

Cole Spear is a mental health therapist who learns information about his father who died when he was 10 years old. As Cole delves into his father's past, he must confront unpleasant truths about his life and choices he has made.

Once I Knew You

by Robert Plotkin

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A full-page photograph of a person standing on a beach at sunset. The person is in silhouette, facing away from the camera towards the ocean. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a bright, golden glow that reflects on the wet sand. The sky is a gradient of yellow and orange. The title 'Once I Knew You' is printed in a dark, serif font in the upper half of the image.

Once I Knew You

Robert Plotkin

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First Edition

Chapter 1

The angry driver gave Cole the finger as he whipped around on the right, horn blasting. The light changed from green to red. Cole stayed where he was, foot on the brake, eyes on the rearview mirror. There was no one else. He drew in a ragged breath, feeling his heartbeat in his chest.

The street was quiet at this hour. The shops closed for the night, except for the Lucky 7 Food Mart. Cole looked at the pile of lottery tickets on the passenger seat. He rubbed the scruff on his chin, picked up the blunt in the ashtray, and took a long drag. Coughing as he exhaled, he put the Honda back in drive and rolled slowly onto Roosevelt Boulevard. The lottery tickets would have to wait.

The '85 Civic rumbled beneath him. He put the blunt back in the ashtray — *Mom would not be proud*, he thought — and spritzed himself with some peppermint water from the spray bottle he kept in the car. He passed a sign for the hospital. His mother, at 77, had tried to quit

smoking many times. He couldn't remember a time when she didn't have a cigarette hanging from her lips and a glass of Schnapps in her hand. Now she was in the hospital for shortness of breath. It worried him.

And really, he thought. Who drinks Schnapps?

He found a parking spot across the street from the hospital. There wasn't a valet for miles who could be trusted with a stick shift. He couldn't afford money for parking anyway. Things were tight as it was. The rent was due, and his job situation was tenuous.

He walked into the brightly lit lobby and turned right at the check-in desk. The woman there looked up, forced a smile, and asked if she could help him.

"My mother was admitted," he said. "Jessica Spear."

The woman tapped her keyboard. "You are?"

"Her son. Cole Spear."

She handed him a clipboard. "Please sign in. She's in Delta 413. That's D413 of the main hospital." She motioned toward the bank of elevators behind her.

"Thanks...Beth," he said, pausing to read her nametag. She nodded, smiled again, and turned back to the crossword puzzle she'd been working on.

Cole took the elevator to the fourth floor. He walked around a plastic floor sign proclaiming *piso mojado* and through the automatic double doors. Some poor guy was pushing a broom down the long hall, leaving behind the stringent odor of antiseptic.

Cole hated hospitals, despite working in one himself. The door to D413 was open, and he paused. He could see his mother lying in bed with her eyes closed.

A boyish woman with short-cropped hair approached him. Her right ear was covered in piercings. "May I help you?" she asked.

"I'm her son," he said, inclining his chin toward his mother.

"I'm Jolynn, her nurse," said the woman. "We've been trying to reach you."

Cole met her gaze. He didn't like the way she was looking at him. Maybe she could smell the weed. She shouldn't be looking at him like that even if she could.

Look at you, little miss man-hair, with your ugly neck tattoo and your ear pierced all to hell, he thought.

"How is she?" he said, making himself focus.

"She was at the mall and collapsed. It seems she was just here a few weeks ago."

"She was?"

"You didn't know?"

He crossed his arms. "So, what have you found?"

"High blood pressure, lost some weight, and dehydrated. Does she live alone?"

"Yes," he said. He risked another glance at his mother. She stared blankly back at him.

"You can visit for about 15 minutes," Jolynn told him. "We usually don't allow visitors this late."

He went to sit down next to his mother's bed. "So," he said, rubbing his hands together. "You didn't tell me you were here a few weeks ago."

"I didn't want to bother you," his mother said. "What with your busy schedule and all." He let that go. She went on, "How's your drawing?"

"It's fine," he said. He'd tried drawing her portrait many times but couldn't capture her. He'd been drawing now for about five years, having picked it up while sitting alone at a McGlinchey's bar in Roxborough. The tables were covered with paper tablecloths. They had crayons and pencils out for the kids to occupy themselves while

the dads watched football, and the moms gabbed about mom stuff. After a beer or two, Cole started drawing on the white paper. First, it was doodles, then the salt and pepper shakers, until finally, he began to do Sara's face.

Sara was his waitress, and he'd seen her around quite a bit. She wasn't a stunner, but there was something attractive about her. Was it the way she watched him over his shoulder while he sketched a bar patron? She would ask if he'd had art classes and wondered how he captured people so well.

He liked Sara's attention. Until then, he hadn't known that he had an artistic bone in his body. This discovery, this talent, was very satisfying. He continued to develop it, in part because Sara was intrigued.

"So, what happened?" he finally asked his mother.

"I must have fainted, that's all." She touched the back of her head. "Just a few stitches." Her eyes were more sunken than he remembered. The shadows cast by her brow over her eyelids reminded him of his grandmother when she was dying.

"Concussion?" he asked.

"Meh," she shrugged. "Don't worry yourself."

"So, why'd I get the call this time?"

"They made me. Especially that one," she pointed toward the door at Jolynn. "But I wondered if you would come or just let me wither away and die."

"Nice, Mom."

"Well, it's the truth." She closed her eyes. "Come closer. I won't bite you. We need to talk."

Feeling like a child again, Cole walked over to the chair by the bed, hesitated, and sat down. It reminded him of sitting at her bedside while she slept off the liquor.

"We've grown so far apart. I barely recognize you." She coughed. "Now, there's something you should know." Cole folded his arms across his chest and sighed. "Do you remember our trips to the Islands?" she asked.

"Yes. Of course."

"And the summer camps I sent you to?"

"When I was five," he said. "*Five*." He held up as many fingers.

"Ok, a little young to be away. Touché."

"Don't worry about it. I had a good time. I made good memories. You traveled with Dad. We're all good."

"We took you to Florida, St. Martin, Curacao, Martinique..." she trailed off.

"Martinique. Yes, such fond memories," Cole said. He knew he sounded bitter, and he did not care.

"But... it was good for a while."

"A while."

"Sent you to the best schools, the best camps. Always the best for my Cole."

"Uh-huh," he said, resisting the urge to stand up and storm out. He rested his elbows on his knees and rubbed his face with both hands.

"Are you high, Cole? She asked suddenly. "I need you here, not off in goofy-land."

"I'm fine." He rubbed his sweaty palms together, then rested them on his knees. "Can I have some of that water?" He reached for the cup on her nightstand.

"It's apple juice," she said. "And yes. Cole," she was whispering now, looking away from him. "It was a good life."

"For a while. What's this all about, Mom?"

"Do you remember your father?"

Cole stared at the floor. She never mentioned him, never talked about him. The topic had always seemed off-limits

"What about him?" he asked.

"You were ten when he died."

"I know how old I was."

"It was sudden, wasn't it? So quick. From one day to the next."

"He was a ghost," he said, shrugging. "Look, Mom, I have a meeting..." he looked at his watch.

"Always trying to run off." She said, trying to catch her breath. Then she started coughing. "Water," she said, pointing.

"Apple juice," he said, handing her the cup.

She sipped slowly, her lips quivering. Cole looked at her, really looked at her for the first time that day. She looked old and worn. Her gray hair was pulled back in a bun.

She was quiet for a long time. Finally, she said, "I hated him. For a long time, I hated him."

Cole pursed his dry lips. He didn't need this now.

"He was so selfish," she said. "And always so busy. Always running to something. Or running *from* something. I don't know which."

"Mom." He rose and walked to the end of the bed. "Why are you telling me this?"

Why now?"

"Because you should know the truth about the man you hold so high on a pedestal. He was a coward."

"I don't need this," he said, waving a hand in the air.

"No, now's the time." Her chest heaved as if she couldn't breathe. "You know," she said. "Deep down, you

know, don't you? You *must* know, so you don't follow in his footsteps."

"I'm as far from his as I could be. No worries there."

"Really? Not from where I sit."

"How would you even know?"

"A mother knows."

"Ha!"

"Cole," she said. "We were in so much trouble." Tears welled up in her eyes. "The walls were closing in on him."

Cole gripped the end of the bed. "What trouble?" he asked.

"I... never told you the truth. About how he died."

"Tell me what?"

She laid there for a moment. Cole watched her eyes widen. "It wasn't his heart," she said.

Cole eyed her. Was this one of her tricks? She never discussed this subject. She had never permitted it.

"We told you that it was a heart attack to protect you." He gripped the bed rail. Her eyes were on his wrist. He thrust his hand into his jacket pocket.

"Protect me from what?"

"You already know. You've suspected it," she said. She closed her eyes.

"He... he killed himself, didn't he?" Cole finally said.

"But you knew that already. Remember the day you knocked out two of little Tommy Wagner's teeth? It was because he was teasing you about your father."

Cole's hand stopped inside his pocket, where he had been searching for a stray Xanax. "I don't remember," he said.

"You never told me what he said to you," said his mother. "But I can imagine. The word was out. I thought I could shield you from the truth. I couldn't. I was in shock,

and the doctors said to keep it from you until you were older. Until you could handle it. You were so depressed. So fragile. Maybe I missed something."

He took his hand out of his pocket and touched his wrist. "You think?" he said.

"That was an accident," she said. "The scissors slipped."

"It was an X-ACTO knife," he said.

"Nine-year old's aren't suicidal."

Cole looked at her. "Why didn't you take me to the hospital?" he asked.

"Stuart was a good friend," she said.

Cole thought back. His memories of nine were vague. A commotion. An unfamiliar house. Someone carrying Cole into the kitchen, his wrist wrapped heavily in a bloody towel. He remembered fading in and out of consciousness.

"Stuart. Was he a doctor? What, you thought if you took me to the hospital, they'd take me away? Maybe because of the drinking?"

"It was for the best," she said. "Stuart sewed you up, and we went home."

"All these years, I thought I would die at forty because of Dad's heart condition. I'm on goddamned blood pressure medicine, Mom." He leaned forward. "Why did he do it? Why did he kill himself?"

"We were away, in Martinique. Christmas in the islands, we always called it. Your Dad stayed behind. He had work, he said."

"You don't believe that?"

"That's just what he said. 'I have work.'"

Cole closed his eyes. He remembered the winding road on the way to the airport, the heat exhaustion. "I threw up on Mick in the car."

"We were in a hurry, it was so hot, and then you vomited all over. All you had to eat was a mango."

"I thought one of the granddads had died the whole trip home."

"You kept asking me, was it Pickles or Meat?" She smiled at Cole as if it were a good memory. Pickles or Meat? Grandpa Pickles, his father's father, drove a pickle truck. Grandpa Meat was a butcher who used to bring over fresh cuts every Friday.

"You should have told me the truth. I remember getting off that plane, expecting to see Dad. All I saw was Pickles and Meat walking toward us. Both granddads alive."

"Then, you knew."

"I didn't know."

"But you didn't cry. You kept rubbing my back, saying, 'It'll be all right, mama.' You had no idea what was going on, but you were taking care of me even then."

"I guess I haven't done so well, lately."

"Shhh." She raised her hand from the bed. "That's enough. There's more." She beckoned him, and he came over to sit on the side of the bed.

"What?"

"Mick." She sighed heavily.

"Mick," Cole shook his head. "What about him?" He felt a tinge of guilt.

"You loved him like a father," she said.

"Yes. He was fun. Exciting. Always had a story for me. I have more memories of him than Dad."

"No wonder. He was very attached to you, too."

"You know they were business partners."

"Yes. Why?"

"Why are you telling me this now?" he said. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Be the man your father never was," she said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You have to figure that out, Cole. But it starts now."

* * *

Cole sat in his car, engine running, hands gripping the wheel. His mother's words echoed through his mind. He felt so alone. There was no one he could call.

He looked at his watch. It was 2:30 in the morning — too late to wake Sara, who wouldn't get it anyway. Or would she? He rubbed his forehead.

He and Sara didn't talk about family. Or feelings. They spoke of scoring weed, or how funny it was to watch SpongeBob stoned. Never anything important. Never anything *real*. The sex was good, though.

Had his father killed himself? Had he been alone? Isolated? He rolled it over in his mind. Maybe it was true. Cole had never questioned the heart attack story. He had simply buried his father.

How would he have done it? How would he have killed himself? Gunshot? Pills? Maybe in the car? Cole's car was idling now. He put his hand on the dashboard, feeling the motor's vibration. Did carbon monoxide smell like anything? Or did you just... fall asleep. Maybe it was like anesthesia. You count backward from ten until you don't feel anything anymore. It would be easy. It wouldn't hurt.

He realized he was crying. He touched his face, surprised. The heat was on full blast, and the inside of the car was starting to feel very warm.

Could you taste carbon monoxide? Had his father been breathing it in, gulping it down? Or had he taken shallow, tentative sips, each breath poisoning him a little bit more?

He squinted as the lights of a passing car briefly shone in his eyes. Then he rolled down his window. Tears streaming down his cheeks, he ran the car backward out of the tight spot. Pausing to pay at the ticket kiosk, he pushed the car out under the moon's glow. The sky was bright with stars. With his right hand on the wheel, he used his left to brush his fingers across his scar. His fingertips lingered on the spot.

Had it been an accident?

Chapter 2

An Autumn breeze was blowing. The falling brown leaves, the blue skies — they reminded Cole of a time when his life was easy. He'd played with Tommy, Danny, Moe, and Reese until sunset every day. They'd ride their bikes over to Cole's house, then head out as Cole yelled to his mother that he was leaving. His banana seat red Schwinn would take him to nowhere special. They'd ride the suburban streets of the Mainline, maybe cruise to Deke's Deli. There they'd steal lunch by leaving separately out the back door, laughing all the way to the school playground. Then they'd spend hours playing football with another pack of kids.

Cole was a pretty good athlete. What he lacked in power and size, he made up for in speed. Tommy was the steady quarterback. Tommy would hit him on the outside for a quick score, or Cole would find himself on the receiving end of a kickoff and outrun the bigger, slower guys. They thought he was fast.

He was running for his life.

He was walking his bike home with Tommy after one of those games when he realized it for the first time. Tommy was chunky for a quarterback, like his old man. He owned a green raider.

Things had been weird since Cole had returned to school. The teachers were nicer to him. His friends, like Tommy, treated him like glass. Like he might break.

Scared to give him grief like they used to. Worried that he might fall to pieces at any minute, probably.

Even Principal Gold, who was a curmudgeon at the best of times, had cupped Cole's face in his hands in the cafeteria. He kept saying, "You poor boy. I'm here for you. I'm here for you." Cole remembered being more worried about getting teased for that than anything else. Kids had short memories. The teasing, the hassling, kicked in not long after.

Cole worried his grace period had made him soft. But it was just the opposite. He didn't feel anything about it. The teasing didn't bother him. Losing his father had toughened him. Or maybe it had numbed him. Perhaps it wasn't right to feel this way... or to *not feel* this way.

He didn't know.

"Remember how you climbed that tree?"

His mother's voice in the passenger seat broke him out of his reverie. He looked at her, as if for the first time, and then looked back to the street. He put the car in to park beside the house in which he'd grown up.

Cole recalled falling out of the large cherry blossom tree. "I remember," he said. His eyes moved to the neighbor's house. "Remember that spray paint?"

"God, do I," she said. "They were furious with you. The windows, the air conditioner, the door to the cellar..."

"I was a little out of control."

"You think?" said his mother. She sighed and touched his right hand, which was still on the gear shift.

"Are you going to be okay here?" he said, moving his hand. She pulled away and opened the door.

"I'll be fine, Cole," she said.

The house was in Lower Merion, just outside Philadelphia. It was in the heart of the Main Line, which

comprised a collection of affluent municipalities. There were houses in the neighborhood that listed for millions of dollars.

Cole's childhood home had been designed by an architect obsessed with angles and simplicity. It was smaller than most of the neighborhood houses, standing on a triangular lot. His parents had bought it in the late sixties. The mortgage was paid off. That was the only way Cole's mother could afford to stay there.

The region's wealth was centered in the suburbs of Philadelphia. He hated it. It was pretentious and alien to him; he always felt like an intruder. At that moment he wanted, of all things, to ask his mother why she had pulled him out of school, but the question made no sense. She couldn't hear his thoughts. She didn't know how much he'd been dwelling on the past, running it over and over in his mind. She'd just needed a ride home from the hospital.

She slammed her door harder than she needed to. Cole retrieved her bag from the trunk and followed her up the walkway to the back door. The yard was uneven and patchy. There was a conspicuous sunken area near the center.

He scanned the yard, shook his head at the uneven, sinking grass. His mother was waiting for him to enter. Cole turned to her and said, "I see the yard is still mucked up."

She took off her sunglasses and placed them on the counter. "Don't start."

"Why would anyone bury a concrete barbecue? He had to know the ground would settle there."

"We never used it."

"My grandfather must have been appalled," said Cole.

Stepping into the house, stepping back into his old life, he felt a twinge of guilt at his long absence. He didn't consider this place home anymore. It hadn't been for a long time.

He scanned the bulletin board in the kitchen. It held old notices, hand-written reminders, some ancient recipes. A nearly antique Westinghouse radio sat on the table where it always had. He turned it on and tuned past static to a classic rock station. Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young was playing. Southern man, better keep your head.

Cat Stevens, the Rolling Stones, Neil Young. They were the music of his childhood. He'd seen them all before. "Southern Cross" was a song about sailing in the open ocean in the South Pacific. He thought of his father's 33-foot sailboat. His father had never set the sails free, never opened them up. They'd putter out beyond the dock, circle for an hour, then come back. He had no memory of the sails ever being hoisted.

"The kitchen could use some updates," he said. The room felt smaller than he remembered. The floral wallpaper was bubbling in places. The refrigerator was making an unhealthy metallic noise, and the faucet in the sink had a slow drip. The wrought iron kitchen chairs had held up okay, but their orange seat cushions were faded. The glass-top table, at which he had spent so much of his youth, was chipped and scarred in spots.

"You want to do some renovations, be my guest," said his mother.

She hadn't used this kitchen for some time. There was no scent of cooking here, no sign of recent activity. The stovetop was grimy.

"Maybe we should hire Ronda back to clean," he said.

"That woman wouldn't step foot on this property," his mother said, snorting. "Too much water under that bridge."

"Yet another friendship ruined?" he said, not thinking. When she glared at him, he said, "Sorry. Cheap shot."

He remembered Ronda as a heavy-set woman always dressed in sweats. He tested her will. She had baked fish for dinner, and he didn't want to eat it. He wanted fish sticks instead. She told him it was the same thing, even broken a frozen fish stick in front of his face so he could compare it to the fish on his plate. He'd knocked the whole thing off the table.

Her punishments were... unique. She'd bare his ass and pinch his butt cheek so hard it would send him hopping off each foot.

Mostly, he and Ronda would spend hours in the basement while she ironed his father's shirts. They'd set the ironing board in front of the television and watch "The Young and the Restless" and "Guiding Light." In between, she'd clean, do laundry, maybe fix his lunch. Cole helped with the ironing. He'd learned at an early age and could still taste the hot steam. They creased his shirts to razor sharpness.

Ronda had shown him how to clean the bathroom, ostensibly to keep him busy. He'd figured out very early on that this was simply a ploy to give her time in front of the television. She'd fall asleep on the couch, and he'd keep cleaning. At lunch, she always served him noodles. That was what she called him. There was a picture of him as a baby with a bowl of noodles on his head. Ronda never tired of pointing it out. Even his mother resorted to calling him "Noodles" from time to time when she needed to get his attention.

Cole walked into the dining room. The table was grimy with buildup, and many of the lights in the chandelier were burned out. The room smelled musty, like hidden water damage, creeping somewhere through the walls and ceiling. In the upper corner near the side door, there was a bad water stain. The wallpaper was peeled back as if someone had investigated.

"You climbed up there?" he asked, pointing.

"Not me," she said. "A friend."

"A friend?"

"Yes, Cole," she said. "Even I still have some friends left."

"Is this friend a boy?"

"No, he's a man."

Cole wandered through the arched walkway into the living room. The same off-white shaggy carpet was still too close to the fireplace. To the right sat a glass table with an art deco lamp and an Alexander Calder backgammon set.

"No shit," he said, sitting down. "I can't believe you still have this."

"How long has it been since you've been here?" she asked. "It's been out forever."

Cole rose. His gaze fell on the ceramic bowls and "collectible" plates lining the windowsill. Everything was coated in dust. "Tell me again," he said, "how you manage here."

"Manage what?"

"Financially, Mom," he said. "How are you getting by?"

"I get social security now," she said. "I mostly live off that. Glenn helps me sometimes."

"And the money from Dad?" he asked.

"Money?"

"The insurance, Mom."

"Oh," she said. "I don't know anymore."

Cole considered that for a moment. "Was his claim paid? I thought they didn't pay out on suicides."

"They don't," she said.

He stared at her. When the silence became uncomfortable, he said, "Mom."

"I don't know," she said. "I don't." She looked past him at the Calder painting on the wall. It was a black sun surrounded by brightly colored rays. "You were always scared of this piece," she said.

"As scared as I was of the Tin Man at the bottom of the steps," he said. The metal sculpture beside the front door had always bothered him.

They made their way into the den. The room breathed when he opened the door; it had been closed up for some time. The shades were pulled down. The old black and gray couch looked battered and beaten. No one had sat in it for years; he was sure.

As a kid, he had taken to that couch every day after school. Sundays he took refuge on it in the mornings, cuddling up with a bowl of cereal and the Three Stooges and Bugs Bunny. There was also wrestling, starting the likes of Chief Jay Strongbow, Bruno Sammartino, Dick the Bruiser, and Andre the Giant.

The couch was piled with blankets. Cole recognized some of them from his childhood. Lifting one, he noted the burn marks on the sofa. The fabric was riddled with cigarette burns.

He ran his hand over the little RCA television before walking to the built-in desk facing the window. A tan rotary phone sat there under a blanket of dust. He picked up the

receiver, but there was no dial tone. He ran his finger through the circular dial, anyway, feeling it turn.

"Calling someone?" said his mother.

"Old girlfriend," he said. He put the receiver back in the cradle. "I haven't seen one of these in forever."

"We old people get nostalgic," she said.

"Doesn't look as if anyone has been in this room for a while."

"No," she said. "No reason to. It's not a place I like to sit, anymore."

They were avoiding the matter at hand. "Mom," he said. "The money."

"We spent it," she admitted, sounding defensive. "We lived high on the hog. Camps. Vacations. Private schools. Glenn controlled everything. He had power of attorney."

"No one thought to put some money in trust for me? For my future?" He felt selfish asking, but he needed the money.

"I thought he had. But we spent through it. I had to ask Glenn for spending money."

"From the estate?" asked Cole.

She shook her head. "I don't know. It's all a blur."

"Could there be any money left?" he asked.

"No, no," she said.

"There must have been."

"Private school tuition is expensive, Cole," she said. "So was your trip to Japan that summer after your freshman year of college."

"Where are the statements, Mom? The bank books?"

"I never saw a statement," she said. "I don't know what you mean."

He sighed. She was so smart in some ways, and so blind in others. "Why did you think you could trust Glenn?"

"He was your father's attorney," she said. "We were *friends*."

"You just took him at his word? Tell me something, Mom. Did you and Glenn—"

"No!" she said. "It wasn't like that. He was married to Maggie for a million years."

"Then why did you trust him? Why did you never check?"

"Because I did!" she raised her hands. "I knew he wouldn't cheat me."

"How, Mom? How did you know?" he said.

"You can't tell anyone," she said.

"Tell anyone *what*?"

"When we were away on vacation," she said, "he'd come overnights or weekends. With his boyfriends. They'd have parties. They'd put on my dresses and have parties."

He blinked. "You're kidding."

"Your father and I caught him once. He was wearing my wedding gown and lying face-down on the living room floor. The dress was hiked up, and he was wearing a white garter on his thigh. We... we woke him up and laughed."

"*Laughed*?" he asked.

"What else could we do?"

"So, wait," Cole said. "You thought this knowledge would, what, stop him from stealing from you? What did you do, blackmail him?"

"Not me," she said. "Your father. He took pictures. But it wasn't blackmailing. We didn't make Glenn do anything. He just knew that he'd be ruined if the pictures ever got out."

"How did Glenn sneak into the house?"

She shifted her feet. "We'd given him a key. Those were the times. We didn't have any reason not to trust him."

He shook his head. "Where are the pictures now?"

"In a safe place," she said. She smiled, then frowned. "Why? Why do you want to know?"

"I'm curious," he said. "Do you still lord those pictures over him?"

"I remind him once in a great while," she said. "But I think he's lost interest. He hasn't been by in a long time."

"What, did he get tired of your wardrobe?" said Cole. "How long is a long time?"

"Well," she said. "I haven't bought anything new in years."

Cole couldn't picture it. He'd always considered his father a quiet, even meek person. It was incongruent. Back then, it would have ended Glenn's career as well as his marriage. Today, they didn't even call it cross-dressing. Hell, coming out as trans-whatever would probably *get* Glenn clients today.

Cole's thoughts returned to his father, and this small den where he had spent so much of his childhood. He tried to picture his father on the couch. No, he wasn't there. He looked at the television and the sofa. He saw himself, watching cartoons on Sunday mornings and after school. All he could picture was kissing his father good-bye as the man rushed to leave in the mornings.

Where was he heading?

Why was he always in such a hurry to leave?

Cole opened the top drawer of the desk to find it stuffed with unopened mail. He looked at the dates on the old envelopes and shook his head. The bottom two drawers were jammed entirely with magazines, mostly

National Geographic. The built-in bookshelves to the right and left of the desk were filled with Sidney Sheldon and Jackie Collins. Some historical novels lined the bottom. An outdated *Britannica* set filled the entire second shelf on the right.

In the cabinets below were the old photo albums. Cole had spent many hours thumbing through these.

"Do you mind if I look at the old pictures?" he asked.

"No," she said, motioning to the couch. "I'm enjoying you being here. I'll rest here."

He took the first of the albums, sat down, and crossed his legs. This one had been his least favorite as a kid. All of the pictures were black and white, fading with age. His family had immigrated to the United States from the Ukraine in the early 1900s. These were their stories.

The family was from Kiev. His great grandmother had come here as an infant. She had traveled with about twenty people across Russia to the United States to escape the pogroms. The group spent weeks in the hold of a ship, fighting off strangers, hunger, and disease.

His great grandmother, Bubby, had two sisters. One of these, Bessie, had a deformed daughter named Clara. Clara suffered from compression fractures in her vertebrae. During the mandatory physical inspections at Ellis Island, the inspector took one look at Clara's back and motioned her to a different queue.

Clara, who did not speak English, tried to bring Clara with her. Not knowing English, her mother motioned for Clara to come with her, instead. The inspector grabbed Clara's arm and pushed her roughly into the "correct" line, motioning for Bessie to follow.

No member of the family ever saw them again.

He'd heard they'd gone back to Russia and were slaughtered or died during the voyage back. The story of Clara and her mother was rarely told during Cole's childhood, but he knew it because Bubby had known it.

Bubby, his great grandmother, was four foot ten, a large-busted woman whose face was a mass of wrinkles. She was a proud old lady who had grown up working in garment factories as a seamstress. She had belonged to the International Garment Workers' Union, once one of the largest unions in the United States. It was also the first of the American unions to have a predominantly female membership. It had been a critical player in the labor movements of the 1920s and 1930s. Every Monday night, she would climb aboard the bus into town, returning late. Cole would wake up when she got home, pad down the carpeted steps, and join her in the kitchen. She would pour him a glass of milk and give him a cookie.

"Hello, my little ballabusta," she would say. She was always bright-eyed, even after a long day, her hair pulled back into a perfect, tight bun. They would sit, sometimes talking, sometimes not.

Bubby lived with Cole's family until he was about six years old. Then she went to live with his grandmother. Cole's father wanted a bigger house, so he moved the family from Overbrook to the Main Line.

Sometime after the move, Bubby died. There were whispers. Cole learned from his grandmother that, sometime before her death, she had started taking a new bus route. One brutally cold, snowy night, she was struck by a plow truck while crossing the street to the bus stop. There was plenty of blame surrounding her death, most of it pointed at Cole's mother and father. The rift between

them and the rest of the family was inevitable. They receded as the years passed.

Growing up, Cole learned some things were best left alone. Secrets, like water, found fault lines. They would seep through, bubbling to the surface, every time.

He thought again of his father. Indeed, there was shame in his father's death. His mother could have kept it secret from him. She was well-versed in keeping the family's secrets; Bubby's rarely discussed death was just one of them. And, oh yes, she knew how to keep her shame hidden. Looking back, the fact that he was pulled from the Main Line Reform synagogue and sent to a new one, all the way in the city, made perfect sense. In the city, he was an unknown, a nobody. Nobodies could blend in. Nobody talked about mysterious suicides to nobodies.

He lost track of time, thumbing through the old pictures. His father seemed so youthful, so full of life, in his old Army shots. He had missed Vietnam by a hair, getting out as soon as he could. There was one picture of him holding a rifle and smiling. Had Cole's father shot himself? The thought was dark and abrupt.

In one picture, Cole's father held him, close. His father looked like a young Sinatra. It was not as Cole remembered him. Another photo had the date inked on the back: 1973. Here, Cole's father looked haggard and tired. His hair had turned salt and pepper, his face ashen.

What had happened during those years? What had changed?

There were pictures of Cole's mother looking "divine," as she used to say. She had a perpetual tan in those photos, the result of constant travel. In some of the pictures, she held bags from Macy's and Bloomingdale's.

He started to set the album aside, but something caught his eye. It was a more recent picture. This one was in color, clearly more recent than the others. Scribbled on the back, in Cole's handwriting, was the name, Adam. The date was June 2008.

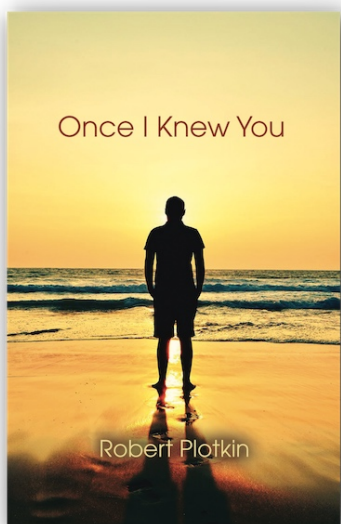
Cole. Holding Adam, who was curled up in a blanket.

What must Adam look like now? How old would he be? The round, babyface in the photo was so innocent. Cole took the picture and put it in his pocket, fighting the feeling that had driven him to try and reconnect with Adam's mother years ago.

She had wanted nothing from him. She'd married. Adam's new father loved him, she said.

Let it go, he thought. *Let it go*.

But there was no escape from his memories.



Cole Spear is a mental health therapist who learns information about his father who died when he was 10 years old. As Cole delves into his father's past, he must confront unpleasant truths about his life and choices he has made.

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