just looking at that."

I pushed my barely eaten clams and linguini aside, wishing someone else would say what I had to say, wishing I could fast-forward to the end of my confession already said without hearing a word. I took a sip of champagne, imagining us walking in the rain, my head softly on his shoulder. "Alexander...I have a female and a male identity." I carefully avoided his contorted look of unsure superiority that something was wrong, that something was amiss." Perhaps in an ideal world I could be both, affirming each, accepted by my husband for who I am. But that's not the world I live in." I was relieved to have finally mentioned 'it,' relieved that I had finally broached the subject with a 'normal' person; surprised at how easy the words formed. "It took me a long time to realize...and an even longer time to accept it...I didn't choose this—nobody in their right mind would."

"I don't understand. Separate identities? Female and male? What are you saying?"

"I'm glad you don't understand, Alexander. I'm glad that you never awoke in the middle of the night unsure and confused, never witnessed your friends commit suicide because they couldn't pretend to be someone else, never struggled to stay alive while your own family disparaged you and your so-called friends disowned you."

For a split second I thought I saw a modicum of understanding.

"Why didn't you say something when we first met?"

"I'm telling you now."

"So does this mean you dress as a man?"

"Sometimes."

"In public?"

"Yes."

"What exactly do you wear?"

Couples around us were smiling, talking, eating, celebrating. I felt like I was going to throw up. I slouched forward, fidgeting my knife; my

voice subdued. “Everything. . . jackets, jeans... underwear. . . even a Fu Manchu.”

“A Fu Manchu? Why?”

I shrugged.

“And underwear you said? Men’s underwear?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I just do.”

The waitress rearranged our glasses and utensils, making room for the roasted spit of boar, steak, venison, and sausage. I wanted to finish my confession and leave, for I realized that confessing was tiring and debilitating. “I’ve spent a lifetime trying to understand who I am and why I was born like this. I’ve spent a lifetime blaming others. I’ve spent a lifetime trying to survive. I’m transgender, Alexander. There—I said it. Now you can leave and find someone else, someone halfway normal.” I dabbed at my plate, not sure if I was eating sausage, venison, steak, or boar.

“My world’s black and white,” Alexander said. “Male and female. I’m hard-wired to like a certain type of woman.”

“I’m also hardwired, Alexander. Something I can’t help, something I’ve no choice, something I have to accept and live with.” I rose to leave, my eyes watering, avoiding his look of complacent contempt. “I hope you find someone normal, someone safe and secure, someone you can listen to, someone you can share your life with—you deserve that.

I bid Alexander good-bye, softly kissing his forehead, and hurriedly left.

I remembered my grandfather comforting me during our first dinner at the Old Post Inn, that someday I’d meet someone who will love me for who I am. Yeah right. I’m sure that stuff happens. Somewhere. Perhaps in the movies. I stopped at the register informing the maître d’ that it wasn’t the food, the service or the ambience, but that I had been feeling nauseous all day (anticipating my confession) and perhaps shouldn’t have come for dinner. The maître d’ offered to call a cab. I paid the bill, leaving a generous tip for the waitress, promising to return soon, thanking him, saying my car was in the parking lot. As I bid the maître d’ goodnight, I noticed Alexander rising, straightening his jacket, brushing his hair back; the waitress talking, as if reprimanding,

## 1. Joanna Turnus

handing him the dozen roses, the stems wrapped in foil.

Outside in the chilly evening air, I hurriedly passed a young couple entering the Old Post Inn, exuberant, anxious to celebrate a birthday, an anniversary, the birth of a child; her head softly on his shoulder, his arm wrapped around her, whispering how beautiful she was.



**Part II.**

**Book One**



## 2. Joanna Turnus

My parents were happiest when my mother was pregnant with me, at least that's what my grandfather had said—except for one minor and short-lived argument early during her pregnancy; the major ones would come later: My mother wanted to name me Joseph Michael Turnus after my two deceased brothers, but my father adamantly objected—thank God. And I'm not giving anything away to say that they were never so happy again.

In anticipation of my birth (twenty-nine years ago this month) my parents had painted my bedroom blue and gold with a white trim, and stenciled Red Sox and Patriots' logos on the walls. They stocked my room with soldiers, footballs, baseballs, a horse rocker. On the walls, an autographed portrait of Carlton Fisk, photos of Knute Rockne, Ara Parseghian, and Joe Montana; an aerial view of Fenway Park.

It was a fun time for my parents, sharing their dreams for me. My father saw me in the family construction business, after college of course; while my mother insisted that her young husky (her nickname for me during her pregnancy) would play football, eventually getting a scholarship to Notre Dame, following her father's footsteps. While my father saw me as a tight end, maybe a defensive end, my mother saw me as a quarterback, just like her father. In their dreams there was plenty of room for compromise.

Sounds ideal, right? Off to a great start while still in my mother's womb?

Except that I was born a girl.

At the hospital, my parents had either forgotten, didn't want to, or were too upset to give me a middle name, but my grandfather insisted. He said that not having one would complicate my life (as if my complicated life could've been any more complicated). Adamant, he expected an argument with my father—after all, they had argued about everything else—but surprisingly my father quietly deferred, no doubt

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distracted by my mother's grief.

I was named Joanna Meredith Turnus.

Sometimes I wonder if I initially was a boy in my mother's womb, then somehow became a girl. Sometimes I wonder what it would've been like to be happy in my gender, never imagining anything but. Sometimes I wonder if my parents had done everything right—even if they had treated me like a girl from the beginning and were happy for me—if I still would have been screwed up. I mean, look at my best friend Rachel: from a happy and 'normal' family, but she always knew that something was wrong: that she was a woman trapped in a man's body.

If my mother had known that she was pregnant with a girl, she would have aborted me. I know that. I overheard her tell my aunt when I was eight years old, before I even knew what the word meant.

### 3. Alexander Morgan

“Morgan!” Phil yelled. “Help the welder watch the sparks so the roof don’t go up in flames, you goddamned son-of-a-bitch.”

“After I finish,” I said, centering a wickedly large concrete shard into my wheelbarrow; careful so it wouldn’t tip.

“Now!”

Sure as hell, Phil had forgotten that Zella Asphalt was about to pave the bank’s newly expanded parking lot, and that we—make that I—had to pick up all the accumulated bricks, bottles, cans, nails, spikes, sawed-off planks, concrete shards, pieces of strapping, and other crap; assuming, of course, that pick-up duty was ever on his schedule.

“Send Paul,” I said, nudging my wheelbarrow forward to the left, compensating its slight tilt to the right. “Zella will be pissed as hell—”

“If you ain’t on the roof in two minutes, you can start working for Zella.”

I threw my hands up in disgust and headed toward the backside of the bank.

“Are you deaf?” Phil yelled, waving his arms up and down. “I just asked you to grab a goddamned extinguisher.”

If I insisted that he had said no such thing, he would’ve ranted and raved even more, but I had better things to do than to bear witness, so I slipped away and did as asked.

To be honest I don’t know where they got this bastard. Zachary should have started him on an easy one-story addition rather than this bank which was challenging even for a semi-competent supervisor: Originally two stories, the bank was expanding 200 hundred feet in back and five floors up in the middle of a busy city block, while remaining open for business,

The extinguisher wasn’t where it was supposed to be—but when is shit ever rightfully returned? I snatched a yellowed invoice from the desktop and wrote in bold, black letters:

### 3. Alexander Morgan

Please return the extinguisher to where it friggin' belongs!

I double-underlined the sentence, highlighted it, then hooked the yellowed invoice on the wall above the desk, exactly where the extinguisher should have been.

At the back of the trailer, I plowed through square shovels, round shovels, picks, bars, rakes, water hoses, boots, water pumps, stepladders, sledgehammers, chipping hammers, buckets, paint cans, cement bags, asphalt shingles, compressor hoses—everything was heaped in an organized mess. Finally, I found an extinguisher wedged between a compactor and a flat-tired, one-armed wheelbarrow.

With a half-broken shingle, I scraped off the dirt and grime caked on the extinguisher from years of non-use. Then I monkeyed up the long aluminum ladder leaning against the bank's backside, shouldering the extinguisher like a Christmas tree. On the roof, I tapped the welder's shoulder, letting him know that his all-important spark-watcher was ready for duty.

He tipped up his Darth Vader mask just above his nose, bracing it with his index finger, barking instructions like I was an idiot, like I didn't know that the sun-baked insulation was dry as a bastard.

The welder slipped off his mask, rubbing its Plexiglas eye cover. "Give me a minute."

I meandered to the roof's front edge. A delicious aroma of baking bread knitted the stale smells of gasoline, lumber, fresh dirt, diesel, and sawdust.

"Don't disappear, I'll be—"

The welder was snuffed by the whining and screeching of screw guns—metal against metal—whirring from the newly-built partitions below. A constant, day-long, seductively irritating rhythm: One gun. A second. A third. A brief silence. Then the first, second, third.

Directly below the roof's edge, Nick, Abe, and Walter were framing a wooden form for the new sidewalk on what used to be a broad expanse of grass studded with tall oak trees: a peaceful buffer between the bank and the busy street traffic. But the bank president had ordered the trees cut down, claiming that they obstructed the view. Really? A traffic-clogged rotary fed by three, traffic-clogged streets, and that's a friggin' view?

The welder signaled that he was ready; ready to strengthen the steel

beams across the old roof that would soon support the new floors. The steel skeleton of the upper addition was already in place.

I kicked a few pebbles over the roof's edge, then scooted back.

"Cut the shit!" I heard Nick yell above the whining and screeching.

At the roof's far end a crane operator was unloading steel beams. A huge American flag draped motionless from his cab. As fast as he unloaded, guys aligned and welded, showering sparks in every direction. I gave the crane operator the finger, like I did every morning, and he ignored me, like he did every morning. Sure, he makes triple my salary, but does that entitle him to be a prick?

Watching sparks ain't as easy as it seems. Yeah, you wait for nothing to happen, but no matter how hard you try, you can't help glance at the welding arc. It won't blind like you an friggin' eclipse, but even a casual glance hurts your eyes, and then you suffer like a bastard that night.

Below us was an old computer billing room. Everything flammable had long been removed; polyethylene covered the still-remaining metal filing cabinets. Guess who was chomping on an unlit cigar, looking up at me, armed with a water hose? Gary. I'm sure he had reserved this job days ago before anyone else even knew about it. Everyone says that he used to be a good laborer but that must have been years before his triple chin and large, protruding stomach.

Why have two guys standing around waiting for nothing to happen? I clicked on my cell phone to call Phil and was surprised as hell to find three text messages from Lisa, and it wasn't even eight o'clock.

I stepped back from the welder, away from view, reading the first message, "Derek's working overtime tonight. I'm making a nice dinner, why don't you stop by?" Then the second: "He won't be home until nine!!!" And the third: "Call Me!"

Maybe, just maybe, if she wasn't married to my brother. "Call you later," I texted. "I'm working." My message didn't send. I tried resending. Finally, after three tries.

Suddenly the insulation began crackling and sizzling. Shit! The welder whipped off his mask, stomping and swearing like a bastard. I sprayed the extinguisher, but nothing came out. Gary threw us the hose and the welder extinguished the flames, and not a second too soon.

"What the hell were you doing?" demanded the welder. "Why'd you bring an empty extinguisher? Get another one that works! And no

### 3. Alexander Morgan

more fuckin' screwups."



## 4. Joanna Turnus

It was an unusually warm day during an unusually warm spring. Trees had budded early, the grass was green, and everyone was mowing their lawns. It was Thursday, March 30, 1997—my grandfather's birthday—that's how I remember. I was in the sixth grade.

At school I had made my grandfather a nice birthday card out of yellow construction paper, and with a red marker had sprawled in my neatest script,

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO THE BEST GRANDFATHER IN THE WHOLE WORLD!!

I had crossed out 'WORLD' and replaced it with 'UNIVERSE.' But instead of gluing a photograph, I drew a picture of us; I knew that he'd appreciate that more.

My parents said that I was his clone, never nicely of course, but I didn't realize how true it was until I began drawing. We both have small ears, which I never minded (as if I had a choice). We both have large foreheads, which looked good on my grandfather, especially with his receding hairline, but not on me, although he always said so just to assuage me. We both have wide, brown eyes. Mine are soft—that's what everyone says—but soft is just a nicer word for too big. My grandfather's eyes were definitely not soft, and if they were any bigger, you'd swear he was a frog.

Thank God I didn't have his beak nose. A large forehead is bad enough, but I couldn't imagine having a beak nose and a large forehead—I'd never go out in public. My nose is small, too small (if there's such a thing) but at least it matches my small ears (as if that matters). But I worry that my kids will have super big noses (things like that usually skip a generation), although my father has my grandfather's nose.

My grandfather always wore a full moustache to distract attention from his nose (at least that's what he said) but it didn't work: You saw the moustache you saw the nose.

I drew my mouth a little smaller. Everyone says I have my mother's wide-open mouth. My grandfather said it was from her constant laughing, at least before her two miscarriages. He also said that my mother was the prettiest girl in the senior class at Walpole High, when she met my father, who was, by the way, no slouch himself.

I didn't have the heart to draw all those deep lines across my grandfather's temple making him look older. However, I did draw him a little taller and me a little shorter, so that we were almost the same height. He always boasted being average height, although he was actually shorter than average; and I was taller than average—I still am—in fact, I was the tallest girl in sixth grade.

When school ended my grandfather was waiting for me. I was wearing olive-green shorts with an over-sized white shirt. (Just before school ended that afternoon, I had changed from long pants to shorts.) I wore shorts a lot, even in winter. I liked feeling the hair on my legs and how it made my legs look stronger, as if I had muscles.

He opened the passenger door of his new Silverado truck and extended his helping hand—a big step even for me. He smiled and I smiled back.

"Bubbling Brook just opened for the season," my grandfather said. "How does that sound?"

I nodded enthusiastically—he didn't even have to ask.

For a split second my grandfather had that perplexed stare, that contorted look of unsure superiority that something was wrong, that something was amiss; a conscripted stare that I would become so inured to from so many people that even now when I'm introduced to someone I look to the ground, the sky, anywhere but their eyes.

I carefully removed my grandfather's birthday card from my backpack. Noticing an edge was bent just a little, I smoothed it before handing it to him. "I made you something," I said, with a hint of apprehension.

He smiled. "It's absolutely beautiful." He blew his nose with a Kleenex.

I never knew anyone so emotional. Too bad none of that rubbed off on my father.

Bubbling Brook had already opened its seasonal shed behind the main restaurant; a pleasant area with lots of picnic tables and shady pine trees. We decided to eat there on such a warm, sunny afternoon.

The line to the shed was long, but it moved quickly; lots of mothers with their kids, talking and laughing. Two boys stood behind us with their mother. One, short with red hair, the other, my height with black hair. They didn't look related—the mother had blond hair—but she talked as if she was their mother. The tall boy was really cute, a little older than me, like in junior high school. I kept glancing at the back of the line pretending to look for someone just to sneak a peak.

A brook meandered between the tables, and sometimes if quiet enough—although it never was—you could hear it swooshing over deep sink-holes, like someone gargling mouthwash. I never heard it, but my grandfather swore he had, once when he took me here in my stroller.

On the other side of the brook, beyond the tables, were blueberry bushes. During the summer, Bubbling Brook makes the best blueberry ice cream, but you really have to like blueberries because it's like eating a blueberry pie. They also grow their own strawberries, raspberries, peaches, watermelons, and apples, making them into ice cream, but blueberry is their best. My grandfather agreed.

The ground was wet and mucky, suggesting that the brook had recently overflowed. The wonderful smell of grilled hamburgers made me hungry. My grandfather read my mind, as always. I nodded enthusiastically when he asked if I wanted a hamburger (if I had said no, he would've ordered one anyway).

When it was our turn to order my grandfather stepped to the window. "Do you have any blueberry ice cream?"

I heard the boys laughing.

"No," replied the waitress. "We sold the last of the summer lot just yesterday with the warm weather, but we still have peach ice cream?"

"No. Give me two vanilla cones and two hamburgers: one with everything and one with just extra ketchup." My grandfather winked at me.

The boys continued laughing.

Curious, I was about to turn to see why, when I realized that they were laughing about me.

"That's disgusting," said one, loud enough for me to hear. "I'd never go out with someone like that."

I'm sure my grandfather heard, although out of the corner of my eye, he was still talking to the waitress.

"I bet she doesn't shave her armpits," said the other.

"Why would someone that pretty not shave her legs?" asked the mother. "Why would her mother allow it?"

"Disgusting," the boys said.

I knew my grandfather heard, although he pretended not. His smile disappeared, that's

how I knew. I wished the brook was deeper and carried to the ocean. I imagined swimming backwards, my ears submerged, listening to the water, arms slicing, legs kicking, immersed in my hidden world.

My grandfather asked for extra napkins. He said something to the mother. I snuck behind him, hidden from view. He wrapped his arm around me, guiding me away. He was talking. I wasn't listening.

The engine was running. We were sitting in his truck. My grandfather had finished his ice cream and his hamburger. I must have finished mine because my hands were gooey, although I didn't remember eating.

"Sometimes boys say things they don't really mean," my grandfather said, handing me a napkin. "Sometimes they say things without thinking, especially when together. Sometimes they say things that they'd never say alone, just to please their friends. It's natural for boys to. . ."

I saw my mother peeking from behind our living room curtain, smiling, watching me play touch football with the neighborhood boys. I was the only girl ever asked to play, although everyone considered me a boy because I dressed like one and was better at every sport. My mother smiled when I scored a touchdown, smiled when I ran faster than anyone else, smiled when I made a nice block; so I ran faster, blocked harder, and scored more touchdowns. More touchdowns than anyone.

## 5. Alexander Morgan

I tapped the welder's shoulder, asking if he wanted anything for coffee break.

He propped up his mask just above his nose, bracing it with his forefinger. "Just a small coffee." He handed me a ten-dollar bill. "Black. And an English muffin. Buttered."

"Both sides?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you join us?"

"By the time I climb down, shut the machine off, coffee break will be over. Just bring it up you with you. And the change."

"Who's going to watch for sparks while I'm gone?"

The welder shook his head, lowering his mask.

I descended the ladder and headed to the front of the bank sidestepping two-by-fours, pipes, planks, bricks, spikes, and unannounced holes.

"Leaving for the day?" Nick dropped his hammer in his holster. "I wish I had your goddamn hours." Admiring his almost-finished wooden form for the concrete sidewalk, he fished deep in his overall pockets pulling out a pack of cigarettes.

"What you want for coffee?" I asked.

Nick lit a cigarette, then handed me a five-dollar bill. "Take a wild guess. And make sure there's four goddamn sugars. Yesterday—"

"I put them four in myself."

Nick removed his hard hat, brushing back his blond hair—what was left of it—then hurriedly put it back on, as if shying away from baldness. But there ain't nothing you can do about it. And I'm sorry, but blonde dudes shouldn't try to grow a beard. A moustache perhaps, even a friggin' Fu Manchu, but definitely not a beard.

Nick exhaled smoke in my face, "Make sure there's four goddamned sugars."

5. Alexander Morgan

“One large coffee with four goddamned sugars.” I typed his order into my cell phone—you have to with these bastards. “Hey, if they’re out of goddamned sugars—they sell out pretty quickly—”

“Four goddamned sugars. And don’t disappear after coffee. You have to put the wire down for the sidewalk.”

Yeah, no shit.

This was damn fine weather. Just like an August day but without the humidity. If I didn’t have my truck payment hanging over me, I’d call in sick and head to the beach, but with my luck some reporter would do a story on construction guys playing hooky and then everyone in the city of Boston would know that I wasn’t sick.

“Well, well, well,” Abe said. “Look who’s coming to work.” He stood at the other end of the wooden sidewalk form, steadying a plank lengthwise, while Walter braced it with a piece of strapping. Abe removed his thick black glasses, wiping them with a handkerchief before putting them back on. “Give us a hand.”

“We’re good,” said Walter. A short man with a perfectly round face and an always-red left eye, like he was suffering a perpetual hangover. “The kid’s goin’ for coffee.”

“First work he’s done all day,” said Abe.

Despite Walter being white and Abe black, at first glance you’d swear these two bastards were related: Same height, same stout build, same upturned, pudgy nose, but Abe’s stomach is flat and his eye ain’t always red, although sometimes it’s hard to tell with them heavy glasses. Everyone says Abe is a youthful 59, but if you ask me, he looks exactly 59; whereas Walter’s leathery, weather-beaten skin makes him look even older. So much for first glances.

Walter handed me a twenty-dollar bill, then said to Abe: “I’m buyin’.”

“You win the lottery or something?” asked Abe.

“Haven’t bought in a while.”

“The friggin’ understatement of the year.” Abe picked up another plank, eyeballing it for straightness. “Make sure them both sides of my English muffin are buttered.”

“You should be double-checkin’ everyone’s order,” Walter said to me. “And take Gary’s coffee out of my twenty.”

“I’ll need a lot more that,” I said, extending my hand.

"Just get him one coffee. And one goddammed muffin."

"English?"

"Bran," said Walter. "He's on a new diet."

"Every week he says he's on a new diet," snickered Abe.

"If he exercised every now and then," I said. "He wouldn't need no diet. So, he don't want his muffin slabbed with butter as usual?"

Walter frowned. "Didn't say, but yesterday he was full of piss and vinegar that his muffins were marmaladed."

"Marmaladed?" asked Abe.

"His words."

"Then he should've said something if he was so pissed"

"He did," Abe said. "He raised quite a stink during coffee. Don't you remember?"

"Dozin' off again?" Walter said. "You should be payin' attention during coffee break."

"Hey, the kid put in a good fifteen minutes of work and needed to rest."

Walter fondled a piece of strapping, then, at a forty-five-degree angle, nailed it to the plank. "Gary wants a small black coffee, no cream and no sugar. And one friggin' bran muffin. Get goin' kid, it's almost time for lunch."

"Where's Paul?" I asked, typing in Gary's order. Of course, everyone knew that he was still snapping off them rods sticking out from the newly poured foundation, and probably will for the rest of his life.

"He's found a new home," Walter said.

"If he'd listened to me, he'd be done by now," I said.

"Why would anyone listen to you?" asked Abe.

"He better not get too comfortable," added Walter. "When they start gradin' he might be backfilled along with the dirt."

"Not the worst thing to happen," I muttered.

"Get goin' kid, it's almost time for lunch."

At the rear of the bank, I straddled a six-foot mound of fresh black dirt, paralleling the newly poured foundation, carefully side-stepping the aluminum ladder. Not that I'm superstitious about shit, but I have enough bad luck without inviting more. Sure enough, Paul was leaning against the foundation clasping an open-ended pipe around a two-inch,

exposed reinforcing rod, pushing it to the right, left, right, left, right, left.

“Hey Paul. Time for coffee.”

“Time for coffee!” I repeated. “I ain’t got all friggin’ day.”

The rod snapped, throwing Paul to the ground. He pushed himself up with his long, bony hands, wiping his forehead with his sweaty tee-shirt.

“Look at you: Sweating like a bastard and it ain’t even nine o’clock. If you had torched them rods like I suggested, you’d be done by now.”

“You know I get the same thing every day,” Paul said, searching for his open-ended pipe.

“Because the one day I don’t ask, you’d want something different and then I’d never hear the friggin’ end of it—and besides I need money.”

“Use the change you still owe me from yesterday.”

“Change? You owe me twenty cents, you cheap bastard.”

Paul handed me a sweaty five-dollar bill. “Twenty cents? And I’m the cheap bastard?”

“Twenty cents one day, forty cents another; it adds up.”

Just then a large flatbed truck hauling a bulldozer and a grader rumbled into the bank’s newly expanded parking lot.

“I thought they weren’t grading until Friday?” Paul said.

“Friday? Who said that?”

“Phil.”

“And you believed him?” I pointed to the far end of the foundation. “What about them two rods still sticking out?”

“Two rods? Big deal.”

“Big deal? Why not leave them all in?”

“Don’t tell me how to do my job.” Paul shuffled down the dirt mound, giving me an over-the-shoulder the finger. Like I really gave a shit.



## 6. Joanna Turnus

I wasn't going to mention underwear—after all it's no one's business—but since you'll soon find out, I'll tell you now so that at least you'll understand. I wear male boxers, except, of course, when I have to wear a dress or a skirt for work, then I wear male briefs, which aren't nearly as comfortable. When I get married next spring (yes, I will wear a wedding dress—a friend of mine is designing it) I will wear boxers. I've already informed my fiancé and he's fine with that—he's such a wonderful man.

I'm not blaming anyone, and I don't have an axe to grind. I'm also old enough to make my own decisions, but like every aspect of my life this decision was made for me, by others; more specifically, by my mother.

It was a cold December afternoon. I was nine years old. After snowing all morning, it abruptly stopped, giving way to a clear blue sky. It was the first snowfall of the season, and quite unexpected since the forecast had called for rain and then freezing rain. I wanted to play in the backyard but needed my winter clothes that were stored in the basement, which I hated, partly because of the ubiquitous smell of heating oil—so bitter you could taste it. (We still used an old-fashioned oil furnace, only because my father was supporting his friend's oil business.) And partly because of our furnace, and for good reason: Just one month earlier, I was in the basement getting something—I don't remember what—when I heard the furnace clicking. Curious, I noticed that the small, circular glass window on the furnace front was broken. I could see the dull orange flame in the center. Suddenly, the furnace made a low hammering noise, spitting out sparks; one brushed my leg, and another landed on the rug. I ran upstairs, screaming, scared that it was about to explode. Of course, my father didn't believe me, laughing that I had made the whole thing up. But I didn't lie (I've never lied to anyone; well actually only once—I had to, which I'll tell you in due time) and I know what I saw.

My winter clothes were thankfully shelved underneath the wooden

staircase, easily retrievable without nearing the furnace. Nevertheless, I patiently waited until it shut off, then quietly descended, fearful that any noise might trigger it. I was putting my snowsuit on, leaning against a glass cabinet filled with never-used wedding dishes. I had one leg in when I noticed my mother methodically descending the stairs clutching a small package. Reaching the bottom, she tersely handed it to me. It was underwear. Boys' underwear. Her cold, empty eyes were far away in a distant past, a past which I knew nothing; a past which I'll never know.

I shoved the underwear back into my mother's chest. I'm not sure why; I had never before disobeyed her. Maybe because of how callously she presented it, like presenting the head of John the Baptist to Salome; maybe because she didn't even ask, presuming that I'd do whatever she wanted; maybe because even for me—only nine years old—I knew something was dreadfully wrong: Girls aren't supposed to wear boys' underwear and their mothers aren't supposed to make them.

She stumbled backwards, steadying herself on the railing. She brushed her short hair back, revealing streaks of grey. She glanced at me, then opening the door to the glass cabinet, placed the underwear on a shelf next to a stack of dusty dishes. Relieved, I assumed she had changed her mind. Then she took a dish, blew off the dust, methodically examining it. She raised it high as if offering a sacrifice, then let it crash to the floor. A small piece nicked my bare leg. I winced. She removed another dish; examined it, blowing off the dust. She held it high, then let it crash to the ground, shattering it. Another dish. Another. And another.

I screamed, fearing what she might do next. I took the underwear from the shelf and slowly removed my snow pants. I tried balancing myself but couldn't see through my watered eyes and fell. My mother closed the cabinet door, then snatched my panty just as I had slipped it off. I inched the underwear up my leg, shivering, crying, ashamed; wondering if any other mother in the world made her daughter wear boys' underwear.

## 7. Alexander Morgan

“Where’ve you been?” demanded Walter.

Snapping turtles—all of them—crouched in a circle waiting to snap. You’d think they’d be relaxed, basking in the shade, waiting for their hand-delivered morning coffee.

“We thought you took the rest of the day off,” Walter said. He was sitting on an overturned plastic bucket, underneath a lone, yellow-leaved oak tree.

“How can he take the rest of the day off when he ain’t even worked the first part?” said Abe, squeezed next to Walter on a stack of old newspapers; his back against the water barrel.

“He’s got a point, kid,” Nick said to me, lighting a cigarette. He sat on a stack of two-by-fours, opposite Walter.

“Where’s my coffee, kid?” Walter asked. “It’s almost time for lunch.”

“Did you get my hot water?” asked Gary, squished next to Abe.

“Hot water?” I said. “You didn’t ask for no hot water.”

“I most certainly did. I told Walter to—”

“You didn’t mention nothing about no hot water,” I said to Walter, who seemed to be busying himself with his coffee.

“I did kid, you wasn’t listenin’.”

I handed Gary his coffee, then showed everyone Gary’s order from my cell phone, while reading Walter’s words: “Gary wants a small black coffee, no cream and no sugar. And one friggin’ bran muffin. Get goin’ kid, it’s almost time for lunch.”

“Sounds like something you’d say,” said Nick.

“Hot water?” Abe asked Gary.

“With my new diet I’m drinking nothing but tea.”

“New diet?” asked Walter.

“It’s a new week,” I noted.

“All the tea in goddamned China won’t help you lose a goddamned ounce,” said Abe.

Gary, unwrapping his muffin, turned toward me: "I supposed you had both sides buttered?"

"I figured that with starting a new diet you'd only want one."

"See, the kid's always thinkin'," said Walter.

"It's called anticipation." I was sitting on the bare ground on Nick's left, against a stack of two-by-fours still wet with morning dew. Closing my eyes, I inhaled its sweet, apple cider perfume. The fifteen minutes for coffee break seemed like an eternity.

Nick tugged my shoulder. "You'll get worms sitting on the goddamned ground."

"Paul out sick again?" asked Gary.

"Jealous?" Abe asked.

"Well, well, well; speaking of the goddamned devil," Nick said, as Paul slumbered in, his tall skinny frame hunched like a camel.

"You're the slowest fuckin' rod-snapper I've ever seen," Abe said.

"My change?" Paul demanded, sitting on Nick's right.

"I'll get it after coffee."

"You should see him dab cement on them holes," Gary said. "Like he was Picasso or someone."

"You're jealous because you didn't get that job," Walter said.

"Christ, if he did," added Nick, "he'd ask Phil for a goddamned addition just to keep workin' on them goddamned holes."

Gary wiped his face with a handkerchief. "I thought about it, but with my back there ain't no way I could work like that for eight friggin' hours."

"Since when you ever worked eight friggin' hours?" Walter said. "Maybe if you did some work now and then you wouldn't have no back problems. I'm your age but you don't hear me complainin' about my friggin' back every wakin' hour."

"Hey Walter," Nick suggested. "Give Alex some newspapers to sit on."

"He can get his own."

Nick tugged my shoulder. "With Zella here, you'll have to move our trailers so they can start grading."

Walter cleared his throat, smiling; a smile that boasted of advanced, privileged knowledge. "Just this mornin' Zachary said this tree's stayin'."

"Talking to Zachary again?" Gary asked.

"In fact, this little section right here ain't bein' hot-topped at all. They're keepin' the tree and makin' a little oasis so the bank employees can eat their friggin' lunch outside."

"What about the rest of the parking lot?" I asked.

"From here to the bank, asphalt," Walter replied, beaming as if it was his own idea. "And from here to the back alley, grass."

"I was thinking—" said Paul.

"A fuckin' first," Nick said, a cigarette dangling from his lower lip, as if held tight by a groove. I tried that once, but sucked the cigarette into my mouth, practically singeing my tongue.

"I was thinking why no one's invented nothing for snapping them rods off. It wouldn't take much: take a six-inch, open-ended pipe, smooth it, paint it; then attach a compressor to the sucker, just like a chipping hammer."

"No one would buy it," Gary snorted. "Them open-ended pipes are a dime-a-dozen."

Walter balanced his half-eaten bran muffin on the rim of his coffee cup. Either his muscular hands were too big for his small body, or his body too small for his fast-moving hands as if they had a life of their own, as if they were pushing and pulling and coaxing the slow-forming words out of his mouth—and sometimes they would intimate a completely different line of thought before words could follow. "Ever since foundations have been poured, them rods have been taken out the same friggin' way. I did it, you're doin' it, and—"

"He's right," added Nick. "You can't sell nothin' no one wants to buy."

"It takes me two days to snap off them rods," Paul said.

"Only two hours with a friggin' torch," I noted.

"And my invention can do it in one hour," said Paul with newfound confidence. "Think of the savings."

I could tell Paul was itching to say something like, 'I'll be rich someday and then I'll show all you bastards.' Every week he dreams up a new invention, but to be honest, they all suck. Like last week's retractable, pocket-sized cat's paw, especially made for women. Can you imagine! I've dated lots of women and I've yet to meet one who knew—or even wanted to know—how to use a cat's paw.

Walter blew his nose on a napkin. "So, what you call this friggin' invention of yours?"

He inspected the napkin as if searching for lost change, crumpled it, and tossed it in the water barrel.

Paul frowned.

"How can you invent something without first naming it?" I asked. "Anyone can think of shit to invent. No wonder all your ideas suck."

"How about the all-purpose snapper?" offered Gary.

Everyone laughed, except Paul, of course.

"How about a video?" I suggested. "Paul busting his skinny ass, manually snapping off

each rod, taking all day just for one, then Gary snapping, not even breaking a sweat."

"We don't want it too realistic," said Abe.

"I'll call it The Cabrini."

"You don't name something after yourself, you dipshit," I said. "Call it what it does, so everyone knows what the hell it is."

Lisa texted me, "Hello???"

"It's that time," Walter said, rising from his bucket.

That's how he ends every break, like we're about to march off a cliff or something.

"Time for what?" I asked.

"What'd you think?" Nick flicked his cigarette butt at me.

"You can't sit on your ass all mornin'."

"Why don't you ask Zella to join us for afternoon coffee," Nick suggested.

Walter nodded. "Not a bad idea kid."

"They can get their own."

Walter took my arm. "Listen kid, you want people rememberin' you as the prick who never bought coffee? Asphalt guys remember shit like this: here just for a few days, then onto the next job, spreadin' news like friggin' wildfire." He tightened his grip. "If you want to get elected AFL-CIO president, you have to make people remember you."

"I'll vote for you just to get your ass out of here," Nick said, lighting a cigarette.

Walter removed a wad of bills from his wallet, handing me a twenty. "Every bastard you meet is a friggin' vote."

"Christ Almighty!" exclaimed Nick. "How'd you get so loaded?"

“So, doing shit jobs and scrounging everyone’s coffee will get me elected?”

Walter waved me away. “Get goin’ kid, it’s almost time for lunch.”