

I

Arthur Adamski learned the disadvantages of being a man one by lumbering one. He invented routines to protect and sustain what few pleasures survived his education. As he had every Saturday morning for more than twenty years, he'd got himself out of bed after Sylvia left for morning Mass. Perched on the narrow bench in the built-in alcove that barely accommodated his six-foot frame, he hunched over the painted plywood table and read the *Pittsfield Courier*. Here, despite the odds, he enjoyed a temporary sense of possession over the house he'd provided his family in Pittsfield's best neighborhood.

The house no longer housed a family. His elder daughter, Jane, lived somewhere in New York City. Alison and her husband and children lived within six blocks of this stucco house on Holmes Road, but the distance wasn't stable; it fed itself on time and grew. Artie—"Arthur junior hardly," according to his father—worked with juvenile delinquents in Pennsylvania, and had given up on the house even as a home for the holidays.

By rights, it should have been Stephen's home. But since the youngest Adamski had decided not to return for his junior year at the University of Massachusetts, he'd lived in a private place, a strangely invisible corner of whatever room he wandered through.

The morning newspaper for the eighth of October, 1983, made public the fact that Stephen had wandered away to a new, if temporary residence. Arthur could just picture his skinny blond son seated on a bench not unlike the bench in the alcove, his eyes fixed on a point of no interest to anyone else who might

be in the room with him. Arthur held to this picture of Stephen as he reread the first few paragraphs of the newspaper story about the local youth who had vandalized the Temple Beth Israel and subsequently stood in front of a local judge and refused to answer the charges on the grounds that his kingdom was not of this world. Arthur hoped he could make sense of the story as a sort of caption for his image of Stephen in a local jail cell.

But the story made no sense to Arthur. And the image of his displaced, unreachable son was not startling or compelling. For weeks now, Arthur had spoken to Stephen across a vast expanse, with no confirmation that his requests and cajolings had been received. "Are you thinking about a job you might like to take on, Steve? Are you going to get a refund for the first semester tuition we sent down to Amherst? It seems you've lost a lot of weight, Steve. Or maybe I'm not used to how tall you are. I don't know which it is. How about it?"

Arthur covered the story with his hands, then raised one hand as a fist and slammed it against the newsprint, to obliterate the incident. As if Stephen might be lurking out of sight in the living room, Arthur addressed him. "Well, what do you want me to do now? You tell everyone you won't see visitors. You won't let me make bail for you. What?"

Accustomed to Stephen's silence, he waited hopelessly for an answer. Frustration faded to sadness as he folded the newspaper's front page in on itself to hide Stephen's story. Inventing a sense of urgency, he resolved to penetrate Stephen's privacy, to reach in with his stronger arm and extricate his son.

Attempting to stand before he'd slid to the end of the bench, Arthur got his leg jammed between the table top and the wall. Instinctively, he reached his hands under the table and began to leverage it off its base. A sharp snap alerted him to what he was about to do. Embarrassed and alarmed, he stared accusingly at

his hands, slid out of the alcove. From a few feet away, the table looked unharmed. But Arthur could see the newspaper had unfolded itself, exposing Stephen. Defeated, he held his hands out to the story, a kind of introduction. Aloud, matter-of-factly, he said, "My son. The crazy bastard."

II

Sylvia McGill Adamski had begun her weekly walk around the neighborhood of the Church of the Sacred Heart by inventing her alibi: "This morning I had to think about Stephen before I could face God." Rarely had she been accosted by a familiar face and been obliged to provide an explanation for her failure to actually go inside the church, but the precaution was her license.

Sylvia's pace this morning was furious. She wanted to propel herself beyond doubt, to a point where Stephen's actions would be simple, quantifiable. But she couldn't make herself believe that Stephen had left college with the express aim of becoming a petty criminal.

When she circled back to the intersection of Holmes Road and Elm Street, she was sweating, pulling her head back with every breath. Resting at the corner, she watched a large maroon sedan edge past the Holmes Road stoplight. Reflexively, she stepped off the curb and rushed along the faded paint of the pedestrian crosswalk, just in time to force the driver to pump his brakes and jar himself against the steering wheel. As was her pleasure, Sylvia turned to face the driver as this small calamity occurred. Meeting the man's embarrassed stare, she performed a pantomime to convey her relief and then her willingness to forgive and forget his potentially fatal miscalculation.

Sylvia was something of an expert at milking such small successes, but this morning's coup was nothing more than a momentary distraction. Her pace returned her home too soon. She tried to justify a visit with her daughter, thinking of the private meetings Stephen had with Alison's husband (and, as far as anyone could tell, Stephen's self-appointed legal counsel), Roger. Despite his claim that he had only reviewed the charges, Roger must have formed a judgment of her son's demeanor.

"I have not seen or spoken to my son in three days." Sylvia tried to forecast the effect of such a plaint on her polite son-in-law.

In fact, she was unwilling to increase the stakes just yet. To date, everyone was dealing with the episode as if it were a small disturbance, a youngster's indiscretion. She did not want to be the one to probe beneath the unlikely but tolerable veneer. It was easy for her to see that the safest route was the path of least resistance, which led her to the broad macadam driveway lined with long since deflowered peonies, through the kitchen door, where she and Arthur could pretend that Stephen's strange behavior had no resonance, that he was just another child to be dealt with, that their most prized secrets were hidden at a twenty-year remove and not within their twenty-year-old son.