

Chapter One: Mirrors

Frank Perlmutter was the last person I expected to see in the Hard Rock Cafe in Stockholm at the end of October. I had ducked in to escape the slate sky and biting cold. More than that, I needed to escape the bioethics conference that had brought me here from San Francisco. The restaurant's gleaming red counter drew me in, and, though I would not have confessed this to anyone, I wanted to eat American food, specifically ground beef on a bun with lettuce and tomatoes. I was tired of the oily shar and the deep fried herring with its skin like sandpaper.

It wasn't that I didn't find the conference interesting. It was right up my alley. My head was reeling, in fact, and not in a bad way, from the panels in the hotel, the debates over plates of crackers and sour cream with pickled onions, the dickering about the ethics of manipulating DNA, about who got to decide whether a life was worth living. The whole thing was giving me a headache.

So when I slid into the red booth and picked up the menu it was a relief from all that. I didn't even look around at first, but when I did I saw Frank's profile in the mirror behind the counter. I wasn't sure it was really Frank Perlmutter, my childhood friend. I peered at the mirror, arcing a hand over my face just in case he looked up. I didn't want to catch his eye. What if it wasn't him? What if it was? He was at a booth down the row, with a group of people, four others besides him, all men. They were dressed casually, in leather jackets and sweaters, no ties or button-down shirts. They were talking and laughing. One reached for the pitcher of beer to refill his glass. It was a curved booth and Frank was seated at the end so that I could see his exact and unmistakable profile, older, of course, than I

remembered, but still his thin pointy face and wide mouth that seemed to belong on someone else. I recognized at once his restrained efforts to please, to be liked without moving a muscle, as if the slightest flinch would send his friends (if they were his friends) flapping away like bats. He laughed, he smiled, it wasn't that he didn't enter into the fun. But all along he was so careful, watching everything, giving nothing. But was it him? Was it?

And then a strange thing happened. The moment I looked at him and took all this in—the group, his strained smile, this older incarnation of Frank Perlmutter (maybe) with his short greying black hair, his curling eyebrows, this looser, longer version of his face — the man sitting next to him burst out with a laugh, jerked his arms up as if acting out some terrific joke, and knocked his beer over with a clatter so loud that everyone working behind the counter and seated around the restaurant turned towards Frank's booth. I had the best seat in the house really because I didn't have to turn at all. I watched the whole thing in the mirror, all the time sipping at my cup of coffee, eyes glued on Frank like a birdwatcher fixed on a rare heron. The overturned glass went skittering across the table top and would have landed on the floor with an even louder crash, but Frank snapped out his hand at the last minute and caught it, flawlessly, silently, as if the last thing he wanted to do was call attention to himself. Sure enough, the others at the table didn't even seem to notice. I watched intently as Frank gently placed the glass back on the table, then pushed it into the center with all the other empty and half-full glasses.

Something about that scene made me think of Bradley falling into the sea. Bradley, who didn't get to grow up the way Frank and I did, who instead fell into the sea. Or maybe he didn't, I didn't really know for sure. No, I didn't see it happen, not really. No one did. But it happened in my mind over and over again, Bradley falling into the sea. Bradley, who

didn't get caught the way that glass did, didn't get rescued by Frank or me or anyone else. They found his clothes folded at the edge of the pier. I imagined his blue sweater on top the way he used to fold it up, with the buttons on top. It was a girl's sweater really, now that I thought about it. It had happened in my mind every day, Bradley falling into the sea, sometimes several times a day, since I was twelve years old, and every time there was more detail, the setting sun glinting off the water, seaweed riding high in the breaking waves, though sometimes it was moonlight and you couldn't see much at all and there was just the sound of one splash and then silence.

I couldn't bear it, so I dug the nails of my hand into my thigh right above the knee, as I always did, to bring myself back into the present. My old friend Frank (I really was pretty sure it was him but not positive) was not left unscathed by the overturned glass. Most of the spilled beer spread across the table and cascaded, yellow and sticky (I could almost feel it), down his shirt and into his lap. He must have felt it, must have hated it, and I know I saw what no one else could have seen—the slightest jerk, not even a jerk, a freezing of his whole body for no more than half a second. I recognized it, the sudden closing of his eyes, like a blink that lasted too long. You would never see it unless you knew him, knew him really well. And they clearly didn't, these other men, because they just kept laughing, pushing their napkins towards Frank and twisting around as they snapped their fingers to call the waiter. The culprit slapped Frank on the back good-naturedly, then moved aside to swipe at the seat between them with his napkin. He handed Frank the napkin. Frank gave the faintest smile, hardly moving.

All my doubt vanished. It had to be him, Frank Perlmutter. Here he was, in the Hard Rock Cafe in Stockholm, pushing fifty I guessed, or fifty-one on second thought, since I was

going to be fifty this year and Frank was a year older. He seemed diminished since the last time I'd seen him, which had to be at least ten years ago, no, twelve. Well, around ten years ago. We had run into each other in Berkeley and it was so awkward. So much hung in the air between us—Bradley's disappearance, the way Frank abandoned him, and how I went along with it, following Frank's lead the way I always did.

I watched in the mirror as he dabbed at his beer-drenched pant legs. The Frank I knew needed to leave, to go home and change his clothes. I knew that about him, how he hated the stickiness. When as kids we bought suckers from Standings Market on the way home from the pool I'd always grab a paper napkin on the way out.

"It just makes it worse," he'd say every time, but I'd thrust it at him anyway and he'd take it, wrapping it around the stick, then bending down to wipe his fingers on the dry grass strip between the sidewalk and the street. Half a block later he would try to dart into the car wash bathroom before the blue-shirted attendant could intercept him, as he always did, grabbing hold of Frank's t-shirt with one hand and the door handle with the other and shoving him back out onto the street as the brushes whirled around, the water sprayed out hard and loud, and I half-walked, half-ran backwards down the street yelling, "Come on, Frank! We're almost home!"

My attention had wandered from the little drama in the Hard Rock Cafe mirror. When I tuned back in, Frank was gone. I felt a moment of panic. Was he heading back to the bathrooms? If so, I should slip out now before he had a chance to catch sight of me. Or maybe he had decided to leave, which was worse, because he would pass right by my table. Suddenly, there he was, right next to me, the stained pant leg, the hand clutching a white paper napkin. I could have touched his hand, it came so close to me. What should I do? I

didn't know what to say to him. My vision blurred and broke up strangely, blue denim, the gleaming pole along the bottom of the bar, something white. The sounds of traffic got loud all of a sudden, seemed to come right into the restaurant. Car engines revved right in my ear. Had someone opened the door? A glass slammed down too hard on the bar, someone burst out laughing. Were they laughing at me, all those men in their leather jackets?

"Frank," I started to say, trying to pull myself together. My voice came out whispered, small.

And then I registered that the space beside my table was clear. I could see the bar. The bartender was pouring whiskey over a glass of ice. I craned around to look towards the entrance but there was no sign of Frank there either. Maybe he just walked by and didn't recognize me, or maybe he hadn't walked by at all and was still in the bathroom.

"You stupid head," I said to myself. I hadn't even ordered yet and I was starving, not to mention that I really wanted that hamburger. But I was too rattled. I stood up and walked out.

At that point I didn't know yet that my trip to Stockholm for a philosophy conference was about to turn into something else and that Frank had just come full force back into my life.