'This isn't only a forensic examination of modern fatherhood; it's also a brutal attack on U.S. gun culture, and a reflection on the country's appetite for assassination. Haunting, terrible and yet utterly real, it's superbly written with a marvellous feel for the American landscape and its soul. It's also a tantalising thriller.' ***Daily Mail***

'A compelling & compassionate book.' **EYE**

'It is rare that a novel so considered is also so gripping. Intense and utterly humane, THE GOOD FATHER is a book, the moment you finish it, you just know you will want to read again. A tremendous achievement.'
Simon Lelic

'Riveting, moving, unique. This novel deserves to become a classic.' ***Sophie Hannah***

'I read THE GOOD FATHER into the small hours. It is that rare gem: a genuine literary thriller, as deep as it is wide. A beautiful, moving and important novel.'
Erin Kelly

'An unblinking look at the ills of modern America, and a conclusion: love might address them in a way that wealth cannot.'
Justin Webb

'Discovering a way to be the good father in this context requires great imagination, and Hawley has written a convincing novel about the disturbing endurance of parental responsibility.' ***The Times Literary Supplement***

'Noah Hawley's flawless writing and staggeringly impressive narrative authority make THE GOOD FATHER so harrowingly plausible . . . a memorable, moving and unputdownable masterpiece.'
Sunday Express

'Timely and unsettling . . . [a] curious but beguiling mixture of fact and fiction.'
TELEGRAPH

'Gripping . . . echoes Don DeLillo.'
THE SUNDAY TIMES

'Brilliant and heartbreaking, THE GOOD FATHER is a book about the final frontier of a parent's love. It is a thriller, a mystery and above all else a savagely contemporary, hugely important love story.'
Tony Parsons

'THE GOOD FATHER packs [a] considerable emotional punch. Not as a harrowing investigation of evil, a critique of gun violence in America or a guide to good parenting, but as an account of a father finally accepting his child, for better or worse, until death do them part. Male readers: get your hankies at the ready.'
Independent on Sunday

'A gripping and poignant novel that chimes with *We Need to Talk About Kevin* and Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*. THE GOOD FATHER is a clever dissection of American gun culture, and what it means to love and trust someone. The perfect reading group book.'
Bookseller

'An agonizing but irresistible look into the souls of a killer and a man who always thought he was a good, or good enough, father.'
Wall Street Journal

'This emotionally fraught and acutely perceptive novel questions the concept of nurturing and how children of seemingly bright, caring parents can grow up and go seriously off the rails. There's a very big moment in this novel, and it delivers.'
Daily Mirror

'A heartfelt and beautifully written novel . . . Written from the point of view of a father questioning his parenting skills, Noah Hawley gives the age old question of nature versus nurture a fresh angle. This is a novel about family, love and the decisions we make. Well written, thrilling and compelling.'
U magazine

'Noah Hawley's gripping new novel . . . hits on a mood of parental anxiety and responsibility increasingly felt by men as much as women.'
The Sunday Times

'Tackles the theme of parental soul-searching in the face of a child's arrest for a criminal act . . . a powerful narrative that builds relentlessly to a stunning emotional climax.'
Chicago Tribune

'A solid, gripping story that is as clever as it is bold, stripping down the paternal relationship to uncover the complex people beneath.'
Associated Press

'Allen's guilt-racked quest to prove his son's innocence. The result is a moving family saga that explores the intriguing notion of a statute of limitations on parental responsibility.' **People**

'This is something different: edgy and confrontational in its treatment of the devastating effects of America's gun culture but shot through with real emotional heft and featuring characters it is impossible not to care about . . . powerful, involving and full of provocative invective.'
Daily Express

'With great skill, Hawley renders Dr. Allen's treacherous emotional geography, from his shock and guilt to his growing sense that he knows far less about his son than he thought . . .'
Publishers Weekly

'A thriller, a drama, a search for sanity in an insane situation; you absolutely must read this book.'
Weekend Post

'An exploration of the anxieties and challenges of parenthood, the flimsy grasp we have on our pasts when it most counts, and, ultimately, the extent to which our characters and fates are shaped by nature, nurture and chance . . . a moving evocation of the bonds of blood . . . the prose has all the qualities of modern literary classic.'
HUFFINGTON POST

The Good Father

NOAH HAWLEY

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1

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For Kyle and Guinevere, proof that life is good

The Good Father

He bought the gun in Long Beach, at a pawnshop called Lucky's. It was a Trojan 9-mm. This is from the police report. The trigger mechanism was rusty so he replaced it, using a kit he bought on the Internet. It was May. He was still living in Sacramento, a squinty kid with chapped lips who spent his days reading about famous murders at the public library. Before that he'd lived in Texas, Montana, and Iowa. Nowhere for more than four months. Sometimes he slept in his car. There was a journey he was taking. Each mile brought him closer to an end.

The Trojan was one of three guns he'd purchased in the months leading up to the event. He kept them in the trunk of his car, an old yellow Honda the police would later find in a parking lot near the Staples Center in downtown Los Angeles. The odometer read 210,000 miles. He had done a lot of driving in the fifteen months since he'd left college. Sometimes he took odd jobs for cash: day labor, fast food, construction. He stayed off the grid. Everybody said the same thing: he was quiet, kept to himself, a little intense. This was later, after the multipronged investigations, the illustrated timelines documenting his journey, the painstaking reconstruction of each leg. Now there are

bar graphs, books in progress. But in the early hours after the event, nobody knew anything. Who was this young man? Where had he come from? They say nature abhors a vacuum, but CNN hates it more. Seconds after the first shot, journalists were scrambling for context, rewinding the tape, analyzing angles and trajectories. Within hours they had a name, pictures. A young man, bright-eyed and milky-skinned, frowning into the sun. Nothing as damning as Lee Harvey Oswald brandishing his rifle, but viewed through the lens of what had happened, the photos seemed prophetic somehow, like Hitler's baby pictures. A feral glint in the eye. And yet what could you see for sure? It was only a photo after all. The closer you got, the grainier it became.

Like any event that can be called historic there is a mystery to the details that remains impenetrable. Flashes of light. An echo unexplained. Even now, months later, there are holes, days that can't be accounted for, in some cases whole weeks. We know he did volunteer work in Austin, Texas, in August, the year before the event. Organizers remember him as a bright kid, hardworking. Ten months later he was working as a roofer in Los Angeles, fingernails black with tar, a skinny man perched on sweltering shale, breathing the smoky air.

He'd been on the road for more than a year at that point. A rubber hobo losing himself in the great American absence. Somewhere along the way he changed his name. He started calling himself Carter Allen Cash. He liked the sound of it, the feel on his tongue. His given name was Daniel Allen. He was twenty years old. As a boy he had never been attracted to the mindless aggression of men. He did not collect toy guns or turn everything he touched into a weapon. He saved birds that had fallen from their nests. He shared. And yet there he was in two-lane Texas, test-firing automatics on a narrow gun range with cigarette butts on the floor.

On clear May nights he would sit on motel-room floors and polish his thoughts. He would handle the bullets, opening the box and letting them crackle in his hand. He was a human arrow racing toward an inevitability. The TV news showed images of politicians making stump speeches in small-town diners and dusty midwestern farmhouses. It was an election year, voters and candidates, pundits and money rushing toward a great democratic surge. Primary season was almost over. Partisan conventions loomed. Sitting on his motel-room floor, Carter Allen Cash fantasized casting his vote with a bullet.

When he was seven he lived for the swing. He would pump his feet and point his heels toward the sky, yelling *more, more*. He was a voracious child, unstoppable, and so alive it made everyone around him seem sickly and still. At night he would lie in a tangled heap on his bed, clothes half on, his brow knit, fists clenched, like a twister that had run out of air. Who was this boy and how did he become a man in a motel room fondling bullets? What made him ditch his comfortable life and embrace an act of barbarity? I have read the reports. I have watched the footage, but the answer continues to elude me. More than anything I want to know.

I am his father, you see.

He is my son.

One

Home

Thursday night was pizza night in the Allen household. My last appointment of the day was scheduled for eleven a.m., and at three o'clock I would ride the train home to Westport, thumbing through patient charts and returning phone calls. I liked to watch the city recede, the brick buildings of the Bronx falling away on the side of the tracks. Trees sprang up slowly, sunlight bursting forth in triumph, like cheers at the end of a long, oppressive regime. The canyon became a valley. The valley became a field. Riding the train I felt myself expand, as if I had escaped a fate I thought inevitable. It was odd to me, having grown up in New York City, a child of concrete and asphalt. But over the decades I had found the right angles and constant siren blare to be crushing. So ten years earlier I had moved my family to Westport, Connecticut, where we became a suburban family with suburban family hopes and dreams.

I was a rheumatologist – the chief of rheumatology at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan. It was a specialty that most people didn't recognize, concerned they'd guess with the watery eyes and phlegmy cough of a bad pollen allergy. But in truth, rheumatology is a subspecialty of internal medicine and

pediatrics. The term 'rheumatology' originates from the Greek word *rheuma*, meaning 'that which flows as a river or stream' and the suffix *-ology*, meaning 'the study of.' Rheumatologists mainly deal with clinical problems involving joints, soft tissues, and allied conditions of connective tissues. We are often the doctor of last resort when patients develop mysterious symptoms involving most of the body's systems: nervous, respiratory, circulatory. The rheumatologist is called to consult when a diagnosis remains elusive.

I was a diagnostician by trade, a medical detective, analyzing symptoms and test results, looking for the most pernicious diseases and intangible traumas. After eighteen years I still found the work fascinating and often took it to bed with me, mulling patient histories in the slippery moments before sleep, looking for patterns in the grain.

June 16 was a sunny day, not too hot but with the threat of New York summer in the air. You could smell the first wisp of humidity rising off the macadam. Soon any breeze would feel like the hot breath of a stranger. Soon you would be able to reach up and smudge car exhaust across the sky like oil paint. But for now there was just the threat, a slight smother, a trickle in the armpits.

I was late getting home that night. Afternoon rounds had taken longer than expected, and I didn't step off the train until close to six. I walked the nine blocks to our house through rows of manicured lawns. American flags hung from mailboxes. White picket fences, at once welcoming and prohibitive, ran beside me like the sprockets of a bicycle wheel, half seen from the corner of my eye. A sense of motion, of one thing being ticked off, then another. It was a town of affluence, and I was one of its citizens, a medical expert, a lecturing professor at Columbia.

I had become an MD in the era before the HMO, before the

nickel-and-diming of doctors, and I had done well for myself. The money afforded certain freedoms and luxuries. A four-bedroom house, a few acres of hilly land with a weeping willow and a faded white hammock that swung lazily in the breeze. On these early evenings when the weather was warm I walked through the suburban quiet with a sense of peace, a feeling of accomplishment, not smug or petty but deep-seated and human. It was the triumph of a marathoner after a race, the jubilation of a soldier after a long war is over. A challenge had been faced and overcome, and you were better, wiser for the facing.

Fran was already working the dough when I walked in the door, rolling it out against the marble countertop. The twins were grating cheese and scattering toppings. Fran was my second wife, a tall redhead, with the slow curves of a lazy river. Turning forty had changed the quality of her beauty from the athletic glow of a volleyball player to a languid voluptuousness. Contemplative and sure-footed, Fran was a woman who thought things through, who took a long-term approach to problems. These were not qualities my first wife shared, prone as she was to impulse and the full roller coaster of emotion. But I like to think that one of my better qualities is that I learn from my mistakes. And that, when I asked Fran to marry me, it was because we were – for lack of a more romantic word – compatible in the truest sense of the word.

Fran was a virtual assistant, which meant she worked from home, helping people she'd never met schedule appointments and make flight reservations. Instead of earrings, Fran wore a Bluetooth earpiece, which she put in when she awoke and didn't remove until just before bed. This meant she spent large portions of every day conducting what appeared to be a long conversation with herself.

The twins, Alex and Wally, were ten that year. They were fra-

ternal and not in any way similar. Wally had a harelip and a slight air of menace about him, like a boy who is just waiting for you to turn your back. In truth, he was the sweeter of the two, the more innocent. A miscoded gene had given him a cleft palate, and though surgery had mostly corrected it, there was still a quality to his face that seemed off-kilter, imprecise, vulnerable. His twin, Alex, fair-haired, comparatively angelic-looking, had gotten into some trouble recently for fighting. It was a familiar problem for him, starting in the sandbox era as a willingness to battle anyone who made fun of his brother. But over the years, that instinct to protect had evolved into an irresistible need to champion the underdog – fat kids, nerds, kids with braces. A few months back – after being called to the principal's office for the third time that semester – Fran and I took Alex to lunch and explained to him that while we approved of his instinct to protect the meek, he would have to find less physical ways to do so.

'If you want these bullies to learn a lesson,' I said, 'you have to teach them something. And I guarantee, violence never taught anybody anything.'

Alex had always had a quick wit and a sharp tongue. I suggested he sign up for debate classes, where he could learn to beat his opponents with words.

He shrugged, but I could tell he liked the idea. And over the next few months, Alex became the top debater in his class. Now he turned every request to eat his vegetables or help with the chores into an Aristotelian voir dire.

I had no one to blame but myself.

This was our nuclear family. A father, a mother, and two sons. Daniel, the son from my first marriage, had lived with us for a year during his sullen teens, but had departed as impulsively as he'd arrived, waking me one morning before dawn to ask if I

could drive him to the airport. His mother and I had split when he was seven, and he had stayed with her on the West Coast when I had come east.

Three years after his brief stay with us, Danny, eighteen, had started college. But he dropped out after less than a year, climbing into his car and heading west. Later, he would say that he just wanted to 'see the country.' He didn't tell us he'd left. Instead, I sent a card to his dorm, and it came back unopened, with a stamp OCCUPANT NO LONGER AT THIS ADDRESS. This had been his way since childhood. Danny was a boy who never stayed where you left him, who popped up in unexpected places at unexpected times. Now he called infrequently; sent e-mails from Internet cafés in the flat states of the Midwest. The occasional postcard scrawled in a moment of summer nostalgia. But always at his convenience, not mine.

The last time I saw him was in Arizona. I'd flown in for a medical conference. Daniel was passing through on his way north. I bought him breakfast in a hipster coffee shop near my hotel. His hair was long and he ate his pancakes without pause, his fork moving from plate to mouth like a steam shovel.

He told me he'd been doing a lot of camping in the Southwest. During the day he hiked. At night he read by flashlight. He seemed happy. When you're young there is no more romantic conceit than freedom – the boundless certainty that you can go anywhere, do anything. And though it still bothered me that he had dropped out of college six months earlier, knowing him as I did, I can't say I was surprised.

Daniel had grown up traveling. He was a teenage gypsy, shuttled between Connecticut and California, living partly with me and partly with his mother. Children of joint custody are, by nature of the divorce settlement, independent. All those Christmases spent in airports, all those summer vacations shuffling

back and forth between mom and dad. Unaccompanied minors, crisscrossing the nation. Daniel seemed to survive it without major trauma, but I still worried, the way any parent does. Not enough to keep me up at night, but enough to add a layer of doubt to each day, a nagging sense of loss, like something important had been misplaced. And yet he had always been self-sufficient, and he was a smart, likable kid, so I convinced myself that wherever he went, he was fine.

Last fall, sitting across from each other in that Arizona coffee shop, Daniel teased me about my coat and tie. It was Saturday, and he said he didn't see the point.

'It's a medical conference,' I told him. 'I have a professional reputation to uphold.'

He laughed at the thought of it. To him all these grown men and women acting and dressing in a manner that society deemed 'professional' was ridiculous.

When we parted I tried to give him five hundred dollars, but he wouldn't take it. He said he was doing good, working odd jobs here and there. He said it would feel strange carrying that much money around with him.

'It'd throw off the balance, you know?'

The hug he gave me when we parted was full-bodied and long. His hair smelled unwashed, the sweet musk of the hobo. I asked him if he was sure about the money. He just smiled. I watched him walk away with a deep feeling of impotence. He was my son and I had lost control of him, if I'd ever really had it. I was a bystander now, an observer, watching his life from the sidelines.

When he reached the corner, Daniel turned and waved. I waved back. Then he stepped into the street and I lost him in the crowd. I hadn't seen him since.

Now, in the kitchen of our Connecticut home, Fran came over and kissed me on the mouth. Her hands were covered in flour

and she held them up the way I had held mine up a few hours ago walking into the ICU.

'Alex got in another fight,' she said.

'It wasn't a fight,' Alex corrected her. 'A fight is where you hit someone and they hit back. This was more like a mugging.'

'Mr. Smart Ass has been suspended for three days,' she told me.

'I plan on being furious,' I told them. 'After I have a drink.' I took a beer from the fridge. Fran had returned to the pizza stone.

'We figured pepperoni and mushroom tonight,' she said.

'Far be it from me,' I told her.

Apropos of nothing Fran said, 'Yes, the seven-fifteen flight to Tucson.'

Tucson? Then I noticed the blue light.

'Yes, he'll need a car.'

I started to speak, but she held up a finger.

'That sounds great. Will you e-mail me the itinerary? Thank you.' The blue light went off. The finger came down.

'What can I do?' I said.

'Set the table. And I'll need you to take it out in ten minutes. That oven still scares me.'

The TV was on in the corner, playing *Jeopardy!* It was another ritual in our house, this watching of game shows. Fran thought it was good for the kids to compete with contestants on TV. I had never understood why. But every night around seven our house became a cacophony of barked non sequiturs.

'James Garfield,' said Wally.

'Madison,' corrected Fran.

'In the form of a question,' said Alex.

'Who is James Garfield?' said Wally.

'Madison,' said Fran.

'Who is James Madison?'

I had gotten used to the nightly confusion, looked forward to it. Families are defined by their routines. The pickups and drop-offs. The soccer games and debate clubs, doctors' appointments and field trips. Every night you eat and clean. You check to make sure homework is done. You turn off the lights and lock the doors. On Thursdays you drag the Toters to the curb. Friday mornings you bring them in. After a few years, even the arguments are the same, as if you are living out the same day over and over. There is comfort in this, even as it drives you mad. As a virtual assistant, Fran was militant about order. We were her family, but also her ground force. She sent us e-mails and text messages almost hourly, updating calendar events in real time. *The dentist appointment has been rescheduled. Glee club has been replaced by ice-skating.* Armies are less regimented. Twice a week in the Allen household we synchronized our watches like a special-ops team tasked with blowing up a bridge. The occasional annoyance this raised in me was tempered by love. To have married once and failed is to realize who you are in some deep and unromanticized way. The veneer of personal embarrassment about your weaknesses and idiosyncrasies is lifted, and you are then free to marry the person who best complements the real you, not the idealized version of you that lives in your head.

This is what led me to Fran after eight years of marriage to Ellen Shapiro. Though I had long thought of myself as a spontaneous and open person, I realized after my marriage to Ellen fell apart that I was, in fact, a creature of rigidity and repetition. I cannot stand living with uncertainty and forgetfulness. The bright-eyed, hippie ditziness that seemed charming in Ellen at first glance quickly became infuriating. Similarly, all the qualities that made me a good doctor – my meticulousness, my love

of redundancy, the long hours I worked – proved to be qualities that Ellen found oppressive and dull. We took to fighting at every opportunity. It wasn't so much what I did or what she did. It was who we were. And the disappointment we voiced to each other was disappointment in ourselves for making such poor choices. This is the learning process. And though our marriage produced Daniel, it was a union best dissolved before any real damage was done.

I took a glass from the cabinet, poured the remainder of my beer into it. I was thinking about the patient who had kept me late at the hospital today, Alice Kramer. She had presented herself to me two weeks earlier complaining of leg pain. It felt like her legs were on fire, she said. The pain had started three months ago. A few weeks later she'd developed a cough. At first it was dry, but soon it became bloody. She had been a marathon runner, but now even a short walk exhausted her.

I was not the first doctor she'd seen. There had been an internist, a neurologist, and a pulmonologist. But a valid diagnosis remained elusive, and despite their best efforts, the weakness and shortness of breath had persisted.

Other than the cough she seemed healthy. Her lungs sounded clear. She had some mild weakness in her right hip, but her joints, skin, and muscle were all normal. The symptoms she presented with suggested that her illness involved the nervous and pulmonary systems. This was unusual. Could it be Sjögren's syndrome? This was a disease where the body's immune system mistakenly attacks its fluid-producing glands. Except patients with Sjögren's usually complain of eye pain and dry mouth, and she had neither of these.

Or maybe it was scleroderma, which is caused by an overproduction of collagen. The condition causes a thickening of the skin and can affect other organs of the body. I ordered

blood tests. While I waited for them to return I went back over the patient's medical files. As the doctor of last resort it is the rheumatologist's job to reexamine every detail with fresh eyes. I reviewed her CAT scans and MRIs. On the chest CT, I saw faint cloudy patches on both lungs. By themselves they didn't mean anything. It was the context in which I read them that gave them meaning. Looking at Alice's film, another piece of the puzzle fell into place.

I'd ordered a lung biopsy. The pathology report showed evidence of inflammation. When the tissue came back I sat with the pathologist and reviewed the slides under a double-headed microscope. And there I saw the pivotal clue: a granuloma, a cell formation made up of groups of cells up to one hundred times the size of normal cells. They are found in the lungs only in a few diseases. The most common are sarcoidosis and tuberculosis. And since the patient showed no symptoms of tuberculosis, I was certain she suffered from sarcoid, a chronic disease characterized by tissue inflammation.

This afternoon when I told her I had a diagnosis, Alice had started crying. It had been months since the onset of her symptoms. She had been to dozens of doctors, many of whom had said her disease was all in her head. But it was my job to believe the patients who came to see me, to take pieces that didn't seem to match and solve the puzzle.

On TV, the game show was interrupted by a newscaster. Banner headlines. Crisis colors. None of us noticed at first. We were deep in the ritual of pizza. The dough was rolled. The cheese and sauce applied. Children were scolded for an overly liberal application of toppings.

'I'm no structural engineer,' I told them, 'but nothing round can hold up under that kind of weight.'

Wally told us about what he'd learned that day. Frederick

Douglass was a freed slave. George Washington Carver invented the peanut.

'I don't think he invented it,' Fran told him.

'Discovered it?'

'I think you need to go back over your notes,' I told him, finishing my beer and getting another.

Fran was the first to notice. She turned to the television and instead of toothy hosts and eager guests found shaky camera footage of some kind of rally.

'What's this?' she said.

We turned to look. On-screen were images of a political event in Los Angeles. We saw pictures of a crowd. Red, white, and blue banners hung on the walls. A presidential candidate stood onstage making a speech. The words were lost in the commercial mute of the TV. It is something the kids do when the ads come on, cutting the volume, letting the hucksters pantomime their sales pitches to the walls. As we watched the politician flinched, staggered back. Behind him two Secret Service agents pulled their weapons.

'Volume,' said Fran.

'Where's the remote?' I asked, searching around.

It took precious seconds to find the remote, then many more to locate the mute button. All the while the children yelled at me to push this button or that one. When we finally got the volume working we heard the newscaster saying, '. . . reports of at least two shots fired by an unknown gunman. Seagram has been taken to a nearby hospital. No report yet as to the extent of his injuries.'

On-screen the footage played again. The candidate onstage, the sound of shots fired from the crowd. This time the frames played slower, the camera pushing in.

'We are trying to find a better angle,' the newscaster said.

I turned the channel. CNN had it. So did ABC and NBC.

'To repeat, thirty minutes ago Jay Seagram, a Democratic senator from Montana and the presidential front-runner, was shot by an unknown gunman.'

Back on CNN we found a female reporter standing in front of a hospital. Wind whipped her hair sideways. She spoke with one hand on top of her head.

'Ted, we're hearing that Senator Seagram is in surgery. He suffered at least two gunshot wounds, one to the chest and one to the neck. No word yet as to his prognosis.'

This is how it happens. There is nothing and then, suddenly, something. A family is making dinner, talking, laughing, and then the outside world muscles in.

Fran sent the kids into the living room. They were too young for this. She was upset. She had gone to Seagram's rally the last time he came to town. She had even gone so far as to stuff envelopes for him one weekend last month. He was young and handsome and spoke with authority. She had come to believe he was what she called 'the real deal.'

'Who would do such a thing?' she said.

As a doctor I knew that Seagram was in for a long night. Reporters said that the first bullet had punctured a lung and the second had severed the carotid artery. Paramedics had gotten him to the hospital quickly, but those injuries would cause extensive blood loss. The loss of blood would depress his circulation, hindering his already compromised breathing. It would take a skilled surgeon to fix the damage in time.

We ate pizza in separate rooms, everyone glued to their TVs. Fran sat at the kitchen table, typing on her laptop, scouring the Web for the latest rumors. In the living room the kids watched Disney pirates seeking adventure on the high seas, the whimsy of the score offsetting our hawkish watching of the news. Every

few minutes I would wander in and make sure they were okay. This is what you do when crisis strikes, check on the people you love.

On TV a witness said, 'I was watching and then, suddenly, blam blam blam.'

Three shots? The news anchors had mentioned only two.

'Two hours,' said Fran. 'But you'll have to connect through Dallas.' She was sitting at her computer trying to do two different things at once. Her Bluetooth earpiece was glowing. On her computer screen I could see the airline's website side by side with a real-time political blog.

'Turn on MSNBC,' Fran told me, looking up from the computer monitor. I changed the channel. We arrived in time to see the event filmed from a new angle. Camcorder quality, shot from the far right of the stage.

'The footage you are about to see,' said the anchor, 'is quite graphic, and may be disturbing to younger viewers.'

I checked to make sure the kids were in the living room. On-screen the camcorder zoomed in on Seagram's face as he spoke. The audio was shaky, homemade. This time the sound of the first shot made us jump. It sounded like the gunman was standing right next to the camera. Onstage the senator stumbled, blood spurting from his chest. The cameraman turned, and for a split second we saw the gun elevated above the crowd. The gunman was wearing a white button-down shirt. His face was blurred by motion and chaos. People were screaming in the background, running. As we watched, the gunman turned and started pushing his way toward the door. A Secret Service agent jumped into the crowd, trying to reach him.

'Who does he look like?' said Fran. 'An actor, maybe. Do you ever get that? That feeling that you've seen people before? Is it that they remind you of someone? Or maybe just déjà vu.'

The camera swung wildly. Spectators grabbed the gunman. Agents and police reached him. They were lost to the camera.

I got closer to the TV, but rather than make things clearer it made them harder to identify.

'We are getting word,' said the anchor, 'that police have identified the gunman.'

The doorbell rang.

Fran and I looked at each other. I reviewed in my head all the disasters of my life. The death of my father, a car crash in high school that required three separate surgeries, the demise of my first marriage, the deaths of every patient I had ever lost. I weighed them against one another. It was a warm spring night, and I was a man who had found contentment in life, happiness. A lucky man, who had come to expect good things. I wiped my hands on my napkin and moved toward the hall.

There were two men in suits at the door, several others on the lawn. I saw a series of SUVs parked at the curb, blue-and-red lights flashing silently.

'Paul Allen,' said one of the men. He was tall, a white man with an impossibly close shave. There was a plastic-coated wire winding from his collar to his left ear. The man next to him was black, broad shouldered. He may have been a linebacker in a former life.

'I'm Agent Moyers,' said the white man. 'This is Agent Green. We're with the Secret Service. We need you to come with us.'

The image I was seeing didn't make sense. The words he spoke.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Are you sure you have the right house?'

Fran crept up behind me and stood wide-eyed in the foyer. She had taken the Bluetooth from her ear. The orchestral narrative of Captain Jack Sparrow reached us from the living room.

'They're saying it's Daniel,' said Fran. 'The TV. They're saying he did it.'

I looked at the Secret Service agents. They were affectless, steel-eyed.

'Mr. Allen,' said Moyers, 'we need you to come with us.'

I felt like a boxer who had taken an uppercut he never even saw.

'Let me get my coat,' I said.

I walked back into the kitchen, each step taken as if through water. I thought about the beers I'd had, the train ride home. I thought about the fences and the lawns and the neighbors I had known for years. How would they look at me now?

On television I saw a photo of my son. This is the speed of the world. Before you can even think, an action has occurred. It had been less than an hour since the shooting. Where had they gotten a photograph? It was one I didn't recognize. Daniel stood on a wide lawn in a sweatshirt and jeans. He was squinting against the sunlight, one hand raised to shield his eyes. He looked about eighteen. A college photo maybe. I remembered the day I dropped him off at Vassar, a skinny kid with all his belongings in a footlocker. A boy who had tried to grow a mustache at fourteen but ended up with only a few whiskers on each side of his mouth like a cat.

What have you done? I thought. But even as I thought it I didn't know if the question was meant for Daniel or for me.