

“I’m living the dream,” Irene Hoffman said quietly and sincerely, in between taking a gulp from the coffee mug she held in her right hand and a drag from the cigarette in her left. She stood alone on the back patio of her house, gazing at the brick wall fifteen feet in front of her that separated her property from the one behind, but somehow gazing far beyond it too. She thought about her beautiful house, sitting here in one of the most desirable spots on the planet; about the two fine automobiles parked in its garage; about her four young children, each being molded for greatness, whose muffled shouts and laughter from inside the house were the only sound currently penetrating Irene’s backyard sanctuary; about her passion for—and skill at—innovation and entrepreneurship. She had always felt that she was the master of her own fate, that the sky was the limit—and had always taken great satisfaction from this feeling.

Irene lived in Orange County, California. Relative to neighboring Los Angeles County, Orange was slightly south on the map, a fair bit to the right politically, several decades newer, and light years ahead on the Boring Sameness scale. The county consisted of a giant grid of streets forming 1,600 half-mile-square blocks surrounded by six-foot-tall sand-colored brick walls. At the corners of these blocks were gas stations, supermarkets and strip malls. Inside each block were 600 single-family homes with standardized floorplans, difficult to distinguish from each other and from the ones inside the other 1,599 blocks. The residents of the county had been enormously pleased by the advent of GPS, prior to which they’d found it quite a struggle to navigate themselves home each day.

It was at Orange County High School, so long ago, longer than she cared to remember, that young, awkward, nerdy Irene Morales had befriended young, awkward, nerdy William Smede. She and William had been close, almost inseparable, those final two years of childhood. After high school, he’d run off to UCLA, changed his name to Bill, and never returned.

“William,” she muttered, then a quick puff on her cigarette, then, “Silly boy.” Why would someone want to move away from the best place on earth? Shame. She’d never been interested in him romantically or sexually, but he was a good friend. Her favorite friend. Would’ve been cool, she thought, if they’d ended up in identical Orange County houses next door to each other, raising their kids side by side.

But they still got together a few times a year for a couple of hours, went for a bite to eat and got caught up with each other. One such meet-up had been arranged for this morning, which was why he was on Irene’s mind. And

she was excited to tell him all about her latest business venture.

“Fuckin’ A,” she said, for no reason except to formally end her little sunrise session of solitude. She dropped her cigarette butt into an old coffee can lying next to her on the concrete, opened the sliding glass door and stepped through.

It was a circus inside. All the noises that had been muffled were now coming through loud and clear, accompanied by visuals. 14-year-old Keith Hoffman, Junior (whom Irene called Junior but everyone else (including Keith Senior) called Keith) and 12-year-old Luke were sprawled on the living room carpet, their eyes glued to the massive T.V. screen in front of them, fingers punching feverishly on Xbox controllers, lobbing playful obscenities at each other. Their game characters were engaged in a hand-to-hand fight to the death. Irene was impressed with the graphics, and also with the soundtrack, which included an instrumental arrangement of the 1970s rock classic “Peace of Mind.”

“Cut out the foul language,” she barked. “And turn down the volume!” To herself she muttered, “This music is wasted on you knuckleheads, anyway. . .”

Irene’s youngest, 8-year-old Connor, was standing in the kitchen, facing off against his father in a battle of wills, and winning.

“You’ve had enough toast,” said Keith, pulling up the toaster lever that Connor had just pushed down. “And you’ve made a total mess in here.”

“*You’ve* had enough toast,” Connor shot back, laughing and pushing the lever down again. “Now go to your room!”

Keith looked relieved as he spotted Irene approaching. “Mommy’s not going to be happy about this mess, or that you’re still in your pajamas,” he said to Connor.

Irene rolled her eyes as she quickly passed through the kitchen, then asked over her shoulder, “Where’s Alex?”

“Um, I don’t know,” Keith replied. “Hey, honey, can you help me out here? Connor is really out of control this morning.”

Irene ignored her husband and continued down the corridor, singing quietly and mindlessly to herself: “Now everybody’s got advice they just keep on giving, doesn’t mean too much to me. . .”