

# WHERE MY BODY ENDS AND THE WORLD BEGINS

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# 1



*Summer 1967*

Neighbors gather. A familiar voice calls out, *We need an ambulance*. I've heard this before. The sky opens. Limitless. Vast.

Why do I always forget this part? White fire seizing my leg. I'm twenty and lying in the street and I've injured the same leg three, four times now.

"The sinister left leg," Nonna calls it. She's seventy-one and lives in the flat below us and wears black—for me?—and points to my cursed leg every time I limp. She calls up to her Christ for guidance and understanding, pleading, but quickly waves the plea away, knowing her prayers won't be answered. Then she turns and reaches, as if for a cane, which must be for me, to mock me, because she refuses help of any kind. She lost her own cane after a few weeks but not the habit of reaching for it. Now I'll have to face her again.

Mr. Lipschultz. It's his voice I hear. He leans and blocks the sun and studies me, then my leg. I think I detect shock in his glare. And this is what tightens my gut—his grave reaction. Mr. Lipschultz's the sonofabitch on our block who calls the cops if someone's washing his car with the radio blasting. He's an ex-cop himself, retired three years ago, so he knows how to talk to

them. “An ambulance,” he says again. But there’s no urgency in his voice. He shifts to the right and the sun blinds me.

“Don’t move,” he says. As if this is a possibility. I dare a peek, thinking I’ll see blood. Because I felt the crunch, heard the dull snap. I swear I feel a wetness, but this must be my head playing tricks, because there’s no gash, no pool of blood. Just my leg twisted at an impossible angle, a thing apart. Gory and satisfying. Something’s oozing on the inside maybe, the tibia in pieces.

You learn the names of bones when you break them. This time I’m pretty sure it’s both the fibula, which could fracture from an off-balance sneeze, and the tibia, the shin bone, more substantial. With my fingers, I venture down my thigh and wonder if I shattered my femur, too, this time.

Just out of reach is the baseball I’d been gripping, a black bruise on the leather.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Lipschultz asks. “What kind of goddamn klutz... If I didn’t know better... What, do you fall on purpose? Is this some sick way of getting attention?”

I know he means from my dad, to get the attention of my dad.

Other neighbors are behind him, keeping their distance, because Officer Lipschultz is on duty now, out of retirement.

What is this hold he has on everyone? Why does that steely gaze seem so...protective?

He picks up my baseball, turns it in his hand, lays his fingers across the seams.

“Go fuck yourself,” I mutter under my breath.

“What?” he asks.

“The ball. Hand over the ball,” I tell him.

“I got your ball right here,” he says, and tosses it away from me.

“Yeah, go fuck yourself,” I say clearly.

I take in his canvas shoes, the thick wool socks. In the middle of summer. The crazy old bastard.

He bellows over his shoulder in his usual boom, “Has anyone called?”

I hear a distant siren then, as if on his command.

They'll send me back to the shrink now. Either that, or they'll think I'm trying to dodge the draft because my number's coming up. That's how everyone puts it. *Dodging*. Like thousands of guys like me are faking left, then darting right, leaping. Like going to war is fucking dodgeball. If you're quick enough, you get to shatter your bones on a one-way street in Chicago rather than on the fields of Cambodia or wherever the hell they're fighting.

The throbbing is a sound now, like it's coming from outside. From one of the cars gliding by I hear, "One pill makes you larger and one pill makes you small." I close my eyes to steel myself but worry I'm going to pass out, so I force one eye open. Beyond Lipschultz, neighbors line the sidewalk on the other side, trying to catch a glimpse of that lanky stupid klutz Anthony Lazzeri, who can't cross a street without incident, the gimp. *What happened?* they all want to know. *Did a car swipe him? Is this some kind of hit and run? In our neighborhood? With Mr. Lipschultz on watch?*

What will I say when people ask? What will my story be? I can live with hit and run. Because Lipschultz's cop pals will have questions. *Make of car? Description of driver?* More important, what do I say to Nonna? To my mom, who has suffered enough?

Suddenly, tiny Mrs. Mazzolini is in my face, a biscotti in her bony hand. I might be dying, but I still have to eat before I get there. "*Grazie*," I tell her and take it. The biscotti is warm and, what the hell, I take a bite, as she backs away. The glazed sweetness coats my throat and somehow eases the pain.

I search through the crowd for my sister, Ellie, who's only eleven but seems much older, like she's ready to run the world. She'll shake her head, the way she's seen Nonna do, then she'll nurse me back to health, ordering me around when I start to feel sorry for myself.

I swallow and the biscotti falls from my fingers. Then I do pass out. But it must be for just a second or two because when I open my eyes, nothing has changed, except that I realize,

as if for the first time, that my leg is shattered. *That would be hell*, I think. To pass out every few minutes and to come back having forgotten, with the realization of...*this*. My leg seizes up. I spot a red halter top across the street, and I squint hard to see if it's my sometime girlfriend, Maryann, who lives next door, which would be impossible because she's at school, taking finals for two summer classes at Loyola so she can graduate in three years. *What's the hurry?* I always ask her. She could be *here*, in the street, holding my hand and forgiving me for being such a jerk the past few months. The past few years?

I glance back at our apartment. At Nonna's window. I think I spot the curtain flutter. I picture her rooted there seconds before, glaring out, then turning in disappointment.

I didn't break my leg to slow me down or because I wanted to kill myself or to gain Maryann's sympathy or anyone else's. I broke my leg, the left one, because the entire length of it, or nearly, inside and out—the bones and tendons, the muscles, the skin, the sparse forest of hair—none of it belongs to me.