

The Unvanquished

BY MARLENE OLIN

“Retirement is overrated,” said Morris.

He looked out his window. No matter where the old man gazed, the buildings seemed the same. Red-tiled roofs and sand-colored walls. Wrought iron bars caged the windows.

“And you know what else is overrated? said Morris. “Your so-called senior communities. Your so-called Valencia Villas.”

His son Howard lived thirteen hundred miles away in Long Island. Morris glared at the handset and yelled. “You park us in these parking spaces, these holding cells, these... these Pritikin prisons. Then you hope we shrivel up and die.”

As usual his son spoke in starts and stops. Like he wasn’t paying attention. Like he was typing on the computer, watching TV and talking to his father at the same time.

“You’re eighty years old, Pops... You been there what? Six months? Give Boca Raton a try.”

Somewhere down the hall Morris heard moaning and groaning of unspeakable sorrow. “I’m aging in dog years, Howard. Six months to you is an eternity to me.”

Three blocks away from the retirement community sprawled a lovely gated development. Each house boasted a large patio, a swimming pool, the accoutrements of a life well-lived. At first glance, these homes also looked the same. Manicured hedges. Long driveways. Porte cocheres that blocked both the rain and the sun.

Only on closer examination, hidden behind the doors and drapes, were there secrets. In the house at 100 Andalusia, only half of the rooms were occupied. Two of the bedrooms were unfurnished. A spanking new swing set went unused. Like an abandoned plan or a forgotten book, something that once held promise was now neglected. The curtains were drawn, the lawn uncut, the pool a pile of leaves.

“Put the shoe down, Chip.”

It was and will ever be a mystery. From the moment Chip was born, Marianne's sweet loving baby refused to act like other babies. He never curled his little hand around her finger. He never glanced into her eyes and smiled.

Now he was six and liked to chew. Today it was a tennis shoe, gummy and sweaty and sitting in her husband's closet for God knows how long. And whenever Marianne tried to exchange it for something newer or cleaner, the boy would bristle. Let's be honest. Not so much bristle as growl. Then he'd swat her hand, narrow his eyes, and scamper to his room.

She had different voices. A whole wardrobe of voices. Next she tried on the one from the autism guidebooks, the one where the mothers speak calmly and capably, the one where they dangle treats and plead the commands.

She walked to the bedroom. "Here's a cookie, Chip. Wouldn't you like a delicious cookie?"

Professionals may have considered him deficient but Marianne knew better. Chip was smart, whip smart. Smart enough to jam his body under the bed smack in the middle where she couldn't reach him. Smart enough to lose himself in places she couldn't find. He was gnawing on the shoe now. Threading the laces between his teeth as if they were dental floss.

"I want you to open your mouth, Chip. I want you to drop Daddy's shoe right now!"

Whatever plans she had for the day were suddenly erased. Saturdays were usually set aside for grocery shopping. Sometimes they'd take a nice stroll to the park. But now they'd spend the whole day in the house, the boy yipping and yapping under the bed, sneaking in toys when she isn't watching, scurrying out to pee in the backyard underneath his favorite bush. Sometimes, if his mood were right, he'd sit in her lap and sniff her hair. Sometimes, if his mood were right, he'd even drop the shoe.

Sighing, she remembered another lifetime. A lifetime of tennis games and highballs and let's do Neiman's for lunch.

A mile away, in a smaller house, in a house in need of new paint and a sweep, a teenager worked at his desk. In the kitchen, his mother was sipping coffee, buttering toast, starting her morning. Saturdays were always busy, the day she'd be gone from nine to five showing

open houses to her clients. Jackson listened for the squeal of her car on the driveway. Then locking his door, he performed the ritual.

Every morning, the minute he had a moment's privacy, the routine was the same. Slowly he peeled off his clothes and stood naked in front of the mirror. Then he examined his body from head to toe. Hairs were sprouting in places where hair wasn't supposed to grow. Above his lip, the slightest of shadows bloomed.

It was time, he knew, for time to stand still. There were things you could do to stop the progression. Hormones. Chemicals. Injections. If only he could have a little more time! But his parents refused to see the doctor, his counselor at school refused to talk to his parents, and everybody else just thought he was gay.

Being fifteen years old was a nightmare. He switched on his computer and turned to his only companion. In a world filled with enemies, he could always count on the chat room. His fingers flew over the keyboard as he texted once more for help.

Morris' Saturday excursions required the logistics of a military assault. It took him a good five minutes to slather sunscreen on his arms, legs, and face. Then after positioning his behind on the sofa, it took another ten fifteen minutes to loop the laces on his goddamned shoes. How he hated his hands—the spattering of brown spots, the gnarled knuckles, the mooned nails. Shaky and unreliable, who would have guessed how his hands would betray him!

It took another ten minutes to round up his stuff. Nitro pills. Check. A UV rated hat. Check. Cane. Check. Where the hell did he put his wallet, his wallet was supposed to be on his desk, the goddamned housekeeper probably stole his wallet. After finding his wallet on the top of his bureau, he clenched his yoga mat under his armpit and proceeded out the door.

By lunchtime, the smell of grilled cheese frying on a pan lured the child from under the bed. If Marianne were lucky, there was still time to go grocery shopping.

As usual, he sat under the kitchen table. The sandwich lay in his hands (twelve hundred dollars of therapy but worth every penny) as he nipped and licked the bread.

She cleared her throat. "I need to go to the store, bud."

Grrrr.

A list materialized in her head. Milk. Bread. Peanut butter. Staying home was no longer an option. Why should she spend another day stuck at home? Warbling in a singsong voice, she channeled Dr. Seuss.

“How ‘bout if we go to Publix, Chip? How ‘bout we grab our shoes and socks and head right out the door!”

The boy looked up.

“You can sit in the cart, Chip. You can sit in the cart and eat carrots and dip and count the square tiles on the floor!”

He stopped in his tracks. When he opened his mouth, her heart lurched.

“Park,” said the boy.

She held up her fist. Yes!

The word, when it came out, always surprised her. Low, guttural, more of a grunt than a word. It was a victory to be savored.

Let Mommy do all her shopping, let Mommy buy all her stuff! Then we’ll go to the park and frolic and play. I think that will be quite enough!

His favorite chat room was quiet. Instead, Jackson let his fingers jump from link to link. Soon he found himself in a different chat room, a chat room with funny sounding names. Captain Underpants. Long John Silver. Mighty Joe Schlong. Jackson was savvy enough to be wary. People faked where they live, what they looked like, even what they ate. But when you’re fifteen years old and lonely—hope’s not easily vanquished.

He glanced at his bedroom door. Sometimes his mother dropped by for lunch. He pictured the two place settings on the table, the water pitcher, the creases in her smile when she asked about his day. Nothing could be more depressing.

Once more the screen flicked and flickered, beckoning like a lover. And even though he knew better, even though one part of his brain was shouting Don’t be a moron, Jackson! Don’t be a fool! he was desperate. Any proffered hand was better than none at all.

Just driving to the park made Morris' heart race.

Ever since he discovered the yoga class two months earlier, his life had forever changed. The park was huge, a little city really, a maze of bike paths and lakes where people rented paddle boats and canoes. The flyer had said the class was taught in Picnic Area Four, and it took Morris nearly twenty minutes to locate a map and another twenty minutes to find the small shelter with a 4 painted on a post. The class was already in progress. A dozen plastic mats had been laid on the grass. Eyes focused. Bodies moving in sync. There were people of every persuasion. Long-haired hippies, middle-aged housewives, college kids. And canopied by oak trees, a ray of sunshine lighting her face, was Cheryl.

Though Morris prided himself on keeping fit—a two mile walk every morning, twenty sit-ups, a stab or two at push-ups on the floor—he had no idea what yoga entailed. Sure he had tried other classes. A stint at Zumba. That Karate disaster. But yoga seemed bulletproof. The chances of stumbling, of crashing into your neighbor, of embarrassing yourself by tripping or falling, were practically nil.

And even though there were a dozen other people that first day, he could swear the instructor was talking straight to him, barking commands in her husky voice, shouting over the children playing and the mothers yakking and the teenagers laughing in the shelter across the lake.

“Now breathe in, lift your spines, and reach to the heavens...”

Blond. Tanned. Her exercise clothes fit like a second skin and whenever she raised or lowered her arms, her nipples followed. And even though she walked the rows adjusting arms, legs, and hands, only when she reached Morris did her touch seem to linger.

Afterwards, he stood in the shadows while she smiled to the others and said goodbye. Then offering his other armpit, he carried her yoga mat to her car. He figured she was fortyish or fifty, but who could really tell?

“Maybe one day we could get a cup of coffee?” said Morris.

She clicked open her car. Over their heads, kites were flying and birds were swooping in the blue clean air.

“Coffee?” she said. Opening her purse, she fished out a pack of Lucky Strikes. Then she pulled out a cigarette, struck the lighter with a practiced flick of her thumb, and slowly inhaled. “Sure. One day coffee would be peachy.” A few seconds later, she pressed down on the gas and was gone.

It was three o’clock by the time the boy and his mother arrived at the park. The season had jumped straight from summer to winter as a sharp brisk wind cooled the air. Nothing made the child happier. Silver green leaves dropped from oak trees, twisting and turning in the breeze. Marianne knew the routine. She sat on a bench and waited while the boy tilted his chin. Then she watched his upturned nose twitch and tremble, taking in sights and smells.

“Now remember the park rules, Chip.” It was her NCIS voice, grim and policelike. “First we stand tall.” Inside her purse, she pulled out a tennis ball. She paused as the boy cupped his hands and brought them together. Then she grinned as he inched his way toward her until they stood just a few yards apart.

“Now remember. I throw and you catch.”

The trick, she had learned, was to aim right for the depression between his palms. Meanwhile the boy stood motionless, watching the ball as it arced in the air and landed at his feet. It was the ritual, of course, that soothed him. The cupping, the arcing, the retrieving. No matter how many times his mother threw the ball, he was perfectly happy just to scoop it up, trot over to the bench, and leave it by her side.

The man named Slim Jim claimed he worked at a hospital. Jackson was smart enough to realize that he wasn’t a doctor. Why would a doctor stick his neck out pilfering drugs?

And then there were the nosy questions. Have you transitioned yet? What do you look like? How about if we hang out?

Of course Jackson added six years to his age. A lot of douchebags hung around the Internet—kid snatchers, perverts, the kinds of guys who live under bridges. And when Jackson lied, when he told the man that he was twenty-one, he could swear the guy was disappointed. Like Dr. Strange pictured him riding a Hot Wheel with his dimes and nickels saved up in a jar.

“Look,” typed Jackson.” Do you want to sell me hormones or what?”

“Like I said,” the man typed back. “A thousand bucks for a three-month supply.”

For months Jackson had been saving, and what he hadn’t saved he stole. His grandfather’s watch. His mother’s necklace. “If you’ve got the vials and the syringes,” wrote Jackson. “I’ve got the cash.”

There was a long pause. Dr. Strange was clearly thinking it over. And for a brief moment, Jackson both hoped and didn’t hope that the guy would change his mind.

“You know that park on Poinciana and 12th? The one with the lake and the picnic tables?” wrote the man. “There’s a baseball diamond and a dugout. Look for the guy with the Red Sox hat. That’ll be me.”

Jackson never expected for it to happen this fast, this soon. He glanced at his closet. The front end was loaded with his school uniforms—khaki pants and button down shirts. The middle part was stuffed with the sport coats and slacks he wore to church. Hidden in the rear was his secret stash. His heart was thumping as his fingers typed. “Look for the vintage Madonna tee-shirt. You know, the Blond Ambition tour.”

Morris was nothing if not persistent. His parents were immigrants, fresh off the boat from Poland. And with nothing in his pocket, without so much as a high school degree, he built a one-man paint shop into Woodmere’s biggest construction company.

Morris was nothing if not stubborn. His son liked to patronize him, to treat him like an imbecile, to file him under “DIFFICULT” and throw away the key. But Morris wasn’t ready to take marching orders, especially when they were dictated by Howard. Howard!

That Cheryl, she was a gift. And for some unknown reason, in the autumn of his life, when the clouds nearly blocked the sun, the two of them were brought together. When she refused his entreaties, he grew more determined. He asked her out again and again until she finally said yes.

First it was coffee. Then club sandwiches at the Cheesecake Factory followed by sixty dollar steaks at The Capital Grille. Morris bought himself a new Italian wardrobe. At a fancy hair salon, they buffed his nails and tweezed his wayward hairs. With Cheryl by his side, age no longer mattered. The future was a wide open road.

Was it only a month ago? They had been sitting in a leather banquette. The lights were low. Frank Sinatra was singing while the candle on their table flamed and flickered.

“Now let me get this straight,” said Cheryl. “You get three squares a day, free maid service, a complimentary barber, and bingo every Sunday afternoon.”

Morris counted down on his fingers. “The food has no taste. The barber’s a butcher. The maid steals your money, and the bingo’s rigged.”

Cheryl pushed aside her plate. As usual, she ate half of her meal and saved the other half to bring home. “You know what’s overrated, Morris? Cleaning. Cleaning, vacuuming, dusting. And you know what else is overrated? Schlepping that mat to the park twice a week for fifty bucks a pop.”

Marianne glanced at her watch. They’d been at the park for an hour and still the boy showed no signs of tiring. She was scrolling her phone with one hand—a game of Candy Crush, a few email responses, checking her Twitter feed and her Facebook page—and throwing the ball with the other. The boy’s energy knew no limits. And if she didn’t tire him out at the park, she’d get nothing accomplished at home.

The list in her head was long. She had dinner to cook, a pile of toys to pick up, a load of wash wrinkling in the dryer. Without realizing it, she threw the ball further. Beyond the bike path, through a grove of trees, past a shelter marked #4.

Jackson pulled up to the bike rack in his ten-speed. Far off, past the picnic shelters and a stand of oak trees, he could see the wooden bleachers of the baseball diamond. He locked his bike then swallowed hard. His lunch jumped in his throat.

If his mother found out, she’d kill him. She didn’t understand what it felt like. The feeling that you’re stuck in the wrong body, that your life was a nightmare and there was no waking up. And the more he tried to explain, the more she pushed him away. Now she was dragging him to church on Sundays and to special sessions with the Pastor after school.

Jackson hugged his jacket tighter. Though the sun glinted overhead, it was cool out. He stared and squinted until his eyes focused. In the distance, he swore he saw a red hat

bobbing in and out of the dugout. Even though he got to the park early, the guy was even earlier. This was actually happening. Help me, Jesus. Did I really want this to happen?

Could he, would he learn to inject himself? The Internet was both his teacher and his muse. Could he, would he endure an operation? He imagined the most horrific pain in the world and wondered if he could bear it. Could he, would he want to have children? No one seemed to know the long term side effects of the hormones. In fact, no one seemed to know a lot about anything.

As usual, Morris arrived at the park an hour before yoga started. The tai chi class was just wrapping up. Even though it was sweater weather, the instructor wore a tank top and bulging shorts. Morris waited in the shadows and watched the group until they finished. It was like a TV show, the way that man showed off, flexing his biceps and flaunting his abdominal muscles. The way the women craned their necks when he passed by.

Morris patted his pocket. The diamond ring cost a fortune. And he paid retail! Whatever could have possessed him to pay retail? But Cheryl, he was convinced, was worth every penny. Together, they'd find an apartment. Something classy with a view of the ocean and a string of lawn chairs on the beach. Howard would rant, his accountant would protest, his lawyer would absolutely explode. But Morris was one hundred percent positive. Today assisted living. Tomorrow the nursing home.

Marianne traced and retraced her steps. She had thrown the ball south. She was sure it was south. Then her phone pinged with an instant message. She only glanced at it for a second. Her friend Marcy had another life crisis, another drama queen near death experience so of course Marianne had to reply. She laughed. She chuckled. Her fingers danced. Another ten fifteen seconds probably passed before Marianne remembered the boy.

She looked around. Since when had the park gotten so crowded? Teenagers on skateboards. Dads with coolers. Moms toting birthday gifts with one hand and their toddlers with the other.

To the south, a dozen people in a yoga class were bending, touching, stretching. A blondish instructor. An old man. A bunch of college students. The picnic shelter was empty,

the boy nowhere to be found. Beyond the grove of trees the park opened up in all directions. On her right was a playground. Would he head to the playground? On her left, around a hundred yards in the distance, was a deserted baseball field. Four dusty bases, a pitcher's mound, and partially hidden below the ground, what looked like an abandoned dugout.

Jackson couldn't help staring at the strange boy. Every few minutes, a tennis ball rolled onto the grass, and wherever it landed—under a bush, on top of a picnic blanket, between a grove of trees—the kid fetched it.

A cute kid. Moppy hair. A Life is Good tee-shirt. He didn't so much run as scamper, head forward, shoulders tilted, hands reaching. Instead of slicing the air he leaned into it, like he was one step from falling forward all the time.

Something about him seemed different. Most kids had shit-eating grins on their faces. They acted goofy or stupid or mean. But this kid looked hypnotized. Like nothing existed but him and that ball. Back and forth. Back and forth. Sitting on his haunches, Jackson followed the two of them wherever they went as if he were hypnotized, too.

His forearms straining and his hamstrings cramping, Morris lifted his ass into the air.

"Downward-facing dog," said Cheryl to her class, "stretches your spine while it flexes your muscles."

Once he raised his ass, Morris always forgot how to lower it.

"Breathe in. Breathe out. Feel the tightness in your lower back just disappear."

Though every bone in his body ached, Morris soldiered on. Right or wrong, he was committed. He'd give Cheryl the ring as soon as class ended. The air was crisp, the grass was green, the sun was shining. The moment was nearly perfect.

Then suddenly a tennis ball rolled by. A few moments later he spotted the child. He was chasing that ball as if his life depended on it. Tongue out. Hands fisted. Determined. It was just outside his grasp, nearly inches from his hands, when some wiseacre from the tai chi group kicked it further down the field. Laughing. Sneering. Thinking it funny to torture a kid.

Looking back, Morris could have ignored it. Looking back, it may have been the smart thing to do. But out of the corner of his eye, he saw Cheryl laughing, too.

Morris knew what it was like to be frustrated. Just when you figured out the game, people liked to move the goddamned goalpost. Anyone could see that the boy was running out of steam. Red-faced. Flailing his arms. Tripping. The poor kid was holding his crotch as if he had to pee.

“Now let’s try the cat/cow stretch,” said Cheryl.

Morris looked around. Surely, he thought, the child must have a parent, a mother, someone! But the more the goddamned ball rolled, the more the kid chased it. Somehow Morris managed to stand up. Then he grabbed his cane and started walking down the field.

Her first instinct was regrettably wrong. The moment Marianne realized her son was missing, she headed toward the playground. An assortment of boys and girls were climbing monkey bars, zooming down slides, digging in the sand. A line zigged and zagged in front of an ice cream truck. A kite bobbed and weaved among the clouds. Looking back, she should have known better. What was she thinking? Another child might have headed for the playground. Most children would have headed for the playground. But the boy, of course, would have followed the ball.

Jackson was dumbstruck. Seconds before the kid grabbed the ball, an asshole punted it. He held his breath as the ball looped in the air and rolled further and further away. Instead of stopping, the yellow ball just picked up momentum—feet, then yards, out of the boy’s grasp.

Faster and faster rolled the ball. And all of a sudden Jackson noticed that the baseball field was set in a slight depression. Like a crater, it sloped downhill from the surrounding ground. For a brief moment, his imagination wandered. He pictured a baseball diamond filled with players while a row of bleachers cheered them on. The ball passed the shortstop, meandered between the pitcher’s legs, and missed the catcher’s mitt. On and on rolled the ball until it hit the dugout. Then in a flash it simply vanished.

First the ball disappeared into the dugout. Less than a minute later, in went the boy. Morris dropped his cane. He felt a spring in his step and the wind at his back. He was running now. It was like God lifted the Earth and tilted it toward that baseball field. Faster and faster he flew—his arms swinging, his chest pounding, his feet moving like lightning. Nothing mattered but that ball and that boy. For a brief, shining moment he felt young again. His age no longer defined him; his frailty no longer confined him. And even though Valencia Villas was where he parked his hat, his prospects, he realized, were limitless.

Marianne ran with the phone in her hand. Sure she had lost the boy before. Around the aisle in the grocery store. Playing in the neighbor's sandbox. But never had he disappeared so completely, so utterly without a trace. She backtracked her way to the yoga class and headed for the baseball field. Lord please let him be in the baseball field!

Then all at once she spotted a family dressed in bathing suits and flip flops on the bike path. Lugging towels and beach toys no less. The lakes! My God. There were lakes!

Punching the numbers as she ran, she dialed 911.

"Yes, this is an emergency. I've lost my son somewhere in Poinciana Park...Where in the park? Am I at the park now? Of course I'm at the park."

Her calves pumping, her mind racing, she stopped to catch her breath. "How old is he? Chip's six. Six years old. I have no idea how tall he is or what he weighs. I mean I did yesterday but I don't know now. You're asking me what he's wearing? How I am supposed to remember his clothes?"

She couldn't think. She couldn't breathe.

"Please find my son. He's just a boy. He's just a regular little boy."

The old man already had a head start when Jackson decided to run. Not only had the boy disappeared, but the red hat had disappeared, too.

"That kid," said Jackson, "did you see the kid?"

The old man was huffing and puffing like his chest was going to burst. Nodding, he pointed to the dugout.

The closer Jackson drew, the louder the screams.

Morris had no feeling in his feet. He put one foot ahead of the other and willed his heart to beat. A few yards away, he heard sounds from the dugout. Peculiar sounds. Like growls and muffled moans.

The sirens whooped from blocks away. Minutes later, an entire cavalry seemed to descend on the park. Everyone was running toward the baseball field. Patrolmen with guns on their belts, policewomen with billy clubs in their hands, the noisy onlookers that trailed them. As Marianne neared the dugout, she hoped and didn't hope that her son was there. What-ifs flew from all directions. What if the boy had been injured? What if the boy had been whisked away by some sex perverted stranger?

Her run slowed to a walk as she inched forward. Then she came to a stop. If her ears didn't deceive her, a child was laughing. A light-hearted laugh. No. It was more like a giggle.

A lady looked down into the dugout. Thirtyish. Maybe on a good day she was pretty, even beautiful. But now she looked like she'd been in a hurricane. Her hair was matted to her head. Leaves seemed glued everywhere.

"You the mom?" said Jackson.

The guy in the red hat was surprisingly easy to take down. Three four bite marks were streaming blood. Jackson wasn't sure what the creep had in mind but he sure didn't find what he was expecting. First the kid. Then a few karate moves courtesy of the Gender Bender website. The old man who called himself Morris was sitting on the ground. Weakly, he waved a hand and smiled.

"Chip's one tough dude," said Jackson.

At first, he had no idea who was scarier. The vampire boy with blood on his mouth or the guy in the red hat. But when you ruffled his hair, the boy giggled. Jackson liked to ruffle his hair.

The mother's eyes were darting back and forth, taking it all in. "You know his name? He said his name?"

Jackson gazed at Morris then back again at the boy. Perhaps they were stuck in the wrong bodies, too.

"Sure he knows his name," said Jackson. "He knows hand signals, too. He was signing your cell phone number just when you showed up."

Some conversations, thought Jackson, take a while to get started. And suddenly the decision seemed obvious. That night he and his mother would talk. Really talk. Because if you thought about it, a whole spectrum of choices was out there, an infinite number of options just waiting to be explored. Why draw dividing lines? Maybe life's not meant to be programmed in binary codes.

The old man stood up. His voice was stronger. The color had crept back to his face. "You know what's overrated?" said Morris.

"What?" said Jackson.

"Yoga," said Morris. "Yoga is tremendously overrated. I'd try something else if I were you." □