

# **The Borrowed Saint**

*A Horror in Five Skins*

David Boles

David Boles Books Writing and Publishing  
New York

Copyright 2026 by David Boles

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Published by David Boles Books Writing and Publishing

New York, New York

[BolesBooks.com](http://BolesBooks.com)

First Edition

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests, contact David Boles Books Writing and Publishing at [BolesBooks.com](http://BolesBooks.com).

*For the good men who dig the ditches.  
The water flows. No one applauds.*

*“The sad truth is that most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil.”*

— Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*

*“My face is my fortune, sir, she said.”*

— English nursery rhyme, traditional

*“I have been so many men, and never the one I wanted to be.”*

— Georg Kaiser, *From Morning to Midnight*

# Contents

Section 1: The Seed .....	6
Section 2: The Branch .....	33
Section 3: The Tree .....	60
Section 4: The Fire .....	90
Section 5: The Ash .....	111
On the Lability .....	123
Also by David Boles .....	125
About the Author .....	126

# Section 1

## *The Seed*

The boy stood in the bathroom and looked at the mirror and the mirror looked back and neither of them was satisfied.

He was five. Cold filled the bathroom. The tile under his feet had a color that was almost green but had given up on green and settled for something duller, something that water and bleach had worn down to the memory of green. Above the sink, a light buzzed at a frequency he could feel in his back teeth. A faucet dripped. Each drop hit the porcelain basin with a sound like a fingernail tapping bone.

His name was Asa Greer, and his face was wrong.

He could not have said what was wrong with it. The parts were ordinary. Two eyes, a nose, a mouth, the standard equipment. Brown, straight hair fell across his forehead in a way that made his mother push it back with the heel of her hand whenever she was close enough to reach, which was seldom. Skin pale in winter and slightly less pale in summer. Ears proportional. His teeth, the ones that had come in so far, were white and even.

The wrongness was not in the parts. The wrongness was in their arrangement. His face did not compose into something that made people want to keep looking. It composed into something that made people look once, register the standard equipment, and move on. It was a face designed for passing through. A face that rooms forgot.

He leaned closer to the mirror. The tip of his nose almost touched the glass. His breath fogged a small circle and he watched his reflection disappear behind the condensation and reappear as he inhaled. Gone and back. Gone and back. The game was interesting for the span of four breaths and then it was not.

He thought about the boy next door.

The boy next door was named Cal Fenton and Cal Fenton had a face that worked. Asa had watched it work many times from the upstairs window, from the sidewalk, from the back seat of his mother's car as she drove past the Fenton yard without slowing. Cal Fenton's face was round where Asa's was

narrow. Cal Fenton's mouth turned up at the corners even when he was not smiling, which meant that his resting expression was an invitation. People talked to Cal Fenton. Adults crouched to his height and asked him questions with genuine interest. Cal Fenton's mother touched his hair the way you touch something you are glad to own.

Asa, still close to the mirror, thought about Cal Fenton's face the way a hungry boy thinks about food behind glass. He thought about the roundness. The upturn of the mouth. The spacing of the eyes, which was slightly wider than his own and which gave Cal Fenton an expression of perpetual, welcoming surprise, as if every person he encountered was a gift he had not expected.

His own reflection shifted.

It happened the way water moves when you drop a stone into it: a ripple starting from the center and pushing outward. His cheekbones softened. His jawline lost its angles. The space between his eyes widened by a millimeter, then two, then three. His mouth, that thin straight line that made adults look away, curved upward at its corners as if pulled by threads attached to something above and behind his head.

The buzzing light went silent. Every drip from the faucet ceased. Stillness filled the bathroom, a stillness so complete that he could hear the blood moving through his own ears, a sound like wind in a narrow tunnel.

He was looking at Cal Fenton's face on his own head.

The face lasted three seconds. Maybe four. Long enough for him to see it, to register the way the new arrangement changed the quality of the mirror's attention. The mirror seemed to lean toward this face. The light, when it resumed its buzzing, seemed warmer on these cheeks. Even the tile under his feet seemed less cold, as if the room itself preferred this version of the boy standing in it.

Then the face collapsed. His own features rushed back like water filling a hole in sand, and the bathroom was loud again, louder than before, the buzz and the drip and the blood-sound all arriving at once and at the wrong volume, as if someone had turned every dial in the building up by a quarter turn.

He gripped the edge of the sink. His fingers were white. His heart was doing something he had never felt it do: beating in his throat instead of his chest, each pulse visible in the mirror as a twitch in the soft skin below his

jaw.

He stood in the bathroom and breathed and waited for the world to get quiet again, and when it did, when the buzz returned to its normal frequency and the drip resumed its bone-tap rhythm, he looked at his own face in the mirror and understood something he did not have the words for.

His face was not fixed.

And if his face was not fixed, then the world's reaction to his face was not fixed either.

He turned off the bathroom light and walked down the hallway to his bedroom and got into bed and pulled the covers up to his chin and lay in the dark with his eyes open. The hallway nightlight, a plastic owl plugged into the baseboard outlet, cast an orange glow through his open door. The shadow it threw on his bedroom wall was the shape of a body with no head.

He lay there and felt the edges of his face with his fingertips, pressing the bone beneath the skin, mapping the geography of what he was. Forehead, temple, cheekbone, jaw. The topography was his own again. The borrowed arrangement was gone.

No one was told. At five years old, he already understood, through the animal intelligence that children possess and adults forget, that the thing that had happened in the bathroom was a thing you kept, a tool, and tools belonged to the hand that held them.

He fell asleep with his fingers on his face and dreamed of nothing.

. . .

His mother's name was Cordelia Greer and she ran the house the way a warden runs a minimum-security facility: with efficiency, without affection, and with the constant low-grade alertness of someone who expects an infraction but cannot predict its form.

She was not cruel. Cruelty requires attention, and Cordelia's primary quality in relation to her son was the absence of attention. Feeding was required, so she fed him. Clothing was required, so she clothed him. Driving him to school, picking him up, asking about his day, receiving his answers and processing them (input received, filed, no action taken): all of this she did with competence, on schedule, without the gravity of care, which is the weight a child feels when a parent's gaze lands on them and stays.

Asa experienced his mother's presence as a thermal phenomenon. When she was in a room with him, the air between their bodies was cooler than the air between his body and any wall, any piece of furniture, any other object in the room. Not cold. Not hostile cold. Just the absence of the warmth that other mothers seemed to generate, a warmth he could observe from a distance the way a boy on a winter sidewalk observes the glow from someone else's window.

He had watched Cal Fenton's mother hold Cal Fenton's face between her palms and look at it as if looking were a form of feeding. He had watched this from behind the fence that separated their yards, standing in wet grass with his shoes soaking through, and he had felt something in his chest that was closer to the sensation you feel when you hear music from a room you cannot enter. The music is real. Other people hear it from inside the room. And yet you are outside, and the door is not locked, and still you cannot go in, because the room was not built for you.

Cordelia did not hold his face between her palms. Cordelia touched him when logistics required it: adjusting his collar, pulling the seatbelt across his chest, pushing the hair from his forehead with the heel of her hand. Each touch was brief and purposeful and landed on his skin with the weight of a transaction. Here is the touch. The touch is complete. The hand withdraws.

He did not blame her. Blame also requires a kind of attention he had not learned to direct at her. He observed her the way he observed all adults: as a landscape feature, a terrain to be navigated, a source of resources whose distribution patterns could be studied and, perhaps, influenced.

After the bathroom, he began his experiments.

The first experiments were small. He would sit at the kitchen table while Cordelia prepared dinner and work at his face the way a child works at a loose tooth: pushing gently, testing, retreating. He found that he could soften the angles of his jaw by concentrating on the sensation of softness, by thinking about things that were soft (the inside of a glove, the belly of the neighbor's cat, the skin behind his own ear) and directing that thought downward and outward into the bone.

The changes were minor. A slight rounding of the chin. A barely perceptible widening of the eyes. The upturn of the mouth by a fraction of a degree, just enough to shift his resting expression from neutral to something that might, if you were generous, be called pleasant.

Cordelia did not notice. Or she noticed below the level of naming, through a small unconscious adjustment. She lingered two seconds longer when she set his plate in front of him. She looked at him for an extra beat when he answered her question about school. The air between them warmed by half a degree, maybe less, an amount too small to measure with an instrument but large enough for a five-year-old body to register as a change in climate.

He took note. He adjusted further. Over weeks, through the autumn of that year and into the early dark of winter, he refined the pleasant face into something he wore at the kitchen table the way you wear a coat in weather. The face was his own face, tuned, like a radio dial turned a fraction of an inch to bring a fuzzy station into clarity. Same signal. Cleaner reception.

By December, Cordelia was lingering four seconds at his plate. In January, she twice touched his hair in a way that was slower than the corrective sweep, something that involved the pads of her fingers rather than the heel of her hand. Come February, she had looked at him across the living room while the television played a program neither of them was watching, and she had smiled.

A small smile. Less than a second. The muscular equivalent of a match being struck in the dark: a brief flare that illuminated the fact that the capacity for warmth existed in her face, somewhere, buried under the competence and the efficiency and the long habit of withholding.

He saw the match flare and he understood. The face was a dial, and the dial controlled the weather between bodies. If he turned the dial far enough, even Cordelia Greer would cross the cold space between them and arrive.

He practiced the pleasant face in the bathroom mirror every morning before school and every night before bed. He practiced until holding it required no more effort than holding his eyes open. The pleasant face became his default in the house, and the house responded. Not dramatically. The walls did not lean in. The light did not warm. But the silence changed quality. It became a silence that had something in it rather than a silence that was the absence of something. As if the house had been holding its breath and had, at some signal too quiet for adults to hear, begun to exhale.

One night in March, past eleven, he woke to the sound of water running in the kitchen. He lay in bed and listened. The sound was rhythmic: tap on, tap off, tap on, tap off. He got up and walked to the end of the hallway and

looked around the corner and saw Cordelia standing at the sink in the dark, washing a single glass. She washed it and rinsed it and set it on the rack and picked it up and washed it again. The kitchen was lit only by the streetlight coming through the window above the sink, and the light turned the water orange and turned Cordelia's hands orange and the glass in her hands caught the light at angles that sent small moving shapes across the ceiling, and Cordelia's face, in profile, was doing something it never did when she knew she was being observed.

It was open. The closed system had opened, the muscles around her mouth releasing their habitual tension, the mouth softening into a shape that was neither smile nor frown but the resting position of a face whose owner has temporarily forgotten to guard it, the position that a face assumes when no one is watching and the performance of competence and control is unnecessary because the audience has gone to bed. The face left behind was tired. It was older than the face she wore during the day, the skin under her eyes darker, the lines beside her mouth deeper, and the overall expression was one that Asa, with his seven-year-old's vocabulary of facial taxonomy, could only describe as the shape of someone who is carrying something and has set it down for a moment and is standing in the brief physical relief of the setting-down, knowing she will pick it up again in the morning.

A third washing. The glass set on the rack. Then she stood at the sink with her hands submerged, and the water ran over her fingers and the orange light played on the ceiling and Asa watched from the hallway and saw, for the first time, that his mother had an interior life that had nothing to do with him, that her closed face was a wall built against something else, something older, something that required the nightly ritual of washing a glass that was already clean, alone, in the dark, while the rest of the house slept.

Back to bed. No mention of what he had seen. He added it to his data: Cordelia had a face behind the face, and the face behind the face was exhausted. The difference between cold and exhausted is the difference between a dead fire and a banked one, and a seven-year-old who could change his own face by thinking about it could see the difference even if he could not feel its warmth.

. . .

The school was a low brick building that smelled of floor wax and milk cartons and the fungal sweetness of winter coats drying on hooks in an overheated hallway. Asa attended Garfield Elementary on Prospect Street, and Garfield Elementary was an experiment in institutional geometry: long corridors connecting square rooms, each square room containing twenty-two to twenty-six small bodies arranged in rows facing a larger body who stood or sat at the front and spoke.

He understood the geometry within his first week. The room was a theater. Up front, the larger body performed. Arranged in rows, the small bodies were the audience, but not a passive audience. They were an audience whose responses determined the performer's behavior: attention produced warmth, inattention produced correction, disruption produced anger. The performer was reading the audience constantly, and the audience, without knowing it, was managing the performer through the quality of the faces it presented.

Asa, who was already practicing the management of faces, found the classroom legible in a way that other children did not. He could see the machinery. He could see that Mrs. Olwen, who taught second grade, softened when she encountered a face that showed effort, and hardened when she encountered a face that showed indifference, and that the difference between effort and indifference was often a matter of millimeters: the eyebrows raised by a fraction, the chin tilted by a degree, the mouth held open by the width of a breath.

He built what he thought of as the listening face.

The listening face was a minor modification of the pleasant face: the same softened jaw, the same widened eyes, but with the addition of a slight forward lean of the head and a stillness in the lower face that suggested absorption. It was the face of a boy who was hearing every word and finding each one valuable. It was the face that every teacher, in every classroom, in every school that has ever existed, has scanned the rows hoping to find.

Mrs. Olwen found it in the third row, second seat from the left.

The effect was immediate. Asa became the student Mrs. Olwen called on when she wanted a correct answer delivered with the appearance of thoughtfulness. He became the student she praised in front of the class, the student whose homework she read with an extra half-minute of consideration, the student whose name she said with a rising intonation that suggested

pleasure. He was the most legible boy in the room, which mattered more than being the smartest. His face told Mrs. Olwen the story she needed to hear about her own effectiveness, and in return, Mrs. Olwen told the class a story about Asa's promise.

The other children felt the shift the way animals feel a change in the electromagnetic field before a storm. Something was different about the third row, second seat from the left. Something was being received there that was not being received elsewhere. Naming it was beyond them. No one tried. They adjusted, unconsciously, the way fish adjust when one moves differently: the formation tightened around the anomaly without acknowledging it.

They maintained a distance that was measured in the quality of their attention rather than in feet. When Asa spoke during group activities, they listened with a politeness that stopped just short of interest. When he sat at a lunch table, no one moved away, and no one moved closer. He occupied a space in the social geometry of Garfield Elementary that was neither center nor margin, a fold in the fabric where a boy could sit without being seen or unseen, wanted or unwanted, present in a way that left no residue.

Seven years old, and already learning that the face purchased different things from different people. From Cordelia, it purchased proximity. From Mrs. Olwen, it purchased status. From the other children, it purchased a careful, instinctive neutrality that he recognized, even then, as the response of organisms to something they could sense but not classify.

He was fine with neutrality. He was hungry for information, not the children's love. Each face he built and tested was a hypothesis, and each response was data. He was mapping the relationship between muscular arrangement and social outcome with the patience of a boy building a trap who has not yet decided what he wants to catch.

. . .

Harlan Moeck sat in the front row and did not perform.

This was the thing about Harlan that Asa could not account for. Every other child in the room, including Asa, including the loud ones and the quiet ones and the ones who thought they were refusing to play the game, was performing something. Loud children performed confidence. Quiet ones performed obedience. Defiant ones performed indifference, which is the most labor-intensive performance of all because it requires the constant

suppression of the care it pretends not to feel.

Harlan performed nothing. His face did what his face did, and what it did was respond to things as they happened. When Mrs. Olwen said something interesting, Harlan's eyebrows rose because the thing was interesting, not because raised eyebrows would produce a reward. When a classmate dropped a pencil, Harlan picked it up and handed it back because the pencil was on the floor and the floor was not where pencils should be, not because the act of returning it would be observed and credited. When another child was crying in the hallway, Harlan stopped and stood near the crying child and said nothing and did not touch the crying child and remained present, in the way that a warm object remains present next to a cold one, until the crying stopped.

Mrs. Olwen did not notice Harlan. This was remarkable only because Harlan sat in the front row, directly in her sightline, and his work was consistently adequate, and his behavior was consistently kind, and none of it registered. Harlan existed in the blind spot that schools create for children who require no management. He was a boy who was neither problem nor prize, a boy whose face did not tell adults a story about themselves, and so adults looked through him the way you look through a window to see what is on the other side.

Asa watched Harlan with an attention he gave to no one else in the classroom.

Asa watched Harlan return pencils, stand near crying children, share the larger half of a snack broken in two (giving the bigger piece away with no hesitation and no glance to see if the giving had been witnessed). At recess, he watched Harlan lose a game and congratulate the winner with a hand on the winner's shoulder and a sentence that was too quiet for Asa to hear from across the blacktop but that made the winner's face open in a way that suggested the sentence had been worth more than the victory.

Asa studied these actions like a naturalist with an opaque species. He could see what Harlan did. He could catalog the inputs and outputs. What he could not locate was the engine. Something inside Harlan was generating these behaviors, and that something was a force that preceded calculation, strategy, and performance, a force that operated below the level of decision, the way a heart beats without being told to beat.

He tried to build a Harlan face. In the bathroom mirror, he attempted to reproduce the quality of Harlan's expression: the openness, the absence of agenda, the willingness to be seen without armor. Jaw softened. Eyes widened. Mouth relaxed into something more exposed than the pleasant face or the listening face, more permeable, a face that was receiving rather than projecting.

The result was close, the angles right, the muscle positions accurate. And the face was wrong. It was wrong like a wax replica of a living person: every measurement precise, every surface rendered, and the whole thing dead at its center. The openness in Harlan's face came from somewhere behind the face. Asa's version of the openness came from the face alone. It was a window painted on a wall. It looked like a window. Light did not pass through it.

He dropped the experiment. He went back to the pleasant face, which worked. The Harlan face failed because the thing it was copying was a condition of the self rather than an arrangement of features, and conditions cannot be stolen. They can only be grown, and the soil in Asa Greer produced different crops.

He was eight years old and this was the closest he would come to understanding his own limitation. He would spend the rest of his life building better and better replicas of windows, and people would praise the craftsmanship, and light would never pass through any of them.

. . .

The town was called Decker, Ohio, and it sat in the flat land between Columbus and the Pennsylvania border like a coin dropped on a table: round, small, and unlikely to be picked up again. Population four thousand and something. The something fluctuated with births and departures, and in the years Asa lived there, the departures outpaced the births by a margin that was visible in the empty storefronts on Main Street and the houses on Elm and Prospect and Vine whose windows went dark one by one, as if the town were a body losing feeling in its extremities.

The sky above Decker sat too low. This was a perception Asa held from early childhood and never revised: the sky over the town was closer to the ground than skies in other places, closer than the sky in the pictures his teachers pinned to the classroom walls, closer than the sky on the television, which seemed to begin where the rooftops ended and extend upward forever.

In Decker, the sky started just above the telephone wires and pressed down with a weight he could feel on the top of his head when he walked to school in the morning. It was a gray sky for most of the year, the gray of galvanized metal, and when it was not gray it was a blue so intense it hurt to look at, a blue that tasted like the spark you see when you bite down on aluminum foil.

The colors of Decker were too vivid. He experienced them this way from the beginning and would only later understand that his sensory processing was running at a different clock speed than other people's. Red, at the stop sign on the corner of Prospect and Fourth, vibrated, pushing outward from its surface and occupying the air like heat from a stove. Green, on the lawns in spring, was so saturated it looked wet even in dry weather, as if the grass were exuding its color the way a cut exudes blood. Yellow, on the walls of Mrs. Olwen's classroom, was a yellow that tasted of metal, of pennies, of the inside of a battery.

These sensory experiences were his normal. Other children, he assumed, tasted yellow and felt the weight of the sky and experienced the red of stop signs as a thermal event. Everyone, he believed, lived in a world this bright, this heavy, this loud with color, and the adults who moved through it with apparent ease had simply learned to bear the volume.

Much later, he would learn that the volume was his alone. That his nervous system was wired to receive at an intensity most bodies filtered out before consciousness. That this intensity was connected, in ways he would never fully map, to the other thing his body could do: the thing with faces. The receptors that made color taste and sound weigh and light press were the same receptors that could reach out and copy the contours of another person's skull. Sensitivity and mechanism were the same instrument.

But at seven, at eight, at nine, he simply lived in a world that was louder than other people's world, and he compensated by building faces that gave him control over the one variable that mattered: how other people responded to his presence in their loud, bright, pressing rooms.

. . .

The first full shift happened in October of the year he turned ten.

He had been practicing partial shifts for years by then, learning to soften, widen, brighten, round. By now he could adjust his features like a sound engineer at a mixing board: this up, that down, the overall balance tilted

toward warmth or toward neutrality depending on what the room required. But every adjustment had been a modification of his own face. He had never left his own face entirely. He had never stepped out of one arrangement of bone and skin and into another.

The boy he chose was someone he had seen once, in the cereal aisle of the grocery store on Fifth Street, a boy about his age with reddish hair and a spray of freckles across the bridge of his nose and a face that carried an expression Asa thought of as the unworried face. It was the face of a child who had never had cause to study faces. A face that wore itself without effort, without strategy, without the constant low-grade calibration that Asa performed every waking hour. The unworried face was the face of a boy for whom identity was a condition to be inhabited rather than a problem to be solved, the way a fish inhabits water, without the awareness that water is a thing, that you are in it, that there are places where it is not.

He wanted that face.

He stood in the bathroom. The light buzzed. A faucet dripped. Cold tile pressed against his feet. Everything was the same as the first time, five years earlier, except that he was larger and the bathroom was smaller and he knew, this time, what he was going to do.

He closed his eyes and thought about the boy in the cereal aisle. Reddish hair. A spray of freckles. The spacing of the eyes and the slope of the nose and the way the boy's lower lip protruded a fraction past the upper, giving him the look of someone perpetually on the verge of asking a question.

The shift started in his jaw. He felt the bone move. It did not hurt. It produced a sensation that was worse than pain because it had no name: a deep, wet reconfiguration, as if the structures beneath his skin were made of something softer than bone, something between cartilage and clay, and they were being pressed into a new mold by hands he could not see. The sound it made was audible only to him, and only because his ears were attached to the skull that was changing: a muffled clicking, rhythmic, like knuckles cracking underwater, like the sound a lobster shell makes when you twist it apart.

The clicking spread upward from his jaw to his cheekbones. His nose shortened. The bridge narrowed. His forehead widened by a centimeter, then two. His eye sockets adjusted, and the adjustment produced a moment of doubled vision, two overlapping images of the bathroom mirror, one from his old eye-spacing and one from the new, and the overlap made him dizzy

enough that he gripped the sink again and waited for the images to merge.

They merged. The clicking stopped. The silence returned, that same total silence from five years ago, the silence that felt as if every machine in the building, every insect in the walls, every car on the street, every airplane in the too-low sky, had stopped at the same instant.

He opened his eyes.

The boy from the cereal aisle looked back at him from the mirror.

The face was complete. A replacement. Reddish hair (his own brown hair had changed, the pigment shifting from root to tip in a wave he could see in the mirror's fluorescent light, brown giving way to copper giving way to the orange-red of the grocery store boy). Freckles across the bridge of the nose (each one appearing individually, like drops of brown ink falling on wet paper, spreading into circles, then settling into the pattern he had memorized). The lower lip protruding past the upper. The unworried expression. Every feature in place.

His eyes were the same.

He leaned close and confirmed this. The rest of the face was borrowed. The eyes were his. Brown, flecked with amber near the pupil, set in a shape that was neither wide nor narrow. His eyes, in the other boy's face, looked like tenants in a building they had not chosen: present, stable, belonging to somewhere else.

He stepped back and looked at the whole picture. A boy. Reddish hair. Freckles. The unworried face. Wearing Asa Greer's eyes the way a stranger wears a borrowed coat: without adjusting it to fit.

The smell hit him then. His own smell had changed. The specific Asa-smell, the one that had been the background odor of his own body for ten years (a smell like warm bread crust and pencil shavings and the mineral tang of his own scalp), was gone. In its place was a different chemistry: something sweeter, grassier, with a note of something that reminded him of copper pipes. The other boy's smell. Or rather: a copy of the other boy's smell, reconstructed from whatever molecular information had transferred during the copying.

The original smell was gone. Gone. He would never smell like warm bread crust and pencil shavings again. That combination had been dissolved and replaced, and the dissolution was permanent.

This was the cost. What he knew was partial: something was different, something had been exchanged, and the exchange felt like losing a tooth: a gap where a solid thing used to be, a space the tongue could not stop probing.

He held the new face for eleven minutes. He knew because he counted the drips from the faucet and divided by the rate he had memorized over years of standing in this bathroom (approximately twelve drips per minute, varying with water pressure, which varied with the time of day, which was currently mid-afternoon, when the pressure was highest because fewer houses on the block were running their taps).

During those eleven minutes, he touched the new face with his hands and felt the differences. Skin slightly coarser than his own, with a texture over the cheekbones like ground glass. A jawline smoother, rounder, the bone sitting higher than his own jaw, closer to the surface, with less flesh between bone and air. A forehead warmer than the rest of the face, as if the reddish hair generated heat the way dark soil absorbs sunlight.

He also felt something else. The other boy's face, worn on his own skull, carried a residue that operated through physical channels despite having no physical weight. Phantom sensation in his cheeks: the ghost of a smile that belonged to someone else's recent memory. Tightness at the corners of his eyes, suggesting the boy had been squinting in sunlight shortly before Asa saw him in the grocery store. Faint pressure behind his lower lip, the muscular memory of the protruding expression, which felt like wearing a shoe that has been broken in by another foot.

The other boy's last expression was in there. The face Asa had copied came with an imprint of whatever the face had been doing at the moment of copying, and that imprint sat in his muscles the way a tune sits in the mind after the radio is turned off: not chosen, not wanted, simply present.

He stood in the bathroom for the remaining minutes and experienced, for the first time, the full strangeness of prolonged occupation. The borrowed face was not static. It did small things on its own: a twitch at the corner of the mouth, a flicker in the muscles above the left eyebrow, involuntary adjustments that belonged to the face's original habits rather than to Asa's conscious control. The face had habits. It had been worn by a boy who smiled easily, and the musculature retained that ease the way a mattress retains the shape of the body that sleeps on it, and the ease pulled at Asa's own facial

muscles from inside, trying to recruit them into a smile he had not requested. He resisted. The resistance took effort. Holding a borrowed face, he was learning, was like wearing a coat that wanted to walk in a different direction.

At the eight-minute mark, the bathroom began to feel smaller. Not physically (the walls did not move, the ceiling did not descend) but perceptually. His spatial awareness had shifted with the face. The cereal-aisle boy was the same height as Asa, roughly, but the boy's habitual posture was different (shoulders back, chin level, the posture of a child who was used to being looked at without flinching), and the posture placed Asa's eyes at a slightly different angle to the room, and the angle made the ceiling seem closer and the mirror seem larger and the tile floor seem to stretch farther from the door to the tub. He was in the same bathroom. The bathroom was a different room. The room was different because the body in it was different, and the body was different because the face was different. Change the face and you change the body. Change the body and you change the room. The room changes the world, and the world does not know it has been changed. The not-knowing is the power. The power is ten years old and standing on cold tile in a bathroom in Ohio.

After eleven minutes, he let the face go. His own features returned, rushing back the way they always did, like water filling a hole. Clicking briefer this time, more practiced, as if the process had loosened with use. Silence for only a second. Then the world resumed.

He looked at his own face in the mirror. The standard equipment. The arrangement that rooms forgot. Everything was the same as it had been twelve minutes ago, except for the smell. The bread-crust-and-pencil smell was gone. His nostrils drew in air and found nothing where the smell had been. A blank. A gap in the sensory record.

He turned off the light and walked to his bedroom.

. . .

The next day was a Saturday, and Asa put on the borrowed face and walked through Decker.

He had not planned this. Or rather, he had planned it the way a cat plans a jump: through the sudden alignment of impulse and capacity, the body knowing before the mind that the distance was crossable. He woke up, ate breakfast (Cordelia had made oatmeal, which he experienced as texture

without flavor, the first meal since the shift, and he registered the absence of the brown-sugar taste he used to find in Cordelia's oatmeal as another debit in the ledger he did not yet know he was keeping), and went upstairs and stood in the bathroom and put on the cereal-aisle boy's face.

It was easier the second time. Clicking faster this time. Silence shorter. Doubled vision lasting only a blink. Within two minutes he was the other boy: reddish hair, freckles, unworried face, a smell like grass and copper.

He put on a baseball cap from the back of his closet. He walked downstairs. Cordelia was in the kitchen with her back to the hallway. He walked past the kitchen doorway and out the front door and down the porch steps and onto the sidewalk and into the town.

The world was different.

The difference was not dramatic. Decker was still Decker: the same too-low sky, the same too-bright colors, the same streets emptying one storefront at a time. But the world's response to his body moving through it had changed. A woman walking a dog on Prospect Street glanced at him and her face performed a tiny, automatic calculation: recognition of a child, assessment of threat (none), default expression of benign neighborliness. She did not know him. The borrowed face was from the grocery store, not the neighborhood, and her subroutine processed him as an unfamiliar-but-categorizable object. Boy. Approximately ten. Reddish hair. Freckles. Harmless.

When Asa walked through Decker wearing his own face, the calculation produced a different output. He had seen it hundreds of times. The glance. The assessment. And then a flicker, brief and involuntary, that he had learned to read as a computational error: the woman's face would hesitate, as if the categorization had stalled for a half-second, as if something in the standard equipment had failed to resolve into a clean output. Boy. Approximately ten. Brown hair. Harmless? The question mark was the flicker. It was the moment when the observer's system flagged an anomaly it could not name and then, because naming it was impossible and the sidewalk encounter did not justify further processing, dismissed the flag and moved on.

The borrowed face produced no flicker. The borrowed face resolved cleanly. Boy, approximately ten, reddish hair, freckles, harmless, done. The woman's subroutine completed and her gaze moved on and Asa was categorized and filed and freed.

He kept walking. The town felt different through the borrowed face, and the difference was not in the town. Decker's streets were the same cracked sidewalks, the same leaning mailboxes, the same porches where paint curled like dead skin. What was different was his body's relationship to these surfaces. Walking in his own face, he moved through Decker with the low-grade vigilance of an animal that knows it carries a scent the pack has not accepted: shoulders slightly raised, stride slightly shortened, eyes scanning for the micro-responses of passersby that told him, in real time, whether his face was being flagged or filed or forgotten. Walking in the borrowed face, the vigilance was gone. Shoulders dropped. Stride lengthened. Eyes moving from face to face with the easy rotation of a person who expects to be received without incident, and the expectation was fulfilled, and the fulfillment did something to his body that he had never felt before: it relaxed. The muscles in his back, which had been carrying a tension he had not known they were carrying because the tension had been present since birth and was therefore invisible in the way the weight of the atmosphere is invisible, released. He walked down Prospect Street with the posture of a boy who belonged in the world, and the world, receiving the signal of belonging, confirmed it.

Forty minutes of walking. Down Main Street, past the barbershop and the hardware store and the pharmacy with the green awning that was turning the color of old moss. Through the park where the oaks were dropping their last leaves in slow spirals that he watched with the attention of someone seeing the town from inside a different body, which is a different town. Past the school, dark and locked on a Saturday, its brick face reflecting the gray sky in its windows. Past Cal Fenton's house, where Cal Fenton was in the front yard kicking a soccer ball against a wall, and Cal Fenton looked up and saw the borrowed face and his expression did the thing Asa had been waiting to see: it opened. Cal Fenton looked at the reddish-haired boy on the sidewalk and his face produced the expression of friendly curiosity that Asa had studied from behind fences and through car windows for five years. Cal Fenton raised a hand. A wave. The universal signal of a child who sees a potential playmate and has no reason to hesitate.

Asa raised a hand back. He kept walking.

Home. The borrowed face released in the bathroom. Hands washed. Downstairs. Cordelia was where he had left her, in the kitchen, and when he

passed the doorway she did not look up.

The cost came that night. He was lying in bed, in the dark, with the headless owl shadow on the wall, and he realized that he could not remember the smell of his bedroom. Not the bread-crust-and-pencil smell, which he had already lost. This was different. His bedroom had a smell: the combination of laundry detergent from the sheets, dust from the bookshelf, the wood of the dresser, the mustiness of the closet where winter coats waited in bags. That combination had been the smell of sleep, the smell of lying in the dark with the owl on the wall, the smell of the place where consciousness ended and the nothing of night began.

The combination was gone. He breathed in and the room smelled of nothing. Sheets odorless. Bookshelf odorless. Closet stripped of its must. The room existed, and he existed in it, and the connection between them that had been maintained by the most primitive and persistent of senses, the sense that operates even in sleep, even in darkness, even when every other sense has withdrawn, was severed.

He lay in the bed that smelled of nothing and felt, for the first time, the loneliness of a boy who can become anyone and is, because of that ability, losing the sensory evidence of being himself. He did not have the word for what he was losing. The word was home. Home is not a building. Home is the smell of the room where you sleep. When the smell is gone, the room is just a room, and you are just a body lying in it, and the difference between you and any other body in any other room is a difference of location, not of belonging.

He was ten years old and he had made his second exchange. The first was the smell of his own skin. The second was the smell of his own bed. He could not have predicted the exchanges that would continue, that each shift would subtract something from his inventory of sensation, that the ledger would never balance, that by the time he was a grown man he would have traded so much of his sensory self for borrowed faces that the remaining inventory would fit in a list you could write on a napkin.

He lay in the bed and stared at the headless shadow and eventually fell asleep.

. . .

He consumed two more faces before his eleventh birthday.

The second was a girl. She was in the grade below his, a girl named Waverly who had transferred from a school in Columbus and who carried herself with the confidence of a child who has been popular in a larger place and cannot understand why the smaller place has not yet recognized her status. Waverly's face interested Asa because it was a performing face, like his, but a performing face that believed in its own performance. Waverly smiled because she expected the smile to work, and the expectation was so deeply integrated into her musculature that the smile was, from any external measurement, genuine. She was performing, and she did not know she was performing, and the not-knowing was what made the performance effective.

He took her face on a Tuesday afternoon in the school library. She was at the next table, reading a book with a horse on the cover, and he sat across from her and looked at her face and felt the reaching sensation, the extension of something from inside himself toward the architecture of her skull, and the copy was made. It was smoother than the first time. Faster. The imprint transferred with a sensation he experienced as a temperature: warm, like pressing your hand against a window in a room where someone has been breathing.

Waverly continued reading. She turned a page. She was unaware that anything had happened. The copy was a copy. The original remained intact. She was still Waverly, still performing, still believing.

That night, Asa stood in the bathroom and wore Waverly's face and looked at the girl in the mirror and learned something important. A female face on his body produced a different set of distortions than a male face. The bone structure pulled differently against his muscles. The skin lay differently over the changed geography. And the world, when he imagined walking through it wearing this face, would respond according to a different set of rules, rules he could observe but not feel from inside, rules that governed how the world treated the category of person this face signified.

He held Waverly's face for six minutes and then let it go. The cost was the texture of his winter coat. He had owned the coat for two years. Its fabric was a nubby wool blend that he had liked to rub between his thumb and forefinger while waiting for the school bus. After the shift, the coat felt like every other coat: a layer of material between his skin and the air, undifferentiated, carrying no tactile identity. Another item removed from the inventory. Another connection to his own physical history dissolved.

The third face was a man's. An adult's face. A risk, and he knew it was a risk, which is why he did it.

The man was a stranger at the gas station on Route 16, filling a truck, wearing a canvas jacket and a cap with a logo Asa did not recognize. The man had a face that Asa categorized as the authority face: square jaw, heavy brows, a mouth that suggested competence and finality, a face that said I have made decisions and do not intend to explain them. It was a face that took up space. A face that rooms organized themselves around, the way furniture organizes itself around a fireplace: everything pointing toward the source of heat.

He took the face from across the gas station lot, standing by the air pump pretending to fill a bicycle tire. The distance was the farthest he had attempted. He felt the reaching sensation extend across twenty feet of cracked asphalt, and the transfer was thinner at this distance, less detailed, like a photograph taken through dirty glass. The imprint arrived with less warmth. Less residue. The man's last expression (a neutral, task-focused look: filling a truck, thinking about something else, a grocery list or a football score or a woman's name) was barely perceptible, a ghost of a ghost.

He held the adult face that night in the bathroom and the mirror showed him something that frightened him.

He looked old. Not old in years. Old in authority. The square jaw and the heavy brows and the decided mouth, mounted on a ten-year-old's body, produced a distortion that was deeply, specifically wrong. It was the wrongness of scale: an adult's face on a child's frame, like a cathedral door installed on a garden shed. The face demanded a body that matched its implications, and his body was three feet eleven inches tall and weighed sixty-two pounds and had not yet begun to change in the ways that puberty would change it.

He let the face go after ninety seconds. The mirror showed him his own face, small and standard and forgettable, and for the first time the forgettability felt like shelter.

The cost was the taste of tap water. Decker's tap water had a flavor: mineral, slightly metallic, with a finish that reminded him of the inside of a tin can. It was a taste, if not a pleasant one, and it was the taste of thirst being satisfied in the place where he lived. After the shift, water tasted of nothing. He drank and the liquid was wet and cold and it was water the way a word in

a language you do not speak is a word: present, functional, carrying none of the meaning that made it more than sound.

. . .

By the spring of the year he turned eleven, Asa Greer had taken three faces and lost four sensory specifics: the smell of his own skin, the smell of his own bedroom, the texture of his winter coat, and the taste of tap water. He could not feel the losses as grief because grief requires the recognition that something valuable has been taken, and he did not value sensation for itself. He valued sensation for its utility, and the lost sensations were not useful. They were background. They were the wallpaper of a life he was already preparing to leave.

What he valued was the data. Three faces, three different worlds. The cereal-aisle boy's face opened doors that his own face left closed. Waverly's face taught him that the world ran on different tracks for different categories of body. The gas station man's face taught him that authority is architecture, that a commanding face is a building, and that a building needs a foundation of adequate size or it collapses.

He sat in Mrs. Olwen's classroom, wearing the pleasant face, running the listening subroutine, receiving the steady current of approval that his performance generated, and he watched Harlan Moeck in the front row.

Harlan was having a bad spring. His father was sick. Asa knew this the way all children in small towns know the private troubles of other children's families: through the slow osmosis of overheard conversations, observed absences, and the quality of a child's face when the child is carrying something too heavy for a child's body. Harlan's face had changed over the winter. The openness was still there, but it was thinner, as if the same window now had less glass. Pencils returned, presence offered to crying children, all of it still done without strategy, without performance, without the expectation of reward. But the doing cost him more, and the cost was visible in the shadows under his eyes and the way his shoulders sat higher than they used to, pulled upward by a tension that had moved into his body and set up residence.

Asa watched Harlan carry the weight. He watched the way Harlan's kindness continued even when Harlan's own reserves were depleted. He watched and he learned the last lesson Harlan would teach him before they

ceased to exist in each other's worlds.

One afternoon in April, Asa was sitting on the concrete wall behind the gymnasium, eating an apple that tasted of apple (this was before the flattening; apples still had grain and acid and a sweetness that arrived at the back of his tongue like a small bell), and Harlan Moeck sat down next to him. Not across from him. Not facing him. Next to him, on the same wall, looking at the same parking lot, close enough that Asa could hear his breathing.

Harlan said nothing for a full minute. Asa, who was wearing the pleasant face and who had prepared, in the half-second of Harlan's approach, the appropriate response for a peer interaction (eye contact, mild smile, opening question about the school day), found that none of the subroutines were being called. Harlan had not looked at him. Harlan was looking at the parking lot. And the quality of Harlan's presence beside him on the wall was unlike the quality of any other person's presence Asa had experienced, because Harlan's presence made no demand. It did not ask to be acknowledged. It did not perform casualness. It occupied the space next to Asa the way a warm stone occupies a wall: by being there, and by being warm, and by not requiring the wall's opinion on the matter.

Then Harlan said: My dad's going in for surgery on Thursday. I'm scared.

Not to Asa. Not as a confession that required a response. The words arrived with the directional quality of a person speaking to the parking lot, to the air, to the situation itself, and Asa happened to be sitting in the path of the speech the way a person sitting on a riverbank happens to be in the path of the current. The words were not aimed. They were released.

Asa's subroutine offered three responses: sympathy (tilt head, soften eyes, say something about hoping it goes well), deflection (change the subject, offer a distraction), or reciprocal disclosure (share something of his own to create the illusion of mutual vulnerability). He selected the first. He opened his mouth.

What came out was nothing. His mouth opened and no sound emerged, and the silence that followed was not the silence of a boy choosing not to speak. It was the silence of a mechanism encountering an input it had no program for. Harlan had given him something real, and his system, which was designed to produce appropriate outputs in response to social inputs, could not locate the output because the input was not social. It was human. And human was a language he could parse but not speak.

They sat on the wall. The parking lot was empty. The apple was half-eaten in his hand. After another minute, Harlan stood up and walked away, and as he walked he put his hand on Asa's shoulder, briefly, the way you touch a fence post as you pass it, confirming its location, acknowledging its presence without expecting it to move. The hand was warm. The warmth lasted on Asa's shoulder for eleven seconds after the hand was gone. He counted.

Harlan would be fine. His father would get better (or not, and Harlan would carry that too, without performance, without reward). Harlan would continue to be kind because that is what Harlan did, and the doing cost him, and the cost was visible, and the cost was not refunded by the world's response, and Asa could see this and could not understand it and the not-understanding was the closest thing to reverence his system could produce.

Asa would not be fine. Asa would be something else. Something more effective than fine, more successful than fine, more visible and more powerful and more admired than fine. He would be everything that the world distributes to faces it finds legible, and he would stand on stages and in corridors and in rooms full of people who loved what they saw, and the thing they loved would be a window painted on a wall, and Harlan Moeck would be somewhere digging a ditch, and the ditch would be real, and the water in the ditch would flow somewhere useful, and no one would applaud.

. . .

The school year ended. Summer came in with the smell of cut grass and hot asphalt and the ozone sweetness that precedes a thunderstorm on the Ohio plains. Asa could still smell these things. The losses so far were specific: individual smells, individual tastes, individual textures. The general categories remained. He could smell grass. He could not smell the grass of the yard behind his house, which had once carried a note of wild onion from the patch that grew along the fence. That note was gone. The grass smelled of grass. It did not smell of home.

He spent the summer practicing. He discovered that composite faces, built from features of multiple sources rather than copied from a single person, were more stable than borrowed faces. A borrowed face carried the residue of its original owner, and that residue pushed back against his control, a subtle pressure from inside, like wearing a glove that another hand

had broken in. A composite face carried no residue because no original existed. It was his construction, his architecture, and it sat on his skull with the passive obedience of a thing that had never belonged to anyone.

He built three composites over the summer. The first was a boy slightly older than himself, with features chosen for approachability: the roundness of Cal Fenton's jaw, the freckle pattern of the cereal-aisle boy, the eye spacing of a child he had seen at the county fair. The face was pleasant without being memorable. It was the face of a boy you would sit next to on a bus and forget by the next stop.

The second composite was sharper. He built it to test whether a face could project intelligence as a visual quality: jaw narrowed, cheekbones raised, brow given a slight forward weight that suggested concentration, mouth resting between the pleasant upturn and a straight line in a position that read as thoughtful. He wore this face to the public library and asked the librarian a question about a book, and the librarian answered him the way she would answer a colleague rather than a child: with specificity, without condescension, without the automatic volume reduction that adults apply when addressing small people. It had worked. One face, and his category changed.

The third composite was an experiment in neutrality. He stripped away every feature that invited a response: no warmth, no sharpness, no suggestion of anything. The face he built was the most forgettable arrangement of features he could achieve: average in every dimension, carrying no signal that would cause a viewer's system to flag, process, or remember. He wore this face to the grocery store and moved through the aisles and not a single person looked at him. Not once. Invisible. A body occupying space without generating friction, a human shape that the eye registered and discarded before conscious processing could engage.

Twenty minutes in the grocery store wearing the neutral face. Past the cashier, whose eyes moved across him the way eyes move across a shelf of products they are not looking for: receiving, dismissing, continuing. Next to a woman comparing cereal boxes, he stood and the woman did not adjust her posture, did not angle her body to create the small social buffer that people unconsciously create when another person enters their immediate space, because her system had classified him as equivalent to the shelf he was standing next to: an object, a fixed element of the environment, a thing that

required no social response. In the produce section, he stood among the apples and watched a father and son select oranges three feet from where he was standing, and neither the father nor the son registered his presence, and the non-registering was a form of freedom he had never experienced, the freedom of total perceptual exemption, and the freedom produced in his body a sensation he would later recognize as the prototype of a feeling that would define his relationship to power: the pleasure of moving through a world that does not see you, that cannot prepare for you, that has no defenses against a thing it does not know is there. The pleasure of the unobserved observer. The efficiency of a body that generates no friction.

. . .

September arrived. The leaves on the oaks in the park turned colors that Asa experienced as temperatures: the reds were hot on his eyes, the oranges were warm, the yellows were the electric lukewarm of a wire carrying current. Eleven years old, entering his last year at Garfield Elementary. Taller by two inches and heavier by eight pounds, his voice unchanged, his body not yet begun on its reorganization. The bathroom mirror showed him a boy on the edge of a transition that had nothing to do with the transitions he had been practicing.

He stood in the bathroom. The light buzzed. The faucet had been fixed in July, and the silence where the drip used to be was a new kind of silence, a silence that was the absence of one sound rather than the absence of all sound. He looked at his own face. The standard equipment. The arrangement that rooms forgot.

He thought about what he had learned.

He had learned that faces are currency. Different faces purchase different things. The pleasant face purchased proximity from Cordelia and approval from Mrs. Olwen. The cereal-aisle boy's face had purchased the wave from Cal Fenton and the clean categorization of the woman with the dog. A sharp composite had purchased the librarian's respect. A neutral composite: invisibility.

He had learned that every face inhabits a different world, and the differences are not cosmetic. Rules change, temperatures shift, the quality of attention reorganizes. A face determines how people look at you and, more powerfully, whether they look at you at all.

He had learned that the cost of changing faces is paid in sensory specifics. Each shift subtracts something from his connection to his own history. The smell of his skin, the smell of his bed, the texture of his coat, the taste of water. These are the small, unremarkable anchors that tether a person to the life they are living as opposed to any other life, and he has cut four of them, and the cutting was easy, and the ease is itself a piece of information.

He had learned, too, that the cost scales with the ambition of the change. The daily adjustments, the tuning of a jaw or the softening of a brow, cost nothing. They are maintenance. The full acquisition of a new face, the reaching and the copying and the clicking of bone into unfamiliar positions, is where the ledger debits. And prolonged occupation of a borrowed body, wearing the whole architecture rather than sampling a feature, costs deeper still, as if the mechanism charges rent on borrowed space and the currency is always a sensation he will not get back.

He had learned that Harlan Moeck's face cannot be copied. The architecture can be reproduced. The expression can be approximated. But the thing that makes Harlan's face what it is, the thing that makes it a window rather than a wall, is located somewhere behind the face, in a room Asa cannot enter, and the door is not locked, and still he cannot go in.

He had learned that he is alone in a way that other people are not alone. Other people are connected to their lives through a web of sensory experience that is specific and irreplaceable and so ordinary that they do not notice it until it is gone. Strand by strand, he is losing that web and replacing it with faces that connect him to other people's responses and sever him from his own existence. An expert at producing reactions, an amateur at having experiences. Ten years old and then eleven, standing in a bathroom that smells of nothing, tasting water that tastes of nothing, wearing a face he was born with and no longer trusts, and the world outside the door is louder and brighter and heavier than anyone else's world, and he can walk through it wearing any face he chooses, and the choosing is the thing that is taking away his ability to be present in the world without a disguise.

He turned off the light.

He walked down the hallway. The headless owl threw its shadow on his bedroom wall. He got into bed. He pulled the covers up to his chin. No smell from the sheets. No smell from the room. Air at the temperature of air and

nothing more.

He lay in the dark with his eyes open. His face, his original face, his first face, the face that was wrong in the way that a tool is wrong when it does not fit the hand, was the only face he could not change on purpose. The face he was born with, the face he would carry inside every other face he would ever wear, the foundation beneath every composite, the original beneath every copy, and it was already becoming difficult to look at, the way a house you are leaving becomes difficult to look at: because you have decided that you are going somewhere else, and the decision makes the house smaller, and the smallness makes you sure you are right to go.

Eyes closed. Sleep arrived. In the dream, a hallway that went on longer than any hallway should, and every door in the hallway was closed, and behind every door was a face waiting to be worn, and at the end of the hallway was a mirror, and in the mirror was a face he did not recognize, and the face was smiling, the warmest thing he had ever felt. He reached for it. The mirror was a wall. The warmth was paint.

## Section 2

### *The Branch*

The hallway was a throat.

Asa moved through it at 7:42 on a Monday morning in September, carried by the peristaltic rhythm of four hundred bodies pushing toward their classrooms, and the hallway was a throat that swallowed them all at the same rate regardless of size or preference or the quality of dread each body carried into the building. The walls were the color of unbrushed teeth. The floor was linoleum that had been green in a previous decade and was now a shade that suggested something organic had been pressed flat and varnished over, and the sneakers and boots and cheap dress shoes of Keeler-Hargrave High School passed over it in a continuous abrasion that raised a smell of rubber and floor wax and the faintly electrical odor of synthetic fibers heated by friction.

He was fourteen. His body had changed in ways that had nothing to do with the changes he controlled. Shoulders widened. Jaw squared at the corners, which was convenient because the composite face he wore to school was built on a squared jaw and the natural development saved him the effort of holding that modification. His voice had dropped into a register that no longer required conscious adjustment to sound like the voice of someone worth listening to. Hair had appeared in places that made the bathroom mirror a more complicated negotiation than it had been in Decker, because every morning he had to decide which changes were his and which were the composite's, and the border between the two was getting harder to locate.

His family had moved from Decker to Kellam, a town forty minutes east that was larger by six thousand people and more anonymous by a factor that Asa felt as a physical relief, like a hunted animal crossing from open ground into woods. In Kellam, no one had known him as a child. No one carried a memory of the boy he had been at Garfield Elementary. He arrived wearing a composite face he had spent the summer refining, and the composite was, by any measure he could apply, his best work to date: a face assembled from seven sources, none of them dominant, all of them contributing a quality to a

whole that read as a boy named Asa Greer who was unremarkable in the precise way that made unremarkability an asset rather than a deficit.

The composite had no original owner pushing back from inside. It sat on his skull with the obedience of a thing that had been built rather than borrowed, and because it had been built, it carried no residue, no phantom expressions, no taste of someone else's saliva or ghost of someone else's last thought. It was clean architecture, and he wore it the way an actor wears a costume that has been fitted by a professional: with comfort, with confidence, with the faintest awareness that the fit was so good it might, if he was not careful, become indistinguishable from the body wearing it.

The hallway deposited him into a classroom. He sat. The day began.

. . .

Keeler-Hargrave was a machine for processing adolescence into something the adult world could absorb, and Asa understood its mechanisms the way he had understood Garfield Elementary's mechanisms, completely and from the outside, a mechanic listening to the engine rather than being a piston.

The social structure was legible within his first week. Three tiers. At the top, students whose faces worked the way Cal Fenton's face had worked in Decker: effortlessly, generating warmth and attention and the gravitational pull that drew other bodies into orbit. In the middle tier, where most students lived, performing adequacy, performing normalcy, performing the appearance of not caring about tier placement while monitoring their position with the obsessive vigilance of traders watching a stock price. At the bottom, the failures of performance accumulated: the students whose faces worked against them, whose bodies betrayed them through size or shape or smell or the quality of visible effort that adolescent social systems identify and punish with a precision that no adult institution can match.

Asa positioned himself in the upper middle. Close enough to the top to receive its reflected warmth. Far enough from it to avoid the scrutiny that proximity to the center invites. His composite face was calibrated for exactly this position: attractive enough to register, mild enough to forget, warm enough to invite approach, cool enough to discourage the sustained attention that would, over time, expose the absence at his center.

He was good at this. He had been practicing for nine years.

• • •

The boy's name was Garrett Voss, and Garrett Voss had the kind of ease that Asa had been studying since the cereal aisle in Decker.

Voss was a junior, seventeen, with the build of someone who had played sports seriously for long enough that his body had reorganized itself around the activity: shoulders wider than his hips, a neck that began behind his ears and sloped to his trapezius without a visible transition, hands that were too large for his age in a way that suggested the rest of him was still growing to catch up. His face was angular where Asa's composite was rounded, hard where the composite was soft, and it carried an expression that Asa categorized as the settled face: the face of a person who had arrived at an understanding of who he was and had found the understanding adequate.

The settled face interested Asa more than any face he had encountered since Harlan Moeck's. It interested him because it was a performing face that did not know it was performing. Voss's ease was real in the sense that Voss experienced it as real, and constructed in the sense that it depended on a set of conditions: athletic success, social position, the kind of male confidence that is generated by having a body that occupies space without apology and a face that rooms organize themselves around. Remove the conditions and the ease would evaporate. Voss was, in Asa's assessment, a man whose identity had been built for him by circumstances and who had mistaken the circumstances for the self.

This was useful information. It meant the ease could be taken.

Asa studied Voss for three weeks. He sat two rows behind him in American History and one table away from him in the cafeteria and watched the way Voss moved through rooms (directly, without the lateral adjustments that most people make to accommodate other bodies in their path), the way Voss spoke (in complete sentences with a cadence that suggested he expected to be heard to the end), the way Voss's face responded to stimuli (slowly, as if the face had a half-second buffer between the stimulus and the expression, a delay that read as deliberation rather than sluggishness and that gave Voss the appearance of a person who considered things before reacting to them).

Asa memorized the architecture. He filed the jaw angle, the brow weight, the lip set, the distance between the bottom of the nose and the top of the

upper lip (slightly longer than average, which gave the face a quality of patience, of willingness to wait before the mouth opened). He filed the voice: a baritone that sat in the chest rather than the throat, that emerged with a solidity suggesting the words had weight and the speaker was accustomed to the world receiving them.

On the first Tuesday of October, after school, in the parking lot behind the gymnasium where the light was flat and gray and the air smelled of cold asphalt and the distant vegetable rot of the creek that ran behind the athletic fields, Asa took Garrett Voss's face.

. . .

The consumption was different from any shift he had performed before, and the difference was in the word he would later use for it, which had a weight that the words shift and change and copy could not carry.

The word was consumption.

He stood twenty feet from Voss, who was leaning against the bed of a pickup truck talking to another student, a girl Asa did not know, a girl with dark hair pulled back tight against her skull so that her face had the taut, exposed quality of a drum. Voss was talking and the girl was laughing and neither of them was aware of the boy standing at the edge of the parking lot with his hands in his jacket pockets and his composite face aimed at Voss's profile like a lens.

Asa felt the reaching sensation begin. It had been years since the first time in the bathroom, and the sensation had evolved the way a muscle evolves with use: it was stronger, more directional, more precise. What had once been a diffuse extension, a groping outward like a hand in the dark, was now a focused instrument, a beam of attention that locked onto the target's facial architecture and began to read it the way a scanner reads a document, line by line, contour by contour, from the hairline to the chin.

The reading took less than a minute. During that minute, something transferred.

He had taken faces before. The cereal-aisle boy, Waverly, the gas station man. Each time, the transfer had carried a thermal signature and a faint imprint of the source's most recent expression. Those takes had been like pressing his hand against a warm window: he received heat and a vague impression of the room on the other side.

This was different. This was a hand reaching through the glass.

Voss's face arrived in Asa's nervous system with a density he had never experienced, a weight of information that settled into his bone structure and his musculature and his skin with the thoroughness of water filling a vessel. The jaw angle registered in his own mandible as a potential, a shape his bones now knew they could assume. Brow weight arrived as a heaviness above his own eyes, a new gravitational center pulling his forehead forward. The distance between Voss's nose and upper lip as a stretching sensation in his own philtrum, as if the skin there were being gently, firmly pulled downward by invisible fingers.

And he felt something else. Something that the earlier, lighter takes had only hinted at.

He felt Voss's body from inside.

The sensation arrived as a cascade of proprioceptive data: the width of Voss's shoulders registering in Asa's deltoids as a phantom expansion, the heaviness of Voss's hands arriving in Asa's fingers as an increase in pressure sensitivity, the way Voss's weight sat in his hips (forward, always slightly forward, the athlete's center of gravity permanently adjusted for the next movement) transmitting as a tilt in Asa's own pelvis that made him lean toward the balls of his feet.

The imprint of Voss's last expression was there too, stronger than any previous take: the half-smile he had been wearing while talking to the dark-haired girl, a smile that involved the left side of his mouth more than the right and that carried in its muscular signature the faint residue of something that was either affection or its performance, and Asa could not tell the difference, and the inability to tell the difference was itself a piece of data.

Voss did not notice. Voss continued talking. The girl continued laughing. The parking lot continued to smell of cold asphalt and creek rot. Nothing had changed except that Asa now carried, in the architecture of his nervous system, a complete blueprint of another human being's physical self, a blueprint so detailed that wearing it would feel less like putting on a mask and more like climbing inside a body and pulling it closed around him.

He walked home. His hands were trembling, which surprised him, because the trembling came from overstimulation, from neither cold nor fear. His system was processing more physical data than any previous take had generated, and the processing manifested as a fine motor vibration that made

his fingers tap against the insides of his jacket pockets in a rhythm that belonged to someone else.

Voss's rhythm. The tapping pattern matched the finger-drumming Asa had observed Voss performing on the edge of his desk during American History. Voss drummed his fingers when he was thinking. Now Asa's fingers were drumming in the same pattern, without instruction, without conscious direction, as if the blueprint had brought with it a small motor program that had installed itself in Asa's musculature like a song caught in the memory: unbidden, persistent, impossible to delete by force of will.

Voss's rhythm drummed through his fingers all the way home. Stopping was impossible. He did not try.

. . .

He put Voss's face on at 9:30 that night, in the bathroom of the rented house on Quarry Road where Cordelia maintained her regime of efficient habitation (the house in Kellam was identical in atmosphere to the house in Decker: clean, orderly, sensorily neutral, a space optimized for the absence of contact), and the transformation was the most complete he had ever achieved.

The clicking was deeper. Lower in frequency. The bones of his face rearranged with a deliberation that suggested his body had encountered a more complex blueprint than usual and was taking care with the details. His jaw squared and widened. His brow thickened. The distance between nose and lip extended, and as it extended he felt the skin stretch with a resistance it had never shown before, as if his face were learning a new shape rather than merely assuming one, as if the tissue itself were being educated.

The rest of his body followed.

This was new. Previous takes had been facial only. He could change his features, his hair, the surface of his skin, and his body had remained his own, and the mismatch between a borrowed face and his fourteen-year-old frame had been a limitation he had accepted as mechanical. Voss's blueprint was a whole-body document, and the mechanism, having received a whole-body document, attempted to execute it.

His shoulders widened. An inch, perhaps slightly more, a shift that felt like the bones of his clavicle were being gently pressed apart from inside, the cartilage at his sternum stretching to accommodate the new span. His hands

thickened. The sensation was acute: each finger swelling slightly, the knuckles tightening, the pads of his palms gaining a density that made them feel like different objects at the ends of his arms. His center of gravity tilted forward, toward the balls of his feet, and he caught himself leaning into the sink as Voss's athlete's posture superimposed itself on his own.

The mirror showed him Garrett Voss.

Voss's face on Asa's body, which was now partially Voss's body too, the two physiques merged at a point somewhere between Asa's actual dimensions and the blueprint's specifications, a compromise between the body he had and the body the mechanism was trying to build. The result was a younger version of Voss, a boy who looked like Voss's cousin or Voss's younger brother, someone who carried the same genetic vocabulary spoken with a different accent.

His eyes, as always, were his own. Brown, amber-flecked, set in a face that was harder and wider and more settled than his own face had ever been. The eyes looked displaced, bewildered, like small animals that had wandered into an unfamiliar room and were standing still in the hope that the room would not notice them.

The smell. Voss's chemistry replaced his composite's neutral scent with something sharper, earthier, a smell that carried notes of exertion and salt and a musk that Asa recognized as the smell of testosterone doing its work in another person's body. The smell was masculine in a way that his own body had not yet arrived at, and wearing it felt like wearing a credential he had not earned, like a child in a uniform that belonged to someone who had seen combat.

He stood in the bathroom for seven minutes, feeling the shape of Voss's body wrapped around his own, and during those seven minutes he experienced a sensation he had no name for and would not have a name for until much later, when the accumulated weight of consumed identities gave him the vocabulary of invasion.

The sensation was occupation.

Wearing the cereal-aisle boy's face had been like wearing a hat. Wearing Voss was like being inside a building. The blueprint was so detailed, so physically comprehensive, that the boundary between his body and the borrowed form was blurred in a way it had never been. He could feel Voss's habitual tension in his shoulders, a tightness that sat between the shoulder

blades and that came from years of overhead throwing motions, and the tightness was not his tightness, and his body knew it was not his tightness, and the knowing produced a low-grade nausea that sat in his stomach like something he had eaten that did not agree with him and that his system was trying to return.

He let the face go after seven minutes because the nausea was intensifying and because his hands would not stop drumming.

His own face returned. His own body returned. Smaller, narrower, lighter, fourteen years old, uninhabited. The word came to him in the mirror and stayed: uninhabited. His body, after seven minutes inside Voss's architecture, felt like a house whose furniture has been rearranged by someone who left before the owner came home. Everything was where it should be. Nothing was where it had been. Shoulders narrow again, feeling like shoulders that had been wider and remembered the width. Hands thin again, feeling like hands that had been thick and missed the density. Center of gravity returned to its natural position slightly behind the balls of his feet, as if leaning backward, overcompensating for a forward tilt that was no longer there. His body was readjusting to itself, and the readjustment was itself a kind of body horror: the discomfort of fitting back into a container you had briefly outgrown, the way a foot feels after removing a shoe that was too large and returning to one that is the correct size. The correct size should feel right. It felt confining.

The nausea faded over the course of an hour. The finger-drumming faded over the course of a night. By morning, both were gone, replaced by a residue that was subtler and more permanent: the sensation of Voss's shoulder tension, which had settled into Asa's musculature as a phantom, a ghost-ache in muscles that had never thrown anything overhead, a knot between the shoulder blades that would flare without warning at random moments over the next several years, arriving and departing on a schedule that bore no relationship to Asa's own activities and that he would learn to recognize as the first voice of the consumed.

The cost came before he slept. He was lying in bed in the dark, in the rented house on Quarry Road, in a bedroom that already smelled of nothing (that loss had carried forward from Decker; bedrooms would never again smell of sleep), and he realized that the texture of his own bedsheets, the last tactile anchor to his private physical life, was gone. The sheets were cotton.

They were the same sheets he had slept on the night before. And they felt like nothing. A generic plane of contact between his skin and the world, stripped of the specificity that had made these sheets his sheets, the tiny imperfections of thread count and weave and the places where the fabric had softened from his body's heat and the places where it remained stiff because he never slept on that side, all of that granular, unremarkable, irreplaceable information erased.

He lay on the generic surface and listened to the house settle and added the loss to the ledger. Smell of his skin. Smell of his bedroom. Texture of his winter coat. Taste of tap water. Texture of his bedsheets. Five specifics gone. The general categories intact. He could still smell, taste, touch, hear, see. The instrument panel was fully operational. Individual gauges were going dark, one by one, and the pattern of their darkening corresponded precisely to the faces he had taken, and the correspondence was the cost, and the cost was the price, and he paid it because the alternative was to live inside a face that rooms forgot, and at fourteen the memory of being invisible was sharper than the sensation of losing a bedsheet's texture.

He fell asleep. His fingers drummed against the mattress, twice, in Voss's rhythm. Then they stopped.

. . .

The party was at a house on Caldwell Avenue, a street where the houses were larger and older and spaced farther apart than the houses on Quarry Road, a street where the trees had been growing long enough to canopy the sidewalks and where the streetlights, filtered through the remaining October leaves, cast a light that was amber and moving and that made every surface look like it was breathing.

Asa wore Voss's face. He had practiced the form three more times since the first occupation, and each practice had been smoother, the nausea less severe, the boundary between his body and the blueprint less disorienting. He was getting better at being someone else. The mechanism was adapting. His musculature was learning the new shape the way a dancer's body learns choreography: through repetition, through the gradual replacement of effort with ease, through the slow conversion of instruction into instinct.

He walked into the party and the room changed.

He had experienced room-changes before. The pleasant face at Garfield Elementary. The cereal-aisle boy on the streets of Decker. Each time, the quality of attention directed at him had shifted in response to the face he was wearing, and each time the shift had been modest: a degree or two of temperature, a slight adjustment in the social barometer. This was different. Voss's face, mounted on a body that was now convincingly close to Voss's body, produced a shift that Asa experienced as gravitational. Bodies in the room reoriented. Conversations tilted. The ambient noise, which had been a flat hum of music and voices and the percussive clatter of cups and cans, developed a directional quality, a current that flowed toward the place where he was standing as if the room had acquired a new low point and everything in it was running downhill.

A boy he did not know offered him a drink. A girl standing near the kitchen doorway looked at him and held the look for a count of three, then four, then five, a duration that in the social physics of adolescent gatherings constituted an invitation. Two boys near the stairs nodded in his direction with the practiced casualness of people acknowledging a superior in a hierarchy they had internalized to the point of reflex.

Asa took the drink. Nod returned. The girl's look held for a count of three, then broken with a smile that was Voss's half-smile, left side dominant, and the smile produced in the girl's face a response that he noted and filed: a softening of the mouth, a slight drop of the chin, a brightening around the eyes that was the physical signature of attraction registering as willingness.

Two hours of moving through the party. Talking to people. Using Voss's voice, which sat in his chest like a warm stone and emerged with a solidity that made his own voice, by comparison, sound like something being transmitted from a distance. Discussing things he knew nothing about (football, a teacher named Beisch who was apparently disliked for reasons involving a lab experiment gone wrong, the relative merits of two brands of energy drink) and he discussed them convincingly because Voss's voice and Voss's face and Voss's body language created a context in which the content of speech was secondary to the authority of the speaker. People listened to him because he looked like someone worth listening to, and the looking came first, and the listening followed, and by the time the content arrived it was received as already validated.

The girl from the kitchen doorway found him in the living room. Her name, he learned, was Maren, and Maren had a face that performed interest with a precision that made Asa aware, for the first time, that his own performances were crude by comparison. Maren's interest was layered: the surface was attraction, beneath it was assessment, beneath the assessment was a competitive pleasure in having attracted the attention of the highest-status person in the room, and beneath all of it, visible only because Asa's perceptual acuity made him a connoisseur of performed feeling, was a genuine warmth that existed independently of the layers above it, a warmth that was directed at him, or at the face she believed was him, and that reached through the performance and touched something in his chest that was not his chest because his chest was wearing another person's posture.

She kissed him on the back porch, beneath a yellow bulb that attracted moths, and the kiss was the first sustained physical intimacy he had experienced while wearing a borrowed face, and the experience was this:

Her lips were warm. The warmth registered on the surface of Voss's lips, which were his lips, which were Voss's lips, the boundary unclear, and the warmth traveled through the surface into the tissue beneath, into the muscle, into the bone of his borrowed jaw, and the bone received the warmth the way a stone receives sunlight, absorbing it without response, heating by a fraction of a degree, giving nothing back. She pressed closer. Her hand was on the back of his neck, on Voss's neck, on the place where Voss's hairline began, and her fingers were in the hair that was not his hair and the sensation of fingers in hair transmitted through the borrowed scalp as a pressure that was all mechanics and no electricity, all data and no charge.

She pulled back and looked at him and her face was open in the way that faces are open when the person behind them has allowed the performance to drop for a moment and is standing in the space behind it, unprotected, available, and she said something that Asa heard with Voss's ears and processed with his own mind and the dissonance between the two made the words arrive at a slight delay, as if they had been spoken underwater.

What she said was: You are different from how I thought you'd be.

He did not ask what she meant. He smiled Voss's smile. The moment passed. They went back inside. The party continued around them and Asa stood in the middle of it wearing a face that rooms organized themselves around and felt, for the first time, the full narcotic weight of borrowed status:

the warmth of being looked at with approval, the heat of being desired by someone who believed the desire was directed at a real person, the gravitational pleasure of standing at the center of a room and feeling every vector of attention point toward him like arrows toward a target, and the target was a painting of a person, and the painting was so good that the arrows stuck.

. . .

The memory gap nearly exposed him three days later.

Voss, the real Voss, existed in the same school Asa attended, and this created a logistical problem that Asa had underestimated. Wearing Voss's face to a party on a Friday night was one thing. Attending a school where the original walked the same hallways was another. Asa did not wear Voss's face to school. He wore the composite. But the composite existed in a social network that now, because of the party, included people who had interacted with Voss's face thinking it was connected to Asa's composite's social identity, and the overlap was a tangle of associations that could, at any moment, produce a contradiction.

The contradiction arrived in the cafeteria. Maren sat down across from him, across from the composite face she could not possibly recognize, having kissed Voss's face in amber light with moths circling and the boy sitting in the cafeteria wearing the composite face was, to her perceptual system, a different person entirely.

She did not look at him with recognition. She looked at him with the blank, categorizing glance of a person assessing whether the seat across from her was occupied by someone she needed to notice. Her eyes processed his composite face, produced a verdict of irrelevant, and redirected her attention to her phone.

Asa sat three feet from a girl who had kissed him and watched her not know him, and the experience produced in him a sensation that was new and that he would encounter many more times over the years: the loneliness of being known as someone you are not and unknown as someone you are, the vertigo of existing in multiple social identities simultaneously and being unable to claim any of them as continuous, and the cold recognition that the kiss on the porch had been given to a face, not a person, and the face was in a drawer, and the person was sitting in the cafeteria eating a sandwich, and

neither the face in the drawer nor the person eating the sandwich was entirely real.

The near-exposure came from a different direction. A boy named Tully Brodt, who had been at the party and who knew the real Voss with the familiarity of a teammate, approached Asa's composite in the hallway and asked a question that Asa's composite should not have been able to answer: Hey, were you at Caldwell on Friday?

Tully had seen Voss's face at the party. Tully had also seen someone at the party whose behavior did not match Voss's behavioral profile (Voss would have known about Beisch's lab experiment; the person wearing Voss's face had faked his way through the conversation with a vagueness that Tully had noticed without consciously flagging). And now Tully was standing in front of a composite face that bore no resemblance to Voss and asking it whether it had been at the party, which meant that Tully's subconscious had done the math his conscious mind had not: something at the party was wrong, and the wrongness was connected to a face that did not match its behavior, and the mismatch had created an itch that Tully was scratching by asking the wrong person the wrong question.

Asa said no. His voice was steady. His composite's face held its neutral position. But something happened in his body that he had not experienced before and would not experience again for decades: his hands went cold. Both hands, simultaneously, a drop of several degrees that he felt as a contraction of the capillaries in his fingers, a physical withdrawal of blood from the extremities, and the withdrawal was involuntary, and the involuntariness was the thing that frightened him, because it meant his body had identified a threat that his conscious system had not yet processed, and the body's identification was faster and more honest than any face he could build. Tully looked at him for a beat longer than the question warranted, looked at the composite's eyes with a searching expression that did not find what it was looking for, and then moved on.

Asa stood in the hallway with cold hands and felt, for the first time, the weight of exposure as a physical event. If Tully had pushed, had asked one more question, if his subconscious mathematics had surfaced into his conscious mind at that moment rather than being filed as an itch he could not scratch. The composite would have held. The voice would have been steady. And the cold hands would have betrayed him to anyone who reached for

them.

He would not take a living person's face for social impersonation again. Borrowed faces carry borrowed histories, and the histories have witnesses. The safest impersonation is the one that copies no one: the composite, which has no original and therefore no expectations against which the performance can be measured.

He would not take a living person's face for social impersonation again. He would take faces for their features, for their architecture, for the raw material they provided to his composites. Wearing a specific person's complete face in a setting where that person was known was a risk that scaled with the closeness of the observer, and closeness was the one variable he could not control.

. . .

November brought the first cold that meant itself, the cold that was the thing itself, past preview, past warning, and Asa walked to school through air that bit the exposed skin between his collar and the bottom of his composite's jaw and thought about the boundary between his body and the bodies he had borrowed.

The boundary was thinning.

He noticed it first in his hands. His own hands, his composite's hands (there was no difference now; the composite had been worn so long that his body had adapted to it like a foot adapting to a shoe, taking the shape of the container), would occasionally perform a gesture that did not belong to him. A rotation of the wrist that he had cataloged as belonging to Waverly, the girl from Garfield Elementary, a movement she made when she was explaining something to someone she considered slow. Or the gas station man's grip, a way of closing the hand that started with the pinky finger rather than the index finger, a fist built from the outside in, the grip of a person who had done manual work long enough that his tendons had developed a preference.

These were not voluntary. These were motor programs that had been installed during the takes and that were now, four years later, beginning to surface in his behavior like roots working their way through a sidewalk. The consumed were making themselves known through the only channel available to them: the body they had been incorporated into.

The consumed were not voices. They were not ghosts in the theatrical sense, translucent figures standing at the foot of his bed delivering warnings. They were data. Fragments of physical experience that his nervous system had absorbed during each take and that had been filed, initially, in some deep archive below the level of conscious access. The archive was leaking. Whatever filing system governed it was losing its ability to keep the fragments separate from his own motor patterns, and the leaks manifested as small, involuntary irruptions: a gesture, a posture, a way of shifting weight from one foot to the other that belonged to someone he had copied years ago and that arrived in his body without announcement, like a guest who had been living in the basement and had decided, without permission, to come upstairs.

The phantom aches were also increasing. Voss's shoulder tension had been the first, a knot between the blades that flared at intervals having nothing to do with Asa's own physical activity. Now there were others. Tightness in his right hip, traced to the gas station man, whose truck-driver's posture had favored one side. Recurring itch on his left forearm, at the exact location where Waverly had a mole. Pressure behind his eyes that arrived in the late afternoon and that he could not assign to any source and that may have been a composite pressure, the aggregate of multiple consumed residues pressing against the inside of his skull simultaneously, a crowd behind a door.

He cataloged these irruptions without fear, treated them the way he treated the sensory losses: as entries in a ledger, costs of doing business, the price of having more faces available than the one he had been born with. By any rational accounting, the ledger was favorable. Losses minor: bedsheets, water, coat, bedroom smell, skin smell, and now the occasional uninvited gesture from a consumed person's motor archive. Gains enormous: the ability to move through the world wearing any face, to enter any room calibrated for maximum effect, to generate responses from strangers that most people spent lifetimes earning and many never received at all.

Balanced. Or he believed it balanced, which was the same thing, because there was no auditor, and the accountant was the one spending.

. . .

Winter closed over Kellam the way a lid closes over a box, and inside the box the days were short and gray and lit by a fluorescent light that turned every interior surface the color of refrigerated skin.

Asa took three more faces that winter. A woman at the post office: middle-aged, wide-featured, with a face that projected the authority of a person who has been in charge of a small domain for long enough that the charge has become a personality trait. A boy from the track team: lean, compressed, with features that sat close together on a narrow skull in a way that suggested concentration, as if the face itself were focused on a point just ahead. An old man at a bus stop: weathered, deep-lined, with the collapsed musculature of a face that had given up its tension and settled into the contours of the bone beneath, a face like a landscape after erosion, showing the geology.

Each take was smoother than the last. The reaching sensation had become nearly effortless, a practiced extension that locked onto the target's architecture and pulled the data across in under thirty seconds, and the cost per take was becoming predictable. From the post office woman, the taste of cinnamon: a spice, gone from his palate overnight, unremarkable in its absence except to a boy who had eaten cinnamon toast every Sunday morning in Decker and who would never taste it again. The track team boy extracted the ability to distinguish between the textures of wood and plastic by touch: both materials now felt like smooth, hard surfaces, and the fingertips that had once been able to read the grain of a tabletop or the seam of a plastic case as distinct tactile languages now reported only a binary (smooth/rough) with no information between the poles. From the old man, something larger, something he did not notice for weeks: the ability to feel his own heartbeat. His heart continued to beat. He could take his pulse and confirm this with his fingers against his wrist. The internal sensation of the heart as a living thing inside the chest, the rhythmic presence that most people feel as a background hum and notice only when it accelerates or stutters, was gone. His chest was silent. His body was a mechanism that continued to operate, and the operator could no longer hear the engine.

He was fifteen. He had consumed nine faces. The sensory inventory was depleting at a rate that, had he plotted it on a graph, would have shown a gentle downward slope. General categories remained: he could smell, taste, touch, hear, see. Specific instances within those categories were vanishing,

and the vanishing followed the logic of the takes, each face extracting something particular and leaving a hole that could not be refilled by any subsequent experience, no matter how intense.

No graph was plotted. No trend was identified. He thought about the losses the way a teenager thinks about the future, which is to say barely and with the unshakeable conviction that the future will be better than the present because the present is merely the place where you wait for the future to arrive, and the waiting is temporary, and the arrival is guaranteed, and the cost of getting there is a cost that can be paid later, always later, by a version of yourself that will have resources you do not currently possess.

He was wrong about all of this, and he would not know that for decades, and by then the ledger would be too deep in debt to close.

. . .

In March of his sophomore year, Asa sat on a bench in Kellam's municipal park and watched a couple on the adjacent bench and tried to understand what was passing between them.

They were young, early twenties, dressed in the manner of people who had spent the morning together and would spend the afternoon together and saw no reason to perform for each other because the performance had been set aside sometime between waking and arriving at the park, replaced by the looser, less composed version of the self that people only display in the company of someone who has agreed, through the accumulated evidence of shared time, that the unperformed self is acceptable.

The man had his arm across the back of the bench, and the arm was touching the woman's shoulder, and the touch was neither deliberate nor accidental. It was habitual. A touch that had been performed so many times that it had ceased to require volition and had become a property of the man's body when the woman's body was adjacent: proximity triggered the arm, the arm found the shoulder, and the circuit was complete, and neither person was aware of the circuit because awareness of it would have introduced the element of performance that its absence defined.

Asa watched the circuit with the attention he brought to all human behavior: precise, taxonomic, oriented toward mechanism. He could see the touch, the woman's body responding to it with a fractional lean, a shifting of weight toward the arm that reduced the space between them by an inch, the

man's face, in profile, perform a micro-expression that was too small and too fast for the woman to consciously register but that Asa, with his forger's eye for muscular detail, caught and categorized: a tightening at the corner of the eye, a contraction around the eye that lasted less than a quarter of a second, what Asa had learned to call a Duchenne signal: the one muscular event that cannot be voluntarily produced and that therefore constitutes, in the taxonomy of facial performance, the single reliable indicator of actual feeling.

The man was feeling something. The something was produced by the woman's proximity and the woman's lean and the completion of the habitual circuit of arm-and-shoulder, and the something was real in the sense that it originated below the level of decision and expressed itself through a muscular channel that voluntary control could not access.

Asa could see this. Identification, naming, even reproduction of the Duchenne signal in a mirror (or he thought he could; in fact, he could approximate it, which was enough for any observer who was not a trained researcher or another person like him, another student of faces the way entomologists are students of wing patterns). What he could not do was produce the interior event that the signal indicated. The event was a feeling. The feeling was generated by a circuit that ran from the presence of a person through the nervous system and back out through the musculature of the face, and the circuit required, at its center, an apparatus that he did not possess: the capacity to be changed by proximity, to be altered by the existence of another person in the space next to his body, to receive the fact of another consciousness as a stimulus that produced a response that was neither calculated nor performed but the body's way of acknowledging that it was not alone and was glad.

He sat on the bench and watched the couple and felt the sensation of being on the wrong side of a barrier that had no physical existence and no visible edge and that he had never been on the other side of and that he would never cross because the crossing required an organ he had been born without, and the organ was not the heart (his heart continued to beat, silently, in his chest) and was not the brain (his brain was, by any measure, exceptional in its capacity for observation and analysis and strategic adaptation). The organ was something for which there was no anatomical term because anatomy concerns itself with structures and this was a function, and the function was the capacity to be genuinely affected by another person,

and he had observed it in Harlan Moeck at Garfield Elementary and was observing it now in a man on a bench who did not know he was being studied and whose arm on the shoulder of the woman he sat with was the most honest gesture Asa had ever witnessed and the gesture he was least capable of reproducing, despite being capable of reproducing virtually everything else a human body could do.

He left the bench. He walked home. The air was cold and the sky was the flat white of a system that had emptied itself of precipitation and was gathering energy for the next delivery, and his composite face was numb from the cold, and inside the composite his own face was numb from something else, something that was the same shape as the cold and did not come from outside, something that was always there and that he noticed only at moments like this, when the contrast between what other people felt and what he did not feel was illuminated by proximity to the real thing, the way a dark room becomes darkest when someone opens a door to a lit hallway and then closes it again.

The house on Quarry Road was dark when he arrived. Cordelia's car was in the driveway, which meant she was inside, which meant the darkness was voluntary, which meant she was in her bedroom with the door closed and the light off, engaged in whatever activity (sleeping, reading, lying in the dark with her own thoughts, washing a glass that was already clean) constituted her private life. He let himself in and stood in the entryway and the house received him with the same neutral temperature it always maintained, the thermostat set to sixty-eight regardless of season, a temperature that was comfortable in the way that institutions are comfortable: adequate, impersonal, maintained for the benefit of the building rather than the bodies inside it.

He stood in the entryway for a full minute and listened to the house. Refrigerator humming. Furnace cycling. In the kitchen, a clock, a round plastic clock that Cordelia had hung on the wall above the stove on the day they moved in and that neither of them had ever adjusted for daylight saving time, ticked at a rate that was slightly too fast, gaining three minutes per week, so that the clock's time and the world's time were in a state of continuous, widening disagreement. A discrepancy noticed on the first day and never mentioned, because mentioning it would have required a conversation, and conversations with Cordelia were structures that required

more engineering than the outcome justified.

His room. No light. Down on the bed. He stared at the ceiling and the ceiling was blank. The blankness was the room. The room was his life.

. . .

He turned sixteen in April and Cordelia baked a cake and placed it on the kitchen table and stood across the table from him and sang the birthday song in a voice that was competent and tuneless and that she stopped as soon as the melody was complete, cutting the final note with the efficiency of someone closing a drawer.

He looked at her across the cake. Sixteen candles, which she had arranged in two rows of eight with the geometric precision that governed every physical space she managed. Her face was the face he had spent eleven years trying to read, and reading it had become harder, because the more skilled he became at reading other faces the more aware he was of how little Cordelia's face gave him. Other people's faces were instruments that played whether or not the owner intended them to play: micro-expressions leaked, muscle tensions betrayed, involuntary signals fired or did not fire and in either case communicated. Cordelia's face was a closed system. It gave him the information she chose to give and withheld everything else with the discipline of a person who had been guarding her interior for so long that the guarding had become the interior, the wall becoming the room.

He blew out the candles. She cut the cake. They ate in the silence that had always filled the space between them, a silence that was occupied, neither hostile nor comfortable, like a chair that someone was sitting in, a silence that had weight and presence and that both of them treated as a third resident of the house, something to be accommodated rather than addressed.

After the cake, she washed the dishes and he dried them and their hands passed the same objects back and forth in a rhythm that was the closest thing their bodies ever produced to the circuit he had observed in the park. Plate, rinse, hand, dry, stack. Plate, rinse, hand, dry, stack. The water was hot. He could see the steam rising from the sink and curling around Cordelia's wrists, and the steam carried the smell of dish soap (lemon, chemical, the same brand she had used in Decker, a continuity he recognized as one of the few sensory threads that connected the two houses, the two kitchens, the two versions of their shared silence). Her hands moved through the water with

the practiced efficiency of hands that had washed ten thousand plates and that would wash ten thousand more and that found in the washing, if not pleasure, then at least the comfort of repetition, the comfort of a body performing a task it knows so well that the task becomes a kind of rest.

His hands received the plates. The plates were warm from the water and the warmth traveled from the porcelain through the dish towel and into his fingers and the warmth was the warmth of the water and not the warmth of Cordelia's hands, because Cordelia's hands and his hands never touched during the exchange, the handoff timed so precisely that the plate occupied a fraction of a second in transit between her release and his reception, a fraction of a second during which the plate belonged to neither of them and to both of them and was the closest thing they shared.

The rhythm was mechanical and efficient and it was also, he recognized with the clinical detachment of a boy who cataloged every human interaction for its structural properties, the most intimate physical exchange he and his mother had shared in sixteen years. Their fingers did not touch during the passing. The plates conducted no warmth from her hands to his. The transaction was frictionless.

He dried the last plate and put it in the cabinet. She wrung out the dishcloth and draped it over the faucet and turned off the kitchen light and walked down the hallway toward her bedroom without saying goodnight, and he did not expect her to.

Alone in the dark kitchen, he listened to her bedroom door close, a soft click that was the most consistent sound in his life, more regular than his own breathing, more reliable than his own heartbeat (which he could no longer feel), and the click was the period at the end of every day he had spent in her house, and the period was final, and the sentence it completed was always the same sentence: the day is over and we have survived each other's company without incident.

He was sixteen and he understood, with the clarity that the consumed's accumulated data had given him (nine faces' worth of physical experience layered beneath his own diminishing sensory life), that Cordelia was not cold. Cordelia was defended. The defense was so total and so long-established that it had calcified into personality, but beneath the calcification, in the same way that beneath the limestone of a cavern floor there is water moving in the dark, something in Cordelia was alive and in motion, and the motion was

grief, old grief that was not about him, grief that was the reason she could not touch his hair without withdrawing, could not sing the birthday song without cutting the last note, could not pass a plate without eliminating the possibility of contact.

He did not investigate further. He added the observation to the file and closed the file. His mother's interior was her own. He had enough interiors to manage, most of them stolen, all of them pressing against the inside of his skin with increasing insistence, and the last thing he needed was another person's unprocessed emotional weight taking up space in a system that was already running at capacity.

. . .

At seventeen he stopped counting the takes.

The cereal-aisle boy, Waverly, the gas station man, Garrett Voss, the post office woman, the track team boy, the old man at the bus stop: these seven he remembered by name or description. After the old man, he stopped memorizing. The takes became routine, a regular intake of raw material that he processed into composites like a factory processing ore into alloy. Faces in grocery stores, at gas stations, on sidewalks, in a waiting room, at a football game, in the audience of a school assembly. Each take was brief, efficient, nearly painless (the nausea had diminished to a passing queasiness, the trembling to a faint vibration in the fingertips lasting seconds), and each take deposited into his system a new residue that joined the accumulated archive of consumed experience pressing against the boundary of his consciousness.

The sensory losses continued. By seventeen, the list was long enough that he would have needed a notebook to track it, and he did not keep a notebook, because keeping a notebook would have required acknowledging that the losses were a pattern and that the pattern had a trajectory and that the trajectory pointed downward. He had lost, in no particular order: the taste of cinnamon, the tactile distinction between wood and plastic, the sensation of his own heartbeat, the ability to smell rain before it arrived (rain still had a smell once it started falling; the ozone-and-mineral scent that precedes a storm, the smell he had experienced as a child in Decker as a sweetness, was gone), the texture of denim against the skin of his thighs (all fabric now registered as a pressure gradient without qualitative character), and the ability to hear the difference between two notes that were less than a whole

tone apart (music remained audible as rhythm and structure; the tonal distinctions that gave melody its emotional contour were flattening, and songs he had once heard as complex were now heard as simple, and the simplicity was a diminishment of the instrument receiving it, not a revelation about the music).

What he gained was range. His composite library was extensive. He could build any face the situation required, drawing on a palette of features that gave him more options than most people have outfits: older, younger, harder, softer, warmer, colder, projecting intelligence, openness, authority, submission, empathy, indifference. Each projection was a surface event, a rearrangement of the borrowed material, and the surface was becoming easier to manage even as the interior became more crowded, more noisy, more populated with the phantom residue of people he had taken pieces from and would carry forever.

The consumed were louder now. The motor irruptions (Waverly's wrist rotation, the gas station man's grip, Voss's finger drumming) had been joined by sensory irruptions that arrived without warning and without context: a flash of taste (something metallic and sweet, belonging to no food he had ever eaten), a phantom smell (perfume, floral and heavy, the perfume of a woman whose face he had taken at a department store and whose olfactory memory had transferred with a strength disproportionate to the brevity of the take), a temperature spike on the back of his left hand (heat where no heat source existed, a ghost of a sunburn from a face he had copied on a summer afternoon and whose skin had been carrying the day's accumulated warmth when the blueprint transferred).

These irruptions were manageable. Seconds long, never interfering with function, they were, if anything, interesting, the way static on a radio is interesting if you listen to it long enough: patterns emerge, rhythms suggest themselves, and the static begins to sound less like noise and more like a message in a language you have not yet learned.

He was seventeen and he was listening to the static and mistaking it for information. What the static carried was a warning, a message: we are here, and we are not leaving, and the longer you carry us, the louder we will become, and there will come a day when our voices are louder than yours, and on that day you will discover that the room you thought was yours was always ours, and the face you thought was yours was always borrowed, and

the borrower and the borrowed do not agree on who owns the debt.

The warning went unheard. Static, filed with the rest of the data. He continued.

. . .

Senior year arrived like a sentence reaching its final clause, the grammar already established, the meaning already determined, only the punctuation remaining to be placed.

Asa was eighteen. His composite face was his masterwork: a construction so refined, so seamlessly integrated with his own underlying bone structure and musculature, that the line between the composite and his original face was, even to him, uncertain. He had worn the composite for so long, adjusted it so many times, allowed his growing body to merge with its architecture so thoroughly, that he could no longer retrieve his original face with confidence. When he tried (standing in the bathroom, relaxing every voluntary hold, letting every modification release), what he got was something that might have been his birth face or might have been the earliest version of the composite or might have been a compromise between the two, a palimpsest of faces layered so tightly that the original text was illegible.

This did not trouble him. His original face had been wrong. His original face had been a tool that did not fit the hand. What he wore now fit. And if the fit had been achieved by replacing the original piece by piece, like a boat that has had every plank replaced over the course of a voyage and is technically a different boat by the time it reaches shore, then the boat was still floating, and floating was the point.

He graduated. Cordelia attended the ceremony and sat in the bleachers with her hands folded in her lap and her face closed and her presence, even at that distance, registering on Asa's body as the familiar chill, the cool zone between them that had been the thermal signature of their relationship since he was five years old and standing in the bathroom for the first time.

After the ceremony, she drove him home. They sat in the car without speaking. The silence was their silence, the occupied silence, and the ride was twelve minutes, and during those twelve minutes Asa looked out the passenger window at the town of Kellam moving past in the flat light of a June afternoon and felt the sensation of a person leaving a place he was never in.

He had lived in Kellam for four years. He had attended its school, walked its streets, eaten in its restaurants, breathed its air. And none of it had imprinted on him the way Decker had imprinted before the first take, before the sensory losses began. Kellam existed in his memory as a collection of facts without texture: addresses, schedules, the layout of rooms, the names of people who had interacted with his composite and would remember the composite and would, if they thought of him at all in the years to come, remember a person who had never existed.

He had left no mark on Kellam and Kellam had left no mark on him, and the symmetry was the purest expression of what he was becoming: a body that passed through spaces without creating friction, a presence that consumed without being consumed, a face that rooms forgot.

Cordelia stopped the car in the driveway. Asa opened the door. The afternoon air was warm and smelled of cut grass, a smell he could still detect in its general category but that carried none of the notes it once carried (wild onion, heated earth, the mineral tang of the garden hose) that had once made the smell of cut grass an experience belonging to a boy in a place.

He stood in the driveway. Cordelia remained in the car. The engine idled. Through the windshield, her face was visible in the late-afternoon light, and for a moment, a moment so brief he could not have measured it, her face did something he had never seen it do. It opened. The closed system, the guarded interior, the wall that had become the room: all of it, for a fraction of a second, yielded, and behind the yield was a face that looked at him with something that his cataloging system could classify because it existed in a register he had never been able to access, a register that contained, in its unclassifiable quality, the faintest signal of a woman looking at a son she could not reach and knowing, in the way that the body knows things the mind will not admit, that the distance between them was permanent and that the distance was not her fault and was not his fault and was the fact of their lives and that the fact was grief and the grief was old and the grief would outlive them both.

The moment ended. Her face closed. She looked at the dashboard. Asa closed the car door and walked into the house.

He packed that night. A bag of clothes. His toothbrush. A laptop. Nothing from the bedroom because nothing in the bedroom was his in the way that possessions are a person's when the person has a tactile relationship with

their objects, when the shirt in the drawer carries the memory of the body that stretched it and the book on the shelf carries the smell of the hands that held it. His objects were inventoried, not inhabited. He packed them like a hotel guest packing the complimentary robe: aware that the robe exists, indifferent to its departure.

He left Kellam on a Tuesday morning in August. Cordelia drove him to the bus station. The ride was nine minutes. The silence was their silence. At the station, she stopped the car and he opened the door and she said, for the first time in his memory, something that was not logistical.

She said: Be careful.

A concrete platform with a metal bench and a sign listing departure times in a font designed to be read from a moving car. On the bench, a woman with a suitcase and a man reading a newspaper whose front page Asa could not see. Above them, the late-summer sky of Ohio, high and blue and carrying the first hint of the yellow that would arrive in September and turn every leaf into a signal. A pigeon walked the length of the platform with the proprietary assurance of an animal that has decided this territory is its own. The air smelled of diesel from the buses idling in the lot behind the station and of the sweetness of warm grass growing through cracks in the concrete, the same sweetness he could no longer fully parse because the notes had been lost to takes he could no longer name.

Cordelia's hands were on the steering wheel. Ten and two. The knuckles were pale from the pressure, as if the steering wheel were the only thing preventing the car from drifting, which was true in a way she would never articulate: the car, with Asa in it, had been the vehicle of their shared silence for eighteen years, and the silence was about to end, and the ending would leave her in a car that was quiet in a different way, quiet the way an empty room is quiet rather than quiet the way an occupied room is quiet, and the difference between the two was the difference between solitude and loneliness, and the hands on the steering wheel at ten and two were bracing for the change.

He looked at her. Her face was closed. The two words sat between them with the weight of objects that had been carried a long distance and set down with relief. Be careful. Two words. A sentence that could mean anything, that could mean watch for traffic or dress warmly or lock your doors, and that also, in the register only available to a mother speaking to a child she cannot

name her fear for, meant something else, something that Asa's cataloging system received and filed and did not understand and would not understand for decades, by which time the filing cabinet would be so full of other people's data that his mother's two words would be buried under the accumulated weight of every life he had touched and taken a piece of and carried away in the growing, pressing, whispering archive of the consumed.

He said: I will.

He closed the car door. She drove away. He stood at the bus station with his bag of uninhabited possessions and his composite face and his twelve consumed residues pressing like thumbprints against the inside of his skull and the world ahead of him was wide and flat and loud with possibility and quiet with the silence of a boy who had spent eighteen years learning to wear any face and had succeeded and the success was the thing and the thing was hollow and the hollow was home.

The bus arrived. He got on. The door closed. Kellam shrank in the window behind him.

He did not look back.

## Section 3

### *The Tree*

The city ate people the way the hallway at Keeler-Hargrave had eaten them, by peristalsis, by the rhythmic contraction and expansion of avenues and subway cars and revolving doors that pushed bodies through a system designed to process volume without registering content. Asa arrived in the city at twenty-two and was swallowed and pushed through and deposited, six months later, into a chair at a desk in an office on the fourteenth floor of a building that smelled of carpet adhesive and recycled air and the faint plastic sweetness of new electronics still releasing their manufacturing gases.

He was working in communications. The title on his business card said Associate, Strategic Communications, and the title meant that he wrote sentences other people would say out loud in rooms where the saying of sentences produced measurable outcomes: votes tallied, contracts signed, donations deposited, reputations inflated or deflated depending on which direction the client's money was pushing.

His composite face was his finest construction to date: a man in his mid-twenties with features assembled from over forty sources, none dominant, all calibrated to produce an impression of competent warmth. Jaw carrying authority from the gas station man and the post office woman. Eyes carrying openness from the cereal-aisle boy and a sharp attentiveness from the track team runner. Mouth a blend of seven sources, tuned to a resting position that read as engaged without being eager, serious without being severe, approachable without being soft. It was a face built for professional environments like a building designed for a climate: every surface chosen for function, every angle calculated for the conditions it would encounter.

He was good at writing sentences other people said. He was good at it because the work was a professionalized version of what he had been doing since he was five years old in the bathroom: studying faces, identifying what they wanted to see, and building a surface that delivered it. The clients' audiences wanted to trust. The sentences Asa wrote were engineered for trust like a bridge: invisible structure underneath, smooth passage on top,

and the people crossing never looked down.

He had been in the city for two years when Phelan found him.

. . .

Cormac Phelan was fifty-three years old and had the face of a man who had been handsome thirty years earlier and had spent the intervening decades converting that handsomeness into something more durable: the appearance of having been through things and survived them with his judgment intact. His hair was gray at the temples and brown elsewhere and cut in a way that suggested he had a barber rather than a stylist, a man with a chair and a straight razor rather than a salon with ambient music. His eyes were the pale blue of a gas flame turned low, and they moved across rooms with the economy of a searchlight that knows where the target is and is merely confirming its position.

Phelan ran a consulting firm whose name was three surnames joined by ampersands, and the firm's work was the manufacture of public perception. They built candidates the way Asa built composites: feature by feature, source by source, assembling a surface that the audience would accept as a person. The difference was that Phelan's candidates were already people. They arrived with faces and voices and histories and opinions, and Phelan's job was to sand them, to tune them, to strip the contradictions and the hesitations and the human noise from their public presentations and replace it with a signal that was clean and consistent and that the audience could receive without the static of complexity.

Phelan found Asa because Phelan was looking for Asa, or rather for the type of person Asa was. Phelan's searchlight had swept the offices of the firm where Asa worked and had stopped on the young associate whose memos were sharper than his title, whose instinct for the persuadable sentence was too precise for someone who had been in the business for only two years, and whose face, when Phelan studied it across a conference table during a client presentation, carried an expression of such attentive interest that Phelan, who had spent three decades reading faces for a living, felt the tingle of professional recognition: this boy was performing. The performance was expert. And the expertise was natural, in the way that a bird's flight is natural, born into him and practiced every minute since.

Phelan took Asa to dinner at a restaurant where the lighting was designed to make everyone look ten years younger and the menu was designed to make everyone feel they could afford what they had ordered. Over steak that tasted to Asa like all steak now tasted (protein, fat, salt, char; the differences between cuts that a functional palate could distinguish were lost to him, flattened by the accumulated sensory taxes of thirty-plus consumed faces), Phelan asked questions that were not questions. They were calibrations. Phelan was measuring Asa's range like a piano tuner: playing each key, listening for the tone, noting which strings were tight and which were loose.

What Phelan found was an instrument of exceptional range and no interior resonance. He would not have used those words or thought in those terms. What Phelan thought, as he watched Asa modulate his voice and his expression and his posture in response to each shift in the conversation's temperature, was: this kid can become anyone in any room. And then, immediately after: I can use this.

Phelan offered Asa a position. The position had no title because the work Phelan wanted done was the kind that does not benefit from being named. Asa would sit in rooms with candidates and clients and study them and then write their speeches and coach their delivery and design their public personas with the same precision he had been applying to his own face since childhood. He would be, in effect, a face-builder for people who already had faces, and the building would be invisible, and the invisibility was the point, because the product Phelan sold was the appearance of authenticity, and authenticity that is visibly manufactured is a contradiction that collapses on contact with a skeptical audience.

Asa took the position. He took it the way he took faces: completely, without hesitation, because the opportunity was a shape that fit his hand.

. . .

The work was education.

For two years under Phelan's direction, Asa learned the grammar of public performance at a scale he had never operated at before. In Decker and Kellam, his performances had been personal: one face, one room, one audience member at a time. Under Phelan, the audience was a city, a district, a state. The mechanisms were the same (study what the audience wants to

see, build a surface that delivers it) and the mechanics were different (the surface had to survive cameras, microphones, print journalists, opposition researchers, the sustained scrutiny of professional skeptics whose job was to find the crack in the performance and pry it open for public viewing).

Phelan taught him the physics of the podium: how a speaker's body relates to the microphone and the lectern and the audience and the camera in a four-point geometry that determines how the speaker's face will be perceived by each of those four receiving surfaces simultaneously. A microphone hears differently than an audience hears. Cameras see differently than the eyes in the front row see. Each lectern, depending on its height and its material and the way the speaker's hands rest on it or grip it or avoid it, communicates a relationship to authority that the audience processes below the level of language. Phelan knew these things the way an architect knows load-bearing walls: as structural facts that determined what you could build and how high you could build it.

One evening in the second year, Phelan got drunk. Not performatively drunk, not the controlled loosening that professionals deploy to signal accessibility. Drunk. They were at a bar near the office, a place with dark wood and low lighting and the smell of old beer in the carpet, and Phelan had been drinking bourbon since six o'clock and it was now nine and the bourbon had done the thing to Phelan that it did to most people and that it could never do to Asa, which was to dissolve the barrier between the performed self and whatever was underneath.

Phelan talked about his daughter. She was twenty-two and lived in Portland and had not spoken to him in three years. The estrangement was his fault, Phelan said, and the way he said it, the flatness of the delivery, the absence of the rhetorical shape that Phelan applied to every other sentence he spoke, told Asa that this was a sentence Phelan had said to himself so many times that the words had worn smooth, like river stones, losing their edges without losing their weight. He had chosen the work over the family, Phelan said. He had chosen the rooms with the podiums over the rooms with the high chairs and the homework and the school plays. He had done this because the podium rooms were the rooms where his talent operated and the other rooms were rooms where his talent was irrelevant and relevance was the drug and the drug was the choice and the choice was the daughter who no longer answered the phone.

Phelan's face, at the bottom of the bourbon, was open. Not Harlan-open, not the openness of a self that has never required armor. This was the openness of exhaustion: a face that had been held together by professional discipline for thirty years and that the alcohol had temporarily released from its contract, and what was behind the discipline was a man who was tired in a way that sleep could not fix, tired of the work that he was too good at and too old to leave and that had cost him the one thing he had not meant to spend.

Asa watched this and filed it. He cataloged the micro-expressions of Phelan's grief the way he cataloged all human data: precisely, taxonomically, without resonance. What he stored that night was not the fact of Phelan's pain but the shape of its display. He would use the architecture later, on other faces, in other rooms.

He did not buy Phelan another drink. He did not touch Phelan's arm or say anything that a person capable of being moved would have said. He signaled the bartender for the check and he walked Phelan to a taxi and he went home and stood in his bathroom and his face, in the mirror, was his composite, and the composite had not changed, and the not-changing was the fact.

Asa absorbed the knowledge and applied it to the candidates who passed through Phelan's firm the way patients pass through a hospital: damaged, anxious, willing to submit to procedures they did not fully understand in exchange for the promise of a better outcome. The candidates arrived with their faces and their voices and their policies, and Asa took them apart the way he took faces apart, architecturally rather than physically, studying their features and their gestures and their speech patterns and identifying the modifications that would make them more legible to the audience they needed to persuade.

A state senator whose natural speaking voice was a thin tenor that conveyed anxiety rather than authority: Asa coached him to drop his register by a quarter-tone and to support the lower register with diaphragmatic breathing that grounded the voice in the chest, transforming the sound from something that drifted up and away into something that sat in the room like a piece of furniture. A congressional candidate whose facial expressions ran two seconds ahead of her words, so that her face announced the punchline before her mouth delivered it: Asa taught her to introduce a half-second delay between thought and expression, a buffer that made her face appear to be

processing information rather than performing it, and the buffer made her look thoughtful, and looking thoughtful was, in the grammar of public perception, more valuable than being thoughtful, because looking could be seen and being could only be inferred.

He was twenty-six. He was building other people's faces for a living, and the building was a professionalized version of what he had always done, and the professionalization gave the thing a name (consulting, communications, strategy) that made it legible to the world in a way that what he actually was could never be.

. . .

At twenty-eight, Asa discovered the mechanism that would define the rest of his life. He discovered it by accident, at a fundraiser, on a night in October when the air outside the hotel ballroom was cold enough to taste like metal and the air inside was warm enough to taste like nothing, which was all he could taste now: temperature without flavor, a binary of hot and cold with a widening dead zone between them where the pleasures of food and drink used to live.

The fundraiser was for a congressional candidate Phelan's firm was managing, a man named Cahill whose natural charisma was a seven out of ten and whose coached charisma, after four months of Asa's architectural attention, was a nine. Cahill was onstage delivering a speech Asa had written, and the speech was doing what speeches do when they are well-constructed: it was making the audience feel that the speaker understood them, that the speaker shared their concerns, that the speaker would carry their interests into the halls of power like a priest carrying prayers into the sanctuary. Speech as machinery, audience as load, the machinery lifting the load and the load did not feel the machinery because the machinery was invisible, which was the whole point.

Something went wrong. A woman in the third row stood up during the speech and began to cry. Not the controlled crying of a person moved by rhetoric, the dabbing of eyes and the bitten lip that audiences sometimes produce in response to well-crafted emotional appeals. This was the other kind. Uncontrolled crying, the kind that comes from a body that has been carrying something too heavy for too long and that has, at the frequency of a sentence spoken by a particular voice in a particular room, found the

resonance that shakes the load loose.

She was crying because her son had died of an overdose three months earlier and Cahill's speech, which was about healthcare access in rural communities, had touched the nerve that ran from policy abstraction to personal catastrophe in a way that no amount of coaching could have predicted or engineered because the touch was accidental, which is to say it was real in the way that only accidents are real.

Cahill stopped speaking. Cahill looked at the woman. And then Cahill did something that Asa, watching from the wings, had not written and had not coached and did not expect.

Cahill walked off the stage.

He walked down the steps and into the audience and to the third row where the woman was standing with her hands over her face and her shoulders shaking and the people on either side of her frozen in the paralysis that grief produces in witnesses who want to help and do not know how. Cahill reached the woman. He put his hand on her shoulder. He leaned close and spoke to her in a voice too quiet for the microphone to catch, and whatever he said made her lower her hands from her face and look at him, and whatever she saw in his face made her nod, once, and then Cahill turned back to the stage and returned to the podium and said, to the room, something about the woman's son, something about why the work mattered, something that Asa did not hear because Asa was not listening to the words.

Asa was watching the room.

He was watching from the wings, standing behind a black curtain that smelled of dust and the chemical preservative they spray on stage fabrics to make them fire-retardant, and his vantage gave him a view that the audience could not have had: the view from the side, the view that shows you the audience and the speaker simultaneously, like standing at the edge of a tennis court, both players visible at once and can read the match as a system rather than as a sequence of individual shots. From this angle, the transformation was visible as a physical event in the room. Bodies shifted. With the involuntary lean of organisms responding to a gravitational change. Shoulders dropped throughout the room, as if a collective tension had been released at the same instant by the same signal. Hands that had been folded or gripping armrests or holding phones opened and went flat against thighs or laps, the posture of surrender, the posture of people who have decided to

stop holding themselves together and to let the thing in the room hold them instead. Faces softened. Row by row, the professional masks that people wear at political fundraisers (the attentive face, the evaluative face, the I-am-being-seen-here face) dissolved, and what replaced them was rawer, less composed, the face that people wear when they have forgotten that they are in public and are responding to something with the unmanaged musculature of private feeling.

The room had undergone a transformation so total and so instantaneous that it registered on Asa's body as a physical event, a shift in barometric pressure, a change in the room's electromagnetic field, a reorganization of every body's orientation from audience-facing-speaker to audience-unified-with-speaker. The woman had been crying alone. Now the room was crying with her. The tears were real. The feeling was real. And the agent of the change was Cahill's act of leaving the stage and crossing the distance between performance and personhood and touching a woman's shoulder and speaking too quietly for the microphone to hear.

The act was spontaneous. Asa confirmed this in the car afterward, asking Cahill directly, studying his face for the micro-indicators of deception and finding none. Cahill had seen the woman crying and had acted on something that was not calculation, not strategy, not performance. The same thing Harlan Moeck had carried at Garfield Elementary. The thing behind the window that Asa could see and could not build.

And the room had worshipped it.

Asa sat in the back of the car. The discovery was this:

Performed competence produced compliance; charisma, admiration; authority, obedience.

Goodness produced worship.

The room would defend Cahill's goodness against any attack, because attacking his goodness was attacking theirs. This was the power of the face that rooms cannot bear to disbelieve.

He would learn to build that face.

. . .

The first experiments were cautious.

He modified his composite. The adjustments were small: a softening of the brow that reduced the appearance of calculation, a widening of the eyes

by a millimeter that increased the appearance of receptivity, a slight downturn of the outer corners of the mouth that, paradoxically, made the face look warmer because the downturn read as gravity, as weight, as the face of a person who carries the burdens of others and is marked by the carrying.

He tested the modified composite in client meetings, in casual conversations, in the transactional encounters of daily life (the barista, the doorman, the woman at the dry cleaner who handed him his shirts wrapped in plastic like a body in a bag). In each encounter, he performed a minor act of conspicuous attention: he listened longer than expected, he asked a follow-up question that demonstrated he had heard the content of the previous answer, he paused before responding in a way that suggested the response was being composed with care rather than retrieved from a script.

Responses came immediately and out of proportion to the input. A barista who had never looked at him for more than the two seconds required to confirm his order looked at him for five, smiled, said something personal (her mother was visiting from Dayton, she was nervous about it) that she had never said to him before and that she was saying now because his face had told her that saying it was safe. A doorman who had always nodded began to greet him by name. At the dry cleaner, a woman, whose professional efficiency Asa had always admired as a mirror of his own, slowed her transaction by three seconds to tell him she hoped he was having a good week.

Three seconds. Five seconds. A name. A personal detail. These were the returns on performed goodness at the retail level, and the returns were already, in their modest way, remarkable, because they represented a shift in category. He had moved, in these people's perceptual systems, from person I serve to person I recognize, and the movement had been accomplished through the appearance of care, bypassing charisma and authority and competence entirely.

He scaled upward.

In client meetings, he began deploying what he thought of as the concern face. The concern face was a modification of the composite that reduced the professional warmth to something more personal, more exposed: the face of a person who was listening because the thing being said mattered to him as a human being, regardless of whether listening was his job. The concern face was expensive to build because it required the suppression of every

optimized-for-efficiency signal that his composite had been designed to project. It required him to look slower, less capable, more affected. It required vulnerability, or the surface of vulnerability, and the surface of vulnerability was the most technically demanding performance he had ever attempted because it meant deliberately presenting a face that appeared to have lowered its defenses, and lowering defenses, even the appearance of lowering defenses, ran against every instinct his nine years of face-building had developed.

The results were extraordinary. Clients who had been guarded became open. Conversations that had been transactional became confessional. A state senator who had never discussed anything with Asa beyond talking points and polling data began telling him about his marriage, his drinking, the son he had disappointed, the father he was trying not to become. The senator told him these things because Asa's face had told the senator that these things could be said safely, and the safety was a fiction, but the senator could not tell it was a fiction, because the fiction was built by a craftsman who had been studying the architecture of human faces since before the senator had entered politics, and the craftsmanship was so precise that the fiction was, at the resolution of human perception, indistinguishable from fact.

The warmth came.

He felt it for the first time during the senator's confession. The senator was talking about his father, and his eyes were wet, and his voice had the texture of a voice trying to control itself and failing, and the failure was genuine (the involuntary tightening around the senator's eyes confirmed it), and the senator looked at Asa and the senator's face said: I am showing you who I am, and Asa's face said: I see you, and the senator believed the exchange was real, and in the moment of the senator's believing, something happened in Asa's body that he had never experienced before.

Warmth. Something other than thermal warmth, other than proximity to a heat source. A different kind. An interior phenomenon that originated somewhere behind his sternum and radiated outward through his chest and into his arms and up into his face and the warmth was the most pleasurable sensation he had encountered since the party on Caldwell Avenue, since the kiss on the back porch, since Maren's lips on Voss's lips, and it was more pleasurable than those because those had been the pleasure of borrowed status and this was the pleasure of borrowed trust and trust was warmer than

status like a fire against a spotlight.

The warmth lasted for the duration of the senator's confession, approximately eleven minutes, and when the senator stopped talking and collected himself and resumed the transactional register that was their professional default, the warmth withdrew, and its withdrawal left a space in Asa's chest that was colder than the space had been before the warmth arrived, the way a room that has been heated and then un-heated feels colder than a room that was never heated at all.

He wanted the warmth back. The wanting was immediate and total. He had identified the mechanism. Performed goodness generated trust. Trust, when it was received, when it was believed, when a human being looked at his face and decided to be vulnerable in front of it, produced in his body a warmth that was narcotic in its intensity and surgical in its withdrawal.

He had found his drug. The drug was other people's trust.

. . .

Leda came into his life in the spring of his thirtieth year, at a dinner party hosted by a client in a brownstone on a street where the trees were old enough to create the illusion that the city was a forest that had accidentally grown buildings.

Her name was Leda Carraher and she had the kind of face that Asa's system flagged immediately as a face that resisted easy categorization. Most faces Asa encountered resolved into a legible signal within the first two seconds of observation: the face was performing warmth, or authority, or submission, or indifference, or some identifiable point on the grid of human social signals. Leda's face resolved into nothing. It presented itself without a signal. It was simply present, a face at rest, and the restfulness was so unusual in Asa's experience (he had spent twenty-five years in a world where every face was performing something) that he spent the first ten minutes of the dinner party watching her from across the room the way he had once watched Harlan Moeck across the blacktop at Garfield Elementary: with the attention of a person observing a species whose mechanisms he cannot account for.

Leda's face was narrow where his composite was wide, angular where his was smooth, and it carried its expressions with a specificity that made other faces in the room look blurred by comparison. When she laughed, her entire

face participated: forehead, eyes, cheeks, mouth, jaw, all contracting and releasing in a coordinated event that lasted exactly as long as the laughter lasted and not a millisecond longer. When she listened, her face went still in a way that was different from Asa's performed stillness. His stillness was the absence of movement. Hers was the presence of attention, which looked like stillness from the outside but which Asa, with his forger's eye, could identify as a kind of active reception, the way a satellite dish is still but not inert.

He crossed the room and introduced himself. His composite delivered the warm handshake, the eye contact calibrated to three seconds (long enough to register interest, short enough to avoid the intensity that reads as predatory), the first sentence pitched to establish a common ground (the host, the neighborhood, the unreasonable persistence of winter into April). Leda received the handshake and the eye contact and the sentence and her face performed a response that Asa's system could not map: a half-smile that was neither welcoming nor unwelcoming, neither interested nor uninterested, but that occupied a position on the grid that his system did not have a coordinate for because the position was genuine.

She was reacting, not performing. And the reaction was to him specifically, to his composite specifically, and the reaction said: I see a person, and the person is pleasant enough, and I am reserving judgment, and the reservation is not hostility, it is accuracy.

He was intrigued. Intrigue was rare. He had not been intrigued by another person since Harlan Moeck.

They talked for forty minutes. She was an urban planner who worked for the city, which meant she spent her days studying the relationship between physical spaces and human behavior, which was close enough to what Asa did (study the relationship between physical surfaces and human response) that their conversation had a structural resonance that he recognized as compatibility, or at least as the performance of compatibility, though in this case the performance was happening on her side too, and her performance was not a performance, it was just a person talking to another person with genuine interest, and the difference between her genuine interest and his performed interest was a difference he could feel in his body, the way you can feel the difference between standing in sunlight and standing under a sun lamp: both are warm, and one of them is lying.

He asked for her number. She gave it. The exchange was efficient and unsentimental and Asa recognized, in the efficiency, a quality he shared with Leda Carraher: neither of them wasted time on rituals they considered decorative. The difference, which he could not have articulated and which would take months to become visible, was that Leda's efficiency was the product of confidence (she knew what she wanted and did not need ritual to approach it) and Asa's efficiency was the product of incapacity (he could not perform ritual without the emotional content that made ritual more than choreography, and the choreography, performed without content, looked wrong to people who were paying attention).

Leda was paying attention.

. . .

Their courtship lasted two months and it was, by any external measure, successful. Restaurants where the lighting was designed for intimacy and the food arrived in portions that encouraged conversation over consumption. Walks through parks and along the river and through the neighborhoods she had studied professionally, which she narrated as they walked, reading the city's architecture the way a translator reads a foreign text, turning buildings and sidewalks and intersections into stories about the people who had built them and the people who lived in them and the decisions, invisible to the untrained eye, that determined who had access to beauty and space and light and who did not.

He listened to her narrations with a quality of attention that was, in its visible manifestation, indistinguishable from the real thing. His concern face had evolved, over the months since its first deployment, into something subtler and more integrated: a face that appeared to be affected by what it was hearing, that registered the emotional content of another person's speech through small, responsive shifts in expression that tracked the speaker's cadence and mirrored the speaker's affect. The face was his masterwork of interpersonal performance. When Leda spoke about the injustice of a highway that had bisected a neighborhood, his face registered sorrow. A community garden that had reclaimed a vacant lot drew warmth. Her father, who had built houses in Lorain, Ohio, and who had taught her to read a building the way most fathers teach their daughters to read a book, his face registered a complex of tenderness and admiration that was, in its

muscular execution, flawless.

She responded to the face. She opened. Over the weeks that followed, in increments so gradual that neither of them could have identified the moment when the opening began, she allowed the resting neutrality of her first impression to soften into something that looked, from the outside, like trust, and that felt, from the inside (though Asa could only observe the outside), like the slow yielding of a person who has decided that the risk of being seen is worth taking because the person doing the seeing appears to be safe.

She stayed at his apartment for the first time in June. His apartment was a space he had furnished the way he furnished his face: with attention to the signals the surfaces would send to any observer. Furniture warm-toned and comfortable. Bookshelves stocked with books he had read (his brain was excellent; his intellectual life was rich; the deficit was in feeling, not in thinking). Kitchen showing evidence of use. Bedroom clean and the sheets were good and the light was controlled by a dimmer that he adjusted to the level that produces, in most people, a sensation of intimacy: bright enough to see the other person's face, dim enough to feel enclosed.

They were together that night and the experience was this:

Leda's body was warm and her warmth registered on the surface of his composite's skin and traveled through the surface into the tissue beneath and the tissue received it the way it had received Maren's kiss on the back porch of the house on Caldwell Avenue: as data. Pressure, temperature, friction, the electrical discharge of skin touching skin, all of it arriving at his nervous system as information rather than experience, like a thermometer receiving heat without being warmed.

He performed. His performance was technically accomplished. He had studied human sexuality the way he had studied faces: through observation, through the cataloging of responses, through the identification of the muscular events that constitute the appearance of pleasure and of connection. His body did what bodies do. His face did what it was told. And the performance was good enough, comprehensive enough, responsive enough to Leda's signals that she believed it, or believed enough of it to allow the night to proceed to its conclusion without the dissonance that would have made her pull back and look at him and ask the question she was not yet ready to ask.

Afterward, she lay beside him with her head on his chest and her hand on his stomach and her breathing slowed to the rhythm of someone approaching sleep, and he lay beside her and felt her body's warmth against his body and felt the weight of her hand and heard the sound of her breathing and experienced none of it as anything other than what it was: the physical proximity of another organism, measured in degrees and pounds-per-square-inch and decibels, cataloged and filed and carrying no charge, producing no heat of its own, the warmth coming entirely from her direction and nothing, nothing returning.

He stared at the ceiling. The ceiling was white. The dimmer was at its lowest setting. Leda's breathing was even. His heartbeat, which he could not feel (that loss, extracted by the old man at the bus stop when Asa was fifteen), continued in its inaudible rhythm. His chest was silent. The woman on his chest was warm. The man beneath the woman was room temperature.

Weeks passed. They settled into the patterns that new couples settle into, the patterns that feel spontaneous and that are, if examined, as structured as any performance: the weeknight dinners, the Saturday mornings, the Sunday walks that loop through the same neighborhoods and return to the same apartment and produce, in functional couples, the warmth of shared routine, the warmth of a circuit that has been completed enough times that the completing feels like home.

One evening in late June, he arrived at her apartment twenty minutes early and found the door unlocked. He let himself in. She was on the phone in the kitchen, her back to the hallway, speaking to someone in a voice he had never heard her use. Lower than her normal register, faster, with a cadence that suggested she was finishing someone else's sentences and the someone else was finishing hers, and the mutual finishing was so practiced that it constituted a private language, a compression of speech that only two people who had known each other for decades could achieve.

She was talking to her father. He could tell because she was using a word he had never heard her say aloud: *Tata*. A Polish diminutive, she had mentioned once, the name she had called him as a child, and the word in her mouth now had a texture that Asa's system could identify but not produce: the texture of a word that has been worn smooth by thirty years of use and that carries, in its smoothness, the entire history of the relationship that produced it, like a doorknob carrying the oils of every hand that has ever

turned it.

She laughed. The laugh was different from the laugh she produced in his presence. Same volume, same warmth, same genuineness (her laughs were always genuine; that was the problem). But operating at a different frequency. It operated at a pitch that suggested an older, younger version of herself, a version that predated her professional composure and her careful intelligence and that surfaced only when the person on the other end of the phone was someone she had never needed to perform for.

Asa stood in the hallway and watched her back and listened to the laugh and the Tata and the fast, compressed, mutually-finishing sentences, and he understood that he was observing a room he would never enter. Not because the door was locked. Because the room was built for two people and he was not one of them, and the building had happened before he existed, and the materials were a substance he could not synthesize, and the substance was time, and time was the one thing his faces could not borrow.

She turned and saw him. The phone voice stopped. Her face performed the transition from private self to shared self, and the transition was brief and seamless and entirely unconscious, and the unconsciousness of it was what made it real: she was not performing for him, she was simply becoming the version of herself that existed when he was in the room, and the version was slightly different from the version that existed when her father was in her ear. Leda Carraher had an interior that operated independently of Asa Greer. The independence was the thing he admired most about her and understood least.

Leda cooked for him on a Thursday in July. She made risotto, standing at the stove and stirring the rice in a pot with a wooden spoon that she held at an angle he noted (forty-five degrees, loose grip, wrist rotating clockwise, the grip of a person who had been taught to cook by someone who valued process over speed) and the kitchen filled with the smell of saffron and white wine and the savory sweetness of arborio rice releasing its starch into liquid. He could smell the saffron. He could not smell it the way she could smell it. Saffron, for him, registered as warm and yellow (he still experienced some smells as colors, a residue of the synesthetic intensity of his childhood), and the warmth and yellowness were general, were categorical, were the saffron-ness of saffron without the note that distinguishes the saffron in this pot from the saffron in every other pot, the note that a working palate locates as a thread of iron or honey or hay depending on the origin and the age of the

spice and the temperature of the liquid absorbing it. His palate was no longer working at that resolution. The general survived. The specific had been paid out to faces he could no longer name.

She served the risotto and he ate it and the eating was caloric intake, fuel, adequate, and the adequacy was, to Leda, an insult she could not identify because the insult was hidden inside a performance that looked like enjoyment: the right sounds, the right facial responses, the compliment delivered at the correct moment with the correct specificity (the saffron is good, the texture is perfect, you have a gift for this), and the compliment was architecturally sound and emotionally empty and the emptiness was undetectable to anyone except a woman who was beginning, in the sixth week of this relationship, to listen for a frequency she could not name and that she would spend the rest of the summer trying to locate.

. . .

Leda noticed the wrongness on a Tuesday in August, four months into the relationship, at a restaurant where the air conditioning was set too high and the bread basket arrived cold.

The wrongness did not arrive all at once. It accumulated like a slow leak: the consequences of the water rather than the water itself, the stain on the ceiling, the buckle in the wallpaper, the faint smell of something damp in a room that should be dry.

She said: You're always the same temperature.

They were at the table. She was holding his hand across the white tablecloth, and the hand she was holding was his composite's hand, which was his hand, a hand assembled from the contributions of forty-plus consumed faces and which functioned, in every observable respect, as a normal human hand: it gripped, it gestured, it held, it released. What it did not do was fluctuate. His hand was always the temperature of the room. Decades of shifting had severed the connection between interior state and thermal expression. A hand that never surprised.

She said: When I hold your hand, it's like holding something that's been sitting on the table. It's the right temperature. It's always the right temperature. And that's the problem. It's never a different temperature.

He looked at her across the table and his face performed the expression of a person who has been told something surprising and is processing it with

interest, and he said something that he meant to sound curious and self-deprecating and that landed, to Leda's ear, with the flatness of a response that has been composed rather than felt: Maybe I'm just even-keeled.

She looked at him. Her face did the thing that had intrigued him the first night at the dinner party: it resolved into something his system could not map. The half-smile that occupied a position on the grid he did not have a coordinate for. The smile said: I know something is wrong. I cannot name it. I am not ready to push. But I have noticed, and the noticing is a door I have opened, and doors, once opened, are difficult to close.

Dinner continued. Bread remained cold. Air conditioning hummed. He held her hand across the table and the hand was the temperature of the tablecloth, which was the temperature of the room, which was sixty-seven degrees, and the hand told her nothing, and the nothing was the loudest signal in the restaurant.

. . .

The wrongness accumulated over months. Leda did not catalog it the way Asa would have cataloged it (systematically, taxonomically, with the detachment of a researcher logging data points). She experienced it as a growing discomfort that she could not resolve because the thing causing the discomfort was an absence rather than a presence, and human cognition is poorly equipped to identify what is missing, being calibrated instead for what is there.

What was there: a man who was intelligent, well-read, professionally successful, physically attractive, attentive in conversation, responsive in bed, reliable in the small logistics of partnership (he returned calls, he remembered dates, he showed up when he said he would). By every standard that dating advice and popular psychology and the observable behavior of functional couples would consider sufficient, the relationship was working.

What was missing: the involuntary. Accidental warmth. An unrehearsed gesture. A moment when a person forgets they are being observed and does something that reveals the interior, like wind lifting a curtain to show the room behind it. In the five months of proximity to Asa Greer, Leda had never seen the curtain lift. She had never caught him mid-thought, mid-feeling, mid-anything that was not a finished product. Face always composed,

gestures always complete, responses always arriving with the latency of responses that have been constructed rather than generated, a half-second delay between stimulus and expression that most people would never notice and that Leda, who spent her professional life studying the relationship between surfaces and what lies behind them, felt like a musician feeling a note that is microscopically flat.

Testing began, though she would not have called it testing. Investigation of the discomfort, like a person prodding an unfamiliar pain to find its boundaries to determine its boundaries.

She came home early and walked into the apartment unannounced. He was in the kitchen, and his face, in the half-second before he heard the door and oriented toward her, was blank. Not relaxed. Not pensive. Blank. A surface with no signal on it. The face of a mannequin between costume changes. The face resolved into warmth within the half-second, the composite sliding into its greeting position (eyes brightening, mouth curving, the whole architecture reorganizing to project welcome), but the half-second of blank was enough. She had seen the room behind the curtain, and the room was empty.

She brought him to a dinner with her friends and watched him perform. His face tracked each speaker in the conversation with a fluency that was, she now realized, too fluent. Real people miss things. They are caught looking at the wrong person at the wrong moment, or staring at the salt shaker while someone is making a point, or wearing an expression that does not match the topic because they are thinking about something else. Asa never missed. His attention was flawless. And the flawlessness was the flaw.

She lay in bed beside him and tried to find the moment when his breathing changed from waking to sleeping, the threshold where consciousness relaxes and the body's involuntary processes take over, and she could not find it because his breathing did not change. Awake and asleep, his breathing was the same rhythm, the same depth, the same mechanical regularity. No twitching, no muttering, no shifting in his sleep the way bodies shift when the brain is processing the day's emotional residue through the involuntary cinema of dreams. He lay in the same position he assumed at the beginning of the night and he remained in that position until morning, and the stillness was not peace. The stillness was the absence of the interior activity that produces movement.

She was sleeping next to a piece of furniture that generated heat and conversation and the appearance of a human being, and the appearance was so convincing that it had taken her five months to notice that the appearance was all there was.

. . .

Between Leda's growing awareness and the widening of his public career, Asa existed in a condition he experienced as dual-track: two lives running in parallel, sharing the same body, operating at different frequencies.

The public track was escalating. Phelan's firm had expanded, and Asa's position within it had expanded with it. Individual candidates' faces were no longer his work. Now he designed the principles that other face-builders in the firm applied, wrote the speech templates, the coaching manuals, the internal documents that codified the relationship between facial performance and audience response into a system that could be taught and replicated and scaled. Without intending it, he was becoming an authority, and the authority was generating the social heat that authority generates in professional environments: people sought his opinion, deferred to his judgment, oriented their behavior toward his approval.

And he was deploying the kindness. Not just in client meetings and professional encounters. In public. At events. On panels and at conferences and in the growing number of appearances that his rising status required. He had refined the concern face into a full persona, a version of his composite that projected the blend of competence and compassion that audiences found most trustworthy: the face of a man who was capable enough to solve problems and kind enough to understand why the problems mattered.

Each public deployment of the kindness persona produced the warmth. The warmth was reliable. It arrived within minutes of a successful performance, spreading from behind his sternum through his chest and into his limbs, and it lasted for the duration of the performance, and its intensity correlated with the audience's response: the more people who believed the kindness, the warmer he got. Small meetings generated small warmth. Public panels generated more. Speeches before full auditoriums, with hundreds of faces turned toward him, hundreds of perceptual systems receiving his projected goodness and returning it as trust and love and the moral investment that audiences make in leaders they believe are genuinely kind,

generated a warmth so intense that it bordered on ecstasy, a full-body heat that made his hands tremble and his vision sharpen and his hearing acute in a way it had not been since childhood, as if the warmth were temporarily reversing the sensory losses, reconnecting the dead gauges, flooding the instrument panel with light.

And then the burn.

The first burn arrived at a conference in November, three months after Leda's observation about his temperature. He was on a panel discussing public engagement strategies, and his kindness persona was deployed, and the audience was responsive (two hundred people, mostly professionals in communications and political consulting, an audience that was sophisticated enough to recognize good performance and too invested in the performance industry to question whether the performance was authentic), and the warmth had been building for forty minutes, a long deployment, longer than he usually sustained.

At minute forty-one, something changed. The warmth, which had been a diffuse and pleasurable heat distributed across his chest and arms and face, consolidated. It gathered at a single point beneath his jaw, at the hinge where the mandible meets the temporal bone, and the gathering converted the warmth from pleasure to something else.

The something else was burning.

The burn started at the jaw and spread downward along the sternocleidomastoid muscle, the long muscle that runs from behind the ear to the collarbone, and the burning was specific and located and unmistakable: it was the sensation of tissue under stress, of a material being asked to hold a shape it was not designed to hold, of the face rebelling against the form it was wearing.

His hands trembled. Not the fine motor vibration of overstimulation that he had experienced after taking Voss's face. A different trembling. Coarser. Visible. The kind a viewer in the front row might notice if the viewer were watching his hands instead of his face.

Remarks cut short. The moderator's closing signal used as an exit point, three minutes earlier than planned. A closing smile, the smile that says I have enjoyed this and am grateful for your attention, mechanically perfect while the jaw beneath it was on fire and the fire was spreading to his temples and the temples were reddening and the reddening would, if he remained on the

stage for another five minutes, become visible to anyone in the first three rows.

Offstage. A men's room. Door locked, standing in front of the mirror.

The mirror showed him the kindness persona at war with the body wearing it. Face holding. Composite stable. Kindness persona still in place, the warm brow, the open eyes, the mouth at its carefully calibrated position of concerned attentiveness. And beneath the holding face, beneath the stable composite, beneath the persona, his body was burning. The skin at his temples was red, a flush that began at the hairline and crept downward like dye dropped into water, and the red was the red of inflammation, of tissue responding to an irritant, of a body's immune system recognizing something foreign and mobilizing against it. His hands were shaking. His breathing, normally that mechanical constant that Leda had noticed and been disturbed by, was ragged, uneven, the breathing of a body in pain.

The burn was localized and mapped: jaw first, then the sternocleidomastoid on both sides, then the temporal muscles, then the frontalis muscle across his forehead, the progression following the exact anatomy of the kindness persona, burning along the muscles the performance had recruited, as if the persona were a chemical that was dissolving the tissue it had been applied to. The pain had a texture. It felt like the burn you get from holding a hot pan, the same delayed onset, the same spreading heat, the same sensation of the skin saying I was not designed for this temperature and the temperature saying I am here regardless.

His jaw clicked. A single, muffled click, the same sound the mechanism made during a shift, and the click told him something the burn alone had not told him: the body was trying to change. The kindness persona was pressing the face into a shape, and the shape was close enough to an actual shift that the shifting was activating, and the activation was involuntary, and the involuntary activation meant that the kindness performance was operating at a level of muscular commitment that was indistinguishable, to his body's systems, from a full transformation, and the body was paying the cost of a transformation without having authorized one.

He let the kindness persona go. He dropped it the way you drop a hot pan, by reflex, by the body's override of the will's intention. The composite remained (it was always the base; the personas were overlays), and the kindness overlay retracted, and as it retracted, the burning diminished. Red

at the temples fading. Tremor subsiding. Breathing regularizing. The click did not repeat.

He looked at his composite in the mirror. The composite looked back. Professional, competent, warm enough. A face designed for rooms. A face that did not burn.

The kindness burned.

He understood, standing in the men's room with the fluorescent light buzzing above the mirror in a frequency that reminded him of the bathroom in Decker, in the house where Cordelia maintained her regime of emotional absence, in the room where he had discovered, at five years old, that his face could be altered: the kindness, the performed goodness that generated the warmth that was the closest thing to pleasure his system could produce, was also the form that his body could least sustain. It was an allergen. It was a shape that did not fit. Every other persona (the competent face, the authoritative face, the concerned face, the warm face) could be held indefinitely without physical consequence. The kindness face, the face that generated worship, the face that produced the narcotic heat of other people's trust, was a shape that his body recognized as foreign and was, at durations exceeding about forty minutes, rejecting.

He was addicted to a drug his body was allergic to. The realization settled into him the way the consumed's residue settled into him: heavily, permanently, with the weight of something that could not be unfelt.

Face washed. Tie straightened. Back to the conference. The kindness persona stayed in its drawer for the rest of the evening. He was professional and competent and warm enough and no one noticed the difference because the difference between warm-enough and kind was a difference most people could not perceive, and the people who could perceive it were not in the room.

Leda could perceive it. Leda was at his apartment, waiting, and the waiting was a form of attention, and her attention was the one instrument in the world calibrated finely enough to detect the frequency of his absence.

. . .

Harlan Moeck appeared on a Tuesday evening in March, on a screen in the back of a car that was carrying Asa from one meeting to another through streets that smelled, through the cracked window, of exhaust and cooking oil

and the wet-cardboard sweetness of a city in early spring.

On the screen, a local news segment about municipal water quality. Three minutes long, the kind of segment that local news produces to fill the space between weather and sports: earnest, underfunded, featuring a spokesperson from the city's Department of Environmental Protection who stood in front of a treatment facility and explained, in language calibrated for an audience that had already started thinking about dinner, the process by which the city's water supply was monitored and maintained.

Harlan Moeck.

Asa did not recognize him immediately. Twenty years had passed since Garfield Elementary, and Harlan's face had changed in the ways that faces change when the body carrying them has spent two decades working: the boyish openness had been compressed by fatigue, the skin had coarsened, the jaw had squared under the influence of the same gravity and tension that reshapes every face past thirty. The eyes had not changed. The eyes were Harlan's eyes, and Asa recognized them the way you recognize a melody in a different key: the notes were transposed but the structure was the same.

Harlan was explaining water treatment. He was explaining it the way he had shared his lunch at Garfield Elementary: without performance, without strategy, with the steady application of competence to the task at hand. His face, on camera, did the thing that had fascinated Asa in childhood: it responded to the information it was delivering as if the information were real, as if the words describing water treatment were a fact to be communicated rather than a script to be performed, and the difference between the two was visible in the way Harlan's expression tracked the content rather than the camera.

No one watching this segment would have registered Harlan Moeck as remarkable. He was a city employee doing his job on local television. He was none of the things television rewards: charismatic, photogenic, trained in media presentation (his hands, Asa noticed, did the thing that untrained speakers' hands do: they moved too much, gesturing at facts that did not need physical illustration, and the movements were unselfconscious and slightly too large and they communicated, to Asa's trained eye, the signal of a person who had never learned to manage his body's signals because managing them had never occurred to him as a necessity).

Harlan was doing real work. A water system serving nine hundred thousand people. Monitoring protocols catching contamination events before they reached the distribution network. And the labor he represented, the labor of maintaining the invisible infrastructure that made urban life possible, was the labor of authentic goodness: unglamorous, technically demanding, performed without audience, producing results that were measurable in parts-per-billion rather than in applause.

Asa watched the segment to its end. The car moved through traffic. The screen showed a commercial for a personal injury attorney, then the weather. Asa's face, in the privacy of the car's back seat, did not perform a response. It sat in its composite default, processing the data, filing Harlan Moeck under the same taxonomic heading where Harlan had been filed since childhood: the species whose mechanisms he could observe and never replicate.

The good man digging the ditch. A real ditch, carrying real water to somewhere useful. No one applauded.

. . .

Leda left on a Sunday in September.

She left the way weather changes: gradually, incrementally, with a cumulative logic that made the final state feel inevitable even though each individual step toward it had been too small to count as decisive.

She had been pulling back for weeks. The testing had given way to a quieter form of withdrawal: she stopped trying to catch him unperformed and began instead to exist alongside his performance without engaging it, the way a person in a theater stops watching the play and begins watching the audience instead, observing the illusion from outside its intended effect.

On the Sunday she left, they were in his apartment. It was afternoon. The light was the kind that September produces in northern cities: low-angled, golden, capable of making any room look like a painting of a room, and the light fell across the floor and the furniture and their bodies and made everything look warmer than it was.

She was sitting on the couch. He was in the kitchen, making coffee with the methodical precision that characterized every physical task he performed (his hands moved through the sequence of filter, grounds, water, switch with the economy of a machine running a program it had executed a thousand times and that it would execute a thousand more without variation, without

error, without the small inconsistencies that human hands produce when human hands are attached to human minds that are distracted by feeling).

She said: I need to tell you something.

He brought the coffee. He sat across from her. His face arranged itself into the expression of attentive receptivity that the moment required, and the arrangement was automatic, and the automaticity was the thing she was about to describe, though she would not describe it in those terms because the terms available to her were the terms of emotion, not of mechanism.

She said: I keep waiting for you to be in the room with me. And you never are. I am always alone when I am with you.

The sentence landed on his composite's face and his composite's face performed the response of a person who has been told something painful and is absorbing it with the seriousness it deserves: a softening of the brow, a slight parting of the lips, a stillness in the eyes that communicated I hear you and I am affected.

He was not affected. The sentence had arrived at his processing system and had been categorized and filed with the same efficiency that every piece of human communication was categorized and filed. Sentence's meaning understood, emotional content parsed, the experiences that had led her to this formulation identified: the always-right temperature, the never-wrong attention, the breathing that did not change between waking and sleeping, the half-second of blankness she had seen behind the curtain.

Comprehension total. Feeling absent. The grief was in her face in the form of a controlled stillness that was, Asa recognized, the mirror image of his own controlled stillness: a surface held steady over a depth.

She said: I don't think this is about anything you've done wrong. I think there's something you can't do. And I don't think you know it.

She was wrong about the last part. He had known it since before Leda, since before Phelan, since Harlan Moeck and the unpaintable window and the bathroom in Decker and the cereal-aisle boy and every face he had consumed and every face he had built and every room he had entered wearing a surface that told the room what it wanted to hear while the space behind the surface remained what it had always been: a room that no one lived in, that no one had ever lived in, that had been empty since the day he was born and that would be empty when he died, and the furniture he had placed in it over the years (the composite, the personas, the concern face, the kindness face, the

warmth that came from other people's trust and burned him when he held it too long) was rented furniture, borrowed furniture, furniture that belonged to someone else and that he could never own because ownership requires the thing Leda was describing: presence. The ability to be in a room. Not to perform being in a room. To be in a room.

She stood up and picked up her bag, which she had brought with her, which meant she had known before she arrived that she was leaving and had prepared for the departure with the same efficiency with which she approached every logistical task, the efficiency he had admired as a mirror of his own.

Her hand went to his face. Her hand was on his composite's cheek, and her hand was warm (her hands were always warm, dynamically warm, the warmth fluctuating with her emotional state, the thermal broadcast that his hand could not return), and the warmth of her hand on his face was the last time she would touch him and both of them knew this.

She said: I hope you find it.

She left. Door closed. Apartment quiet. Coffee cooling. September light continuing its low-angled transit across the floor, warming everything it touched.

Asa sat in the chair where she had left him and felt the temperature of the room, sixty-nine degrees, and which was the exact temperature of his hands, and which would remain the exact temperature of his hands whether Leda Carraher was in the room or out of it, alive or dead, present or absent, because his hands did not know the difference, and the not-knowing was the fact of his life and the fact was permanent. The room he lived in was empty. The coffee was cold.

. . .

Phelan was disposed of in January.

It happened in stages. Asa stopped returning Phelan's calls. Meetings where Phelan's presence was expected went unattended. Internal communications were redirected so that Phelan's name appeared on fewer distribution lists, then on none. Firing was beyond his authority (Phelan was a partner). He removed Phelan from the circuitry of his professional life by extraction, cleanly, leaving the contacts empty.

Phelan knew too much. Not about the shapeshifting (Phelan, for all his professional acuity, had never suspected that his protege's talent for becoming what rooms needed was literal rather than metaphorical). Phelan knew about the construction. He knew that the kindness persona was manufactured, had participated in the manufacturing, had taught Asa the grammar. He had provided the tools. And the knowledge, stored in Phelan's sixty-year-old head, was a liability that scaled with every increment of Asa's public visibility.

The last time Asa saw Cormac Phelan was at the firm's office, on a Thursday afternoon in February. Asa was leaving a conference room. Phelan was standing in the hallway outside, holding a folder, the kind of prop that a man holds when he has been waiting for someone to emerge from a room he was not invited into and needs a reason to explain his presence in the corridor.

Phelan's face was doing something Asa had never seen it do. The searchlight eyes, those pale-blue gas-flame eyes that had swept every room Phelan entered for thirty years, were not sweeping. They were fixed on Asa. The expression bypassed anger, bypassed hurt, bypassed the theatrical betrayal that lesser professionals perform when they discover they have been outgrown. What remained was recognition. Phelan was looking at Asa with the face of a man who has spent his career building instruments and who is now watching the best instrument he ever built turn in his hand and cut him, and who understands, with the clarity that only a builder can possess, that the cutting is function. The instrument is doing what it was designed to do. The designer's hand was simply in the way.

Phelan said: You're good, kid. You're better than I built you.

The sentence sat in the hallway between them. Asa's composite performed the expression of regret, a softening of the brow and a downward tilt of the mouth that projected the appearance of a man who wished things were different. The projection was flawless. Phelan, who had spent thirty years reading faces for a living, read the projection and saw it for what it was. His mouth tightened. He nodded once. He turned and walked down the corridor with the folder under his arm, and his footsteps on the carpet were absorbed by the carpet's density so that his departure made no sound, and the soundlessness was the last thing Asa perceived of Cormac Phelan, the man who had taught him the grammar of public performance and who was

leaving the building without the grammar making a noise on his behalf.

Asa did not think about Phelan after the disposal. This was a capacity issue, not a decision. Phelan occupied no emotional space that required management, the way a piece of furniture, once removed from a room, occupies no spatial memory. The room simply reorganizes around the absence, and the absence is not missed because the room was never arranged for the furniture's benefit. The room was arranged for the room's benefit, and the furniture had been there only because, for a period, its presence had been useful.

. . .

In the years after Leda left and Phelan was discarded, Asa's public life entered a phase of acceleration that he experienced as a thinning of the boundary between his private emptiness and his public warmth, as if the two tracks that had been running in parallel were converging, and the convergence was producing a friction that manifested as the burn: more frequent, more acute, more difficult to manage within the time constraints of his expanding public schedule.

He was thirty-four. His name appeared in profiles and in quoted mentions in trade publications that covered the intersection of communications, politics, and public life. He was invited to speak at conferences, to sit on panels, to advise campaigns that were larger and more visible than any Phelan's firm had serviced. The invitations came because his public persona, the kindness persona, had achieved a critical mass of visibility: enough people had seen him perform goodness convincingly enough that the performance had generated its own momentum, the way a lie, told often enough and with enough conviction, generates an independent existence that no longer depends on the liar's continued effort.

The warmth was constant now. Every public appearance generated it. Every meeting in which his face performed the blend of competence and compassion that he had identified as the most potent formula for trust produced the narcotic heat that spread from his sternum through his body and that he craved the way a person craves the substance that is simultaneously sustaining them and destroying them.

And the burn was constant too. It arrived earlier with each deployment. What had started at minute forty-one in the conference men's room was now

arriving at minute thirty, then twenty-five, then twenty. The burn's progression was predictable: it began at the jaw, spread to the temples, produced the tremor in the hands, the reddening of the skin, the metallic smell of the sweat that seeped from his hairline. He had learned to manage the progression by timing his appearances: shorter speeches, fewer open-ended interactions, more controlled environments where the duration of the kindness deployment could be calibrated to end before the burn became visible.

The management worked. The public saw a figure of composed authority who chose his appearances carefully and who radiated, in the limited windows of his public presence, a warmth that felt more potent for its rarity, the way a perfume seems stronger when it is worn sparingly. They saw none of what followed offstage: the men's rooms where he recovered, the trembling hands gripping porcelain sinks, the face in the mirror, the composite holding its shape while beneath it the burn smoldered and the consumed pressed and the eyes, his eyes, the only part of him that had never changed, stared back from the mirror with an expression that was the closest thing to fear his body had produced in twenty years.

He was thirty-eight. He was ascending. The world saw a surface that was smooth and warm and good. The surface was burning, and the fire was invisible, and the fire was him. The fuel was borrowed. The ash was accumulating. No one was counting the cost because the accountant and the account were the same person, a face that rooms could not bear to disbelieve.

## Section 4

### *The Fire*

The corridor was sixty-four feet long and eight feet wide and lit by recessed fixtures that produced a light indistinguishable from daylight in color temperature but distinguishable in every other quality, because the light had no source that could be located by a body walking beneath it, no window or lamp or opening in the ceiling through which the light entered, and the sourcelessness gave the corridor the atmosphere of a space that was lit from within, as if the walls themselves were generating the illumination and the illumination was a byproduct of the walls' function rather than a service provided for the people who walked between them.

Asa walked the corridor at 7:15 on a Monday morning in November, and the corridor was silent except for the sound his shoes made on the carpet, which was a sound so attenuated by the carpet's density that it registered less as footfall and more as the idea of footfall, the acoustic memory of contact between sole and surface with the actual contact engineered out. Carpet the color of ash. Walls the color of milk. Air at seventy-one degrees and carried no smell and moved in no detectable current and pressed against his skin with the uniform, impersonal consistency of air that has been filtered and conditioned and reconditioned until it has lost every molecular trace of the exterior world from which it was originally drawn.

Forty-four years old. A position whose title was printed on a business card that opened doors and whose description, if anyone had attempted to write it honestly, would have required a vocabulary that did not exist in the language of organizational charts. The person who designed the face that the institution presented to the public. The institution was large enough and powerful enough and embedded deeply enough in the machinery of governance that its face was, in effect, a public face that millions of people received as a signal about the nature of authority itself: what authority looked like, how authority sounded, what authority cared about, and whether authority could be trusted. Asa built that face. He had been building it for six years, since the kindness persona's momentum had carried him out of

consulting and into the architecture of institutional power, and the building was the same work it had always been (study the audience, identify what the audience wants to see, construct a surface that delivers it) performed at a scale that made the earlier work, the candidates and the campaigns and Phelan's firm, look like sketches for the painting he was now executing.

The corridor deposited him into an office. The office was large and its surfaces were hard and its light was the same sourceless daylight as the corridor and its air was the same seventy-one degrees and the combined effect of these qualities was a room that felt like the interior of a machine: functional, precise, optimized for the processing of decisions and the generation of outputs, and as sensorily neutral as any space Asa had occupied since the bedroom in Decker that had lost its smell when he was ten years old.

He sat at his desk. His desk was a surface. His chair was a surface. The window behind him was tinted to reduce glare and the tinting reduced the world outside to a blue-gray wash, though if he pressed close to the glass he could see the limestone facade of the building across the courtyard, a building older than the one he occupied, its stone darkened by a century of weather, and at certain hours in the late afternoon a pigeon roosted on the ledge of the fourth floor, and the pigeon was the only living thing visible from his window that did not work for the institution. He did not press close to the glass. He looked at the window and saw weather without feeling it, distance without experiencing it, a world that existed on the other side of a material barrier that was also a perceptual barrier, and the perceptual barrier was not the glass. The perceptual barrier was himself.

He opened his briefing folder. The day began.

. . .

Power, at the level Asa now occupied, was an environment rather than an activity. It was something you were inside of, the way a deep-sea diver is inside a pressure that operates on every square inch of the body simultaneously and that the body adapts to by adjusting its own internal pressures until the inside and the outside are in equilibrium and the diver can function as if the pressure does not exist, which is the moment when the pressure is most dangerous, because the adaptation that makes it invisible is the same adaptation that makes its removal lethal.

The environment of power was organized around the elimination of surprise. Meetings scheduled. Attendees vetted. Documents prepared, reviewed, and cleared before they reached his desk. Public appearances scripted, rehearsed, and timed to the minute. Rooms swept (for listening devices, for structural risks, for the presence of unauthorized persons, for the environmental conditions that his staff had learned, over years, to maintain: temperature at seventy-one, humidity at forty percent, lighting at the color temperature that his composite's skin tone photographed best under, ambient noise at a level low enough for conversation and high enough to mask the content of the conversation from anyone outside the room's perimeter).

The elimination of surprise was also the elimination of sensation. In a controlled environment, there is nothing to smell (the air is filtered), nothing to taste (the food is catered and standardized), nothing unexpected to hear (the acoustics are managed), nothing unexpected to see (the sightlines are designed), and nothing unexpected to touch (the surfaces are maintained). The environment of power was a sensory vacuum, and the vacuum suited Asa in a way that would have disturbed anyone who understood what the suit meant: he had built himself a world that matched his interior. Controlled, regulated, emptied of the sensory noise that reminds a body it is alive, the corridors and offices and conference rooms of institutional authority were the architectural expression of the condition he had been approaching since childhood, which was the condition of a surface without a room behind it, a face without a self behind the face, a mechanism operating in an environment optimized for mechanisms.

He did not notice the suit because the suited did not have the sensory capacity to perceive what the suit was doing to him. The losses had continued. By forty-four, the ledger of sensations lost to the accumulated cost of shifting was longer than the ledger of sensations retained. Vision remained (though color had lost its saturation, so that the reds and greens and yellows that had vibrated with painful intensity in the Decker of his childhood were now muted to the point where a red tie and an orange tie were indistinguishable in dim light). Hearing remained (though the flattening of tonal distinction that had begun in adolescence had progressed to the point where music was rhythm and volume without melody, where the human voice was information without music, where the sound of rain on a window, which he remembered from childhood as a complex percussion with tonal variation

depending on the size of the drops and the speed of the wind, was now a uniform hiss). Touch remained (though the gradients of pressure and texture that had once allowed his fingertips to read the difference between cotton and silk, between oak and maple, between warm skin and cold skin, had collapsed to a binary that reported only hard/soft and hot/cold with no information between the poles). Smell remained (though the irreplaceable scents that had anchored him to places and moments, the bread-crust-and-pencil of his childhood skin, the wild-onion-and-hose of the Decker lawn, the ozone sweetness of approaching storms, were all gone, replaced by a general olfactory capacity that could detect categories of smell without distinguishing instances within those categories: food smelled like food, perfume smelled like perfume, rain smelled like rain, and none of them smelled like anything enough to constitute a memory).

He had consumed over one hundred faces. The number was approximate because he had stopped counting at seventeen and the takes since then had been so routine, so integrated into his daily existence (a face on the subway, a face in a restaurant, a face at a conference, each one scanned and absorbed in under twenty seconds, each one depositing its residue into the archive, each one extracting its cost from the dwindling inventory of sensory specifics), that the individual takes had long since ceased to be events and had become instead a continuous process, a background intake that ran alongside his conscious life the way digestion runs alongside thought: automatically, below the level of attention, producing outputs that were noticed only when they surfaced.

The outputs were surfacing with increasing frequency.

. . .

Before the surfacing overwhelmed him, there was the Kellner crisis. It was the last time the instrument worked at full capacity, and it was the performance that would make a later generation of analysts argue, once the footage was re-examined, that the dissolution had been prefigured all along.

A regional administrator named Kellner had been caught in a procurement scandal that threatened to metastasize into the institution's core. The evidence was financial, the trail was documented, and the press had enough to publish by Friday. Asa's staff brought him the problem on a Wednesday morning, in a conference room where the light was the same

sourceless seventy-one-degree daylight and the air carried no information about the world outside.

He built the response in four hours. Not a denial. Denials are surfaces that crack under repetition. He built a context, wrote Kellner's resignation letter in a register of quiet accountability that would make Kellner sound like a man who had identified his own failure before the press could name it. He drafted the institutional response in a register of measured sorrow that would make the institution sound like a body capable of self-correction, an organism that expelled its damaged tissue before infection could spread. He prepared his own public statement, nine sentences, to be delivered at a podium, in which he would stand beside the empty chair where Kellner would have stood and would project, through face and voice and the precise geometry of his body in relation to the podium and the cameras and the absent man, the impression of a leader who valued integrity over loyalty and who found the valuing painful.

The statement was delivered on Thursday. Seven minutes. Burn onset at minute five, jaw warming, the first tremor in his left hand arriving at minute six, managed by gripping the edge of the podium at an angle that read as emphasis rather than as the bracing of a body against its own dissolution. At minute seven, the sweat had not yet reached his hairline. He finished. He stepped away from the podium. The room, forty journalists and eleven cameras, had received the performance with the collective stillness that indicated belief, and the belief was total, and the totality was his product.

In the hallway afterward, walking toward the car that would take him to a room where no one would see the burn complete its transit from jaw to temple to hairline, he passed a woman named Deshawn Okafor. She was on his advance staff. She had been with the operation for three years. Her job was logistics: room dimensions, lighting angles, podium heights, the mechanical conditions that allowed his performances to proceed without friction. She was good at the job because she was precise and because she did not, as a rule, look at his face with anything other than the professional attention that her role required.

She looked at his face in the hallway.

The corridor was empty except for the two of them and a security officer twenty feet ahead, the lighting the same sourceless institutional daylight, the air at seventy-one degrees. And Asa's jaw, which had been holding the

composite's professional configuration for the duration of the Kellner performance, relaxed. The relaxation was involuntary. The burn had consumed the muscles that held the jaw at its calibrated angle, and the muscles, overtaxed, released for two seconds before Asa felt the release and corrected.

During those two seconds, his jawline softened. It rounded. It became, briefly, a jaw that did not match the face above it, a jaw belonging to someone else, someone whose architecture had been filed in the archive decades ago and whose mandible had surfaced now because the composite's grip had slipped and the consumed, who pressed hardest when resistance was lowest, had pushed through.

Deshawn Okafor saw this. Her stride broke. A half-step, less than a half-step, a hitch in the rhythm of a woman walking down a hallway who has encountered something her legs need a moment to process. Her eyes went to his jaw and stayed there for a beat that lasted longer than any professional glance should, and in that beat her pupils dilated and the muscles around her mouth contracted in a way that Asa, even with the burn climbing his temples, could read as the body's earliest registration of threat. Then her face did the thing that mattered: it closed. Deliberately, visibly, with effort. Eyes breaking contact with his, stride resuming, body reorganizing itself around the decision to not have seen what it had seen, performing the posture of a woman walking down a hallway thinking about nothing unusual.

She did not report what she saw, did not mention it to the chief of staff or to the security officer or to anyone in the inner circle whose job was to manage the distance between what the principal was and what the public needed the principal to appear to be. Instead she filed it in whatever private archive people maintain for things they have witnessed and decided not to know, and the filing was an act of self-preservation, because Deshawn Okafor's career and her salary and her mortgage and her daughter's school tuition were downstream of the face she had just watched malfunction, and reporting the malfunction would have required her to name something she did not have a vocabulary for, and the naming would have cost her everything the not-naming preserved.

Asa walked to the car. The burn was at his temples now. The sweat was beginning. He sat in the back seat and the door closed and the corridor was behind him and Deshawn Okafor was behind him and the Kellner crisis was

resolved and the institution had survived and the face had held, except for two seconds in a hallway, and the two seconds had been witnessed, and the witness had chosen silence, and the silence was the institution's immune response: loyalty built on fear, fear built on a foundation that was cracking, and no one whose livelihood depended on the building was willing to look at the foundation.

. . .

The consumed had passed from whisper to speech.

At forty-four, the irruptions that had begun in adolescence as phantom gestures and occasional misplaced sensations had intensified to a level that required active management. The phantom smells were the most disruptive. He would be in a meeting, surrounded by the scentless, filtered air of the conference room, and a smell would arrive with the force of a door being opened into a room he had never entered: perfume, heavy and floral, the perfume of a woman whose face he had taken at a department store when he was seventeen, arriving so strongly that he turned his head involuntarily, scanning the room for a source that did not exist. Or the smell of pine resin, sharp and medicinal, belonging to no tree in the vicinity and to no face he could consciously identify, rising from somewhere in the archive as if a file drawer had been jarred open by the vibration of some interior earthquake and its contents had spilled into the air of the present.

The phantom temperatures were subtler and more persistent. A cold spot on the back of his left hand that appeared without warning and remained for hours, the ghost of a winter afternoon imprinted on a face he had taken outdoors in January at an age he could no longer specify. Warmth on the right side of his neck, concentrated in a strip two inches wide, the residue of a face he had copied while the original stood in a shaft of sunlight, and the sunlight's heat had transferred with the blueprint and now lived in Asa's neck as a phantom band of warmth that activated at random intervals, independent of season, independent of environment, a summer trapped in a body that walked through November.

The phantom tastes arrived during meals. He would be eating (food was fuel now, a caloric intake that his body processed without pleasure, like a generator processing gasoline: efficiently, with no regard for the quality of the input) and a taste would erupt that had nothing to do with the food in his

mouth. Metallic and sweet. Smoky. Salt water and iodine, the residue of a face he had taken at a beach he had never visited, and the taste of that beach's air had followed the face into his archive and was now being served, unrequested, at a table in a climate-controlled room sixty miles from the nearest coastline.

He managed these irruptions by cataloging them, assigning them probable sources when possible, and filing them in the same system that had organized his data since childhood. The filing system was losing coherence. The archive was too large, the cross-references too numerous, the overlap between his own diminishing sensory experience and the consumed's growing sensory output too extensive for clean separation. He was beginning to encounter moments when a sensation arrived and he could not determine whether it was his or theirs: a warmth in his chest that might have been the kindness burn's distant precursor or might have been the residue of a consumed person's memory of being held, a cold on his forearms that might have been the conference room's air conditioning or might have been the ghost of a consumed person's fear.

A Tuesday in March. A meeting about budget allocations for the coming fiscal year. Eight people at the table, each with a briefing folder, each with a water glass, each performing the posture of institutional attention that meetings of this kind require (leaning slightly forward, pen in hand or hand on chin, face arranged in the configuration that says I am taking this seriously). Asa was at the head of the table, reading from a prepared statement, when the perfume arrived.

It came from nowhere. The room was climate-controlled, filtered, odorless by design. No one at the table was wearing perfume. The consumed's olfactory output had been escalating for months, phantom smells arriving at unpredictable intervals with increasing force, and this one was the strongest yet: a dense, floral, slightly powdery scent that flooded his nostrils with such intensity that his voice faltered mid-sentence, a half-second pause that the people at the table registered as a moment of concentration and that was, in fact, a moment of ambush. The perfume was heavy with jasmine and something underneath the jasmine that smelled of heated skin, and the combination was so personal, so saturated with the molecular identity of a particular human body that Asa knew, with the certainty of a man reading his own handwriting, that this smell belonged to someone, that it had been worn

by someone whose face he had taken and whose olfactory signature had been filed in the archive and was now surfacing with the insistence of a memory that refuses to remain forgotten.

He could not identify the source. The archive was too large. The smell could have belonged to any of a dozen women whose faces he had consumed over the decades, and the not-knowing was itself a new development: in earlier years, he could trace each irruption to its probable origin. Now the origins were blurring, the consumed's individual residues merging into a collective output that resisted attribution, a crowd speaking in a voice that belonged to no single member.

He resumed reading. The perfume lingered for eleven minutes, then faded. No one at the table had noticed anything except the half-second pause, and the pause had been filed, by his aide, in the running log of incidents.

The boundary between Asa and the consumed was thinning the way a wall thins when something is pressing against it from the other side: the surface holds, the structure holds, and the pressure is visible only in the way the paint has begun to crack.

. . .

Harlan Moeck appeared for the third time in Asa's life on a Wednesday afternoon in February, in a conference room on the thirty-second floor of a building that overlooked a river whose water, from that height, was the color of brushed steel.

Asa did not recognize him immediately. The recognition came in stages, the way a signal emerges from static when you tune a radio slowly across the dial: first the eyes (still Harlan's eyes, still carrying the quality that Asa had identified in childhood as the window rather than the wall), then the structure of the face around the eyes (heavier now, the boyish softness compressed by fifty years of gravity and weather and the particular erosion that comes from caring about things you cannot control), then the voice (deeper than Asa remembered, roughened by decades of use, still carrying the quality that had distinguished it from every other voice Asa had ever heard: the quality of a voice that said what it meant because the speaker had never learned, or never needed to learn, to say anything else).

Harlan was at the conference table because Harlan was the deputy director of environmental compliance for the regional authority that managed

the watershed supplying the metropolitan area's drinking water, and the meeting was about infrastructure funding, and infrastructure funding was the kind of topic that required the presence of people who understood how the invisible systems beneath the visible city actually functioned. Harlan was one of those people. He had been one of those people for twenty-five years, working at the level of governance where decisions are made about pipe diameters and treatment protocols and testing frequencies, the level where the consequences of error are measured in parts per billion and the consequences of success are measured in the absence of catastrophe, where success is invisible, and the work is invisible, and the worker vanishes into the functioning of the thing he maintains.

Harlan sat at the table and spoke about aquifer recharge rates and filtration upgrades and the capital investment required to replace aging infrastructure before it failed, and he spoke the way he had always spoken: directly, without ornament, with the settled authority of a person whose expertise was earned by years of labor in the field rather than years of managing the labor of others. His hands, which Asa observed with the professional attention he brought to all hands (hands being the most reliable involuntary communicators of interior state, more reliable than faces because most people manage their faces and forget to manage their hands), were the hands of a man who had done physical work: thick at the knuckles, weathered at the backs, moving with the unself-conscious purposefulness of hands that had turned valves and lifted manhole covers and held testing instruments in conditions where the testing mattered because the water mattered because the people drinking the water mattered.

No one else at the table was looking at Harlan's hands. No one else at the table was looking at Harlan with the attention that Asa was directing at him, the attention of a man who had first observed this particular species at the age of seven and who had spent thirty-seven years since then observing it at intervals and who had never, in all those years, been able to replicate the mechanism that made the species what it was.

Harlan did not recognize Asa. The composite face that Asa wore was not the face that Harlan had sat behind in Mrs. Olwen's classroom. The composite had no connection to the boy from Garfield Elementary, and Harlan's attention, which was directed at the infrastructure funding proposal on the table in front of him, did not scan the room for ghosts from a childhood forty

years in the past.

The meeting lasted ninety minutes. Harlan spoke for eleven of those minutes. His eleven minutes were the most substantive contribution to the meeting's stated purpose, and his contribution would be summarized in the meeting notes by an aide who would spell his name wrong and list his title incorrectly and file the notes in a system where they would be read by four people and acted on by none, because the funding decision had already been made before the meeting began, and the meeting's purpose was to create the appearance of consultation in order to provide documentary evidence that the decision-makers had listened to the experts before making a decision that the experts' input could not alter.

Harlan left the meeting and walked to the elevator and pressed the button and waited and the door opened and he stepped in and the door closed and Asa stood in the hallway outside the conference room and watched the indicator lights track Harlan's descent from the thirty-second floor to the lobby, floor by floor, the numbers counting down the way the years of a useful man's career count down: steadily, toward zero, in a building whose corridors Harlan would never walk again because the meeting was over and the appearance of consultation had been produced and the documentary evidence had been filed and the man who understood the water had been heard without being listened to and had returned to the level of the city where the invisible work continued.

Asa stood in the hallway. The sourceless light pressed down. The scentless air moved through the ventilation system with a hum that was the building's version of a heartbeat: regular, mechanical, audible only if you stopped and listened for it, which no one in this hallway ever did.

He returned to his office. He sat at his desk. The briefing folder was where he had left it. The window showed the same blue-gray abstraction.

No thought of Harlan Moeck followed. No thought of aquifer recharge rates or the filtration upgrades or the capital investment required to replace aging infrastructure before it failed. These were operational details, and operational details belonged to the level of governance where Harlan worked, the level that maintained the invisible systems, the level that dug the ditches.

Asa worked at the level that designed the face the public saw when it looked at governance, and the face he designed was kind, and the kindness was burning, and the burning was getting worse.

• • •

The kindness burn had progressed according to a logic that Asa, with his talent for structural analysis, had mapped with precision and managed with decreasing success.

At thirty-four, the burn had arrived at minute forty-one; by thirty-eight, minute thirty; by forty, minute twenty-five; by forty-two, minute twenty. The progression was linear and the slope was predictable and the prediction told him that by fifty the kindness persona would be sustainable for approximately ten minutes before the burn began, and by fifty-five for approximately five, and the extrapolation beyond that was a line approaching zero that his mathematical literacy was sufficient to graph and his emotional literacy was insufficient to feel, because feeling the approach of zero would have required the capacity for fear, and fear was one of the sensations he had lost (extracted, he believed, by the old man at the bus stop when Asa was fifteen, though the specificity of that attribution was uncertain; fear might have been lost to any of several takes in the years that followed, and the uncertainty itself was a symptom of the archive's growing disorder).

He managed the burn by managing his schedule. Public appearances were shortened. Press conferences were limited to prepared statements with controlled question periods. Speeches were timed to end before the burn became visible. The machinery of his staff adapted to these constraints the way a body adapts to a chronic condition: workarounds were developed, protocols were established, and the workarounds and protocols were normalized to the point where they ceased to be perceived as accommodations for a deficit and began to be perceived as the stylistic preferences of a leader who chose brevity over expansiveness, reserve over exposure, and whose reserve was read by the public as gravitas.

Convenient reading, and wrong. The reserve was survival, not gravitas. The brevity was a boundary, the point at which his body began to reject the face that the public most needed to see.

Physical progression of the burn was consistent. It began at the jaw, at the hinge of the temporomandibular joint, as a localized heat that spread downward along the sternocleidomastoid and upward into the temporal muscles. One minute past onset: the heat became visible as a reddening at the temples. Two minutes: the tremor began in the hands, a coarse vibration

controllable only by gripping a podium or a table edge or the inside of a jacket pocket. Three minutes: the sweat, emerging from his hairline with a metallic scent detectable at close range and explained by his staff as a reaction to the stage lighting. Four minutes, if he had not withdrawn from the performance, the composite would begin to lose coherence: a softening at the jawline, a blurring at the brow, a micro-instability in the arrangement of features that was too subtle for cameras to capture and too obvious for close observers to miss.

Five minutes was a threshold he had never reached. What happened there was unknown. He suspected that five minutes was the point at which the composite would fail entirely, the architectural structure giving way under the stress of the kindness overlay's incompatibility with the body beneath it, and the failure would be visible, and the visibility would be the end of everything he had built.

The closest he came was at a state funeral.

The funeral was for a public figure whose death had produced the kind of collective grief that institutions are designed to process and that leaders are expected to manage through the performance of shared sorrow. Asa was required to attend. He was required to be visible. He was required to project, for the duration of the ceremony, the blend of compassion and strength and solemn dignity that constitutes the institutional expression of mourning.

The ceremony lasted one hundred and ten minutes. Asa's kindness persona was deployed for the first seventeen of those minutes (the procession, the opening remarks, the early eulogies), and the burn arrived on schedule at minute fourteen, and by minute seventeen the reddening was at his temples and the tremor was in his hands and the metallic sweat was beginning and he needed to withdraw.

He withdrew. His seat was positioned to allow discreet exit. His staff had rehearsed the withdrawal protocol: a hand signal to the aide positioned behind the second pillar, the aide's response (a timed approach, a whispered communication suggesting an urgent matter requiring the principal's attention), the controlled departure from the pew to the anteroom to the car to the private space where the composite could stabilize without observation.

Withdrawal succeeded. Cameras missed the reddening, reporters missed the tremor, and the public saw a leader who had attended a funeral with appropriate gravity and who had departed before the ceremony's conclusion

because the demands of office required his attention elsewhere, and the explanation was plausible, and the plausibility was sufficient, and the sufficiency masked the fact that the kindness he had performed for seventeen minutes had nearly cost him the integrity of the face he wore to the world.

In the car, alone, in the controlled silence of the back seat, his face did something it had never done in a public or semi-public space.

It shuffled.

The composite lost its hold. The features, which had been stable for hours, began to cycle: his jaw narrowed and then squared and then narrowed again. His brow thickened and then softened. The distance between nose and lip shortened and then extended. Cycling rapid, less than a second per configuration, each one a face he had consumed, the architectural blueprint activating in sequence as if the archive had been jarred loose and its contents were spilling out one by one, face after face after face flashing across the surface of his skull in a rotation that he could feel as a deep, grinding vibration in his bone structure, the mechanism running at a speed it had never been designed to run at, each face pressing outward for its fraction of a second of existence before being displaced by the next.

The shuffling lasted four minutes and twelve seconds. He knew because the car's dashboard clock was visible from the back seat and he watched it while his face cycled through configurations that spanned thirty years of taking: young faces and old faces and male faces and female faces and faces of people he had forgotten and faces of people he had never remembered and faces that lingered for two cycles instead of one, as if their original owners were pressing harder, demanding a longer moment at the surface, insisting on being seen.

At the four-minute mark, the composite reassembled. The cycling slowed, the features stabilized, the grinding vibration in his bones subsided to the baseline hum that had been his body's resting state for years (the consumed's constant low-frequency presence, audible to him the way tinnitus is audible to the person who has it: always there, usually ignorable, occasionally rising to a volume that demanded attention and then subsiding before the demand could be acted on).

He sat in the back of the car and looked at the composite in the rearview mirror. The composite looked back. Stable. Professional. Warm enough. His eyes, the only part of him that never changed, stared out of the borrowed

architecture with an expression that he could not read because the expression was, for the first time in decades, involuntary, unmanaged, and the expression was something that an observer would have identified as fear, except that Asa had not felt fear since his teens and did not have the interior vocabulary to name the sensation that was now, for the first time in twenty-five years, making itself known in his body: a coldness in his chest, a contraction in his throat, a heightening of his visual field that made the dashboard clock and the back of the driver's head and the streak of city light outside the window register with a sharpness he had not experienced since childhood, since the time before the losses, since the time when the world was too loud and too bright and too heavy with color and he had not yet learned to dim it.

The fear lasted thirty seconds. Then it, too, subsided, retreating to wherever it had been stored for the past twenty-five years, and his body returned to its operational baseline, and the baseline was stable, the foundation of his life, eroding.

. . .

The years between forty-four and fifty-five passed in the prose of governance: long, syntactically complex sentences that subordinated clause to clause the way institutional authority subordinates person to function, and the subordination was so complete that the person performing the function could, at times, forget that the function was being performed by a person, and the forgetting was a kind of relief, because the person performing the function had less and less person remaining to perform it with.

He managed the burn. The management became the center of his operational life, the way managing a chronic illness becomes the center of the patient's day: medication schedules, dietary restrictions, activity limitations, all of the architecture of accommodation organized around the single imperative of preventing the visible manifestation of the condition that, if visible, would end the life the patient has built around the management of the condition.

His public schedule contracted. Where once he had given hour-long speeches and ninety-minute press conferences and full-day appearances at events that required sustained deployment of the kindness persona, he now operated in windows: fifteen minutes here, twelve minutes there, a brief

remark at the opening of a meeting followed by a withdrawal to an anteroom where the composite could stabilize. His staff, who had been managing these contractions for years, had developed the logistical vocabulary of accommodation (he has a schedule conflict, he has been called to a briefing, the principal will make brief remarks and then depart for a previously scheduled engagement) and the vocabulary was accepted because the vocabulary was normal and the normal was sufficient and the sufficient was all that the public required.

The consumed grew louder.

By fifty, the phantom irruptions that had been manageable at forty were arriving at a frequency and intensity that challenged his ability to maintain the composite's coherence during professional interactions. A meeting about budget appropriations would be interrupted, for him, by the sudden arrival of a smell so powerful that his nostrils flared involuntarily: the smell of woodsmoke and wet leaves, belonging to no fire and no forest, arriving from the archive with the force of a memory that demanded to be experienced even though the memory belonged to someone else, someone whose face he had taken on an autumn afternoon decades ago and whose olfactory experience of that afternoon had survived inside him the way a seed survives inside a stone: dormant, compressed, waiting for the pressure to crack the stone open.

His hands performed gestures that did not belong to him with increasing frequency. In meetings, his left hand would execute Waverly's wrist rotation, or his right hand would close in the gas station man's outside-in grip, and the gestures were involuntary and momentary and he had learned to mask them by converting them into deliberate-seeming movements (reaching for a pen, adjusting a cuff, shifting papers on the desk), and the masking was effective, and the effectiveness was decreasing as the gestures became more frequent and as the consumed, it seemed, became more insistent, pressing their motor programs through his musculature with a force that suggested volition, though he knew it could not be volition because the consumed were residue and residue does not will.

At fifty-two, a new phenomenon. He began to hear things.

The hearing did not take the form of voices that spoke to him, that addressed him, that communicated messages from identifiable sources. What he heard was a layer of sound beneath the ambient noise of any environment

he occupied: a hum, a murmur, a frequency that sat below the range of conversation and above the range of the building's mechanical systems and that had the quality of many voices speaking simultaneously at near-inaudible volume, like a crowd heard from a distance too great for individual words to resolve into intelligibility but close enough for the fact of speech, the fact of multiple human consciousnesses generating sound simultaneously, to be unmistakable.

The murmur was the consumed. He understood this. The archive, which had begun as a collection of discrete residues filed separately and accessible only through triggers (a gesture, a taste, a temperature), had consolidated into something denser, something collective, something that operated below the level of individual identity and that expressed itself as a continuous low-level output, a broadcast from the accumulated sensory debris of over a hundred stolen lives pressing against the walls of his consciousness like water pressing against a dam.

Stopping the murmur was impossible. Reducing it required tasks of high cognitive load (the murmur receded during complex negotiations, during document review, during any activity that forced his processing system to allocate its resources to the present and away from the archive), and the reduction was temporary, and the murmur returned when the task ended, and the return was, each time, at a slightly higher volume than the last departure, as if the murmur were a tide and each recession was followed by an advance that covered slightly more of the shore.

He was fifty-five. Corridor sixty-four feet long, eight feet wide. Sourceless light. Air at seventy-one degrees. Carpet absorbing the sound of his footsteps, returning a silence that was the absence of sounds that a building makes when it is alive with the activity of people who are doing things that matter, and the building he walked through was alive with activity and the activity mattered to someone and the someone was not him. That absence was the fact of his life, the corridor that was long and always the same length and he walked it every morning and every morning it was new because every morning the murmur was louder and every morning the consumed pressed harder and every morning the composite held and every morning the holding cost more and every morning the cost was invisible and every morning the invisibility was the only thing keeping the corridor intact.

• • •

On a Friday evening in March, in the fifty-seventh year of his life, Asa stood in a bathroom that was not the bathroom in Decker and was not the bathroom in Kellam and was not any bathroom he had previously used for the purpose he was about to attempt, and he tried to find his original face.

The bathroom was private, attached to a suite in a hotel where he was staying for an event that would occur the following morning and that would require fifteen minutes of the kindness persona and that he was not confident he could sustain. The burn's threshold had contracted to approximately twelve minutes. Fifteen was a risk. The three-minute margin between what he could sustain and what the event required was narrow enough that any variable (a longer-than-expected introduction, an interruption that required an unscripted response, an audience reaction that demanded a sustained display of performed compassion) could push him past the limit and into the zone where the composite began to lose coherence and the shuffling began.

Thinking about the shuffling, the four minutes and twelve seconds in the back of the car after the state funeral, the faces that had cycled across his skull, the archive spilling its contents, the consumed pressing outward. And he was thinking about the face beneath the composite, the face he had been born with, the face that the mirror in Decker had shown him at five years old: the face that was wrong, the face that rooms forgot, the face that had been the starting point of everything.

He wanted to see it. The wanting was not emotional (he did not want to see his original face out of nostalgia or self-compassion or the sentimental desire to reconnect with a younger self). The wanting was diagnostic. He wanted to know whether the original face still existed beneath the composite, the way a restorer wants to know whether the original painting still exists beneath the layers of overpainting that subsequent hands have added. If the original existed it could be found, and if found it could be mapped, and if mapped it could serve as a reference point, a zero-state, a baseline against which the composite's degradation could be measured.

He stood in front of the mirror. The mirror was large, well-lit, the kind of mirror that hotels install in bathrooms designed for guests who need to look at themselves with professional attention, evenly and warmly lit, the glass clean.

He relaxed the composite. He released, one by one, the voluntary holds that maintained the architecture of the face he had worn for over thirty years: the jawline, the brow, the spacing of the eyes, the position of the mouth, the angle of the nose. Each release felt like unclenching a fist that has been closed so long the fingers have forgotten the shape of open. Muscles that had been held in position for decades resisted the release, because the hold had become structural, like a tree grown against a fence incorporates the fence into its trunk.

The composite receded. What emerged was not his original face.

What emerged was a palimpsest. Layers of faces, none of them fully present, all of them partially visible, the way text on a page that has been written on and erased and written on again retains the ghost of every previous inscription. His jaw was neither his original jaw nor the composite's jaw. It was something between the two, shaped by both, belonging to neither, a compromise architecture that reflected thirty years of holding and releasing and holding again. His brow carried the weight of the composite's optimized authority and, beneath it, a faint trace of something lighter, narrower, younger, that might have been the brow he was born with or might have been the earliest version of the first composite he had built in Kellam at fourteen.

The longer he looked, the more the palimpsest revealed. In the cheekbones, a shadow of the post office woman's wide-set architecture, her broad face pressing through the composite's narrower structure like a watermark. In the chin, the gas station man's heaviness, the authority face that had frightened him at ten years old, now reduced to a residual weight that pulled his jawline down by a millimeter from where the composite held it. Across the bridge of his nose, a faint trace of the cereal-aisle boy's freckle pattern, the pigment long since overwritten by a dozen subsequent blueprints but lingering at the cellular level, visible in the warm light of the hotel bathroom as a constellation of spots so faint they could have been mistaken for age marks if you did not know, as Asa knew, that they were the last physical evidence of his first full transformation, the first face he had borrowed, the face that had taught him that the world is a different world for every face. And in the set of his mouth, the faintest residue of Garrett Voss: the half-smile that pulled to the left, the patience of the longer philtrum, the settled quality that had drawn Asa to Voss's face in a parking lot thirty-seven years ago and that had survived every subsequent modification, living in his

musculature like a dialect that persists in the speech of a person who left its region of origin decades ago.

His mouth was the most uncertain feature. It rested at a position that he could not identify as any configuration: not the pleasant face of childhood, not the composite's calibrated warmth, not the kindness persona's gravity. It was a mouth at rest, and the rest position was a position it had never occupied in his memory, a position that suggested a face that had never been performed, a face that existed in the spaces between performances, a face that was left over when every deliberate modification had been removed, and the leftover was fragmentary, incomplete, a ruin.

His eyes were his eyes. Brown, amber-flecked, set in a face that was a record of every face he had worn and a representation of none of them. The eyes looked back at him from the mirror with an expression that he recognized, after a moment, as the expression the mirror in Decker had shown him at five years old: the expression of a boy whose face was wrong.

The face in the mirror was wrong. And the wrongness was different now. At five, the wrongness had been a mismatch between the face he had and the face the world wanted to see. At fifty-seven, the wrongness was a mismatch between the face he wore and the face that should have been underneath it. The original was gone. Overwritten. Incorporated into the composite like a river incorporating the stones it flows over: the stones are still there, somewhere, their mineral content dissolved into the water, their shapes smoothed and reduced and distributed along the riverbed, and you can stand at the bank and know that stones were once here and you cannot point to a single stone and say that is the one I was looking for.

He could not find his original face because his original face no longer existed as a recoverable configuration. The mechanism that allowed him to assume any face had, over five decades of continuous use, consumed the one face it was built on. The foundation had been dissolved by the building it supported.

He stood in the bathroom for eleven minutes. In the mirror, the palimpsest stared back with his eyes, and the man in the mirror was a record of a hundred stolen lives layered over the ghost of a life that had been surrendered so gradually that the surrender had been mistaken, for fifty years, for a choice.

He reassembled the composite. The clicking was slow, careful, the mechanism operating with the deliberation of an old machine that knows its tolerances have narrowed. Feature by feature, the professional face returned: the jaw, the brow, the spacing, the mouth, the nose. Each feature locked into place with a small, private sound that only he could hear, the sound of architecture being restored, of the surface being rebuilt over the ruin.

The composite held. The mirror showed the face that institutions trusted and audiences worshipped and colleagues relied on and no one, in thirty years, had ever questioned. Stable. Professional. Warm enough. The eyes looked out of it like tenants in a building they had not chosen, present, belonging to somewhere else.

Light off. Into the bedroom. Down on the hotel bed. He lay and stared at a ceiling that was white and featureless and that did not press down the way the sky over Decker had pressed down, because ceilings in hotels are designed to feel high and neutral and unthreatening, and the ceiling performed its function, and the man beneath it performed his function, and between the ceiling's blankness and the man's blankness there was a sympathy that neither could appreciate, because appreciation requires an interior, and the ceiling was plaster, and the man was a composite, and neither of them had one.

The murmur of the consumed was louder in the dark. The accumulated voices of a hundred stolen lives pressed against the walls of his consciousness and the walls held and the holding was the last thing he could do, and the doing was everything, and the everything was less each morning than the morning before.

He did not sleep. He lay in the dark and listened to the murmur and waited for the morning, when the kindness persona would be required for fifteen minutes, and the burn would arrive in twelve, and the three-minute margin was the distance between the face the world needed and the face his body could sustain, and the distance was shrinking, and the shrinking was the clock, and the clock was his life, and the life was borrowed, and the lender was coming.

## Section 5

### *The Ash*

The smell woke him.

Not one smell. Many. Layered, simultaneous, arriving from nowhere and everywhere at once, filling the bedroom of the residence where the air was supposed to be filtered and conditioned and stripped of every molecular trace of the world outside and where the air was now saturated with a density of olfactory information that made him sit upright in bed and grip the sheets (sheets he could not feel, sheets that registered only as a surface against his palms, the texture of Egyptian cotton having been lost to a take he could no longer identify) and breathe through his mouth because his nose was overwhelmed.

Perfume, floral and heavy, the department store woman from age seventeen. Grass, cut grass, the wild-onion note that had been the smell of the yard in Decker before the first take erased it, arriving now as a phantom, the consumed's copy of a smell he had lost from his own inventory thirty years before his body began leaking it back into the air around him. Pine resin. Diesel exhaust. The copper-pipe smell of the cereal-aisle boy's chemistry. Soap, institutional soap, the kind that comes in dispensers bolted to bathroom walls in schools and hospitals. Blood, faint, metallic, the taste of it in the back of his throat though there was no wound and no source. A child's shampoo, strawberry-scented, belonging to a face he had taken at a playground when he was in his thirties, a face he had forgotten, a face whose shampoo he had never consciously registered at the time of the take and that had waited in the archive for twenty-five years before surfacing now, in this room, at 3:47 in the morning, as if the child whose shampoo it was had crawled up from the deepest level of the archive and pressed its scented hair against the inside of his skull.

He sat in the dark and breathed through his mouth and the smells did not dissipate. They accumulated. New layers arrived on top of the existing layers: tobacco, cooking oil, rain on hot asphalt, the ozone that precedes a storm (the smell he had lost at fifteen, returned now as a consumed's residue, his own

lost sensation coming back to him through someone else's nervous system), body odor sharp with adrenaline, floor wax, the sweetness of new plastic, and beneath all of them a base note that he could not identify and that he would later understand was the combined olfactory signature of over a hundred human bodies compressed into a single output, the smell of a crowd condensed into a single pair of nostrils.

City. School. Beach and forest and parking lot and kitchen and hospital and church. The room smelled like everyone he had ever taken a piece of, and the pieces were leaking, and the leak was not metaphorical, and the air in the room was carrying molecular information that did not belong to the room's environment and that his security detail, arriving at 6:00 for the morning shift, would notice as a strangeness they could not explain, a scent profile that had no source, a wrongness in the air that they would attribute to a malfunction in the HVAC system and that would be investigated and that the investigation would fail to explain because the source was not mechanical. The source was him.

He got out of bed. He stood in the dark. The smells pressed against him like weather.

. . .

He was sixty-one. Most days, the composite held with the rigidity of a structure whose engineering margin has been consumed by age and stress and that continues to stand because standing is what it was built to do and because the alternative to standing is collapse and collapse, once begun, is total.

From speech to chorus.

What had begun in his fifties as a low-frequency hum beneath the ambient noise of controlled environments had intensified, over the past six years, into something that occupied the midrange of his auditory field, a sound that was now louder than quiet conversation and that competed with normal speech for his attention, so that meetings had become exercises in dual processing: one channel receiving the voices in the room, another channel receiving the voices in his skull, and the two channels cross-contaminating in ways that produced, with increasing frequency, the cognitive event that his staff had begun to notice and to explain with words they found comfortable.

Fatigue, stress, the demands of the position, the natural effects of age on cognitive processing: comfortable words, all of them wrong. The cause was occupation. The consumed were occupying his sensory bandwidth the way an invading signal occupies a radio frequency: by broadcasting on the same channel at the same time, so that the original and the invader were layered on top of each other and the listener could not separate them and the result was noise where once there had been clarity.

He was responding to the consumed's input in public. This had begun six months earlier, at a meeting where the murmur had risen to a volume that, for three seconds, exceeded the volume of the speaker addressing him, and he had turned his head toward the murmur the way a person turns toward a sound, and the turning was involuntary and visible and the speaker had paused and the room had registered the pause and the aide behind the second pillar had noted it in the running log of incidents that the aide maintained and that the aide shared with the chief of staff and that the chief of staff shared with the small circle of people whose job was to manage the distance between what the principal was and what the public needed the principal to appear to be.

The distance was widening.

. . .

His face slipped for the first time in a public setting on a Tuesday in October.

He was at a table. Eight people. A discussion about something that the briefing folder had described in language he had read and comprehended and filed and that now, seated at the table with the eight people and the sourceless light and the scentless air (no longer scentless; the consumed's olfactory output was now a constant presence, a low-grade fog of displaced smells that hung around him like a personal atmosphere, detectable by anyone within arm's reach and explained, by those who detected it, as cologne or medication or the chemistry of an older body under stress), he could not retrieve from the filing system because the filing system was overwhelmed.

His hand reached for a coffee cup and the hand, in the moment of reaching, was not his hand.

Fingers shorter. Nails bitten. Skin darker by two shades. A hand belonging to a face he had consumed in his twenties, a man whose hands he

had never consciously studied and whose manual architecture had been absorbed as part of the whole-body blueprint and stored in the archive for thirty-five years and was now, without warning, asserting itself through Asa's motor system, pressing its shape outward through the composite's surface the way a body presses outward through a sheet.

One second. Asa saw it. No one else at the table saw it because no one else at the table was looking at his hand at that moment, and one second was too brief for the peripheral vision of a person focused on a briefing document to register as anomalous. But the one second was a rupture. The composite had held for over four decades without a visible break. The hand was the first crack.

He corrected. The hand returned to its composite configuration. He picked up the coffee cup. He drank. The coffee tasted of nothing (all coffee tasted of nothing; hot, bitter, liquid, these were the surviving descriptors, the differences between roasts and origins and preparations having been lost to the accumulated takes the way specific words are lost to a language dying one speaker at a time). His face remained stable. His voice, when he spoke, was the voice the room expected.

But the crack was there. And cracks, once opened, widen.

. . .

Over the following weeks, the slippage accelerated.

Jawline softening during a phone call, holding the softer configuration for four seconds before he noticed and corrected. Brow thickening during a solitary walk through the residence's private corridor, the consumed man's heavy brow pressing forward through the composite's lighter architecture, lasting seven seconds, seen by no one. Vocal register shifting, mid-sentence, in a conversation with an aide, dropping into a baritone deeper than his composite's calibrated range, a voice that belonged to Garrett Voss and that had been stored in his system since he was fourteen years old and that emerged now with the force of a presence that had been waiting in a room for forty-seven years and had decided, without permission, to speak.

A look from the aide, whose face performed the micro-expression of someone registering an anomaly and suppressing the registration, and the conversation continued, and the voice returned to its composite register.

A pattern in the slippage. It occurred during moments of low attention: transitions between activities, the seconds between one task ending and the next beginning, the gaps in the schedule where the system that maintained the composite relaxed its hold because the system had learned, over decades, that these gaps were private and that privacy meant safety. The system was wrong. Privacy no longer meant safety. Privacy meant that the consumed, who pressed hardest when resistance was lowest, could push their features and their voices and their motor programs through the composite's surface and hold them there for seconds that were becoming, with each incident, longer.

His staff noticed. The inner circle, the five people who managed his public existence with the precision of engineers managing a reactor, began to observe inconsistencies they could not reconcile. A jawline that looked different from one meeting to the next. A vocal register that shifted without warning. The smell that surrounded him, that miasma of displaced perfumes and phantom cooking odors and inexplicable pine resin that the HVAC investigation had failed to explain and that they had agreed, among themselves, to attribute to a medical condition they would never name because naming it would require acknowledging that the principal was changing, and the changing was not the kind of changing that age or stress or fatigue could account for, and the alternative explanations were not explanations anyone in the inner circle was prepared to consider.

They did not want to see. They had invested their careers, their reputations, their daily labor in the maintenance of a face that the public trusted, and the trust was the product, the product their livelihood, and the livelihood depended on the face holding. The face was not holding. The fact was inadmissible because admitting it would collapse everything the face had built, and the everything included them.

. . .

The child was at the annual public reception, a controlled event, two hundred guests, held in a hall whose acoustics and lighting and temperature had been engineered by Asa's staff to the specifications that his diminishing capacity required: cooler than standard (sixty-eight degrees, which slowed the burn's onset by approximately ninety seconds), dimmer than standard (which reduced the visibility of the reddening at his temples), and acoustically

dampened (which muffled the ambient crowd noise that competed with the consumed's murmur for his attention).

He was performing the kindness persona. The deployment had begun four minutes ago. The burn would arrive in approximately eight. He had twelve minutes of total capacity and the event required fifteen, and the math was wrong, and the math had been wrong for three years, and every event was a gamble that the margin of error would not be exceeded and that the withdrawal could be executed before the composite destabilized.

He was moving through the crowd, performing the movements that the kindness persona required: the handshake held one beat longer than necessary, the eye contact that lingered, the head-tilt of attention, the mouth at its position of compassionate engagement. Every movement a debit against the diminishing account of time before the burn, every handshake costing seconds, every sustained eye contact costing seconds. The account was draining and the drain was visible to no one because the drain was internal and the internal was the one space where Asa Greer had always been alone.

The child was standing near a column.

She was alone. Whatever adult had brought her to this event had moved into the crowd, and the child had been left in the shadow of the column the way children are sometimes left at the edges of adult gatherings, occupying a space that the gathering's social geometry does not include, a pocket of stillness at the margin of a room designed for movement and contact and the performance of institutional belonging. She was holding a glass of something clear, water or soda, and the glass was too large for her hand and she gripped it with both hands the way a much younger child grips a cup, and the gripping gave her the posture of a person who is holding something because holding something gives the hands a job to do, and having a job to do makes standing alone at the edge of a room slightly more bearable.

She was six or seven. Dark hair cut straight across her forehead. Eyes that were large and brown and set in a face that had not yet learned to perform, a face that was still operating in the mode that all children's faces operate in before the social education that teaches them to manage their expressions and to present surfaces calibrated for the responses they wish to generate. Her face was receiving. Openly, without filter, without defense. It was doing what Harlan Moeck's face had done in childhood: responding to what was there rather than to what the social contract required.

Asa, moving through the crowd, performing the kindness persona at minute six (burn arriving in approximately six more minutes, the margin narrowing, the jaw beginning to warm at its hinge, the first signal of the onset), passed the column and the child looked at him.

She looked at him the way children look at things that do not make sense. Not with fear. Fear is a response to a recognized threat, and what the child was seeing was not a recognized anything. Her face performed no social subroutine. No smile, no frown, no smile, no frown, no automatic deference or performed warmth that children learn, even at six or seven, to deploy in the presence of powerful adults.

Her face went still. The stillness was a different stillness from Asa's performed version or Leda's attentive version. This was the stillness of an organism encountering something its classification system cannot process: a pause, a suspension of all output while the input is being evaluated, the biological equivalent of a computer encountering data it has no program to handle.

She was looking at the space where his self should have been.

He looked at the child and the child looked at him and the exchange lasted three seconds.

In those three seconds, something cracked.

Not the composite. The composite was holding (barely; the burn was at minute seven now, the warmth spreading from the jaw toward the temples, the tremor stirring in his hands). What cracked was something beneath the composite, beneath the construction, beneath the decades of construction and consumption and performance. Something foundational. A six-year-old girl with a glass too large for her hands had looked at him without protocol, without the education that teaches adults to accept a surface as a person, and her confusion was worse than Leda's suspicion, worse than Phelan's searchlight, worse than any scrutiny he had ever faced, because confusion meant her system had encountered something it could not file, and the unfiled input was sitting in the room between them like an object neither of them could pick up.

He turned away from the child. He continued moving through the crowd. The kindness persona held. The burn continued its progression. Minute eight. Minute nine. Jaw on fire. Temples reddening. Tremor visible now if anyone were looking at his hands, and no one was looking at his hands because

everyone was looking at his face and his face was still the face they needed to see, the face of kindness and strength and compassionate authority, the face that rooms could not bear to disbelieve.

Minute ten. The sweat began. Metallic, emerging from his hairline in a thin film that caught the engineered light and reflected it as a sheen that his aide would attribute to the room's temperature. The aide was moving toward him. The withdrawal protocol was about to begin.

Minute eleven.

The composite failed.

It did not fail the way it had failed in the back of the car after the state funeral, with a cycling through configurations that lasted four minutes and that no one witnessed. It failed in a room with two hundred people and sixteen cameras and the quality of public attention that powerful figures attract at public events, the attention of people who are watching because the watching is an opportunity to be in the presence of something they believe in, and the believing is fragile, and the fragility is the thing that makes the believing precious, and the precious believing was about to be shattered by the sight of a face dissolving.

Dissolution starting at the jawline. A jaw that had been squared and firm and set at the angle of authority for thirty years, softening. Visibly. Rounding, narrowing, becoming something younger, and then shifting again, becoming something older, broader, the jaw of the gas station man, and then shifting again, and the shifting no longer sequential but overlapping, two jaw configurations occupying the same space at the same time, the composite and the consumed competing for the same bone structure, and the competition produced a visual effect that the people in the front of the room would later describe in language that circled the truth without landing on it: his face looked wrong, his face was moving, his face was doing something faces do not do.

Upward. Brow thickening and then thinning and then thickening again. Nose shortening and lengthening. Spacing of the eyes shifting by millimeters that were visible at close range as a wrongness of proportion, the eyes too close and then too far apart and then too close again, and through all of it his eyes remained his eyes, brown and amber-flecked, unchanged since the bathroom in Decker, the only stable element in a face that was now cycling through consumed configurations with the speed of a slot machine, each face

appearing for a fraction of a second before being displaced by the next.

Young faces. Old faces. Male faces. Female faces. The cereal-aisle boy's freckles surfacing for a quarter of a second and vanishing. Voss's settled jaw appearing and holding for a full second, the longest any single configuration held, as if Voss's blueprint, the first whole-body consumption, the first true occupation, retained a structural priority that the later, lighter takes did not possess. The post office woman's wide features pressing outward, stretching the composite's narrower architecture until the skin at his temples went white with the tension. Waverly's bone structure, a girl's face on a man's skull, the wrongness of it drawing a sound from someone in the front row, a sound that was not a word, a sound that came from the throat without the permission of the mind, the sound a body makes when it sees something that violates its assumptions about what bodies can do.

Faces of people in the room, who saw their own features worn by the figure at the center of the reception and who felt, in the seeing, a horror that bypassed cognition and arrived directly in the body as a visceral wrongness, the wrongness of seeing your own face on a body that is not yours, the wrongness of recognizing yourself in a mirror that is also a stranger. A woman in the second row pressed her hand to her own cheek as if confirming that her face was still attached to her skull. A man near the bar turned away and then turned back, unable to look and unable to stop looking, caught in the paralysis of a witness to something that should be impossible and is happening.

The smell erupted. Every stolen scent, released simultaneously, flooding the immediate area around his body with an olfactory chaos that people within ten feet would describe as overwhelming, nauseating, a wall of smell that had no source and no logic and that contained, if you breathed it in, the combined olfactory histories of a hundred human lives compressed into a single exhalation.

Sound. And the murmur, the consumed's collective sub-auditory broadcast, broke through some threshold and became, for a moment, audible to others. Nearest to him, people would describe hearing something, a hum, a vibration, a sound like many voices overlapping at a frequency just below intelligibility, the sound of a crowd trapped inside a single body and pressing against the walls.

Room watching. Cameras recording. Two hundred guests, who had come to the reception to be in the presence of the face they trusted and to receive the signal of competent compassion that the face projected and to return, in exchange, the devotion that performed goodness generates, stood in the engineered light and the dampened acoustics and watched the face dissolve and felt the unrepeatable sensation of a belief collapsing in real time, the sensation of watching the curtain fall and the room behind it be empty and the emptiness be visible and the visibility be permanent.

No scream. No speech. Standing at the center of the collapse, wearing every face and no face, surrounded by a room that was seeing what it had chosen, for decades, to not see.

The aide reached him. Hands on his arm. Movement toward the exit. Crowd parting. Cameras following. Composite still cycling, face after face after face, and the cycling slowing now, the mechanism running down, the consumed's pressure easing as the dam gave way and the pressure that had built for fifty years found its release and the release was not cathartic and not redemptive and not any of the things that narrative convention suggests a climactic dissolution should be. The release was ugly and mechanical and final, the way a building's collapse is ugly and mechanical and final: no music, no meaning, just structural failure and gravity and the sound of material that was never designed to hold the weight it was asked to hold reaching the point where it could hold no more.

. . .

What followed was not silence.

What followed was the sound that institutions make when the face they presented to the world is removed and the machinery behind the face is exposed: the sound of statements being drafted, of legal language being constructed, of communication protocols being activated, of the distance between what happened and what would be described as having happened being measured and filled with words that were engineered to carry the weight of explanation without bearing the weight of truth.

Words received. Words processed. And the public, which had watched the dissolution on screens and in the hall and in the quality of footage that camera phones produce (shaky, close, human-scale, the footage of witnesses rather than professionals), applied the words to the footage and found that

the words did not fit, that the words described something that the footage did not show and that the footage showed something that the words did not describe, and the gap between the words and the footage was the space where certainty had lived and where certainty no longer lived and where something else, something that had no name and that most people preferred to not examine, had taken up residence.

Coverage circled the event. Experts were consulted. Medical language was deployed. The institutional machinery, which had been designed to process disruptions and to convert them into narratives that the public could absorb and that the institution could survive, processed this disruption the way it processed all disruptions: by framing, by contextualizing, by deploying the rhetorical tools that had been developed, in part, by the man whose face had dissolved, the tools of performed concern and performed transparency and performed accountability that were, now that the face that had built them was gone, revealed to be what they had always been: tools. Instruments. Things built for a purpose, carrying no meaning beyond the purpose, empty when the hand that held them opened.

Harlan Moeck was not mentioned in the coverage. Harlan Moeck was somewhere in the infrastructure of the metropolitan area's water supply, testing samples, reviewing data, maintaining the invisible systems that continued to function regardless of which face the institution wore to the public. Water still flowing. Pipes still holding. Filtration systems still catching the contaminants before they reached the distribution network. Work continuing because the work was real, and real work does not depend on the face of the person credited with its results, and the person credited with its results had never been the person doing the work, and the person doing the work had never been credited, and the lack of credit was the ditch, and the ditch was real, and the water in it flowed somewhere useful, and no one applauded.

. . .

The final passage has no date.

Time unspecified. A room. In the room, a mirror. Ordinary: glass, silver backing, wooden frame, the kind of mirror you find in a bathroom or a hallway or a bedroom in a house that belongs to no one in particular.

A figure stands before the mirror.

The figure's face is still. Not performing, not shifting, not cycling through consumed configurations or projecting a persona or deploying the blend of muscular positions that constitutes the appearance of any particular quality. It is a face at rest, and the rest is the rest of a surface that has stopped holding, that has released its grip on every voluntary modification and every architectural choice and every borrowed feature and has settled into whatever configuration the bones and the muscles and the skin, left to their own devices, produce.

The configuration may be the original face. It may be the palimpsest that the mirror in the hotel showed at fifty-seven. It may be a composite of all the faces ever worn, a final averaging that has dissolved the distinctions between stolen and original and built and borrowed into something that is none of them and all of them and that belongs, in the end, to no one, because the self that would have owned a face was never assembled, and the faces that were assembled in its place have been shed, and the shedding has left a remainder, and the remainder is standing in front of a mirror, and the mirror is reflecting what is there, and what is there is a question the mirror cannot answer and the figure cannot ask because asking requires a self and the self was the thing that was never built and the building was the thing that was always attempted and the attempt was the life and the life was borrowed and the borrowing is over.

The eyes are the same. Brown. Amber-flecked. Unchanged since birth, unchanged through every face, the one constant in fifty years of shifting, the tenants who outlasted every building they were housed in. Eyes looking out of the face and into the mirror, which shows them their own reflection, and the reflection is the only honest thing in the room: two points of brown and amber that have seen everything and felt nothing and that will continue to see, and continue to feel nothing, for whatever time remains.

No smile. No frown. Rest.

Reflection.

## On the Lability

### CASE NOTES (provenance uncertain; recovered from institutional archive, undated)

Subject presents with congenital morphological lability affecting the craniofacial complex and, at advanced stages, the full musculoskeletal system. The lability permits voluntary reconfiguration of facial architecture through a process the subject describes as "reaching," a proprioceptive extension directed at a target individual's bone structure, resulting in the transfer of a detailed morphological blueprint. Non-invasive to the target, who retains original configuration. Subject acquires a functional copy.

Each reconfiguration event is accompanied by a permanent, irreversible loss of a sensory capacity, the nature of which appears to be stochastic but correlates with the sensory environment at the time of the event. Cumulative losses follow a predictable trajectory from specific instances (individual scents, textures, flavors) to general categories (tonal discrimination, thermal sensitivity, proprioceptive feedback). The consumed residue of each target's morphological and sensory data persists indefinitely in the subject's nervous system and manifests, over time, as involuntary motor programs, phantom sensory experiences, and a collective sub-auditory output that increases in amplitude with each subsequent acquisition.

Of particular clinical interest is the subject's paradoxical response to the configuration designated "the kindness persona." The performance of facial and postural signals associated with compassionate affect generates a measurable endothermic response in the subject's thoracic region, described by the subject as "warmth." The same configuration, sustained beyond a threshold that decreases with age and frequency of deployment, produces an acute inflammatory response along the muscles recruited by the performance, consistent with a tissue-level incompatibility between the performed affect and the subject's baseline neurological architecture. The subject is, in effect, allergic to the one configuration that generates the response he most seeks.

Addendum (recovered separately; filed apart from the primary case notes, origin unverified): A woman identifying herself as the subject's mother presented at a regional clinic in 1987, requesting evaluation for what she described as "a thing that runs in my family." Intake notes describe the woman as composed, guarded, and unwilling to submit to physical examination. She stated that her father had possessed the ability to "move his face" and that the ability had "eaten him from inside" and that she had spent her life "holding still so it would not start." A referral was offered and declined. She asked whether the condition could be passed to a child, was told the literature contained no recorded cases of hereditary transmission, and left the

clinic without providing a surname. Attending physician's marginal note, illegible except for two words: the first appears to be "carrier." The second appears to be "contained."

**Prognosis: structural failure.**

## Also by David Boles

### Novels

*Abandoned in Place*

*What the Light Carries: A Book of Temporal Correspondence*

*The Last Living American White Male*

*Touching Everything, Holding Nothing*

*The Dark Matter People*

### Nonfiction

*From Genius to Joke: How We Betray the People We Should Remember*

*The Failed City: An Autopsy of Urban Collapse*

*Miscast: Who Owns the Story on Stage?*

### The Fractional Fiction Series

*Standard Deviation*

*Reduced Gradient*

*Marginal Yield*

*Terminal Velocity*

*Phase Transition*

*Surface Tension*

*Elastic Limit*

*Inverse Square*

### The Westborough Crusaders Trilogy

*The Westborough Crusaders*

*The Westborough Crusaders: Returning Fire*

*The Westborough Crusaders: Final Charge*

*\*The ASL Linguistics for Practitioners Series\* (with Janna Sweenie)*

*Arm Angles*

*Depicting Space*

*Beyond the Hands*

*BolesBooks.com*

## **About the Author**

David Boles is a writer, dramatist, editor, and publisher. A member of the Dramatists Guild since 1984 and a graduate of the Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Theatre Studies at Columbia University, he has published novels, nonfiction, and dramatic works through David Boles Books Writing and Publishing since 1975. He lives in New York City.

BolesBooks.com

*The Borrowed Saint: A Horror in Five Skins*  
*David Boles Books Writing and Publishing*