

# SPOONBENDERS

ALSO BY DARYL GREGORY

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# SPOONBENDERS



DARYL GREGORY

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“You’d think that whatever causes these things to happen  
doesn’t want them to be proved.”

—URI GELLER



1995

JUNE





I

# Matty



Matty Telemachus left his body for the first time in the summer of 1995, when he was fourteen years old. Or maybe it's more accurate to say that his body expelled him, sending his consciousness flying on a geyser of lust and shame.

Just before it happened, he was kneeling in a closet, one sweaty hand pressed to the chalky drywall, his right eye lined up with the hole at the back of an unwired electrical outlet box. On the other side of the wall was his cousin Mary Alice and her chubby white-blond friend. Janice? Janelle? Probably Janelle. The girls—both two years older than him, juniors, *women*—lay on the bed side by side, propped up on their elbows, facing in his direction. Janelle wore a spangled T-shirt, but Mary Alice—who the year before had announced that she would respond only to “Malice”—wore an oversized red flannel shirt that hung off her shoulder. His eye was drawn to the gaping neck of the shirt, following that swell of skin down down down into shadow. He was pretty sure she was wearing a black bra.

They were looking at a school yearbook while listening to Mary Alice's CD Walkman, sharing foam headphones between them like a wishbone. Matty couldn't hear the music, but even if he could, it was probably no band *he'd* heard of. Someone calling herself Malice



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wouldn't tolerate anything popular. Once she'd caught him humming Hootie & the Blowfish and the look of scorn on her face made his throat close.

She didn't seem to like him as a matter of policy, even though he had proof that she once did: a Christmas Polaroid of a four-year-old Mary Alice, beaming, with her brown arms wrapped around his white toddler body. But in the six months since Matty and his mom had moved back to Chicago and into Grandpa Teddy's house, he'd seen Mary Alice practically every other week, and she'd barely spoken to him. He tried to match her cool and pretend she wasn't in the room. Then she'd walk past, sideswiping him with the scent of bubblegum and cigarettes, and the rational part of his brain would swerve off the road and crash into a tree.

Out of desperation, he set down three commandments for himself:

1. If your cousin is in the room, do not try to look down her shirt. It's creepy.
2. Do not have lustful thoughts about your cousin.
3. Under no circumstances should you touch yourself while having lustful thoughts about your cousin.

So far tonight the first two had gone down in flames, and the third was in the crosshairs. The adults (except for Uncle Buddy, who never really left the house anymore) had all gone downtown for dinner, someplace fancy, evidently, with his mom in her interview skirt, Uncle Frankie looking like a real estate agent with a jacket over a golf shirt, and Frankie's wife, Aunt Loretta, squeezed into a lavender pantsuit. Grandpa Teddy, of course, wore a suit and the Hat (in Matty's mind, "Hat" was always capitalized). But even that uniform had been upgraded slightly for the occasion: gold cuff links, a decorative handkerchief poking up out of his breast pocket, his fanciest, diamond-studded wristwatch. They'd be back so late that Frankie's kids were supposed to sleep over. Uncle Frankie mixed a gallon of powdered Goji Go! berry juice, placed a twenty-dollar bill with some ceremony next to the jug, and addressed his daughters. "I want change," he said to Mary Alice. Then he pointed to the twins: "And you guys, try not to burn down the fucking house, all right?" Polly and Cassie, seven years old, appeared not to hear him.

Uncle Buddy was technically in charge, but the cousins all understood that they were on their own for the evening. Buddy was in his own world, a high-gravity planet he left only with great difficulty. He worked on his projects, he marked off the days on the refrigerator calendar in pink crayon, and he spoke to as few people as possible. He wouldn't even answer the door for the pizza guy; it was Matty who went to the door with the twenty, and who set the two dollars' change very carefully in the middle of the table.

Through some carefully timed choreography, Matty managed to outmaneuver Janelle-the-interloper and the twins to score the chair next to Mary Alice. He spent all of dinner next to her, hyperaware of every centimeter that separated his hand from hers.

Buddy took one piece of pizza and vanished to the basement, and the high whine of the band saw was all they heard of him for hours. Buddy, a bachelor who'd lived his entire life in this house with Grandpa Teddy, was forever starting projects—tearing down, roughing in, tacking up—but never finishing.

Like the partially deconstructed room Matty was hiding in. Until recently it and the adjoining room were part of an unfinished attic. Buddy had removed the old insulation, framed in closets, wired up lights, installed beds in both rooms—and then had moved on. This half of the attic was technically Matty's bedroom, but most of the closet was filled with old clothes. Buddy seemed to have forgotten the clothes and the empty electrical sockets behind them.

Matty, however, had not forgotten.

Janelle turned a page of the yearbook and laughed. "Ooh! Your lover!" she said.

"Shut up," Mary Alice said. Her dark hair hung across her eyes in a way that knocked him out.

"You want that big thing in your mouth, don't you?" Janelle asked.

Matty's thighs were cramping, but he wasn't about to move now.

"Shut the fuck up," Mary Alice said. She bumped her friend's shoulder. Janelle rolled into her, laughing, and when the girls righted themselves, the flannel shirt had slipped from his cousin's shoulder, exposing a black bra strap.

No: a *dark purple* bra strap.

Commandment #3, Thou shalt not touch thyself, began to smolder and smoke.

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Twenty feverish seconds later, Matty's back arched as if yanked by a hot wire. An ocean roar filled his ears.

Suddenly he was in the air, the studs of the slanted ceiling inches from his face. He shouted, but he had no voice. He tried to push away from the ceiling, but realized he didn't have arms, either. In fact, no body at all.

After a moment, his vision swiveled, but he felt no control over that movement; a camera panning on its own. The floor of the room swung into view. His body had fallen out of the closet and lay stretched out on the plywood.

*That's what he looked like? That chubby belly, that pimply jawline?*

The body's eyes fluttered open, and for a vertiginous moment Matty was both the watcher and the watched. The body's mouth opened in shock, and then—

It was as if the strings holding him aloft were suddenly cut. Matty plummeted. The body screamed: a high-pitched, girlish squeal he had time to register as deeply embarrassing. Then consciousness and flesh crashed into each other.

He bounced around inside his body like a Super Ball. When the reverberations settled, he was looking out through his eyes at the ceiling, which was now the appropriate distance away.

Thumps sounded from the next room. The girls! They'd heard him!

He jumped up, covering his crotch like a wounded soldier. "Matty?" Malice called. The door began to swing open.

"I'm okay! I'm okay!" he shouted. He launched himself into the closet.

From somewhere the blonde laughed. Mary Alice appeared at the closet doors, hands on her hips. "What are you doing in here?"

He looked up at her, the bottom half of his body covered by women's apparel, the topmost dress an orange striped number that looked very seventies.

"I tripped," he said.

"Okay . . ."

He made no move to get up.

"What's the matter?" Mary Alice asked. She'd seen something in his expression.

"Nothing," he said. He'd just had a bad thought: These are

Grandma Mo's dresses. I've just despoiled my dead grandmother's clothes.

He propped himself on an elbow. Trying to look comfortable, as if he'd just discovered that twenty-year-old frocks made the perfect bedding material.

Mary Alice started to say something, then she glanced at the wall behind him, just over his shoulder. Her eyes narrowed. Through force of will, Matty did not turn around to see if she was looking at the empty electrical box.

"Okay then," she said. She backed away from the closet.

"Right," he said. "Thanks. All good."

The girls left the room, and he immediately turned and covered the hole in the wall with the orange gown. He began to rehang the dresses and coats: a waist-length rabbit fur coat, a bunch of knee-length skirts, a plaid raincoat. One of the last items was covered in a clear plastic dry-cleaning bag. It was a long, shimmery silver dress, and the sight of it rang chimes somewhere far back in his brain.

Oh, he thought. That's right. It's what Grandma Mo wore on the videotape. *The* videotape.



Uncle Frankie had shown Matty the tape at Thanksgiving four years ago. Frankie had been drinking a lot of red wine, hitting it hard as soon as his wife, Loretta, unwrapped the shrimp cocktail appetizers, and his sentences had turned *emphatic* and *urgent*. He was railing about some guy named the Astounding Archibald, who'd ruined *everything*.

"Think what we could've had," Frankie said. "We could have been kings."

Irene, Matty's mom, laughed, making Frankie scowl. "Kings of what?" she asked.

Irene and Matty had driven in from Pittsburgh the night before, and they'd woken up to find that Grandpa Teddy had bought a bird and not much else; he'd been waiting for his daughter to conjure the rest of the meal. Now that they were finally on the other side of dinner, the table turned into a postcombat battlefield: pumpkin pie destroyed,

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Rice Krispies Treats in ruins, all wine bottles depleted. Matty was the last kid left in his chair. He'd always liked hanging out with the adults. Most of the time he stayed under the radar, not speaking, in the hope that they'd forget he was there and start saying interesting things.

"That no-talent hack just couldn't stand to see us win," Frankie said.

"No, he was a talented man, a talented man," Grandpa Teddy said from the head of the table. "Brilliant, even. But shortsighted." As usual, he was the most dressed-up person in the house. Shiny black suit, pink shirt, riotous paisley tie as wide as a trout. Grandpa always dressed like he was about to go to a wedding or a funeral, except in the mornings or just before bed, when he walked around as if he were alone in the house: wife-beater T-shirt, boxer shorts, black socks. He didn't seem to own "sportswear" or "work clothes," maybe because he never did sports and didn't work. He was rich, though. Irene said she didn't know where the money came from, but Matty imagined it was all poker winnings. Grandpa Teddy, it was understood, was the greatest cardshark of all time. He taught Matty seven-card stud, sitting at the kitchen table for hours until Matty's pennies ran out. (Grandpa Teddy always played for money, and never gave it back after a game. "You can't sharpen your knife on a sponge," he'd say, scripture that Matty believed in without entirely understanding.)

"Archibald was a necessary evil," Grandpa Teddy said. "He was the voice of the skeptic. If your mother had shown him up, the audience would have loved us for it. We could have gone to the stratosphere with that act."

"He was evil," Frankie said. "A damn liar and a cheat! He wouldn't take Communion without palming the wafer."

Grandpa Teddy chuckled. "It's all water under the bridge now."

"He was just plain jealous," Frankie said. "He hated our gifts. He wanted to destroy us."

Matty couldn't stand it any longer. He had to ask. "What did this guy do to us?"

Frankie leaned across the table, looking Matty straight in the eye. "What did he *do*?" he said in a low, emotion-choked voice. "He killed Grandma Mo, that's what."

A thrill went through Matty. It wasn't just this dramatic declaration; it was the electricity of being noticed by his uncle. Of being seen.

Uncle Frankie had always been kind to Matty, but he'd never talked to him as if he mattered.

"Can we drop this, please?" Irene asked.

"He did kill her," Frankie said, leaning back but keeping his eyes on Matty. "Sure as if he'd put a gun to her head."

Matty's mom frowned. "You believe that, don't you?"

Frankie swiveled his head to stare her down. "Yes, Irene. Yes, I do."

Loretta got to her feet. "I'm going for a smoke."

"I'll join you," Grandpa Teddy said. He rose from the table, straightened his cuffs, and took her arm.

"You're not supposed to smoke, Dad," Irene said.

"Loretta's smoking," he said. "I'm secondary smoking."

Uncle Frankie gestured to Matty. "Come on, it's time you saw something."

"I'm not doing these dishes alone," Irene said.

"Have Buddy help you." He slapped his brother on the shoulder—a little too hard, Matty thought. Buddy's eyes fluttered, but his gaze never moved from the middle distance. He had a way of sitting very still, slumping lower and lower, as if he were turning to pudding.

"Leave him alone," Irene said.

Buddy remained unperturbed. He'd been in one of his trances since finishing his pie, staring into space, occasionally smiling to himself or silently mouthing a word or two. His muteness was a mystery to Matty, and the adults wouldn't talk about it, a double silence that was impenetrable. Matty's mom would only give him variations of "That's the way he is." Once Matty worked up the courage to ask Grandpa Teddy about why Buddy hardly spoke, and he said, "You'll have to ask him."

Frankie led Matty to the front room, where a huge console television was parked against the wall like a Chrysler. His uncle dropped heavily onto his butt—holding his wineglass aloft and managing to keep most of the wine inside it—and opened up one of the cabinets.

"Now we're talking," Frankie said. A VHS machine sat on a shelf, and in the space below was a jumble of videocassettes. He pulled one out, squinted at the label, and tossed it aside. He started working his way through the stack. "I gave Dad a copy," he said under his breath. "Unless Buddy threw it out, that fuckin'—hey. Here we go."

It was a black cassette box with orange stripes. Frankie ejected the current tape from the machine and jammed in the one from the box.

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“This is our history,” Frankie said. He turned on the television. “This is your heritage.”

On the screen, a store clerk madly squeezed rolls of toilet paper. Frankie pressed play on the VCR, and nothing happened.

“You have to turn it to channel three,” Matty said.

“Right, right.” The TV’s dial was missing, exposing a naked prong. Frankie reached up to retrieve the set of needle-nose pliers Grandpa Teddy kept on top of the console. “That was my first job. Grandpa’s remote control.”

The tape had the swimmy look of something recorded off broadcast TV. A talk show host in suit and tie sat on a cramped set, with a brilliant yellow wall behind him. “—and they’ve been thrilling audiences around the country,” he was saying. “Please welcome Teddy Telemachus and His Amazing Family!” Matty could hear the capitals.

The applause on the recording sounded metallic. The host stood up and walked over to an open stage, where the guests stood awkwardly, several feet back from a wooden table. Father, mother, and three children, all dressed in suits and dresses.

Grandpa Teddy looked pretty much like himself, only younger. Trim and energetic, the Hat pushed back on his head, giving him the appearance of an old-time reporter about to give you the straight dope.

“Wow, is that Grandma Mo?” Matty asked, even though it could have been no one else. She wore a shiny, silvery evening dress, and she was the only member of the family who looked like she belonged onstage. It wasn’t just that she was Hollywood beautiful, though she was that, with short dark hair and large eyes like a 1920s ingénue. It was her stillness, her confidence. She held the hand of a sweet-faced, kindergarten-age Uncle Buddy. “She’s so young.”

“This was a year before she died, so she was, like, thirty,” Frankie said.

“No, I mean, compared to Grandpa Teddy.”

“Yeah, well, he may have robbed the cradle a bit. You know your grandfather.”

Matty nodded knowingly. He did know his grandfather, but not in whatever way Uncle Frankie was talking about. “Oh yeah.”

“Now, this is the number one daytime show in the country, right?” Frankie said. “Mike Douglas. Millions watching.”

On-screen, the host was pointing out various things on the table:

metal cans, some silverware, a stack of white envelopes. Beside the table was a kind of miniature wheel of fortune about three feet tall, but instead of numbers on the spokes there were pictures: animals, flowers, cars. Matty's mother, Irene, looked to be ten or eleven years old, though her velvety green dress made her look older. So did her worried expression; Matty was surprised to see it already set in place on such a young face. She kept her grip on the arm of her younger brother, a wiry, agitated kid who seemed to be trying to twist out of his suit and tie.

"Is that you?" Matty asked. "You don't look happy to be there."

"Me? You should have seen Buddy. He got so bad that—but we'll get to that."

Maureen—Grandma Mo—was answering a question from the talk show host. She smiled bashfully. "Well, Mike, I don't know if I'd use the word 'gifted.' Yes, I suppose we have a knack. But I believe every person has the capability to do what we do."

When she said "every person," she looked at Matty. Not at the camera, or the audience watching at home—at him. They locked eyes, across a gap of years and electronic distortion. "Oh!" he said.

Uncle Frankie glanced at him and said, "Pay attention. My part's coming."

Grandpa Teddy was telling the host about keeping an open mind. "In the right kind of positive environment, all things are possible." He smiled. "Even kids can do it."

The host crouched awkwardly next to Frankie. "Tell the folks your name."

"I can move things with my mind," he said. Visible at Frankie's feet was a line of white tape. Everyone except the host was standing behind it.

"Can you, now!"

"His name is Franklin," his sister said.

The host held his microphone to her. "And you are?"

"Irene." Her tone was guarded.

"Do you have a special ability, Irene?"

"I can read minds, sort of. I know when—"

"Wow! You want to read my mind right now?"

Grandma Mo put a hand on Irene's shoulder. "Do you want to try, sweetie? How are you feeling?"

"Fine." She didn't look fine.

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Teddy jumped in to explain that Irene was a “human lie detector—a divining rod, if you will, for the truth! Say that we use these cards—” He reached toward the table.

“I’ll get them,” Mike Douglas said. He stepped over the taped line and picked up a large stack of oversized cards.

“Fucker,” Uncle Frankie said.

“What?”

“Wait for it,” Frankie said.

On-screen, Teddy said, “Those are ordinary playing cards. Now, Mike, shuffle through the deck and choose a card, then show it to the camera for the folks at home. Don’t show it to Irene, though.”

Mike Douglas walked to one of the cameras and held up a five of diamonds. He goofed around a little, moving it in and out of focus.

“Here’s your chance to lie to a little girl,” Teddy said. “Let’s put your card back in the deck. Excellent, Mike, excellent. And a couple of shuffles . . . all-righty, then. Hold out your hand, if you please. I’m going to start dealing cards, faceup. All you have to do is answer Irene’s question. And don’t worry, she always asks the same thing, and it’s a very simple question.”

Grandpa Teddy dealt a card onto the host’s palm. Irene said, “Mr. Douglas, is that your card?”

“No-siree, little miss.” He mugged for the camera.

“That’s the truth,” Irene said.

“It’s that simple,” Grandpa Teddy said to the host. “You can say yes or no, whatever you like.” He dealt another card onto his palm, and another. Mike said “no” to each new card, and Irene would nod. Then Mike said, “That one’s mine.”

“You’re lying,” Irene said.

Mike Douglas laughed. “Caught me! Not the queen of spades.”

They went through more cards, Mike saying “no” each time, but after the tenth Irene shook her head.

“That’s your card,” she said.

The host held out his palm to the camera: on the top was the five of diamonds. Then he addressed Grandma Mo. “What do you say to people who say, Oh, those are marked cards. They taught the girl to read them!”

Grandma Mo smiled, not at all upset. “People say all kinds of

things.” She was still holding Buddy’s hand. He was so small his head was barely in the frame.

The host reached into his jacket pocket and brought out an envelope. “So what I’ve done is brought some pictures. Each of them is a simple, geometric pattern. You’ve never seen into this envelope, right?”

Irene looked worried—but then, she’d looked worried from the start of the show.

“Ready?” the host asked. He picked a card from the envelope and looked hard at it.

Irene glanced at her mother.

“Simple geometric shapes,” the host said.

“You don’t have to prompt her,” Grandma Mo said.

“Tell me if I’m lying,” the host said. “Is it a circle?”

Irene frowned. “Um . . .”

“Is it a triangle?”

“That’s not fair,” Irene said. “You can’t ask me questions, you have to—”

Uncle Frankie pressed a button and the image froze. “Take a look at the bowl.” He pointed at a small, round-bottomed stainless steel bowl. “It’s got water in it. Ready?”

“Sure,” Matty said.

Frankie pressed play. On-screen, Irene seemed angry. “He’s not doing it right. There’s no way I can say yes or no if he keeps—”

From offscreen, Grandpa Teddy said sharply, “Frankie! Wait your turn!”

The bowl on the table seemed to tremble, and then the whole table began to vibrate.

The camera swung over to little Frankie. He was sitting on the ground, cross-legged, staring at the table. The pile of silverware rattled, and the bowl began to rock back and forth.

“Careful now,” Grandpa Teddy said. “You’re going to—”

The bowl tipped a bit more, and water sloshed over the edge.

“—spill it,” Grandpa Teddy finished.

“Holy cow!” the host said. “We’ll be right back.” A band played, and then a commercial came on.

“You did that, Uncle Frankie?” Matty asked. “Cool.”

Frankie was worked up. “You see that shit with the pictures? That

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was Archibald's idea, too, trying to fuck us over. Told Douglas not to let us use our own material, gave him those Zener cards."

Matty wasn't sure how that would throw off his mother's power. He knew that she couldn't be lied to, just as he knew that Grandpa Teddy read the contents of sealed envelopes, that Grandma Mo could see distant objects, and Uncle Frankie could move things with his mind, and that Uncle Buddy, when he was small, could predict the scores of Cubs games. That they were psychic was another Telemachus Family Fact, in the same category as being half Greek and half Irish, Cubs fans and White Sox haters, and Catholic.

"It gets worse," Frankie said. He fast-forwarded through the commercials, overran the resume of the show, rewound, then went forward and back several more times. Grandma Mo and Buddy were no longer onstage. Grandpa Teddy had his arm around Irene.

"And we're back with Teddy Telemachus and His Amazing Family," the host said. "Maureen had to take care of a little family emergency—"

"Sorry about that," Teddy said with a smile. "Buddy, he's our youngest, got a little nervous, and Maureen needed to comfort him." He made it sound like Buddy was an infant. "We'll bring them back out here in a sec."

"You're okay with going forward?" the host asked.

"Of course!" Teddy said.

"What happened to Buddy?" Matty asked his uncle.

"Jesus, he broke down, crying and wailing. Your grandmother had to take him backstage to calm him down."

The host had his hand on young Frankie's shoulder. "Now, just before the break, little Franklin here seemed to be—well, what would you call it?"

"Psychokinesis, Mike," Uncle Teddy said. "Frankie's always had a talent for it."

"The table was really shaking," the host said.

"That's not unusual. It can make dinnertime pretty exciting, Mike, pretty exciting."

"I bet! Now, before we continue, I want to introduce a special guest. Please welcome noted stage magician and author the Astounding Archibald."

A short bald man with a ridiculous black handlebar mustache strode

into the shot. Teddy shook his head as if disappointed. “This explains so much,” he said. The bald man was even shorter than Grandpa Teddy.

“Good to see you again, Mr. Telemachus,” Archibald said. They shook hands.

“G. Randall Archibald is not only a world-renowned magician,” Mike Douglas intoned, “he’s also a skeptic and debunker of psychics.”

“This explains so much,” Teddy said again, more loudly.

The host didn’t appear to hear him. “We asked him here to help us set up these tests for the Telemachus family. See this line?” The camera pulled back to show the full extent of the white gaffer tape. “It was Mr. Archibald’s idea that we do not allow Teddy or members of his family to handle the silverware, or approach the table in any way.”

“Perhaps you noticed,” Archibald said to the host, “that Irene had no problem reading the cards when they were the ones that Teddy provided for you. But when you used the Zener cards—which Teddy had no advance access to, and was not allowed to touch!—she hemmed and hawed.”

“Not true, not true!” Teddy said. “Mike was doing it wrong! But worse, *someone* filled with negativity was causing interference. Severe interference!”

“You mean my mere presence caused her powers to fail?” Archibald asked.

“As I told you, Mike,” Teddy said, “you gotta have an open mind to allow these abilities to work.”

“Or an empty one,” Archibald said. Mike Douglas laughed.

Archibald, looking pleased, addressed the audience. “While Irene was concentrating *so* hard, we had a camera focused on her father. Mike, can we show the television audience what we recorded?”

Teddy looked shocked. “Are you mocking my daughter? Are you *mocking* her, you pipsqueak?” This from a man barely two inches taller.

“I’m not mocking her, Mr. Telemachus, but perhaps you are mocking the audience’s ability to—”

“Let’s bring my wife out here,” Teddy said. “Maureen Telemachus is, without a doubt, the world’s most powerful clairvoyant. Mike, can you bring her out here?”

The host looked off camera and appeared to be listening to someone. Then to Teddy he said, “I’m told she’s unavailable. Tell you what,

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let's just look at the videotape, and we'll see if she can come back out after the next break."

"I think you'll notice something very interesting," Archibald said. He had a showy way of speaking, punching the consonants. "While everyone was distracted by the little girl, the table began to move and shake."

"It sure did," Mike Douglas said.

"But how did that happen? Was it *psychokinesis* . . . or something a little more down to earth?"

The screen showed the stage from minutes before, but from a side angle, slightly behind the family. At first the camera was aimed at the host and Irene, but then it swung toward Teddy. He had stepped across the strip of gaffer tape, and his foot was pressed against the table leg.

Archibald spoke over the playback. "This is an old trick. Just lift the table slightly, and slip the edge of your shoe's sole under the leg."

Teddy's foot was barely moving, if it was moving at all, but the table was undoubtedly shaking. Then the screen showed Archibald and the host. Teddy stood off to the side, looking into the wings, grimacing in frustration.

"I can teach you how to do it," Archibald said to the host. "No psychic powers required."

Mike Douglas turned to Grandpa. "What do you say to that, Teddy? No powers required?"

Teddy appeared not to hear him. He was staring offstage. "Where the—" He stopped himself from swearing. "Where is my wife? Could someone please bring her out here?"

Irene grabbed Grandpa Teddy's arm, embarrassed. She hissed something to him that didn't make it to the microphones.

"Fine," Grandpa Teddy said. He called Frankie to him. "We're leaving."

"Really?" Archibald said. "What about Maureen? I'd really like to—"

"Not today, Archibald. Your, uh, negativity has made this impossible." Then to the host he said, "I really expected better of you, Mike."

Teddy and his children walked offstage—with great dignity, Matty thought. Mike Douglas looked flummoxed. The Astounding Archibald seemed surprisingly disappointed.

Uncle Frankie pressed the eject button and the screen turned to static. "See what I mean?"

“Wow,” Matty said. He was desperate to keep the conversation going, but he didn’t want Frankie to get fed up and stop talking to him. “So Grandma Mo never came back onstage?”

“Nope. Never got to do her part of the act. It would have shut Archibald up, that’s for sure, but she never got the chance. Buddy got worse and we all went home.”

“Okay, but . . .”

“But what?”

“How did that kill her?”

Frankie stared at him.

Uh-oh, Matty thought.

Frankie hauled himself to his feet.

Matty hopped up, too. “I’m sorry, I just don’t—”

“You know what chaos theory is?” Frankie asked.

Matty shook his head.

“Butterfly wings, Matty. One flap and—” He made a grand gesture, which brought his almost-empty glass into sight, and he drained it. “God damn.” He studied the front window, perhaps seeing something new in the old houses. But the only thing Matty could see was his uncle’s reflection, his shiny face floating like a ghost over his body.

Frankie looked down at him. “What was I saying?”

“Uh, butterflies?”

“Right. You have to look at cause and effect, the whole chain of events. First, the act is wrecked. We’re dead as far as the public is concerned. Gigs get canceled, fucking Johnny Carson starts making fun of us.”

“Carson,” Matty said, affecting bitterness. Everybody in the family knew that Carson had stolen Grandpa Teddy’s envelope act.

“Once they isolated us, we were sitting ducks.” Frankie looked down at him with an intense expression. “Do the math, kid.” He glanced toward the dining room; Matty’s mom had moved into the kitchen, and no one was in sight, but Frankie lowered his voice anyway. “Nineteen seventy-three. Height of the Cold War. The world’s most famous psychics are discredited on *The Mike Douglas Show*, and just a year later, a woman with your grandmother’s immense power just *dies*?”

Matty opened his mouth, closed it. Immense power?

Frankie nodded slowly. “*Oh* yeah.”

## SPOONBENDERS

Matty said, "But Mom—" Frankie put up a hand, and Matty lowered his voice to a whisper. "Mom said she died of cancer."

"Sure," Uncle Frankie said. "A healthy woman, a nonsmoker, dies of uterine cancer at age thirty-one." He put his hand on Matty's shoulder and leaned close. His breath smelled like Kool-Aid. "Listen, this is between you and me, right? My girls are too young to handle the truth, and your mom—you see how *she* reacts. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, your grandmother died of natural causes. You follow me?"

Matty nodded, though he wasn't quite following, starting with why he could be told this secret, and Mary Alice, who was two years older than him, could not. Though maybe that was because she wasn't a Telemachus by blood? She was Loretta's daughter from a previous marriage. Did that make a difference? He started to ask, and Frankie put up a hand.

"There's more to this story, Matthias. More than's safe to tell you right now. But know this." His voice was choked with emotion, his eyes misty.

"Yes?" Matty asked.

"You come from greatness," Uncle Frankie said. "You have greatness in you. And no jackbooted tool of the American government can—"

Matty would never know what Uncle Frankie was going to say next, because at that moment a loud bang sounded from upstairs. Mary Alice screamed, "Fire! Fire!"

"God damn it," Frankie said softly. He squeezed his eyes shut. Then he hustled up the stairs, shouting for everyone else to stop shouting. Matty followed him into the guest bedroom, which served double duty as a kind of utility room, crowded with boxes and laundry baskets. The padded cover to the ironing board was on fire, and the iron sat in the middle of the flames, its black cord dangling over the side, not plugged in. The three-year-old twins stood in a corner, holding hands, looking wide-eyed at the flames; not afraid so much as surprised. Mary Alice held one of Buddy's huge shirts up in front of her, as if she was shielding herself from the heat, though she was probably thinking of smothering the flames with it.

"Jesus, get Cassie and Polly out of here," Frankie said to Mary Alice. He looked around the room, didn't see what he was looking for, and then said, "Everybody out!"

The twins bolted for the hall, and Mary Alice and Matty moved only as far as the doorway, too fascinated to leave completely. Frankie crouched beside the ironing board and picked it up by the legs, balancing the iron atop it. He carried it toward them as if it were a giant birthday cake. Mary Alice and Matty scampered ahead of him. He went down the stairs, moving deliberately despite the flames in his face. This impressed Matty tremendously. Mary Alice opened the front door for him, and he walked to the driveway and dumped the ironing board on its side. The smoking, partially melted iron bounced twice and landed bottom-side down.

Aunt Loretta appeared from around the corner of the house, followed a moment later by Grandpa Teddy. Then Matty's mom burst through the front door, followed by the twins. The whole family was standing in the front yard now, except for Buddy.

"What happened?" Loretta asked Frankie.

"Whaddya think?" Frankie said. He turned the ironing board so that it was upside down, but flames still licked at the sides. "Pack up the hellions and Mary Alice. We're going home."

For months Matty couldn't get that videotape out of his mind. It seemed to be a message from the distant past, an illuminated text glowing with the secrets of his family. He desperately wanted to ask his mother about it, but he also didn't want to break his promise to Uncle Frankie. He resorted to asking his mother oblique questions about *The Mike Douglas Show* or Grandma Maureen or the government, and every time she cut him off. Even when he tried to sneak up on the topic—"Gee, I wonder what it's like to be on TV?"—she seemed to immediately sense what was up and change the subject.

The next time he and his mother returned to Chicago, he couldn't find the cassette in the TV cabinet. Uncle Buddy caught him pawing through the boxes, trying each tape in the machine, fast-forwarding to make sure Mike Douglas didn't pop up mid-tape. His uncle frowned and then slumped out of the room.

Matty never found the tape. The next Thanksgiving Frankie didn't seem to remember showing it to him. At holidays Matty sat around the dinner table, waiting for the adults to talk about those days, but his mother had placed some kind of embargo on the matter. Frankie would bring up something that seemed promising—a reference to Grandma Mo, or "psi war"—and Mom would fix him with a look that dropped

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the temperature of the room. The visits became less frequent and more strained. A couple Thanksgivings Frankie's family didn't show up at all, and some years Matty and his mom stayed home in Pittsburgh. Those were terrible weekends. "You've got a melancholy streak," she'd tell him. If that were true, he knew where he got it from; his mother was the most melancholy person he knew.

It *was* true that he was unusually nostalgic for a kid, though what he pined for was a time before he was born. He was haunted by the feeling that he'd missed the big show. The circus had packed up and left town, and he'd shown up to find nothing but a field of trampled grass. But other times, especially when Mom was feeling good, he'd be suddenly filled with confidence, like the prince of a deposed royal family certain of his claim to the throne. He'd think, *Once, we were Amazing.*

Then his mother would lose another job, and they'd have to eat Kraft macaroni and cheese for weeks straight, and he'd think, *Once, we were Amazing.*



And then, when he was fourteen years old, his mother lost the best job she'd ever had, and they moved back in with Grandpa Teddy, and soon afterward he found himself sitting in a closet full of his dead grandmother's clothes, recovering from the most interesting thing that had ever happened to him. His embarrassment had faded, which made space in his body for other emotions, a thrumming mix of fear, wonder, and pride.

He'd left his body. He'd floated eight feet off the ground. Some ceremony was called for.

He thought for a moment, then lifted the silver dress by its hanger and addressed it. "Hiya, Grandma Mo," he said, quiet enough that Mary Alice and her idiot friend couldn't hear him. "Today, I am—"

He was going to say, "Today, I am Amazing." It was going to be a poignant moment that he would someday tell his children about. He was young Bruce Wayne vowing to avenge his parents, Superman promising to uphold his Kryptonian heritage, a Jewish boy doing whatever Jewish boys do on their Bar Mitzvahs.

Then he noticed the shadow at the door.

It was Uncle Buddy. He held a hammer in one hand, and a staple gun in the other. His gaze slowly moved from Matty to the closet, then back to Matty—and the dress. His eyes widened a fraction. Was he about to smile? Matty couldn't take it if he smiled.

"I was just putting it away!" Matty said. He thrust the gown at him and ran, frantic to escape his uncle, the room, and his body.