Tea With Interpol

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Years ago my mother told me about a woman, Sofia, whose son called one day to say goodbye, he loved her, she was never going to see him again. The way my mother told the story, she might have been describing a comet — it was a hunk of ice, it arced across the night, it was gone — and her easy acceptance of his vanishing bothered me more than the vanishing itself.

Sofia, her husband, and their three sons had been part of my life since I was a child. The one who disappeared, Johnny, the middle boy, had once babysat my brother, sister, and me. That evening, after my parents delivered the instructions and took off, Johnny put a finger to his lips, skipped out, and came back with a chocolate cake he'd hidden in the driveway, making us promise not to tell. Then he sat us in front of our favourite TV show and together we ate the whole thing. Later, with the sugar crashing through our systems, we jumped so hard up and down on my sister's bed we broke one of its legs. My parents never asked him to babysit again.

In my other memory Johnny is high up in our cherry tree, beyond the furthest branch I dared climb, balanced against the sky, straining for the brightest cherries ripened to perfection for being so far out of reach, laughing when my mother puts her hand to her mouth and tells him to be careful. Afterwards, my father complained that when Johnny asked if he could pick a few cherries, he never thought he'd pick the whole tree clean.

That's it: two memories.

But I remember his mother, Sofia, and his father, Dane, like they were carved in concrete.

My mother had a nickname for Dane: the Rat. He had the hair, rising in pointed tufts, a big nose built for snooping, for tearing into people's secrets. But mostly he he had the teeth and eyes, glinting with so much desperation, so much wanting, it terrified her. From then on Dane was the Rat to my brother and sister and me. Even when he'd done something nice he was still the Rat. The Rat gave mom a bike for Christmas, my sister said. Pretty nice bike, too. The Rat has good taste. And when we talked about an actual rat we always called it Dane. I went outside last night, my brother said, and lifted the

lid off the compost, and there were three Danes scrabbling around in there. You should put out some Dane traps, my sister replied.

But it wasn't just his appearance that made him verminous. I've never been a believer in the separation between the inner and outer, being and appearance, because the way the world responds to your looks will, year after year, become who you are, right to the bones. My father said Dane was born a bastard, and to that generation of men such things still mattered. Maybe the world had treated Dane like a rat for so long he became one. He was always busy — busy, busy, busy — in that rat-like way. He never drove Sofia anywhere. He was off paying compliments to other men's wives, usually when the men weren't around, though sometimes when they were, if he felt they were passive enough to take it. He once told my mother she was so beautiful he'd kiss the seat she sat on. He tried, one night, long after Sofia died, to interest my father in pornography. He invited him over for a drink, my father reluctantly went, and the Rat took him through his stash of images and videos, testing him for the wandering eye that would give him some leverage with my mother. The Rat, my father said the next day, showing me that stuff, it's sick! And when I worked at the pulp and paper mill as a summer student, the Rat, who also worked there, would sidle up and call me kiddo. Hey kiddo, how's your mother? Let her know I'm looking out for you, okay kiddo? Fuck you, Rat, I thought.

The Rat scurried across the world, short quick footsteps because of the chronic back pain that my mother said had been an unheeded warning sign of the cancer that killed him. Near the end, his stomach looked like a bag stuffed to bursting with tennis balls. All of this, he said to my mother, all of it, he jiggled his lumpy stomach, is cancer. I'm made of cancer. But that same night, he also confessed that he'd realized too late what Sofia had been: For three decades I was married to an angel.

And for three decades his angel had trudged alone across town.

We always called Sofia, Mrs. Birx. She was super sweet. The kind of laugh that filled a room and blew out the windows. She was continually trying to repair the clothes on your back. If she saw you in a pair of rolled up or torn jeans she'd send you to the bathroom to take them off so she could put in a hem or a patch, she didn't care how in style your look was, and if you had stitching undone in a T-shirt she sewed it together by hand right where you stood.

She was a diabetic, it would kill her long before cancer got the Rat, and she smoked, which gave her voice a crunchy softness, as if scorching it with ciga-

rettes coarsened and smoothed it at the same time. She had a small orchard out back, four plum trees, three apple, two each apricot and peach, and in the summers, as a favour to my mother, she hired me to pick the fruit at four dollars an hour, which was one dollar under minimum wage, but a fortune for a ten, eleven, twelve year old. Comic books were thirty cents.

She was always hiring me for something.

The bulk of her time was spent in the kitchen, both when her sons lived at home and after, once they'd moved out and all she had left was the ache of the hundred thousand meals she'd cooked for them, at a time when what she had to get done every day must have seemed identical to the larger meaning of her life. She probably wondered where that purpose had gone, lighting another Craven A by the foggy window, with not much to cook but the small meals she and the Rat ate less and less of as they aged.

We spent time in that kitchen the summer I turned sixteen. She paid me to wash the walls. No matter how I scrubbed the water ran yellow, bleeding out of the paint. It was all that nicotine. Years of it. Sofia watched me and smoked, lighting each cigarette off the last, blowing the tar back into the walls as fast as I could wash it off.

She never once mentioned the Rat. She talked about her sons. The space left in her brain, once the groceries, the washing, the laundry, the meals were done, was theirs exclusively.

The youngest was a hockey player, recently drafted by the Maple Leafs, at training camp in Toronto trying to crack the lineup. Mark was a fighter. Sofia had watched him take on another kid at the high school. I just happened to be there, she said. I walk a lot. Sometimes the places I walk, she shrugged, I come across my sons.

She waited for me to quibble, but her smile was so bright I couldn't say a thing, though I was trying to imagine the kind of loneliness that sends you out stalking your own children.

Sofia watched them trade punches, her fingers woven into the hurricane fence. When the other kid pinned Mark down, and was beating his face in, she started whispering through the fence, God please help him to stand up, he's stronger than that, make him stronger. She could swear Mark heard her — though they never talked about it, not that day, not any of the days after — because he twisted free, grabbed the other boy by the shirt, pulled it up and over his head, and with his opponent blinded he hit him half a dozen times in the face full strength, until the other boy's knees collapsed. Sofia clasped her hands to her chest, relieved. Mark could take care of himself in the world. Not a word for the pain he'd inflicted. This didn't surprise me, since my

own mother, and all the mothers of that generation in that town, thought the same: boys were better if they knew how to fight, and best if they won.

Later that day, or the next, she spoke to me about her eldest, also called Dane after his father. She said the Rat kept disinheriting and reinheriting him. She knew when it was going to happen because the Rat would begin ranting over the phone to the lawyer, who by this point had two copies of the will, one with Dane Jr. in it, another with Dane Jr. out. Dane Jr. would do something that made the Rat mad, like marrying the wrong woman — one who had no time for the Rat's flirtations — or not carrying on the tradition of also naming his first-born son Dane, or refusing to come by on a Saturday and help pull slugs from the lettuce in the garden, and he'd be disinherited once again, with the revised will arriving in the mail filled with stickies pointing to the places where his name had been removed, only to have the whole thing revised again with his name back in place when he somehow made his father happy again. One time, when Sofia knew the Rat had disinherited Dane Jr., she walked over to her son's for a coffee every day around the time the postal worker usually showed up. She watched Dane Jr. open the big yellow envelope, saw him glance at it, not bothering to flip a single page, then laugh and shake his head and throw it into the garbage. She said she went home happy to know Dane Jr. was secure — he couldn't care less about his father's approval.

A storm swept in off the sea the afternoon I worked on the last wall of the kitchen. One of those quiet May showers. Afterwards, Sofia lent me an umbrella with pelicans on it, saying she'd have liked to give me a ride, but she didn't know how to drive, and the Rat was out, we both knew where.

What about Johnny? I stood on the dripping threshold and I could tell she didn't want me to go. I had no expertise, in those days, with the soft exit. She wanted to keep talking. Her sons were no longer available to her, she was sick by then, tired and empty with her pointless walks across Hollyfield, and she'd hired me for the company. You didn't tell me about Johnny, I asked again. What's he up to? Johnny joined the navy, she said, quietly. Yes, I heard, I said. Does he still like it? Sofia shrugged. You know, I never came across him, she mumbled.

The storm picked up. Rain blew sideways against the umbrella. I could smell the sea. Sofia smiled. What else have I got to do? The most startling thing about her was the smile, or not a smile but a reaching for one, like she couldn't quite get there, into the feeling she was after. I started to shake in the cold. Half my body was drenched. Why don't I ever see him? she asked. I could find Mark and Danes Jr. whenever I wanted. I leaned in as she continued. She thought she'd catch Johnny flying by in a fast car. He'd had one

for a while, a yellow Mustang. Or Johnny in a group of friends, so many friends, gangs of seven and eight, horsing around along the sidewalk. Or Johnny holding a girl in scant light outside the Patricia theatre, music leaking through windows and doors thrown open to the summer. She never found him.

Sofia was talking about the past, but it sounded like she was still looking for Johnny, her verb tenses inconsistent. I never found him anywhere, she said. It's like he left this house and went nowhere. She didn't continue. I didn't ask her to, it was too bewildering, and I wanted to get home, into dry clothes. There was no way for me to know she'd already had the phone call with Johnny; he'd already said goodbye.

But she hadn't yet had the visit from Interpol.

I wouldn't know about that until long after. By then, Sofia was dead. The Rat too. Their house was gone, torn down, a condo built in its place. Even the huge rose bush in the front yard had been cut down. We, my mother and me, passed by the property one February day decades after I'd washed the walls. I asked if she ever rode the bike the Rat had left for her. Were Sofia's sons still around?

My mother said she'd visited Sofia in the hospital when she was dying. She'd already lost three toes to diabetes, but in her last year she lost one of her feet. There were ongoing complications from that, and along with the advanced stage of the disease, it was what finally got her. That woman could not stay put, my mother said. We all told her. The doctors too. But every day I'd see her tramping over town. Five kilometres from home. Ten. She could barely take a step, a cane in each hand, but there she was, in some odd corner of Hollyfield.

Then my mother told me the story about Johnny, as Sofia had told it to her in the hospital. He left home at eighteen to join the navy. He'd always wanted to travel, and it seemed the way to do it, getting paid to go places. For a few years he thrived, or seemed to: promotions, better pay, stationed on exchange in the UK, the Netherlands, Germany.

Sofia didn't know where he called from that last time. The phone rang on a Sunday afternoon. She was always home then. He knew this. His voice sounded so close to her in the earpiece, as close as it had been when he was a child, in bed with night fears, and he'd whispered the thing, the exact thing, he was terrified of in her ear. Mom, listen, he said, you're not going to see me again. Sofia didn't understand. Was he being deployed to a place without phones? Was he going undercover? Had he become a spy?

I'm in trouble Mom. Bad trouble. She asked what it was, in the way a mother asks a child to tell her what the problem is, as if she could fix it

instantly, as if she had greater powers than he did. I can't, he replied. I got mixed up with the wrong thing. The wrong people. He paused. I wasn't street-smart. Sofia's voice was rising now, into a failing register. She asked where he was, she'd get him, pick him up, bring him out of it. Mom, you have to listen to me. This is the last time we're ever going to talk, so don't waste time pretending I'm five years old.

There was no way for Sofia to continue the conversation after that. What else was she supposed to ask? How's the weather over there? What's the sales tax rate? Can you give me an address to which to send baking? She waited a minute then said, Tell me where to find you. But Johnny said goodbye, and it felt as if the phone was already listening in on the dead, already gone beyond the click at the end.

I waited in the car for my mother to finish the anecdote, but she was done. She looked at me just as expectantly. What happened next? I asked. There is no next, she replied. But what was it? Was Johnny involved in drug smuggling? Embezzlement of procurement funds? Defection to the Soviets? What? They never found out, she said. They never even knew if he was dead. They couldn't tell if the phone call was just a cover, a way of getting Johnny to break with his past, the people he'd known, so he could become a dead man and start a new life. All they knew is that he vanished — the boy, the son, her favourite one

Sofia told my mother the phone call was burned into her memory like grooves in a record. She could spin it again and hear every word. She played it a million times to find some hint, some clue, to where Johnny had gone, and it was still going, on repeat in her head, in the hospital before she died.

But there was nothing. No nuance beyond the immediacy of what he'd said. He'd arrived at the limit of his time and shared it with her, taken her right to the threshold, and let go.

I pulled over to the shoulder of the road. Outside, a grassy slope ran down to the shore. When did this happen? My mother didn't answer. We listened to the gulls screeching over and around us. You were fifteen, she finally said. The summer I was washing her kitchen? My mother nodded. Why didn't they do anything? I asked. If it was me, I would have gone to the police. I would have hired a lawyer. Or a private eye. I would have made a stink in the newspaper. I would done something.

My mother looked at me exhausted. No you wouldn't have. You would have thought about it, maybe at three in the morning when you couldn't sleep. Then in the morning the sun would be shining, you'd hear the birds, or it would be rain or snow, and you'd know it was pointless. Remembering

the phone call would tell you as much, because that was Johnny's message: there's no point in looking for me any further.

Sofia and Dane didn't have money, or not much of it, she sighed, watching the whitecaps break against the base of the hill. They didn't know where to start. They tried a few places — the military, the police, Johnny's old friends. Nobody knew anything. Beyond that, where else would you look?

I thought of Sofia wandering all over town, even in the last years of her life, with those two canes, the missing toes, when she could barely stay on her feet. She would have wanted to look for Johnny everywhere, the world over, but she was stuck in Hollyfield, so she looked for him in the small places — behind the counter at the grocery store, down the candy aisle at the supermarket, in the back seat of the car, her rear-view mirror trained on the spot he'd sat in as a boy. There was never any part of any day when she wasn't looking for him, until she realized he wasn't in any part of the day, and never would be, the days he was part of were all behind her, irrecoverable. How was she ever going to get back there? How many hundreds of miles of Hollyfield would she have to walk before she arrived? She walked until her bad foot gave out, into the final hospitalization that was the end of her journey, a last crossing to days already gone, where Johnny waited.

But I didn't get far with this. My mother broke in. It was the visit from Interpol, she said, that put it to rest once and and for all.

Interpol?

She nodded. Many years after Johnny's last call there was a knock on the door one afternoon. They'd received no advance communication, no letter, no voicemail, no police notification of the visit. Interpol was simply on the doorstep. Two men in suits, thin as marathoners, smiling professionally, the kind of expressions you'd see over the top of someone's Sunday best.

They identified themselves, they said it was about Johnny, asked if they could come in. Sick as she was then, with only months left, Sofia must have felt a wild leap inside. After so much time, so much hopelessness, they were going to tell her things were okay, the whole thing had been a ruse to enable one last long-term mission for the navy. Her son was safe, they knew where he was. But the feeling lasted only a second. One of them was holding a chrysanthemum plucked from her garden.

Please sit, said the Rat, suddenly a gentleman, intimidated by the impeccable tailoring, the English accents. They settled into the living room, with its view west over the water, the distant blue strip of Vancouver Island. For a long moment nobody said anything. The two agents were contemplating the view, smiling, filled with approval for that long sweep of tranquility. The Rat took the opportunity to boil water for tea, which he brought out on a tray.

Can we ask you about your son? one of the agents finally said, accepting the cup the Rat poured for him. There was an old-world politeness to the question, as if he would have nodded and apologized if Sofia and the Rat had answered that they couldn't, they were sorry, the years had not made it any less raw, they preferred to grieve in silence. But they really wanted to talk about Johnny, and seeing this the agents became even more relaxed, intimate. Do they know whether he'd had a girlfriend? they asked. Sofia recalled Monica O'Brien, the black hair, the green eyes. When she broke it off Johnny locked himself in his room, thinking he'd never go out with a girl as beautiful again. She remembered Cindy Lindberg — in grade twelve art class she gave Johnny a charcoal drawing of clouds to put up in his windowless room.

The agents took notes. They seemed focussed, intent, no detail negligible or not worth considering. Uh, anyone more recent? they asked.

Both of them leaned forward when Sofia said there was a time shortly after Johnny joined the navy where it seemed as if he might propose to an officer he'd met on a posting to Halifax. She swam laps every morning the same time he did. She had pointedly refused to say hello for a long time when they ran into each other on the pool deck. The first time he took her out for dinner she wore her uniform. He told his mother she scared him, everywhere she put up boundaries, but it felt as if once you were inside them you'd be safe. Her name was Corinne, Sofia suddenly remembered. The last name was similar. Compton? She offered it to the agents, they wrote it down, and for a second Sofia felt like she'd gained an inch on her son's vanishing.

One of the agents leaned back and smiled, It sounds as if Johnny had a lot of love in his life. The other agent raised and lowered his eyebrows, A whole lotta love.

Neither Sofia nor the Rat knew what to do with that. But after a minute's reflection they had to agree, Johnny had never been without a girlfriend, and most of his relationships had been intense but open, with no great claims or demands made, affections freely given and taken. The agents nodded and wrote it down.

Going to sea? one of them asked. Tell us about that part of Johnny's life.

The memories were coming faster now. Sofia recalled the weeks after Johnny left university when the dean of science put him on a one-year vacation because of failing grades. He moved home, weeding the garden to keep busy, planting tomatoes, rerouting grape vines around the pergola, digging trenches to bury weeping pipe under the greenhouse. At night he walked to the Westerly pier in the last light, gazed across the Salish Sea, followed the glitter of ferries up Desolation Sound, running down the list of every reason

for getting out of Hollyfield. That's where he decided to join the navy, she said. He said if he was going to drift there might as well be waves under him.

Poetic, one of the agents said. A keen sensibility, the other added. Attuned to beauty. They were talking to each other. Sofia and the Rat had been left out. They turned back to them. Sorry, just conferring with my colleague here. Can you tell me — and I know this is a strange question, but it's important — was that something Johnny did often? I mean, look for consolation?

Sofia was bewildered. What to do with this? She'd been hoping, after they arrived, that she'd get to ask questions, but as the agents sat there, being weird, she found herself forgetting what she wanted to know. Each question from them eliminated one of her own. Sofia and the Rat ransacked their memories for the time Johnny crashed, aged five, following his brothers down the handrail outside the Church of the Immaculate Conception, shooting off the end into a rose bush. Or the time, hanging upside down off the monkey bars, he'd fallen on his head and gotten a concussion. Or the time he'd tossed a red leaf into the creek against his brothers' yellow and green under the Millings Beach culvert, and lost every race, and Sofia had to hold him while he sobbed and said that he'd always come last forever.

Forever? the agent asked. He said that? Sofia nodded. How old you say he was? Eight, she replied. Both agents looked at each other and whistled under their breaths.

Did he know how to steer by the stars?

The Rat jumped in. This was his chance. I taught him the constellations, he said, on a blanket on summer nights in the backyard. He was the only one of the boys who was interested.

The agents nodded at him, then at each other. The one obligatory good memory of Dad, the agent on the left said. Survival skills vis-a-vis celestial navigation, plus the poetry of the stars — the agent on the right replied — that's a winning combo. The two men took a break to sip their tea. They were pouring it for themselves now. Nobody was standing on protocol.

What about the heat of a summer sky? they asked. It can get awfully hot on the deck of a battleship. The way he said hot, it had an accusatory tone, or maybe it was just respectful of hardship, in the way of military men, Sofia couldn't tell.

He spoke about it, said Sofia in a whisper. The memory had come to her with the question. It wasn't even something she remembered remembering. It seemed, instead, an experience Johnny had kept for himself and which had now been delivered to her.

And here, as suddenly, was another one: He and some friends crawled

up the drainage tunnel by the loading docks, she began. Go on, the agent replied.

The tunnel was wide at its mouth, emptying into the breakwater. At high tide it was invisible, submerged under waves, but when the water dropped you could walk down the pipe, knee-deep in brine, the corrugated steel covered in barnacles and starfish. After a hundred feet it narrowed and sloped uphill at forty-five degrees, and you crawled up bracing your back against the tunnel. From there it grew smaller. You could no longer crouch and shuffle, you were on all fours, the seams between the pipes cut into your knees. There was a clanging, maybe from the cars driving above, a sluice gate slamming far away, a trapped bird flapping in the maze. You were startled by bars of light through a sewer grate overhead, a bar code of solar ones and zeroes, beamed in from a brighter world, then darkness again, the tunnel branching — you had to trust that the boy in front of you was telling the truth when he said he knew the way — the tunnel forking yet again. Now you were in spaces so confined you crawled on your belly, scraping your head against the pipe, your chin barely above the water flowing around your body, lapping against you in the total dark. The voice up ahead asked for your trust, and that request *was* your trust, the only gauge you had for how far it went. The narrowness of the pipe stifled the urge to run, it was too tight to turn around in, for you to go back, even if you wanted to. At certain points you thought of inching in reverse, but it was absurd, you'd grow old before you made it back, excitement turning into apprehension turning into panic — and that's when Johnny saw the burst of green. He crawled out of the concrete wormhole into the verdant cut made by the river as it flowed through the backyards of west Hollyfield before disappearing underground. Up above, beyond the highest leaves, a blue river of sky snaked between the treetops, a blue he'd never seen, endless in its spaces, untouched by anything of the world below or above except the towering clouds, scintillant white, tracing their secret itineraries. It was all around him in an embrace that was also a limitless release.

Sofia stopped. The two Interpol agents were holding their teacups halfway to their lips. They'd been holding them that way for minutes. There was a long silence, like after perfect music. They closed their notepads, slipped their pens back into their pockets. Well, I guess that's it, they said. We don't have any further questions.

And Sofia realized she didn't have any either.