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## Chapter 1

AT THIS LATE DATE, WOULD IT BE FAIR TO say that people, after a fashion, have come to doubt the building blocks of life itself? That we suspect our food? That we fear our children? And that as a result we live individually today atop pyramids of defensive irony, squinched into the tiny pointed place on the top and looking balefully out at the landscape below? In such a time of dark views and darker diagnoses, I'll forestall all second-guessing and declare it up front: I loved him. I'd grown up across the street from him. In my own way, I worshipped him. With the slavish adoration of a child, I'd tried briefly to be him. Although we were both boys the same age and although we chaffed and teased each other constantly, below it all ran an awareness on my part that there was always something quick silvery, musical, more sharply drawn about him that set him apart from the rest of us.

His name was Rob Castor. Quite possibly, you've heard of him. He became a minor cult celebrity in his mid-twenties for writing a book of darkly pitch-perfect stories set in a stupid sleepy upstate New York town. Several years later, he murdered Kate Pierce, his writer girlfriend, and then committed suicide, causing the hot lights of the media to come on with an audible whoosh, and stay there, focused on his life, the town of his birth and, by default, we his friends and neighbors. In truth, it was fascinating, in a somewhat repulsive way, to watch how a lone wireser vice story spilled outward, and the newsweeklies picked it up, and then, when it hit television, everything exploded in a bright and twinkling cloud of coverage. In the control rooms of America, apparently, they'd made the collective decision: this is the one. So within six days of the event, TV people were driving up from Manhattan and bivouacking in the Dorset Hotel, along with the big trucks with their sleek antennas and dishes, the over-made-up oncamera host women and anchormen looking all of them like something struck from the Stone Phillips mold and oozing a special kind of major-market insincerity.

For those of us who were his friends, even if we hadn't been in touch with him much these last years, there was the inevitable shock, followed by the inevitable (in my case) sorrow. For the rest of us in town, it was more about the transforming wave that ran through us on the heels of the media attention: that hot bolt of change that left us keenly aware of the way our bodies and faces might look in the rare air of television. By default, it seemed, we'd all become actors on a reality show dedicated to showing the rotten underbelly of innocent American small-town life. Except there was no rotten underbelly. This wasn't Columbine High School. This wasn't that sandy sad place where poor David Koresh preached and died. This was Monarch, New York, a trim, proud little town on a hill far enough away from the major urban centers that people still pause a second to consider before they speak.

But no matter. The weather was turning crisp, the apples had already swelled, reddened, and fallen from the trees, and suddenly too many of us were outside braving

the cold while wandering the streets of the town in pretend idleness, hoping to be on the nightly news. It was undignified to see Major Wilkinson, our World War II vet and a man rumored to have squirreled away millions in silver coins, buying a whole new wardrobe (at eighty-five years of age!) and posing in a photo op each morning at the entrance to the Krispy Kreme like a Wal-Mart greeter gone mad. Old diaries and dusty storage boxes were ransacked for sellable artifacts, and there was a kind of unspoken lottery that was won by Hilary Margold, who unearthed a tattered browning piece of paper with Rob's unmistakable high school penmanship forming the words "question authority." It was authenticated, publicized in the local press, and in tribute to the perennial American hunger for morbid memorabilia, ended up on eBay, where it went for a pretty sum. All of us, whether we'd known Rob personally or not, walked around with a strange lifted feeling, like a freshening wind was blowing, and maybe that wind would bring something live and new into our lives. For my part I participated in almost none of it. I was stunned by his death, and then doubly shocked by the extent of the pain it brought with it—a sharp piercing ache in a private place, way up inside, that hadn't been touched in years.

## Chapter 2

UNSURPRISINGLY, I SUPPOSE, MY WIFE, Lucy, has been less than interested in sharing my bereavement. In truth, she's never quite trusted the wildness of my old friend, or liked hearing the wiggly picaresque stories that, especially after a glass or two of wine, I love to recount about our childhood together: Here's Rob and me at age ten writing and distributing a newspaper filled entirely with dirty words. Here's Rob showing me a new way to masturbate, which is "how they do it in China." Not Norman Rockwell perhaps, but I confess I'm still a bit mystified by the vehemence of my wife's disgust. He was a deep friend, I've told her, part of the landscape of ancient memory, and I loved him the way you love an old land formation like a pier or jetty off which you remember jumping repeatedly into the cool, blue, forgiving water. "It's so simple, darling," I'd say, looking at the woman whose marriage to me has been a steady falling away from a dream of undivided light: "I felt really enriched by our friendship as a kid, and why shouldn't I honor those feelings as an adult?"

I've told Dwight and Will, our eight- and ten-year-old sons, stories about Rob, describing him as someone who was dedicated to telling us affectionately how lame we were, how silly, dumb, humanly wasteful to go through our days in a fog of nodding complacency and not scratch an inch below the brilliant surface of life. But being children, they're more interested—of course—in some of the spectacular scrapes we got into together over the years. And over the years, we got into a lot.

When I ask myself why the life and death of my old friend and his lover blew up into a rolling national media storm that is still, weeks after the event, engulfing us with battering headlines and high editorial winds, the only conclusion I can come to is that it must have been the universal appeal of the whole thing that turned people's heads. It had good looks, talent, the New York skyline and a bad end. It had boy-girl emotions, and even, depending on your point of view, a villainous asshole, in the person of a man named David Framkin. Some of us have advanced the idea that it was his girlfriend Kate's mysterious aloofness, her untouchable composure, that seemed to entrance the many men who wooed her, and that from within the illimitable detachment of her own death she was able—briefly—to entrance an entire nation. But I think at bottom the truth is much more mundane, and can be boiled down to one word: video.

Right at the height of the first wave of national interest, a cache of tapes of Rob and Kate was discovered from an unfinished documentary about the mystique of the writer's life, filmed at the art colony where they met. Nearly instantly they entered the special sad pantheon where that poor little starlet JonBenét Ramsey lives, along with Dylan Klebold, and even Patty Hearst posing with her machine gun like a porn star of mayhem and murder. The video contained several wrenching scenes of them individually talking to the camera about what they wanted to do as writers and with their lives. But I think the shot that captured the heart of America was the sentimental one of the two of them sitting in a place called Race Point Beach, on Cape Cod, and singing songs together, with Rob doing some fast-fingered chords on a guitar. It was old Beatles stuff, some Hendrix, a little Nirvana, but a big flaming brazier of a sunset was falling into the water, the waves were crashing off to one side, and as their piping little voices rose, twined and fell together in complete ignorance of what would befall them, it was impossible, watching, not to be a little sick with foreknowledge about it all, and to feel that maybe the best, most passionate love always breeds its own extinction.

For about two weeks straight, the tabloid TV shows were jammed solid with these unplugged excerpts. Repeatedly we watched that fatally demure girl with her face canted a little bit off axis, as if looking, steadily, into a better world, and that guy with the striking good looks of a Kurt Cobain, but beefier, singing and pausing every few seconds to announce his thoughts on life with the impudent self-confidence of a born shit kicker.

Meanwhile, the literary community, roiled by the murder, mobilized to mourn Rob, while some of them, his supposed friends, did their best to distance themselves from the act. Benefits in his girlfriend's name were held to provide funding for victims of domestic violence. Others, predictably, mounted the soapbox of the tragedy to opine on the obscene competitive pressures brought to bear on young artists today. Semi-famous people wrote strong columns for and against Rob in the New York Times, and former mentors of his lived the mayfly cycle of quotation for several consecutive news rotations. All the while, watching and listening, I took a bitter satisfaction in the thought that, if nothing else, and at least for a few weeks, the entire country seemed to concur with me that my dear old friend was unforgettable.

### Chapter 3

NOT LONG AFTER THE MEDIA FRENZY ramped up, the phone rang at our house with Shirley Castor, Rob's widowed mother, on the other end. I hadn't talked to her in years, and I felt a sharp, not entirely pleasant pang at hearing her voice. She wanted to see me, she said, in a commanding tone that recalled the theatrical haughty lady who had intimidated me as a boy. Shirley was a controlling, unnaturally present mother who had fused with Rob in a way I'd vaguely envied as a child. He was clearly her favorite of the three of her kids. For several years, she'd basked happily in the reflected light of his success. But from the moment of the murder-suicide on, there was another woman linked far more memorably with him than his mom. In death, Kate Pierce had eclipsed Shirley forever, and I knew she didn't like that one bit.

I should explain that after Rob became well known for writing a book that, for at least one whole season, was the must-have fashion accessory on trains and planes for its "lyric anatomizing of the human heart," he began a new life which seemed to consist almost entirely of him moving in long, elliptical circuits through college campuses and art colonies, and arriving home about twice a year with an exotic new woman in tow. He

came here to see his mother, and also to see us, his old roadies, at our monthly pizza-and-beer dinners, held by long-standing arrangement at a local dive called New Russian Hall. Most of us found it amazing that in the face of the stern challenge of earning a living, our grade-school pal had become not only famous, but on top of that had somehow achieved the slippery distinction of writing for a job. But we collectively envied him—to a fault—the by-products of that distinction: his conquests. We were awestruck by the beautiful young Turkish painter who moved through life doing the Dance of the Seven Veils with her hair. We were intrigued by the career novelist with perfect nails and a blinkless stare. We were bowled over by the smoldering, anorexic poet, and dear Lord but we were killed by the sensitive Winnebago Indian girl with the downcast eyes and the shimmering cataract of black hair. Each of these women, tense, gorgeous, and dramatic looking in entirely different ways, arrived in town on Rob's arm, took a look around, and did their best to conceal their disappointment.

Kate was unlike them from the start. She wasn't obviously an artist, to begin with. She didn't toss her hair, speak in a fake baby voice, or act like European royalty inexplicably fallen to earth among American hayseeds. A poised woman of about thirty, she was pretty enough in a regular way, affable but slightly cool, with straight blond hair combed so as to fall in two evenly parted curtains, modest clothes and a pleasingly upturned nose. Standing in front of you as self-contained as a vase, she smiled at you in a way that made you feel punched clean through with inner recognition. There was knowledge in that smile, otherwise kept carefully under wraps. And though we knew she was a writer herself, we were still deeply surprised that Rob had chosen her. Rob had always been such a strutting out loud type in his own way that we were sure he'd end up with someone stridently beautiful or an aggressive social climber. Yet this girl, at least at first blush, was perfectly normal, the kind of forgettably average-looking woman you'd find loitering in an apron at the cosmetics counter, offering up spritzes of the featured scent of the day.

We were shocked when they swore eternal love, moved into Manhattan and began a life together. From that moment on, most of our information about them came from a guy named Mac Sterling. I'd known Mac—that grasping phony—since grade school, when we'd shared equal billing as “best friends of Rob.” A big, loud, smart kid, he would later go on to be a top-tier journalist writing celebrity profiles in national magazines. I was always a little bit helpless in front of his obvious affinity with Rob—an affinity of wildness, as children, and of writers as adults—and after high school, Mac stayed more in touch with Rob than anyone else did. When Rob and Kate left the art colony where they'd met and planned to move in together, it was Mac, already living in New York, who visited them regularly and faithfully reported back to us during his return trips to Monarch to see his ailing mom.

Aloft on an updraft of love, the happy couple came to earth on the outer reaches of downtown Manhattan, in some edgy neighborhood filled with the smell of fried grease, piss and poverty and that way the streets of New York (Mac talking now) reek from deep inside themselves in summer, their stinks activated by the heat. Rob had begun working on a novel for which, Mac explained, he was already under contract. Kate had meanwhile given up her previous long-standing secretarial job in Cincinnati and been able to transplant her skills to a rich lady on the Upper East Side who loved her dependability, her calm and her typing speed.

Outwardly at least, things ran smoothly for a while. She did her best to blend in among Rob's social set of grungy artist types. According to Mac, she'd increased the percentage of black in her wardrobe, and at Rob's urging had cut her hair in one of those dramatic downtown cantilevers that leans way out over a face. Her accent remained the same, as did the way she had of saying little and remaining poised inside the frame of her self-possession. But she'd begun to seem a little bit more subtly Manhattan, and less the Midwestern girl she was by birth.

The seasons passed, the leaves fell and in miraculous fits, in tantrums of green, they appeared again, and every day, Rob climbed to his desk like an exhausted swimmer battling the outgoing tide to the beach, and there tried to concentrate. Something, he reported to Mac, was off. The work didn't flow, the sentences built outward to no apparent purpose. For the first time in his life, his artistic nerve was failing, Mac explained, failing the way a healthy person fails into illness, taking their light and laughter with them, and the situation was all the worse because the expectations were running so high. Rob had never lacked for industry, and so he redoubled his time at the desk, roaring through draft after draft of the book and growing only more dissatisfied with the thickening end product. Maybe he was up against the limitations of his gift. Or maybe fame, in its suddenness, had blasted him right out of his formerly unshakable sense of self. Out, in any event, went the drafts, and back they came, covered all over with the penciled evidence of the editor's calm, sober and supportive no. And in this high wind of refusal, Mac said, Rob was beginning to panic. Because he wasn't prepared for rejection. It wasn't in the Rob Anthology. It was missing from the Rob Theory of Self. Misunderstood, yes, and important even. But rejected, no.

The only saving grace in it all, if there was one, was that almost no one in the wider world knew as of yet about his block. The city of New York tosses up so much noise and light that it's easy to pretend you're busy and convince everybody else of it as well, even if you're sitting all day in a box of squared failure and staring out a window waiting for the phone to ring.

Kate, meanwhile, had burrowed down into life and quickly found her footing. She loved the speed and efficient deployments of Manhattan. She found a cognate echo of her own ambition in the streaming, nervous vitality of the city. Every morning, she woke early and went to her millionaires castle on Sutton Square, where she sat with perfect posture while typing 125 wpm and managing the woman's social schedule and fielding her calls. One day the woman, Annabel Radek, asked Kate if she'd like to stay on after work, because she was having a little cocktail party and there was someone there she wanted her to meet. After mulling it over, she said yes, thank you, and phoned Rob to explain that she'd be late that evening. And that was how she got to meet David Framkin.

The event was held in the double-height penthouse "library," with views, so the press later said, of both rivers. There was a guy playing the piano and waiters in white livery revolving around the room with tiny silver trays. The room was filled with that category of people who look like famous people, along with a few genuinely famous people themselves, and everybody was very stimulated and trying out their best looks, their wittiest lines. Kate had washed her face and put on a little bit of eye makeup, but that was all she'd done by way of getting ready. Probably she understood her role was to be social filler, and she did the best she could, circulating around the room with

a little smile and making polite conversation, while occasionally refreshing people's drinks when the waiters were occupied.

About an hour after the party started, David Framkin filtered in. He was the famous corporate raider who had recently bought and bankrupted one of the city's oldest leather manufacturers. His preferred mode of operation, in fact, was to purchase heirloom companies, squeeze leveraged money out of them, cashier their employees, and then declare with a long face that these businesses were no longer "viable." He loved the word "viable." A balding fifty-something man with a big penguin belly, upswept gray hair, and an expression on his face of angry diagnosis, he strode into the penthouse, looked around himself, sniffing, like maybe the room was a day past its sell date, and then he went straight to the bar. On his way, he passed Kate, and stopped, drew himself up, and said hello. She would later confess to a friend that he was a "stiff, oddly formal man" who eyeballed her, she thought, with that important person's way of assessing the potential damage she might do him. She simply smiled and told him that she was Ms. Radek's personal assistant and had he tried the marinated porcini spears? A half an hour later, their paths again crossed. David Framkin had had two glasses of wine in the interim. He was a little bit warmer this time, and told her with a small air of self-congratulation that it was clear she was not a New Yorker, and he'd bet his bottom dollar on it. He leaned into her personal space while saying this. She was a Buckeye, she said, an Ohio girl. Holding her eye gravely, he opened his arms as if in ecstatic confirmation.

Two days later, Kate was sitting at the computer answering her e-mail. It was ten p.m. Rob and she had been fighting a lot lately, with him finding her "unreachable" and increasingly cold, and her refusing to "nurse" him through his extended bad moods. On that particular evening, an online glance at his dwindling bank account had triggered an irritability attack in which he'd flung a dish into the wall, and stomped off to bed early, leaving Kate to clean the higgledy-piggledy kitchen and eat dinner alone under the fluorescent bulb. She was writing to her mother back in Akron when a message with a corporate return address blipped in her in-box. Rob was sleeping across the room from her in the pull-out bed, and I like to think she turned and looked once at him, faintly lit by the lunar glow of the computer monitor, as she clicked and the icon popped open on her screen. I like to think she made some sign or gave some acknowledgment to his unconscious form that she was about to do something of momentous consequence. But probably she just clicked and read the letter from David Framkin, who wrote her, formal with embarrassment, to say he'd enjoyed meeting her and that—he hoped she'd forgive him—he'd had an assistant do a little research on her, and this assistant had found one of her two published short stories and he'd read it and loved it. He added in his rigid way that if she were interested in discussing it with him over a drink, he might be amenable himself.

AFTER THE MURDER-SUICIDE THERE WAS A WRONGFUL-death suit brought by Kate's parents against Rob's estate, and because the e-mail transcripts were eventually classified as evidence and read out loud at the trial, we know exactly what happened next. At nearly one a.m., in a friendly noncommittal manner, she wrote him back thanking him for his interest, and marveling at the fact that he'd found one of her published stories. After another sentence or two of casual chitchat, she said that yes, if he liked, she'd be willing to see him to discuss it further.

They met, Mac told us, two days later in a bar in midtown, a place that was plush with dark wood paneling and mirrors in the pretend Irish pub manner, even if the main clientele these days, Mac explained, was young hedge fund managers eager to drink fancy vodkas and wax expansive about the day's killings. As we heard it, David Framkin was nervous at the beginning. He was out of the carefully controlled environment in which he usually traveled, and on top of that was faced with the challenge of wooing the calm, perfectly contained person of Kate Pierce. Somehow or other, he managed, because they made a date to meet again two days later.

Of course, back up here in dozy Monarch, we didn't know any of this at the time. And ever since then, one of the things we've pondered is exactly how much Rob was aware of what his girlfriend was getting up to. Like I said, he and Mac went way back and they spoke to each other with the honesty of old lodge brothers. But Rob was a proud, stubborn man, and I think it would have been hard for him to admit, even if he knew it, that the woman who'd cashed him out of long-term bachelorhood could be wooed and won by a fat man with the grim, faintly pissy look on his face of someone who's just taken a bite of fish with bones in it.

But that was well in the future. At the moment, Framkin was still in the phase of meeting her at bars and restaurants around Manhattan, and doing his increasingly urgent best to reel her in. There is abundant testimony of waiters and bartenders on this point specifically, and they describe an older man bent always forward into the face of a girl invariably raked back, and smiling slightly. Meanwhile, predictably, the situation at home between Rob and Kate was lurching from bad to unbearable. His creative block was now nearly total, and he spent hours simply walking the streets, or getting so stoned and drunk at parties that he passed his days drifting in the long, slow curves of hangover. One evening, Mac showed up at our monthly pizza dinner and told us, shaking his head, that after more than two years together, he didn't think the two of them were going to make it after all. At the next dinner he quoted Rob describing himself and Kate as two people who over time had individually retreated toward the center of their loneliness, circling warily until that moment when they were finally back-to-back, facing outward, and every space on earth was foreign save the little warm spot where their tailbones met. After Mac stopped talking that time, there was a silence in which we all suddenly became aware of the rowdy sound of the jukebox and the low roar of chat along the bar. We tried to joke it off, but it was, we later agreed, probably the single saddest thing any of us had ever heard.

And then, like an explosion deep undersea, Kate's most recent story, "Bloodstone," surfaced in an important magazine that just happened—imagine that—to be published by a subsidiary holding company of Framkin's, and from that moment on, everything seemed to move at warp speed. In a matter of weeks after the publication, she was under contract for her first book of stories and a novel. Nearly as fast, Rob moved out—he found her publication a "betrayal," Mac said, of their unspoken contract never to let the accomplishment gap between them grow so wide that they couldn't shout across it and be heard. After roughing it on friends' couches for a few weeks, Rob took a tiny apartment near the UN. Not long after, he moved again, to a place on a far spur of Chinatown just under the Manhattan Bridge, where Brooklyn-bound subway trains rattled his building, and the Lucifer-light of passing cars shone in his smeared windows.

It's a sure bet that around this time he saw the (later) famous photo that appeared in a New York tabloid and bore the headline "Say It Ain't So!" Grainy but distinct, the image showed Frankin and Kate leaving a restaurant. She was staring grimly straight ahead, and hurrying as she walked, and Frankin was hurrying as well, but with a satisfaction visible beneath his usual scowl. Indifferent to the accusations of adultery that would soon begin flying, his face bore the unmistakable signs of a man who, after a long slog through the dry deserts of marriage, has fallen into an oasis of sex.

Perhaps it was the photo that caused Rob's final unraveling. Whatever it was, we know he was spotted around this time at the Marx Bar, looking haggard and worn, and that he showed up once at the Pin Club unshaven, and according to someone who knew him, "really spooky looking." And then, for several weeks, he dropped completely out of sight, even to Mac, who tried repeatedly to raise him on the phone, and finally trekked all the way down to his smelly neighborhood and banged on the door, only to be ignored. No one to this day is certain what he did in that period, actually, but we can imagine him sitting for days in his miserable loud apartment as time slowed to a collection of long, slow thuds, like a heartbeat dwindling, and he stared out the window at the ceaseless cycling of city life. We can imagine that as the days went by, the discrepancy between inner and outer worlds continued to grow. The food turned bad in the sink and began to grow horns of mold; the bills were slipped hissing under the door, and Rob, the formerly important but now terminally stalled artist, simply watched, unmoving. Maybe as a writer he was used to seeing himself from a little bit outside his own skin, and found a certain odd familiarity in sitting silently from within a still point of expanding time. Maybe, for that, he wasn't even aware of having reached the apex point atop his mountain of woe, that tippyfulcral moment from which, with increasing speed, he began his tumble all the way down the other side.