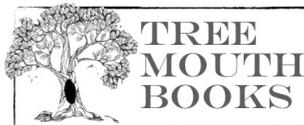


The Magnificent Mind of Ostaf

by
Jason T. Shapiro

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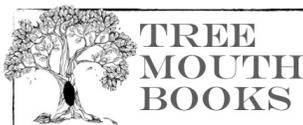
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*To Ryan and Alyssa:
Your creativity and disregard for failure
inspires me.
Never stop dreaming and believing.*

The Magnificent Mind of Ostaf

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The Magnificent Mind of Ostaf

Preface

I have always been fascinated with the dreamers—those who actually believe their imagination is the fuel to create positive change in the world. The ones who go against the grain, follow a different path, and never let the doubt of others impede their journey. These are the people who inspired me to write this story.

Reaching back into the memory box of my own life, I quickly realized I was subconsciously creating characters that a part of me already knew. I wrote this story based on relationships from my past that are worth sharing, with the intention of inspiring others.

There is a story behind the curtain of *every* person's life. My hope is that this book will prompt readers to be more conscious and consider that people's personalities are molded by their circumstances. The depth of one's turmoil often is not visible. When we can replace judgment with compassion, that is the true definition of kindness.

Regardless of political or religious views, we can all agree that there has never been a better time to see the good in humanity. It is there: we just need to look behind the curtain.

The Magnificent Mind of Ostaf

Chapter One

An Outcast Voyage

Our imagination is the gift used to create the vision of a dream, without any limitation of failure. The belief that something is possible before it has manifested into fruition, is the recipe to change the world.

• **Harding, New Jersey – Saturday, June 26, 1993** •

Hey, Dad, what’s going on?” Jacob smells food as he attempts to dart past his father. He’s holding his black backpack. It’s stuffed with cassette tapes, VHS movies, and random 1980s sports cards.

Howard spins around on his bar stool. He’s wearing only underwear, and he’s holding a deli bag full of corned beef. “Where are you going, Jakester? You know once you start college next month, you’re not gonna be able to sleep until 12 o’clock every day. Ya got it?”

“I’m going to be 18 years old in a week. Stop already, big guy. Trust me, I know what I have to do.” He pauses. “Dad, what’s that over there?” Jacob prepares for the heist.

Howard glances at the random location across the room before realizing he’s been set up. Jacob reaches inside the deli bag and snatches a handful of Howard’s mouthwatering corned beef. Frustrated, Howard pokes Jacob in the stomach and shouts, “Keep your paws out of my food! Ya hear me?”

Jacob chuckles as he chomps on the prize. “You *always* fall for that one. That was delicious.”

“Where are you heading off to? Please tell me you aren’t going over to Ostaf’s dump. He’s nothing but trouble, Jake. I’ve told you that a *million* times...and you better not be giving him more of your things to sell. I’m serious about that.” Howard clears his throat and turns his back.

Jacob jumps to Ostaf’s defense. “Give him a break, Dad. He means well. You know he can’t keep a job. I’m just trying to help him out.”

“Jake-man, I admire the type of person you are, but remember this... sometimes people can’t be helped, no matter how hard you try. You are wasting your time. I’m trying to help you here.”

As Jacob hurries toward the front door he clenches his fists and snaps back, “I’ll take my chances, Dad! I will call you later.” Before leaving, he stands still and glares at his father. “You know, I’m getting *really* tired of you always ripping on him.”

“Wise up, man!” Howard shouts, just as Jacob slams the front door closed.

My name is Jacob Roth. I’m the adult who was the 17-year-old boy you just met. When you see text inside a gray box like this, you will know it’s me speaking to you in the current time. I’ll pop in every so often and provide context and perspective on what you just read. Think of me as your tour guide as you embark on this journey with me. I am grateful you decided to read my story. Thank you, and welcome to “The Magnificent Mind of Ostaf.”

Jacob opens the driver's-side door of his white, pristine 1984 Mercury Cougar. He gets in and starts the engine. He rolls down the windows and inserts a cassette labeled, "Old School Mix-Tape." Static blares through the speakers before his favorite song, "In Your Eyes" by Peter Gabriel, begins to play. Turning up the volume, Jacob backs out of the driveway. He sings along with it as the wind blows through his just-styled hair.

After cruising through town, Jacob reaches the on-ramp for the highway. He continues to belt out several more 1980s classic hits as if he were performing live on stage. After 30 minutes of therapeutic road time, Jacob exits off the highway. He passes miles of abandoned farmland before turning onto a dusty dirt road. Driving next on gravel and rocks, the popping sound from the car's rubber tires drowns out the music. Wobbling, the car continues down the uneven surface. Jacob grips the wheel with both hands. Beads of sweat drip down his temples. Captivating streams of water flow along both sides of the narrow lane. Jacob approaches the weathered and rotted remains of a wooden bridge. He pumps the brakes until he comes to a complete stop.

Jacob turns off the engine and steps out of the car. He hears the crunching gravel beneath his feet as he moseys along the trail. He gazes at the euphoric view of the forest surroundings. Several deer bustle through the leaf debris that blankets the ground. The chirping sound of blue jays and robins echoes through the clusters of enormous oak and pine trees. Jacob bends down, picks up a small rock and chucks it into the stream below the bridge as he crosses it. After a second of free fall, there's a splash.

Anytime I wanted to go to my Uncle O's house... and I use the term "house" very loosely, it was an adventure just to get there. No one else could locate him, even if they wanted to. I was one of the few people who knew where he lived. He had moved all over the country. Somehow, he ended up out in the boonies about 45 minutes away from my father, his older brother. You would have thought this was a wonderful thing, but unfortunately it wasn't.

Have you ever tried to push two large same-pole magnets together? It's impossible. You can't do it. There is something called *repulsion* that's an invisible force pushing the magnets away from each other. That's probably the best way to describe the toxic relationship between these two men.

My father was never happy to hear I was going to visit my uncle. Me, on the other hand? I looked forward to it. I enjoyed making the drive out west to the sticks. It gave me a chance to clear my head and reset. I know that probably sounds odd coming from someone who was only 17 at the time. I can vividly remember the feeling of calmness running through my body on the way to see him. I would play my favorite music, roll down the windows, and let the wind blow through my hair. Even though I risked my life crossing that bridge (*I'm laughing*) to see my uncle, it was worth it. I loved him...a lot.

Jacob's heartbeat races as he walks across the unstable structure. Each deep, gulping breath helps calm his nerves. With the same uncertainty as balancing on a tightrope, Jacob closes his eyes and whispers an impromptu prayer: "Almighty God, please don't let me fall through this piece of garbage bridge." Jacob is hopeful his prayer will help protect him from dropping through the rickety, decayed platform. Every soft, timid step inches him closer to victory. Finally, he crosses the finish line and completes what should have been a relaxing stroll across the 20-foot overpass. Jacob sighs and wipes the sweat from his forehead using the bottom of his T-shirt. He grins and shouts with tremendous relief, "Holy shit!" Shaking his head, he looks at his watch and starts the trek up the dirt road.

The squirrels shoot through the roughage as Jacob passes corroded household appliances that have been discarded and are littered along the sides of the path. In the distance he sees the run-down, mid-1920s house. The beams holding up the front porch overhang are slightly tilted. There is a large blue tarp draped across the roof, covered with pockets of water collected from the rainstorm the evening before. Several second-story windows are boarded up with decayed plywood. The asbestos shingle siding is coated with mold and clumps of green algae. The shrubs surrounding the perimeter of the home are overgrown, blocking sunlight from the windows. A 1975 AMC Gremlin is parked in front of the garage. Its yellow paint has faded and the body is riddled with severe rust holes. A trash bag is taped over the passenger's side window to prevent rain from entering.

The sun's intense summer rays pound down from the clear, majestic, blue sky. The humidity is thick and sticky. Jacob continues to wipe the extreme perspiration from his face onto the bottom of his damp T-shirt. He approaches the porch steps and stands on each one with caution. The creaking sound of the rotted wood makes Jacob uneasy. He attempts to avoid the rusty nails sticking out from the loose boards. He pulls open the rickety screen door and knocks on the door. He peeks around and notices a gray tabby cat curled up and snoozing on a rocking chair. Despite Jacob's knocking a few times, there is no answer.

Through the window's empty panes, Jacob shouts, "Are you home? It's me. Open up!" Losing his patience, he opens the front door. It's unlocked and Jacob wanders inside. The stench of rotten garbage and filth immediately fills his nostrils.

"Oh my God, it smells so bad," Jacob mumbles to himself. The house is dark and clutter is visible on every surface, in every direction. As Jacob maneuvers around piles of dirty clothing and sealed cardboard boxes, he shouts again, "Are you here?" Continuing through the room, he shuffles between collections of antique furniture pieces stacked one on top of another. Tools and appliance parts are scattered across the floor. The kitchen sink is overflowing with food-encrusted pots and pans. Jacob hears an AM news broadcast playing from a transistor radio. He follows the sound and creeps inside the cave-like bedroom.

An obese man with a scruffy, graying beard is lying on his back, wearing only boxer shorts. He's sleeping on a stained tweed couch, snoring while his glasses slide on and off his face. A lit cigarette is burning in the ceramic ash tray. Jacob glances over to the corner of the room where he sees a large crock pot with battery-operated fans glued onto the sides. It is sitting on top of a flimsy, foldable card table. Jacob lifts the top off of the pot. There are blue ice cartridges attached using Velcro tape on the inside.

"So, you found the invention that is going to revolutionize the ice cream industry?" the man blurts out, coughing.

Jacob is startled from the unexpected greeting. "Hey, I thought you were sleeping?"

The man responds, "I was, but you woke me up, asshole. I was up all night working on that masterpiece. It took me hours to design and build the prototype. Actually, I have to call the CEO of Carvel today and set up an appointment. I'm telling you... I am going to sell millions of those."

"What exactly does it do?" Jacob wonders as he inspects the world's next great invention.

Hacking and wheezing, the man answers, frustrated, "Are you kidding me? What does it do? Dude, that machine right there will keep your ice cream frozen for literally hours. Imagine you're having a summer barbecue and you want to bring ice cream. Leaving it in the carton, it will be

soup within five minutes. If you have the *Cream Cooler*, just put the carton inside and you're set for the entire day! It only weighs 10 pounds."

"That sounds awesome. Hopefully you sell lots of them," Jacob encourages.

Insulted, the man answers while trying to catch his breath, "Hopefully? Are you kidding me? I *will* sell millions of them."

"That's great, Uncle O. Believe me, I hope you do. What ever happened with the vacuum that had the built-in drink holder and radio?" Jacob inquires.

"The *Utility Vac*? Yeah, that was a winner...if only the CEO of Hoover would have gotten back to me." He picks up the lit cigarette from the ashtray and takes a long drag on it. "So, what have you been up to, Dude?"

"Oh, not much. You know, this is the last summer I have before I start college in the fall. The cool thing is that my friend Mitch is going to the same school I'll be going to."

Ostaf's mouth falls open. "Holy shit! College? I remember watching you run around in your diaper." He chuckles. "You know your mom and dad would never let me take you anywhere by myself. Your dad would always have to tag along. They never thought I was *capable* of taking care of you. Screw them both."

Jacob takes a deep breath and runs his fingers through his hair. "Hey, I brought you some items to sell at the flea market this weekend. I think you might be able to get some decent money out of this stuff."

"Thanks, but I don't need your crap. I'm not the *loser* your father thinks I am. I've done fine for myself over the years," Ostaf proclaims.

Jacob glances at the trash-infested house and then stares at his uncle struggling to get up off the raunchy couch.

"You're a good kid, Jacob. I'm sorry, I don't mean to take my frustrations out on you. Let's go into the kitchen. I'll make us some breakfast. I think I have some eggs and cereal left."

Jacob is confused. *Breakfast? It's 2:30 in the afternoon.*

They both dart around the clutter and head into the kitchen. Sitting down in one of the chairs, Jacob is quick to catch his balance as it sways from side to side.

Ostaf chooses a pan from the collection in the sink. “Oh, be careful on that chair: one of the legs is loose. Listen, these eggs expired last week, but they should still be good. How many do you want?”

Jacob cringes. “Um, I’ll have one. Thanks.” He stares at the filthy countertops and appliances. “Hey Uncle O, would you ever want me to help you clean up your house? I mean, I have the next few weeks off. I’m happy to help. I could trim the bushes outside and fix the porch steps. We could get this place looking sweet. I can even ask Mitch to help us.”

“Thanks, but I’m happy with the way it looks. I don’t need help. Everything is just the way I want it. Do you want a beer with your eggs?” Uncle O asks while coughing. He twists the cap off and sets it down next to Jacob. “Hey, when we’re done, let’s go down into the basement. I’ll show you some other cool stuff I’m working on. I have a new theory on time travel. I know you love the movie *Back to the Future*, so it may interest you. You’ve heard of Albert Einstein, right?” Jacob awaits the punch line. “Well, there was an important piece to Einstein’s time travel theory that he was missing. I figured it out.”

Jacob humors his uncle. “Wow, really? That’s amazing. I have always been fascinated with time travel. It would be a trip to see my parents as teenagers. But yeah, I’d love to hear about that one some time, Doc Brown.”

“Good one, Dude. By the way, your father was no angel in high school. Anyway, there’s so much shit I have down in that basement. I have million-dollar ideas scattered all over the place. I just need someone who wants to buy them. Maybe you can ask your dad if he could invest in some of this stuff with me.” The silence is uncomfortable. “He owes me, Jacob!” Ostaf slams his fist on the table.

Looking at the clock, Jacob stutters, “Uh, sure. . . yeah, I’ll ask him and see what he says. Listen, I have to get going.”

“What about your breakfast?” Ostaf takes a swig from the opened beer bottle and then clears the mucus from his throat.

Jacob can sense the tension escalating. “Can I take a rain check? I’ll be back next week. I have more stuff in my closet for you.”

Reaching into his backpack, Jacob pulls out a plastic bag and places it on the table. “Like I told you, there’s some good stuff in here. Make sure you go this week and sell it. I even threw in some of my best baseball cards. You’ll see there’s a Ken Griffey Jr. rookie card I found. You can get at least \$50 for it. Oh, and I’m giving you my autographed Lyle Alzado card. It’s in the bag, too.”

Ostaf takes off his glasses and picks the crust out of his eyes. “Dude, I’m not taking that. It’s your favorite card.” He peers into the bag. “Why the hell are you so good to me? You’re really the *only* person in my life that gives a shit about how I’m doing.”

“Cause you’re my uncle. That alone makes you cool,” Jacob laughs as he zips up his backpack. “Listen, like I said, I will be by next week and we are going to do some summer cleaning. We’re going to get this place looking good. Have an awesome week, OK? I love ya.”

Coughing up phlegm, Ostaf spits onto his plate. “Love you, too, bud. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Although he is repulsed, Jacob looks at the mucus and notices small blood droplets within the saliva. He gets up, hugs his uncle, and starts walking toward the front door. Making his way past the obstacles of trash, Jacob finally exits the house and begins the voyage back to his car.

So that was my Uncle O. Let's just say there was always something "unique" about him. Even when I was a young child, I remember something wasn't quite right. He was different than everyone else in the family. Like a gigantic kid. He was always loving and kind to me, but "off." I guess most families have that one relative no one quite gets. The crazy thing is that for some reason, in the case of Uncle O, I did get him.

At that point, my uncle was only 44 years old—actually, the same age I am today. However, if I'm being honest, he looked 64. It was clear he wasn't aging well. I could tell his health was going to catch up to him if he didn't start taking care of himself. Even though he was relatively young, I still worried about him. I may have been the only one in the family who felt that way. My father had absolutely no patience for him...none. They were oil and water. My father always worked hard for everything he had and my uncle always felt that my dad *owed* him something. All my uncle ever wanted was for my father to be proud of him. It was a dysfunctional relationship and oftentimes I was caught right in the middle of it.

Chapter Two

Lovestruck

• The Next Day •

The roaring sound of a vacuum thuds against Jacob's bedroom door. His eyes flash wide open and he is awakened from a deep sleep. He looks at the digital clock that displays it is 7:30 a.m. Infuriated, he grits his teeth and then grumbles, "Jesus Christ. You gotta be kidding."

Pounding his fist on the mattress, Jacob gets dressed before stomping out of his room to confront the cleaning lady. He yanks the vacuum cord from the wall outlet. "Are you *really* serious right now? It's 7:30 in the morning. I'm exhausted." Jacob is losing his patience as he pleads his case.

The woman answers with a thick Polish accent, "I am sorry, honey, your mother told me to start the vacuuming first, before I do anything else."

Jacob groans as he marches into Linda's bedroom. "Are you kidding me, Mom? You basically told the cleaning lady to wake me up at 7:30 in the morning? I was up late last night."

"If you don't like it, you can move out at any time." Jacob bites his lip. "And why were you up so late, anyway? Please don't tell me you were rummaging through your closet again looking for things to give that moronic uncle of yours." Linda's posture stiffens as she turns away.

The tension escalates as Jacob snaps back, “What the hell did he ever do to you? I swear you just repeat *everything* Dad says. Uncle O has no one. You *all* should be ashamed of how nasty you are to him.”

Howard overhears the argument brewing as he re-enters the house after getting the Sunday paper. “What’s going on? I could hear your screeching voice from outside, Jake.”

“I’m getting really tired of everyone giving me crap because I actually care about Uncle O. The guy is in rough shape, but of course no one gives a shit. The worst part, Dad...you’re his freakin’ older brother!” Jacob loses control of his emotions and scolds his father.

Howard chucks the newspaper against the wall and fires back. “You don’t know anything about the situation, Jacob! That guy is nothing but trouble. He will ruin your life, just like he’s ruined everyone else’s. Wise up and listen to me. I’ve told you a *million* times...you-are-wasting-your-time!”

“I’m not listening to this, Dad. I’m leaving. I’ll see you guys later!” Jacob shouts as he speed walks to the kitchen counter. He grabs his car keys and slides on his sneakers.

Howard asks, “Where are you going? You didn’t even eat breakfast.”

“I’m going to Mitch’s. I’ll eat at his house. I need to get out of here,” Jacob shouts as he opens the front door, flings it closed, and charges outside. He hurries down the driveway. Howard’s newly polished, silver Jaguar Vanden Plas is blocking Jacob’s car. Irritated, Jacob gets into his Cougar and tears into the middle of the front yard. As he reverses, sunken tire tracks are left in the grass. Jacob’s car drops off the curb and then speeds away. The smell of burnt rubber fills the air.

After a short trip down the street, Jacob pulls into an open, gated driveway. He slams the car into park, gets out, walks toward the front door and rings the doorbell. Jacob taps his foot as he waits for someone to answer. The door cracks open and an attractive woman in her mid-40s sashays outside. She leans in. “Hi honey, how are you? You look *so much older* every time I see you. What’s the matter? You seem upset. Are you OK?”

“Hi, Ms. Glantz. I’m fine. My parents are just giving me a hard time, that’s all.” He swallows and fiddles with his car keys.

She rubs Jacob’s shoulder. “Oh, I’m sorry, sweetie. I’m sure your mom and dad are just looking out for you.... Oh, and *how many times* have I told you to call me Julie?”

“Um, thanks...Julie. I appreciate the concern. I’m just going to go find Mitch, if that’s OK,” Jacob mutters as his voice cracks. The interaction becomes awkward and a perspiration mustache begins to form on his upper lip. Jacob wipes away the sweat and rushes inside the house. Ms. Glantz grins from behind.

After walking through the kitchen, Jacob sees a foldable, wooden ladder hanging down from the ceiling inside the hallway. He climbs the steps to the top and enters the loft. The decor consists almost exclusively of New Jersey Nets memorabilia. Custom-framed jerseys and photographs fill the walls. Lucite cases containing autographed basketballs are displayed on wooden pedestals. They are placed in each corner of the recreation room. Jacob walks past the pool table toward the enormous 65-inch television. There is a red-haired teenager lounging on a beanbag wearing headphones as he plays a video game. The graphics on the television screen are like nothing Jacob has ever seen.

“Hey!” Jacob shouts as he grabs the boy’s shoulders from behind.

The boy shrieks, “What the hell, dick!” as he pushes Jacob.

“Dude, are you fuckin’ kidding me? Is that the PlayStation? It’s not supposed to come out until next December...in Japan!” Jacob steps closer and squints. “Wait a minute...please don’t tell me you’re actually playing Final Fantasy VI.” Jacob tries to contain his excitement.

“Yeah, it is. My dad knows the vice president of retail sales for Sony. They sponsored the slam dunk contest when it was here in Jersey. I think it was back in the early 80s. They sat next to each other that weekend. My dad gets him great deals on cars, so he gives my dad shit before it even hits the retail market. That reminds me, are you going with me to the Nets’ team dinner next week? It’s going to be awesome. Kenny and Derrick will be there, I found out.”

“Sure, I’ll go. That sounds fun. And, by the way...I wouldn’t tell *anyone* you have that PlayStation. It’s like having a million dollars cash inside your house,” Jacob advises as he admires the gaming system.

That's my boy Mitch. We were best friends since preschool and were practically like brothers. Our birthdays were only a few weeks apart. We also happened to live in the same neighborhood in Harding. Here's the deal: this kid was an absolute genius. He memorized every single volume of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I remember when we were in sixth grade, he built a freakin' *working* computer out of parts we found at my dad's office and one trip to Radio Shack. Not only could he build computers, but he could also program them. His parents wanted him to be an engineer, but Mitch's dream was to be a doctor one day.

Our families became good friends over the years. We would go on cruises and vacations together. It was like having a second family. It was great while it lasted. Unfortunately, back in 1988, Mitch's older brother, Jeff, passed away from a drug overdose. He was only 17 when he died. His parents' relationship was already on rocky ground prior to that horrific incident, and after a while, the agony of losing Jeff pushed them to divorce. The only good thing for Mitch and his mother was that his dad was rich. He owned over 30 incredibly successful car dealerships in the tristate area. Mitch had everything he wanted, including courtside seats for every single New Jersey Nets home game. His father sold the owner of the team his cars and they became good friends. Mitch didn't really care about money; in fact, he hated driving around in his brand-new black convertible Lexus. He would always say, "A dream is worth a million dollars and believing you can actually achieve it is like winning the lottery." His intellect was way beyond his years. We knew each other better than our own parents knew us. He was the brother I never had and I was a substitute for the one he wished was still alive.

“So, what the hell is going on, Jake? You look pissed off.” Mitch can sense that something happened. He turns off his gaming system and television with the remote control.

Jacob’s overcome with emotion. “I saw my Uncle O yesterday. He’s a mess, man.”

“What do you mean? I thought you said last time you went there he was doing better. Wasn’t he selling stuff at that flea market in town and starting to make some money?” Mitch puts on his sneakers.

Taking a deep breath, Jacob explains, “It’s not even about the money. He would never tell me, but I know my grandmother gives him just enough to pay his bills. Although, who knows what he does with it. Anyway, it wouldn’t matter if he was a millionaire. He just doesn’t know how to do basic life tasks. It’s like it doesn’t register. His house...it looks like an episode from the television show *Sanford and Son*. There is shit *everywhere*. I could barely walk through each room. God only knows what his basement looks like. It’s his ‘laboratory’ where he builds his inventions and keeps all his ‘million dollar’ theories and hypotheses.” Jacob chuckles.

“Don’t they say that there is a fine line between being insane and being a genius?” The boys laugh in unison. “Last time we saw your uncle I remember him telling us about the ‘Super Straw’ where you could drink your soda from another room,” Mitch reminisces as he grabs a cue stick. He mocks the wacky invention by pretending it’s a straw.

Jacob flops onto the futon. “Yeah, I know. He comes up with some stupid shit. I try to be supportive each time he tells me about his newest contraption, but it’s not easy. When I saw him yesterday, he showed me a portable ice cream cooler built out of a fuckin’ crock pot.” Jacob puts his hands behind his head and stares at the ceiling. “You know, a part of me wonders if he actually had the hustle and work ethic, could he sell one of his prototypes? There’s investors out there looking to make a quick buck.” Jacob stands up and starts to pace. “I mean, what if...? What if something down in that basement actually could be something?”

Mitch shrugs. “Anything is possible, I guess. You never know, but it sounds like he needs to get his life straightened out first and foremost. I mean, he’s still young. There’s time.”

“I guess. It’s so weird. I still can’t figure out exactly why my dad and uncle can’t stand each other. All my dad ever says is to stay away from him. He is going to ruin my life like he did to everyone else. Something is missing there. It just doesn’t make sense.” Jacob ponders as he rolls the 8 ball across the pool table. It drops into the corner pocket.

Mitch cracks his knuckles and looks at the clock. “I don’t know, man...but what I do know is that I am starving. You want to hit up Bagel Land?”

“Dude, you don’t have to ask me twice. Aren’t the free mini muffins the best? I could eat them all day. Hopefully we can sneak out before your mom sees me.” Jacob smiles as he playfully pokes the side of Mitch’s belly.

Mitch doesn’t appreciate the humor. “Don’t be an ass.” He puts Jacob in a head lock and gives him a nuggie.

The boys scamper out of the house and get into Mitch’s car. The song “Give It Away” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers is on the radio. Jacob turns up the volume and begins to sing the song as if he were auditioning for the band. Moments later, the car pulls into a parking spot in front of Bagel Land.

Mitch gasps. “Oh, shit! Look whose car that is! She’s here! I can’t believe it. You better not be a pussy, and go and talk to her.”

Jacob glances over in anticipation. He sees a polished, apple-red convertible BMW with the top down. “I’ll see, man. That may not even be her car. It’s not like there aren’t a hundred red convertible BMWs in this town.” Jacob rubs the back of his neck and then begins to bite his fingernails.

Mitch jokes, “And they all have our high school mascot painted on the window with the class of ’93?” He tugs Jacob’s shirt to get his attention. “Christine is here, Dude. She likes you. Stop being so damn shy.”

Jacob clears his throat and tries to gather his composure. “Let’s just go eat. If I see her, I’ll say hi. You better not embarrass me. I’m serious. I have a reputation to uphold.”

“A reputation? Don’t you have to date girls to have a reputation? Please stop, you’re making me cry, I am laughing so hard.” Mitch slaps his knee.

Annoyed, Jacob begins to lose his patience. “Let’s go in and eat already. I gotta get going soon. Remember, if we see Christine, keep it cool.”

The boys stroll into Bagel Land and sit down at the table. They start to devour the basket of assorted mini muffins. “Where do you have to go today? It’s Sunday morning. Be thankful we stopped going to Hebrew school years ago,” Mitch reminds Jacob, chuckling.

I’m thinking about driving out to see my Uncle O again. I haven’t been in his basement in a long time. Believe it or not, there is some cool shit to look at down there. Once school starts, I won’t be seeing him often. I need to try and spend as much time as possible with him now.” Jacob scoops out the crumbs from the basket.

With a warm, welcoming smile, the waitress swoops over and greets the boys with a distinct South Jersey accent: “Good mornin’. Do ya know what you want, or should I bring ya a menu?”

Out of nowhere, Jacob, pops off of his chair and slams his hands onto the table. “I’ll get whatever he’s having!” In a frenzy, he dashes in the direction of the bathroom.

Confused but starving, Mitch requests, “We will take two orders of the Sunday Special, please. Oh, and can we get a refill on the mini muffins?”

Without warning, a teenage girl wearing rolled-up denim shorts and an oversized gray sweatshirt sits down in Jacob’s chair. As she smiles, kindness radiates across the table. Her crystal-blue eyes sparkle, hypnotizing Mitch as he gazes at her. The blonde highlights in her long, wavy brown hair shine bright like her captivating spirit. Gentleness and compassion flow from each word she speaks.

Mitch stutters as he welcomes the girl. “Hey, how are you? When did you get here? I had no idea you liked this place.” Beads of sweat begin to percolate on his forehead.

In a sweet tone, the girl begins, “Things are good. I’m here with Lisa. We’re just getting ready to leave.” She looks around. “Where did Jacob go? I saw him make a beeline toward the bathroom.”

“Oh, yeah...that,” Mitch attempts a response.

The girl questions, “Is he OK?”

“I think so. Listen, please don’t say anything. The eggs didn’t agree with him, but you didn’t hear that from me,” Mitch mischievously whispers to the girl. She covers her mouth and mumbles, “Oh my goodness.”

From behind Mitch, Jacob approaches the table. “Oh...hey, Christine. How are you doing? I had no idea you were here,” Jacob babbles as he uses a damp paper towel to wipe the sweat from his rose-colored face.

“I’m great. Sorry, I hope I’m not bothering you guys. I just wanted to stop by and say hi.” Christine smiles as the waitress places the boys’ food onto the table.

Jacob offers a swift assurance: “Oh, you’re not bothering us. Trust me.”

“Wow...a second side of eggs? You must be really hungry. Well...I gotta go,” Christine informs. “We’re heading down the shore today. It was good seeing you both. I hope you feel better, Jacob. Bye.”

Perplexed, Jacob waves and replies, “Thanks,” and then looks over at Mitch mouthing the words, “What-is-she-talking-about?” Christine frolics away and Jacob glares from across the table. “What the hell did you tell her, Mitch?”

“Um, nothing.” He folds his hands and whistles. “Fine, maybe I told her the eggs didn’t exactly agree with you. Sorry, I couldn’t help myself,” Mitch confesses through snide chuckles.

Jacob clenches his teeth. “You mean the eggs I never ate, asshole? You totally embarrassed me. What did I tell you right before we walked inside?”

Without warning, Christine returns. “You may need these. I could see you’re sweating.” She hands Jacob a stack of napkins and then dashes away.

“Oh, thanks!” Jacob shouts across the crowded restaurant. Everyone stares at him. Looking down, he sees a message written on the top napkin. It says, “call me sometime” with Christine’s phone number and a smiley face.

Mitch’s eyes widen as he presses his palms against his cheeks. “Holy shit!” He stares at the message. Everyone in the restaurant looks over again. “Jake, do you know what this means?”

“She needs a study partner?” Jacob’s naive response is comical.

Mitch leans in. “She wants to study alright, and it has nothing to do with school.” He pretends to faint. “Christine Dupree just gave you her telephone number and told you to call her. It doesn’t get clearer than that.”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to see.” Jacob’s nerves get the best of him and he knocks the stack of napkins onto the ground.

Mitch is stunned when he notices Jacob’s empty plate. “You’re already done eating? Did you inhale your eggs? I haven’t even taken a bite of mine yet.”

“Well, you eat like a snail, bro. Hurry up. I want to get over to my uncle’s before it gets too late.” Jacob reaches down and grabs the sacred napkin from the floor. He folds it up and places it onto the table.

Shoveling his food into his mouth, Mitch mumbles, “Do you want me to go with you? I haven’t seen the big guy in a while. I could use a laugh.”

“Sure, if you’re up to it. Just don’t get upset when he calls you Red Head Fred.” The boys both laugh. “He’s always liked you, Dude. Hey, remember the time at my Bar Mitzvah when he got drunk and tried to convince your mom that Steven Spielberg offered him a multi-script deal to write his next two movies...and the best part was that he would co-direct them?” Jacob reminisces.

Flagging down the waitress for the check, Mitch laughs. “Yeah, I remember that. I also remember him and your dad getting into a tussle during the horah. Everyone was dancing and singing, and they were in the middle of the circle arguing. Man, it got heated for sure. The crazy

thing is that no one would even know they were brothers, other than their appetites, of course.”

“That horah argument is on video. My mom was so embarrassed. I remember my dad’s other brother, Dan, and my freakin’ grandma had to break it up. Jesus, Dude. My family is so fuckin’ dysfunctional. Sometimes I wonder if I was adopted.” Jacob shakes his head and sighs.

Mitch reaches over and pats Jacob’s back. “Well, don’t get down in the dumps, bro. Everyone’s family has their own issues. Hell, I know mine does. My mom can barely get through a day without crying. Here take this,” he reminds Jacob, tossing him the holy napkin with Christine’s phone number on it.

Gasping, Jacob realizes he almost forgot it. “Jeez, thanks. I would have left it here. I’m a total mess, man. My heart rate still hasn’t gone back down. Hey, be honest: do you think she really likes me?”

“Shut up. I’m not playing this game anymore,” Mitch tosses a hand full of sugar packets at Jacob. “Let’s get going to your uncle’s. I remember it takes forever to get there.” The boys pay their tab at the register and leave. After getting into Mitch’s car, they roll the windows down, turn up the radio, and head out on the quest to Ostaf’s house.