

A Sweet Kid

WILLIAM TORPHY

Editors' note: "A Sweet Kid" is a follow-up to Mr. Torphy's "The Good Son," which appears in the 2019 edition of the Bryant Literary Review (Vol. 20). Although "A Sweet Kid" is a fully realized story in itself, we recommend seeking out "The Good Son" if you like Mr. Torphy's writing as much as we do.

I wait anxiously in the United terminal sipping a cup of coffee and feeling ungrounded. My nephew's flight from Baltimore is late because of a severe weather system over the Midwest. My sister Kat tells me that Justin has become very selfish, even for a teenager, and that he lies and constantly tries to manipulate. "Brian and I are at our wits end," she confesses. "Justin tries to hide it, but we know he's smoking pot all the time. Who knows what else he's doing? We've threatened to send him to rehab this summer, but he's told us that he'll run away if we do."

"Rehab seems pretty draconian, Kat. He's only seventeen." I think of myself leaving home when I was Justin's age. I had just been outed and was convinced that our parents would send me to conversion therapy camp that summer.

"Justin was so easy. He was such a good student, mostly A's," she says. "Now he cuts classes and takes a bus somewhere downtown."

I'm tempted to remind her that not only did she smoke pot in high school but was also truant. Is it age or parenting, or both, that's made my sister so tense and anxious? I miss her old wit. Her defiance and fearlessness.

“Brian searched his room a couple of weeks ago. He found a bong, a pipe and a baggie of weed, but no other paraphernalia. Justin blew up when he found out and taped a rock poster with a skull-and-crossbones on his door. They’re arguing all the time now.”

Unlike Kat, I never fought with our parents. I was good at pretense. I did have terrible knockdown, drag-outs with my two alcoholic ex-partners though.

“Justin says he wants to visit you, Edward. What do you think?”
There’s desperation in my sister’s voice. I’m tempted to tell her no.

“He loves you, Edward. He was so excited when he visited you last time.”

I enjoyed Justin’s visit myself. I took time off from the gallery. We drove up to the Gold Country and spent two days at Yosemite. He was such a bright, sweet kid.

“You would be doing us a big, big favor. I know it’s a lot to ask.”

What do I know about teenagers, much less about my special needs, handle-with-extreme-care nephew?

“There’s something you should know,” she says. “Justin has just come out to us. Brian’s having some difficulties with that, but he’s trying.”

“You mean I’ve been elected for a rescue operation?”

“We just need a break, some time to re-group.”

“Okay. I just hope you’re not expecting too much to come from this visit.”

“You’re a real lifesaver.”

Justin lopes up the terminal’s walkway and stands before me. He unslings his backpack and pulls back his hoodie, neither smiling nor

frowning. His dark hair, tips frosted blond in the front, flops over to one side of his forehead and partially covers his right eye.

I smile and conceal my apprehension. "Hello, Justin. It's great to see you." I automatically move to hug him, but hesitate. I put my hand out instead, which he shakes with a surprisingly strong clasp. "Let's get down to baggage claim," I suggest.

He slings his backpack onto his shoulder. "This is all I brought."

A biting wind assaults us on the pedestrian bridge to the parking structure.

"I thought this was supposed to be California," says Justin.

"It's San Francisco. You've been here before."

"Oh, yeah, I remember. Freezing my ass off on the cable car."

The 101 is mercifully free of traffic. The lights of a plane taking off are reflected in the rearview mirror. Even after thirty-five years, I'm still thrilled when I see the city's skyline suddenly appear, skyscrapers glowing, the fingers of fog tumbling over the hills. I'm even beginning to appreciate the looming phallus of the Salesforce tower, with its LED display like some lightshow beaming from Mount Olympus. It's featuring an anti-drug message tonight. Maybe there is a god. But Justin doesn't notice. His eyes are glued to his iPhone's screen.

"Have you called your mother to let her know you're here? She'll be worried."

"She's always worried."

"Why not put her out of her misery?"

He sighs and dials. "Hi Mom, it's me. I'm in the car with Uncle Edward. Talk to you later." Are adolescents really that curt? He must have gotten her voicemail.

I maneuver through jammed city streets and head up Market Street. Justin stares silently out the window. Despite a gale-force wind howling down from Twin Peaks, guys in shorts and T-shirts crowd the sidewalks. At home, Tigre greets us warily, peeking from behind the Chinese chest in the hallway. He's terribly territorial and not fond of visitors. At least he's not hissing, prelude to a hunger strike and a pissing match.

Justin bends down to pet Tigre, who retreats deeper under the chest. "Isn't that the same cat you had when I visited you last time. He must be a million years old now."

"He's only ten."

"That makes him fifty-three in cat years," he informs. My age.

"I'll show you your room." We tread up the spiral staircase, metal ringing with two sets of shoes. My home office doubles as the guestroom. Justin scampers to the windows and stares down at the city. "This is so cool. Baltimore isn't anything like this. I'm so fucking glad to be out of that shithole."

The next morning, I take Justin to the gallery, a straight-shot from Ashbury Heights down 17th Street to Dogpatch. The area was once filled with light-manufacturing, greasy-spoon cafes and working-class bars. It's now chockablock with new condos, vegan-locavore restaurants, hip boutiques and art galleries like mine. I point out a few of the more interesting shops. Justin dutifully glances up from his phone and nods.

I had a gallery downtown on Geary Street until high-tech rents scattered us dealers across San Francisco's forty-nine square miles. I was

lucky to win the leasing lottery to relocate in a former machine shop rehabbed into a kind of art multiplex. I park in my dedicated space—forget finding parking on the streets anymore—and switch on the gallery lights. “These graffiti paintings are so cool!” exclaims Justin. I’m cheered by this unexpected enthusiasm.

“They’re by Nick Stone. He used to be homeless but started painting after he stopped taking drugs.” I’ve decided to be instructive right out of the gate. “You can sit in my office with your friend the phone while I change some of the art work. We can go out for lunch after my assistant Patrick gets here.”

“I can help you,” he volunteers.

“I want to replace these drawings with one of Nick’s big paintings.” From storage, I pull out a six-by-four-foot canvas bursting with brilliant color and crawling with a multitude of overlapping images, among which are two anatomically-identifiable men fucking. I’m caught off-guard and feel embarrassed for a moment, but quickly collect myself. After all, my sister has sent her boy to spend quality time with his very identifiably gay uncle.

Justin helps me carry the painting and we set it against the empty wall. I show him a trick for installing at the ideal height and have him pencil in the spots for two hooks. We hoist together, attach the wire, and step back. It’s our first bonding experience of the trip.

Justin studies it critically. “It’s crooked.” And adjusts it.

My assistant, Patrick, arrives early. He’s only a few years older than Justin and they seem to hit it off, trading comments in arcane phrases I’m not hip to. After leaving instructions, Justin and I leave for lunch. Mexi-Cali is always busy but the food is terrific. Justin wolfs down his

carnitas along with three glasses of Coke, which would undoubtedly make my health-conscious sister apoplectic.

"I'd like to wander around for a while," he announces. "If that's okay with you."

I wonder if I should let him go out on his own so soon. I remember wandering around town when I first came to the city. Looking for trouble.

"I close the gallery at six, so please come back by then, earlier if you get bored."

"Sure thing." He smiles and heads out the door while I pay the bill.

A minivan of visitors arrives at the complex. Perfectly-coifed middle-aged women from Walnut Creek set upon the gallery. I delegate Patrick to entertain them and hole-up in the office to send a few emails before making an appearance. They ask the usual questions. "Where does the artist get his inspiration from? How long did it take him to paint it? Are there posters available?" The ladies are window-shopping, but their interest is sincere. There's always the off-chance that one or two of them might return to the gallery someday and buy something.

Six o'clock comes. No sign of my nephew. I tell Patrick that I'll close up shop and call Justin's cell phone. No answer. I call again. He doesn't pick up. He finally appears at 6:20, carrying a shopping bag and wearing a Duran Duran sweatshirt that could have been mine back in the day.

"Where were you? I called several times."

"My phone went dead and I lost track of time."

I'm about to scold, but he cuts me off. "There's a dope Goodwill down the street with some really sweet stuff." I stiffen hearing the word, dope.

“Look what I got.” He pulls out a pair of jeans from the bag. They’re ripped to shreds, like the ones in the store down the street that sell for \$180. Justin unfurls several washed-out T-shirts printed with catchy phrases—*Good Year for Tires*, *I Don’t Play Games*, and, emblazoned in black gothic font, *Queen*.

“This is my favorite,” he declares., holding up a pair of bright magenta cargo shorts. “I’m saving these for the Castro.”

My face must have registered horror. “Just joking,” he laughs.

The kid has a sense of humor, which is more than I can say for his uncle at the moment.

I toss a frozen cheese pizza in the oven for Justin and make a salad for myself. I’ve vowed to limit my intake of alcohol during his stay.

Justin gallops down the stairs, barefoot and wearing a Goodwill T-shirt and the magenta shorts. He looks very cute. Was I ever that young, my skin ever that smooth?

“Very cool crib, Unc!” he enthuses.

“Nothing’s changed much since you were last here.” The house was a royal mess when I bought it. It had the same owner since the 1950s. Cat shit everywhere, filthy carpet, leaking plumbing. But the house was dirt cheap, the last bargain to be had in San Francisco.

Justin takes a soda from the fridge. “The view is totally rad. The hills are so cool, like a roller-coaster. Baltimore is so fucking flat.”

“Damn!” I burn my fingers lifting the pizza from the oven and nearly drop it. “I remember how much you liked roller-coasters.”

He pulls the pop-top of his soda can. “I don’t go to theme parks anymore. They’re for kids.”

“What do you like now?” I asked my sister the same question. “Smoking pot and sleeping late,” she said. I wasn’t sure if she was informing me or being sarcastic.

Justin shrugs. “Whatever.” He helps himself to a slice of pizza, rolling the crust until it resembles an oozing, oversized joint.

At seventeen, I had an after-school job at a pizzeria and worked full-time in the summer cutting grass (on lawns). On Saturday mornings, I took a bus into Minneapolis to attend a studio class at the Institute of Art in Morrison Park. I had my first sexual experience with a classmate in the museum basement’s men’s room.

“Whatever you’d like to do is fine with me, Uncle Edward.” He burps and covers his mouth. The boy has good table manners.

Liz calls after dinner. “Justin texted me. He said you had an awesome day together. You’re a good influence on him, Ed.”

“Give me time, sis. I have two weeks to fuck up.”

I’m having a dinner party. Ben and Leon are eager to meet Justin, perhaps too eager. I’ve told them that he’s come out to his parents. I also mentioned drugs. They’re good friends, but they can be over-the-top silver flamers, riffing off one another like a double-act at Gay Comedy Night. As buffers, I’ve invited Karen and Max.

Ben and Leon arrive unfashionably early and volunteer to help, which means hanging out in the kitchen and drinking wine while I braise the chicken and prepare the polenta. Leon is strikingly handsome, with cocoa skin and the longest eyelashes I’ve ever seen on a man. Ben is a white-bread Midwesterner who likes sharing hair-raising tales of their sexual antics, together and separately, like real-life evocations of a Francis Bacon painting.

I ask them to tone things down for the night. Ben affects an innocent expression. "Don't worry, dear. Justin grew up with the web and social media. I'm sure he's been exposed to everything."

Speaking of, where is the drug addict?" asks Leon.

I wave a wooden spoon at him. "Neither drugs nor sex are to be mentioned tonight."

Ben refills their glasses with Pinot Grigio. "What else is there to talk about?"

"I mean it. Justin has problems, but he's my nephew, not some boy toy."

The doorbell rings. Karen gives me a hug. Max smiles and hands over a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc. Karen and I met at the Stud twenty years ago. She had given up on finding a partner. I was already on my second, but the relationship was at end times. Karen met Max at a work-related event. It was love at first collation. Max is tall and handsome in a Scandinavian, blonde-god sort of way. Which isn't my thing. But he's the most open, gay-friendly straight man I've ever known. He tends to encourage Ben and Leon's outrageousness, and I've asked Karen to tell him to not encourage them.

Justin appears on the landing, wearing the magenta shorts and the *Don't Play Games* T-shirt. He descends, flip-flops flapping.

"I want you to meet my friends, Justin. This is Karen and Max." He waves to Karen and manfully shakes hands with Max. "I'll get Ben and Leon." Who, I discover, are standing behind me and leering.

"It's good to meet you," chirps Ben. "We've heard so much about you," trills Leon. Which is the very worst thing to say to someone who has issues.

At dinner, Max and Karen dutifully ask safe questions. Where do you live? Where do you go to school? What's there to do that's fun in Baltimore? Justin, scraping capers off his chicken piccata, answers politely.

During dessert, Ben brings up John Waters. "He's from Baltimore too, you know. I just lo-o-o-ve his films. He was in town recently. We went to see him at Norse Auditorium. He's so wonderfully dirty, isn't he, dear?"

I shoot Leon a cautionary glance. He takes the hint, but Ben continues: "He's so funny and hyper. He must be on drugs all the time."

"Excuse me," says Justin, pushing back his chair. "I have to make a phone call." He retreats up to his room.

"Maybe it's his drug dealer," whispers Leon.

Ben arches his eyebrows. "Love those shorts."

"It's good of you to have him here," declares Max, saving me from swatting them.

"My sister and brother-in-law needed a break. It's been a rough year for them."

Karen takes my hand. "If there's anything we can do, let us know."

"Us too," volunteers Ben. "We'd love to help," echoes Leon.

I bite my tongue.

Kat tells me that Justin spends half the night on Facebook and texting his friend, and sleeps in whenever he gets a chance. I slept late too, in my twenties, after closing down the clubs.

I leave the house, carrying a list of Justin's favorite foods: chips and jerky, baby carrots, an expensive brand of organic soup, along with the

kale and cranberry salad from Whole Foods that Liz told me he craves. The boy is spoiled. In my day, we ate whatever our mother served, whether we liked it or not.

Wandering the aisles, I make plans for the day. It's been ages since I've driven to the ocean. I'll take Justin through Golden Gate Park to Ocean Beach. Lunch at Chalet on the Beach with those WPA-era murals. We'll grab a window table upstairs and stare at the Pacific over crab cakes or a burger—or whatever. Maybe walk the trail at Land's End and check out Rodin's hunky sculptures at the Legion of Honor.

Back home, I call upstairs. No response. I clamber up to find his bed empty, sheet and comforter thrown to the side, pillows still indented from his sleepy head. The bathroom door is open, the shorts and T-shirt from last night wadded on the floor. I'm tempted to check for drug paraphernalia, but tromp back downstairs, annoyance trumping concern.

On the dining table, amid napkins and crumbs from last night's party, I find a scrawled note: *Taking a walk. Back later. J.*

He's getting some exercise at least. When I first came to the city, I walked everywhere from my grubby little studio apartment off Polk Street, exploring Chinatown and North Beach, hiking to Potrero Hill and the Haight. It was a fucking urban "Sound of Music" in Technicolor for the first few years. I found plenty of opportunities to get into trouble, too, mostly sexual.

A long-haired dealer occupied every other corner then and Justin is out there now.

I'm not going to fret. I clean up the remains of the last night's dinner. I heat up a little of Justin's expensive soup. Ben calls to ask,

more a provocation than a question, if he and Leon had sufficiently behaved themselves last night. “What are you and Justin doing today?” he asks.

“I don’t know. He’s disappeared.”

“Should we organize a search party?”

I don’t take his bait and call Justin as soon as we hang up. I’ve been told that kids don’t actually talk on their phones, so I follow up with a text. I put on a meditation tape, attend to my breath and repeat a mantra, “The peace of God is shining in me now,” which I only use when I’m not at peace.

The front door opens and slams shut. Justin is wearing the Magentas again and looks pretty pie-eyed. I know the signs.

“Where have you been? I was worried.”

“You read my note?” He plops down on my Danish lounge chair and pulls at the frosted forelock of his hair nervously. “I’m wiped.” Even though his lids are half shut, I can see that his pupils are dilated. “You’re not going to interrogate me like Mom and Dad, are you?”

I take a deep breath and modulate my voice. “You have to understand, Justin. I’m responsible for you. If something bad happened, I couldn’t face your mother and father.”

“Then I guess you’re actually worried more about yourself.”

How do Kat and Brian deal with his adolescent conceit?

He stares at me accusingly. “I heard what your friends said last night,” he snarls. “Why is everyone on my case?” He springs from the chair and stomps upstairs.

I knock on his door later and ask if he’d like something to eat. No answer. Let him sleep it off.

Kat calls. "How are things going?"

"We decided to have a quiet day. Justin took a walk earlier." I don't tell her more than that.

As if nothing happened yesterday, Justin asks, "What do you want to do today?" Clever boy.

I treat him to a "way cool" thirty-dollar haircut in the Castro and we head toward Golden Gate Park. A car vacates a parking spot (there is a God after all!) right in front of the Conservatory of Flowers. Throngs of tourists are milling around taking selfies. "I'll take a picture of you for your mom and dad." I pull out my phone and stage Justin in front of a flowerbed planted with bright orange and yellow daffodils. He makes a funny face.

"What's that?" He points to the pedestrian tunnel under the road, a urinous underpass that I've avoided ever since seeing 'A Clockwork Orange.' Justin runs inside, hoots and hollers, his echoes bouncing off the walls. He goes down on one knee to snap a few photos. I ask if I can see and he hands me his phone.

I accidentally scroll to a photo of Justin sitting on a couch with a young man who has his arm draped around my nephew's shoulder. "Who is this?"

Justin grabs his phone and slips it in his pocket. "Just a friend." I wonder if that's his downtown friend.

We walk through the tunnel to the fern grove where colossal primeval ferns cohabit with elephantine fronds of mystery plants. "It looks like dinosaurs live here!" yells Justin, snapping a photo of two frogs humping on a lily pad. He has a good eye. We wander past dense

shrubbery where I once enjoyed sex with other flagrant flaneurs. I don't mention this to Justin.

There's a David Hockney show at the deYoung I want to see, but instead I lead Justin over to the Rose Garden. He looks bored. We head back to the car and pass a clearing where several deeply-tanned men in speedos lounge at picnic tables. Justin eyes them casually. Whenever I came across scenes like this as a young man, I wavered between feelings of apprehension and exhilaration.

We pass the bison paddock where no bison are to be seen and take the last curve on Kennedy Drive, suddenly face-to-face with the Pacific Ocean.

"Awesome!" exclaims Justin.

I cross Pacific Coast Highway and find a parking spot in front of the concrete seawall at Ocean Beach. Justin nearly rips open the passenger door. "Meet you down there!" He flips off his sneakers and tears toward the water, spraying sand behind him. "Careful. There's an undertow!" I caution. Justin ignores me and wades into the water, waves breaking over the hem of his shorts. He throws his arms up and yells like a banshee, prancing around in a circle.

The first time I laid my eyes on the Pacific, it was in December. I'd been in town only a couple weeks. A guy I met took me there. It was at night, the beach deserted. We stripped off our clothes and ran naked into the water. The frigid cold was shocking. My friend laughed as I let out hoarse cries. We were in the water for maybe a minute, swiftly pulled on our clothes and found a place for coffee. Afterwards, he drove me to his place.

I take off my shoes and pad along the hard sand near the water. Justin joins me and we head toward the rocks at the northern end.

I mention lunch and we dodge traffic to cross the highway to The Chalet at the Beach. I stop to point out a few details on WPA-era murals in the lobby but Justin grows antsy. He excuses himself to use the restroom.

I immerse myself in the mural until I see Justin standing outside the restroom. A young man in a denim jacket and torn jeans skirts behind him and dashes out the front door.

“Did anything happen in there?”

My nephew looks nonplussed.

“The man who followed you out of the bathroom. Did he try anything with you in there?”

Justin looks at me as if I’m crazy.

It’s Friday. We catch the ferry to Sausalito and eat lunch at a sidewalk café on Bridgeway. Justin is effusive and talkative, telling me about sail-boating with his dad on Chesapeake Bay. At Surf’s-Up, he tries on a pair of boardshorts he calls “crazy sick” and chooses two bright t-shirts. I nix the *Cannabis Wave-Rider* number, imagining Liz and Brian’s reaction. We head up Bridgeway and stop in at the Rogers Gallery. I had a brief fling with Ron Rogers years ago. We hug and I introduce Justin, whom he eyes just a bit too eagerly. We don’t stay long.

Outside, Justin lobs me a sly look. “How do you know him?”

“We’re in the same business.” I can be crafty too.

“How many lovers have you had in your life, Uncle Edward?” A middle-aged couple in matching baby blue jogging suits turn around, looking slightly alarmed at us.

“Mom must have told you that I came out to them, right? Mom

and Dad aren't making a big a deal about it. Not like they are about smoking grass."

"I'm sure drugs concern them more than your sexual orientation. Coming-out is easier now than when I was your age."

"I know about you leaving home in high school. That must have been kind of scary."

"It was scarier to stay. I didn't know anyone here, but it was easy to make friends."

"I bet it was easy to get drugs then too."

"I'm not sure I should answer that."

We walk from the center of town to a small park on the hilly side of Bridgeway and settle on a bench, staring out at the bright water and the city shimmering across the bay. I clear my throat. "When I was twenty-five, I smoked pot with a friend in this park and almost got arrested."

"Really?" Justin looks impressed.

"My friend and I took the ferry here and decided to get high. We figured no one would notice. Big mistake."

Justin's eyes brighten. "What happened?"

"Someone must have seen us, or smelled us, and reported it to the foot patrol."

"No way! That would totally weird me out."

"Fortunately, we had just finished a joint. My friend dropped it on the ground and covered it with his shoe. The cops demanded to see our IDs and frisked us. My friend didn't move his foot the whole time."

Justin snickers. "What happened then?"

"After they made a big show of writing up a report, they ordered us to move along and followed us all the way back to the ferry."

"But pot is legal in California now. It's not a problem anymore, right?"

"It's still a problem if you're under twenty-one."

"I bet the cops don't hassle you unless you're being really obvious."

"Not true. Now that recreational marijuana is legal for adults, they're cracking down on under-age use even more."

"What's the big deal? Practically everyone at school smokes. Mom and Dad act like it's the end of the world. They guzzle down at least one bottle of wine every night."

Not to mention my own alcohol consumption. "Drugs have the biggest impact when you're young. Pot affects brain development well into your twenties and it's definitely addictive." I hear myself sounding like an after-school special. "And what about you skipping out of school and taking a bus downtown?"

"I just chill out with friends."

"You should be in class. You may be sacrificing your future in ways you can't imagine."

He rolls his eyes.

"Why *do* you smoke pot, Justin?"

"It makes me feel normal. It helps me get through things."

"Listen to me. You say that pot helps you relax. But your brain compensates for this eventually. So when you're not high, your stress level increases and you need more and more THC to feel good."

Justin looks defensive. "You smoked pot when you were my age. You even left home."

"I left because I was caught having sex with another boy. Your grandparents were fundamentalists. The town was full of people who hated fags. I would have been bullied and persecuted if I'd stayed."

"I'm being persecuted too! Mom and Dad carry so much shit in their heads. There's so much pressure. They ground me for no good reason and—"

"They worry about you. That's what parents do."

"I hate them. They're always colluding against me."

"Most seventeen-year-olds hate their parents. It's compulsory. Your parents are still entitled to have a say in your life. You don't realize how fortunate you are. You've come out to them and they're totally supporting you. They've sent you to spend time with your gay uncle, for god's sakes."

"An uncle who freaks out when I go out for a walk."

"I don't want you to get in trouble on my watch."

"What if I bought some pot to share with you?"

"That's not going to happen, Justin. I don't smoke anymore. Even if I did, I wouldn't smoke with you until you turn twenty-one, at least."

"Have you ever tried opiates or meth?" I don't like where this conversation is going.

"Never. Meth and opiates, cocaine—they're killers. Promise me you won't do any of that stuff."

He holds his hand to his heart and affects the jaded expression of a Caravaggio saint.

I'm not particularly interested in pursuing the role of anti-drug crusader. "We should leave. I want to get back to the city before rush hour."

We head back toward the ferry. A group of gay men are waiting with us at the dock, joking and laughing. They all have soft Southern accents. Justin observes them sullenly. We board the ferry two at a time, like unicorns entering Noah's Ark.

Things have come up for me at work and so I ask Kathy and Max if they would meet Justin for lunch near their place in Noe Valley. They're both teachers and good with kids. They're also hikers and there's a terrific park with rocks to climb nearby, which I'm hoping will satisfy Justin's penchant for wandering for at least one day.

At the gallery, Patrick hands me a list of clients I should contact. There's been a major uptick of interest in Nick Stone's work since his show opened. I'm alerting collectors about getting in at the current level before his prices are raised.

I close two sales before Patrick fetches lunch.

"How are things going with your nephew?" he asks, opening cartons from Hi-Thai.

"Adolescence is a pretty awful time. Old enough to get into trouble, too young to realize the consequences."

"Have you had the talk about drugs?"

"He admits to using pot. Hinted at other things."

"Being gay and drugs pretty much go hand-in-hand at a certain age, especially club drugs."

"Like ecstasy, you mean?"

"Mostly crystal meth. It makes for the most amazing sex."

"You aren't using, are you?"

"Not anymore. Daniel would drop me super-immediately."

"You have a great future, Patrick. I'm sure you won't fuck up."

My cell rings. It's Kathy. "Justin didn't show up at the restaurant. We called his cell phone but he didn't pick up. Did his plans change?"

I pretend not to be alarmed. "He must have decided to do

something else at the last minute. Sorry about the mix-up. Thank Max again for volunteering.”

I try to reach Justin several times without success. I’m not sure what else to do.

I distract myself with calls to clients. My cell phone rings again just before closing time.

“Is this Edward Burton? This is Sarah Wheeler, admissions assistant at Zuckerberg SF General. A Justin Rohnert was admitted to emergency services thirty-five minutes ago. We found your card in his wallet. We’re seeking a family contact.”

A red-haired receptionist takes my name and asks me to take a seat. I search out the admissions clerk, who can’t tell me anything specific but assures me that someone from the medical staff will be out to talk with me. I give her my cell number as well as Liz and Brian’s phone numbers.

A thousand scenarios go through my head—Justin hit by a car, accosted by a crazy street person, struck by falling debris at a construction site. Or more likely, he’s OD’d on some designer drug. I hope it’s anything but that, so, and this is terrible, it won’t be my fault for trusting him to be on his own.

I take a seat and wait. A patient, bleeding through his pants leg, limps in and shouts for help. A gurney shoots through the open glass doors carrying someone covered in a sheet. My worst fears inflate.

The first time I went to County General, as it was called then, I’d torn the palm of my hand on a rusty gate and required ten stitches. I returned too many times since, visiting dozens of friends dying in the AIDS ward.

Finally, a young man in a tie and rolled-up sleeves arrives and sits on the edge of a chair next to me. He introduces himself as Doctor Fennerman.

"Mr. Burton, since you're not Justin's legal guardian, I can only tell you that we received a 9-1-1 call reporting that your nephew was acting very erratically, running in and out of traffic."

"Jesus Christ! How is he? Can I see him?"

"I'm afraid it'll be a while before you can see him. I can tell you that his condition is stable. We've run a few tests for drugs. We're trying to get him to talk." He puts his hand on my shoulder, which does nothing to reassure me. "Why don't you get something in the cafeteria."

I forget to ask him if the hospital has called Liz and Brian. I take a few deep breaths and dial. "Liz, I'm at the hospital. I'm afraid it's Justin. He's in the ER."

"Oh my god. What happened?" Her voice rises an octave. "Is he okay?"

"They haven't told me much, except that he was on the street acting strangely. The doctor seemed to think that it was drugs."

"Christ! We should never have sent him out there. From her stifled sobs, I can tell Liz is trying to keep it together. "I have a call coming in," she croaks. "I think it's the hospital." She hangs up.

I let Patrick know that I won't be coming back to the gallery.

"I figured. How's Justin?"

"They haven't told me much."

Dr. Fennerman appears again. "I've just spoken with Justin's parents. They said that I could fill you in. Your nephew arrived in ER sweating profusely, breathing rapidly and with dilated pupils.

There's a methamphetamine epidemic on the streets. It's cheap and easily available. Your nephew used crystal meth, and judging from his behavior it may have been cut with something else. People are dying from these combinations, but Justin should pull out of this okay. He's young and his heart valves are resilient. You can see him now."

I follow a nurse to the ward room. Someone behind closed curtains is coughing and coughing. Justin lays in a hospital bed, as pale as the sheet that covers him. He's slack-jawed, his mouth agape, a UV line attached to his arm.

"We've sedated him," the nurse informs. "You can sit with him if you like."

I stare at the boy, registering his heavy breathing. It's heart-breaking to see him like this and maddening that he did this to himself. I stare at my hands. They look old. I think of all my friends who have died here.

I caress Justin's forehead and return to the waiting room to call Liz.

"I've left two messages for you," she complains, her voice grabbing me by the sleeve. "Brian's been absolutely frantic. The doctor said that Justin overdosed on methamphetamine."

"They intend to keep him under observation overnight."

"I can get a flight out this evening."

"There's nothing you can do here, Liz. Why don't you hold off?"

"I'm his mother. I should be with him."

"I promise to keep you posted. If Justin is well enough to return home in a couple days, I can fly back with him."

"It was too much to expect that you could handle him."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"How could you let this happen, Edward?"

"I'm not his fucking father, Liz. You asked me to relieve you and Brian of your son for two weeks, remember?"

"I should have known better. Irresponsibility runs with the men in our family. You were Justin's age when you took off from home. You left me alone to deal with the repercussions."

"What repercussions?"

"Like my classmates treating me like a pariah. Our parents' hysteria and being humiliated every Sunday by the congregation praying for my sinful prodigal brother's contrite return."

"Why are you bringing this up now?"

"We shouldn't have put you in this position. That's all I'm saying."

She's saying more than that. This is crazy. My sister harping on something that happened thirty-five years ago, when, meanwhile her son is in ER?

"What can I say, Liz? I'm sorry."

"Too little, too late," she bleats and hangs up.

Kat and I were raised in an atmosphere imbued with guilt, saturated in shame. I rejected that upbringing, but the awareness of sin still clings to me, like dirt on a gardener's hands. I never once regretted my decision to leave Aurora. But, years later, I realized how much I must have hurt my parents. I tried to talk about it one Thanksgiving visit. It never occurred to me that my sudden departure may have been traumatic for my sister too, leaving her alone to fend for herself in that bigoted atmosphere. A rush of shame overwhelms me. I've no idea if this is justified, but there it is.

Maybe it would be better if Justin stays here with me. Now who's being crazy?

I look for a more comfortable chair for my back, an overstuffed number made for some E.R. victim's grandmother. I feel exhausted and lay my head back.

My friend Adam, or someone like Adam, raises his bony arm, and whispers, "You need to survive so you can bury us." He grabs me with his gnarled hand. I protest that he isn't going to die, that he'll beat this virus.

A nurse rouses me out of sleep. "Your nephew is awake. He's asking for you." It's nine o'clock. I follow her through several hallways to the main hospital. A UV line is still in Justin's arm, but I'm relieved to see that a little color has returned to his face.

He stares up at me. "I guess I screwed up." His voice is weak.

"It looks like it." I don't push things.

"They told me I was dodging cars on the street. I don't remember that."

"Apparently, you were acting like a drunken toreador. You could have been killed."

"Do Mom and Dad know yet?"

"Your mother wants to fly out here."

"Please don't let her, Uncle Edward. I don't want to go back to Baltimore. Can't I just stay with you?" he pleads. "Everyone in Baltimore hates fags. They bully me."

Liz would have told me if he was being bullied. "You're still a minor and your parents make the decisions."

"My summer will be totally fucked. They'll probably make me go to rehab."

"You've sent yourself to rehab, Justin."

"Whatever."

"No. *Whatever* were you thinking?"

"I don't want to talk," he moans, and turns away. "I'm tired."

I grab my jacket, bridling at this adolescent selfishness. "I'll leave you alone in that case." See you in the morning, okay?"

Any idea I may have had about having Justin stay with me are mercifully resolved.

At the airport, we hug, and then he is out of my arms. He looks me straight in the eye. "I met a guy on the street," he confesses. "He took me to his apartment and gave me something so we could have more fun. Then he kicked me out."

Justin slowly moves through the TSA line past the checkpoint, recovers his backpack and flips his hoodie over his head. Intent on his phone's screen, he doesn't turn to wave and disappears into the crowd of summer travelers. My heart lurches. I suddenly feel astonishingly empty.

I reach Liz. "Justin's at the gate. His flight is scheduled to arrive in Baltimore on time."

She lets out a sigh. "Thank you, Ed, for taking him." Her voice is meek. "I know it wasn't easy."

My sister has apparently come down from crazy-ville. I don't tell her what Justin has just confided. He'll continue to make bad choices as well as good ones, just like his uncle does.

At home, Tigre emerges from under his hiding place, a bit bedraggled, and purrs at my feet. The disarray Justin brought makes me miss him for a moment. I fall into bed and sleep until I'm wakened by my cell phone ringing.

“Justin’s plane just landed,” Liz says. “We’re taking him to rehab in two days.”

“Let me know how you’re all doing, won’t you?” I’m concerned of course, but I suddenly feel abstracted from them, distanced from their lives. Maybe I don’t want to admit failure.

Throwing cold water on my face, I see creases I never noticed before. I shuffle into the kitchen and open the cabinet where I’d stashed all the liquor. I pour myself a scotch and stare out at the city through a rare summer drizzle, watching the lights from traffic snaking on freeway. The LED display at the top of the Salesforce tower emits abstract images of what seems to be a modern dance performance replicating strobe-light syndrome. The wail of sirens pulses somewhere in the Mission and paws at the windows.

The scotch is taking the edge off. I’m relieved that Justin is gone, but sadder too than when he first arrived, when anything was possible between us. □