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### The Records

Brian knew his sister to be particularly vigilant about these types of affairs and figured she had probably already been to his mother's over the past few days. The will had failed to dictate so, but those records belonged exclusively to him. He knew where he stood as far as child-rankings were concerned. In no way did he expect to win any inheritance grand-prizes: the dining room furniture, the Italian bedroom set, the Spanish armoire, etc. He only wanted the records. The ambiguity of his mother's will typified her reign as matriarch. She had to have known his desire for the records, but she was absolutely frightened of making a "family-splitting" decision- an irrational fear considering the already fragmented condition of the family.

Roaring through the Queens-Midtown Tunnel and past the urban skyline west of the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, Brian called his son, Nathan. "Listen buddy, I'm heading straight to Nanny's. Just meet me there. You should be able to take the *L-I-R-R*."

*The* records, as they were commonly referred to in familial dialogue, included a small canvas-shell briefcase containing 45" vinyl recordings of Brian's father singing on the boardwalk of Coney Island circa 1951. The records had remained unheard by anyone in the family for years when Brian coincidentally excavated the briefcase in search of photographs to display at his father's wake. He isolated himself shortly after the loss, interacting solely with the indexical crests and troughs of his father's voice stamped onto the thirty-something-year-old vinyl. Throughout the following years in times of crisis and

conflict, the warm crackle of his father's crooning acapella would often hang behind his closed bedroom door.

A few months later, when Brian decided to move to Chicago with his wife, Donna, he packed the records in his luggage. His mother, however, removed the records and replaced them with a note: *Brian, Could you wait til I'm dead to rob my grave? Love, Mom.* Upon confronting his mother on the phone, she claimed she was genuinely uncomfortable with her kids beginning to empty out her house as if she didn't live there. "I'm sorry, Bri'. I just don't think it's right for you to be *liquidating my assets* while I'm still alive."

"Mom, I'm not liquidating anything. Those aren't even assets."

"That's right, you're a big shot in *Chicago* now. I guess I should have reviewed some vocabulary before we spoke." He was not a big shot. He had taken a paralegal position at a small Chicago firm instead of continuing the desperate pursuit of success as an economic journalist. Convinced that his mother held the records in Long Island purely to spite his emigration (she had fervently campaigned against his relocation), Brian declared a one-year boycott on New York. He spent Christmas the following year with Donna and her Jewish Aunt Merna. They attended a matinee screening of *JFK*. Brian mailed the ticket stub home as an official declaration of war.

Now with heavy eyes, Brian slowly patrolled the first floor of his childhood home. The stale and static air of his mother's parlor prompted an unanticipated reverence. As he descended into his father's chair, a cloud of dust jumped from the fabric. The chair had deteriorated over the past twenty years. It was very similar to its predecessor, but featured a reclining lever. Across from the chair, the homemade entertainment shelves housed the television, stereo, and speakers. The turntable was gone. Transmitted through those very

old speakers, the records had been the pride of the family, listened to ritually during holidays over the chatter of houseguests. Perhaps, the records had received the most steadfast adoration from a very young Brian concerned for the welfare of his road faring father. A seasoned truck driver for regional shipping agency, Franklin Barter Freight & Shipping, Brian's father, Anthony, spent four nights a week on the road delivering hazardous industrial byproducts to points north of New York. During the treacherous winter months, Brian would worry himself into a headache in light of his father's absence. Not only did Brian fear for the safety of his father, but he also worried about his own well-being. Without his father around, no one was left to defend boyhood. He was outnumbered. Majority rule required that he abide by female law and all of its ordinances.

On nights when his father left, Brian was not to be spoken to or disturbed. He would simply curl up on his father's chair with his eyes closed listening to the records. He opened his eyes only in between songs to ensure the next album's safe drop onto the turntable. Once asleep, his mother had to play through the collection once more, taking special care not to disturb the musical cycle into which Brian had lulled himself. When his father returned he would often greet Brian with gadgets and nick-knacks he picked up from the road to make up for being gone; however, a Franklin Barter Freight & Shipping magnesium flashlight could only keep a child occupied for so long (regardless of the great battery life and luminous power the tiny flashlight continued to exhibit to this very day).

*Sitting back* in the chair, the floor creaked. He instantly regretted coordinating with his sister and grew apprehensive of seeing her. Karen called down to him. "Have you been in here yet?" Karen habitually asked questions to which she already knew the answers.

"No. I don't have the key." Brian slowly ascended the steps to the attic.

"Right, how did you get in?"

"The door was open," concern quickly overrode his intention of sounding sarcastic.

As a boy, he understood the scent of his home to be a blend of maple syrup and potpourri.

That scent was now absent. He inquired, "How long has it not smelled here?"

"I don't know. What did it smell like?" Brian wasn't surprised that his sister had never even appreciated the smell of her own home, yet her ignorance still bothered him. He was always amused with his own ability to precisely predict the disconcerting behaviors of his mother, sister, and wife. "When was the last time you were even here?" Karen asked.

"Last Christmas." Brian had come back to New York upon request from his son. Nathan, terrified of being disloyal wanted to share the holidays with both his father and newly emigrated mother, Donna. This was really the last time Brian had seen or spoken to Karen. Before that, they had briefly corresponded through email.

"Where's Nate?"

"His mom's. He's on his way though."

"Oh, yeah," Karen shifted her eyes away from her brother's, "Donna sends her regards, by the way."

"Her regards? I know she sends her regards."

Karen defended herself; "I talked to her on the phone earlier. She said to tell you she's really sorry about mom."

"You still keep in touch." Brian's glare prompted an impatience in his sister.

"Yes, Brian. Let's not get into that right now." Karen perpetually claimed impartiality; however, she had developed a sisterly-affection for Donna, especially after her

move back to New York. Brian was not much jealous of Donna's relationship with his sister; he was really just sore because he had hoped Donna would experience a shared sense of post-marital isolation. Closer in age to Donna, Karen referred to her as the sister she never had. Brian's relationship with his sister and mother (collectively, of course) had ebbed and flowed, and he tried his hardest to keep distance for the sake of peace. Karen and Donna's revived friendship was only the cherry on top of very large scoops of familial discontent and disappointment. Twenty years ago, when Brian had challenged his parents' endorsement of Karen's second wedding, he developed an unpopularity with his mother and sister that foundationed the present-day bitterness.

He had privately pleaded with his father, "But Dad, you can't afford a second wedding. You can hardly afford to live here anymore."

Karen would interject from the kitchen, "Leave him alone, Brian. How could he not fund the wedding? What kind of message would that send to Dean's family?"

His mother would add, "Brian, let your father do what he wants. It's a special occasion to give your daughter to away in marriage, and it's true what Karen said: What kind of example would she set to her in-laws if she was already asking for money?"

Only half aware of the line he was crossing Brian retorted, "I am certain that Dean's family is hardly concerned with the example *she* sets." Karen's first marriage had, in fact, ended on account of infidelity to her husband- with her to-be-husband, Dean. From the living room, their father roared over the commotion. "That's enough out of all of you! Brian, I don't know why you are so concerned about my finances, but it's none of your business, OK? That's it!"

It pained Brian to accept his father's decision. He knew his father was scared of death and ashamed of the working class existence with which he had provided his family. He was concerned for his father's blood pressure, and that was precisely why his father couldn't afford to risk his early retirement to take on the expense of another extravagant wedding. Brian wanted to launch a full-scale inquisition of his sister's request, equipped with income statements, mortgage bills, and tax returns, but he did not want to embarrass his father.

Growing up, a heightened interest in the finance world led him to his father's expense sheets, exposing the inadequate income that his parents had kept secret. For the remainder of his father's life he kept a close, yet covert watch on his father's financial activity. Desperately averse to being a bigger financial burden than he had already been, Brian insisted on asking for only one book on birthdays, and one sweater on Christmas. His mother could never understand why.

*Karen* broke the silence, "I know you're probably itching to get out of here, so"

"That's not fair," he was actually seconds away from asking for the records and heading out. Now, he was stuck, "How are Dean and the kids?"

"They're fine. How's Nate?"

"Good. Still smoking, I think. Going to Fordham next year. "

"Really, in New York?" *Karen* was intrigued by this blatantly symbolic defeat.

"Lincoln Center." The architects of the custody agreement thought it quite convenient that Nathan could finish high school in Chicago, which he wanted to do, and have the option to go away to school where Donna and Brian would share visiting rights.

There were plenty of fine educational institutions in Chicago. Initially, Brian was not concerned about Nathan leaving for college. He had actually suggested a Fordham University (of Chicago) to Nathan, not realizing the potential for confusion. After Donna left him to return to New York, Brian began to feel increasingly insecure. Nathan had an entire family back in New York: aunts and uncles on both sides who Brian was afraid would win his son over. He wasn't in the mood to discuss it with *Karen*. "All right, lets just get the ball rolling on the attic. Do we have to call sanitation and notify them of a special load?"

"Well, I figured by the time we split things up it wouldn't be a ridiculous load." His sister rationalized.

"I'm not sure how much of this I'm going to want." Brian once again tried not to sound condescending.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'll help you with whatever you need, but I really only came for one thing," he knew immediately that he should not have phrased it that way.

"What, the records?" She asked like it was an impossibility. "Mom didn't want them leaving New York."

"No, that's not it at all, actually. She said she didn't want them to leave her house while she was still alive. She's not anymore." Brian tried hard to avoid talking down to his elder. As Brian's less successful older sibling, Karen had regretted her inability to serve as any type of role model for her brother. He was, in all aspects, the more motivated, competent, and intelligent Wicks child. Brian's marriage to Donna opened up an entire avenue through which Karen hoped to mentor her little bro. Being better than Karen at everything else he did, Brian figured he would excel as a husband and father, coldly

resisting what he considered “domestic snobbery” from his sister. The judgment was not entirely inaccurate considering Karen’s unorthodox pedagogical methods; however, she had decent intentions.

When coupled with her largely suppressed desire to gain her brother’s respect, Karen’s deficient grasp of tact often served as a catalyst for familial blowouts. Two years prior, Karen Fed-exed her brother a fresh copy of *Being a Great Dad: for Dummies!* in response to Nathan’s school-suspension for possession of marijuana. Minutes after opening the Fed-Ex packaging (only enough to see the cover), he had lit the package, in its entirety, on fire, and photographed the pyre. “I don’t understand what kind of person would do that,” his sister wrote back to him in an email entitled “Re: GROW UP KAREN.” Karen was genuinely mystified by her brother’s response to her seemingly nice gesture. He had emailed the photograph to his sister with a strongly worded caption.

“WHAT KIND OF PERSON AM I? DO YOU UNDERSTAND HOW DISRESPECTFUL IT IS TO SUGGEST THAT A BOOK,” he paused, “TO COMPENSATE FOR FATHERLY ‘INCOMPETENCE?’” Brian reprimanded the computer monitor. He had simultaneously typed this exact statement out in capital letters in “Re: Re: GROW UP KAREN.” Both were grammatically incoherent. Karen had actually bookmarked the award-winning and very insightful chapter on drugs, entitled, “Your Kids & Drugs: An Inceptive Approach.” Brian was far too eager to have justification for lashing out at his sister, and did not notice her thoughtfulness. An apology was never formally proposed and the bitterness continued to snowball.

“You can’t just disregard her will.” Karen retorted.

“Her will doesn’t even mention it.”



"Neither does Dad's." Karen snapped back.

"That's because he didn't really get to make one." Brian hoped his sister understood the reference. He walked downstairs and closed the door to his old bedroom in an effort to disallow any response. Karen's second wedding had cost her father a small fortune. To avoid having to move, Anthony Wicks postponed his retirement two years. Within those two years, Brian found him collapsed at the kitchen table where medics confirmed he was dead. He was getting his lunch ready for work. After days in his bedroom, Brian had formulated a logically valid, however bold, theory that placed responsibility for his father's death on his mother and sister.

He knew his sister was to blame for the burden put on his father, but he couldn't help be more disappointed with his mother. His mother supported Karen, while aware of the economic consequences the entire time. Brian attributed his mother's loyalty to Karen to a supreme inability to connect with *him*. When Brian privately consulted her with concern for his father, she brushed him off commenting on the queerness of Brian's sensitivity and tendency to worry. He got the sense that general affection bewildered his mother. She and Karen were close, but Brian concluded it was only a sort of monetary relationship that consisted of shopping and having her mom babysit for her. His mother expressed a certain discomfort in the presence of his love for his father. She exhibited no understanding of appropriate reactions to it. After Brian's father died, just as when he would leave on his work-trips, Brian had nothing but a vinyl surrogate on which to rest his head.

*Interrupting his brooding*, Karen knocked on the door. "Brian, come on, come out, Donna's on the phone. She wants you."

Brian spoke through the closed door "Why is she calling *you*?" He stepped out, took the phone, closed the door, and snidely inquired. "I don't understand why you wouldn't just call me, if you wanted to speak to me?"

"I had to tell Karen something first." Donna nagged, "And, I'm not sending Nathan on the train alone, come pick him up."

"I'm in the middle of something right now, Donna"

"No you're not. Karen told me you haven't done anything since you got there."

He turned to his sister, "Listen, can you just give me the records, Kar-Bear? I've got to go get him, and this whole thing is just way out of hand."

"Brian, I've already told you-" she started again and looked upset. Her eyes had welled up a bit. He could not tell if she was very angry with him or if she was actually saddened by something, but through his sixth sense for sibling disappointment, he had a very strong feeling that the records weren't at the house at all. He figured Karen had probably taken them upon hearing he was on his way, and hid them in her house. Or in that stupid storage facility she and Dean rented. He should have known coming down here it was going to be a losing battle. He had once again gone expectedly disappointed by his family. He sped off, headed for the Belt Parkway.

He hated New York and its Manhattan-centric mentality. New York was a temptress. She would call to the west and the east, offering her wealth and beauty, and spit newcomers out on the nearest glacier-carved pile of dirt she could find. He sat in bumper-to-bumper traffic realizing why his family couldn't fathom leaving. The traffic on the Belt Parkway alone had single-handedly convinced his father to turn around and stay on two separate family vacations. People spent years of their lives in traffic but loved bitching

about it rather than leaving. "Gotta' love New York traffic." He just didn't get it.

Even worse was how people accepted and actually possessed gratitude toward Manhattan for their unreasonably high property taxes and filthy waterways because it gave them something else to talk about at dinners and parties. Other things existed outside of New York- a concept Brian was determined to demonstrate to his mother, and sister, and most importantly his son, but this concept was proving difficult. He was continually depicted as a losing man. It made sense for Nathan to want to leave the losing side and join the winning side of the family while he was still welcome.

Arriving at Donna's house, Brian leaned on the horn. Donna came to the door and rolled her eyes. She probably expected him to get out. From the car he called out. "He's eighteen years old, he can't be on the train alone?"

"Give him a break, Brian. The kid lost his grandmother." Donna yelled back from behind the screen door.

"She was *my* mother. By the way, thanks for the regards." Nathan got in the car. They headed back toward Long Island.

"How's mom?" Brian didn't really want to know.

"She's fine, I guess. I can't really tell." Nathan seemed subdued.

"You know I think you should reconsider the whole Lincoln Center thing. Kind of a lot of gays around there, am I right?"

"I don't really mind. How's Aunt Karen?"

"She hates me. Do you really want to go see her, we could probably make great time to Ohio if we left now."

"I just want to see them, so it's not weird when I'm at school."

"Well I'm just warning you: she's a terrible sister and probably won't make for a good aunt."

"So, no records?" Nathan had become an expert decoder of his father's bitterness. The entire drive down, Brian had explained to his son in Homeric prose the legacy of the records and what they meant to him. If he went home empty-handed, he would have once again typified the haggard and defeated character that Nathan was beginning to identify as his father. He had to set an example for his son. Driving over the behemoth structure that charged eleven dollars to westbound traffic while allowing eastbound traffic to ride freely toward demise, Brian reflected on the things Karen had stolen from him during both childhood and adulthood. She was especially notorious for her sock thievery:

When Brian was in middle school, she would take dress socks from his top drawer to wear as knee-highs for cheerleading and dance team. At the end of one week when she had fully depleted his sock supply, she found, at the bottom of his drawer, a Victoria's Secret catalog he had embezzled from the kitchen table. She immediately turned him in to the authorities who issued Brian a stern talking-to about the immoralities of lust- a mere slap on the wrists; however, being out of dress socks on the day of his spring concert, he was forced to wear white socks. He looked, as one of his peers had noted, like an idiot, and received two days detention from his conductor for breach of the dress code. He didn't play one note of the entire concert. He stared at his mother and father, staring back at their perverted and improperly attired son.

Honoring his son's request, Brian exited the parkway headed for Karen's house. She lived on one of those typical blocks where all the neighbors were friends and would have each other over alternating nights of the week for drinks and obnoxious late-night cackling. When they arrived, the lights were off in Karen's house. Brian figured she and Dean and the kids were across the street at Marie's, the wildest neighbor on the block. Nathan, excited to see his cousins, unlocked his door to get out. Brian held his son back by the shoulder. He pulled away from the curb and drove off, parking around the block with the lights off. "Listen, Nate. I don't want to startle you, but you think you could stand lookout while I investigate something at your Aunt's house?" Nathan looked at his father patiently awaiting an elaboration. "All you have to do is look out and give me a signal if anyone approaches or give me help if I signal you. You don't need to know what I'm doing."

"So, you're breaking into her house?"

"I could fit through a window easy." He could see the back of her house through the adjoining house's yard. "I know she has to have them in there."

"So you're going to steal them."

"Back. I'm stealing them back. They were stolen from me." Brian reassured.

"I don't know that I want to be involved." The easiness of Nathan's decision slightly annoyed Brian. He hopped out of the car.

"Fine. Sit tight, Nate."

Nate poked his head out from the sunroof and called to Brian, most likely hoping to stall him. "Dad, I don't understand. If they were yours why wouldn't you have them? Why wouldn't Nanny give them to you?"

In a simulated shout-whisper, Brian replied. "No. She was mad at me because I moved. I didn't do anything wrong."

"But wasn't that right after Papa died? Why did you leave?"

Brian didn't think he had let on this much over the past years. He thought about it and negotiated, "Never mind, just stay here." He flashed his fully functional Franklin Barter Freight & Shipping flashlight key-chain at Nathan. "I'll flash you if I need help."

As he walked toward Karen's house, he tried his hardest to cultivate the guilt and frustration of the white-socked boy on the auditorium stage of Rutherford B. Hayes Elementary. He imagined the Fed-Ex envelope and his mother's note and his sister's second wedding. So what if he was transparent? His family never believed in subtlety anyway. If Karen wanted to practice childish tactics he would have no problem playing in the dirt. He was somewhat relieved that the option was available.

Through the adjacent backyard, Brian scaled one fence and landed in Karen's yard unnoticed. At the side of the house he spotted a window that lead to the basement. He pried it open and slithered through the opening. He waltzed around the basement using his right hand to reach out and feel for a canvas surface. He could not understand what Karen and Dean were possibly doing with their storage facility when every piece of junk they owned seemed to obstacle the basement floor. What he found that felt and smelled and briefly resembled the old briefcase was empty, so he headed towards the stairs. Inching up the

staircase in the darkness, he thought he heard footsteps, and wondered if Nathan had come to back him up. Opening the door, he cautiously stepped into the hall cluttered with assorted artifacts that Karen must have cleared out from his mother's home. Stacks of shoeboxes filled with photographs, books and coupons lined the walls.

He was staring at the shadow-draped living room when he heard the muffled sound of his father's vibrato consoling a gently sniffing woman behind a door down the hall. A glowing light outlined the doorframe. For a second, Karen's listening to the records bothered him (after all, that was *his* thing). In another second, he realized what he had not had the heart to grasp since returning to New York: his sister was, indeed, grieving the loss of their mother. He called out to her. "Karen?" The door clicked into its frame.

Brian sat outside the bedroom and waited for the scratchy music to complete its progression. In surprisingly nonchalant tone, Karen spoke to Brian from beyond the door. "Do you think we would have stopped talking if mom died first?"

"I can't say. Though, I still would have been angry when Dad went."

"Do you think I really killed him?" Karen pathetically inquired.

Brian hated to admit, but he had probably caused his father equal stress by continuing to worry him with talk of "financial stability," "high-density lipoproteins," and "your daughter is an idiot." It had never occurred to Brian that his insistent dislike of his mother and sister, two people his father loved, might have been as equally depleting as a very expensive wedding.

Time and distance and bitterness and stubbornness had hardened Brian to this reality, but to Karen, his mother might have actually been a true companion. Giving Karen as much credit as he could possibly gather, Brian figured his mother to be one of maybe two remaining and meaningful relationships in Karen's life. If Brian thought about it honestly, he was nearing zero. He sat among the ruins of a once thriving nuclear family. The remaining citizens constituted two disconnected and broken adults who, for the past fifteen years, shared nothing more than a similar facial structure. New to that list of similarities was this very unique coping mechanism. He opened the door, reset the records, and lay on the floor at his sister's feet, flashing the light on his keychain out the window, so his son would see.