

## BLOOD RELATIONS

1988

They had their usual season tickets, and when the first play opened, Frank realized that he wanted to go. David, back in the hospital again, encouraged him. "Take Paul, or Jay." But Frank didn't want to see any of their friends.

There were his sisters, his parents, his cousin. No. He decided he wanted his grandmother, who had never gone to plays or concerts and was now over eighty, with failing sight, hearing, memory. "Come with me, Nonna. It's a musical, *Sunday in the Park with George*." He knew she would come. The only grandson of a large family, Italian on both sides, he could count on her old unjust preference. For once he was glad of it, shameless.

They drove down Geary Street through gradually thickening traffic. At a long stoplight, he suddenly asked her one of the old questions about his grandfather, whom he knew only through photographs and the stories Nonna told him. It had been years since she'd told this one, his favorite. How he and his grandfather were together all the time in those last months, pattering in the garden until he was too weak. How Frank, barely three years old but talking constantly in either English or Italian (he could not speak a word of Italian now), understood his grandfather perfectly. No one else could, not after seven operations on his cancerous jaw.

Frank's memories began after his grandfather's death, when Nonna became the settled old lady he knew. He never thought of her as ever having had a husband. He never asked her how she had endured those two years of his grandfather's terrible dying. Frank's mother said that Nonna nursed him day and night, never complained, never cried. Only by the time he died, she had a slight tremor, an almost imperceptible shaking of her head that still remained after thirty years. It was as if she were constantly whispering inwardly, No, no, no . . .

Frank dropped her in front of the theatre while he parked the car. Alone, he felt a stab of guilt. These stabs came regularly now when, absorbed at work, he forgot for a few minutes, then suddenly remembered David sitting at home, probably staring out the garden window. Or when he took a deep breath of cool, foggy air, felt a surge of ordinary

well being and rejoiced in it. And then remembered David with silvery-blue plastic oxygen tubes in his nose. He wondered if Nonna had ever felt guilty for not being able to share each moment of her husband's pain.

He found her just where he had left her, shivering a bit in the crowd. It took them some minutes to inch their way across the jammed, noisy lobby, to squeeze into the elevator, to find their seats. The theatre, filling quickly, was already hot and stuffy, and Nonna looked tired. Usually she was in bed by this time. It had been cruel to bring her. She would not enjoy this kind of musical. Even Frank preferred the old-fashioned kind of musical, with tunes you could hum.

She sat silent beside him, as usual. Living alone all these years, she had no one to talk to. She spent hours working jigsaw puzzles, as she had done with his grandfather during those final months. It had been something they could do without his having to talk. A visitor could join their silence, watching, fitting in a piece or two. When Frank was there, Nonna had told him, his grandfather would hand him a piece and show him how to fit it in, which he did with great concentration and satisfaction. No, he could not remember that either.

Aside from the puzzles, she read an occasional best seller, watched television, telephoned her grandchildren. Yet even on the phone she said little. There was silence in her eyes, too. They looked, they saw, they expressed nothing. Frank was grateful for that tonight. It would have been a mistake to invite his mother. Her eyes said everything. Whenever she looked at him, they widened into an abyss of prophecy, full of images of him in David's place. Last week, suddenly infuriated, he had snapped at her, "Don't bury me yet!" It was a strange phrase for him to use, more like something Nonna would say.

A few minutes into the play he was sure they should not have come. He did not want to sit in the dark listening to these tones of abrasive, intellectual sentiment. It would have been better if they had gone to a movie, where he could cry. Like Nonna, he never cried. Except at the movies, where sometimes, at the most banal scenes, tears suddenly spilled down his cheeks. How David laughed at him! But he had not been to a movie during these past two months. The flat, simplistic images that usually relaxed and distracted him had become unbearable, torture by stupidity, irrelevancy.

Only his job, only work brought him relief. Nonna had had no job during those two years, no break from nursing her husband, using up their savings, then going to work after he died, on night shift for the next twenty years, “not to be alone when the sun goes down.” After the first week, Frank realized he was lucky that he had to go to work every day.

Lucky. It was a word he and David used often now. Lucky to have each other, not like some poor bastard all alone. Lucky to have their own house, no panicky roommates or landlord to evict them. Lucky that family, friends, employers, all were behaving well, impeccably, like Nonna, who had, as usual in any family crisis, sent jars of soup, ravioli, and her incomparable veal cutlets. David had laughed and said he wondered where on the hierarchy of “luckier than they” he and Frank stood. Surely his former lovers were calling themselves lucky not to be Frank. He and David laughed a lot these days, alone together, or with friends and family. Everyone roared at each other’s jokes. They had become the ideal audience for a stand-up comic, all eagerly pitched on the edge of laughter, dreading the silence that followed.

Frank found himself drawn into the play in spite of, or because of, the abrasive, repetitive music. Maybe he felt in tune with this music that wasn’t trying to be sweet and this story that led nowhere. Ragged and hesitant and fragmented, the story lurched from side to side rather than forward, as George, the impressionist artist, conceived his painting from the bits and pieces of his life, fitting them together into beauty no one else could see.

Frank wondered if Nonna was paying attention or day dreaming. Could she follow the play? Or did she see and hear and then forget a moment later, as she forgot so many things now? How much did she actually understand before she forgot? Did she understand what was happening to David and would possibly—probably—surely—happen to Frank? He stopped that thought, grabbed it, firmly put it aside. Stopping thought was a new process for him, requiring great discipline. Maybe Nonna didn’t really forget, but had learned to set aside certain thoughts she must live with.

When the houselights came up for intermission, she nodded, yes, she was enjoying the play. No, she did not want to leave her seat. She sat watching people move

about. Frank knew she would not speak again unless he asked her a question. “Did you ever get mad at my grandfather. I mean, when he was sick?”

She seemed unsurprised by the question, nodding as if always ready with the answer. “At the end, the last months, when he was leaving me.”

Frank nodded. It had come sooner to him, the rage, and to David as well. Anger exploded in small ways, in telephoning from work and yelling when he learned that David would not, could not, eat his lunch. In low, petty ways, like his sulking when David called the Shanti Project to ask for a counselor, someone who would “come between us,” Frank whined, flinching at the contempt in David’s eyes, in his cutting response, and then, worst of all, in his silence. They apologized, forgave, quarreled again, made up, forgave, wondered at the ignoble form their anguish took. They were not prepared for this, they who had prepared so well.

They had been together five years when the HIV blood test became available, and they took it, glad of the chance to escape the cloud hanging over their friends, confident that their fiercely defended monogamy would be vindicated. They could hardly believe the results. Positive. Each had picked up the virus years ago. Or one had carried it to the other.

They made their wills, took vitamins, went to bed early, stopped drinking even wine, talked about death-with-dignity, quoted statistics: ten percent of positives got sick. Twenty percent. Thirty-five to fifty percent. The statistics rose as the year slowly passed, until suddenly David became a statistic.

Now their suicide pact was revealed as childish romanticism. Their contempt for heroic measures shriveled and, abjectly, they accepted medical assault. Dignity dissolved in the ocean of petty necessities—the unwashed dishes, the disability application, the mortgage payments—the dozens of reminders that, while everyone must die, life lurches on.

The lights dimmed again. Now the setting was modern, and the great-grandson of George was the artist, still struggling with the same questions, his own life a fragmented puzzle. The baby in the first-act painting was now a grandmother, dozing and drooping in a wheelchair, singing in a weak, piping squeak, “Children and art, children and art.”

Those were the only things, she sang, that you leave when you died, that are worth anything. “Children and art, children and art.”

Frank waited to see if the insistent chant of that simple equation would take him in like a movie and wet his eyes, but it did not touch him. He would never have children, and he didn't make art. Whatever he left would not be so easy to name. What did Nonna think of that song? Not children and art, just children. They were all that mattered to Nonna. That was why she was here with him, why she would sit in the dark through anything with him. So, the force that held them together was, in reality, a huge gap between them. Did she even know him? Did she understand why he needed her tonight, needed to begin to learn what she had known for thirty years?

He reached out to take her hand, gently, respectful of her arthritis. She gave his hand a quick, hard squeeze. Her strength surprised him, hurt him. She had never been so abrupt with him, so rough. He had never felt so grateful.

They sat and watched the rest of the play, hand in hand, dry-eyed, two old soldiers in the long war.