From the outside, our house on the North Carolina coast—the Sea Section—is nothing much to look at. It might have been designed by a ten-year-old with a ruler, that’s how basic it is: walls, roof, windows, deck. It’s easy to imagine the architect putting down his crayon and shouting into the next room, “I’m done. Can I watch TV now?”

Whenever I denigrate the place, Hugh reminds me that it’s the view that counts: the ocean we look out at. I see his point, but it’s not like you have to limit yourself to one or the other. “What about our place in Sussex!” I say. From the outside, our cottage in England resembles something you’d find in a storybook—a home for potbellied trolls, benevolent ones that smoke pipes. Built of stone in the late sixteenth century, it has a pitched roof and little windows with panes the size of playing cards. We lie in bed and consider sheep grazing in the shadow of a verdant down. I especially love being there in the winter, so it bothered me when I had to spend most of January and February working in the United States. Hugh came along, and toward the end we found ourselves on Maui, where I had a reading. I’d have been happy just to fly in and fly out, but Hugh likes to swim in the ocean, so we stayed for a week in a place he found online.

“Let me guess,” the box-office manager of the theatre I performed at said. “It’s spread out over at least four levels and paneled in dark wood, like something you’d see on a nineteen-seventies TV show, right?”

He’d hit it squarely on the nose, especially the dark part. The wood on the interior walls had been rigorously stained, and was almost the color of fudge, a stark contrast to the world outside, which was relentlessly, almost oppressively bright. As for the various levels, any excuse seemed to have been taken to add stairs, even if only two or three. If you lived there full time, you’d no doubt get the hang of them. As it was, I tripped or fell down at least twice a day. The house reminded me of the condominium units my family used to rent on Emerald Isle when I was in my twenties, though none of those had a crucifix hanging in the kitchen. This one was ten inches tall, and supported a slender, miserable Christ plated in bronze.
That was the only decoration aside from a number of framed photo collages of the owner and his family taken over the years. They were a good-looking group, one that multiplied as the children grew and had kids of their own. The color in the earlier snapshots had faded, just as it has in pictures of my own family: same haircuts, same flared slacks and shirts with long droopy collars, only now drained of their vibrancy, like lawns in winter. Each generation looked healthy and prosperous, yet I found myself wondering what lurked beneath the surface—for surely there was something. “Which of you is in prison now?” I’d ask, glancing up as I tripped on the stairs to the bedroom.

The house was on the ocean, and the beach that began where the back yard ended was shaded with palms. Most often it was deserted, so, aside from a few short trips up the coast for supplies, Hugh stayed put during our week on Maui. If he wasn’t on the deck overlooking the water, he was in the water looking back at the deck. He saw whales and sea turtles. He snorkeled. My only accomplishment was to sign my name to five thousand blank sheets of paper sent by my publisher. “Tip-ins,” they’re called. A month or two down the line, they’d be bound into copies of the book I had just about finished. There were still another few weeks to make changes, but they could be only minor grammatical things. Hugh, who is good at spotting typos and used to do so for his father, a novelist, was reading the manuscript for the first time. Whenever I heard him laugh, I’d ask, “What’s so funny?” Should five or ten minutes pass with no reaction, I’d call out, “Why aren’t you laughing?”

It takes quite a while to sign your name five thousand times, and so I set myself a daily goal, and would stop whatever I was doing every two hours and pick up my Magic Marker. Often, while autographing, I’d listen to the radio or watch a TV show I like called “ Intervention.” In it, real-life alcoholics and drug addicts are seen going about their business. Most are too far gone to hold down jobs, so mainly we see them starting fights, crying on unmade beds, and shooting up in hard-to-spot places like the valleys between their toes. Amazing, to me, is that anyone would allow him or herself to be filmed in this condition. “Did you catch me on TV?” I imagine them saying to their friends. “Wasn’t it incredible when I shit on that car!”
That’s what a thirty-one-year-old drunk woman did in one of the episodes I watched as I signed blank sheets of paper: pulled down her pants, positioned herself just so, and defecated on the rear bumper of a parked Audi A4. As she went at it—a diamond shape blurring her from the waist down—I thought of my mother, in part because she was a lady. By this, I mean that she never wore pants, just skirts and dresses. She never left the house without makeup on and her hair styled. Whenever I see a young woman boarding a plane in her pajamas, or a guy in a T-shirt that reads, “Your Hole Is My Goal,” I always wonder what Mom would think.

She’s been dead since 1991, so she missed a lot of the buildup to what is now thought of as less than scandalous behavior. I once watched a show in which a group of young men were sent out to collect pubic hair. It was a contest of sorts, and in the end the loser had to put all the spoils on a pizza and eat it. That was in 2003, so, to me, someone on television shitting on a car—Sure. O.K. That makes sense. To go there straight from “Murder, She Wrote,” however, would be quite a shock.

Another reason “Intervention” makes me think about my mother is that she was an alcoholic. It’s a hard word to use for someone you love, and so my family avoided it. Rather, we’d whisper, among ourselves, that Mom “had a problem,” that she “could stand to cut back.”

Sober, she was cheerful and charismatic, the kind of person who could—and would—talk to anyone. Unlike our father, who makes jokes no one understands and leaves his listeners baffled and anxious to get away, it was fun to hear what our mom might come out with. “I got them laughing” was a popular line in the stories she’d tell at the end of the day. The men who pumped her gas, the bank tellers, the receptionists at the dentist’s office. “I got them laughing.” Her specialty was the real-life story, perfected and condensed. These take work, and she’d go through half a dozen verbal drafts before getting one where she wanted it. In the course of the day, the line she wished she’d delivered in response to some question or comment—the zinger—would become the line she had delivered. “So I said to him, ‘Buddy, that’s why they invented the airplane.’”
We’d be on the sidelines, aghast: “That’s not how it happened at all!” But what did it matter with such great results?

You’d think my mother could have seen the difference between the sunny, likable her and the dark one who’d call late at night. I could hear the ice cubes in her glass rushing forth whenever she took a sip. In my youth, when she’d join my father for a drink after work—“Just one, I have to get dinner on the table”—that was a happy sound. Now it was like a trigger being cocked.

“The little bitch,” my mother would say, her voice slurred, referring to someone she might have spoken to that afternoon, or maybe five years earlier—a shop clerk, a neighbor. “Talking to me that way? Like that? Like I’m nothing? She doesn’t know it, but I could buy and sell her.”

Fly home for a visit and you’d find her in the kitchen, slamming around, replaying some argument she’d had with our father. “Goddam bastard, shove it up your ass, why don’t you, you and your stinking ‘Why hire a plumber when I can do it myself?’ You can’t do it yourself, you hear me, buddy? You can’t.” Late in her life, my mother embraced the word “fuck,” but could never quite figure out its place in a sentence. “So I said to him, ‘I don’t give a damn fuck what you do with it, just get it the hell out of my driveway.”

By that point in the evening, she’d look different, raw, like you’d taken the lady she was earlier and peeled her. The loafers she favored would have been kicked off and she’d be in her stocking feet, hands on the counter to steady herself as she raged. She was hardly ever angry at the person she was talking to, exceptions being my brother Paul, my father, and my sister Tiffany; rather, she’d be looking for support. “Can you believe this shit? I mean, can you?” We didn’t dare contradict her.

I have an English friend named Ingrid, and her father was an alcoholic. When he lost his license for driving drunk, he got himself a tricycle and would pedal it back and forth to a pub, everyone in the village watching.
“Not a regular bike?” I asked.

“He would have fallen off!” Ingrid told me, relieved to be at the stage where she could laugh about it. Her father was a horrible person, a mean clown, which makes it easier, in a way. Our mother did nothing so cartoonish, and if she had we’d have felt traitorous making fun of her. Instead, we separated her into two people, and discounted what the second, drunk one did. For that wasn’t really her, we reasoned, but a kind of virus talking. Her father had it, too, and drank until men in white coats carted him off to the state hospital, where he received shock treatments. I look at pictures of him after his release and think, Wait, that’s me. We didn’t resemble each other when I was young, but now we could be twins.

The big moment on “Intervention” is when family and friends of the alcoholic or drug addict confront him or her. It’s supervised by a counsellor and often takes place in a sad hotel conference room with flesh-colored furniture and no windows. The addicts are usually in full blossom, drunk or high or on the nod. “What the hell . . . ?” they’ll say, looking around at their parents, their brothers and sisters, their wives or husbands, all together, seated in a semicircle.

The subjects of the intervention already feel ambushed, so steps are taken to keep them from feeling attacked as well. It’s easy to lose one’s temper in this situation, so the counsellor has instructed the friends and family members to organize their thoughts on paper. The letters they read are never wholly negative, and usually kick off with a pleasant memory. “I remember when you were brought home from the hospital” is a big one. This is the equivalent of a short story beginning with the main character’s alarm clock going off, and though I know I shouldn’t get hung up on this part of the show, I do. Oh, please, I think, rolling my eyes as the combative meth addict is told, “You had a smile that could light up a room.”

The authors of the letters often cry, perhaps because what they’ve written is so poorly constructed. Then again, reality TV is fuelled by tears. Take another of the shows I like,
“My 600-lb Life,” about morbidly obese people struggling with their weight. In each program, loved ones appear, always weeping, always saying the exact same thing: “I don’t want to have to bury my own” child/sister/nephew, etc.

Yes, well, I wouldn’t, either, I think. If digging the grave didn’t do me in, I’d surely die trying to roll that massive body into it. There’s crying on “Hoarders” as well, though rarely by the pack rat, who sees no downside to saving all his toenail clippings.

After everyone on “Intervention” has had his say, the addict is offered a spot in a rehab center. Not all of them accept, but most do. The places they’re sent tend to be sunny: Arizona, Southern California, Florida. We see them two months into their stay, most looking like completely different people. “Here are the wind chimes I made in my arts-and-crafts group,” the woman who, earlier in the program, was seen shooting speed into her neck says.

Not everyone stays the prescribed ninety days. Some leave early and relapse. Others get out on schedule and relapse a week or six months later. The heartiest of them are revisited several years down the line, still sober, many with jobs now, and children. “All that time I wasted,” they say. “What on earth was I thinking?”

I asked Ingrid once if she ever talked to her father about his drinking, and I think she was ashamed to answer no. Not that I or anyone in my family ever confronted my mother, no matter how bad it got. Even my dad, who’s super direct, and tells complete strangers that they’re loud or wrong or too fat for that bolero jacket, said nothing. Then again, it built so gradually. For as long as I was living at home, it never seemed a problem. It was only after five of her six children had left that she upped her quota. The single Scotch before dinner became two, and then three. Her wine intake doubled, then tripled. She was never a quality drinker—quantity was what mattered. She bought jugs, not bottles. After dinner, she’d switch to coffee, and then back to Scotch or wine, supplementing the alcohol with pills. “Mom’s dolls,” we called them.
When she told us that she would no longer drive at night, that she couldn’t see the road, we all went along with it, knowing the real reason was that by sunset she was in no shape to get behind the wheel. “Gosh,” we said. “We hope that doesn’t happen to our eyes when we’re your age.”

In that respect, you have to hand it to the family members on “Intervention.” Corny letters notwithstanding, they have guts. The person they’re confronting might storm out of the room and never talk to them again, but at least they’re rolling the dice. Though we never called our mother on her behavior, she knew that we noticed it.

“I haven’t had a drink in four days,” she’d announce out of nowhere, usually over the phone. You could hear the struggle and the hope in her voice. I’d call her the next night, and could tell right away that she’d lost her will power. “Why aren’t you stronger?” I wanted to ask. “I mean, really. Can’t you just try harder?”

Of course, I was drunk, too, so what could I say? I suppose I felt that my youth made it less sad. The vast plain of adulthood stretched before me, while she was well into her fifties, drinking alone in a house filled with crap. Even sober, she’d rail against that, all the junk my father dragged home and left in the yard or the basement: old newspapers and magazines, toaster ovens picked out of the trash, hoses, sheets of plywood, all of it “perfectly good,” all of it just what he needed.

In my mind, our house used to be so merry. There was music playing in every room. The phone was always ringing. People in my family laughed more than people in other families. I was as sure of that as I was of anything. Up and down the street, our neighbors left their dinner tables as soon as they could and beat it for the nearest TV. That’s what my father did, while the rest of us stayed put with our mother, vying for her attention as the candles burned down. “Group therapy,” she called it, though it was more like a master class. One of us would tell a story about our day and she’d interject every now and then to give notes. “You don’t need all that detail about the bedroom,”
she’d say, or, “Maybe it’s best to skip the part about the teacher and just cut to the chase.”

“Pour me a cup of coffee,” she’d say, come ten o’clock, our empty plates still in front of us. “Get me another pack of Winstons from the pantry, will you?” One of the perks of having six kids was that you didn’t have to locate anything on your own. “Find my car keys,” she’d command, or, “Someone get me a pair of shoes.”

There was never a rebellion, because it was her asking. Pleasing our mother was fun and easy and made us feel good.

“I’ll light her cigarette . . .”

“No, I will.”

Maybe ours wasn’t the house I’d have chosen had I been in charge of things. It wasn’t as clean as I’d have liked. From the outside, it wasn’t remarkable. We had no view, but still it was the place I held in mind, and proudly, when I thought, Home. It had been a living organism, but by the time I hit my late twenties it was rotting, a dead tooth in a row of seemingly healthy ones. When I was eleven, my father planted a line of olive bushes in front of the house. They were waist-high and formed a kind of fence. By the mid-eighties, they were so overgrown that pedestrians had to quit the sidewalk and take to the street instead. People with trash to drop waited until they reached our yard to drop it, figuring the high grass would cover whatever they needed to discard. It was like the Addams Family house, which would have been fine had it still been merry, but it wasn’t anymore. Our mother became the living ghost that haunted it, gaunt now, and rattling ice cubes instead of chains.

I’d come home from Chicago, where I was living, and she would offer to throw a dinner party for my friends. “Invite the Seiglers,” she’d say. “And, hey, Dean. Or Lyn. I haven’t seen her for a while.”
She was lonely for company, so I’d pick up the phone. By the time my guests arrived, she’d be wasted. My friends all noticed it—how could they not? Sitting at the table as she repeated a story for the third time—“I got them laughing”—watching as she stumbled, as the ash of her cigarette fell onto the floor, I’d cringe, and then feel guilty for being embarrassed by her. Had I not once worn a top hat to meet her at the airport, a top hat and suspenders? With red platform shoes? I was seventeen that year, but still. And how many times had I been drunk or high at the table? Wasn’t it maybe my turn to be the embarrassed one? Must remain loyal, I’d think.

The morning after a dinner party, her makeup applied but still in her robe, my mother would be sheepish. “Well, it was nice to see Dean again.” That would have been the perfect time to sit her down, to say, “Do you remember how out of control you were last night? What can we do to help you?” I’m forever thinking of all our missed opportunities—six kids and a husband, and not one of us spoke up! I imagine her at a rehab center in Arizona or California, a state she’d never been to. “Who knew I’d be so good at pottery?” I can hear her saying, and, “I’m really looking forward to rebuilding my life.”

Sobriety would not have stopped the cancer that was quietly growing inside her, but it would have allowed her to hold her head up—to recall what it felt like to live without shame—if only for a few years.

“You think it was my fault that she drank?” my father asked not long ago. It’s the assumption of an amateur, someone who stops after his second vodka tonic, and quits taking his pain medication before the prescription runs out. It’s almost laughable, this insistence on a reason. I think my mother was lonely without her children—her fan club. But I think she drank because she was an alcoholic.

“Why can you watch that crap?” Hugh would say whenever he walked into the house on Maui and caught me in front of “Intervention.”

“Well, I’m not only watching it,” I’d tell him. “I’m also signing my name.”
This was never answer enough for him. “You’re in Hawaii, sitting indoors in the middle of the day. Get out of here, why don’t you? Get some sun.”

And so I’d put my shoes on and take a walk, never on the beach but along the road, or through residential neighborhoods. I saw a good deal of trash—cans, bottles, fast-food wrappers—the same crap I see in England. I saw flattened cane toads with tire treads on them. I saw small birds with brilliant red heads. One afternoon, I pushed an S.U.V. that had stalled in traffic. The driver was perhaps in his mid-twenties and was talking on the phone when I offered a hand. He nodded, so I took up my position at the rear and remembered after the first few yards what a complete pain in the ass it is to help someone in need. I thought he’d just steer to the curb, but instead he went another hundred or so feet down the road, where he turned the corner. “Does he expect me to... push him... all the way... home?” I asked myself, panting.

Eventually, he pulled over, and put on the brake. The guy never thanked me, or even put down his phone. Asshole, I thought.

Back at the house, I took another stack of papers and started signing my name to them. “That’s not your signature,” Hugh said, frowning over my shoulder.

“It’s what’s become of my signature,” I told him, looking at the scrawl in front of me. You could sort of make out a “D” and an “S,” but the rest was like a silhouette of a mountain range, or a hospital patient’s medical chart just before he’s given the bad news. In my defense, it never occurred to me that I’d be signing my name five thousand times. In the course of my entire life, maybe, but not in one shot. This was not the adulthood that I had predicted for myself: an author of books, spending a week in Hawaii with his handsome longtime boyfriend before deciding which house to return to. I had wished for it, sure, but I also wished for a complete head transplant.

Hugh had made himself a Manhattan and was sitting on the patio with my manuscript. A minute passed, then two. Then five. “Why aren’t you laughing?” I called.
I was living in New York, still broke and unpublished, when my mother—only sixty-two years old—died. Aside from the occasional Sidney Sheldon novel, she wasn’t a reader, so she didn’t understand the world whose edges I was fluttering around. If she thought it was hopeless, or that I was wasting my time writing, she never said as much. My father, on the other hand, was more than happy to predict a dismal future. Perhaps it was to spite him that she supported us in our far-fetched endeavors—art school for Gretchen and me, Amy at Second City. Just when we needed money, at the moment before we had to ask for it, checks would arrive. “A little something to see you through,” the accompanying notes would read. “Love, your old mother.”

Was she sober in those moments? I wondered, signing my name to another sheet of paper. Was it with a clear mind that she believed in us, or was it just the booze talking?

The times I miss her most are when I see something she might have liked: a piece of jewelry or a painting. The view of a white sand beach off a balcony. Palm trees. How I’d have loved to spoil her with beautiful things. On one of her last birthdays, I gave her a wasp’s nest that I’d found in the woods. It was all I could afford—a nursery that bugs made and left behind. “I’ll get you something better later,” I promised.

“Of course you will,” she said, reaching for her glass. “And whatever it is I’m sure I’m going to love it.”