

PART ONE

One

When Eldon spoke, his voice was slow and muffled, as if his tongue had grown unwieldy, and his words heavy. "Sutekh, go up and wash."

Sutekh looked up from the book in his lap. He stared, not at his father's face, but at his breathing tee-shirt. He pursed his lips, shaping them into a momentary, silent protest, and then he stood up and walked across the small room. In the hallway, he passed the pictures of old people on the wall, captured in straight-backed postures, in shades of black and white, with eyes that seemed to follow him. He sought out the image of the woman who had been his mother. He knew her picture well: the creamy tones and fine lines of her features, her thin eyebrows and gentle eyes, that long black hair, so straight, cast over her shoulder as solid and thick as a rope woven of seaweed. And he knew her name, Anita, so often on his father's lips. But his memory of her, only nine months old, was fading as each passing day pushed between them.

The bathroom was a cramped space, with an old bathtub and a slowly dripping sink. It smelled of mildew and of moisture trapped in towels. Faint city sounds entered through the tiny window above the tub. Sutekh closed the door, turned on the water and undressed. His body was small, skinny, light brown and smooth as an eggshell, gentle as

a marble statue, marked only by a paisley-shaped slash of pink across his forehead, a birthmark. He had a face of delicate features, with a narrow, aquiline nose, and eyes so grey they seemed almost translucent.

Looking through the window, Sutekh caught sight of a gull swooping through a cloud-laden sky. He watched its erratic flight until he heard footsteps coming up the stairs. He stepped into the tub, scowled at the heat and stood there, listening. The noise had stopped. He held one hand to his heart; the other rested on the cool yellow tiles. Finally, he reached for the cold water knob. Just as he touched it the door opened. Sutekh looked up and there, his father. He shifted his eyes to his father's chest and sat down, wincing slightly at the heat of the water.

The man swayed as he walked in. "Stand up," he said.

Sutekh rose.

Eldon touched Sutekh's head. He slid his hand from the boy's forehead, up over his hair, and traced his fingertips down the boy's spine. He cleared his throat, closed his eyes and swallowed. "Let's clean you up," he said. "Okay? We'll just wash."

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Eldon had a light chestnut complexion, with freckles under the eyes that jiggled as he talked. His features were well formed and evenly spaced, with the slightly pudgy quality of a young boy. He stood leaning beside the refrigerator, with the phone to his ear. With one finger, he pushed plastic magnets around on the metal door: pears and apples and bananas, several alphabetical letters.

Sutekh sat at the kitchen table, with a book in his lap. He ran his fingers over its

smooth cover and along its edges. His gaze drifted around the wall near his father and settled on a dim stain on the flowered wallpaper, the splash of some liquid.

"Yeah, Gen," Eldon said into the phone. "Yeah. It's all right. I mean, I still have the same job. I don't know for how long, but it's all right... You know what I do. The furniture reupholstering... Right... Of course." Eldon glanced over at his son. "Yeah, Sutekh is fine." His finger knocked off an apple shaped magnet. It fell to the floor, bounced off his foot and twirled under the refrigerator. He kneeled down and slid his hand underneath the appliance. The metal grating at the bottom of the refrigerator dislodged and fell onto his fingers. He pulled back, and the grating clanked to the floor. "Damn it!" he said. "No, I dropped something and now the damn grating fell off the fridge."

He kicked it, backed away a few steps and put his palm up to his forehead. "Forget it. So, Gen, why is everyone always after us to come visit? Jesus. It's either you or Rosella, but somebody's always nagging. It hasn't been that long..."

Sutekh looked down at his book. It was a large, thin children's book. On the cover there was an illustration of a boy in a bulky yellow raincoat and hat. The boy held a duck out before him, grasped by the leg. The duck was captured in mid-squawk, and the boy appeared to be pulling back, surprised. Sutekh traced a line around the boy with his finger.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay. We'll come by soon. But first Rosella wants to have Sutekh stay over there for the weekend or something." Eldon had been rubbing his injured palm with the fingers of his other hand. He stopped and his gaze shot over to Sutekh. "You want?... Okay, hold on. Sutekh? Come talk to your Aunt Genevieve." Eldon extended

the phone toward him.

Sutekh rose and, holding the book under one arm, took the phone from his father. The receiver was warm and greasy with moisture. "Hello?"

"Hey, Sutekh!" said Genevieve, her voice exhilarated, almost breathless. "How are you?"

Eldon walked away and stood next to the table. His hand pushed around the newspapers that covered it. He leaned over them and let his eyes drift over the words and pictures.

"Okay," Sutekh said.

"Okay? Well, all right. Great. I haven't seen you since the Fourth of July. Remember the Fourth of July? When we took that boat ride to Saint Michaels and had all those crabs?"

"Yeah."

"You were scared of them at first, remember?"

Sutekh tucked his head and smiled. "'Cause they had pinchers," he said.

"I know. They are pretty ugly. But they're good on the inside."

"Yeah." Sutekh nodded. He raised his book up as if just remembering it. "Gen, I have a book."

"Really? What book?"

"Um..." Wrinkles stood out on the boy's forehead. He looked down at the cover. "About a boy and a duck."

"Yeah? Hey Sutekh, that reminds me- how's school? You just started school, right?"

Sutekh glanced over at his father. "No."

"No what? You didn't start school?"

"No."

"What?" Genevieve's voice grew serious. "Why not? Didn't your father take you to school? I can't believe this. You should be starting school. You're going to be behind already. Let me speak to your father."

Sutekh shook his head. He looked over at his father, who was watching him.

"No. It's okay, Aunt Gen. Right? I don't want to go so much."

"Well, of course you don't, but that's just because it's something new. Once you tried it you'd like it fine. And anyway you have to go. It's not a choice. Let me speak to your father."

Sutekh turned toward the wall. "I have a book-"

"Sutekh, honey," Genevieve said, her voice both gentle and commanding. "Put Eldon on."

The boy turned back to his father and held the phone out toward him. The corners of Eldon's lips dipped, but he grasped the phone. "Yeah?"

Sutekh walked back to the kitchen table and sat down. He again held the book on his lap.

"Gen... I'm taking him. You just don't know how things are. It's not easy... He's been coming to work with me..." He listened for some time. He nodded, and when he spoke his voice had softened. "I don't know. It's just been these last nine months. I'll take him, but sometimes I'm afraid to have him out of my sight. Other times..." He ran a hand up over his hair. "Other times I just don't know. Anyway, fuck it, Gen," he said,

not angrily, but with an exasperated sigh. "I'm hanging up now. You should watch what you ask for. Some day I might drop him on your doorstep for good." He hung up the phone and stood leaning against the wall for a few moments, one hand in a fist that slowly rapped against the wall.

He turned around.

Sutekh didn't look up at him, but said, softly, "I just said I had a book."

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Sutekh's bedroom was a small space, cluttered by articles of clothing on the floor, toys and books. A single bed ran the length of the wall, its crumpled bedspread trailing across the floor. The walls were painted with a thick, innocuous yellow, and were bare except for a poster of the Earth viewed from space and a calendar featuring football players frozen in motion. The room's one window opened onto the wall of the next row-house, just below an opposing window.

Sutekh walked in, clothed in light blue pajamas, his bare feet padding lightly across the hardwood tiles. He tossed his book down on the floor and stood still in the center of the room. His eyes drifted up to the window across the alley. The light was on over there, and a person's vague shadow moved across the scarlet and gold curtains.

He took a few steps toward his bed, then jumped as he approached it, landing with a bounce on the mattress. The jostling of the mattress and sheets tossed several objects into the air: two Star Trek action figures, a miniature automobile, a small brass elephant figurine. The boy picked up the Star Trek figures and stood them face to face with each other, he controlled their arms with his fingers. One figure gently touched the other on

the forehead. Then, suddenly they began to wrestle, their bodies pushed clumsily together, rolling over the sheets. Sutekh picked up the elephant and tilted it upward. A faint sound escaped his lips, the high pitched roar of the elephant.

"You call that an elephant roar?" Eldon asked. He stood leaning against the doorframe.

Sutekh stopped moving. The elephant fell from his fingers.

"That's no elephant roar. That sounded like a mouse roar or something." He entered the room and sat down on the corner of the bed. He placed a hand on Sutekh's back.

The boy didn't move, his eyes fixed on a wrinkle in the blanket.

"If I was an elephant, I'd roar like this..." He let out a roar, a guttural cry that went from low pitched to higher pitched, ending with an expulsion of air somewhere between a laugh and a cough. "Well, something like that." He swiped in the air with a hand. "Something like that..." The humor with which he had just spoken faded quickly, and his expression changed to one of exhaustion. The bags below his eyes were more pronounced than usual, with a bluish tint to them. His gaze drifted around the room, over his son's back and shoulders. He moved his hand from Sutekh's back to his head and stroked his hair.

When he spoke again, his voice was limp, each word falling heavily from his lips. "Have you ever seen an elephant? You never have, have you?" He stretched out on the bed beside his son.

Sutekh squirmed away a few inches and rolled over on his side, facing his father. The man's breath smelled of the stale scent of alcohol and onions.

"I went to see the elephants with your mom, at the circus," he said. "She didn't like the circus, but she liked the elephants. She talked about Hannibal and how he rode elephants across the mountains and fought the Romans. That must of been something... Anita could tell such good stories. I'll tell you about Hannibal sometime. But I can't tell it as good as her. I can't do anything as good as her." Eldon exhaled a long breath and looked past Sutekh at the wall. He closed his eyes and inhaled. "Sutekh, your dad's going crazy," he said, his voice barely a whisper. "He's going crazy, and he doesn't know what to do." With his eyes still closed, he reached out and felt for his son.

Sutekh moved back a little, but let his father grasp him around the arm. The man's fingers were firm in their grip, but somewhat gentle. Sutekh watched his father's face, the lines around his mouth, the flutter of his eyelids, the movement of his lips.

"She shouldn't have gone. You didn't have to, Anita. You didn't..." He pulled Sutekh close to him. "I would have fought the snakes with you. I wouldn't have let them get you, never. We could have fought anything together. That's all I ever wanted. To fight back the world with you. To make a place for us."

Eldon opened his eyes and liquid burst forth from both of them, lingering momentarily on the rim of his eyelids, then sliding over the bridge of his nose, down his cheek, and falling onto Sutekh's head, which the man held under his chin. He closed his eyes again and rubbed Sutekh with comforting gestures, gentle circles on the small of his back. He said, "Shhh," softly, as if it were the boy who was crying. "Shhh." It was only very gradually that his own body began to move, that his comforting gestures became caresses, and he began to rub the boy's body against his own.

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Sutekh sat in the front window. The city beneath him was a jumbled patchwork of color: the fluid blue lines of spray paint over red brick, mottled black roads and white trash, the sticky brown of the sidewalk and bright yellow of curtains in the windows of a home. Out there were brown-skinned women and their children, talking loud and laughing. And there were men, walking slowly, perhaps smiling, but menacing, in tee-shirts and some with caps, one with a bottle held close to his chest. There were smells: rubbish left out from the restaurant downstairs, the exhaust of a passing truck, or the scent of curry from the house next door, that flowed in the air with a liquid quality. There were sounds: murmurs of voices and then a yell, or the words of a strange language, rapid and flowing, or music, pulsing from the windows and over the roars of nearby cars. To Sutekh, these colors and the city were little more than a moving collage of dirty smudges.

"Sutekh, come and eat," his father called.

He left the window and walked to the kitchen. His eyes down, he pulled out his chair and sat on the flowered garden of the cushion. On the round table in front of him was a bowl of puffed rice cereal.

Eldon opened the refrigerator and grasped a carton of milk. He swirled it in small circles and poured milk onto Sutekh's cereal. The rice moved, first with the rush of the milk, then with the shiver of tiny eruptions. "How 'bout that? Snap, Crackle and Pop." Eldon smiled and patted Sutekh on the back. He walked around the table and sat down in front of his fried eggs, corned beef hash and toast. He picked up the toast and smeared butter on it.

Sutekh listened to the cereal, but watched his father in the vague reflection of the table top. The egg as it rose on the fork, the yoke trailing behind, and the hash, engulfed by greasy lips and the bread, a loud crunch as teeth ripped through it. The boy raised a spoon of cereal to his mouth. The milk was cool on his lips, but tasteless on his tongue.

Eldon shifted his eyes as he ate, looking from his food, to the tiles of the floor, and up towards Sutekh. Behind his eyes was a timorous quiver; in his lips and his hands, a hesitation. Under the table his bare foot tapped the floor. He cleared his throat and spoke. "Maybe we can do something today. Sunday. You want to play some ball later? We could go down to the courts behind the school."

He waited, but the boy was silent, apparently concentrating on his food. The man crunched his toast. "Your grandparents been wanting you to go out to the house before it gets too cold. I told them maybe next week." He pressed the toast into the egg yoke. "You could do some fishing. Your grandfather has always got to be fishing. What do you think? Go out there for a few days?"

Eldon looked at his son. He watched the top of his head, and then his forehead as it rose, and his face, slim and nearly angelic. But when the boy finally lifted his eyes the man cringed as if a sharp pain had just taken hold of him. For in the liquid of those eyes, in their shape and color, in the light pupil and the black depths of the iris, in the arch of the eyelid- in all of these the child's mother still lived.

Eldon turned away, but Sutekh watched him for a long moment and finally answered, "Yeah."

My Father's Pointy Boots

-Eldon-

It's hard to know where to start. There are a million different events, a million different moments, that make up a life. Seems like any one of them could've turned things one way or another. Perhaps they did. Maybe this life I have now is just one particular winding path, shaped by all those decisions made or left unmade. Perhaps, but to me it feels more like one long, relentless grind that always leads in one direction.

If I have to begin this story somewhere, I guess the best place to begin is with my father, Norman Chaplin, with simply being his son. My mother always told me to let him age in peace. She wanted me to forget the past and go easy, just let things fade away. But how do you do that when the past is not really the past? When it becomes the present every day? When so many things come up to haunt me? Memories always popping up, without permission, like things caught in a whirlpool. I never know what I'm gonna' remember next. It always feels like somewhere just out of sight is the next memory, and just beyond that, the next one. That's no way to live a life, with your present always pulling along your past like some almighty chain.

Let me tell you about my father. Listen. This is what memory means for me.

When I was ten I found a stray dog hiding under the back porch of our house, the big house in Silver Spring. It was a little rat-faced mutt, thin as an Ethiopian, with these long legs like it was part Greyhound. Of course I wanted it. He was hungry. He was pathetic. I gave him some milk in a bowl and he lapped it up. Then he rested his head on my lap and sort of twisted sideways and looked up at me with his big ole' eyes, eyes full of fear and hope all rolled into one.

So I did what I was supposed to do. I walked on inside and asked my daddy could I keep it? Please could I keep it? Just like I was supposed to. But Norman said no. He didn't even look up from his paper. Just no. That was that. That was final. His word was law and there didn't need to be any reason to it.

And, even though I knew I could never change that no once he had spoken it, I kept the dog anyway. I hid it out in the little tool shed that night and brought it scraps of food. Isn't that just what the good little boys on T.V. would've done? Wouldn't Dennis have done the same? Wouldn't Beaver? Only problem was that my father was not Ward Cleaver. He walked into the kitchen the next day and, with his ice voice, his calm voice that he showed to the world, he asked me to come out back with him. I walked following his creased trousers, his ironed white shirt. I followed him to the tool shed, where the dog whimpered and kept its nose close to the ground. My father asked me what the hell was this? He wanted to know if I thought he was a fool? Did I think I could do whatever I wanted? Spurn him? Did I think that I had any right that he didn't allow me?

I answered him, no. No. No. No. And I was ready for that hand to teach me the lesson again. I knew those hands, I knew them like mallets, I knew their strength. But I also knew that eventually they must tire. Eventually, they always stopped. And when they did I would still be looking nobly into the dog's face, and he would know I was a martyr for him.

But this didn't happen. Instead, my father wrapped his fist around one of those thin dog legs, and he smashed it with his shin. He broke it like kindling. The dog was yelping murder and he tried to bite, his teeth suddenly fangs. But my father's pointy boots were too much like spears. He kicked, and kicked and kicked... It's no easy thing

to kick something to death, but my father managed it like some sort of dog-killing pro. Then he turned around to me, and he asked me if I understood him, was it clear now?

I answered him, yes. Yes. Yes.

When he walked away he left bloody footprints. I cleaned up the mess and dragged the dog to the trash barrel and hid it away before anyone saw.

That's my father. As long as I have lived I have had no other. He was a confused man. I understand that much now. But when I was a child he always spoke as if he was perfectly sure of himself, and perfectly sure of what was wrong with everybody else. But who knows what his own demons were? I certainly don't.

When I think back to my childhood, I never think of my mother. She was sort of neutral, like some background music that never quite gets your attention, although you know its there. I remember Gen though. She was the only one who was truly on my side. She and I used to hide in her closet and play dolls. She with her baby dolls and me with my action figures. We spent so many days like that. So many adventures those dolls had. We pretended they were brother and sister, a team against all that was wrong with the world. At least, this is how we were when we were young. That all fell apart too. I think maybe we were too close back then. We knew too much about each other. You get older and the world starts making things more complicated and, instead of looking at Gen and being glad she knew what I was thinking, I'd find I didn't want to look at her, didn't want her knowing what was going on inside of me.

Norman was different with her than with me. With her he wasn't physical. He beat her with words. Nothing she did mattered. No thought she had was of any importance. The better she did in school, the more critical he became. She tried so hard,

and did so well, but still, still he tormented her. Somehow, though, I think it made her stronger. Maybe that's really where we grew apart, with her getting stronger and stronger, while I just sunk down under it all, taking the ones that I loved with me.