

# Walls

**W**e were not consulted. It was the 1970s. And then it was the early 1980s. What would happen was that men would come to the door, smelling of Brute, or smelling of cigarettes and the fine leather interior of their Gran Torinos or TR7s, and they would say, “I’m here to pick up Sally. This the right house?”

We’d say, “Yeah, come on in. She’s getting dressed.” Or we’d say, “Do you mean Mommy?” Or, and this was rare, but it happened because we were young and angry and when your parents have divorced and all you have to show for it is a mother who has suddenly decided that she’d like to fuck as many men as possible, and a father who it turns out was gay but you wouldn’t know that until long after he was dead and you found the photos and the letters, but who, at the time, was dating a woman named Miss Lisa who hosted *Romper Room* on Channel 2, we’d say, “Are you our new daddy?” It was cruel, but we were smart and we were sad and we had agendas.

We kept a list. We updated it nightly. We remember you. That’s what this is all about. We remember you. We thought you’d stay. We thought, on the day before the last night, when you sat us down and said that you’d stay but that our mother was crazy, was ruining your life, was ruining our

lives, too, and if you had any legal rights, why, you'd take us out of this house. You told us you'd just wait until our mother went to work and you'd back up a big truck and we'd all just move our stuff into it. We'd take the two dogs, Sam and Roxanne, and we'd pull up the yellow shag carpet in the family room, the hundreds of *Star Wars* action figures, the posters of Peter Frampton, the posters of Rick Springfield, the posters of Heather Thomas, the Easy-Bake Oven, the RISK board, the photo albums from when we still had the beach house, back when Mom still looked so young, still had that Jackie O thing going for her. Dad used to be in those photos, too, but he's gone, cut out, just a shoulder or a foot or the brim of a hat barely visible in a jagged corner.

You were a cop, we remember that. But then you quit your job after you saw a guy get his head blown off. BLAM, you said. BLAM. And then there was nothing but a stump. You said that's what made you quit your job and become a steel worker, and then you lost that job because people had a way of dying around you. People had a way of being near you and then not being near you. They said you didn't follow protocol. That you were responsible for an industrial accident. And so you lived in our house for a little while, and that was good. We felt so calm. We felt normal. We felt the wall shake when you had sex with our mother, but that was okay. And we felt the wall shake when you'd climb into her shower and sob, banging your fists against the tile, probably unaware that her bathroom backed up to one of our bedrooms.

We remember you.

We remember Doug Loomis. He called accidentally, looking for someone else, but Mom liked his voice, told him

she thought he sounded very interesting, wondered if he might like to buy her a drink the next time he was in town. She called him “Wrong Number,” and she told us he had a boat and that he really wanted to take us all out on it; that we’d sail to Catalina, or Hawaii, or Peru, and that he loved all of us kids. Doug Loomis was bald. Doug Loomis showed up in our kitchen one Sunday morning and asked us to make him some coffee. Asked us to get him the newspaper. Asked us if we could quiet the fuck down. Mom wanted to know, a few days later, what we’d done to “Wrong Number,” because he no longer called, not even by accident.

You once took us to a park and told us to forget who our parents were. You told us to pretend that you were our father and that the woman who’d just thrown a platter of frozen meat at us was a burglar.

We remember Cy Cohen. Cy Cohen sold Seiko watches. In the morning, he’d walk outside in one of our father’s old bathrobes and he’d read the paper standing up on the driveway. Cy Cohen drove an Alfa Romeo. Cy Cohen used to scream his own name at night. It sounded like this: “Oh, fuck yes, Cy!” Cy Cohen lasted a few weeks, actually, long enough to enjoy Thanksgiving in our home. He gave us all Seiko watches. He left them on doilies next to our plates. They were thick and silver. They glowed in the dark. They pulled our wrists down. They kept imperfect time. Mom told us Cy cared very deeply for us, would probably want to adopt us, that he loved us very much. We wrote excessively long thank-you notes to Cy for the watches. A week after Cy Cohen stopped his eponymous joy, he showed up at the house and demanded all of our watches back.

You told us we'd be eighteen one day. You told us to hold onto that.

We remember Mark Barton. Mark had three kids, all boys, and they were big scary fucks. They went to school with us. They used to beat the shit out of us. They once tied us to the bike racks in front of Castle Rock Elementary and threw walnuts at our genitals. They said things like, "We're going to make your pussies bleed." Mark Barton owned a chain of hardware stores. He wore golf shirts with a penguin logo. He had silver hair that he kept cut short, like he was in the military. Mark Barton starred in his own commercials where he'd say, "Hi, Kids! I'm Mark Barton. Go get your parents and tell them I'm on TV and want to make a deal with them!" Mom met Mark Barton when she was thinking about becoming a realtor. She went to some community mixer where he was the toastmaster. She didn't come home for two days, just left a message on the Record-A-Call that said she'd met someone, that we should eat the Swanson Chicken TV Dinners in the freezer, that we should ask Stephanie Howser's mom to drive us to school. The three Barton boys cornered us at school and told us that our mother sounded like a malfunctioning backhoe when she was getting fucked, that she made shitty pancakes, and that if we weren't careful, they'd make our pussies bleed.

Your sister died while you were living in our house. We went to the funeral even though we didn't know her. It was December, a few days before Christmas, and the service was held out in Benicia. In the distance, we could see the Navy Mothball Fleet docked out in the shallow bay. You got up during the service and said that you were sorry that you'd been such a terrible brother to her; that you'd let her make

so many mistakes; that you should have just picked her up in your arms and carried her away, put her in a place where she could get the help she needed, where she wouldn't find a way to meet guys like you, Freddie, you fucking cocksucker. You made eye contact with us. We nodded our heads and mouthed that we loved you. We went to Farrell's afterward and ate hot fudge sundaes. You told us stories about your sister. You told us she lived in regret. You told us her negativity propelled her toward drugs and guys like Freddie who would rather kick her fucking ass than kiss her on the lips. When Mom said not to use such language in front of us, you said, "You remind me of her a lot, Sally. You really do. That's not a compliment."

We remember Jack Merken. Jack wore velour. Jack went to Purdue on a basketball scholarship in some nebulous, yellowed past, but that didn't stop him from wearing Purdue sweatshirts and Purdue T-shirts and velour pullover V-neck sweaters with a tiny Purdue logo stitched over the chest. Jack Merken owned a limo service and said he had a house up in Tahoe. Every time he came to pick up Mom, a long, black limo would pull up in front of our house. "Jack's here," we'd say, watching him through the living room window, his shadow barely visible as he slid through the opening between the front seat and the back seat so he could get out through the back passenger door. The neighbors would come out onto their front porches to see who was in the limo, because this was in the 1970s and not just anyone could get a limo, unless you had \$75 to spend for the evening. We got to drive in the limo once. It was raining, and we pounded on the master bedroom door to let Mom know we needed a ride to school, that all of us would be drenched if we walked, that there was lightning

that might kill us. Jack came to the door. “Your mom says to ask the neighbors for a ride,” Jack said, “but why don’t I take you?” We climbed into the back of the limo and it was nothing like we imagined. The seats were once crushed red velvet, but now they were crusted and hard, black electrical tape keeping them together in places. It smelled of perfume and cigars and something like vinegar, but more pungent. We found a bra on the floor. We found a high-heeled shoe. We found Marlboro butts in the ashtray. We found handprints on the back window. We found Jack staring at us through the dividing window at the stop sign on the corner of our street. It looked like he wanted to cry, or he wanted to cough, or he wanted this moment in his life to end, because he just kept staring at us before finally saying, “I’m sorry. You guys should just walk.”

You took us for lobster on the day your unemployment ran out.

We remember Dan Kern. Dan was our stepfather for six months. Dan was a lawyer. Dan spoke German fluently. Dan wore bikini underwear long before it was fashionable. Dan had three children from a previous marriage, though all of them were adopted. Steven, Bonnie, and Lyle came to live with us on weekends, sharing our rooms, eating our Pop-Tarts, changing the TV from reruns of *The Brady Bunch* to reruns of *Get Smart* without even asking. Dan didn’t particularly care for the fact that we didn’t call him Dad. He asked us if we loved him. We said no. He asked us why not. We told him we didn’t even know him. Mom told us he was going to adopt us, and we were going to change our last names, and that Dan was going to get full custody of his kids and we’d all

live together in a big house in Pacific Heights. Then Steven beat up his grandma with a broomstick and told everyone that Johnny Carson told him to do it. Then Bonnie brought a Ouija board to our house and started taking her top off around us, which caused problems, because we weren't related and we were young and we knew from the shaking wall that there was possibility in all of this, that we could all scream our names and no one would know what it meant but us. Then Lyle showed up at homecoming dressed as a woman, and we found out that he had the machinery to be both and he'd made a choice, because he was sixteen, and he was now Linda. One day shortly thereafter, Dan chased us all into the garage. He was wearing his Hawaiian print bikini underwear and was waving around a butcher knife and screamed at us in German. And then he wasn't our stepfather anymore.

You showed up at our graduations. We saw you in the back. It had been years, but we recognized you. We looked for you afterward, and since we never found you, we began to think that maybe you weren't really there, were just a mirage, just us wishing you'd reappear.

We remember when there was no one left. We remember when the men stopped coming because Mom had become sick, was told she'd be dead in six months, though of course she never did die. But by then we were gone. We came back as adults to care for her, back to our old bedrooms. We slept on our *Star Wars* sheets. We listened to The Knack and Gordon Lightfoot and Journey and REO Speedwagon and The Thompson Twins and Shaun Cassidy and Blondie and talked about how much those songs used to mean to us, so much so that when Mom would scream "Down or off!" we'd just turn it up and wait for

the rage, wait for her to walk outside and turn off the power, leaving us in the dark, spinning the records on our old Fisher-Price record players, the music just tinny scratches of sound, a departure from the yelling that rippled down the hallway, that caused Sam and Roxanne, the dogs, to crap themselves right where they stood. We found Bonnie's Ouija board and tried to contact you there, in case you were dead. We stood Mom up in her shower and bathed her, the water glancing off the tile wall and pooling at our feet, and we imagined you standing there alone, hitting that wall, pounding that wall, sobbing, and we reached out to you in our minds in case you stood there still, haunting the shower, your demons buried in the grout along with bits of skin from your knuckles. We put Mom into her bed, and it seemed so much smaller than we imagined it. Just a bed. Four corners. Sheets. A headboard. We imagined you there beside her. We tried to figure out what drove you there in the first place. How old were you? Thirty-five? Forty? Our age now. We have our own beds. We have our own master bedrooms, and yet we think of you still, standing here, saying good-bye to her in bed, because that's where it happened. You stood in the doorway of the master bedroom, and you said, "I just can't do this. How many others, Sally? How many?" And she said a number like five or seven or who fucking cares just get the fuck out you no-job son of a bitch. And you walked down the hallway and poked your head into each of our rooms and you said good-bye and you said sorry and you said you tried for us but that there's a limit and you'd found yours, and then the stapler hit you in the back and we looked and Mom was throwing things from her bedroom at you. You just kept walking. You even stopped and hugged the dogs. You

put your nose in that space between Sam's eyes and you held her ears and you whispered something. And you picked up Roxanne, who was a collie, and you hugged her like a child and she licked your face. A bottle of your cologne came sailing down through the air and it cracked on the wall and you didn't even move. The hallway still smells of you. Mom would have us shampoo the carpet and scrub the wallpaper, but nothing removed the smell. Here we are, decades in the dust, and we find tiny bits of glass still wedged into the wall.

You exist on the Internet. We've MapQuested your addresses. One day we will fly to you in Florida and Iowa and Alaska and Washington and we will knock on your door and when you open it we will say, "Do you remember us?" And you will say no and you will say no and you will say no and then maybe you will say yes. Because it will be you and not just a man with your name. You'll be older, too, because there isn't a way for memory to freeze the body like it freezes trauma in place.

Or we will let you be, give you that grace. We will drive by your homes across the country and we will imagine you inside and we will wonder if you've known all along that we remember.