

SECOND SUMMERS

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CIRCUMSTANCES BROUGHT ME TO MY GRANDMOTHER'S HOUSE the night my sixty year old Uncle Dom sprang his girlfriend on the family. I'd left the office late and, with Deirdre working the night shift at the county medical center, swung by the house on my way to our apartment. My grandmother lived in a small duplex in a section of town called Limerick after an influx of Irish immigrants at the turn of the last century. My parents sat on one porch, my grandmother and Aunt Connie on the other. My grandmother held one arm aloft, arthritic fingers dangling to shield her eyes against the setting sun that in June blazed down the road leading to the commuter station two blocks away. I knew immediately she'd held that pose since 7:05, the time Uncle Dom appeared at the crest of the hill when life and Conrail ran according to schedule.

A train whistled behind the trees. Moments later, commuters trickled into view. I spotted Uncle Dom's easy gait, hands thrust into his pockets, suit jacket tucked under his arm. My grandmother should have relaxed, lowered her hand, struggled up from her chair to re-heat the dinner wrapped in foil on the stove. Instead, her eyes tightened behind her glasses.

"Who's that with Dominick?" she said.

At first, the silhouette pressing close to Uncle Dom looked like a trick of perspective, someone who happened to follow the same path and who, as soon as the sun cleared out of our eyes, would resolve into a neighborhood lady dolled up for a day in New York City. But then Uncle Dom unlatched the front gate and the lady followed him up the flagstone path. She surely didn't hail from Limerick, not with the white satin dress hugging her hourglass shape, or the high heels pitching her

forward at a precipitous angle, or the mass of raven hair sweeping back from her forehead. She seemed to be somewhere in that vast range I still thought of as middle age.

Uncle Dom raised one foot onto a porch step, hands still thrust in his pockets, suit jacket still under his arm. His tie was loosened and a pink smudge smeared across his collar and onto his neck. He looked at each of us, his mouth pulled into a tense grin, his throat bubbling the self-deprecating titter that often preceded his words. Then he fixed his eyes on my grandmother.

"Mama," he said. "This is Inez."

A silence seemed to settle over the neighborhood, not unlike the silence that followed the breaking of the Seventh Seal, until my grandmother pushed herself out of the chair and dragged her heavy shoes toward the front door.

"I'll fix your dinner, Dominick," was all she said.

TO OUTSIDERS, my grandmother was a mild-mannered woman who watched the afternoon soap operas. But she exerted confounding power over her children. Aunt Connie never left home. My mother married in a fit of rebellion, escaping only to the other side of the duplex. Uncle Dom went off to World War II, but even then my grandmother insisted he join the Navy to avoid the Army draft. For years, I didn't think anything strange about my family's tight weave. I had my parents, grandmother, and aunt all under one roof, and Uncle Dom as a built-in pal.

Uncle Dom's carefully circumscribed life hadn't changed in the thirty years I'd been alive. Days he worked as a commercial artist for a large New York publishing company. He always rode the same train home, except when deadlines forced him to work overtime, and he never remained in the city for one extra minute without first phoning my grandmother. Weekends he played golf, loading his clubs into the trunk of whatever clunker of a car he happened to be driving and chugging off into the predawn darkness to beat the crowds at the public courses. Nights he pattered in his basement studio, dabbing brush strokes on his latest canvas.

His studio fascinated me, mainly because it seemed to belong to someone completely different from the plodding, soft-spoken Uncle Dom I knew. I'd leaf

through stacks of New York City scenes and naked women, the pencil outlines sharp behind the pale paint because Uncle Dom never could decide exactly how deep to mix the colors. I'd lift the heavy lid of a footlocker crammed with souvenirs from his days as a Navy Seabee. Hats, a pea coat, a pistol and sword stripped from a captured Japanese officer. Black and white photos curled stiff with age: a tiny Uncle Dom on the edge of an aircraft carrier, the empty Pacific stretching behind him; a shirtless Uncle Dom, waist deep in earthworks cut into the beach of some forgotten atoll; a stateside Uncle Dom in full regalia, seated on a stool, arms folded, a Navy cap set jauntily on a thick crop of jet-black hair, a confident smile on his face.

UNCLE DOM CAME OUT FROM DINNER, his tie gone, the sleeves of his white dress shirt rolled up as if he had been working hard. I was sitting alone on the steps and listening to the whistles of passing trains. The sun was long down. Light from the living room window formed a fuzzy trapezoid on the floor of the porch.

"How's it going?" I said.

He cocked his head, inviting me to look inside. Inez sat with a photo album spread on her lap. Aunt Connie hovered behind, narrating. Inez occasionally glanced at my grandmother, who lay on the sofa with the TV images flickering on her eyeglasses, hand raised ostensibly to shield herself from the glare of the table lamp but more likely to blot the interloper from view.

Uncle Dom started by telling me that his overtime nights were actually detours to Roseland, his favorite dance hall. He'd met Inez there about three months ago. Her last name was Ravenna. She lived in a section of the Bronx where the houses were a lot like Limerick's. She was a good dancer.

"I'll pop the question soon," he said.

"You're going to marry her?"

"Well, I need to set things up first. Find an apartment. She lost her job last week. The timing isn't right just now."

"Is it ever?" I said, trying to sound both philosophical and encouraging.

"So what do you think?" he said. "Pretty nice looking, eh?"

I expected a deeper wind-up, something about how Inez Ravenna made him

feel, how they planned to share their lives, what special qualities in this woman finally persuaded a confirmed bachelor to consider marriage.

"Sure," I said. "Real nice looking."

What the hell did I know about life at sixty? I was half that age, and deep in my own relationship with its own set of expectations. Or at least, that's what I thought.

I BID UNCLE DOM GOOD NIGHT and returned to the garage apartment I shared with Deirdre on the other side of Limerick. Deirdre's shift didn't end till midnight, and I planned to pass the time watching television. Instead, I found a pair of men's boxer shorts peeking out from beneath our bed. I wore only briefs.

I phoned the medical center with some trepidation. Deirdre and I rarely spoke during her stints on the night shift. Instead, we communicated through notes stuck to the refrigerator door by cutesy magnets. "How about a movie on my night off?" "Meet me at the diner for breakfast, my treat." I thought nothing amiss. The schedules of a lawyer and a nurse did not always mesh, and life for the cohabiting could fall into the same patterned existence as any marriage. But after hearing from the night supervisor that Deirdre had rotated back to the day shift three weeks ago, I realized these notes meant less to shepherd our relationship through a rough patch than to fool me.

I stayed up all night, scalding my throat with bourbon and replaying my entire history with the opposite sex: two-week grade school crushes, seasonal high school romances, semester-long college affairs. Deirdre's was the first that had lasted a full revolution around the sun, and I found it ironic that I would lose her at the door to our second summer.

Our confrontation was nothing like I imagined. Deirdre breezed in at nine a.m., all bouncy and fresh, wearing an Indian print sundress I never saw before, her long red hair gathered into a loose ponytail. Her facade barely slipped at the sight of me hunkered at the kitchen table, although my mere presence in the apartment at that hour did not bode well for her ruse.

Finding myself without words, I lifted the boxers with the tip of one finger.

She played at ignorance. I told her about phoning the medical center. She fumed about me prying into her life. I laughed giddily. Then we both fell silent.

I stumbled into the shower, shrugged into a suit. Deirdre still stood in the kitchen, idly tapping one of the magnets against the refrigerator door. I heard myself say I expected her to move out by the end of the day.

She did.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1962, I was ten years old. Week nights after dinner, Uncle Dom and I would hop into his DeSoto and drive to the county airport. Each visit followed the same script. We would walk along the fence outside the National Guard hangars, looking at the huge transport planes painted camouflage style. We would stand under the control tower, hooding our eyes to search for something big that might drop out of the sky. Inevitably, we saw only Piper Cubs drifting in for touchdown or sputtering toward the end of the runway, where the sky always looked as pale as one of Uncle Dom's paintings. After five or six Piper Cubs passed, my attention turned to the airport's Quonset hut terminal.

"Want some ice cream?" Uncle Dom would say.

The waitress, Betty, wore a frumpy black uniform and a white doily pinned to her hair. She always served my sundae with a glass of water, which, Uncle Dom explained, washed the funny ice cream aftertaste from your mouth. Uncle Dom never ordered anything for himself. Watching his weight, he would tell Betty, then laugh that self-deprecating titter. They would talk while I dug around the butterscotch that started out hot but turned hard as taffy where it touched the ice cream. Sometimes they talked over the counter, Uncle Dom sliding off his stool so he could lean closer. Other times, when the restaurant wasn't busy, they stood by the window and watched the planes go by.

Once, heading home in the DeSoto, I asked Uncle Dom if he liked her.

"Betty and I are old friends," he said.

"Why don't you ever bring her home on Sundays?"

"Too complicated," he said.

Uncle Dom turned forty in August of that year, and my mother and Aunt

Connie threw him a birthday party. Neighborhood men arrived early in the afternoon while Uncle Dom played golf. They lugged bags of charcoal to the barbecue pit, hung Japanese lanterns from the clotheslines, and tacked checkered tablecloths to the picnic tables.

At sundown, Uncle Dom floated in to a round of applause, a woman on his arm. He often brought girlfriends home for Sunday dinners or holidays. They were always different and always flashy, not like Betty with the frumpy uniform and the doily pinned to her hair. This one was tall with a red beehive and a white dress that sparkled in the lantern light. The dress bunched tight at her waist and her stockings made zipping sounds when she walked. Her name was Ramona.

I tagged along behind Uncle Dom and Ramona as they circulated through the party. My grandmother sat on the back porch, rubbing her elbows while she watched. People milled around the barbecue pit and around a washtub bobbing with ice and beer bottles. More people circled the patio, where a neighbor piled a stack of 45s on the record player. Some joked with Uncle Dom about life beginning at forty.

Someone slipped a rumba onto the record player. The music hit Ramona like a shot. She shooed people off the patio and began to dance.

"Dommy and I practice every week at Roseland." She wiggled and the dress crept up her legs. "We're entering the Harvest Moon Ball."

She reached out her arms and crooked her fingers, beckoning Uncle Dom to join her. He waved her off and climbed to the porch. My grandmother was already up from her chair, the back door just closing. All the men gathered around the patio. They whooped and laughed as Ramona kept dancing. She sank deeper; her dress crept higher. And then her heel caught a gap between flagstones, and down she went. Two men helped her to the picnic bench. A pencil-thin line of blood ran down her shin.

"Get some ice," someone told me.

I ran into the kitchen. Uncle Dom and my grandmother stood at the sink, their backs to me. I was about to tell them Ramona fell when I saw how hard Uncle Dom gripped the faucet. His arms trembled.

"Goddammit, they all are to you," he said.

I ducked behind the refrigerator for a few seconds, then popped out to ask for ice cubes wrapped in a dishtowel. Neither Uncle Dom nor my grandmother asked me why.

Labor Day night that same year, I lay awake listening to the crickets when something ticked near the window. I whipped off the sheets and crawled across the bed to the sill. Down below, Uncle Dom stood in the driveway, ready to toss another pebble. He silenced me with a finger to his lips.

I pulled on my slippers, crept down the stairs and out the door.

"I came to say good-bye," he said.

The DeSoto was parked in front of the neighbor's hedge, its lights off and its motor idling. Someone sat in the front seat, and I leaned in before I recognized Betty. Her hair was combed out long and she wore Bermudas instead of her waitress dress. She gave me a big smile.

"I'll miss making butterscotch sundaes for you," she said.

I swallowed hard. In the back seat, I saw suitcases, golf clubs, canvases rolled up and tied with rubber bands. Uncle Dom crouched, both hands on my shoulders.

"I'll send you my first painting as soon as it's finished," he said.

A window slid open with a loud whoosh.

"Who's there?" shouted my grandmother from her bedroom.

Uncle Dom's hands tightened, even though we both knew we were hidden behind the hedges.

"Who's out there?" she shouted again.

Uncle Dom hugged me, then scrambled around the car and crawled in behind the wheel.

"I'll call the cops!"

The DeSoto rolled backwards to the end of the block, where Uncle Dom flashed the headlights before he escaped.

I didn't question Uncle Dom's return on the Sunday before Christmas, or his explanation that he and Betty had taken a vacation together. Years later I learned Uncle Dom had called my grandmother from Boston to wish her a Happy

Thanksgiving. No one ever quoted the exact words she used to bring him home – in family lore they assumed the power of some unspeakable incantation.

FOR THE REST OF THE SUMMER, Uncle Dom phoned my grandmother whenever he planned to stay in the city past the appointed hour. He continued to stick by his overtime excuse, but confided to me he was meeting Inez at Roseland.

"No sense rubbing her nose in it," he said, meaning my grandmother.

Meanwhile I compensated for losing Deirdre by returning to a former love – golf. With the days long, I drove directly from the office to the club. Walking through silent cathedrals of trees seemed especially lonely in my state of mind, so I didn't actually play golf. Instead, I parked myself on the practice tee and launched ball after ball into the dusk.

Uncle Dom started showing up at these practice sessions. I'd see him in the distance, sauntering along the stone wall that skirted the range. Then he'd appear behind me, shifting slightly after each shot to study my swing from a different angle. We had played many rounds together when I was a boy, and he was the only person in the entire family who understood what golf meant to me. He applauded my victories, consoled me in defeat, and patiently worked me through bouts of hooking and slicing. On the practice tee now he just watched, though his mere presence forced me to ratchet up my concentration. He didn't say anything; he certainly didn't mention Deirdre. But a feeling of kinship that was beyond golf, beyond even blood, pervaded these quiet scenes like the dew descending on the blue grass of the practice range.

One evening he interrupted me. I thought he'd spotted some minor defect in my swing, but no, he worked a tiny box out of his pocket. I was no expert on diamonds, but I knew even a cut-rate jeweler would have charged four to five grand for that setting and stone. Uncle Dom lived in his mother's house. He drove his cars until their chassis fell out. What little he earned from his job was tied up in supplies for paintings he never finished. No way he could afford this ring, a wedding, and the start-up costs of a life with Inez.

He planned to surprise her with the ring the following night at Roseland, he

said. But when I asked the date for the wedding, he shrugged. Maybe late August. Maybe just after Labor Day.

Two nights later, he appeared again at the range. The little box cut a sharp outline in his pants pocket. I pretended not to notice.

LABOR DAY PASSED and Uncle Dom stopped working overtime. Business was slow, he said, and I didn't press any questions. With the cooler temperatures and earlier sunsets, my grandmother moved her evening vigils inside the front door, where one finger bent a Venetian blind slat until Uncle Dom crested the hill, passing from the light of one street lamp to the next as he descended toward home.

One Sunday afternoon in late September, Uncle Dom appeared as I stroked putts on the practice green.

"Her brother-in-law's sick, so she went to Tampa to help her sister with her kids," he said.

He wore an old, bell-sleeved golf sweater with shallow pockets shaped like half moons. The torn flap of an envelope hung out of one pocket. I thought he was about to hand it to me, and in a flash I saw myself reading the letter and pretending she'd be back in a month or two. Instead, he took the putter from my hand.

Brown leaves from a pin oak carpeted the green. Uncle Dom rapped a putt, too hard for the closest cup, not hard enough for the cup at the bottom of the green. The ball slid and slid, the brittle leaves crackling beneath it, and settled on the fringe.

By mid-October, Deirdre began leaving messages on my answering machine and, when I didn't respond, sent six red and six white roses. "Red is for love and white is for friendship," read the note. "You decide." I broke down and met her at a little diner on Merchant Street. The diner was a special place in our personal history. We had come here the morning after our first night together, and again and again whenever one of us felt the other might be slipping away.

"I think this happened for the best," she said. "In the long run, we'll be stronger."

That was a particularly one-sided view, but I didn't argue, didn't say much of anything. I was watching myself in split-screen, the present me sitting there with

Deirdre and a future me, thirty years hence, wandering a golf course with a tiny box buried in my pocket.

"I'll pay," Deirdre said after breakfast wound down to its inconclusive finish. "This was my idea."

She pulled a handful of bills from her jeans and unwadded them on the table between us. The diner door opened. A cold draft blew past and sent the bills spinning.

Our hands brushed as we raked them back into a pile. Then our fingers twined, and we leaned across the table. Summer was over, and autumn, maybe our second of many, was just beginning.