the Temporary Life
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Stories

Eric Wasserman
To my mother and father

And to Thea
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Here there are two Jews, there will be three opinions.” I often thought of that Jewish proverb as I revisited these stories, because it can be related just as much to the relationship between writers and their readers. What struck me the most while rereading these stories was that I had my own opinions about them when they were first sent into the world, then readers had theirs, and now the stories have the opportunity to be given another look. What more could I ask for?

My favorite celebration has always been Passover. I may no longer need holidays in the traditional sense, but I will always need their stories. The Passover Hagaddah—the story of the Jews’ Exodus from bondage in Egypt—includes the story of four sons. I am the third of four brothers, and every Passover growing up my mother reveled in having our family share this particular section of the annual seder ceremonial dinner. There is a wise son, a wicked son, a simple son, and a young son. When The Temporary Life was first
published, I enjoyed receiving correspondence from readers, and considering how they interpreted my characters and their situations. As soon as a story is launched on its journey, set free from the protection of its parent’s nurturing, an author’s intentions go out the door and each reader is left to come to his or her own conclusions. Back in 2005 it was intriguing to see that some of these stories I was most attached to did not resonate with certain readers, and that ones I considered only playful yarns held deeper significance to readers than they did to me. The wise, wicked, simple, and young that originate from the same place hold different meanings to different people—to different readers.

The young son in the Haggadah is not yet able to inquire and must therefore be told the story of Passover. I’ve always liked the idea of not knowing enough and instead relying on a story. It has often been said that writers should write what they know. In these stories I can see that I was not writing what I necessarily knew for certain, but what I knew about and was still trying to understand. The joy of rereading them is that I am still inquiring, still questioning. I may have intended a particular story to be wise and a certain reader may have thought it to be wicked, but perhaps we can both agree that it is also simple and young; two perspectives, three outlooks.

The great thing about stories is that they may grow older, like all of us. And as readers we are allowed to become closer or more distant to stories depending on who we once were when they first came into our lives, and who we have become when we reconnect. So, what does all of this have to do with two Jews and three opinions? As F. Scott Fitzgerald once claimed, “Writers aren’t exactly people, they’re a whole lot of people trying to be one person.” Therefore the stories that a writer shares, his imagined offspring if you will, do not necessarily have to be one thing to any one reader. For those who have read these stories before, I wish a happy reunion. For
those encountering them for the first time, I hope for a fulfilling maiden voyage. And if you explore them with another and find both common ground as well as disagreement, you are being what every writer should hope for in a reader: two people with three opinions.

May you enjoy and question these stories as I continue to do so myself. Begin formulating rebuttals. And don’t worry, we can still go out for kosher style deli together. Pass the brisket and turn the page.
I would like to express my enduring appreciation to everyone I acknowledged in the original 2005 La Questa Press edition of this book. You know who you are and I will always be eternally grateful to each of you for your unconditional belief, encouragement, and assistance, especially the wonderful Kate Abbe and my incredible forever friend and wife, Thea.

A very special thanks to the faculty and students of The University of Akron and the Northeast Ohio Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing program (NEOMFA) for their support. And much gratitude to Craig Tenney for looking over the particulars.

This new edition of The Temporary Life was championed by the hard work of the University of Akron Press, especially Director Thomas Bacher and the super-talented Amy Freels.

Finally, nothing would have been possible without the initiative of my steadfast friend and editor extraordinaire, Mary Biddinger. Happy reading!
You have to laugh with us,
at us, and take us seriously
all at the same time
or you’re going to miss the point.
—Abbie Hoffman
Even as the plane descended, Gabe Allen thought of how fond he had always been of his nephew. That was why he decided to fly to Los Angeles for the bar mitzvah. It surely had nothing to do with not seeing his family since his last visit. As far as he knew, nobody had died recently. And in the Allen family, only funerals required attendance.

Now almost forty, Gabe, a man with prominent hooded eyes who had only recently lost his boyish complexion, was constantly aware of his mortality. He demanded a seat in the emergency exit row of the airplane, and not for the comfort of his giraffe-like legs. He had even taken to reading the evacuation manual before takeoff, and gave undivided attention to stewardesses instructing passengers how to secure oxygen masks in the event of cabin pressure loss.

He had no wish to even see the family, except for his nephew, Jeremy. The calculated life of his older brother Mason, a psychiatrist, was unimaginable to Gabe: married at twenty-two, three children each separated precisely by two years, a spacious home in Brent-
wood, where Jeremy attended a private performing arts school. Gabe had fled Los Angeles after law school, determined never to succumb to domesticity. Unlike Mason’s life, Gabe’s was a series of airport terminals, courtrooms, and evenings of take-out meals in his condo, which was more of a second office than a home. His time was not his own, and he preferred it that way.

He rarely dated anymore. To Gabe, bars were like meat markets displaying various cuts of divorcées not looking for love, but rather somebody adequate to remedy loneliness. Only the week before he had gone out to dinner with a thirty-seven-year-old dermatologist. He still didn’t know if he wanted to see her again. She was pretty. Not beautiful but certainly a woman who took care of herself. He imagined she had a membership to a fitness club for women. But there was something about the way that she had written call me! on the back of her business card—handing it to him after a chaste good night peck on the lips—that made him feel that he had just been on a job interview. She had talked about her younger sister’s children all night. It turned him off. There was always something about women that seemed to turn him off.

As a child Gabe had enjoyed flying, exhilarated by being thousands of feet above the earth in the grip of sky alone. “This is as close to God as you will ever come,” his atheist father had once said. Flying had been as thrilling as discovering a duplicate rookie in a pack of baseball cards. Now flying had become a necessary chore. Only three days earlier he had flown to Ann Arbor to take a deposition for a case he was certain to lose, knowing his client was blatantly guilty of bending the law, if not breaking it entirely. Then again, Gabe knew that it was his job to defend people from prosecution by those in his own profession.

He was tired, anxious about traveling to Los Angeles. His stomach coiled loosely, like worn bedsprings. “I’ll order you a kosher
meal for the flight,” his travel agent had said. “They tend to be better.” His digestive system was now paying the price. He was accustomed to brown, square pieces of meat that chewed like Styrofoam, accompanied by tiny bits of rubber-like rice. The kosher meal was worse. He had pushed the tray aside after a few bites and ordered a vodka tonic. But the damage was already done, and he spent the duration of the flight between his seat and the lavatory.

Just removing his seatbelt was unsettling. He had heard the stories: the tops of planes dislodging in midflight, stewardesses whisked away, plummeting to imminent death below, bodies never recovered. However, the trips to the lavatory were unbearably necessary.

He couldn’t smoke on the flight either. Six hours of travel with only a forty-minute layover in Dallas allowing him to have three cigarettes was nerve-racking, more so than concealing his habit on that date with the dermatologist. That probably had more to do with his stomachache than the kosher meal he had nibbled. In Dallas he was forced to smoke in a room resembling a holding cell at the precinct station where he had once bailed a client out. At least the hotel room had been ready when he arrived.

From the lobby, the Beverly Hills Hilltop Hotel—recommended by Gabe’s brother—was impressive: marble pillars, oak paneling, impeccably white carpets. No hint of the Formica countertops at the motels his firm reserved. Even the plants appeared to have been watered with routine care.

His younger sister, Ingrid, had insisted they share a room. “Bonding time, like when we were kids.” But Gabe was not particularly accustomed to sharing space, especially with his twice-divorced, still childless sister.

Gabe and Ingrid talked on the phone once a month, whereas he and Mason obliged each other with calls only on holidays. Mason
still lived in Los Angeles, Gabe had planted his new roots in Chicago years ago, and Ingrid followed each new boyfriend or husband around the country: Miami, Minneapolis, Phoenix, now Seattle.

“Mrs. Allen has already checked in, sir,” the desk clerk informed Gabe, who was surprised that Ingrid had discarded her second husband’s surname. Hearing his sister being referred to as Ingrid Allen, Gabe conjured images of a fifteen-year-old girl stuffing her bra with tissue paper.

Ingrid was not in the room when he entered, but he could hear her humming *Fiddler on the Roof*’s “Matchmaker” from behind the bathroom door. On one of the two double beds her charcoal suitcases—still displaying the monograms from her former life as Ingrid Esther Schulman—were open, exposing her wardrobe: black sweaters, black slips, black stockings, at least six pairs of black shoes for only three days in Los Angeles. “I’m here,” Gabe shouted towards the bathroom.

“Great,” Ingrid answered. “I’ll be out of the tub soon.”

The windows were open. He remembered that about Ingrid, her needing to sleep with circulating air, even in the winter. The memory almost brought with it the aroma of burning leaves. Of all his childhood recollections, those that included Ingrid were the most vivid, particularly that of waking early on fall mornings with their bedroom window open and the odor of burning leaves rising from their parents’ yard.

He took the chair at the coffee table by the window, leaned back, and looked at the Los Angeles skyline, the sun setting over Pico Boulevard. The intoxicating hues of pollution glazed billboard advertisements for cellular phones and sport utility vehicles. He looked at the table and noticed a complimentary dish of mints, each sealed with the Beverly Hills Hilltop Hotel logo of a palm tree superimposed over an aqua-green shield. He was opening a new pack of
cigarettes when he saw the card. *The Beverly Hills Hilltop Hotel thanks you for refraining from smoking.*

Gabe took the dish and dumped the mints, as if pollinating the surface of the table. He fitted a cigarette between his lips, lit up, and inhaled strongly. He exhaled, watched the smoke silhouette throughout the room from the fading sunlight; flicked ash into the candy dish. He then noticed a rubber band on the carpet, leaned down, and placed it in his pocket. Rubber bands caught his eye everywhere—on the street, in restaurants, airports.

His stomach coiled again, and he felt something creep downward into his lower abdomen. But the sky was gorgeous, nothing like the one he looked out upon from his office on the eighth floor of a Chicago high-rise.

Gabe took nervous drags from the cigarette, the tiny inhalations making him feel like a sputtering engine on its last cylinder. He felt his stomach drop again in rapid, loosening increments. That was it; another journey to the toilet, his sixth that day.

He smothered the cigarette into the dish and made a beeline for the bathroom.

Ingrid turned her naked body to her brother as the door opened. Soapy water spilled from the tub onto the linoleum, blanketing Gabe’s wingtips.

“Gabe,” she gasped, smiling.

He dropped his slacks and was already evacuating his bowels before his skin touched the toilet seat.

“Airplane food?” Ingrid asked, not looking at Gabe as he scrunched his eyes into crow’s feet. “You should have ordered a kosher meal. They’re always better.” Gabe said nothing, just opened his eyes, looked at her, and sighed.

Ingrid now faced him from the tub, her tiny, pedicured toes protruding through the bubbles. Her breasts were exposed just as
they had been in high school when she would bathe while practicing her clarinet. Neither she nor Gabe felt embarrassment. They had shared a bathroom in their childhood: brushed their teeth while the other showered, changed clothes in one another’s presence. Ingrid and her girlfriends had even used Gabe to practice French kissing.

She set down a hardcover copy of English translations from the Hebrew Tanakh onto the shampoo rack. After her first divorce she had vigorously submerged herself in a kind of quasi-Judaism, mailing Gabe passages of scripture that he would feed into his recycling bin. But he always thanked her for thinking of his soul while he was occupied with the monetary salvation of his clients.

“Better?” she asked.

“I think so. Nice to see you.”

“You, too,” she said. “I like you without the beard, looks good. Oh, be careful, I think I saw a rat in the toilet. It might have been an acid flashback, but you never know. These older hotels look top-shelf, but the plumbing might have gone to shit. Oh, sorry, bad word choice.” She laughed. “By the way, there are some joints in my purse, might help your stomach. I campaigned for medical marijuana use last year, remember?”

Gabe nodded. She hasn’t changed, he thought. “Isn’t there a dinner or something you should be at?”

“Me? We, Gabe.” She stretched her arms over her head. Gabe watched the soap bubbles trickle from her wrists to her armpits, noticing that she was shaving them again. Her small breasts raised higher out of the water, settled again when she relaxed and ran her talon-like fingers through her damp black hair. “The whole family went to services. I can’t stand Friday night services at Conservative temples; such a bore.” They were all the same to Gabe. “Mason and Wendy had a fit about my refusing to go, even more so that you
hadn’t taken an earlier flight. Jeremy is just sitting on the bimah tonight, won’t even participate in the service until tomorrow morning. I was just reading up on tomorrow’s Torah portion. Wanna know what it’s about?”

“Not really.” Gabe was crinkling his eyes again. He could sense another approaching release, had come to recognize the warning signs. He turned away toward the sink, which was cluttered with Q-Tips, vitamin C tablets, skin moisturizers, and Ingrid’s diaphragm. Sandal-wood incense burned from a stick propped in a water glass.

“Not worth going to,” Ingrid continued. “All of Mason and Wendy’s ritzy friends will be there. They socialize with people who display bumper stickers that tell the whole fucking world that their children are honor roll students. It’s all a big show.”

“I thought they were Reform,” Gabe said.

“What?” Ingrid asked as she began to finger through the book again.

“Reform. I thought Mason and Wendy belonged to a Reform shul. You said it was Conservative.”

“Oh. I don’t know, maybe they are Reform. Still, it’s a bore. You at least go to temple on high holy days, don’t you, Gabe?” No answer, he simply squinted his eyes in readiness for the assault of his bowels. “You’re still Conservative, right?”

“No,” he said to the violent splash of water. “I’m just a lawyer now,” and flushed.

She bent her cheeks in disapproval. “But you still believe in God, right?”

“Yes, Ingrid,” he sighed. “I still believe in God. We just don’t talk that often anymore.”

“Very funny,” Ingrid said, closing the book. “I have this great idea,” she continued. “Here it is. I see so much in common with Jews and American Indians.”
“How so, besides genocide?”

“Genocide? I hadn’t thought of that one. No, I was thinking how wonderful it would be to have a drumbeat during the Mourner’s Kaddish at services.”

Gabe looked at her, perplexed. Ingrid was always seeking to fulfill an inner life with something; attending Arizona retreats that taught the correlation between tarot cards and the Torah, campaigning to save obscure plant species. For a while she had reveled in garage sale hunting, thrilled by the potential treasure of other people’s junk. After her last divorce she had taken up painting Jewish midrash with watercolors like some late seventies rabbinical dropout. “You’re serious?”

“Absolutely!” she sang like a giddy schoolgirl. “I brought a small hand drum with me for Jeremy’s bar mitzvah tomorrow. If it goes well, I’ll introduce the idea to my own unaffiliated shul. What do you think?”

“Maybe you should just bring it up at your own temple before—ach!” Gabe felt an excruciating pain in his left buttock.

He leaped from the toilet. His feet tangled in the slacks at his ankles and he barreled over into the tub with Ingrid, his body smothering her tiny frame. He lifted his neck to breathe. She shook and wiggled to pull herself from the water, holding the book high.

“Oh, my God!” Ingrid gasped, and dropped the book into the tub. They watched as a pair of claws reached over the toilet seat, followed by the head of a large sewer rat. Ingrid screamed. The rodent answered with its own piercing voice and retreated into the toilet water. Gabe leaned out of the tub and slammed down the lid to the toilet seat.

“Find something heavy to put over it!” he shouted at Ingrid, the bath water now having drenched his entire body, his scratched buttock bleeding. But Ingrid was still screaming. She leaped from
the tub and didn’t stop to wrap herself in a towel as she bolted for the phone in the bedroom.

“Sir, we do not have rats at the Beverly Hills Hilltop Hotel,” the manager told Gabe later that evening after calling a plumber. But the rodent had already escaped to the pipes. “This has never occurred before. I assure you that we will do everything possible to upgrade your accommodations and comfort.” What Gabe had wanted was a new room, but the hotel was completely booked. Ingrid, more livid than she was after her pilgrimage to Roswell, New Mexico—convinced that the government was concealing UFO secrets—had demanded another hotel entirely, particularly after being mistaken for Gabe’s wife. “Oh, your sister. I see,” the manager had said. “We would appreciate you not mentioning this incident. The Beverly Hills Hilltop Hotel does not have rats, sir.” Gabe settled on a forty percent discount and his inoculation shots at Cedars Sinai’s ER paid for in full.

The doctor at the ER told Gabe that he shouldn’t worry, that the inoculations, which were relatively painless compared to the rat scratches, should take care of any fears, including rabies. Gabe was told that he could see his own doctor in Chicago for a follow-up if he wished, but that it was not necessary since the rat had obviously not bitten him, only torn his skin with its claws. But for Gabe, just the idea that he could have been bitten by a rat brought about thoughts of imminent death. My God, he contemplated, I could die childless.

He couldn’t wait until Monday; he wanted a second opinion immediately. And for some reason, the first doctor that came to mind was not his physician of the past four years, Dr. Charlesworth at Northwestern Medical, but that dermatologist he had gone on a date with the week before. He fished out her business card from his
wallet, the one with call me! written in her swirled penmanship on the back. Her name was Debbie. He remembered it being Denise, but he had to admit that Debbie sounded nicer, softer, sweet really. She answered on the third ring.

“Oh, Gabe,” she said after he finally reminded her who he was. She then gave him a silent, heavy breath response after he described in great detail what had just happened to him. “It’s really not my field,” she said. “But yes, you should be fine if it was only a scratch and not a bite, just see your regular doctor when you get home.” He thanked her and said that he would call her again when he returned to Chicago. She said, “Sure.” Gabe liked her quiet tone. He decided that he was more attracted to her than he initially thought, and then proceeded to call Dr. Charlesworth’s answering service to schedule an appointment for Monday.

Gabe and Ingrid stacked three phone books atop the toilet lid before leaving their hotel room for the bar mitzvah the next morning. He had not seen Jeremy in four years, but he was certain that the child would remember him. He called all of Mason’s children on holidays. But Jeremy was his favorite. Had it been Kalia’s or Daniel’s special day, he might not have come to Los Angeles at all.

Gabe sat with Ingrid near the back of the synagogue’s sanctuary, though they could see Mason and Wendy proudly situated on the bimah. The ceremony consisted of Jeremy falteringly reciting his haftorah and maftir portions in English, the rabbi, a plump woman wearing Birkenstocks, openly correcting him a dozen times.

Ingrid removed the small drum from her purse during the Mourner’s Kaddish and began to tap lightly. When bodies turned towards her, she steadily magnified the beat. Gabe could see Mason’s face, mortified.
He was amazed by how much Jeremy had grown. The thirteen-year-old was already at least five-foot-seven. Looking at Jeremy, Gabe wondered if the child had inherited his own rare height.

When the ceremony concluded, the guests bellowed, “Mazel tov,” and stood up to leave. Jeremy was immediately congratulated, although he had probably spent more time on his waxed hair than on preparing for his participation in the service.

The number of guests was impressive, the children in attendance astounding. Perhaps every child from Jeremy’s school was there. Gabe followed Ingrid, shaking hands with people he vaguely recognized. “Good to see you again, still in Chicago?” was repeated some fifteen times before he left the sanctuary. “How’s the wind treating you?” Forced laughter. After five minutes of this polite, acceptable language of people so distantly removed by time, mind, and geography that they might as well have been dead, Gabe needed a cigarette.

Guests aggressively surrounded Mason and Wendy as if they were political candidates. Unlike Gabe and Mason’s bar mitzvahs, the reception was not to be held in the basement of the temple, but at the banquet hall of the Beverly Hills Hilltop Hotel.

Gabe slipped on his sunglasses as he left the sanctuary for the arboretum lobby of the temple and followed the migration to the parking lot. He could see the children boarding a chartered Greyhound like ants in a colony, Jeremy standing like a celebrity among the prepubescent entourage. “My God,” Gabe said, “Mason rented a bus for them to travel seven blocks?” He and Ingrid had walked that morning. His buttock was still sore from the scratches and inoculations, and the less he sat the better. For the first time in years he had slept on his stomach and not his back.

He turned to see Ingrid standing with her off-black dress and charcoal shawl fluttering in the light Los Angeles breeze, her horn-
rimmed sunglasses slipping from the bridge of her sloped raven’s beak nose as she pontificated to a stranger about the spiritual void her parents had created by not allowing her to have a bat mitzvah when she was a young girl. She was still stoned from the two joints she had smoked that morning. “I’m really experiencing a new channeling of my displaced aggression,” she was telling an old man wearing a baby-blue polyester suit with brown suede Hush Puppies. Gabe shrugged and lit a cigarette.

Ingrid carried Jeremy’s gift in one hand, her opposite arm looped through Gabe’s elbow as they walked into the hotel. She was giving Jeremy The History of Jewish Feminism, a book Gabe was certain his nephew would write a gracious letter of appreciation for and never read. At least Ingrid had thoughtfulness going for her. If she didn’t know what to give somebody, she purchased an item that conformed to her own interests. Gabe had simply written out a fifty-four dollar check, the Jewish equivalent of triple chai, and placed it into a money holder. He had wanted to buy Jeremy a chess set, maybe instructional videos on acting; he knew the boy was enthusiastic about dramatics. But the Ann Arbor deposition had kept him too busy.

“I don’t know any of these people,” Ingrid whispered as they followed the crowd towards the banquet hall.

“Me neither,” Gabe said. “I need another cigarette.”

“Just relax. You can’t leave me here alone, I might have to explain to somebody why I don’t have a husband anymore.” Gabe was certain that that was exactly what she was hoping for.

The reception was not the balloons and streamers display Gabe had expected. On the far wall was a ten-foot cardboard replica of a projection camera spinning enormous Styrofoam film reels. To the
left of the camera lens, Happy Bar Mitzvah, Jeremy Allen! was spelled out in blue and gold twinkling bulbs. Canister lights swiveled from the corners as if the reception were a movie premiere: “There’s No Business Like Show Business” hummed from speakers while the hired band members arranged their instruments. A shadow of Hitchcock blanketed the dance floor. Even the caterers looked like movie stars. Placed on each table were plastic souvenir replicas of the small wooden tefillin boxes that Orthodox Jews prayed with each morning. The boxes themselves traditionally contained pieces of parchment with selections of scripture. These spun open with potpourri inside. And suspended by cables from the ceiling was a miniature reproduction of The Titanic with an enormous black and white photo of Jeremy dressed in a tuxedo positioned at the ship’s bow. Gabe thought that his nephew looked more like the main attraction at a gay nightclub than Leonardo DiCaprio.

“Sushi, sir?” Gabe turned to see a young girl dressed as Marilyn Monroe spreading her glossed lips at him.

“Excuse me?” Gabe managed to say.

“Sushi?” she repeated. “They’re California rolls.”

His bowels cringed. “No. No, thank you.”

The girl smiled and moved on. A waiter dressed as James Dean passed her with glasses of champagne craned in his arm. Sushi was not what Gabe expected to be served at a bar mitzvah. He wouldn’t have minded some champagne, though.

Ingrid tossed her present onto the gift table. Gabe refused to place a card with a fifty-four dollar check on a table. Besides, he wanted to congratulate his nephew personally. He knew there would be more time to speak with him at the private family brunch at Factor’s Delicatessen the next day. Today was for Jeremy to be with his friends, to acknowledge congratulations. But Gabe still wanted to see the boy.
“There’s Mason and Wendy,” Ingrid said. Taking Gabe by the arm, she maneuvered her slender frame through the maze of cologne and perfume-scented bodies. Every other woman in the room seemed to be wearing a black velvet dress. Even the thirteen-year-old girls wore black velvet dresses worth a fortune that they would outgrow in less than a year.

“Wendy!” Ingrid said, swinging her slim arms around her sister-in-law, who was wearing a black sequined dress with a necklace of modest pearls around her ostrich-like neck. Mason’s wife held herself like a window mannequin. She was a Lutheran convert to Judaism and had paid to have trees planted in Israel for every guest in attendance. Gabe had clipped the certificate he received from the Jewish National Fund to his refrigerator.

“Hi, Mason,” Gabe said, extending his hand.

“So,” Mason said, “you made it.”

“I told you I would,” Gabe said, releasing Mason’s hand.

The tense crinkle of Mason’s brow was unmistakable as he looked up to his much taller younger brother.

“Hello, Wendy,” Gabe said, and kissed her cheek.

“You decided to come?” Wendy said in the condescending tone typically reserved for seasoned schoolteachers. She was the sort of woman who confused her acquisition of wealth for having acquired intelligence. Then again, Gabe knew that rich people could afford to be stupid. He had had plenty of clients prove that to him over the years. Wendy took a glass of champagne from a waitress dressed as Audrey Hepburn.

“You think I would miss my own nephew’s bar mitzvah?” Gabe said, as he too took a glass of champagne.

“Why not?” Wendy said. “You’ve missed every family event over the past four years. Excuse me, I need to make sure the cake has arrived.” Gabe thought it was the perfect excuse for a woman who
earned her family a needless second income coordinating events for a Santa Monica party planning company.

“Don’t worry about her,” Mason said, sipping his champagne as Wendy left. “It’s good to see you again.”

“You, too,” Gabe said.

“Jeremy did well today, didn’t he?” Mason said. It was more a rhetorical statement than a question.

Gabe appreciated it that his brother, unlike their own father, was proud of his children’s accomplishments. He wondered if Debbie liked kids, assumed she wanted them.

“He was wonderful,” Ingrid said.

Mason refrained from commenting on her drumming. “Oh, shit,” he said. “It’s Uncle Edward.”

“He’s still alive?” Gabe asked.

“Yeah, don’t worry, you didn’t miss his funeral, yet.”

“There’s my little Ingy Ingy. Give your Uncle Edward a kiss.”

Ingrid didn’t have the heart to request that her uncle not call her by her childhood nickname. To avoid kissing his Old Spice-soaked cheeks, she put her arms around him and squeezed. Their uncle was affectionate with women: kisses, hugs, pinches to the butt. Firm handshakes were sufficient for Gabe and Mason.

“The boy was good,” Edward said.

“Thank you,” Mason said.

“Your father should have lived to see today,” Edward continued, pulling at his polyester slacks, which were elevated over his ankles by the assistance of safety pins. He was easily in his late eighties and had managed to retain more hair than Mason had at forty-five. “Have you been watching that new television show, Get Rich Quick?”

“Sure,” Mason said. “Every Thursday night.”

“Haven’t seen it,” Gabe said. He owned two televisions and was lucky if he caught the local news, occasionally a Cubs game. Gabe