THE WESTBOROUGH CRUSADERS

Book One: The Year Before the Wire

David Boles

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For Jamie Mussack, who played Crew

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer

W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming” (1920)

If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there.

Anton Chekhov, letter to Alexander Lazarev, 1889

Author's Note

In 1982, I was a sophomore at Northeast High School in Lincoln, Nebraska. I wrote eight episodes of a television series called *The Westborough Crusaders* and, for reasons I still cannot fully explain, decided to film two of them: episodes four and eight. I was sixteen years old.

I wrote, produced, and directed the series. I spent all my money. We held a casting call and attracted outstanding actors. The local Cablevision station allowed us to use their production equipment through their community giveback program, but I was not yet eighteen, so I could not check out the equipment myself. Every day we filmed, I drove thirty minutes to pick up my eighteen-year-old videographer, then thirty minutes to Cablevision, which was five minutes from my house, to sign out the video equipment that had to be returned by five o'clock that afternoon. After shooting, I edited the series on three-quarter-inch videotape.

The two episodes aired that fall on Cablevision and won a Cable ACE award. They were subsequently broadcast on an independent television station in Omaha. Both episodes remain available online. It was probably the greatest achievement of my young life, and also the most disappointing. We should have finished the other six episodes as live productions from the Cablevision studios, just to put a final punctuation on the project. We did not.

A few years later, the actor who played Crew committed suicide. His name was Jamie Mussack, and he was the only Northeast student cast in the show. He was my friend. These books are, in part, an attempt to finish what we started together that summer.

The Westborough Crusaders is a trilogy structured as Before, During, and After. This novel, Book One, dramatizes the year before the eight episodes begin. Book Two, *A Farewell to Shins*, novelizes the eight episodes, expanding their compressed dramatic architecture into full novelistic interiority. Book Three, *The Stopped Clock*, follows the characters beyond the series finale into the territory of consequence and recovery. References to episodes, cameras, and wire throughout the trilogy refer to the original 1982 television production.

The characters and events in these novels are fictional. The feelings are not.

Part One: Summer

Chapter 1: The Tight End

The ball came in low and behind him, which meant Keithe was showing off again.

Ares adjusted without thinking, planting his left foot in the dry grass and torquing his hips to reach back across his body, fingers closing around the leather at the exact moment his right knee reminded him that he had been running routes for two hours in June heat and the knee had opinions about continuing. He caught it anyway. He always caught it. That was the deal between them: Keithe threw, Ares caught, and neither of them discussed the mechanics because discussing the mechanics would mean admitting that what they did together on a football field was closer to conversation than athletics, and boys who played tight end in the Westborough Junior High summer league did not describe their friendships in those terms.

Coach Weddell blew the whistle from somewhere near the bleachers, a sound so thin and exhausted it could have been the wind. "That's practice. Get out of here before I have to fill out a heat stroke form."

Keithe jogged over, his jersey dark with sweat from collar to waist, helmet dangling from his left hand by the facemask. He was grinning. He always grinned after a good throw, and the throws were almost always good, and so the grin had become a permanent condition of his face during football season, a kind of ambient satisfaction that Ares found both reassuring and slightly irritating, the way you can be irritated by a song you like because it won't stop playing.

"You were open by three yards," Keithe said. "I put it behind you on purpose."

"You put it behind me because Davey Hollister was standing where the ball should have gone."

"I put it behind you because I trust your hands."

"You put it behind me because your release was late."

Keithe's grin widened. He put his arm around Ares' shoulder and the weight of it was heavy and warm and smelled like grass and copper and the particular sweat of a fourteen-year-old boy who had eaten three hot dogs at lunch. "Same thing," Keithe said.

They walked home through town because Keithe's mother was working the late shift at the phone company and Ares' mother had stopped picking him up from practice in May, having decided, in the way mothers decide things without announcing the decision or its logic, that Ares was old enough to walk two miles through a Midwestern city in broad daylight without supervision. She was right. The walk was safe and boring and took exactly twenty-eight minutes if they did not stop at the QuikTrip for Slurpees, which they usually did, and thirty-four minutes if they stopped, which made the Slurpee worth six minutes of Ares' life, a calculation he had performed once and then been faintly disturbed by, because he was the kind of person who calculated things like the minute-cost of a Slurpee and then wondered what that said about him.

Today they did not stop. The heat was the kind that sat on your chest like a hand, and even the idea of frozen sugar sounded like work. They walked east on Maple, then south on Grinnell, past the Savings and Loan with its electronic sign flashing the temperature in alternating red digits: 97. 97. 97. Past the barbershop where Mr. Fischetti stood in the doorway smoking and watching traffic as if traffic were a spectator sport and he held season tickets. Past the vacant lot where somebody had abandoned a Buick Skylark with its doors open and its radio stolen and its dashboard baking in the sun like a lizard on a rock.

Keithe was quiet for two blocks, which was unusual. Keithe filled silence the way water fills a glass, automatically and completely, and when he went quiet it meant something was working through him that had not yet found its way to his mouth. Ares noticed this but did not comment on it, partly because he respected the process and partly because Keithe's silences, when they happened, usually ended with something Ares did not want to hear.

"There's a girl," Keithe said, somewhere between the barbershop and the Buick.

"There's always a girl."

"No. A girl. Sandy. At the shore. My dad's taking us up to the cabin next week."

Ares looked at him. Keithe's face had changed, or rather, something behind his face had changed, something in the architecture of his attention, as if a room in his head that had previously been used for football plays and lunch plans had been suddenly cleared out and refurnished for a different tenant. Ares had never seen that particular rearrangement on anyone's face before, but he recognized it the way you recognize a word in a foreign language because its shape reminds you of a word you already know. Keithe was hungry for something. The football field had stopped feeding it.

"Sandy," Ares said, as if tasting the name and finding it insufficient. "Sandy from where?"

"From the shore."

"People don't come from the shore. They visit the shore."

"She lives there."

"Year-round?"

"Her family has a house."

"Everyone's family has a house, Keithe. That's what families do. They have houses."

Keithe punched him on the shoulder, not hard, the way boys punch each other when the conversation has gotten closer to something real than either of them intended. "Forget it."

"Already forgotten."

But it was not forgotten. Ares carried it the rest of the walk, turning it over in his mind like a stone he had picked up from the road, not because it was interesting but because it was there, and the fact that Keithe had put it there meant something, even if neither of them could name what it meant yet. They split at the corner of Grinnell and Pierce. Keithe went north toward the apartments near the highway. Ares went south toward the house on Edgewood that the Talers had rented since he was six, where the

crabapple tree in the front yard dropped fruit on the sidewalk every September and nobody picked it up until the wasps came.

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The screen door announced him the way it announced everyone, with a metallic screech that had been promising to be fixed since the Carter administration. The house smelled like onions and something else, something warm and floury that meant his mother had been baking, which meant something had either gone notably well or notably badly, because Linda Taler baked in response to emotional extremes and the middle ground produced leftovers.

"Mom?"

"Kitchen."

She was at the counter with her back to him, her hands white with flour to the wrists, a strand of hair stuck to her forehead with sweat or effort or both. The radio on the windowsill was playing something country and sad, which was redundant, because the country station played nothing else, and his mother kept it on because the sadness of other people's songs made her own problems seem manageable by comparison. She had explained this to Ares once when he asked why she never changed the dial, and the explanation had struck him as the most honest thing he had ever heard an adult say.

"There's a casserole in an hour. Your father called."

This was how Albert Taler's arrivals were always announced, as if his calling were the arrival and his actual physical presence were a kind of epilogue, a footnote to the more reliable fact of his voice on the telephone line. Albert was a pilot. He flew for a regional carrier that serviced routes between places that did not need to be connected by air but were anyway, because the airline existed and the routes existed and so Albert existed somewhere between the airport and the couch, present in theory and intermittent in practice, like a radio station you could only pick up when the weather cooperated.

"When?"

"Tomorrow. Maybe Thursday. He wasn't specific."

"He's never specific."

"Don't start."

Julie was in the living room with a textbook open on her lap and a pencil behind her ear, her legs folded beneath her on the couch in a position that looked uncomfortable but that she maintained for hours without complaint, as if she had struck a private bargain with her own body about what counted as rest. She was studying for something. She was always studying for something. Julie Taler processed the world through preparation: if she could anticipate the question, she could survive the answer, and the habit had made her the best student in the family and also the most exhausted.

"Hey," Ares said.

"You smell like a farm animal."

"Thank you."

"Shower before dinner. Mom made cobbler."

"What happened?"

"Puck had a headache."

She said it without looking up from the textbook, but the pencil behind her ear shifted, which was how Julie registered concern, through small involuntary movements of objects that happened to be near her head. Ares filed the information without responding. Puck's headaches were new, or newly frequent, and the family had developed a silent agreement not to discuss them directly, the way families develop silent agreements about things that frighten them, not through conversation but through the accumulation of avoided conversations until the avoidance itself becomes the agreement.

A metallic thumping from somewhere above the kitchen announced Puck's location before Ares saw him. The heating ducts. Puck Taler, seventeen years old and built like a question mark, spent more time in the ductwork of the Edgewood house than any human being had a reasonable right to spend in a space designed for the circulation of warm air. He crawled through them. He sat in them. He listened through the grates to conversations happening in rooms below, collecting domestic intelligence with the patience of a Cold War operative and the attention span of a terrier. Nobody told him to get out of the ducts anymore. It was like telling the wind to stop. You could say the words, but the wind was going to do what the wind was going to do.

"Puck, if you fall through the ceiling again, I'm not helping you up," Mom called toward the ceiling without looking up from the dough.

A muffled voice from the ductwork: "I didn't fall through. The ceiling fell up."

"That's not how gravity works."

"You don't know that. You're not a scientist."

"I'm the woman who pays the repair bill. Get down for dinner."

The thumping moved east toward Puck's bedroom, where the duct system connected to a removable grate that allowed him to enter and exit his vertical kingdom without using the hallway like a person who participated in the normal spatial conventions of domestic life.

Stan Harrison was at the dinner table when Ares came down from his shower. He was already there. He was always already there, in the same way that the table itself was always there, and the salt shaker, and the window that looked out on the backyard, and the crack in the plaster above the doorframe that Albert kept meaning to fix and never did. Stan Harrison had been part of the Taler household furniture for going on two months now, sleeping in the guest room that used to be the sewing room, eating meals at this table, watching television on this couch, existing within the domestic rhythms of this family with the quiet permanence of someone who had been absorbed rather than invited. He was Julie's boyfriend. He was also, by the slow arithmetic of proximity and shared meals, something like a brother, or a cousin, or whatever word described a person who belonged to your family not by blood or law but by the simple fact that he kept showing up and nobody asked him to leave.

"Hey," Stan said.

"Hey."

"Good practice?"

"Keithe threw behind me."

"On purpose?"

"He says on purpose."

Stan smiled. It was a good smile, easy and unguarded, the smile of a boy who had found a place where he was welcome and had decided to trust it. He was eating an apple, cutting it into precise slices with a pocket knife, arranging the slices on his plate in a fan pattern that Julie would have called neurotic and that Ares recognized as a kind of order, a small domestic ritual that meant Stan was comfortable enough in this kitchen to have rituals at all.

Julie came in and sat next to Stan and did not touch him, which was how they were together in front of the family, proximate and affectionate and scrupulously physical only in the sense that their shoulders sometimes touched when they reached for the same dish. Puck emerged from the hallway with dust in his hair and a red mark on his forehead from the duct grate. Mom brought the casserole. Albert's chair sat empty at the head of the table, which was normal, and nobody looked at it, which was also normal.

They ate. Puck told a story about a squirrel he had observed from inside the ductwork, which had somehow gotten into the attic and was, according to Puck, building a nest out of old tax returns. Mom told him to stop making things up. Puck said he was not making anything up and that the squirrel had specifically chosen the 1978 returns, which he found meaningful. Julie asked Ares about football. Ares said it was fine. Stan asked Ares about football. Ares said it was still fine. Mom asked nobody in particular if anyone had heard from Albert, and nobody had, and she nodded as if this confirmed a hypothesis she had been testing since 1974.

After dinner, Ares and Stan went to the backyard with the football. The yard was small and patchy, more dirt than grass by July, bordered by a chain-link fence that the neighbor's cat sat on every evening as if it were a wall between kingdoms. The light was going amber the way it does in the Midwest at the end of a summer day, when the sun drops low enough to turn every surface golden and every shadow long, and the air cools just enough that you can breathe without tasting the heat.

Ares threw. Stan caught. They did not speak. It was not the same as throwing with Keithe. With Keithe, the ball was a sentence in a conversation they had been having since seventh grade, each throw a word, each route a clause. With Stan, the ball was just a ball, and the throwing was just throwing, and the silence between them was simply empty rather than loaded with meaning, comfortable, the silence of two people who share a house and do not need to explain themselves to each other.

Julie came out onto the porch with a glass of something and sat on the top step and watched them. The porch light was not on yet. She was a silhouette against the screen door, backlit by the kitchen, her legs stretched out on the steps and her chin resting on one hand, and she watched them throw the

football back and forth in the dying light with an expression that Ares, if he had been looking, would not have been able to name, because it was the expression of a girl who is watching two people she loves do something simple and peaceful and knowing, without being able to explain how she knows, that this is one of the last times it will look exactly like this.

Stan threw the ball back. Ares caught it. The neighbor's cat watched from the fence. Inside the house, Puck climbed back into the heating ducts, and the thumping traveled west toward the kitchen, where Mom was washing dishes and listening to the country station play another song about someone who had lost something they were never going to get back.

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Chapter 2: The Pilot's Son

The headache started behind his left ear, which was the polite one. The right ear's headaches started at the base of his skull and spread forward like weather, like a pressure system moving across a map of his head that no meteorologist had been hired to chart. The left ear's headaches were smaller, more contained, a localized event that he could manage by pressing his thumb into the soft place where his jaw met his neck and holding it there until the pressure equaled the pain and the two canceled each other out, which they did, mostly, if he stayed still and did not turn his head too fast or think about anything too bright.

Puck Taler was seventeen and had been having headaches since April. Not the kind of headaches that aspirin fixed. The kind that lived somewhere behind the architecture of his face, deep in the infrastructure of bone and nerve that connected his neck to his skull, as if something in there had come loose, or come awake, or simply decided to start making noise after years of silence. He did not mention them to anyone. Mentioning them would produce a chain of events he could predict with the accuracy of a person who had lived in this house for all seventeen years of his life and understood its systems the way an engineer understands a building: Mom would worry, which would produce phone calls, which would produce appointments, which would produce waiting rooms with magazines from 1979, which would produce a doctor who would say something that would either mean nothing or mean everything, and either outcome would disrupt the household in ways Puck was not willing to be responsible for. So he pressed his thumb into the soft place and he stayed in the ducts, where the warm air and the low hum of the furnace motor, dormant in summer but still vibrating at some residual frequency, created a kind of white noise that made the headache bearable.

The heating ducts of the Edgewood house were not designed for human occupation. They were designed for the movement of warm air from the furnace in the basement to the vents in the floor of every room, a simple mechanical system that performed its function adequately in winter and sat idle in summer, its tin corridors empty and warm and large enough, if you were built the way Puck was built, to accommodate a teenage body moving on its elbows and knees through a network of horizontal and vertical shafts that connected every room in the house to every other room through a secret geography that only Puck had bothered to map.

He had started crawling into the ducts when he was twelve, during one of Albert's longer absences, a three-week stretch when the airline had routed his father through a sequence of cities that sounded like a geography test nobody studied for: Topeka, Wichita, Tulsa, Little Rock, back to Topeka, then somewhere in Missouri that Albert described on the phone as "the one with the arch" even though everyone knew St. Louis had an arch and nobody needed Albert to identify it as though he had discovered it personally from the cockpit. Puck had climbed into the duct because he wanted to hear his mother's voice from a distance, muffled and warm, the way it sounded when she talked on the phone in the kitchen with the door closed. He had stayed because the ducts felt like the inside of the house's

body, the veins and arteries through which the building breathed, and lying inside them was like lying inside something alive, something larger than himself and older than himself and indifferent to the small dramas of the people who lived within it.

By seventeen, he knew every junction, every turn, every place where the tin buckled slightly under his weight and every place where it held firm. He knew which grate opened onto the kitchen and which onto Julie's room and which onto the guest room where Stan slept with the window open because Stan could not sleep without moving air, a fact Puck had learned from the ducts and never mentioned, because the information gathered in the ducts was for having, not for sharing. The distinction mattered.

From his position in the horizontal shaft above the kitchen, Puck could see, through the floor grate's narrow slats, the top of his mother's head. She was on the phone. The cord stretched from the wall mount to the counter where she stood, her free hand flat on the Formica, her shoulders doing the thing they did when she was being careful about what she said, which was to say they were unmoving, locked in place, as if her body understood that the words coming out of her mouth required structural support.

"Thursday at two," she said. "Yes. Both of them. No, I'll bring the previous films. Yes. Thank you."

She hung up and stood there for a moment with her hand still on the receiver, and Puck watched the top of her head and waited for her to move, and when she moved it was to open the drawer next to the refrigerator, the one that held rubber bands and expired coupons and a notepad from the hardware store, and she wrote something down and put the notepad back in the drawer and closed it. She did not tell anyone about the phone call. She went back to the counter and resumed whatever she had been doing before the phone rang, which was cutting vegetables for dinner with the patient, repetitive focus of a woman who had learned to make the small tasks carry the weight of the large ones, because the large ones could not be performed in a kitchen.

Thursday at two. Both of them.

Puck pressed his thumb into the soft place behind his left ear and watched his mother cut carrots. He did not know what the appointment was for. He knew that "both of them" meant either him and Ares, or him and Julie, or possibly two of anyone, but the way she had said it, the particular care in her voice, the stillness of her shoulders, suggested that "both of them" meant something specific and medical and worrying, and that the drawer where she kept the notepad was becoming a different kind of drawer, a drawer with a secret in it, and his mother was a woman who did not keep secrets lightly.

He backed away from the kitchen grate and moved east through the main horizontal shaft, his elbows finding the familiar grooves in the tin that five years of crawling had worn smooth. The headache pulsed once, a single bright flare behind his left ear, and then settled back to its usual dull insistence, which was manageable, which was fine, which was a word Puck used for a lot of things that were not fine but that did not yet require anyone else's attention.

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The dream had started in May, three weeks after the headaches began, and it went like this:

He was in a room. The room was ordinary. There was a bed, a window, a chair, a lamp on a table beside the bed. The walls were white. The floor was wood. Everything was exactly where you would expect it to be in a room that contained a bed, a window, a chair, and a lamp on a table. The proportions were correct. The light was normal. Nothing was strange.

Then he looked out the window.

The world outside was upside down. The sky was where the ground should be, a flat blue floor stretching to every horizon, and the ground was where the sky should be, hanging above him with its trees and houses and roads and parked cars all pointing downward, suspended from a surface that had no visible means of supporting them. People walked on the underside of the ground with their feet attached to the earth and their heads pointing toward the blue floor-sky, and they did not seem to notice that anything was wrong, and the fact that they did not notice was the most disturbing part, more disturbing than the inversion itself, because it meant that either the world had always been this way and Puck had only just seen it, or the world had changed and everyone else had adjusted and Puck was the only person in the room who still remembered which direction was up.

He had stolen the dream from a book about the Beatles. Not stolen, exactly. Borrowed. Absorbed. The book was called "The Beatles: An Illustrated Record," and it was in the school library, and somewhere in its pages there was a description of a film or a song or a concept that John Lennon had described involving a room that was normal until you looked out the window, and Puck had read that description in February and forgotten it and then in May the dream arrived fully formed, as if his subconscious had taken Lennon's idea, held it for three months, reupholstered it with Puck's own furniture, and returned it as original work. The dream felt like a warning. He could not say what it was warning him about. It came every few nights, always the same room, always the same window, always the same inverted world where everyone but Puck had agreed that down was up and the adjustment required no comment.

He had not told anyone about the dream. Like the headaches, the dream belonged to the category of things that existed in Puck's private infrastructure, the internal ductwork of his mind, where information circulated without reaching the vents.

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In the late afternoon, the house settled into its summer rhythm: the rhythm of a family that had learned to operate as a unit with an intermittent member, the way an orchestra learns to play a symphony when the first violin keeps leaving the stage to catch a flight.

Albert Taler was a pilot. This was the central fact of the Taler household, not because it was interesting but because it was structurally determinative, the way the foundation of a building is not interesting but determines everything built on top of it. Albert flew. Albert left. Albert called from cities that had airports, which was all cities, which meant Albert could call from anywhere, and the phone would ring, and Mom would answer, and the conversation would be brief and logistical and end with

some version of "I'll be home soon," a phrase that had lost its precision sometime around 1978 and now functioned less as a prediction than as a pleasantry, like "have a nice day" or "we should get together sometime," a thing people said because the sentence existed and the alternative was silence.

Puck loved his father. This was not complicated. Albert was lovable in the specific way that unreliable people are lovable: generously, intermittently, and with a kind of gratitude that the reliable members of the family did not inspire, because reliability does not produce gratitude, only expectation, and expectation is the enemy of love, or at least the enemy of the particular flavor of love that Albert inspired, which was the love you feel for weather, for a force that arrives and departs according to laws you do not control and cannot predict but that you learn, over time, to dress for.

Mom held everything together. This was also not complicated. Linda Taler was the load-bearing wall of the household, the structural element upon which every other element depended for its position and its function. She cooked and cleaned. She scheduled. She managed the bills, the appointments, the school forms, the insurance paperwork, the car maintenance, and the ongoing negotiation with the landlord about the crabapple tree, which dropped fruit on the sidewalk and attracted wasps and was, according to the landlord, a naturally occurring feature of the property and, according to Mom, a liability that would eventually sting someone important enough to warrant a lawsuit. She did all of this without drama and without complaint and with the kind of efficiency that is often mistaken for ease but that Puck, from his position in the ducts, recognized as the opposite of ease: a constant, calibrated effort to keep every system running so that no system's failure could cascade into the others.

Julie managed the emotional economy. She was the one who knew when Mom was worried, when Ares was angry, when Puck was in pain, and when Albert's absence had lasted long enough that someone needed to make a joke about it before it became a grievance. She managed these things quietly, through small adjustments, the way a thermostat manages temperature: not by producing heat but by telling the furnace when to produce heat and when to stop. Julie was fifteen and had been performing this function since she was approximately nine, which meant she had six years of practice at being the person who noticed things before anyone else noticed them and who acted on that noticing before anyone else acted, and the result was a girl who was always slightly ahead of the household's emotional weather, always turning on lamps before the room got dark.

Ares was too smart for his own good. Puck meant this literally. His younger brother's intelligence was a tool too large for the jobs available to a fourteen-year-old boy in a Midwestern city where the primary employment of intelligence was schoolwork and the primary social use of intelligence was making people uncomfortable. Ares noticed things. He named them. He described them with a precision that was sometimes funny and sometimes cruel and sometimes both, and the people he described did not always appreciate the description, because being seen clearly is not the same as being seen kindly, and Ares had not yet learned to modulate his clarity with anything resembling tact. He would. He would have to. The world does not reward the kind of seeing Ares did, not at fourteen, not without something to soften it, and Puck worried about this in the abstract way he worried about his brother generally, which was to say constantly and silently and from inside the ductwork.

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At seven in the evening, Puck was in the shaft above the guest room when he heard Stan say it.

The guest room was directly below the junction of the east-west main shaft and the north-south branch that ran to Ares' room, which made it one of the better listening positions in the house, acoustically clear and structurally sound, the tin thick enough to support Puck's weight without the buckling that sometimes gave away his position in the thinner sections near the bathroom.

Stan and Julie were sitting on the guest room bed. Puck could see them through the grate: Stan's sneakers on the floor, Julie's bare feet tucked under her, the blue bedspread bunched between them like a topographical feature. They were not touching. They were talking in the low, careful voices of people who are saying something that matters and who know that the walls of this house are thin, which they were, and that the ducts carry sound, which they did, although neither Stan nor Julie had any idea that the ducts carried sound directly to Puck, who was three feet above them with his chin on his hands and the headache quiet for the first time all day.

"I love you," Stan said. Not dramatically. Not as a declaration or a performance. He said it the way you say a thing that is true and that you have been carrying around and that has become heavy enough that putting it down is no longer optional. He said it looking at his own hands, which were folded in his lap, and the words came out with the particular gravity of a boy who means it and is terrified by the meaning.

Julie did not say it back. Not immediately. She reached over and put her hand on his folded hands, and she held them, and the room was quiet for a long time, and then she said, "I know," which was not the same thing as saying it back but was, Puck understood from his position in the ducts, possibly better, because "I know" meant she had been carrying it too, and the weight was shared, and the sharing was the point.

Puck backed away from the grate slowly, carefully, distributing his weight across his elbows and knees to avoid the tin-buckle that would announce his presence and ruin the moment. He did not feel guilty for listening. The ducts were his territory, and the sounds that traveled through them were the currency of his understanding of this household, and understanding this household was the only job Puck had ever given himself, the only work that used the particular skills he had developed over five years of crawling through the building's veins.

He moved west toward the kitchen branch and settled above the living room, where Ares was sitting on the couch with a notebook open on his lap, his pencil moving, his mouth forming words that Puck could almost hear. Puck adjusted his position and pressed his ear to the grate.

Ares was practicing a speech. The words came in fragments, delivered to an empty room with the seriousness of a person addressing a crowd: "...the fundamental problem with the electoral college is not that it is undemocratic but that it pretends to be democratic while structurally ensuring..."

The speech was for Mrs. Halverson's civics class. Mrs. Halverson's civics class had ended two weeks ago. The school year was over. Summer had begun. And Ares was sitting in the living room at

seven o'clock on a Wednesday evening in June, practicing a speech for a class that no longer existed, delivering arguments to a teacher who was not there, because the speech was not finished and Ares could not leave a thing unfinished, could not allow a sentence to remain unpolished or an argument to remain incomplete, and the fact that the audience had dispersed and the grade had been given and the semester was over did not matter, because the speech existed and it was not yet right and Ares would sit on this couch and practice it until it was right or until dinner was ready, whichever came first.

Puck smiled in the dark of the ductwork. His brother was going to be fine. His brother was going to be someone. The headache pulsed once behind his left ear, and Puck pressed his thumb into the soft place, and the warm air moved around him, and below him the house continued its operations, every room occupied, every person performing their function, the building alive and breathing and unaware that someone was listening from inside its walls, cataloging every sound, every word, every silence, and holding all of it in the private infrastructure of a boy who had stolen a dream from a book about the Beatles and could not yet tell anyone why it frightened him.

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Chapter 3: The Transfer

The razor arrived on a Tuesday in a brown padded envelope that looked like it contained something important, which it did, because the razor was going to change Crewly Smith's life. The magazine advertisement had been specific on this point. The advertisement, which Crew had torn from the back pages of a men's fitness magazine he found in the waiting room of his mother's dentist, featured a man with a jaw like a geometry problem and a woman draped across his shoulder like an expensive scarf, and beneath the photograph, in a font designed to communicate scientific authority, the copy read: "The Bravada Razor System: Scrape away the dead sensuality, uncovering your natural, animal instincts."

Crew was fourteen years old and did not yet have anything on his face that required scraping. A few pale hairs above his upper lip had appeared in March, fine as corn silk and visible only in direct sunlight and only if you were looking, which Crew was, every morning, in the bathroom mirror, turning his face from side to side under the fluorescent light with the intensity of a jeweler examining a diamond for flaws. The hairs were there. They were real. They constituted, in Crew's assessment, the early infrastructure of a mustache, and a mustache required a razor, and a razor required a decision, and the decision Crew made was to order the most expensive razor available from the back of a dentist's office magazine because the advertisement promised animal instincts and Crew wanted animal instincts more than he wanted the $79.88 the replacement blades cost, which was all of his lawn-mowing money from April and most of May.

The razor itself cost $3.87. This was printed in small type beneath the photograph, separated from the blade price by enough white space that a person might order the razor for $3.87 and feel clever about it, and then discover that the blades, without which the razor was a decorative handle, cost $79.88, and by then the envelope had arrived and the handle was in your hand and the commitment had been made. Crew understood that this was a trap. He ordered it anyway. The trap was part of the appeal. Any razor you could buy at the drugstore for two dollars was a razor for people who shaved because they had to. The Bravada Razor System was a razor for people who shaved because they had decided to become the kind of person who shaved, and the $79.88 was the price of that decision, and Crew paid it with bills he had earned pushing a mower through the thick, wet, insect-infested lawns of Seminole County, Florida, where the grass grew like it had a personal grudge against anyone who tried to keep it short.

He opened the envelope on the front porch of the house on Palmetto Drive, which was not going to be his house much longer, which was a fact he was not yet willing to process. Inside the padded envelope was a smaller box. Inside the smaller box was the razor: a chrome handle with three parallel blade slots, heavier than he expected, cold in his hand. It looked serious. It looked like something a man would own. Crew held it up to the sunlight and turned it, watching the chrome catch the light and throw it back in bright slashes across the porch railing and the concrete steps and the front wheel of his mother's motorcycle, which was parked in the driveway because his mother parked her motorcycle in

the driveway the way other mothers parked minivans, which is to say permanently, centrally, and as the dominant visual feature of the household's relationship to the street.

The motorcycle was a 1974 Honda CB360, forest green with chrome exhaust pipes that his mother polished every Sunday morning with a rag and a can of Brasso while listening to the Allman Brothers on a portable radio she kept on the garage shelf for this specific purpose. Diana Smith was a compact woman, five foot three and weighing, according to the bathroom scale, which Crew had checked because he was curious about everything and respectful of nothing, one hundred and eighteen pounds. She rode the motorcycle to work, to the grocery store, to her sister's house in Oviedo, and once, during a thunderstorm that produced hail the size of marbles, to the elementary school to pick up Crew because the bus was delayed and she did not believe in waiting when a Honda CB360 was available. Crew had been nine. He had held onto her waist and pressed his face against the back of her leather jacket and watched the hail bounce off the road like popcorn, and the experience had permanently restructured his understanding of his mother, who was, he realized at nine years old in a hailstorm, not a person who waited for conditions to improve but a person who rode through the conditions as they were.

His father was in the house, packing. His father was always doing something that required efficiency and produced no conversation. Gerald Smith communicated through verbs: pack, load, carry, drive, eat, sleep. The sentences between the verbs were implied but never spoken. "Pack your room" meant: put your belongings in boxes, label the boxes, stack them near the door, and do not ask questions about where we are going or why, because the going and the why are not your department. Crew's department was compliance. He was adequate at it. He complied with the general trajectory of his father's instructions while deviating from them in the specific details, which meant that his room was packed, technically, but packed in a way that no reasonable person would call organized: clothes in with books, books in with soccer cleats, soccer cleats in with the bathroom stuff, and the Bravada Razor System sitting on top of everything in its chrome authority, the one item in the box that had its own packaging and therefore its own dignity.

"Crew."

His father's voice from the hallway. One word. The name was the sentence.

"Packing."

"Faster."

Gerald Smith passed the doorway without stopping, a box under each arm, his face set in the expression it wore when work was being done, which was no expression at all, a deliberate blankness that Crew had spent fourteen years interpreting as either discipline or emptiness and had never been able to determine which. His father was not cruel. His father was not warm. His father was a thermostat set to a single temperature, and the temperature was functional, and functional was the best Gerald Smith had to offer, and Crew had learned, not through acceptance but through the exhaustion that precedes acceptance, that functional was enough if you did not need anything else from the thermostat.

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The best friend came over at four o'clock to say goodbye, and the goodbye was fast, because that was how Crew did things, and the best friend knew it.

They stood on the porch. The best friend had his hands in his pockets. Crew had the chrome razor in his back pocket because he had been carrying it there since the envelope arrived, the way a gunslinger carries a weapon, close and accessible, a talisman against the world's tendency to be ordinary.

"So you're going."

"Midwest. Some city. Westborough or Westbury or West something."

"That sucks."

"Probably."

"You going to play soccer?"

"Probably not. They play football there. Like, actual football. With helmets."

"That sucks."

"You said that."

"It sucks twice."

They did not hug. They did not exchange anything. The best friend lifted one hand from his pocket in a gesture that was either a wave or an aborted handshake and walked off the porch and down the sidewalk and turned left on Palmetto and disappeared behind the Hendersons' hedge, and Crew watched him go and felt the particular ache of a friendship ending not through conflict or betrayal but through geography, through the simple mechanical fact that his father had accepted a transfer and the transfer was to a state that did not have palm trees or year-round soccer or the kind of heat that made you feel like the air itself was alive and paying attention.

Crew would not remember the best friend's name by Christmas. This was the way Crew processed attachment, not callousness: intensely, completely, and with an expiration date that he did not set but that his body seemed to understand the way bodies understand hunger and sleep, as a biological rhythm rather than a choice. He made friends the way some people made fires: fast, hot, with whatever materials were at hand, and when the fire burned down he did not mourn the ashes but looked for the next pile of wood. He had been this way since elementary school, since the first best friend in first grade whose name he could not remember and the second best friend in third grade whose name he could not remember and the best friend in fifth grade whose name was Marcus or Martin or something with an M who had moved to Georgia and sent one letter that Crew never answered, not because he did not care but because the letter arrived after the fire had gone out and answering it would have been like blowing on cold coals and pretending the warmth was real.

He did not know yet that the next fire would be different. He did not know yet that in a hallway in a high school in a state he had never visited, he would meet a boy whose sentences fit inside his own sentences the way a key fits a lock, and that the friendship would not burn down, and that the refusal to burn down would be the thing that changed him. He did not know any of this. He was standing on a

porch in Florida holding a razor he did not need, watching a best friend whose name he was already beginning to release walk away from a house he was about to leave, and the sadness he felt was real but temporary, the way a sunburn is real but temporary, painful in the moment and gone by the time the skin heals and the new skin underneath is tougher and less sensitive to the light.

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Soccer had been the good thing. The one thing that was his and not his father's and not the school's and not the state of Florida's, although Florida claimed some credit because Florida's climate made year-round soccer possible in a way that the frozen states to the north, with their absurd winters and their indoor seasons, could not match.

Crew played striker. He was fast, left-footed, and possessed of an instinct for angles that his coach described as "preternatural" and that Crew understood as simply the way the field looked when he was running: not a rectangle with boundaries but a surface full of holes that kept opening and closing like mouths, and if you were fast enough and you trusted the part of your brain that saw the hole before your eyes did, you could put the ball through the hole before it closed, and the ball going through the hole was the best feeling available to a human body, better than food, better than sleep, better than the chrome razor catching Florida sunlight on the porch. He scored twenty-three goals in the spring season. He also received four yellow cards and one red card, the red for telling the referee that his offside call was "an insult to geometry," a phrase Crew had not planned to say and that emerged from his mouth the way all of his best and worst sentences emerged, fully formed and already in the air before the part of his brain that managed consequences could weigh in, and the part that managed consequences was always a step behind the part that spoke, which was a condition that would serve him well in certain future circumstances and badly in others and that at fourteen he had not yet learned to regret.

The soccer would not follow him to the Midwest. He knew this the way you know a weather forecast: with certainty about the general outcome and resignation about the details. The Midwest did not care about soccer. The Midwest cared about football, and football was a sport played by people who ran into each other on purpose, which struck Crew as a philosophical error so fundamental that it called into question the entire region's relationship to the concept of strategy. But the Midwest was where his father's transfer was taking them, and his father did not consult Crew about transfers any more than the weather consulted the crops about drought, and so the cleats went into the box with the books and the books went into the box with the bathroom stuff and the box went onto the stack near the door, and the season that had produced twenty-three goals and a red card for geometric defense became a season that had happened somewhere else, to someone Crew was in the process of not being anymore.

He packed the orange overalls last. They were not practical. They were not flattering. They were the color of traffic cones and highway construction signs, the color of things that existed to be seen, and Crew wore them because being seen was preferable to the alternative, which was blending in, which was what people did when they were afraid of the space they occupied, and Crew was not afraid of any space he had ever occupied, including this one, which was about to stop being his.

The green shirt went on under the overalls. The red sunglasses went in the front pocket. The effect, in the full-length mirror on the back of his bedroom door, was approximately that of a tropical bird that had wandered into a construction zone and decided to stay. Crew examined himself. He turned left. He turned right. He reached into his back pocket and produced the Bravada Razor System and held it up next to his face, the chrome handle gleaming against the orange fabric, and he looked at himself in the mirror with the razor and the overalls and the green shirt and the red sunglasses in his pocket and he thought: whoever I meet in Westborough or Westbury or West whatever, they are not going to know what to do with me, and the not-knowing is going to be the best part.

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The car was a 1979 Ford LTD wagon, brown, with wood-grain paneling on the sides that was not wood but a vinyl adhesive printed to look like wood, a distinction that Crew found metaphysically offensive every time he looked at it. The car pretended to be something it was not. It pretended that a Ford station wagon from the late 1970s had any relationship to wood or grain or the natural world, and the pretending was not even good pretending, because the vinyl was peeling at the corners and the adhesive underneath was yellow and gummy and the whole effect was less "country estate" than "liar with a skin condition."

His father drove. His mother sat in the passenger seat with a road atlas open on her lap, although she did not need the atlas because the route was a straight line north on I-75 and then west on I-10 and then north again on whatever highway took you to the middle of a country that Crew imagined as a large, flat, beige silence interrupted occasionally by a town. The atlas was a prop. His mother liked props. She liked having something in her hands that corresponded to the activity at hand, the way she liked having the rag and the Brasso when she polished the motorcycle and the portable radio when she listened to the Allman Brothers. The atlas said: we are going somewhere. The somewhere was real, and the atlas made it official.

The motorcycle was on a trailer behind the LTD. This had been a negotiation. Gerald Smith had suggested selling the motorcycle. Diana Smith had suggested that Gerald Smith reconsider this suggestion. The reconsideration was swift and total, and the motorcycle went onto the trailer, and Crew understood, watching the negotiation from the kitchen doorway, that his mother's relationship to the Honda CB360 was structural rather than sentimental, the way his father's relationship to work was structural: it was the thing that held the other things in place, and selling it would have been like removing a wall from a house and then being surprised when the ceiling sagged.

Crew sat in the back seat with a box of his things beside him and the Bravada Razor System in his back pocket and the red sunglasses on his face even though the tinted windows made the sunglasses unnecessary, which was exactly why he wore them, because necessity was the argument of people who had given up on style, and Crew had not given up on style, and the sunglasses turned the Florida afternoon into a warm amber wash that made the palm trees look like they were on fire, slow golden fires that illuminated without consuming, and Crew watched them through the red lenses as the car backed out of the driveway on Palmetto Drive and the house that had been his house became a house he

used to live in, the transition happening not gradually but in the single mechanical instant when the car shifted from reverse to drive and the direction changed and the palm trees stopped getting closer and started getting smaller.

He watched them get smaller. The royal palms along Palmetto Drive, tall and columnar and ridiculous in their elegance, like guests at a formal party who had arrived overdressed and were too proud to remove their hats. The squat, pugnacious sabal palms in the median, which grew at angles that suggested a fundamental disagreement with verticality. The coconut palms in the Hendersons' yard, heavy with fruit that the Hendersons never picked and that fell on the sidewalk in August with a sound like a muffled gunshot, scaring the dog and delighting Crew, who had once timed the interval between the crack of a falling coconut and the dog's panicked bark at 0.4 seconds, a measurement that contributed nothing to human knowledge but that satisfied his need to quantify the world's small comedies.

The palm trees got smaller and the street got smaller. The neighborhood got smaller. Florida got smaller, although Florida was enormous and could not actually get smaller, but in the back window of the LTD it was shrinking, collapsing into the vanishing point the way everything collapsed when you drove away from it, and Crew pressed his face closer to the glass and watched the shrinking happen and felt the familiar ache begin and end in the same motion, the fire lighting and dying in a single breath, because the grief of leaving was real but the grief had an expiration date and the expiration date was somewhere on I-75, north of Orlando, south of wherever, in the space between the state he was leaving and the state he had not yet entered, and in that space there was nothing to feel except the road and the hum of the engine and the weight of the razor in his back pocket and the warmth of the red sunglasses on his face and the knowledge, which was not yet knowledge but something closer to a hunch, that whoever Crewly Smith was going to be next, he was going to be it loudly, and in color, and without apology.

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Chapter 4: The Shoreline

The cabin belonged to his grandfather, who was dead, and to his father, who was present in the way that ownership makes people present, which is to say legally and financially but not always physically, because Keithe's father worked the grain elevator in Westborough during the week and drove the three hours to the shore on Friday evenings and drove back on Sunday afternoons, and the hours in between were the hours when Keithe's father existed in the cabin and the hours on either side were the hours when the cabin existed without him, and the cabin, Keithe had noticed, was more itself without his father in it, the way a stage is more itself before the actors arrive and ruin it with their intentions.

The shore was Lake Michigan. Not the ocean. People who had never been to Lake Michigan imagined something small and manageable, a lake, a body of water with visible edges, something you could see across. People who had been to Lake Michigan understood that the word "lake" was a bureaucratic understatement, a cartographer's refusal to admit that the freshwater sea in the middle of the continent behaved like an ocean in every way that mattered: the waves, the wind, the horizon that swallowed the water at a distance that made the far shore theoretical, a rumor the water told about itself. The beach was sand, fine and pale, and it stretched in both directions until it curved out of sight, and the water was green near the shore and blue further out and gray at the horizon, and the sound of it was the sound of something large and patient repeating itself without variation, which was either boring or holy depending on who was listening.

Keithe was listening. He had been at the cabin for four days, alone except for his mother, who read paperback mysteries on the screened porch and did not require conversation, a quality Keithe appreciated more at fourteen than he had at twelve, when her silence had felt like neglect and now felt like permission. He had the beach to himself. He had a football, which he threw against the side of the cabin in a rhythm that approximated the rhythm of throwing to Ares: release, flight, impact, retrieval. The cabin wall did not adjust its route. The cabin wall did not catch the ball with hands that knew where the ball was going before the ball knew. The cabin wall was a wall, and throwing to it was like talking to someone who could not hear you, an exercise in mechanics emptied of its meaning.

On the fifth day he walked east along the beach toward the public access point where the state park began, and that was where he saw her. She was sitting on a piece of driftwood the size of a small couch, her knees pulled up to her chest, her feet bare, her hair dark and wet and pushed behind her ears. She was watching the water with the attention of a person who was looking for something specific in it, studying rather than scanning, the way you study a page in a book when you know the sentence you need is there but you have not found it yet.

He stopped walking. He did not mean to stop walking. His body stopped, the way a body stops when it encounters something that reorganizes its priorities without consulting the brain, the way a body stops when the cellular machinery that governs attraction fires all of its signals simultaneously and the result is not a thought but a pause, a full-system interruption that leaves the person standing on

a beach with his hands at his sides and his mouth slightly open and his football under his arm and nothing intelligent to say.

She looked at him. Her eyes were brown. Not warm brown. Specific brown. The brown of wet sand at the waterline, the brown that is almost gold when the light catches it and almost black when the light moves on.

"You're staring," she said.

"I'm not staring. I stopped walking."

"You stopped walking to stare."

"I stopped walking because there's a person sitting on a tree."

"It's driftwood."

"Driftwood is a tree that gave up."

She laughed. It was a short laugh, more air than sound, the kind of laugh that means the other person has passed a test they did not know they were taking. She moved over on the driftwood couch. The movement was a rearrangement rather than an invitation, the kind of rearrangement that happened to produce a space, and the space happened to be the size of a fourteen-year-old boy, and the coincidence was so deliberate that it could not have been a coincidence.

Keithe sat down. The driftwood was smooth and warm from the sun and bleached to the color of bone. Between them was perhaps a foot of space, which was too close for strangers and too far for friends and exactly right for two people who were in the process of becoming something that did not have a name yet.

"Sandy," she said.

"Keithe."

"With an E?"

"With an E."

"Why?"

"My mother liked the spelling."

"Your mother liked adding a silent letter to a name that already worked?"

"My mother liked a lot of things that already worked and then improved them."

Sandy looked at him with the expression of a person recalculating. She had expected something, and Keithe had provided something else, and the difference between the expectation and the provision was the space where interest begins, the gap between what you thought a person was going to be and what they turned out to be, and the gap was wide enough to be interesting and narrow enough to be safe.

"I swim," she said, as if this explained something fundamental about her presence on a piece of driftwood on a beach in Michigan in June, and it did, because the information was not about swimming but about identity, about the thing she organized her life around the way Keithe organized his around

the ball and the route and the release.

"Competitively?"

"I don't do anything non-competitively."

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They walked. They walked east along the waterline where the sand was firm and dark and the water ran over their feet in thin sheets that were warm on top and cold underneath, a thermal contradiction that Sandy explained had to do with solar heating of the surface layer and the deeper water retaining the temperature of the lake bed, and Keithe listened to the explanation not because he cared about thermal layers but because he cared about the fact that Sandy knew about thermal layers and chose to explain them, which meant she was a person who processed the world through knowledge and who assumed that the people around her were interested in being taught, and the assumption itself was a kind of generosity, a willingness to believe that the boy walking next to her on the beach wanted to understand the water and not just feel it.

She was from a town forty minutes south. Her family had a house, not a cabin, a distinction she made precisely: a cabin was seasonal, a house was permanent, and her family's house on the shore was permanent, year-round, insulated, with a furnace and storm windows and a driveway that her father plowed himself in winter with a blade attachment on the front of a truck that was older than Sandy and louder than any machine had a right to be. She lived there in summer and during school breaks and sometimes, when the school in town closed for weather, for stretches of January and February that she described as "the months when the lake tries to become the sky," a phrase that Keithe carried home in his head and turned over for days the way you turn over a shell you found on the beach, examining it from every angle, knowing it was beautiful but not knowing yet exactly what kind of beautiful it was.

She collected things from the water's edge. Not randomly. She selected. A piece of driftwood the length of her forearm, curved like a rib, the grain exposed by years of sand and water into a pattern that looked like a topographical map of a country that did not exist. A shell, white and hinged, the two halves still connected, which she called a mussel shell and which she held up to the light and opened and closed like a tiny book. A stone, flat and gray and perfectly round, which she put in her pocket without comment, as if the stone had applied for the position and been accepted on its qualifications.

Keithe collected nothing. He watched her collect. He watched her hands, which were specific in their movements, the way an athlete's hands are specific, trained by repetition to know the difference between a thing worth picking up and a thing the water had already ruined. She swam butterfly and backstroke. She had told him this while selecting the driftwood rib, and the information had arrived alongside the driftwood the way information arrives in conversation, attached to whatever else is happening, riding the current of the other thing. Butterfly required, she said, the kind of upper body strength that most girls her age did not have and most boys her age did not expect, and the not-expecting was the part she enjoyed, the look on a boy's face when he realized that the girl in the lane next to him was pulling more water per stroke than he was.

"How old are you?" Keithe asked, because the question had been sitting in his chest since the driftwood couch and had become heavy enough to put down.

"Fifteen. You?"

"Fourteen."

"You seem older."

"I'm tall."

"Being tall isn't the same as seeming older."

"What's the difference?"

Sandy stopped walking and looked at him. The water ran over her feet. The wind was coming off the lake, which meant it smelled like open water and distance and the faint mineral sharpness of sand being moved by something larger than itself.

"The difference," she said, "is that you listen like you're going to remember what I said."

Keithe did not know what to do with this observation. He was fourteen and had been told, by coaches and teachers and his father, a variety of things about himself that were supposed to function as descriptions: he was fast, he was strong, he had a good arm, he needed to work on his footwork, he needed to focus. Nobody had ever told him that he listened like he was going to remember. The observation landed in him in a place that was not his brain and not his chest but somewhere between the two, some organ of self-understanding that he had not known existed until a girl on a beach in Michigan described it into existence.

They walked back. The sun was lower. Their footprints from the eastward walk were already half-erased by the water, which filled them and softened them and turned them into vague depressions that could have been anyone's. Sandy pointed this out. She said it was one of the things she liked about the beach: that it kept a record of you only as long as the water allowed, and the water never allowed for long, and the impermanence was honest rather than sad, because most records people kept of each other were not much more permanent than footprints in wet sand, and the difference was that the sand admitted it.

She was fifteen and she talked like this. Not performed, not recited, but talked, the way a person talks who has spent a lot of time on a beach in a year-round house with storm windows and a father's plow truck and the months when the lake tries to become the sky, and who has had enough silence to develop opinions about the relationship between water and memory. Keithe listened. He was going to remember what she said.

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She wrote him a letter three days after he went home. The letter arrived in a white envelope with her address in the upper left corner, written in handwriting that was small and even and left-leaning, as if the letters were walking into a wind. The return address included the house number and the street name and the town and the state and the zip code, all in a row, which struck Keithe as the most organized

thing he had ever seen on an envelope and also, somehow, the most intimate, because she had given him the exact coordinates of her life, the precise location on the surface of the earth where she existed when she was not on a beach collecting driftwood ribs and mussel shells.

The letter was one page, front and back. She wrote about the weather, which had turned, and about a swim meet in Grand Rapids where she had taken second in the 200 butterfly and first in the 100 backstroke, and about a book she was reading about marine biology that included a chapter on bioluminescence that she thought he would find interesting, and Keithe did not know what bioluminescence was but he found it interesting because she found it interesting, and the relay of interest from her mind to his through the medium of ink on paper was a kind of connection that football had never provided, a way of being close to someone who was forty minutes away and getting closer through language rather than proximity.

She signed the letter: "Still swimming. Sandy."

He read it three times. He read it once for the content, once for the voice, and once for the signature, which he studied the way he had studied her hands on the beach, looking for the specific in the general, the particular Sandy in the universal act of signing a letter. "Still swimming" was a code rather than a status update. It meant: I am still the person you met on the driftwood. I have not changed since Tuesday. The water is still there. I am still in it.

He kept the envelope. He did not know why he kept the envelope. The letter was the thing that mattered, the page with the words, but the envelope had carried the words from her house to his house, had traveled the forty minutes of highway between the shore and Westborough in a mail truck driven by a person who did not know what was inside, and the envelope's ignorance of its own cargo seemed important, seemed like proof that the world could carry things it did not understand without damaging them.

He wrote back. His letter was shorter and less organized and did not include a chapter recommendation about bioluminescence, because Keithe did not read books about marine biology or any other biology, and the honest version of his letter would have been a single sentence: "I have been thinking about you since the driftwood and I do not know how to stop." He did not write this sentence. He wrote about football practice, which was starting, and about Ares, who was acting strange, and about the cabin, which his father was closing for the season in August. He signed it: "Keithe. With an E." And then, because she had set the precedent and because following a precedent set by Sandy felt like the right kind of following, he added: "Still throwing."

She wrote back. He wrote back. The letters accumulated in a box that had previously held a pair of cleats and now held something his mother would have called correspondence and Keithe called nothing, because naming it would have made it a thing, and naming it a thing would have required him to explain the thing to people who would have asked questions about the thing, and the questions would have been wrong, because the questions people ask about a fourteen-year-old boy and a fifteen-year-old girl are always the wrong questions, always about what are you doing and how far have you gone and is she your girlfriend, and the right questions, which nobody asks, are about whether the letters are

changing you and whether the changing frightens you and whether you can feel the person you used to be receding like a tide that is not coming back.

Sandy signed every letter with a swimming reference. "Still swimming." "Doing laps." "Coming up for air." "Treading water today." "Dove in headfirst." Each signature was a sentence about her body in the water, and each sentence was also a sentence about something else, about her emotional position in the relationship, and Keithe learned to read the signatures the way he learned to read Ares' routes on the football field, as information encoded in motion, the meaning embedded in the movement rather than announced by it.

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He went back to the shore in August, the last weekend before the cabin closed. His father drove. His mother read her mystery. Keithe sat in the back seat with the box of letters on his lap and his football on the floor and the window down, the warm air coming in off the farmland that lined the highway, air that smelled like soil and cut hay and diesel from the trucks that passed them going the other direction, toward Westborough, toward the world that was pulling Keithe back to school and football and a life that had started to feel like a costume he was required to wear to a party he no longer wanted to attend.

Sandy met him at the driftwood. She had new shells. She had a piece of beach glass, green, worn smooth by the water until it looked like a piece of the lake itself, hardened and polished and portable, and she put it in his hand and closed his fingers around it and said, "Keep this. It started as a bottle and the lake turned it into something better."

They walked. They collected. They sat on the driftwood couch and watched the water do what the water did, which was everything and nothing, arriving and departing and arriving again, and the repetition was essential, never boring, the rhythm that made the silence between them possible, the way a metronome makes music possible by providing the structure that the notes hang on.

He kissed her on the second afternoon. Not because he planned to. Because the wind shifted and her hair moved across her face and she pushed it back with the hand that was not holding his, and the gesture was so small and so specific and so Sandy that the distance between them became intolerable, a physical impossibility, a violation of whatever law governed the attraction between a boy who listened like he was going to remember and a girl who swam butterfly with more power than boys expected. The kiss was brief and tasted like lake water and sunscreen and the particular salt of a teenage girl's lips in August wind, and when it was over they did not discuss it, because discussing it would have reduced it to language, and language, for once, was not equal to the task.

Sandy put another shell in the box. A whelk, spiraled, the size of her thumb, cream-colored with a brown stripe that wound from the opening to the point like a road on a map leading somewhere the cartographer had never been.

"That one's for remembering," she said.

"Remembering what?"

"This. Just this."

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The drive home was three hours. His father drove. His mother slept. Keithe sat in the back seat with the box on the passenger seat next to him, the shells and driftwood and beach glass rattling faintly with the vibration of the highway, and the box had become a different kind of box now, not a container for cleats or letters but a reliquary, a collection of physical evidence that the shore existed and Sandy existed and the driftwood couch existed and the summer had happened and was over and would not come back in exactly the same form, because nothing comes back in exactly the same form, and the shells in the box were proof of the form it had taken before it changed.

The radio was on. His father kept it on the AM dial, tuned to a station out of South Bend that played the kind of music that arrived in the back seat as a low, continuous presence, more texture than melody, the sonic equivalent of the wood-grain vinyl on the outside of the car: a reproduction of something that was supposed to create an atmosphere. Keithe was watching the farmland flatten into the Westborough approach rather than listening, his attention on the silos and the power lines and the water tower with the town's name painted on it in letters that were peeling and had been peeling for as long as Keithe could remember, as if the town itself were uncertain about its own name and was slowly withdrawing the announcement.

Then the station shifted. Someone in the front seat, his father or the radio's drift, had moved the dial, and the AM gave way to FM, and the FM was playing a song that Keithe had heard before and not listened to, and now, in the back seat of the car with the box of shells and the green beach glass and Sandy's letters and the taste of lake water still somewhere in his memory, he listened, and the song was "Jessie's Girl" by Rick Springfield, and Rick Springfield was singing about wanting something that belonged to someone else, and the song was wrong for what Keithe was feeling, completely wrong, because Keithe did not want someone else's girl, Keithe had his own girl, or had the beginning of his own girl, or had the letters and the shells and the beach glass that proved that something had started on a piece of driftwood in June and was continuing through envelopes and swimming references into a future that neither of them had mapped. But the song filled the car. And the guitar was bright and urgent and young, the way 1981 was bright and urgent and young, and the song did not know that it was wrong for this particular boy in this particular back seat, and Keithe let it play, because the wrongness did not matter, because the song was about longing, and longing was the one thing the song got right, and the longing Keithe felt was for the shore and the driftwood and the girl who signed her letters "still swimming," and the longing was cellular, deeper than language, operating in the architecture of his body the way the headaches operated in Puck's and the sentences operated in Ares' and the fires operated in Crew's, a force that was changing him from the inside, rearranging the furniture in rooms he had not known were there, and the boy who drove home from the shore with a box of shells on the seat beside him was not the boy who had thrown footballs against the cabin wall five days before the driftwood, and the difference was not something he could explain to Ares or to his father or to anyone who had not sat on that particular couch and watched that particular girl push her hair behind her ear with the hand that was not holding his.

The radio played. The farmland ended. Westborough began. The box of shells shifted on the seat as his father turned onto the county road, and the whelk with the brown stripe rolled against the green beach glass with a sound like a small bell ringing once in an empty room, and Keithe put his hand on the box to hold it steady and kept it there for the rest of the drive.

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Chapter 5: The Boy at Northside

The hallway at Northside Junior High was sixty-four steps from the east entrance to the door of Mr. Paulsen's social studies classroom. Bergie Bergman knew this because he had counted them, many times over, the way a person counts the steps in a minefield, not for the pleasure of arithmetic but for the information it provides about distance, about how much ground must be covered between the place where you enter and the place where you are, if not safe, then at least seated and accounted for and less likely to be touched.

Sixty-four steps. The first twelve were fine. The east entrance opened onto a stretch of hallway that ran past the janitor's closet and the teacher's lounge, and in the mornings the janitor's closet was usually open and Mr. Grabowski was inside doing something with a mop and a bucket, and the teacher's lounge door was closed but the sound of adult voices leaked through it, and the proximity of adults made the first twelve steps a kind of neutral territory, a demilitarized zone where the rules of the hallway had not yet taken full effect.

Steps thirteen through thirty were the lockers. The lockers were the problem. Not the lockers themselves, which were metal and beige and smelled like old lunch and the chemical residue of whatever Mr. Grabowski used to disinfect them every third Friday, but the people who stood in front of the lockers, who leaned against them, who owned the space around them the way certain animals own territory, not through legal claim but through the sustained application of presence, and the presence was the thing Bergie moved through every morning the way a person moves through weather, calculating the wind and adjusting his route accordingly.

The three boys who owned the lockers between steps thirteen and thirty were named Dale, Travis, and a kid everyone called Boomer whose real name Bergie had never learned because Boomer had been Boomer since fourth grade and the real name had been buried under the nickname the way a foundation gets buried under a building and eventually stops mattering to anyone who did not pour it. Dale was thin and quick and had the instincts of a person who could identify weakness at a distance, the way a hawk identifies a mouse from altitude, not through malice but through a biological attunement to vulnerability that functioned as efficiently as any other predatory sense. Travis was Dale's instrument. Travis did what Dale suggested, not because Travis lacked agency but because Travis lacked imagination, and Dale's imagination, specifically Dale's imagination for cruelty, filled the gap. Boomer was large. Larger than Bergie, which was notable, because Bergie was large, and the difference between Bergie's largeness and Boomer's largeness was the difference between a large dog that rolls on its back and a large dog that does not, and the difference was intention rather than size, and Boomer's intention was always legible in the set of his shoulders and the forward tilt of his head and the way his eyes tracked Bergie down the hallway the way a turret tracks a target, mechanically, without the turret needing to understand why.

Steps thirteen through thirty were eighteen steps. Eighteen steps took approximately eleven seconds at a normal walking pace. Bergie did not walk at a normal pace through the locker corridor. He walked faster, which made it eight seconds, or slower, which made it fourteen seconds but allowed him to time his passage for the moment when Dale and Travis and Boomer were engaged with each other rather than scanning the hallway, and the timing had to be precise because the window of engagement was narrow and unpredictable and depended on variables Bergie could not control: whether Dale had something to say, whether Travis was listening, whether Boomer was facing the lockers or facing the hall. On a good morning, all three were turned inward, absorbed in whatever private economy of jokes and plans and hierarchical maintenance occupied them, and Bergie could pass through the eighteen steps without being seen, which was not the same as being invisible but was functionally equivalent, and functional equivalence was the best Bergie could hope for in the locker corridor.

On a bad morning, Dale saw him.

"Bergman."

The name was the thing. Not a greeting. A nomination. Dale said it the way a person calls a number at a deli counter: your turn, come forward, you have been selected. The selection was the beginning. What followed the selection varied in its specifics but not in its structure. The structure was always the same: Dale identified Bergie, Dale said something, Travis repeated or amplified the something, Boomer moved into position, and Bergie stood still, because Bergie had learned, through years of experimentation with alternatives, that standing still was the option that produced the least additional damage. Running produced a chase, which Dale enjoyed and which ended in corners where the geometry favored the pursuers. Talking back produced escalation, because Dale processed resistance the way a fire processes oxygen, as fuel. Ignoring produced physical contact, because the one thing Dale could not tolerate was the suggestion that his attention was not worth receiving, and the physical contact was Dale's correction of this misunderstanding, a tutorial in the social obligation to acknowledge the person who has chosen to acknowledge you.

So Bergie stood still. He stood still and he received whatever the morning had prepared for him, and the receiving was its own skill, a skill he had been developing since elementary school, since the first time a boy whose name he could not remember had pushed him on the playground and Bergie had not pushed back and the not-pushing-back had established a precedent that every subsequent bully had inherited, the way a new tenant inherits the lease terms of the previous tenant and does not bother to renegotiate because the terms are already written and the building is already standing and changing the terms would require an effort that nobody involved believes is worth the trouble.

The trouble was the daily tax. This was how Bergie thought of it, although he would not have used the word "tax" because the word implied an authority that was collecting something for a purpose, and Dale's cruelty had no purpose beyond its own exercise, no revenue that it generated, no service that it funded. It was a tax levied on the fact of Bergie's existence, on his size, on his gentleness, on the particular quality of his face, which was round and open and expressive in ways that he could not control and that read, to people like Dale, as an invitation, the way an unlocked door reads as an

invitation to someone who is looking for doors to open.

The tax took different forms on different days. Some days it was verbal: the name variations (Burger, Blubbergman, Bergwoman, Berg), the observations about his body (the belly, the way he walked, the sound he made on the stairs), the questions designed to produce answers that could be used as additional material (Do you have a girlfriend, Bergman? Does your mom still cut your hair? Why do you walk like that? Why are you so big? Why are you so quiet? Why don't you do something?). Some days it was physical: the shoulder check in the corridor, the foot extended at the top of the stairs, the hand on the back of his head that pushed his face toward whatever surface was nearest, a locker or a wall or, once, the glass case outside the principal's office that displayed trophies from sports that Bergie did not play and that cracked but did not break when his forehead met it, and the crack was visible for the rest of the year, a fissure in the glass that nobody repaired and that Bergie walked past every day and that nobody asked him about because nobody had seen it happen and the crack existed without an explanation the way Bergie existed without protection, as a condition of the building that everyone noticed and nobody addressed.

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The bathroom was the worst. Not because the things that happened in the bathroom were worse than the things that happened in the hallway, although sometimes they were. The bathroom was the worst because it was enclosed, because the door closed, because the sound did not carry, because the tiles and the stalls and the mirrors created a space that was private in the way that privacy is a weapon when the private space belongs to the wrong people. Bergie stopped using the bathroom at Northside in November of seventh grade. He held it. All day. From the first bell at 7:45 to the final bell at 2:30, six hours and forty-five minutes of holding, which was uncomfortable and sometimes painful and which his body adapted to the way bodies adapt to anything, not through acceptance but through the redirection of resources, the system learning to manage what it could not eliminate.

His mother noticed. His mother noticed everything, not because she was unusually attentive but because Bergie was her only child and the bandwidth she had for noticing was not divided among siblings, and the entire allocation of her maternal surveillance was focused on one boy, one body, one face that came home from school every afternoon carrying information it did not voluntarily share.

"You're not using the bathroom at school," Mrs. Bergman said one evening in December, not as a question but as a finding, a conclusion she had reached through whatever evidentiary process mothers conduct when the evidence is a boy who walks in the door at 2:45 and goes directly to the bathroom and stays there for ten minutes and comes out looking relieved in a way that exceeds the normal relief of a fourteen-year-old boy who has used the bathroom.

Bergie did not answer. Not answering was its own answer, and Mrs. Bergman received it the way she received everything Bergie did not say, which was carefully, without pressing, filing it in the place where she kept the other things she had noticed and not yet acted on: the torn shirt in September, the bruise on his arm in October, the way he checked the hallway before leaving his room in the morning, the way he timed his departure for school to the minute, as if the difference between 7:12 and 7:15 was

the difference between arriving at Northside during one condition and arriving during another.

She was gathering. That was the word for what Mrs. Bergman was doing in the months before she spoke. She was gathering evidence the way a prosecutor gathers evidence, not in a hurry, not with the urgency of someone who believes the trial is tomorrow, but with the patience of someone who understands that the case must be complete before it can be presented, and the case she was building was not against Dale or Travis or Boomer or the school or the principal or the system that had allowed her son to stop using the bathroom because the bathroom had been annexed by people who meant him harm. The case she was building was against herself, against her own silence, against the hope she had carried since the first torn shirt that the school would handle it, that the teachers would see it, that the system designed to protect children from other children would perform its function. The system was not performing its function. The system did not know her son's name. The system had a cracked trophy case that nobody had repaired. The system was a building with hallways and bathrooms and lockers and a sixty-four-step corridor between the east entrance and Mr. Paulsen's classroom, and the building did not care who was safe inside it and who was not, because buildings do not care, and the people inside the building who could have cared had chosen not to, or had chosen not to see, which was the same thing.

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The walk home from Northside was eleven minutes if Bergie took Elm Street, which was the direct route, and seventeen minutes if he took the detour through the parking lot of the First Presbyterian Church and down the alley behind the hardware store and across the municipal lot where the city trucks parked overnight. Bergie took the detour. He had been taking the detour since October, when Dale and Travis had followed him down Elm Street for three blocks, not touching him, not saying anything, just following, their footsteps behind his footsteps, their shadows behind his shadow, the proximity itself the message, the message being: the hallway does not end at the school door, the hallway extends into the street, the hallway is everywhere you walk and we are in it.

The detour added six minutes. Six minutes was the price of not being followed, and Bergie paid it the way he paid the daily tax, with the currency of his time and his route and the shape of his afternoon, which was not the shape his afternoon would have had if the world were different, if the Elm Street sidewalk were neutral ground, if three blocks of residential street were not occupied territory. He walked through the church parking lot, where the asphalt was buckled and weedy and the church van sat permanently in the handicapped space with a flat tire that had been flat since August. He walked through the alley behind the hardware store, where the dumpster smelled like sawdust and turpentine and the back door was always propped open with a brick, and sometimes Mr. Keenan, the owner, was standing in the doorway smoking, and Bergie would nod and Mr. Keenan would nod back, two people acknowledging each other's right to exist in an alley without requiring an explanation.

He crossed the municipal lot. He turned onto Birch Street. He walked the final four blocks to the house where his mother was waiting, not at the window, not on the porch, but in the kitchen, where she could hear the front door and calculate, from the sound of his arrival, how the day had gone. A normal

arrival, door opening and closing at conversational volume, meant the day had been manageable. A hard arrival, the door pushed rather than opened, Bergie's feet heavy on the stairs, his bedroom door closing with more force than a door requires, meant the day had extracted something, and the extraction would be visible on his body or in his silence, and Mrs. Bergman would note it and add it to the file and make dinner and not ask, because asking produced nothing but Bergie's face closing like a book whose reader has been told to put it down.

Today was a torn shirt day. The left sleeve. Bergie did not know which of them had grabbed it. The locker corridor, step twenty-two, a hand on his sleeve that pulled and the fabric that gave, and the sound of cotton tearing is a small sound but it is an unmistakable sound, and the two seconds during which the sound occurred were two seconds during which every person within hearing distance knew what had happened and nobody intervened, because intervention was not the culture of the locker corridor, because the locker corridor had its own governance and the governance did not include a provision for the protection of the sleeve.

He came home. He opened the door at conversational volume because the torn shirt was not worth a hard arrival, because the calibration of his arrivals was one of the few things Bergie controlled, and the control mattered, and the distinction between a torn shirt arrival and a bruised arm arrival was a distinction he maintained for his own purposes, an internal taxonomy of damage that allowed him to organize his days into categories and the categories into a hierarchy and the hierarchy into a system of bearability that he could manage without assistance. The torn shirt was bearable. The torn shirt was a three on a scale he had never written down but that he maintained with the precision of a bookkeeper, and a three did not require a hard arrival, and the door opened and closed and his feet on the stairs were neither heavy nor light and his bedroom door closed with exactly the force a door requires.

Mrs. Bergman heard all of it. She heard the conversational door and the neutral feet and the measured bedroom close, and she heard, beneath the calibrated normalcy of the sounds, the thing the sounds were designed to conceal, which was that her son had come home with a torn sleeve and was in his room changing his shirt so that she would not see it, and the concealment was its own kind of information, and the information was: he is managing, he is organized about it, he has a system, and the system is working, and the system should not need to exist.

She stood at the kitchen counter with a dish towel in her hands and she did not go upstairs. She did not knock on his door. She did not ask about the shirt, which she would find in his laundry on Saturday and which would confirm what she already knew. She stood in the kitchen and she gathered, and the gathering was almost complete, and the thing she was going to say to him, when she said it, was going to change everything, although not in the way she intended, and the distance between her intention and his interpretation was a distance she could not see yet, because the distance was in the future, and the future was at a different school, in a different hallway, with different people and different lockers and a different sixty-four steps, and the gun was in the future too, but that was a long way from the kitchen where she stood with a dish towel and a son who was upstairs changing his shirt and a file of evidence that was almost complete and a resolve that was almost ready and a sentence that was forming in her, gathering itself from the months of silence and the torn shirts and the bruises and the bathroom her son

no longer used, a sentence she had not yet spoken because the sentence, once spoken, could not be taken back, and she was a woman who understood that some sentences are doors, and once you walk through them the room you were standing in ceases to exist.

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In his room, Bergie put the torn shirt in the bottom of the hamper and put on a clean shirt, a blue one, and he sat on his bed and looked at the model airplane on his dresser that he had built in fifth grade, a B-17 Flying Fortress with a cracked wing that he had never repaired because the crack gave the plane character, a history of damage that made it more interesting than the intact planes in the hobby shop window, which were perfect and boring and had never been through anything.

He was a large boy. This was the fact about him that preceded every other fact, the fact that entered rooms before he did, the fact that shaped the way strangers looked at him and the way classmates spoke to him and the way teachers called on him, carefully, as if his size required careful handling, as if a large boy answering a question in class might accidentally break something with the volume of his answer. He was five foot ten and weighed one hundred and eighty pounds and he was fourteen years old and still growing, and the growing was happening in directions he could not predict, his shoulders wider this month than last month, his hands larger, his shoes a full size bigger since September, and the body he was developing was a body that could have, in a different context, with different confidence, commanded a kind of respect that his gentleness prevented him from receiving.

Because Bergie was gentle. This was the other fact, the fact that Dale had identified in elementary school and had been exploiting ever since, the fact that made Bergie's size into a paradox and the paradox into a target. A small gentle boy was pitiable. A large gentle boy was funny, because the size promised something that the gentleness refused to deliver, and the refusal was what Dale found intolerable, the waste of potential violence, the body that could fight and chose not to, as if the choosing not to were an insult to the body's capacity, a squandering of resources that Dale, who used every resource his own thin body possessed, found personally offensive.

Bergie sat on his bed and looked at the B-17 with the cracked wing and he did not think about Dale or Travis or Boomer or the locker corridor or the torn shirt in the hamper. He thought about the model airplane and how long it had taken him to build it, the hours of gluing and painting and the patience required to attach the tiny decals to the fuselage without smearing them, and the patience had been a pleasure, not a chore, the slow accumulation of small correct actions producing something whole and recognizable and his. The crack in the wing had happened when the plane fell off the dresser during a thunderstorm that shook the house, and Bergie had picked it up and looked at the crack and decided that the crack was now part of the plane's story, and the plane's story was better with the crack in it, because a B-17 without damage was a B-17 that had never flown a mission, and a B-17 that had never flown a mission was just a toy.

Downstairs, his mother put the dish towel on the counter and opened the drawer where she kept the phone book and looked up a number she had looked up before and not yet called. The number was for the district office. The transfer application was a form, two pages, and the form asked for a reason,

and the reason would require her to write down what she had been gathering, to translate the file of evidence from her private archive into language that an administrator would read and process and act upon or not act upon, and the uncertainty of the outcome was the thing that had kept her from calling, because calling and being told that nothing could be done would be worse than not calling, because not calling preserved the possibility that calling would work, and the possibility was a kind of hope, and Mrs. Bergman was not ready to spend the hope yet, not today, not while the file was still gathering and the sentence was still forming and her son was upstairs in a clean blue shirt sitting on his bed looking at a model airplane with a cracked wing that he had decided not to repair.

She closed the phone book and put it back in the drawer. She started dinner. Upstairs, Bergie heard the sound of the drawer closing and the sound of a pan being placed on the stove and the sound of his mother moving through the kitchen with the efficiency of a woman who has decided, again, that today is not the day, and the decision was a reprieve and a defeat at the same time, and Bergie received both the reprieve and the defeat with the same stillness he brought to the locker corridor, the same measured neutrality of a person who has learned that the distance between a good day and a bad day is not great and that both kinds of day end the same way, in a room, on a bed, with a model airplane and a clean shirt and the knowledge that tomorrow the sixty-four steps will be waiting and the eighteen steps in the middle will require the same timing and the same luck and the same stillness, and the stillness is not courage and it is not cowardice, it is the only tool he has, and he uses it because it is the only tool he has, and the day he stops using it will be the day something else takes its place, and the something else is in the future, and the future is at Westborough, and he does not know that yet.

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Chapter 6: The Winding

The clock required winding every eight days. This was not an approximation. The mechanism was Swiss, built in a village whose name Canterbilly could not pronounce and had stopped trying to pronounce after his mother corrected him for the fourth time at a dinner table that no longer existed in a house that had been sold to strangers, and the mechanism ran on a mainspring that stored exactly eight days of tension before the tension expired and the pendulum slowed and the tick that filled the front room of Jace Canterbilly's house went silent, and the silence that replaced it was not the ordinary silence of a room without noise but the specific silence of a room where noise has stopped, which is a different animal entirely, the way a room where someone has just left is different from a room where no one has ever been.

He wound it on Sundays. The winding was a ritual, and the ritual was the point, because rituals are the structures that people build when the larger structures have been removed, the way a person who has lost a house builds a tent and the tent becomes, through repetition and necessity, a kind of home. Canterbilly opened the glass door of the clock case, which was walnut and darkened with age and smelled faintly of the oil his father had used on the hinges forty years ago, an oil that should have evaporated decades before but that persisted in the wood the way memories persist in houses, not as facts but as residues, chemical traces of the people who touched the surfaces before you. He inserted the key, a brass instrument the size of his thumb, into the winding arbor on the face, and he turned it. The spring tightened. He could feel the resistance increase with each turn, the mechanism gathering force the way a held breath gathers pressure, and the skill of the winding was knowing when to stop, because overwinding would crack the mainspring and a cracked mainspring in a clock this old was a death, no repair available, and Canterbilly had been winding this clock since his mother gave it to him when he was thirty-two and had never cracked the spring, and the not-cracking was a source of private satisfaction that he shared with no one because sharing it would require explaining why the satisfaction mattered, and explaining why the satisfaction mattered would require explaining the clock, and explaining the clock would require explaining his mother, and his mother was a subject Canterbilly did not open for the same reason he did not overwind the spring: the mechanism could not bear the pressure.

He closed the glass door. He checked the time. The clock read 9:17 on a Sunday morning in July, and the 9:17 was correct, verified against the kitchen clock and the clock on the radio and the watch on his wrist, because Canterbilly maintained all of his timepieces in agreement with each other, a household policy that had no practical justification beyond the aesthetic conviction that a house in which the clocks disagree is a house in which time itself has become unreliable, and time was the one thing Canterbilly trusted, the one system that performed its function without supervision, without encouragement, without the constant maintenance that every other system in his life required.

The front room was small. The clock stood against the east wall between the window and the bookshelf, and the pendulum's arc was visible through the glass door, a brass disc swinging left and right with a regularity that the heart, which it resembled, could not match. The couch was against the west wall, brown corduroy, older than the clock and less well maintained, its cushions compressed by years of Canterbilly's weight into depressions that matched his body the way a mold matches the object it was made to hold. The carpet was beige. The walls were beige. The ceiling was white but tending toward beige through the slow accumulation of years and dust and the particular neglect of a man who lived alone and did not notice ceilings because ceilings were above his line of sight and Canterbilly was a man whose attention, formidable and precise in the classroom, did not extend to the domestic surfaces that existed above or behind him.

He was wearing a bathrobe. He was always wearing a bathrobe when he was home, a terrycloth garment of indeterminate age and definite color, which was the color of oatmeal before you add anything to it, the color of a fabric that had been washed so many times that its original color had been replaced by the ghost of its original color. The bathrobe was an absence of a statement rather than a statement. It was the garment you put on when there is no one to see you and no reason to be seen, and the putting on of it each morning was the first act of Canterbilly's domestic day, the act that established the terms of the hours to come: alone, private, unbothered by the expectations that clothing carries, because clothing is a communication and the bathrobe communicated only to the wearer, and what it communicated was: today, like yesterday, like the day before, there is no one here but you.

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The refrigerator contained mustard, a jar of pickles with two pickles remaining, a carton of milk that was either approaching or had recently passed its expiration date (Canterbilly did not check; checking would require reading the date, and reading the date would require acting on the information, and acting on the information would require going to the store, and going to the store would require putting on pants), and a block of cheddar cheese in a Ziploc bag from which he cut slices with a steak knife and ate them standing at the counter, which was his primary method of food preparation during the summer months, when the school cafeteria was closed and the necessity of eating had to be managed through personal initiative, a resource Canterbilly deployed generously in his classroom and sparingly in his kitchen.

He was rarely hungry, and not now. Hunger, like most bodily signals, reached Canterbilly through a kind of bureaucratic delay, as if the message had to travel through several departments before arriving at the department that was authorized to act on it, and by the time it arrived the urgency had faded and the cheese seemed sufficient and the pickles were there and the mustard was there and the combination of these three items on a plate constituted a meal in the same way that a tent constitutes a home: technically, functionally, without comfort.

The house had two bedrooms, one bathroom, a kitchen, and the front room with the clock. Canterbilly used one bedroom for sleeping and the other for storing the things he did not use but could not bring himself to discard: boxes of books from graduate school, a record player that no longer played

records, a suitcase his mother had given him when he left for college that he had used once and that now sat in the corner with the tags still on it from a trip he had taken to a conference in St. Louis where he had delivered a paper on the teaching of composition to reluctant writers, a paper that three people attended and two of them were presenters in the following session who had arrived early. The suitcase was the loneliest object in the house, lonelier than the empty second bedroom, lonelier than the refrigerator, because the suitcase was designed for going somewhere and had gone somewhere once and was now going nowhere, and its purpose had been fulfilled and then revoked, and it sat in the corner with its tags and its single trip and its permanent retirement, and Canterbilly did not look at it when he opened the door to the storage bedroom, which he did infrequently and only when he needed something from one of the boxes, which was almost never.

The silence filled every room he was not standing in, and the filling was literal, not figurative. The clock ticked in the front room, and where Canterbilly stood, the ticking was audible, a companion, a proof that the house contained a mechanical process that was not Canterbilly's own biological machinery. But in the rooms where he was not standing, the ticking was fainter, absorbed by the walls and the closed doors and the distance, and in those rooms the silence was the primary tenant, occupying the space the way silence occupies any space that has been vacated by conversation, by music, by the sounds of a life that includes more than one person. Canterbilly's house was a one-person house. It had been a one-person house since he moved into it eleven years ago, and in eleven years the house had adapted to its single occupant the way a glove adapts to a hand, shrinking around him, fitting him precisely, and the precision of the fit was the problem, because a house that fits one person perfectly is a house that has no room for a second.

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Nancy was a fiction. Not a lie. Canterbilly was precise about this distinction. A lie is a false statement delivered with the intent to deceive about a matter of consequence. A fiction is a constructed narrative that serves a social function, and the social function Nancy served was the elimination of questions that Canterbilly could not answer without opening rooms he had decided to keep closed.

The questions had started in his second year of teaching, when his colleagues, having exhausted the standard topics of staff-room conversation (parking, administrators, and the increasingly elaborate excuses students produced for missing assignments), had turned their collective attention to the question of Canterbilly's personal life, which they perceived as a vacuum, and nature, as the colleagues were fond of observing with the false profundity of people who quote physics without understanding it, abhors a vacuum.

Are you seeing anyone, Jace? Do you have a girlfriend, Jace? My wife's sister is in town this weekend, Jace. There's a woman at my church who teaches piano, Jace. You should get out more, Jace. You should meet people, Jace. You should try, Jace. The word "should" arrived in every sentence like a uninvited guest at a dinner party, a word that carried its own assumptions about what a normal life looked like and what a deviation from that normal required, and the assumptions were always the same: that aloneness was a problem, that the problem had a solution, and that the solution was a woman, any

woman, a woman who taught piano or a wife's sister or someone from a church, the specific woman less important than the category, because the category was what the colleagues were managing, the category of Alone, which made them uncomfortable in the way that an empty chair at a full table makes people uncomfortable, not because the chair is doing anything wrong but because its emptiness is a reminder that not everyone has accepted the invitation that the people at the table believe is universal.

Canterbilly invented Nancy in his fourth year. He did not plan it. He was at a faculty dinner, seated next to Elaine Marchetti from the math department, who had brought her husband, and her husband had brought questions, and the questions had reached the stage of "So is there a special lady in your life?" and Canterbilly, who had been eating a dinner roll and wishing the dinner roll were larger so that the eating of it would take longer and the question could be deferred, heard himself say, "Her name is Nancy. She lives in Kenosha."

The name arrived without preparation. The city arrived without thought. And the fiction, once spoken, took on the structural properties of fact, because the people at the table heard it and processed it and filed it, and by Monday the staff room knew that Jace Canterbilly had a girlfriend named Nancy in Kenosha, and the questions stopped, sufficiently if not permanently, reduced from a weekly interrogation to an occasional inquiry that Canterbilly could manage with the tools of the fiction: Nancy was well, Nancy was busy, Nancy's work kept her in Kenosha, they saw each other when they could, the distance was manageable, thank you for asking.

The fiction evolved. Over the years, Nancy acquired details the way a character in a novel acquires details, through the accumulated necessity of answering questions that the fiction itself generated. Nancy was a librarian who had a cat and liked Italian food. Nancy had been to Europe once, to France, where she visited a library in Paris that Canterbilly named without checking whether the library existed because the colleagues who asked did not check either, and the mutual failure to verify was the agreement upon which the fiction rested, a social contract in which both parties preferred the constructed narrative to the emptiness it concealed.

By his eighth year, the fiction had reached engagement. This was not Canterbilly's intention. The escalation happened the way fictional escalations always happen: through the logic of the narrative, which demanded progression, because a relationship that remained static would invite the same questions the relationship was designed to eliminate, and the questions would be different questions but equally unbearable: Why haven't you married her, Jace? When is she moving here, Jace? Is everything all right, Jace? And so Nancy and Jace became engaged, and the engagement was long-distance, and the wedding was always next year, and next year was always receding, and the colleagues accepted the receding with the patience of people who had their own marriages and their own complications and who preferred to believe in Canterbilly's fiction because the alternative was to confront the possibility that a person could be alone and that the aloneness was not a problem to be solved but a condition to be respected, and respecting it would require them to examine their own assumptions about what a life required, and the examination was more work than the fiction.

The fiction was cheaper than an honest answer. Canterbilly knew this. He was not ashamed of it. He was a man who chose teaching over whatever else he might have done, a man who had contracted his domestic world to a house, a clock, and a silence, and the contraction was a decision rather than a failure, the same kind of decision that produces monks and hermits and lighthouse keepers, people who have looked at the menu of available lives and selected the one with the fewest other people in it, not because they dislike people but because the energy required to maintain people in their personal life is energy they have allocated elsewhere, and the elsewhere, for Canterbilly, was the classroom, and the classroom consumed everything he had, every unit of attention and care and sardonic affection that a person possesses, and what remained after the classroom was the bathrobe and the cheese and the clock and the silence, and the silence was a recovery rather than a symptom, the quiet that follows the expenditure, the way sleep follows labor.

Nancy was the price of privacy. The engagement was the price of Nancy. And the price was acceptable, because the alternative was honesty, and honesty, in the staff room, in the faculty dinner, in the spaces where colleagues gathered and performed the rituals of ordinary social life, would have required Canterbilly to say a thing he did not know how to say, which was: I am not lonely. I am alone. These are not the same condition. The difference is that loneliness is the desire for company, and aloneness is the condition that remains when the desire has been examined and found to be someone else's, adopted out of obligation and maintained out of habit and at last discarded because the habit no longer fits, the way a bathrobe no longer fits a body it was not made for.

He did not say this. He said Nancy was fine, and he wound the clock.

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The student files arrived in a manila envelope from the district office in late July, delivered by the mail carrier to the front porch, where Canterbilly retrieved them at 10:30 in the morning wearing the bathrobe and the slippers and an expression that the mail carrier, if he had been paying attention, would have recognized as anticipation, because the files were the first signal that the summer was ending and the classroom was approaching and the part of Canterbilly's life that operated at full capacity was about to resume.

He carried the envelope to the kitchen table. He poured coffee. He opened the envelope with a steak knife, the same steak knife he used for the cheese, and the parallel uses of the knife amused him in a way he did not share with anyone because there was no one to share it with, and the amusement lived and died inside his own head, a private joke between Canterbilly and Canterbilly, which was the only audience that reliably laughed at Canterbilly's jokes, although the students would learn to laugh, given time and sufficient exposure.

The files were thin. Each file contained a name, a grade, a schedule, an address, a parent's name, a phone number, and, for the students assigned to his journalism class, a writing sample from the middle school feeder program. The writing samples were the thing. Everything else was data. The writing samples were evidence.

He read them in order. Alphabetical. Canterbilly read everything in order because order was the condition under which his attention functioned best, and his attention, in matters of student writing, was his most valuable instrument, the tool that had justified his career and his solitude and his bathrobe and his cheese, because the attention he brought to a student's sentence was the attention of a man who had nothing else to attend to, a man whose entire emotional surplus was available for the work, and the surplus was considerable, and the work was worthy of it.

The first seven files produced the expected range: competent, mediocre, ambitious but sloppy, careful but dead, two students who could write a serviceable paragraph and one who could not write a serviceable sentence and all of whom would be in his room in September requiring his attention and his patience and his red pen, which was not red because red was the color of correction but because red was the color that was visible on white paper at the distance from which Canterbilly read student work, which was the distance of an arm plus a slight lean backward, the posture of a man who has spent decades reading other people's words and who has developed a physical relationship to the page that is part reading and part assessment and part the particular vigilance of a person who is looking for something specific and has not yet found it.

The eighth file was Ares Taler.

Canterbilly opened it. The writing sample was from the Westborough Junior High literary magazine, a publication he had seen copies of in the faculty lounge and had never read because junior high literary magazines are, as a category, the place where language goes to be tortured by people who have not yet learned that sentences are tools and not toys. The sample was a personal essay, two pages, handwritten in a script that was small and precise and slightly angry, the letters pressed into the paper as if the pen were arguing with the page.

He read the first paragraph. He read it again. He put the file down and looked at the kitchen wall and drank his coffee, and the coffee was cold because time had passed while he was reading and he had not noticed, which was a thing that happened to Canterbilly only when the writing was good enough to interfere with the mechanical processes of his day, and the writing was good enough.

The essay was about a football game. Not the game itself but the moment after the game, the moment when the helmet comes off and the air hits the sweat on the face and the world goes from the compressed tunnel of the visor to the open, unframed, overwhelming totality of a sky that has been there the whole time but that the helmet prevented you from seeing. The essay described this moment with a precision that was not the precision of a fourteen-year-old boy, not the precision of a student fulfilling an assignment, but the precision of a writer, the real thing, a person for whom the relationship between observation and language is a compulsion, the way a musician's relationship to sound is a compulsion, something the person did not choose and cannot stop and does not fully understand and is both elevated and burdened by.

The essay was also undisciplined. The sentences were too long. The metaphors competed with each other. The moral certainty of the voice was absolute and untested, the certainty of a person who has never been wrong about anything important and who therefore does not yet know that being wrong

about something important is the beginning of being a writer, not the end. The talent was there. The direction was not. The talent without the direction was a car without a road: fast, powerful, and headed into a field.

Canterbilly read the essay a third time. He closed the file. He sat at the kitchen table in his bathrobe with his cold coffee and his steak knife and his pickles and his cheese and the manila envelope full of files he had not yet finished reading, and he thought about the boy who had written the essay, the boy whose handwriting was angry and whose sentences were too long and whose moral certainty was going to get him into trouble, and he felt the thing he had not felt in years, the thing that made the solitude and the clock and the cheese and the fiction of Nancy worth the cost, which was recognition: the recognition that somewhere in the stack of files on his kitchen table was a student who could be taught, who needed to be taught, who would be ruined without the teaching and might be ruined by it, and the teaching was going to be the hardest work Canterbilly had done since the last student who could write, and the last student who could write was seven years ago, and the seven years between had been the desert, and the desert was ending, and the clock was ticking, and the school year was six weeks away.

He finished the files. He wound the clock, although it was not Sunday and the clock did not need winding, because the winding was the ritual and the ritual was the only prayer Canterbilly practiced, and the prayer, if it was a prayer, was always the same: let the spring hold. Let the mechanism run. Let the time be sufficient for the work that the time contains.

He went to the couch. He sat in the depression that matched his body. He fell asleep in the bathrobe with the files on the cushion beside him and the clock ticking in the front room, and when he slept the house went quiet except for the clock, and when the clock wound down eight days later on a Monday morning that smelled like August, the pendulum slowed and the ticking stopped and the silence filled the front room the way it filled every room he was not standing in, and the clock stood still until Sunday, when Canterbilly woke and wound it and the ticking resumed and the house had a heartbeat again.

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Chapter 7: Stan's Summer

The perfume was the first thing he noticed in the morning and the last thing he noticed at night, and in between it was the weather of the Taler house, present in every room Julie had recently been in, lingering in the hallway after she walked through it, settling into the couch cushions where she had been sitting, and Stan Harrison moved through the house inside a cloud of it, morning dew on roses, a scent that was specific enough to be hers and general enough to be everywhere, and the everywhere was the point, because the everywhere meant she was home, and home was where Stan was, and the two facts had merged into a single condition over the course of two months until the idea of the Taler house without Julie's perfume in it was as structurally impossible as the idea of the Taler house without walls.

He had been living in the guest room since April. The arrangement had been proposed by Linda Taler with the casual authority of a woman who makes decisions the way weather makes rain: inevitably, without apology, and with results that everyone accepts because the alternative is arguing with the sky. Stan's own home, such as it was, consisted of a father who worked nights at the bottling plant and slept days and who communicated with Stan primarily through notes left on the kitchen table in handwriting so compressed and angular that the notes looked like electrocardiogram readouts, each word a spike followed by a valley followed by another spike, the overall pattern suggesting a heart that was technically functioning but not enjoying the process. His mother had left when Stan was nine. She lived in Indiana now, or she had lived in Indiana the last time his father mentioned her, which was two years ago, and the mention had been brief and geographical, a data point rather than an emotion, and Stan had filed it the way he filed everything about his mother, in a cabinet he did not open because opening it would require reorganizing the contents and the contents were not organized and the reorganization would take more time than Stan was willing to allocate to a woman who had allocated herself out of his life with the efficiency of a person canceling a subscription.

The Taler house was the opposite of his father's house. His father's house was quiet and dark and organized around the schedule of a man who slept during the day, which meant the curtains were drawn and the television was off and the kitchen was a place where you ate standing up so that the sound of a chair scraping the floor did not wake the person in the bedroom whose note on the table said EAT SOMETHING and BACK BY 11, the words like vital signs, minimal and sufficient. The Taler house was loud and bright and organized around nothing, or rather organized around the competing organizational systems of five people whose schedules overlapped and conflicted and produced a daily chaos that Linda Taler managed with the patience of an air traffic controller guiding planes that did not always want to land.

Stan loved it. He loved the noise of it. He loved that Puck crawled through the heating ducts and that the thumping was a sound the house made the way other houses made settling sounds, a structural expression of the building's personality. He loved that Albert called from airports and that the calls produced a brief flurry of logistical negotiation (When are you landing? Did you eat? Is the car at the

terminal or the lot?) followed by the calm that followed Albert's calls, the household absorbing the information that the father was somewhere in the air and would eventually be somewhere on the ground and that the distinction, while technically important, did not alter the dinner menu. He loved that Ares sat on the couch practicing speeches for classes that had ended. He loved that Julie studied in the living room with her legs folded under her and a pencil behind her ear that migrated when she was concentrating, moving from behind her right ear to behind her left ear and back again in a rhythm that Stan could have set a metronome to if he had owned a metronome, which he did not, but the rhythm existed regardless, a Julie-specific frequency that Stan had identified and memorized and found beautiful in the way that the smallest, most specific things are beautiful when you are in love with the person performing them.

He did not call it love. Not yet. He called it what it was by its actions: he cut apples into fan patterns at the dinner table because the dinner table was his place. He threw footballs with Ares in the backyard because the backyard was his territory. He said good morning to Linda and good night to Puck's thumping and he carried his plate to the sink after dinner without being asked, and the not-being-asked was the proof, the evidence that he had been absorbed into the domestic machinery of the household so completely that the machinery had adjusted to include him, the way a river adjusts to include a new stone, the water rerouting around the obstacle until the obstacle is no longer an obstacle but a feature of the current.

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They bowled on Tuesdays. This was not a tradition they had chosen but one they had inherited from the bowling alley's schedule, which offered half-price lanes on Tuesday evenings from six to nine, and the half-price was the determining factor because Stan had no money and Julie had allowance money that she spent with the careful deliberation of a person who understood that resources are finite and that the allocation of resources is a moral act, a conviction she had developed from watching her mother manage the household budget and that she applied to her own finances with the same rigor, which meant that half-price bowling was within the budget and full-price bowling was not, and the distinction was non-negotiable.

Julie was a better bowler than Stan. This was not close. She had a technique that involved a three-step approach and a release point that she had calibrated through repetition until the ball left her hand at the same angle and the same speed every time, a mechanical consistency that produced strikes with the regularity of a machine and that made Stan's own bowling, which was enthusiastic and inaccurate and occasionally sent the ball into the gutter with a force that suggested a personal grievance between the ball and the pins, look like a different sport entirely.

"You're releasing too early," Julie said, watching his ball curve into the gutter for the third consecutive frame.

"I'm releasing at exactly the right time. The lane is crooked."

"The lane is not crooked."

"How do you know? Have you measured the lane?"

"I don't need to measure the lane. I need you to follow through with your wrist."

He followed through with his wrist. The ball went into the gutter. Julie scored another strike. The score was 142 to 67, and the 67 included two frames where the pins had fallen from what Stan believed was sympathetic vibration from the neighboring lane rather than any action of his own, but he counted them because generosity toward oneself in matters of bowling was a victimless crime.

They skated on Thursdays. The roller rink on Division Street was open until ten on weeknights, and the rink was the kind of place that had not been renovated since 1974 and wore its age the way old buildings wear their age, not with dignity but with a kind of stubborn refusal to acknowledge that the world outside had changed, the carpet still orange, the lights still colored, the music still played through speakers that converted every song into a version of itself that sounded like it was being performed inside a tin can by musicians who resented the acoustics. Stan was a competent skater. Julie was a competent skater. Neither of them was good, and the mutual mediocrity was one of the pleasures of the activity, because it placed them on equal footing, or equal wheeling, and the equality produced a specific kind of laughter, the laughter of two people who are both failing at the same thing and whose failure is shared and therefore comedy rather than failure, which is just failure observed by someone who loves you.

They walked downtown on Saturdays and looked at the sculptures. Westborough had sculptures. Not many. Five, distributed along Main Street between the courthouse and the library, installed during a civic beautification project in 1976 that had produced the sculptures and a set of benches and a planter box that nobody planted anything in and that had filled over the years with cigarette butts and rain and the particular mulch that accumulates in public containers when public maintenance is a budget line that gets cut every third year. The sculptures were abstract, made of welded steel, and Stan did not understand them, which was part of the appeal, because not understanding them gave him and Julie something to discuss that had no correct answer, and the absence of a correct answer was a kind of freedom, a space where they could say whatever they wanted without the risk of being wrong.

"That one looks like a dog eating a bicycle," Stan said, pointing at a sculpture that the plaque identified as "Emergence."

"It's supposed to be a human figure breaking free from constraint."

"It's a dog eating a bicycle."

"If you look at the negative space between the upper elements, you can see the suggestion of a human torso."

"I can see the suggestion of a dog and the suggestion of a bicycle and the certainty that the dog is eating the bicycle."

Julie laughed. The laugh was the one Stan worked for, the one that started in her throat and expanded until her shoulders shook and her eyes closed and the pencil behind her ear, which she wore everywhere, shifted from right to left. The laugh was the best thing Stan had ever produced, better than

any grade he had earned or any game he had played, because the laugh was evidence that he had said something that mattered to her, and mattering to Julie Taler was the metric by which Stan Harrison measured his days, and the days that produced the laugh were the days that justified everything, the guest room and the apple slices and the backyard football and the half-price bowling and the Thursday night skating and the Saturday sculptures that looked like dogs eating bicycles.

They did not call it dating. The word was inadequate. Dating was what other people did, people who went to movies on Friday nights and ate dinner at restaurants that had menus and who negotiated the terms of their togetherness through the formal protocols of courtship, the asking and the answering and the planning and the performing. What Stan and Julie had was inhabited rather than performed. They lived inside it the way they lived inside the Taler house, moving through its rooms without thinking about the architecture, the togetherness so embedded in the structure of their daily lives that extracting it would have required demolition, and neither of them wanted to demolish anything, and so the thing they did not call dating continued as a condition of their existence, assumed and permanent and smelling, always, of morning dew on roses.

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Mike Redson appeared at the lake in the third week of July. Stan did not invite him. Mike did not require invitations. Mike operated on the principle that all social spaces were available to him by right of his willingness to enter them, and the lake, which was a public lake twenty minutes east of town surrounded by a gravel beach and a parking lot where teenagers gathered on summer evenings to do the things teenagers do when the town offers nothing else, was a space Mike entered with the proprietary confidence of a person who believed that his presence improved any environment it was added to.

"Harrison." Mike called everyone by their last name. The practice was not friendly. It was a classification system, a way of reducing people to a single identifier that could be deployed as a greeting, a summons, or an accusation, depending on the tone, and Mike's tone was always the same, a flat, knowing drawl that suggested he possessed information about you that you did not possess about yourself and that the information was not flattering.

"Mike."

"You look thirsty."

Mike produced a six-pack from the back seat of his father's car, a Buick Regal that Mike drove without a license and without apparent concern for the legal consequences of driving without a license, because consequences were a concept Mike processed as theoretical rather than actual, a thing that happened to other people who lacked Mike's particular combination of confidence and indifference. The six-pack was Budweiser, warm from the car, and Mike opened one and handed it to Stan with the casual generosity of a person who is establishing a transaction, no act of generosity, because Mike's generosity always came with an invoice, and the invoice was not presented at the time of the gift but later, in a different currency, when the debt had accumulated enough interest to be useful.

Stan took the beer. He took it because Mike was offering it and because the lake was hot and because the beer was there and because saying no to Mike Redson was a social act that required more energy than saying yes, and Stan, in the third week of July, in the heat, on the gravel beach, with Julie at home and the evening empty and the beer already in his hand, chose the path that required less energy, which was the path that led to the first sip, and the first sip led to the second, and the second led to the rest of the can, and the rest of the can led to a second can, and the second can was the one that tasted good, not because the beer was good (the beer was warm Budweiser, which is not good by any standard that includes the word good) but because the second can was the one where the heat receded and the evening softened and the gravel beach became a place where Stan could sit without thinking about anything, not about his father's notes or his mother's Indiana or the Taler house or the bowling or the sculptures or the question of what he and Julie were if they were not dating, and the not-thinking was the thing the beer provided, and the thing the beer provided was the thing Stan did not know he wanted until the beer gave it to him.

He did not get drunk. He drank two beers and stopped and walked home and arrived at the Taler house at nine-thirty and brushed his teeth twice and chewed a piece of gum from the pack in his pocket and went inside and said good night to Linda and good night to the thumping in the ducts and went to the guest room and lay on the bed and listened to the house settle around him, the creaking and the ticking and the distant sound of Ares' voice from the living room practicing something that might have been a speech or might have been a conversation with someone who was not there, and the house received Stan the way it always received him, without suspicion, without examination, because the house trusted him and the trust was justified and the two beers on the gravel beach were two beers, nothing more, a summer evening's minor recreation, the kind of thing that every teenager in Westborough did at the lake on a hot night in July.

A flask appeared in August. Not Mike's flask. Stan's flask, purchased at the Army surplus store on Route 9 for four dollars, a stainless steel container that held eight ounces and fit in the back pocket of his jeans and that he filled from a bottle of Jim Beam he bought with a fake ID that Mike had procured from a source Mike described as "a guy," and the guy was never further identified, and the fake ID said Stan was twenty-one, and the man at the liquor store on Franklin Avenue did not look at the ID with the attention the ID deserved, which was to say he did not look at it at all, and the Jim Beam went into the flask and the flask went into the back pocket and the back pocket went to a party at Gary Eliot's house where the parents were in Michigan and the living room was full of people Stan knew and people Stan did not know and the music was loud and the flask was there and the flask was easy and the flask was private, which was the important thing, because the privacy of the flask was different from the publicity of the lake, and the difference was that the lake was social drinking and the flask was solitary drinking, and solitary drinking is a different category of drinking, a category that operates on different rules, and the rules of solitary drinking are simple: you drink because the flask is there, and the flask is there because you put it there, and you put it there because you knew you were going to need it, and the knowing is the thing that separates the social from the solitary, the recreational from the necessary, and the separation had happened and Stan had not noticed it happening, which is how the separation always

happens, not as an event but as a condition that was already present before you noticed the symptoms.

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The porch at night was Stan's. Not by assignment, not by agreement, but by the quiet accumulation of evenings spent there after the house went dark, sitting on the top step with his back against the railing and the street in front of him and the sky above him and the sounds of the Taler house behind him, the creaking and the thumping and the occasional flush of a toilet or the opening and closing of the refrigerator, the domestic percussion of a household in its nighttime mode, everyone in their rooms, everyone asleep or approaching sleep, and Stan on the porch, awake, in the dark, where the air was cooler and the thinking was easier and the world contracted to the size of a step and a railing and a street that went in both directions and a sky that went in all directions and a boy sitting between them with his hands in his lap and the summer ending.

Julie was asleep inside. He could hear nothing from her room, which was on the second floor and faced the backyard, but he knew she was asleep because Julie fell asleep at ten-fifteen every night with the precision of a person whose internal clock was Swiss, as reliable as the grandfather clock in a house Stan had never visited belonging to a teacher Stan had not yet met, and the reliability was one of the things Stan loved about her, the predictability of her rhythms, the knowability of her patterns, the sense that Julie Taler was a system that could be understood, and the understanding was a comfort, because Stan's own systems were becoming less understandable to him by the week, and the contrast between Julie's clockwork and his own increasingly erratic machinery was a contrast he did not examine because examining it would require admitting that the machinery was erratic, and the admission would require explaining why, and the why was in the flask and the flask was in his back pocket and the back pocket was pressed against the porch railing behind which, earlier that evening, while Julie was brushing her teeth and Ares was closing his notebook and Puck was settling into whatever duct he slept in and Linda was turning off the kitchen light, Stan had placed a can of Budweiser, warm, behind the railing's third post, where the shadow was deepest and the angle was wrong for anyone looking out the front window and the can sat on the porch floor like a secret, which it was.

He reached for it. The reaching was not dramatic. The reaching was the smallest possible movement, his right hand extending behind him and down, his fingers finding the aluminum in the dark with the accuracy of a person who has placed things in dark places before and whose hands have learned the geography of concealment, which is a geography Stan was developing fluently, a map of hiding places and angles and shadows that was expanding to include the porch and the railing and the third post, expanding to include the flask in the back pocket and the bottle under the guest room mattress and the peppermint gum in the jacket and the eye drops in the jeans and the mouthwash in the bathroom that he used for camouflage, rather than for hygiene, and the map was growing and the growth was the infrastructure of a habit that Stan did not call a habit because calling it a habit would require acknowledging the pattern and the pattern would require examining the need and the need would require admitting that the two beers at the lake in July had become the flask in August had become the can behind the railing in the last weeks of summer and the trajectory was not flat but

ascending and the ascent was discovered rather than chosen, the way you discover that you are on a hill only when you look back and see the valley you did not notice leaving.

He opened the can. The sound was small, a click and a hiss, the carbonation releasing into the night air, and the sound was the sound of something beginning that should not have been beginning on a porch behind a railing on a street in Westborough where a boy was loved and housed and fed and welcomed and where the perfume of morning dew on roses still clung to the hallway and the couch and the guest room pillow, and the love was real and the housing was real and the welcome was real and the perfume was real, and Stan Harrison drank the beer in the dark.

He did not enjoy it. The beer was warm and flat from the hours behind the railing, and the taste was the taste of aluminum and grain and the particular staleness of a beer that has been waiting, and the waiting had not improved it. But he drank it. He drank it the way he would drink the next one and the one after that, not for the taste and not for the pleasure and not for the social occasion, because there was no social occasion, there was only the porch and the dark and the sleeping house and the boy with the can, drinking because the can was there, and the can was there because he had put it there, and he had put it there because he needed it, and the need was the new fact of his life, the fact that had arrived without announcement and without negotiation, the way his mother had arrived in Indiana, already there before anyone noticed the departure, and the distinction between enjoying and needing had not yet occurred to Stan Harrison, sitting on the porch of a house that loved him, drinking a warm beer in the dark, with Julie Taler asleep ten feet above him wearing perfume that smelled like morning dew on roses and dreaming whatever Julie dreamed in her ten-fifteen sleep, and the distance between them was ten feet and a ceiling and a floor and the width of a need that Stan could not name and that the beer could not fill and that the filling did not require enjoyment, only repetition, only the can and the dark and the reaching.

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Chapter 8: The Last Game

The summer league scrimmage was played on a Wednesday evening in August on a field behind the Elks Lodge that had been mowed that morning and not watered since June, which gave the grass the texture and color of straw and the structural integrity of something that had decided to die but had not yet received permission to lie down. The field had no bleachers. It had a set of aluminum benches on each side that seated, optimistically, forty people, and the forty people who sat on them were parents and siblings and girlfriends and the particular category of adult male who attends summer league scrimmages involving fourteen-year-old boys for reasons that have to do with the memory of having once been fourteen and on a field and fast, and the memory is enough to justify the folding chair and the thermos and the Wednesday evening.

Ares Taler, tight end, stood on the line and waited for the snap. The August air was thick and tasted like dust and the chemical sweetness of the chalk lines that Coach Weddell's assistant had laid that afternoon using a hand-pushed marker that drifted to the right on every pass, producing yard lines that were less a grid than a suggestion, a polite recommendation about where the field might be if the field were interested in being organized, which it was not. Ares' helmet smelled like the inside of every helmet he had ever worn: sweat, plastic, the residual tang of the disinfectant spray that was supposed to prevent whatever grew in the padding from growing, and that accomplished this goal with the same success rate as the chalk lines accomplished straightness.

Keithe was behind him. Seven yards back, in the shotgun. Ares did not need to look. He could feel Keithe the way a compass feels north, through a mechanism that was not sight or sound but orientation, a bodily awareness of the other person's position that two years of running routes together had installed in his nervous system the way software is installed in a machine, invisibly, completely, so that the knowledge of where Keithe was and what Keithe was about to do was not a thought but a condition, a permanent background process running beneath every other process.

The snap came. Ares released from the line, left foot planted, right shoulder dipping past the outside linebacker's reach, and the route was a twelve-yard comeback, which meant he ran twelve yards downfield at three-quarter speed and then stopped and turned and the ball was supposed to be arriving at the exact point where his hands would be when his body completed the turn, and the ball was there, because the ball was always there when Keithe threw it and Ares ran the route they had agreed on, not in a huddle and not in practice but in the private language of two athletes who had spent enough time inside the same patterns to know the patterns without naming them.

He caught it. The leather hit his palms with the satisfying concussion of a thing landing where it belongs, and his fingers closed and his feet were under him and he turned upfield and gained four more yards before the free safety, a kid from the Southwedge team whose name Ares did not know, wrapped his arms around Ares' waist and brought him down on the straw-grass in a cloud of dust that smelled like summer ending.

First down. Ares got up. He jogged back to the huddle. Keithe was grinning, the same grin from practice, the same ambient satisfaction, and Ares looked at the grin and felt the thing he had been feeling for three weeks, the thing he had not told anyone and could not have described if asked, which was the recognition that the grin was directed at a version of himself that was disappearing. The grin was for the tight end. The grin was for the boy who ran routes and caught the ball and gained yards and got up from the straw-grass and jogged back and did it again. The grin was for the body, and the body was still performing, and the performance was still good, but the person inside the body had changed, and the change was the kind that does not announce itself on the field but that makes the field, over time, feel like a costume.

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He had been reading. This was the problem, or the discovery, or the thing that was both simultaneously, because the reading had produced the writing and the writing had produced the recognition and the recognition was not the kind that could coexist with the football. Not permanently. Not honestly.

It started with a book his mother had on the shelf in the hallway, a paperback with a cracked spine and a cover illustration that looked like it had been painted by someone who had been told what the book was about but had not read it. The book was "A Separate Peace" by John Knowles, and the cover showed two boys standing near a tree, and the tree was near a river, and the boys looked like they had been drawn by an artist who understood poses but not faces, which gave them the appearance of mannequins positioned in a landscape, and the mannequin quality of the cover almost stopped Ares from opening it, because he was fourteen and judged books by their covers because he was fourteen and had not yet learned that this particular cliché existed for the specific purpose of preventing fourteen-year-old boys from missing the books that would change them.

He read it in two days. He read it on his bed, which was military-neat, the corners tucked and the surface flat, because Ares' bed was the one space in his life where order was absolute and uncontested, a rectangle of control in a household where control was distributed among his mother (logistics), his sister (emotions), his brother (chaos), and his father (intermittent authority from altitude). The bed was his. The bed was precise. And on the precise bed he read about Gene and Finny and the tree and the river and the war that was coming and the war that was already there, inside the friendship, inside the school, inside the boys themselves, and the book did something to Ares that the football had never done, which was to make him feel recognized.

Not seen. Recognized. The distinction mattered. Being seen is external, the experience of being observed, of existing in another person's visual field. Being recognized is internal, the experience of encountering a sentence that describes a thing you have felt but have not named, and the naming, performed by a stranger in a book written decades before you were born, reaches across the distance between the stranger's mind and yours and touches something, and the thing it touches is the part of you that has been waiting to be described, and the description is simultaneously a relief and a wound, because the relief of being named is also the wound of realizing that you needed naming, that the unnamed thing was there all along, heavy and formless and waiting.

The book led to other books. His mother's shelf had more of them, paperbacks in a row, spines cracked at various angles, the titles printed in fonts that dated them to the sixties and seventies: "The Catcher in the Rye," "Lord of the Flies," "Slaughterhouse-Five," "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." Ares read them in sequence, not because the sequence mattered but because the shelf was there and the books were in order and reading them in order satisfied the same need for structure that the military-neat bed satisfied, the need to impose a grid on a world that resisted grids.

Each book taught him something different, but the cumulative lesson was the same: language could do what the body could not. The body could catch a football and gain four yards and get tackled in the straw-grass and get up. The body's vocabulary was limited: run, catch, fall, rise. The language's vocabulary was unlimited. Language could describe the moment after the catch, the dust, the smell of the grass, the particular quality of the light at seven o'clock on a Wednesday in August when the sun is low enough to turn the chalk lines gold, and the description was not a reproduction of the moment but an expansion of it, the moment stretched and examined and turned inside out until what it meant was visible alongside what it was, and the meaning was always larger than the moment, and the discovery of this fact, the discovery that he could make the meaning visible, was the thing that terrified him.

Because the terror was not about the writing. The terror was about what the writing replaced. If the thing he did with words was better than the thing he did with his body, then the body's purpose was diminished, and the body's purpose was the only thing he and Keithe shared, the only language they spoke together, and the discovery of a new language that Keithe could not speak was the discovery of a world that Keithe could not enter, and the world that Keithe could not enter was the world where Ares was going, and going there meant leaving here, and here was the field and the route and the ball and the grin and the arm around his shoulder and the walk home through town and the Slurpees at the QuikTrip, and leaving here meant leaving Keithe, and leaving Keithe was the cost of the words, and the cost was not negotiable, because you cannot hold a football and a pencil at the same time, not because your hands are too small but because your attention is, and the attention that the writing demanded was the same attention that the route demanded, and there was not enough of it for both, and Ares had made a choice, and the choice was already made, and the choice was the pencil, and the pencil was the terror, and the terror was the knowledge that the person he was becoming was a person his best friend would not recognize.

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The scrimmage went four quarters, shortened to eight minutes each for the summer league format. Ares caught six passes for seventy-one yards. Keithe threw for one hundred and forty-two yards and two touchdowns, one to Ares on a twenty-three-yard post route that Ares ran so precisely that the ball arrived before the defender's brain had finished processing the direction change, and the catch was clean and the run to the end zone was uncontested and the celebration was Keithe running from the pocket to the end zone to put his arm around Ares' shoulder, and the arm was heavy and warm and smelled like grass and copper, and Ares felt the weight of it and thought: this is the last time this arm will mean what it means right now.

They won. The score did not matter. The score of a summer league scrimmage between fourteen-year-old boys on a field behind the Elks Lodge had the same lasting significance as the chalk lines that drifted right, which is to say none, except to the people who were on the field, to whom it meant everything, the way all temporary things mean everything to the people inside them and nothing to the people outside, and the distance between inside and outside is the distance between Ares on the field and Ares on the bed with the book, and the distance was growing, and the field was getting smaller, and the book was getting larger, and the scrimmage was over, and the boys walked off the straw-grass toward the aluminum benches where the parents and the siblings and the girlfriends and the men with thermoses were standing and applauding with the specific enthusiasm of people who have watched something that mattered to them for reasons they could not fully explain.

Keithe found him in the parking lot. The sky was purple at the edges and orange at the center, the sunset performing its nightly drama for an audience of cars and power lines and the flat roof of the Elks Lodge, which had a satellite dish on it that pointed at the sky like a question nobody was answering. Keithe still had his helmet in his hand. His hair was matted with sweat and his face was flushed and his eyes were bright with the particular light that follows physical exertion in a boy who is good at the thing that produced the exertion, the light of a body that has been used at capacity and that is radiating the surplus.

He put his arm around Ares' shoulder. The arm again, the weight again, the smell again.

"Next year," Keithe said. "High school. Varsity by sophomore year. State by junior year. You and me."

Ares did not say anything.

"Taler. You and me. Right?"

The parking lot was emptying. The parents were loading equipment into trunks. Someone's little sister was running between the cars with a popsicle that was melting faster than she could eat it, and the melting was producing a trail of purple liquid on the asphalt that looked, in the sunset light, like a map of something being lost.

"Right," Ares said, because the word was available and the silence was not, because Keithe's arm was on his shoulder and the arm required an answer and the answer required a word and the word "right" was the smallest word that would fill the space, and the space needed filling, and the filling was a lie, and the lie was the first lie Ares had ever told Keithe, and the first lie is the one that builds the wall, not because a single lie is thick enough to be a wall but because a single lie establishes that walls are possible between two people who had previously operated on the assumption that they were not, and the assumption, once broken, does not repair.

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The Taler house was quiet when he got home. Mom was in bed. Albert was somewhere. Julie's door was closed. Stan was on the porch, which Ares noticed and did not investigate, because the porch was Stan's territory at night and what Stan did on the porch was Stan's business. Puck was in the ducts, a

faint vibration above the hallway that tracked Ares' path from the front door to the stairs and from the stairs to his room, Puck's surveillance automatic and constant, the heating duct equivalent of a security camera that cared about you.

Ares closed his bedroom door. The room was dark except for the streetlight through the window, which laid a rectangle of amber light across the floor and the edge of the desk and the corner of the bed, which was military-neat, which he had made that morning with the corners tucked and the surface flat and the pillow centered, because the bed was the order and the order was the need and the need was the thing that kept the room from becoming the world, which was disordered, which was a scrimmage on straw-grass and a best friend's arm and a lie in a parking lot and books on a shelf that had shown him a door he could not close.

He dropped the football equipment on the floor. The helmet landed first, then the shoulder pads, then the jersey, then the cleats, one by one, each piece hitting the carpet with the sound of something being put down, dropped, rather than placed, the distinction between placing and dropping being the distinction between an act of care and an act of release, and the release was deliberate, each piece removed from his body and allowed to fall where gravity took it, and gravity took it to the floor, where it landed in a pile that was the opposite of the bed, a disorder that he permitted because the disorder was the statement, the pile was the sentence, and the sentence was: I am done with this.

The pile sat on the floor. The bed sat above it, precise and flat and tucked. The contrast was the room's argument with itself, the order and the disorder facing each other across six feet of carpet, and Ares stood between them in his T-shirt and shorts and bare feet and looked at the pile and looked at the bed and understood that the pile was the past and the bed was the present and the future was on the desk, which was empty except for a notebook and a pencil, both of which he had placed there that morning before leaving for the scrimmage, placed with the same precision he applied to the bed, the notebook centered, the pencil parallel to the notebook's spine, the arrangement an altar to a practice he had not yet performed but that he knew, with the moral certainty that was both his greatest strength and the thing most likely to destroy him, was the practice that would define the rest of his life.

He sat at the desk. He opened the notebook. The pages were white and lined and smelled like paper, which is the smell of nothing, which is the smell of potential, which is the smell of a thing that does not yet know what it will carry. He picked up the pencil. The pencil was sharpened. He had sharpened it that morning, part of the ritual, the same ritual that made the bed and centered the notebook and aligned the pencil, the sequence of preparations that a person performs when the person is about to do a thing for the first time that the person suspects will be a thing they do for the rest of their life.

He wrote the first sentence of something. The pencil moved across the paper with the sound of graphite on wood pulp, a small scratching that was quieter than the scrimmage and quieter than the helmet hitting the floor and quieter than the lie in the parking lot, and the quietness was the point, because the thing he was starting was a quiet thing, a private thing, a thing that happened between a hand and a page in a room where nobody was watching, and the nobody watching was the condition

that the writing required, the same condition that Canterbilly's clock required, which was solitude, which was the absence of an audience, which was the space where a person can hear the sentence before writing it and can write it before judging it and can judge it before sharing it and can decide, in the privacy of the solitude, whether the sentence is true.

We do not see what the sentence says. The handwriting is precise and small and angry. The anger is not at Keithe or at the football or at the books on the shelf or at the body that had been his instrument and that was now becoming his costume. The anger is at the cost. The cost of the words is the field. The cost of the field is the words. The cost of either choice is the other choice, and the pencil has chosen, and the choice is recorded on the page in a hand that is precise because precision is the only comfort available to a person who has just decided to leave behind the only world where he and his best friend make sense together, and the precision is small because the sentence is the beginning of something, and beginnings are small, and the smallness is not a limitation but a promise, the promise that the sentence will lead to another sentence and the other sentence will lead to a page and the page will lead to a column and the column will lead to a newspaper and the newspaper will lead to a room with a teacher who keeps a grandfather clock and a fiction named Nancy and a red pen and a packet of donuts, and the teacher will read the sentence and recognize in it the thing that frightened him in July, which is talent without discipline, intelligence without direction, and the kind of moral certainty that will either make this kid a writer or destroy him.

But that is September. This is August. The pile of equipment is on the floor. The bed is military-neat, the notebook open, the pencil moving. Somewhere above the room, in the heating ducts, Puck listens to the scratching and does not know what it is, and the not-knowing is temporary, and the scratching is permanent, and the streetlight lays its amber rectangle across the desk where Ares Taler is writing the first sentence of the rest of his life, and the sentence is precise and small and angry, and the anger is the fuel, and the fuel will last.

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End of Part One: Summer

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Part Two: Fall

Chapter 9: First Day

Westborough High School was a brick building from 1947 that had been expanded in 1961 and expanded again in 1973 and that now resembled, from the parking lot, a geological formation rather than an architectural plan, the original structure visible in the center like a fossil embedded in successive layers of newer, cheaper material that had been deposited around it by administrators who understood construction as addition rather than design. The 1947 building was brick, solid, with windows that opened and ceilings that were higher than they needed to be, because in 1947 the people who built schools believed that the height of a ceiling was related to the height of the thinking that occurred beneath it, and the belief, whether true or not, had produced rooms that felt like rooms rather than containers. The 1961 addition was cinderblock, painted the color of institutional optimism, which is the color of a thing that was once white and is now the memory of white. The 1973 addition was prefabricated panels bolted to a steel frame, and the panels had begun separating from the frame in places, producing gaps through which the weather entered and the heating bill exited, and the gaps were sealed with caulk that was itself cracking, which gave the 1973 addition the appearance of a building that was slowly disagreeing with itself about whether it wanted to remain standing.

Ares Taler walked through the front entrance at 7:38 on a Tuesday morning in September and entered the hallway the way a person enters a country whose language he does not speak, which is to say cautiously, attentively, with the peripheral vision turned up to its maximum setting and the central vision deliberately casual, because the first rule of a new environment is that you must see everything while appearing to look at nothing, and the second rule is that the people who have been here longer than you can tell whether you are following the first rule, and the third rule is that none of this matters because they are going to categorize you anyway, and the categorization will be based on information you did not choose to provide: your size, your clothes, your face, the corridor you enter from, the people you stand near, and the invisible signals your body broadcasts about whether you are a person who belongs to this hallway or a person who is passing through it, and the difference between belonging and passing through is the difference between a resident and a tourist, and tourists get pickpocketed.

The hallway was a geography of power. Ares understood this immediately, the way he understood the defensive schemes that opposing teams ran against Keithe's passing game, by reading the positioning. The seniors occupied the center of the corridor, the widest part, where the original 1947 hallway met the 1961 addition at a junction that created a natural amphitheater of linoleum and lockers, a space large enough for a group to stand in without obstructing traffic but prominent enough that standing in it constituted a claim, a territorial assertion that said: this is ours, and "ours" is defined by our willingness to stand here and your willingness to walk around us. The juniors were on the flanks, distributed along the locker rows that ran north and south from the senior junction, their territory smaller but established, their right to occupy it conferred by a year of prior occupancy and the unwritten

law that proximity to seniors constituted a kind of borrowed authority. The sophomores were further out, in the tributary hallways that fed the main corridor, their positions uncertain, their body language oscillating between the confidence of having survived freshman year and the awareness that survival was not the same as arrival. And the freshmen were everywhere and nowhere, a dispersed population of new bodies moving through the hallway with the specific combination of speed and uncertainty that marks a person who knows where they need to be but does not yet know how to get there without crossing someone else's territory.

Ares was a freshman without a football jersey. This was a category the hallway did not have a place for, because the hallway's taxonomy was organized around affiliations, and affiliations were signaled by clothing, and the football players wore their jerseys on the first day the way diplomats wear flags, as a declaration of allegiance that entitled the wearer to the protections and the privileges of the nation they represented. Ares was wearing a white T-shirt and jeans and sneakers that were clean because he had cleaned them that morning with the same precision he applied to the bed and the notebook and the pencils, and the cleanness of the sneakers communicated nothing except that their wearer had cleaned them, which was information without strategic value in a hallway where strategic value was the only currency that mattered.

He saw Keithe. The seeing was involuntary, the compass finding north, the body's orientation system locating the other body before the brain had finished cataloging the hallway. Keithe was in the athletic corridor, the 1961 addition's main artery, which ran east from the senior junction toward the gymnasium and the locker rooms and the coaches' offices, a corridor that smelled like floor wax and rubber and the particular industrial detergent that athletic departments purchase in quantities suggesting they expect the surfaces to be regularly contaminated with substances that require industrial-strength removal. Keithe was surrounded by people Ares did not know. Upperclassmen, some of them, boys whose bodies had the finished quality of athletes who had been lifting weights for two or three years, the kind of bodies that made freshman bodies look like rough drafts. Keithe was in the center of the group, talking, gesturing, his face animated with the light that Ares recognized from the scrimmage, the light of a body that knew its purpose, and the purpose was here, in this corridor, with these people, and the light was not directed at Ares, and the not-directing was not hostile or deliberate but simply accurate, because the light followed the purpose and the purpose was football and Ares had left the football on his bedroom floor and the light had no reason to find him.

Keithe saw him. Across the hallway, through the moving population of bodies and backpacks and first-day noise, Keithe's eyes found Ares' eyes, and for a moment the compass engaged and the orientation held and they were standing in the parking lot behind the Elks Lodge with the arm on the shoulder and the question and the lie. Then Keithe raised his hand. Not a wave. A lift. The palm up, the fingers extended, the gesture lasting approximately one second before the hand dropped and Keithe turned back to the group and the group absorbed him and the corridor continued and Ares was standing in the hallway watching the space where Keithe had been, which was now a space where Keithe was not, and the difference between the two spaces was the difference between a room someone has just left and a room where no one has ever been, and Ares had learned this distinction from Canterbilly's clock

without knowing it yet.

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The journalism room was in the 1947 building, second floor, at the end of a corridor that dead-ended at a window overlooking the faculty parking lot, which meant the room received afternoon light from the west and morning light from the hallway's fluorescent fixtures, which buzzed at a frequency that was either 60 hertz or the frequency of institutional despair, and the two were sufficiently similar that distinguishing between them required equipment Ares did not have. The door was open. The room was larger than a classroom and smaller than a cafeteria, with tables arranged in a configuration that was neither rows nor circles but a kind of organized scatter, the tables placed at angles to each other as if the person who arranged them had started with a plan and then abandoned the plan in favor of whatever the tables wanted to do, and what the tables wanted to do was face the back wall, where a second, smaller room was visible through a doorway without a door, and the smaller room contained a desk and a couch and a coffeemaker and a man in a brown corduroy jacket eating a donut.

The man was reading a newspaper. Not the school newspaper. A real newspaper, the Westborough Courier, broadsheet, held open at arm's length in the manner of a person who reads newspapers the way other people read sacred texts, with the body positioned to receive the information as a physical experience, the arms extended, the head tilted slightly back, the eyes moving across the columns with the systematic coverage of a searchlight sweeping a field. The donut was in his left hand. It was a glazed donut, and the glaze had left a residue on his fingers that he did not wipe away, because wiping would have required releasing the newspaper or pausing the reading, and neither of these interruptions was acceptable to a man for whom the morning newspaper was a sacrament rather than an activity.

"You're early," the man said, without lowering the paper. "Or lost. The two conditions are indistinguishable in freshmen."

"I'm looking for the journalism room."

"You've found it. The journalism room is the room that contains the journalism teacher, and the journalism teacher is the man eating the donut, and the man eating the donut is me, and my name is Mr. Canterbilly, and you will call me Mr. Canterbilly because I have not yet decided whether you deserve to call me anything else. Sit down."

Ares sat. Not at one of the scattered tables but at the table nearest the back room, the table that faced the doorway without a door, because the doorway framed the man with the newspaper and the donut and the corduroy jacket, and the framing made the man look like a painting of himself, a portrait of a teacher in his habitat, and Ares wanted to be close to the painting because the painting was interesting and the hallway outside was not.

Canterbilly lowered the newspaper. The face behind it was older than Ares expected, in mileage rather than years, the face of a man who had been using his face for a long time and who had not taken particular care to preserve it, the lines deep and the eyes deeper and the mouth set in a position that was not a frown and not a smile but the resting state of a face that had smiled and frowned enough times to

have settled into a neutral that contained both. He looked at Ares the way a person looks at a sentence they are about to diagram: with attention, with intent, with the specific focus of someone who is looking for the subject and the verb and the object and the relationship between them.

"Name."

"Ares Taler."

Canterbilly's eyebrows moved. Not much. A millimeter, perhaps less. The movement was the facial equivalent of a book being opened to a page that had been bookmarked, a small adjustment that indicated prior knowledge, and the prior knowledge was the file, the essay about the football helmet, the handwriting that was precise and small and angry, but Ares did not know about the file and could not read the millimeter, and the millimeter was Canterbilly's private reaction, conducted in the privacy of his own face, which was a territory he controlled as completely as Puck controlled the heating ducts.

"Ares. The god of war."

"My mother liked Greek names."

"Your mother liked the god of war?"

"My mother liked the sound. She didn't look up the meaning until after the birth certificate."

"And by then it was too late."

"My mother says names don't determine character."

"Your mother is wrong. Names determine everything. A boy named Ares walks into the world swinging. What have you been swinging at, Mr. Taler?"

The question was a test in the shape of a question. Ares recognized the format from Coach Weddell's film sessions, where the coach would stop the tape and ask a question that was actually an instruction, the question-shape of the sentence a courtesy extended to people who were expected to already know the answer. Ares did not know the answer. He knew that the man behind the newspaper had read something, had seen something in a file or a magazine or a hallway that had produced the millimeter of eyebrow movement, and the something was about Ares, and the something was the reason the test had been disguised as a question.

"Words," Ares said, because the answer was there and it was true and he was not yet old enough to know that true answers given too quickly are sometimes more revealing than the person giving them intends.

Canterbilly ate the rest of the donut. He folded the newspaper. He placed both hands flat on the desk, a gesture that Ares would learn, over the course of the year, was the gesture that preceded a non-negotiable statement, the physical equivalent of a period at the end of a sentence that the speaker has no intention of revising.

"You are assigned to the Krugerand. That is the school newspaper. It is called the Krugerand because the previous journalism teacher thought the name was clever and I have not been able to change it because the administration believes that changing a newspaper's name requires a committee and the committee requires a quorum and the quorum requires interest and there is no interest because

nobody cares what the school newspaper is called except me and the previous journalism teacher, who is in Florida and does not return my calls. You will write for the Krugerand. You will write what I assign you to write. You will write it on time and you will write it correctly and you will submit it to my red pen and you will not complain about the red pen because the red pen is the only honest thing in this building. Do you understand?"

"I don't want to write for a school newspaper."

"I did not ask what you want. I told you what you will do. The distinction between wanting and doing is the distinction between a writer and a person who owns a pencil. You own a pencil, Mr. Taler. I am going to make you a writer. The process will be unpleasant. You will thank me for it in a decade. You will resent me for it now. Both responses are appropriate. Do you have questions?"

Ares had questions. He had approximately forty questions, beginning with "who are you" and ending with "why do you talk like that" and passing through "how did you know about the pencil" and "what did you read" and "why does the back room have a couch" and "how many donuts have you eaten today" and "is the corduroy jacket a choice or a condition." He asked none of them. He sat at the table and looked at the man behind the desk and felt the thing he had felt on the bed with "A Separate Peace," the thing that was not being seen but being recognized, the encounter with a sentence that described a thing he had felt but had not named, except the sentence was not in a book but in a room, and the room was not on a shelf but at the end of a dead-end corridor on the second floor of a building from 1947, and the person delivering the sentence was a man in a corduroy jacket with glaze on his fingers and a newspaper on his desk and a voice that treated the English language as if it were a tool that most people used incorrectly and that he, Canterbilly, had been placed on this earth to demonstrate the correct use of.

"No questions," Ares said.

"Good. There are donuts on the table behind you. They are mine. You may have one. Do not take the glazed."

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Stan Harrison arrived at 8:15, fifteen minutes before the first bell, which was the time at which Stan arrived everywhere, because Stan's relationship to punctuality was the relationship of a person who splits the difference between early and on-time and arrives at the compromise position, which is late enough to avoid the awkwardness of being first and early enough to avoid the consequences of being last. He came through the door with his backpack on one shoulder and his hair still wet from the shower he had taken at the Taler house forty minutes ago, and the wet hair carried, faintly, the smell of the shampoo that was in the guest bathroom, which was the same shampoo that Ares used, which meant that Stan and Ares smelled the same, which was a fact that neither of them discussed because discussing it would have required acknowledging the intimacy of shared toiletries, and shared toiletries, in the taxonomy of male friendship, are acknowledged only by brothers and by people who live in the same house, and Stan was both and neither.

"Hey," Stan said.

"Hey."

"We have this class?"

"We have this class."

Stan sat at the table next to Ares. The sitting was automatic, the spatial logic of two people who share a household translating itself into the spatial logic of a classroom: you sit near the person you know, not because the sitting is a choice but because the body has a default and the default is proximity to the familiar. Stan looked at the back room, where Canterbilly had returned to the newspaper, a fresh donut in his hand, the folding and reading cycle having reset as if the conversation with Ares had not occurred or had occurred in a parenthetical that the main text had now closed.

"Who's that?" Stan asked.

"Mr. Canterbilly. He's the journalism teacher."

"He's eating a lot of donuts."

"They're his. He was specific about that."

"Is he going to teach us something?"

"He's going to make me a writer. He said the process would be unpleasant."

Stan looked at Ares with the expression of a person who has been given information that does not fit the available categories and who is deciding whether to create a new category or to discard the information. Stan chose the third option, which was to accept the information without categorizing it, a skill he had developed in the Taler household, where information regularly arrived in forms that did not correspond to any existing filing system.

"I'm supposed to be in this class for sports," Stan said. "I'm supposed to write sports."

"Then you'll write sports."

"I don't want to write sports."

"Nobody in this room wants what they're going to get. That appears to be the system."

Canterbilly's voice from the back room: "The system is correct. The system is the only honest thing in this building after the red pen. Mr. Harrison, you will write sports. You will write them accurately and on time and without editorializing about the coaching decisions, because editorializing about coaching decisions is the province of people who have earned opinions, and you have not earned an opinion yet. You will earn one. It will take time. Welcome to the Krugerand."

Stan looked at Ares. Ares looked at Stan. The look was the shorthand of people who share a household, a compressed communication that contained, in approximately two seconds of eye contact, the following information: this man is unusual, this room is unusual, this year is going to be unusual, and the unusual may be the best thing that has happened to either of us since the cobbler. The shorthand was complete. They settled into their chairs. Canterbilly ate his donut. The fluorescent lights buzzed at the frequency of institutional despair or 60 hertz. The dead-end corridor was quiet. The school year had

begun.

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Julie was somewhere in the building. Ares knew this the way he knew that Keithe was in the athletic corridor and that Puck was not at school and that the hallway's power geography extended into the cafeteria and the stairwells and every other space where bodies gathered and sorted themselves, because knowing where people were was the thing Ares did, the constant background calculation that his brain performed without being asked, a census of the people who mattered to him conducted at all times and updated automatically as new information arrived.

Julie was a cheerleader. She had made the squad in August, at tryouts that Ares had not attended because cheerleading tryouts were not an event that older brothers attended unless they were the kind of older brother who attended things, and Ares was not that kind of older brother. Julie had come home from tryouts with the news delivered in the Julie manner, which was calm, factual, and already past the celebration, because Julie did not celebrate outcomes, Julie processed them and moved to the next task, and the next task after making the cheerleading squad was acquiring the uniform and learning the routines and integrating the new identity into the existing infrastructure of her life, which was an infrastructure that already included managing the household's emotional economy, maintaining a 3.8 grade point average, and monitoring Stan's condition, which she had not named as a condition but which she was monitoring nonetheless, the way she monitored everything, through small adjustments and careful attention and the particular vigilance of a person who has been the thermostat of a household since age nine.

Puck was not at school. This was the fact that sat beneath the other facts of the first day, the fact that Ares carried through the hallway and into the journalism room and through the conversation with Canterbilly and the donut and the assignment and the arrival of Stan, the fact that weighted everything with a gravity that the other facts did not have. Puck was not at school because Puck had not been feeling well. "Not feeling well" was the family's phrase for the headaches, the phrase that Mom used and that Julie adopted and that Albert, when he was present, did not question, because Albert's method of processing information he did not want to process was to accept the first available euphemism and move on, the way a traveler accepts the first available currency exchange rate without checking whether it is fair.

Puck had not been feeling well since April. The headaches had increased in frequency and intensity across the summer, and the family's response had been the response that the Taler family deployed for every problem that did not have an immediate solution, which was to acknowledge its existence through euphemism and to manage its symptoms through proximity and to avoid discussing it directly because direct discussion would require someone to say the thing that nobody wanted to say, which was that the headaches were not headaches, the headaches were something else, the headaches were the sound of something happening inside Puck's body that the body was reporting but that nobody had yet translated from the body's language into the family's language, and the translation, when it came, would change the family's language permanently.

The headaches had been getting worse. Ares knew this not because Puck told him but because Ares' ledger recorded what people did, not what people said, and what Puck did was press his thumb behind his left ear more often and stay in the ducts longer and eat less at dinner and miss the first day of school, and each of these was a data point and the data points were accumulating and the accumulation was a line and the line was not flat. Mom knew more than Ares. Mom's drawer held the notepad and the notepad held the phone numbers and the phone numbers connected to a medical building on Garrett Avenue where appointments had been scheduled and screenings conducted, and the screenings had produced results, and the results were in the drawer, and the drawer was closed, and the closed drawer was part of his mother's private management system, the system that kept the household running and that operated beneath the household's awareness the way the heating ducts operated beneath Puck's, a parallel network carrying information that the visible system did not have access to. Ares knew only that Puck was not at school and that "not feeling well" was the reason given and that the reason felt insufficient, the way a bandage feels insufficient when the wound is larger than the bandage, and the insufficiency was a kind of information, and the information was: something is happening that nobody is telling you about, and the not-telling is the loudest thing in the house.

But the house was behind him. The school was in front of him. The journalism room was around him. Canterbilly was eating donuts in the back room. Stan was sitting next to him smelling like the same shampoo. The Krugerand was waiting for its first issue of the year. And somewhere in the hallway, the fluorescent lights were buzzing at 60 hertz, and somewhere in the athletic corridor, Keithe was being absorbed by a group that did not include Ares, and somewhere on the second floor, a dead-end corridor was ending at a window that overlooked the faculty parking lot, and the window was letting in the September light, and the light was falling on the scattered tables and the back room doorway and the man with the newspaper and the donut, and the man had read Ares' file and had recognized the talent and the danger and the moral certainty, and the man had decided that this boy would write for the Krugerand, and the decision was non-negotiable, and the year was beginning, and the beginning was the end of the thing that had ended in the parking lot behind the Elks Lodge and the start of the thing that was starting in a room at the end of a dead-end corridor, and the two things, the ending and the starting, were the same thing, which is the thing that happens when a person walks out of one life and into another and the door between them closes and the sound it makes is a click rather than a slam, quiet and precise and final.

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Chapter 10: Orange Overalls

The overalls were a decision. Crew had made the decision at 6:14 in the morning in a bedroom that still smelled like cardboard from the boxes he had not finished unpacking because unpacking was an act of acceptance and acceptance was a thing Crew had not yet performed with respect to the state of Indiana, which was where the Ford LTD had deposited him and his parents three weeks ago and which was, as far as Crew could determine from three weeks of evidence, a state whose primary contribution to the human experience was the invention of a flatness so thorough that the horizon was an absence rather than a line, the place where the ground stopped pretending to have features and surrendered to the sky.

The overalls were orange, the shirt green, the sunglasses red. The combination, assessed in the full-length mirror that his mother had hung on the back of his bedroom door because his mother understood that Crew's relationship to mirrors was strategy rather than vanity, produced an effect that Crew found satisfactory, which meant that a person encountering him for the first time would not know what to do with what they were seeing, and the not-knowing was the advantage, because a person who does not know what to do with you is a person who cannot dismiss you, and a person who cannot dismiss you is a person who has to deal with you, and dealing with Crew was an experience that Crew intended to make memorable.

He had considered other options. The Florida wardrobe contained garments that would have been appropriate for a first day at a Midwestern high school in the conventional sense: khaki pants, a polo shirt, sneakers that communicated nothing more inflammatory than the fact of their wearer's feet. Crew considered these garments and rejected them in the order he considered them, because conventional was the uniform of people who wanted to arrive at a new school and be absorbed into the existing population without friction, and Crew did not want to be absorbed, Crew wanted to collide, and collision requires visibility, and visibility requires the orange overalls, and the orange overalls require the green shirt and the red sunglasses, because the overalls without the shirt and the sunglasses are a construction worker and the overalls with the shirt and the sunglasses are a statement, and Crew was making a statement, and the statement was: I am here, I did not ask to be here, and the fact that I did not ask to be here does not mean I intend to be quiet about it.

His father drove him. The drive was eight minutes from the house on Sycamore to the Westborough High parking lot, and the eight minutes contained approximately fourteen words, distributed as follows: Gerald Smith said "Seat belt" (one word, imperative), Crew said "It's on" (two words, declarative), Gerald Smith said "First day" (two words, observational), Crew said "I know" (two words, redundant but socially required), Gerald Smith said "Don't be you" (three words, advisory), Crew said "Too late" (two words, accurate), and Gerald Smith said "I know" (two words, resigned), and the remaining two minutes of the drive were silence, which Gerald Smith deployed the way other fathers deployed lectures, as a medium for the transmission of content that was too complex for words, and the content of this particular silence was: I understand that you are going to walk into that building

dressed like a tropical emergency and that nothing I say will change this and that the thing I feel about this is not embarrassment but something closer to admiration disguised as exhaustion, and the disguise is necessary because I am your father and admiration for defiance is not in the manual.

The car stopped. Crew got out. He put the red sunglasses on his face. The sunglasses turned Westborough High School into a warm amber structure that looked, through the red lenses, like a building that had been set gently on fire from the inside, a golden-brown combustion that was more interesting than the actual building, which was brick and cinderblock and prefabricated panels and looked, without the sunglasses, like a building that had been assembled by a committee of people who disagreed about what buildings should look like and had resolved their disagreement by building all of their ideas simultaneously.

He walked through the front entrance. The hallway received him the way a body of water receives a stone: with a visible disturbance that radiated outward from the point of impact. Heads turned. Not all of them. Not most of them. But enough of them that Crew could feel the turning, could feel the assessment happening in real time, the hallway's collective processing system cataloging the orange overalls and the green shirt and the red sunglasses and running the data through the available categories and finding no match, because the available categories were athlete, burnout, prep, nerd, freak, and loner, and Crew was none of these and all of these and the categorical failure was the desired outcome, the goal of the overalls and the shirt and the sunglasses, the hole in the taxonomy that Crew had created by the simple act of dressing in a way that the taxonomy could not process.

He found the journalism room by accident, which was the way Crew found most things: not through navigation but through the refusal to stop moving until the thing he was looking for appeared or until something better appeared instead, and in this case the thing that appeared was a door at the end of a dead-end corridor with a sign on it that said "JOURNALISM" in letters that had been cut from construction paper and taped to the door with the kind of tape that holds for three months and then releases without warning, and two of the letters had already released, so the sign read "JO NALISM," which Crew found to be an improvement on the original because "jo nalism" sounded like a philosophy rather than a class, the philosophy of a person named Jo who believed in something urgently enough to put it on a door.

The room was occupied. Two boys were sitting at a table near the back. One of them was bent over a notebook, erasing something with the focus of a person who had been told to erase it and who was performing the erasing as an act of compliance rather than conviction. The other boy was wearing a white T-shirt and jeans and clean sneakers, and the cleanness of the sneakers was the first thing Crew noticed because the cleanness communicated something specific, which was that the wearer had chosen cleanness over comfort, precision over indifference, the small daily labor of maintaining a surface over the easier option of letting the surface accumulate the evidence of its use, and a person who cleaned their sneakers on the first day of school was either a person who cared about appearances or a person who cared about order, and the two were different, and the difference was interesting.

The boy looked at Crew. The look was not a scan. A scan is what the hallway did, the quick categorical assessment that lasted a fraction of a second and produced a classification. This was a read. This was the look of a person who looked at things the way Crew looked at fields, not for the boundaries but for the open spaces, the spaces where something was happening that the other people in the vicinity had not yet noticed. The boy was reading Crew, and the reading was taking longer than a scan, which meant the boy was finding more to read, which meant the overalls were working.

"You're new," the boy said.

"Everybody's new. It's the first day."

"You're newer than everybody. You're not from here."

"Florida."

"That explains the outfit."

"Nothing explains the outfit. The outfit is its own explanation."

A voice from the back room, where a man in a corduroy jacket was holding a donut and a newspaper: "The outfit is an assault on the visual cortex and a credit to whatever educational system produced a freshman who dresses like a traffic accident. You are Crewly Smith. You are assigned to the Krugerand. You are paired with Mr. Taler, the young man whose sneakers are cleaner than your conscience. Sit next to him. Do not eat my donuts."

Crew sat next to the boy with the clean sneakers. The boy with the clean sneakers was Ares Taler, and the name was the second interesting thing about him, because the name was Greek and the boy was Midwestern and the combination suggested a mother with aspirations or a father with a sense of humor or both, and Crew, whose own name was Crewly and whose own mother rode a motorcycle and whose own father communicated in verbs, understood the particular condition of being a person whose name did not match their geography, which is the condition of having been named by someone who imagined you as existing in a context larger than the one you actually inhabit.

"Crewly," Ares said, as if tasting the name. "People call you that?"

"People call me Crew."

"Crew. Like a rowing team."

"Like whatever you want it to be. It's my name. It's flexible."

"Ares. Like the god of war."

"Your mother named you after the god of war?"

"My mother liked the sound."

"The sound of war?"

"The sound of the name. The war was incidental."

They looked at each other. The look lasted approximately three seconds, which is a long time for two fourteen-year-old boys to sustain eye contact without one of them looking away or making a joke or doing the thing that teenage boys do when something real threatens to happen, which is to pretend it

did not happen, because pretending is free and real costs something, and at fourteen you do not yet know if you can afford it. Neither of them looked away. The three seconds elapsed. The joke, when it came, was a door rather than a deflection.

"I have information," Crew said. "I have been at this school for eleven minutes and I have already uncovered a conspiracy."

"A conspiracy."

"A teacher. Third floor. Mrs. Volkov. Member of the KGB. Sentenced for six years. Almost treason."

Ares looked at Crew with the expression of a person who has been handed an object he did not expect and who is deciding, not whether the object is valuable, but whether the person handing it to him understands its value. The expression lasted one second. Then the corner of his mouth moved, not a smile, something prior to a smile, the tectonic shift that precedes the visible event.

"I have an uncle who was sentenced to six years," Ares said. "Took him six years to write a sentence. He was a judge."

The back room produced a sound. The sound was Canterbilly laughing. Not a big laugh. Not the kind of laugh that wanted to be seen laughing. A short exhalation through the nose, barely a sound at all, but Crew heard it the way a striker hears the net when the ball hits it, which is not through the ears but through something older, the part of you that knows when you have scored before you have turned around to look.

Crew heard the laugh. Ares heard the laugh. Neither acknowledged it. You do not point at the net. You do not high-five the goal. You walk back to the center line and you wait for the next kickoff, because the game is still going.

"I'm serious about the KGB thing."

"You can't be serious about the KGB thing. The KGB doesn't recruit high school teachers in Indiana."

"How do you know? Have you checked?"

"Nobody checks. That's the point of being in the KGB. Nobody checks."

"Exactly. Nobody checks. Which means nobody knows. Which means Mrs. Volkov could be KGB and nobody would know because nobody has checked. I have checked. I checked the teacher directory. Volkov is a Russian name. Russian means Soviet. Soviet means KGB. The logic is airtight."

"The logic is a sieve. A Russian name means a Russian ancestor. A Russian ancestor means someone moved here from Russia. People move from Russia to Indiana because they want to live somewhere flatter than Russia, which is an achievement."

"You're defending the KGB."

"I'm defending the English language against a chain of reasoning that would embarrass a sixth grader."

"I was very advanced in sixth grade."

"I believe that. I believe you were the most advanced conspiracy theorist in the sixth grade. I believe you had a theory about the lunch lady."

"The lunch lady had a limp. Limps are suspicious."

"Limps are a medical condition."

"Limps are what you get when you're shot in the leg during a covert operation."

Canterbilly's voice from the back room: "Mr. Smith, if you write that article, I will read it. If I read it and it is well-written, I will consider publishing it. If I publish it and the school burns down, I will deny all knowledge of your existence. These are the terms of journalism. Proceed."

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They walked to Crew's house after school because Ares' house was in the direction of things Ares did not want to walk toward (the athletic corridor's gravitational pull extended, in Ares' mind, to the surrounding blocks, contaminating the neighborhood with the residue of a life he had quit), and Crew's house was in the direction of things Crew did not know about yet, which was every direction, because Crew had been in Westborough for three weeks and had explored precisely two routes: the route from Sycamore to the school and the route from Sycamore to the grocery store where his mother bought the bread and the granola and the Grape Nuts Flakes that constituted the Smith family's pantry with a consistency that suggested either a philosophical commitment to grain-based nutrition or a settled indifference to the existence of other food groups.

The walk was twelve minutes. In twelve minutes, Crew learned the following: Ares had a brother named Puck who lived in heating ducts, a sister named Julie who managed things, a father who flew planes and rarely came home, a mother who baked in response to emotional weather, and a person named Stan who lived in the guest room and was Julie's boyfriend and was also, by some mechanism Ares described without naming, a kind of additional sibling, the way a stray cat becomes a household cat through the simple fact of continuing to show up. Ares learned the following: Crew had a father who spoke in verbs, a mother who rode a Honda CB360, no siblings, a soccer career that the state of Indiana had terminated, and a razor that cost $3.87 and required blades that cost $79.88 and that promised to scrape away the dead sensuality, uncovering your natural, animal instincts.

"The dead sensuality," Ares said. "What does that mean?"

"It means the sensuality that is currently dead. On your face. Beneath the surface. The razor removes the dead sensuality and reveals the living sensuality underneath."

"You don't have anything on your face."

"I have the potential for something on my face. The razor is for the potential."

"You paid eighty dollars for the potential of facial hair?"

"I paid eighty dollars for animal instincts. The facial hair is a bonus."

The house on Sycamore was smaller than the Taler house on Edgewood, a one-story bungalow with a porch that was too small for furniture and a yard that was too small for a football and a driveway that contained the Honda CB360 and the Ford LTD and a space between them where Crew's bicycle leaned against the garage door with the resigned posture of a vehicle that knew it was the least important vehicle in the driveway. The inside smelled like the boxes that were still stacked in the living room and the bread that was on the kitchen counter and the particular absence of smell that characterizes a house where nobody has cooked anything more complicated than toast since the move, because the kitchen was still being organized and the stove was still being inspected by Gerald Smith, who did not trust stoves he had not personally verified, and the verification process involved tools and silences and an amount of time that suggested Gerald was not verifying the stove but having a conversation with it.

Crew made food. The food was bread with granola on it, which was not a recipe so much as an arrangement, the bread providing the platform and the granola providing the texture and the combination providing a meal in the same way that two things placed next to each other on a plate provide a meal if you are fourteen and the grocery situation in your house is what it is. He poured two bowls of Grape Nuts Flakes, which were not Grape-Nuts and not flakes but some third thing, a cereal that occupied the space between granola and gravel and that required a volume of milk that the Smith refrigerator could not consistently provide, and the milk situation was marginal today, which meant the bowls received enough milk to dampen the Grape Nuts Flakes without actually submerging them, which Crew described as "al dente" and Ares described as "a cry for help."

They ate at the kitchen table. The table was small and round and wobbled because one leg was shorter than the other three, a condition that Gerald Smith had not yet corrected because the correction was lower on the priority list than the stove and the stove was lower than the boxes and the boxes were lower than the job, and the job was the reason they had moved to Indiana, and the reason was not discussed because Gerald Smith did not discuss reasons, Gerald Smith enacted them, and the enactment was the house and the table and the wobble.

"I want to show you something," Crew said.

He went to his room and came back with the Bravada Razor System. The chrome handle gleamed under the kitchen's fluorescent light, which was the same frequency as the school's fluorescent light, which was either 60 hertz or institutional despair, and the chrome threw the light back like a dare, and the razor in the kitchen looked exactly as serious and exactly as ridiculous as it had looked on the porch in Florida, which is to say completely both, and the both was the whole point.

Ares held it. He turned it in his hand the way he turned observations in his mind, slowly, thoroughly, examining each surface for the information it contained. The three blade slots, the weight, the chrome. The small engraving on the base of the handle that said "Bravada" in a font designed to communicate precision and masculinity and European engineering, none of which the razor actually possessed, and all of which the font promised with the sincerity of a used car salesman describing a vehicle's history.

"This is the razor," Ares said. "The animal instincts razor."

"The Bravada Razor System. System. It's not just a razor. It's a system."

"The system costs eighty dollars."

"The system is an investment in my future face."

"Your future face has cost you more than my bicycle."

"My future face is worth more than your bicycle."

Ares put the razor down. He picked up the can of shaving cream that was next to it on the counter, a can that Crew had purchased separately at the drugstore because the Bravada Razor System did not include shaving cream, which was like selling a car without tires, but the shaving cream was there and the can was full and Ares held it with the same investigative attention he had given the razor.

"Where's your bathroom?" Ares said.

"Down the hall. Why?"

Ares walked down the hall. Crew followed. The bathroom was small and contained a toilet and a sink and a bathtub and a mirror that had a crack in the corner from the move and a shower curtain that was still in its packaging because installing the shower curtain was on the list below the wobbling table leg which was below the stove which was below the boxes. Ares stood over the toilet with the can of shaving cream and pressed the nozzle. The cream came out in a white spiral that coiled into the bowl, layer upon layer, a soft white architecture that built itself on the surface of the water with the slow inevitability of a thing that knows its shape and is not in a hurry to complete it.

Ares studied his work. He tilted his head. He added a final small peak of cream to the top.

"Snowman," he said. "Snowman with diarrhea."

Crew looked at the toilet. The shaving cream did, in fact, resemble a snowman, if the snowman had been built by a person whose understanding of snowmen was theoretical and whose understanding of digestive distress was extensive. The white spiral rose from the water in three approximate spheres of decreasing size, and the water beneath them had turned a milky, disturbed color that supported the diarrhea interpretation, and the peak on top was either a hat or the snowman's final expression of defeat, and the whole thing was absurd and juvenile and exactly, precisely, the funniest thing Crew had seen in three weeks of living in a state whose primary contribution to comedy was the flatness of its landscape.

Crew laughed. Not a short laugh. Not a polite laugh. A laugh that started in his stomach and moved through his chest and arrived at his mouth with the force of a thing that had been waiting to come out since the car pulled out of the Palmetto Drive driveway, since the palm trees got smaller, since the best friend whose name was already fading walked off the porch and turned left behind the Hendersons' hedge. The laugh was the release. The laugh was the fire lighting. And the fire, this time, lit in a room with a snowman in the toilet and a razor on the counter and a boy whose sneakers were clean and whose timing was perfect and whose name meant war, and the fire was different from the other fires, the Florida fires that burned fast and died fast, because this fire was lighting in a place that was not going anywhere, in a friendship that had formed in the space between a KGB joke and a judge

joke and that was now, in the bathroom of a bungalow on Sycamore with shaving cream in the toilet, being cemented by the oldest and most reliable bonding agent available to fourteen-year-old boys, which is the shared recognition that something is funny, that the something is funny for reasons that only the two of them fully understand, and that the shared understanding is the thing, the actual thing, the substance of the friendship, the mortar between the bricks.

Ares was laughing too. Not as loud. Not as released. Ares laughed the way he did everything: precisely, with the laughter held at a volume and a duration that he controlled, the way he controlled the bed and the sneakers and the pencil, but the control was slipping, the snowman was too much, the diarrhea was too much, the razor that cost $3.87 and the blades that cost $79.88 and the animal instincts that were supposed to be uncovered by the scraping away of the dead sensuality were too much, and the too-much was the permission, the condition under which Ares' control relaxed, and the relaxing was brief but complete, and in the brevity Crew saw the person inside the control, the person who was funnier than the control allowed and sadder than the control admitted and more in need of the fire than anyone in the hallway at Westborough High School would have guessed from the clean sneakers and the white T-shirt and the handwriting that was precise and small and angry.

They stood in the bathroom and laughed at the snowman until the laughing subsided, which took longer than either of them expected, because the laughter kept reviving itself, the way laughter does when the thing that caused it is still sitting in the toilet staring up at you with its shaving cream face, and each revival produced a new wave, and each wave was smaller than the last but no less real, and the diminishing waves were the friendship settling into its shape, the initial explosion giving way to the persistent, lower-amplitude vibration that would become the baseline of every day they spent together for the rest of the year and the year after that and the year after that, the vibration that said: I found you, you found me, the finding is permanent, and the permanence is the joke and the joke is the permanence.

Crew flushed the toilet. The snowman spiraled into the drain with a gurgling sound that seemed, to both of them, like an editorial comment on the dignity of its departure.

"We should write the KGB article," Crew said.

"We should absolutely write the KGB article."

"Mrs. Volkov is going down."

"Mrs. Volkov is going to be confused by the attention."

"Confusion is the first step toward accountability."

"That's not how accountability works."

"That's how journalism works."

They walked back to the kitchen. They ate more bread with granola. The Grape Nuts Flakes were finished. The milk was finished. The afternoon light came through the kitchen window and fell on the wobbling table and the chrome razor and the two boys who were sitting at the table making plans to accuse a teacher of espionage based on evidence that would not survive contact with a rational adult, and the plans were the point, not because they would produce a publishable article (they would) or

because the article would produce consequences (it would) but because the planning was the first collaborative act of a partnership that would eventually produce a newspaper that mattered and a column that told the truth and a friendship that survived the revelation that the pressure never stops and the wounds are hereditary and the adults were never in control, and none of this was visible yet from the kitchen on Sycamore where the light was warm and the bread was on the counter and the razor was on the table and the snowman was in the sewer and the two boys were fourteen and it showed, it showed in everything they said and did and planned, and the showing was a gift rather than a limitation, the gift of being young enough to believe that a conspiracy theory about a high school teacher is worth pursuing and that a friendship formed over shaving cream is worth keeping and that the world, despite the evidence of its flatness and its fluorescent lighting and its institutional despair, is a place where a boy in orange overalls can walk into a room and find the person whose sentences fit inside his sentences the way a key fits a lock, and the lock turns, and the door opens, and the room on the other side is funnier and stranger and more alive than either of them had any right to expect.

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Chapter 11: The Diagnosis

The headache that morning was the right ear. The bad one. The one that started at the base of his skull and moved forward like a weather system crossing a continent, unhurried and total, occupying each region of his head as it advanced, the temples first, then the space behind his eyes, then the forehead, then the bridge of his nose, as if the pain were conducting a census of the structures it intended to govern and wanted to visit each one personally before establishing permanent residence. The thumb trick did not work on the right ear headaches. The thumb trick was a local remedy for a local event, and the right ear headaches were not local. They were federal. They involved the entire territory, and the territory had stopped responding to pressure from the outside because the pressure was coming from the inside, from somewhere beneath the bone, from a place that Puck's thumb could not reach because Puck's thumb was on the surface and the thing that was happening was not on the surface.

Puck lay in bed and waited for the headache to complete its census. The ceiling above him was white with a water stain in the shape of a country that did not exist, a country he had been mapping since he was thirteen, adding details as the stain grew: a mountain range along the eastern border where the stain met the edge of the light fixture, a river system in the center where the water had traveled along a crack in the plaster, a capital city at the point where the stain was darkest, where the leak had been most active before Albert, on one of his intermittent descents into the household, had gone into the attic and applied a substance to the roof that was supposed to stop the leak and that had stopped the leak in the sense that the country stopped growing but the country remained, its borders fixed, its topography complete, a permanent nation on Puck's ceiling that existed only when he was lying on his back looking up, which was often, because lying on his back looking up was the position in which the headaches were most bearable, the horizontal distributing the pressure across a larger area the way a snowshoe distributes weight across snow.

"Puck." His mother's voice from the hallway. "We need to go."

The "we" was the word that carried the information. Not the "go," which could mean anything: the grocery store, the gas station, the school, the dentist. The "we" was the word that told Puck what the "go" meant, because the "we" contained the phone call from the summer, the Thursday at two, the "both of them" that Puck had heard through the kitchen grate, and the "both of them" had eventually narrowed, through a process of elimination that Puck conducted from the ducts and that his mother conducted from the drawer, to one of them, because "both of them" had been a screening and the screening had produced a result and the result had produced a second appointment, and the second appointment had produced a third, and the third had produced today's, a Tuesday in November, which was not a screening but something else, something that required the "we" and the voice in the hallway and the particular stillness of his mother's shoulders that Puck could not see from his bed but could hear in her voice, because stillness has a sound, and the sound is the absence of the small involuntary movements that a person makes when they are not bracing for something.

He got up and dressed. He did not crawl into the ducts. The ducts were for listening to other people's information, and today the information was his.

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The doctor's office was on the third floor of a medical building on Garrett Avenue, a building whose architecture communicated its purpose through the universal language of medical buildings: the beige walls, the dropped ceiling, the fluorescent lights that were always the same fluorescent lights regardless of which medical building you entered, as if there were a single factory somewhere that produced fluorescent lights specifically calibrated to the frequency at which human anxiety vibrates, and every medical building in the country had ordered from the same catalog. The waiting room had chairs upholstered in a fabric that was either green or the memory of green, the color having been leached from the fabric by years of contact with the bodies of people who sat in these chairs waiting for information they did not want to receive, and the fabric had absorbed the waiting and the not-wanting and had faded accordingly, because fabric, like faces, records the history of what has pressed against it.

The magazines were from 1979. Puck had predicted this from the parking lot. He had predicted this because the magazines in medical waiting rooms are always from a period sufficiently in the past to be useless as current information and insufficiently in the past to be interesting as history, the two-to-three-year delay creating a temporal dead zone in which the magazines exist as artifacts of a world that is recognizable but no longer accurate, a world where the President is still Carter and the hostages are still in Iran and the magazine's advice about home decorating involves a color palette that the present has already rejected. Puck did not read the magazines. He sat in the chair that was either green or the memory of green and he looked at his mother, who was sitting next to him with her purse on her lap and her hands on her purse and her shoulders in the position he had heard in the hallway, the bracing position, the load-bearing position of a woman who was about to receive the weight of something and who was organizing her body to receive it the way a building organizes its foundation to receive a floor.

"Mrs. Taler?" The nurse at the window. The clipboard.

They followed the nurse. The corridor was narrow and smelled like rubbing alcohol and the particular clean that is not clean but the chemical simulation of clean, the smell that medical buildings produce to communicate the absence of contamination, which is itself a kind of contamination, because the smell of clean is the smell of a place that needs to be clean, and a place that needs to be clean is a place where unclean things happen. The examination room was at the end of the corridor. The room contained a table covered in paper, a stool on wheels, a blood pressure cuff on the wall, a poster of the human skeleton labeled in Latin, and a window that looked onto the parking lot where Puck could see the roof of his mother's car, the car that had brought them here and that would take them home and that would, regardless of what the doctor said, perform the same mechanical function it always performed, which was to move people from one place to another, and the mechanical function would not change, and the car would not know what happened in this room, and the car's ignorance was, for a moment, the most comforting thing Puck could think of.

The doctor's name was Stannard. Dr. Stannard was a man in his fifties with the face of a person who had delivered bad news enough times that the delivery had become a skill, the way catching a football had been a skill for Ares, something the body learned to do through repetition until the doing was separate from the feeling, the mechanics proceeding independently of the emotional content, and the independence was professionalism rather than coldness, the professional's agreement with himself that the news must be delivered accurately and completely and that the delivery must not be contaminated by the deliverer's own response to the content, because the deliverer's response is not the patient's business, and the patient's business is the news.

Dr. Stannard had films. The films were X-rays, and the X-rays were mounted on a lightbox on the wall, and the lightbox turned them into illuminated images that showed the inside of Puck's neck as a landscape of gray and white, the bone bright, the tissue darker, the structures that Puck had never seen because they operated beneath the surface of his body, in the infrastructure, in the ductwork of his own physical architecture, now visible and labeled and pointing at something that was not supposed to be there.

The something was a mass. Dr. Stannard pointed to it with a pen, the tip of the pen touching the illuminated film at a point on Puck's neck where the bone met something that was not bone, a bright area that was brighter than the surrounding bone and that had a shape that was not the shape of anything that belonged inside a neck, because the things that belong inside a neck are organized and regular and this thing was neither, this thing was its own shape, a shape that had been produced not by the body's design but by the body's error, a cellular miscalculation that had produced growth where growth was not requested, and the growth was the mass, and the mass had a name.

"The mass is consistent with osteosarcoma," Dr. Stannard said. "Bone cancer. Specifically, cancer originating in the bone of the cervical spine."

The word entered the room. Cancer. It entered the room the way a new tenant enters an apartment: by displacing the air that was there before, by rearranging the furniture of the conversation, by changing the quality of the light and the weight of the silence and the meaning of every other word that would be spoken after it, because every word spoken after the word "cancer" is spoken in the context of the word "cancer," and the context changes the words the way a key signature changes the notes, the notes still notes but the music different, the music now in a key that nobody in the room had chosen and that nobody in the room could change back.

Puck looked at the film. He looked at the bright mass on the illuminated image of his own neck and he felt the headache, the right ear headache, the federal one, and the headache was no longer an unnamed weather system crossing an unmapped continent. The headache had a name. The continent had a name. The country on his ceiling was the country inside his neck, and the borders were fixed, and the capital was the mass, and the mass was the thing that had been conducting the census of his skull every morning since April, and the census was a territorial assessment, the mass determining how much of Puck it owned, and the answer, according to the bright white shape on the lightbox, was: more than Puck had imagined and less than Puck feared, because fear is infinite and the mass was finite, the mass

had edges, the mass was a thing on a film that a pen could point to, and a thing that a pen can point to is a thing that can be measured, and a thing that can be measured is a thing that can be fought, even if the fighting is difficult and the outcome is uncertain and the word that names the thing is the worst word Puck has ever heard spoken in a room where his mother is sitting with her hands on her purse and her shoulders in the bracing position.

"Is it hereditary?" Mom said. The question was calm. The calm was the load-bearing wall doing its work, the structure holding the weight so that the things built on top of the structure could remain standing.

"Osteosarcoma can have a hereditary component. There are familial patterns. Your father's case is relevant."

"My father died of bone cancer."

"Yes. The genetic predisposition is a factor. We'll want to discuss screening for your other children."

Puck heard this. The other children. Ares. Julie. The mass on the lightbox was in Puck's neck, but the hereditary component was in the bloodline, in the infrastructure of the family, in the genetic ductwork that connected Puck to his mother to his grandfather to whoever had carried the error before the grandfather, an unbroken line of cellular miscalculation that traveled through the generations the way sound travels through heating ducts, arriving in rooms that did not know the sound was coming.

Mom's hand moved from the purse to the arm of the chair. The movement was small. Puck saw it the way he saw everything his mother did: as data, as information about the state of the system, and the state of the system was that the load-bearing wall had absorbed the first impact and was assessing the structure for cracks. The hand on the arm of the chair was the assessment. The hand was testing whether the arm could hold what the purse could not, which was the weight of the words "your other children" and the weight of the screening and the weight of the genetic predisposition and the weight of the grandfather who had died and whose dying was no longer a historical fact but a predictive model.

Dr. Stannard continued. He talked about treatment options. He talked about radiation. He talked about oncology referrals and imaging schedules and the particular protocols for adolescent bone cancer in 1981, which were protocols that had improved significantly in the past decade but that still operated within the limits of what 1981 understood about cancer, which was more than 1971 understood and less than 1991 would understand, and the gap between the understanding and the disease was the space where outcomes were determined, and the outcomes were statistical, and the statistics were numbers that Dr. Stannard recited with the professional detachment of a man who had learned that numbers were kinder than adjectives, because numbers did not pretend to know what they meant, numbers were just numbers, and the patient and the patient's mother could do with the numbers what they chose.

Puck did not hear the numbers. He heard the headache, which had completed its census and settled into residence, a permanent pressure that was no longer unnamed and no longer mysterious and no longer the private property of a boy who kept information in his internal ductwork without sharing it with the household. The information was shared now. The information was on the lightbox. The

information had a name and a treatment protocol and a hereditary component, and the information was leaving this room and entering the Taler household the same way Puck entered the heating ducts: through a point of access that only certain people knew about, spreading through the infrastructure until it reached every room.

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Mom drove home. The drive was fourteen minutes and contained no words. The silence was not Gerald Smith's functional silence or Canterbilly's solitary silence or the hallway silence of the senior junction at Westborough High. This silence was the silence of two people sitting in a car that was performing its mechanical function while the people inside it were performing no function at all, because the function they were supposed to be performing, which was the processing of the information they had received, required more time and more space than the car provided, and the car was too small for the silence, and the silence was too large for the car, and the fourteen minutes passed in a container that could not hold what it was carrying.

Mom pulled into the driveway on Edgewood. She turned off the engine. She sat with her hands on the steering wheel for a period of time that Puck did not measure because measuring it would have required looking at her, and looking at her would have required seeing her face, and seeing her face would have required Puck to process the information on her face, and Puck's processing capacity was fully allocated to the mass in his neck and the headache in his skull and the numbers he had not heard and the hereditary component that connected him to a grandfather he had never met and to siblings he shared a house with.

They went inside. Puck went to the hallway. He opened the grate in the floor outside his bedroom, the grate that accessed the main horizontal shaft, and he lowered himself into the ducts the way he always lowered himself, feet first, elbows braced on the edges, his body descending into the warm dark of the building's interior, the tin closing around him like a metal throat, and the metaphor was wrong and the metaphor was right and the ducts received him and the grate closed above him and the house continued its operations, and Puck was inside the house's body, inside the infrastructure, inside the place where the sounds of the household traveled without being filtered by walls or doors or the social agreements that determined what was said out loud and what was carried in silence.

He lay in the main horizontal shaft above the kitchen and he waited. The waiting was his skill. The waiting was the thing he had been doing in the ducts since he was twelve, the patient, silent collection of information that the household produced without knowing it was producing it, and today the information was about him, and the collection was different because the collector was the subject, and the subject was the mass, and the mass was in his neck three feet below the tin he was lying on, and the tin did not care about the mass, because tin is tin, and the warmth of the duct was the same warmth it had been that morning and would be tomorrow and was indifferent to the medical status of the person lying inside it.

He stayed for six hours.

In the first hour, he heard Mom cry. The crying was in the kitchen, below the grate, and the sound rose through the slats and into the duct where Puck lay with his chin on his hands, and the crying was not the crying of a person who has lost control but the crying of a person who has maintained control for fourteen minutes in a car and a waiting room and an examination room and a corridor that smelled like the chemical simulation of clean, and who has maintained control through the parking lot and the drive and the driveway and the front door, and who has released the control now, in the kitchen, alone, because the kitchen is the room where Linda Taler performs the operations that keep the household running, and the crying was an operation, a necessary discharge of the pressure that the load-bearing wall had absorbed, and the discharge was efficient, lasting eleven minutes by Puck's count, and when it ended it ended with the sound of the faucet running and a paper towel being torn from the roll, and these sounds were the sounds of a woman reassembling the wall, reinforcing the structure, preparing the surface to receive the next weight.

In the second hour, he heard Julie come home. The front door opened at its conversational volume, because Julie's arrivals were always conversational, calibrated to communicate normalcy regardless of what the day had contained. Julie's feet on the stairs, then a pause, then the feet redirecting toward the kitchen, because Julie's thermostat had detected a temperature change in the house, an emotional shift that was not visible but that Julie's instruments were sensitive enough to register, the way a barometer registers a pressure change before the weather arrives.

"Mom?"

"Kitchen."

"What's wrong?"

Puck heard the question. He heard the space after the question, the space where the answer should have been, and the space was long, longer than a normal space between a question and an answer, and the length of the space was the answer, because a space that long between "what's wrong" and the response means the response is too large for the space and the speaker is trying to compress it and the compression is failing and the failure is audible as silence.

Mom did not answer Julie's question. Not with words. Puck heard a chair move, which meant someone sat down, and the sitting down was its own communication, because a person who sits down in the middle of an answer is a person who needs the chair to hold what the legs cannot, and the chair held it, whatever it was, and Julie sat in a second chair, and the two of them were at the table, and the silence between them was the silence of a mother who cannot yet say the word and a daughter who has already heard the word in the silence and is waiting for the word to be spoken so that the silence can end and the next thing can begin.

Puck did not hear the word spoken. He heard the silence end. He heard his mother's voice resume, low and factual, the voice of the list-maker, the drawer-keeper, the woman who managed the household's logistics with the efficiency of a person who understood that efficiency was the only alternative to collapse. He could not hear the specific words. The voice was pitched below the frequency that the grate transmitted clearly, and the words arrived in the duct as shapes rather than

meanings, the vowels rounder and the consonants softer, as if the ductwork were applying its own compression to the information, smoothing the edges, delivering the news to Puck in a form that was less sharp than the original but still recognizable as the news, the way a radio signal arriving from a distant station is still recognizable as music even when the static has eaten the higher frequencies.

In the third hour, the house was quiet. Julie was in her room. Mom was in the kitchen. The kitchen clock ticked. The clock was not a grandfather clock from Switzerland. The clock was a wall clock from Sears, battery-operated, with a white face and black numbers and a second hand that moved in discrete jumps rather than a continuous sweep, each jump a small mechanical event that produced a sound that was not a tick in the traditional sense but a click, a plastic click, the sound of a machine marking time in the cheapest way a machine can mark time, without ceremony, without beauty, without the craftsmanship that Canterbilly's clock possessed and that the Taler kitchen clock did not possess and did not need to possess because the kitchen clock's job was not to be beautiful but to be correct, and it was correct, and its correctness was the one thing in the house that the diagnosis had not changed.

In the fourth hour, he heard Mom on the phone. The kitchen door was closed, which meant Mom had closed it, which meant the phone call was the kind that required a closed door. Puck could hear the voice but not the words, the same compression, the same smoothing, but the cadence was different. The cadence of the phone call was the cadence of a person giving information to an institution, reciting numbers and dates and names in the order that institutions require, and the institution on the other end of the phone was the airline, Albert's airline, because the cadence included a pause of the specific length that occurs when a person is put on hold, and the hold lasted two minutes, and after the hold the cadence resumed, and the information was being transmitted from the kitchen through the phone line across whatever distance separated the Taler kitchen from wherever Albert's airline maintained the office that received calls from the families of pilots, and the information was traveling through wire the way it had traveled through ductwork, from one container to another, losing its edges, arriving at its destination as a shape rather than a fact, and the shape was the shape of a mother calling a father to tell him that their son had cancer.

In the fifth hour, he heard Ares come home. The front door opened, not at conversational volume and not at the hard-arrival volume that Bergie used but at a volume that Puck recognized as the Ares volume, which was the volume of a door opened by a person who was thinking about something else, the door's sound an accident of attention rather than a communication. Ares' bag hit the floor in the hallway, the thud of books and notebooks landing on the hardwood, and then Ares' feet on the stairs, fast, direct, the feet of a person going to his room because his room was the destination and the hallway was the route and the household's emotional temperature, which Julie would have registered and Stan would have calibrated to and Puck was monitoring from inside the walls, was a signal that Ares either did not receive or did not process because Ares was thinking about something else, about a sentence or an article or a conversation with a boy in orange overalls, and the something else occupied the processing capacity that would have otherwise been available for the detection of a household in crisis.

Ares' door closed. The pencil sharpener started at 4:17, which was earlier than the usual 10:15, which meant Ares was writing in the afternoon, which was new, which was a change in the routine, and

Puck noted the change the way he noted all changes, as data, as a small alteration in the household's operating frequency, and the alteration was interesting but not urgent, and the non-urgency was a relief, because it meant that Ares did not know, that the information had not reached Ares' room, that the ductwork and the closed kitchen door and the compression of the voice and the smoothing of the edges had done their work, and Ares was writing in his room without knowing that his brother was lying in a heating duct three feet above the hallway with a mass in his neck that shared a genetic address with their grandfather.

In the sixth hour, the house went dark. Julie's light turned off. Mom's kitchen light turned off. The living room was empty. Stan was on the porch, because Stan was always on the porch, and the porch was Stan's territory at night, and whatever Stan did on the porch was information that Puck had collected and filed and not acted on because the information belonged to Stan and the filing was its own form of respect. Ares' pencil had stopped. The house was performing its nightly shutdown, each room going offline in sequence, the domestic systems powering down the way the school's hallway powered down, the central corridor first, then the tributaries, then the individual rooms, until the only things running were the pilot lights and the clocks and the refrigerator and the breathing.

Puck emerged from the ducts. The grate opened. His body rose from the floor of the hallway covered in dust, the dust of the ductwork, the accumulated residue of every season of heated air that had passed through the tin since the house was built, the dust of decades settling on him like a second skin, gray and fine and ancient. He stood in the dark hallway and brushed the dust from his arms and his shirt and his hair, and the brushing produced a small cloud that was visible in the light from the kitchen, because the kitchen light was not off. The kitchen light was on. His mother was in the kitchen.

He walked down the hallway. He entered the kitchen. Mom was at the table with a piece of paper and a pen, and the piece of paper had writing on it, a list, the same kind of list she kept in the drawer, the same handwriting, the same organizational principle: things that need to be done, arranged in the order they need to be done in, the order determined not by urgency but by the logic of sequence, because Linda Taler understood that panic was the enemy of sequence and sequence was the only tool that worked when the thing that needed to be done was too large to be done all at once.

She had stopped crying. The evidence of the crying was gone, managed, removed by the faucet and the paper towel and the four hours that had passed between the discharge and this moment. Her face was the face of a woman who had absorbed the impact and assessed the structure and found it standing and was now making the list, because the list was the next thing, and the next thing was always the thing Linda Taler did, regardless of what the last thing had been.

Puck opened the refrigerator. He took out a beer. He opened the beer with the casual expertise of a seventeen-year-old who had been opening beers from this refrigerator since he was fifteen and whose mother had decided, at some point during that two-year span, that the beer was a battle not worth fighting when the other battles were so much larger. He sat down at the table across from his mother. The beer was cold. The can sweated in the warm kitchen air, producing droplets on the table's surface that Puck did not wipe away because wiping them away would have been a gesture, and gestures were

not what the moment required. The moment required sitting. The moment required the beer and the table and the two of them and the kitchen clock ticking its plastic click on the wall above the stove.

Neither of them spoke. The not-speaking was not the silence of the car, which had been too small for what it carried. The not-speaking was the silence of two people who knew the same thing and who did not need to convert the knowing into words because the words would not improve the knowing, the words would only organize it, and the knowing did not need to be organized, the knowing needed to be sat with, the way a person sits with a fire that has burned down to coals, not adding wood, not poking the embers, just sitting and watching the heat do its work in the dark.

Mom's pen moved on the list. The pen added a line. The line was a word or a number or a name, the specific content invisible to Puck from across the table, but the act of writing it was visible, and the act was the message, and the message was: I am here, I am functional, I am making the list, the list is the next thing, and the next thing is the thing we do because the alternative to the next thing is nothing, and nothing is not available to a woman with three children and a husband over Nebraska and a drawer full of information and a son across the table drinking a beer with a mass in his neck that shares a name with the thing that killed her father.

The kitchen clock ticked. The plastic click. The second hand jumped from one mark to the next, each jump a small mechanical event, each event identical to the last, the clock indifferent to the diagnostic, the clock performing its function, the clock correct. The clock did not stop when Puck and his mother sat at the table. The clock did not stop because the clock was not Canterbilly's clock, the clock was not Swiss, the clock was not wound by hand on Sundays by a man who understood the difference between a mechanism and a companion. The clock was a clock from Sears that ran on a battery and marked time in discrete jumps and would continue to mark time in discrete jumps regardless of what the time contained, and the time, right now, contained a mother making a list and a son drinking a beer and a mass in a neck and a word that had entered the household and would not leave, and the clock ticked, and the kitchen was quiet, and Puck drank the beer, and the beer was cold, and neither of them spoke, and the not-speaking was enough.

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Chapter 12: The Separation

The first plan he missed was bowling. Timber Lanes, Tuesday, six o'clock, the same time they had bowled every Tuesday since June, the appointment so fixed in the architecture of the week that it did not require confirmation, the way sunrise does not require confirmation, the way the kitchen clock does not require someone to announce that it is ticking. Stan did not call. He did not explain. He did not appear at the Taler house at 5:45 to drive with Julie to the bowling alley in the car he had borrowed from his father's garage, the car that smelled like motor oil and the pine tree air freshener that his father hung from the rearview mirror to combat the motor oil, an olfactory stalemate that produced a smell that was neither pine nor oil but a third thing, a hybrid scent that Stan associated with Tuesday evenings and Julie's left-handed follow-through and the particular pleasure of watching pins fall in a building that smelled like rented shoes.

He was at the lake. Mike had called at four, which was the hour at which Mike's calls arrived, the hour when the afternoon had reached the point of diminishing returns for sobriety and the evening had not yet provided a location, and Mike's calls were always the same call, which was not a conversation but a coordinate: "Lake. Beer. Now." The three words contained no argument and required no response beyond presence, and Stan's presence had become the default, the thing his body did when Mike's coordinate arrived, the way a compass needle moves toward north without the compass having decided to point there.

He went to the lake. He drank the beer. The beer was cold this time, because Mike had acquired a cooler that worked, a blue Igloo cooler that kept the ice solid for six hours and the beer at a temperature that was crisp and clean and tasted like the opposite of thinking, which was the taste Stan was developing a preference for, the taste of a substance that reduced the volume of the voice in his head that said things like "you are supposed to be somewhere else right now" and "the somewhere else is better than here" and "the person at the somewhere else is better than the person you are becoming," and the substance did not silence the voice but turned it down, the way a knob on a radio turns down the station without changing the station, and the turned-down voice was bearable, and bearable was the standard Stan was operating under, and the standard had replaced the previous standard, which was happy, and the replacement had happened without a ceremony or an announcement, the way standards are always replaced, not through a decision but through a drift.

He did not call Julie. The not-calling was not a decision either. The not-calling was a function of the beer and the lake and the Mike and the distance between the lake and the Taler house, a distance that was three miles but that felt, after two beers, like a distance measured in a different unit, a unit that was not miles but commitments, and the commitments were heavy, and the beer made them lighter, and the lighter commitments were easier to miss, and missing them was easier than carrying them, and the ease was the trap, and the trap was the beer, and the beer was cold.

Julie called him. He knew she called because his mother told him the next morning, his actual mother, at his actual house, the house he returned to after the lake at ten o'clock with his breath managed by gum and his gait managed by concentration, because the management of breath and gait were skills he had developed since the first warm beer in July, the skills of a person who has a secret and whose secret requires physical concealment, and the physical concealment was tiring and the tiredness was another thing the beer was supposed to fix, and the beer fixed it temporarily, and the temporary fix required another beer, and the cycle was a wheel, and the wheel was turning, and Stan was on it.

"Julie called three times," his mother said. She said it without accusation, because Stan's mother was a woman who delivered information the way a news anchor delivers the weather: factually, completely, without editorial commentary on whether the weather was appropriate. "She sounded worried."

Stan called Julie back. The conversation was short and occurred at 7:30 in the morning, before school, with Stan standing in his kitchen and Julie standing in the Taler kitchen, and the two kitchens were connected by a telephone wire that carried Stan's voice to Julie's ear and Julie's voice to Stan's ear, and the voices were the same voices they had always been but the wire between them was carrying something new, which was the space where the bowling was supposed to have been, the negative space of a missed appointment, and the space was not empty, the space was full of the thing that should have been in it, and the thing that should have been in it was Stan, and Stan had not been there, and the absence was the presence, and the presence was the first fracture.

"I was at my dad's garage," Stan said. "He needed help. I should have called."

The lie was easy. The lies were getting easier. The ease of the lies was its own diagnostic, the way a fever is a diagnostic, not the disease but a measure of the disease, and the lies were measuring something that Stan could not see because the measuring instrument was the same instrument that was producing the measurement, and you cannot read a thermometer that you are holding inside your own mouth, or you can, but the reading is always your own temperature, and your own temperature is the thing you are trying to assess, and the circularity is the trap, another trap, a trap inside the trap, and the traps were multiplying.

"It's okay," Julie said. "Next Tuesday."

"Next Tuesday."

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The second plan he missed was skating. The third was a Saturday walk downtown. The fourth was a Friday evening at the Taler house, where Linda had made cobbler because something had happened that required cobbler, and the something was Puck-related, and the Puck-related something was in the category of things the household managed through euphemism and proximity, and Stan was supposed to be part of the proximity, was supposed to be at the table with the family that had absorbed him, and the table had a place for him, the chair had a depression in it that matched his body the same way

Canterbilly's couch had a depression that matched Canterbilly's body, and the depression was waiting, and the chair was waiting, and the cobbler was waiting, and Stan was at Mike Redson's house drinking whiskey from a bottle that Mike kept under his bed in a shoebox that also contained a bag of cocaine and a switchblade and a baseball card of a player Mike could not name because Mike did not care about the card, the card was camouflage, the card was what you saw when you opened the box, the wholesome surface beneath which the unwholesome things were stored.

Mike Redson's house was on Briar Lane, a street that occupied the same city as the Taler house on Edgewood but that existed in a different country, the country of fathers who yelled and mothers who were not present and brothers who had left and a domestic architecture that was organized around absence rather than presence, the rooms full of the evidence of people who used to be here and who had stopped being here and whose stopping had not been managed by a Linda or a Julie but had simply occurred, the way weather occurs, without consultation and without a list. Milton Redson, Mike's father, was a large man with a voice that Stan could hear through the walls of Mike's bedroom, a voice that operated at a volume that was not conversation but announcement, and the announcements were always complaints, and the complaints were always directed at Mike, and the direction was always from the living room toward the bedroom, the complaints traveling through the house the way sound travels through the Taler ducts, except that the Taler ducts carried information and the Redson walls carried hostility, and the hostility was the weather of Mike's house, the daily climate that Mike moved through with the indifference of a person who has stopped noticing that it is raining because the rain has not stopped since he was born.

Stan understood, in the part of his brain that the beer had not yet reached, that Mike's house explained Mike. The understanding was not sympathy. Stan was not capable of sympathy for Mike, because sympathy requires a distance that Stan could not maintain, because Stan was too close to Mike, seated on Mike's floor, drinking Mike's whiskey, occupying Mike's orbit, and the orbit was a gravity, and the gravity was pulling Stan away from Edgewood and toward Briar Lane, away from cobbler and toward the shoebox, away from Julie and toward the bottle, and the pulling was easier to follow than to resist because following a gravity requires nothing, following a gravity is what objects do, and resisting a gravity requires a force, and the force was Julie, and Julie was three miles away sitting at a table with an empty chair that matched Stan's body, and the chair was waiting, and Stan was not coming.

The phone calls changed. This was the mechanism Julie detected first, because Julie detected everything first, because Julie's instruments were the most sensitive instruments in any room she occupied, and the phone calls were a room of sorts, a shared space created by the wire between two kitchens, and in that shared space Julie's instruments were operating at full capacity.

"You sound different," she said, on a Tuesday in October.

"Different how?"

"Different. Like you're further away than the phone should make you."

She was describing the beer. She did not know she was describing the beer. What she was describing was the effect of the beer on Stan's voice, the way the beer softened the consonants and

widened the vowels and introduced a lag between her sentences and his responses that was not the lag of thinking but the lag of processing, the small delay that occurs when a brain is working through a medium that slows it, the way a runner slows in sand, still running but running through resistance, and the resistance was audible to Julie as distance, as the sound of a person speaking from further away than the phone justified.

"I'm just tired," Stan said.

"You're always tired now."

"School is tiring."

"School is the same school it was last month. You weren't tired last month."

This was the thing about Julie. This was the instrument. The instrument did not accept false data. The instrument compared current readings against historical baselines and flagged the discrepancies, and the discrepancy between last month's Stan and this month's Stan was a discrepancy Julie's instrument had been tracking since the first missed bowling night, a file of evidence that was accumulating in Julie's internal architecture the way Linda's list accumulated in the drawer, and the file was not a file of anger or suspicion but a file of information, because Julie's first response to a discrepancy was always information-gathering, the thermostat checking the temperature before deciding whether to turn on the heat.

The phone calls began to smell. Not literally. Stan knew they could not literally smell. But the beer on his breath produced a change in the way he held the phone, the receiver pressed harder against his mouth to close the distance between the mouthpiece and his lips, and the pressing changed the acoustics, and the acoustics changed the voice, and the voice carried the pressing the way it carried the lag, as information, as data that Julie's instrument received and processed and filed without yet naming, because the naming was the thing Julie was not yet ready to do, because naming it would require acting on it, and acting on it would require a conversation that Julie had been preparing for since the first missed Tuesday but that she kept postponing because postponing was the management strategy and the management strategy was working, or appearing to work, or producing the appearance of a working relationship that was, if you did not look too closely, still the relationship that had bowled on Tuesdays and skated on Thursdays and walked downtown on Saturdays looking at sculptures that neither of them understood.

But Julie looked closely. Julie always looked closely. That was the instrument's function.

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The afternoon arrived in November. It arrived the way all culminating afternoons arrive, without announcement, disguised as an ordinary day, the calendar containing no notation that this was the day when the file would be complete and the instrument would produce its finding and the finding would end the thing that had started on a summer porch with a football in the backyard and Julie watching from the steps.

Stan came to the Taler house at 3:30. He had been at Mike's since noon because it was a Saturday and Saturdays had become Mike's territory the way Tuesdays used to be Julie's, and the territorial exchange had happened without negotiation, one day at a time, each Saturday at Mike's replacing the Saturday that should have been at the rink or the bowling alley or downtown with the sculptures, and the replacement was cumulative, each replaced Saturday making the next replacement easier, the way each lie made the next lie easier, the mechanism self-lubricating, the friction decreasing as the system adapted to its new function.

He had been drinking since noon. Not much. Three beers. The three beers were distributed across three and a half hours, which was less than a beer an hour, which was a rate that Stan had calculated as manageable, the rate at which the beer provided its function (volume reduction on the voice, softening of the edges, the general blurring of the distinction between where he was and where he should have been) without producing the visible signs that required management (the gait, the breath, the lag). The calculation was precise. The calculation was the work of a mind that had become skilled at the mathematics of concealment, the algebra of how much he could drink and still pass the inspection that every entrance into the Taler household constituted, because the Taler household contained instruments, Julie's instrument and Linda's instrument and Ares' instrument, and the instruments were always on, and passing the inspection required a blood alcohol level that was below the instruments' detection threshold, and the threshold was a number Stan carried in his head the way Bergie carried the step count of the Northside hallway, as survival information.

He passed the inspection at the front door. Linda was in the kitchen. He heard her voice and it sounded normal and the normal sound was the green light, the signal that the instruments in the kitchen had not flagged his entrance. He went upstairs. He went to Julie's room because Julie's room was where he went on Saturday afternoons when Saturday afternoons were still his, and the going was a habit, and the habit was a ghost, the dead version of a living thing that still moved through the house performing the actions the living thing had performed, opening the same door, sitting on the same bed, occupying the same space, the ghost indistinguishable from the living thing to anyone who was not looking closely.

Julie was looking closely.

She was on her bed with a textbook and a pencil behind her ear, the same position she occupied in the living room, the same relationship between her body and the horizontal surface beneath it, the legs folded, the posture of a person who had bargained with her own body about what counted as rest. She looked at Stan when he sat on the edge of the bed, and the look was the instrument at full power, the entire apparatus of Julie's attention focused on the data that Stan's presence was providing, and the data was: three beers, three and a half hours, Saturday noon until now, Mike's house, Briar Lane, the shoebox under the bed, the whiskey and the cocaine and the baseball card, and Julie could not have known these specifics but she knew the category, she knew the general shape of the information the way Puck knew the general shape of the conversations he overheard through the ducts, the vowels rounder and the consonants softer, the edges smoothed by compression, but the shape recognizable, the shape always recognizable to a person whose instrument had been tracking the shape since Tuesday

bowling in September.

"You've been drinking," Julie said.

She said it the way Dr. Stannard had said "osteosarcoma." Not as an accusation. As a diagnosis. The word entered the room the way the word "cancer" had entered the examination room on Garrett Avenue, by displacing the air, by rearranging the furniture, by changing the key signature of every word that would be spoken after it. Stan heard the word and felt the thing he felt every time the concealment failed, which was not shame, not yet, shame would come later, in the darkroom and on the lawn and in the conversations with Canterbilly and the counselors at Chrichton. What he felt now was the particular vertigo of a person whose calculation has been proven wrong, whose algebra has failed, whose detection threshold has been lower than the instruments required, and the failure was not a single failure but the cumulative failure of every calculation since July, every managed breath and managed gait and managed phone call collapsing into the single diagnostic sentence that Julie had delivered with the precision of a person who had been waiting to deliver it and who had postponed the delivery until the delivery was no longer optional.

"I had a beer at Mike's," Stan said. "One beer."

"You had more than one beer."

"Julie."

"Don't say my name like that. Don't say my name like it's an answer to a question. I asked you a question. How many beers."

"Two."

"Try again."

"Three."

"How often."

The question was not "how often today." The question was "how often," which was a larger question, a question that contained every Tuesday and every Thursday and every Saturday and every Friday cobbler that Stan had missed, and the question was the file, the entire file, opened and spread on the bed between them, and Julie was not asking Stan to confess because Julie did not need a confession, Julie had the file, Julie had been building the file since September, and the file was complete, and the question was not a request for information but a request for acknowledgment, and the acknowledgment was the thing Stan could not provide because providing it would require him to see the file, to look at the accumulated evidence of the drift, and looking at it would require him to see himself the way Julie saw him, which was different from the way he saw himself, and the difference was the distance between them, and the distance had been growing since the first warm beer at the lake, and the distance was now the size of the room, the size of the bed, the size of the space between Julie's textbook and Stan's hands, which were in his lap, folded, the way they had been folded on the guest room bed when he told her he loved her in June, and the folding was the same folding and the hands were the same hands and the boy in the room was not the same boy and the girl on the bed knew it.

"I'm going to tell you something," Julie said. "And I'm going to tell you once."

Stan looked at her. Her face was not angry. Her face was the face of a person who has completed a diagnostic process and who is delivering the results, and the delivery is professional and complete and conducted without the deliverer's own response contaminating the content.

"I have been making excuses for you for three months," Julie said. "I have told your mother you were at our house when you were not at our house. I have told my mother you were at your house when you were not at your house. I have told myself that the phone calls sounded strange because you were tired and that the missed Tuesdays were because your father needed help and that the Saturday you showed up at the house smelling like mouthwash was because you had used mouthwash and not because you had used mouthwash to cover something the mouthwash was not designed to cover. I made these excuses because I love you. I am telling you I made them because I am done making them. The excuses are over. What is under the excuses is the thing we need to talk about, and the thing we need to talk about is that you are drinking and the drinking is not a beer at the lake, the drinking is a thing, and the thing is getting bigger, and I am not going to watch it get bigger while I make excuses for its size."

The room was quiet. Julie's textbook was open on the bed. The pencil was behind her ear. The pencil did not move, which meant Julie was not registering concern through small involuntary movements of objects near her head. The pencil was still because Julie was still, because the diagnosis had been delivered and the delivery required stillness, the stillness of a completed act, the stillness of a sentence that has reached its period and does not require additional words.

Stan sat on the edge of the bed. He looked at his hands. The hands were folded. The hands had held Julie's hand at the skating rink and on the downtown walks and on the guest room bed in June when the love was spoken and the love was received, and the hands were the same hands and they were not the same hands, because the hands had held beer cans and whiskey bottles and Mike's flask, and the holding had changed them, not physically but in their relationship to the other things they held, because a hand that holds a bottle is a hand that has made a choice about what it is for, and the choice, repeated, becomes the hand's identity, and the hand's identity was changing, and the change was visible to Julie and invisible to Stan, and the invisibility was the disease.

"I love you," Stan said. Because it was true. Because it had always been true. Because the truth of it was the one thing the beer had not changed, the one measurement the algebra had not corrupted, and the truth was supposed to be the answer, the thing you say when the thing you have done is indefensible, the word that is supposed to rearrange the room back to its previous configuration, the word that worked in June on the guest room bed when saying it was an act of courage and receiving it was an act of recognition.

"I know you do," Julie said. "That's the problem."

The problem. The love was the problem. The love was the problem because the love was the cage and the crutch simultaneously, the cage for Julie and the crutch for Stan, and Julie saw both at the same time because Julie's instrument saw everything at the same time, the whole system visible to her in a

single reading, the way a doctor reads an X-ray and sees the bone and the mass and the hereditary component in the same image, and the image was: Stan loves Julie and the love is not enough because the love is being used, not by Stan but by the thing inside Stan that the beer is feeding, the thing that uses the love as permission to continue, because as long as Julie loves him the world is still the world where the porch beer was recreational and the bowling was on Tuesdays and the perfume was in the hallway and the guest room was his room, and as long as that world exists the drinking is not a problem because the world is still functioning, and Julie's continued love is the proof that the world is still functioning, and the proof is the crutch, and the crutch is what Stan leans on when the voice in his head tells him that the drinking is a thing and the thing is getting bigger.

And the cage. The love was the cage for Julie because the love required her to stay in the room with the drinking, to watch the thing get bigger while she made excuses for its size, and the dual function was breaking her, the thermostat trying to heat and cool the room at the same time, and the contradiction was the cage, and the cage was the love, and the love was the thing she had to put down before the thing put her down.

"You need to go home," Julie said. "Your home. Not here."

"Julie."

"Your things are in the drawer. You can get them whenever you want."

"I don't want to get my things."

"I know. But the things are in the drawer and the drawer is yours and you can come get them when you're ready."

Stan stood up. The standing was the hardest physical act he had ever performed, harder than the walk from the lake to his father's house, harder than the gait management and the breath management, because the standing was not concealment but exposure, the full weight of what was happening pressing down on his legs and his back and his chest, and his body received the weight the way Linda received the weight of the diagnosis, by bracing, by organizing itself to hold what it was being asked to hold, and what it was being asked to hold was the end of the good thing, the end of the Tuesday bowling and the Thursday skating and the Saturday sculptures and the guest room with the towel that had his name on it.

He walked to the door. He did not go to the guest room. He did not open the drawer. He did not take his things. The things were in the drawer: a T-shirt he had left there in July, a cassette tape of a band he had liked in August, the pocket knife he used to cut apples into fans. The things would stay in the drawer. Julie would find them in the coming weeks, one by one, the way you find seashells that the tide has left behind, artifacts of a presence that has receded, and each finding would be a small event, a small ache, a reminder that the drawer had contained something and the something was gone and the gone was not an absence but a presence, the presence of a person who had been part of the furniture and who had stopped being part of the furniture and who had left behind the evidence of his having been.

He walked down the stairs. He walked through the hallway. He walked past the kitchen where Linda was making something that was not cobbler and was not a celebration and was the ordinary food

of an ordinary evening in a household that had absorbed a diagnosis and a departure on the same timeline and that would absorb this departure too, because the household absorbed everything, the household was the structure and the structure held, and the structure would hold Stan's leaving the way it held Albert's absences and Puck's diagnosis and the empty chair at the head of the table, by adjusting, by recalibrating, by continuing.

He opened the front door. The door opened at a volume Stan did not choose, a volume that was neither conversational nor hard but something between, the sound of a door opened by a person who is leaving a house for the last time as one kind of person and who will return, if he returns, as a different kind of person.

The screen door screeched behind him. The metallic screech that had been promising to be fixed since the Carter administration. Stan heard it and walked down the porch steps and down the sidewalk and the screen door closed and the screech ended and the Taler house was behind him and the evening was in front of him and the evening contained Mike's phone number and the lake and the cooler and the cold beer and the voice turned down and the edges softened and the distance growing, the distance between the house where he had belonged and the house where he was going, which was his father's house, which was the house where his mother delivered information like a news anchor and his father's garage smelled like motor oil and the pine tree air freshener, and the house was not the Taler house, the house had never been the Taler house, and Stan walked toward it because it was the only direction available to a person who had just been diagnosed by the best instrument he had ever known and who had been found, in the reading, to be a thing that was getting bigger, and the thing was getting bigger, and Julie was not going to watch.

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Chapter 13: The Krugerand

The newspaper was named after a coin. Not an American coin. A South African gold coin, the Krugerrand, misspelled by the previous journalism teacher, a man named Fenton who had retired to Florida and who had, according to Canterbilly, committed three unforgivable acts during his tenure at Westborough High: he had named the school newspaper after a foreign currency, he had misspelled the foreign currency, and he had left the misspelling as his legacy, a permanent monument to the carelessness with which the English language was treated by people who were charged with teaching students to use it. The Krugerand, one R where two belonged, printed in bold type at the top of every issue since 1974, was Canterbilly's cross and Canterbilly bore it with the sustained grievance of a man who had petitioned the administration four times to change the name and who had been told, four times, that changing the name of a school newspaper required a committee and the committee required a quorum and the quorum required interest and the interest did not exist because nobody in the administration cared about the name of the newspaper except Canterbilly.

"The Krugerand," Canterbilly said, on the morning when the first issue of the year was being assembled, "is a monument to institutional indifference. It is a misspelled tribute to a gold coin from a country that most students in this building cannot locate on a map. It is the name I inherited and the name I will die with, because the administration of this school is a bureaucratic organism whose primary function is the prevention of change and whose secondary function is the consumption of my patience. Mr. Taler, are you listening?"

Ares was listening. Ares was always listening when Canterbilly spoke, because Canterbilly's speech was the closest thing to written prose that Ares had ever heard produced by a human mouth, every clause constructed, every pause calibrated, the sentences arriving with the architecture of things that had been built rather than spoken, and the building was the lesson, because the lesson was always the same lesson, which was that language was a tool and the tool required precision and the precision was the difference between a sentence that worked and a sentence that occupied space, and the difference mattered, and the mattering was the only thing Canterbilly was serious about.

"I'm listening."

"Then tell me what is wrong with this sentence." Canterbilly held up a sheet of paper. The paper contained a draft of a sports article written by Stan, and the draft had been subjected to Canterbilly's red pen, which had left marks on the page the way a surgeon's scalpel leaves marks on a body, each incision purposeful, each correction a removal of something that was either dead or diseased or in the wrong place, and the cumulative effect of the red pen on Stan's draft was a page that looked like it had been through a minor war, the original black text visible beneath the red corrections the way a landscape is visible beneath a battle, still present but unmistakably altered.

"He used 'very' twice in the same paragraph."

"He used 'very' twice in the same paragraph. He also used 'quite' once and 'really' once. Mr. Harrison has written a paragraph in which four words exist solely to modify other words that did not require modification, because the words being modified were either sufficient without modification or insufficient with it, and in either case the modifier is a prostitution. The English language is not a brothel, Mr. Taler. It is a cathedral. And the people who use it as a brothel are not writers. They are pimps of syntax. Tell Mr. Harrison."

"Tell him yourself. He's right there."

Stan was at the table nearest the window, his head down, his pencil moving across a second draft that was attempting to address the red pen's corrections without producing new violations, a task that Stan approached with the diligence of a person who did not love writing but who respected the person who was teaching him to do it, and the respect was enough, the respect was what Canterbilly required, because Canterbilly did not require love. Love was for English teachers who assigned poetry and asked students how the poetry made them feel. Canterbilly assigned deadlines and asked students whether the sentences were correct, and the question was not rhetorical, the question had an answer, and the answer was either yes or no, and the no was more common than the yes, and the no was where the teaching happened.

"Mr. Harrison," Canterbilly called from the back room, where he was seated on the couch with his feet on the desk and a donut in his left hand and the red pen in his right, a posture that communicated the dual nature of his authority: the donut was the informality, the pen was the power, and the combination produced a man who could eat a pastry and dismantle a paragraph simultaneously without either activity diminishing the other. "The word 'very' is a crutch. A crutch is what a person uses when they cannot walk. Can your sentences walk, Mr. Harrison?"

"I think so."

"Then remove the crutches and let them walk. If they fall down, they were not sentences. They were aspirations."

Stan erased. The eraser produced the smell of rubber friction that Ares associated with the journalism room the way he associated the smell of grass with the football field and the smell of onions with his mother's kitchen, each space identified by its primary chemical signature, and the journalism room's signature was rubber friction and donut glaze and the faint petroleum residue of newsprint ink, because the room contained a printing press, an ancient device against the north wall that Canterbilly operated himself and that produced the Krugerand in physical form, the ink pressed onto paper by a mechanism that was older than the 1947 building and that functioned, according to Canterbilly, better than any piece of equipment installed since, because the press did not require electricity or committees or quorums, the press required ink and paper and a person who understood that the physical act of pressing words onto a surface was a sacred act, and the sacredness was the point, and the point was the only thing in the room sharper than the red pen.

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Crew was on the phone. Crew was always on the phone. The journalism room had one telephone, a beige rotary instrument mounted on the wall near the door, and Crew had claimed it on the first day of class with the territorial confidence of a person who understood that in any organization, the person who controls the telephone controls the information, and the person who controls the information controls the narrative, and the person who controls the narrative is the person the editor relies on, and the editor was Ares, and the editor relied on Crew, and the reliance was the partnership.

"Mrs. Volkov," Crew was saying into the receiver, his voice carrying the tone of professional inquiry that he had developed in the three weeks since school began, a tone that was approximately forty percent genuine journalist and sixty percent fourteen-year-old boy performing an impression of a journalist he had seen in a movie, and the performance was convincing enough that the people on the other end of the phone responded to it as if it were the genuine article, because the genuine article and the performance of the genuine article are, in journalism as in most human endeavors, indistinguishable at sufficient distance, and the telephone provided sufficient distance. "Mrs. Volkov, Crewly Smith from the Krugerand. I'm writing a profile of new teachers and I have a few questions about your background. Specifically, your background before you came to Westborough. Specifically, your background in Russia."

Ares could hear the response from across the room, not the words but the tone, the tone of a woman who had been asked about her background in Russia by a fourteen-year-old boy calling from a school newspaper and who was experiencing the particular confusion that Crew's inquiries reliably produced, the confusion of a person who cannot determine whether they are being interviewed or pranked and who defaults to politeness because politeness is the safer bet.

Crew took notes. Crew's notes were indecipherable to anyone but Crew, a system of abbreviations and symbols and arrows that connected ideas across the page in a web that resembled, to Ares' eye, the map of a conspiracy, which was appropriate because the KGB article was a conspiracy theory documented in a notation system that was itself a conspiracy against legibility. But the notes worked. The notes, when Crew translated them into sentences, produced paragraphs that were energetic and funny and factually questionable and stylistically unlike anything the Krugerand had published in its misspelled history, and the unlike-ness was the value, because the Krugerand under Fenton had been a newspaper in the way that the 1973 addition was a building: technically, functionally, without ambition.

The partnership had discovered itself in the second week. The discovery was mechanical rather than dramatic, the way two gears discover that they mesh: Ares wrote, and the writing was precise and pointed and occasionally too sharp for its own good, the blade cutting deeper than the material required. Crew edited, not in the traditional sense of correcting grammar and removing errors, but in the architectural sense of rearranging the material so that the sharp parts faced the right direction, so that the blade cut where the cutting would do the most good, and the rearrangement was Crew's gift, the ability to see a piece of writing not as a sequence of sentences but as a structure, a building with rooms, and to know which room the reader should enter first and which room the reader should find last and which room should be locked and opened only with the key that the previous room provided.

Crew also promoted. Promotion, in the context of a high school newspaper with a readership of approximately two hundred students and a faculty of sixty-three and an administration of four, was not advertising but performance, the physical act of making the newspaper visible in a building whose primary visual stimuli were bulletin boards, trophy cases, and the occasional handwritten sign advertising a bake sale. Crew made the Krugerand visible by carrying copies through the hallway and handing them to people who did not want them and who took them anyway because Crew handed them with the conviction of a person who believed the thing he was handing you was important, and the conviction was contagious, and the contagion was the promotion.

Crew also created chaos. The chaos was not an accident. The chaos was a method. Crew's method for generating stories was to begin with an absurd premise (a teacher is KGB), pursue the premise with genuine journalistic tools (phone calls, interviews, research), and allow the pursuit to produce the real story, which was never the absurd premise but the thing the absurd premise uncovered, the way a person who digs for buried treasure does not find treasure but finds the geological history of the ground, which is more interesting than treasure and more useful and more true. The KGB article would not prove that Mrs. Volkov was KGB. The KGB article would produce a profile of a teacher who had emigrated from the Soviet Union, who had a story that the school had never heard, and whose story, told with humor and specificity, would be the first piece in the Krugerand that anyone had read twice.

Ares understood the method because Ares recognized it. The method was Ares' method, translated into Crew's idiom. Ares began with a precise observation (the moment after the helmet comes off) and pursued the observation until it produced a meaning (the world is larger than the visor allows you to see). Crew began with a wild hypothesis (the teacher is a spy) and pursued the hypothesis until it produced a fact (the teacher is a person with a history worth telling). Both methods were journalism. Both methods were writing. And the two methods, when they operated in the same room at the same time, produced a newspaper that was better than either method could produce alone, because the precision needed the chaos and the chaos needed the precision, and the need was the partnership, and the partnership was the paper.

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Mike Redson was not on the paper. Mike Redson orbited it.

The orbit was visible to Ares the way the hallway's power geography was visible: through positioning. Mike appeared in the journalism room doorway at least twice a week, leaning against the frame with his arms crossed and his face wearing the expression that Ares had begun to catalog as Mike's Default, which was a combination of amusement and contempt that required no specific stimulus because the amusement and the contempt were not responses to anything in particular but permanent conditions of Mike's face, the resting state of a person who had decided, at some point in his history, that everything was either funny or beneath him and that the two categories were the same.

Mike watched. He watched Crew on the phone. He watched Stan at the table erasing. He watched Canterbilly in the back room with the donut and the pen. He watched the way a person watches an aquarium, with the detached interest of someone observing a contained ecosystem whose inhabitants

cannot escape and whose activities are entertaining precisely because they are small, because the aquarium is small, because the glass between the watcher and the watched is the thing that makes the watching possible.

"What's the paper about this week?" Mike asked, from the doorway, on a Tuesday in October. The question was directed at no one and everyone, the way Mike directed all of his communications, as broadcasts rather than conversations, the signal going out in all directions and the response expected from whatever receiver was closest.

"The prostitution of the English language," Canterbilly said from the back room. "Which is a subject you would know a great deal about, Mr. Redson, if your relationship to the English language were anything more than a restraining order filed by the language against you. May I help you with something, or are you auditing the doorframe?"

Mike smiled. The smile was the Default with teeth. "Just checking on my boy Stan."

Stan did not look up from his draft. The not looking up was its own communication, a signal that Ares received and filed: Stan was performing the act of a person who was not affected by Mike's presence, and the performance was good enough for the room but not good enough for Ares' instruments, because Ares' instruments detected the small change in Stan's posture, the slight drawing-in of the shoulders, the way a person draws in when a cold wind enters a room, and the cold wind was Mike, and the drawing-in was Stan's body acknowledging what Stan's face refused to acknowledge, which was that Mike's orbit around the journalism room was not casual but possessive, the orbit of a moon around a planet it has claimed, and the claim was on Stan, and Stan was in the journalism room writing sports with erased "verys" and the claim was pulling him toward the doorway and the doorway was pulling him toward the darkroom and the darkroom was pulling him toward the bottle, and the pulling was the gravity, and the gravity was Mike.

"Mr. Redson," Canterbilly said. "The doorframe is not a chair. The hallway is not a lounge. If you wish to contribute to the Krugerand, you may submit writing for consideration. If you do not wish to contribute, you may remove your orbit from my field of vision. The choice is yours and the consequence of not choosing is that I choose for you, and my choice will involve the vice principal's office and a conversation about loitering that you will find educational in the pejorative sense."

Mike left. The orbit retreated. The doorway returned to being a doorway, an aperture through which the fluorescent light of the hallway entered the journalism room without the additional weight of Mike's Default, and the room exhaled, collectively and silently, the way rooms exhale when the pressure that was in them departs, and the departure was temporary because Mike's orbit was not a visit but a condition, and the condition would resume, and the doorway would contain him again, and the watching would continue, because Mike watched things he could not understand, and the journalism room was a thing Mike could not understand, because the journalism room was a place where people used language as a tool, and Mike's tools were different tools, and the different tools did not work in the journalism room, and the not-working was what Mike watched for, the moment when the aquarium cracked and the water spilled and the inhabitants were no longer contained and no longer small.

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The first real story was not the KGB article. The KGB article was still in production, Crew's web of notes still being translated into paragraphs, Mrs. Volkov still being interviewed, the premise still being pursued toward whatever fact was waiting at the end of the pursuit. The first real story was smaller, sharper, and came from Stan.

Stan had been covering sports with the diligence that Canterbilly required and the competence that Stan provided, which was a steady, workmanlike competence, the writing equivalent of a bricklayer's work: the bricks were level, the mortar was even, the wall stood, and the wall was not beautiful but the wall was a wall, and the wall was what the sports section needed. But Stan had written something else. Stan had written a piece about the football team's equipment budget, a piece that was not sports coverage but sports journalism, the distinction being that coverage reported what happened and journalism reported why what happened happened, and what happened was that the football team had received new equipment while the girls' basketball team was using balls that had been purchased during the Nixon administration, and the why was a budget allocation process that favored the sports that produced revenue over the sports that did not, and the revenue the football team produced was not actually revenue but the perception of revenue, because the football team lost money every year but the perception of revenue was enough to justify the expenditure because the perception was the point, the perception was what the administration managed, and the management of perception was the story.

Stan had not intended to write the story. Stan had discovered the story while writing a routine piece about the football team's new helmets, and the discovery was the thing that Crew would have recognized as the treasure-versus-geology principle: you dig for one thing and you find another, and the other thing is better. Stan had followed the discovery with the doggedness that was his primary writing trait, the bricklayer's refusal to leave a wall half-built, and the result was a thousand-word article that was accurate, sourced, fair, and devastating to the administration's budget narrative.

Canterbilly read it. He read it in the back room with his feet on the desk and no donut in his hand, which was significant, because the absence of a donut during a reading meant the reading had displaced the donut, and the displacement of the donut was the highest compliment Canterbilly's reading practice could bestow. He put the article down. He looked at Stan through the doorway.

"Mr. Harrison. This is journalism."

Stan looked up. The looking up was the first looking up Stan had done since Mike's doorway visit, and the looking up was directed at Canterbilly, and Canterbilly's face was doing the thing that Canterbilly's face did when the red pen was not required, which was a relaxation of the lines around his eyes that was not a smile but the territory adjacent to a smile, the zip code where smiles lived but did not currently reside.

"It's just the budget numbers," Stan said.

"It is not just the budget numbers. It is the budget numbers arranged in an order that reveals a story, and the story is that this institution allocates resources based on the perception of value rather

than the measurement of value, and the perception is a lie, and you have demonstrated the lie using the institution's own numbers, which is the only way a lie can be demonstrated, which is with the liar's own evidence. This will be published."

"Will Doublewe care?"

"Doublewe will notice. Caring and noticing are different operations. Doublewe notices things that reach his desk and cares about things that reach downtown. This article will reach his desk. It will not reach downtown. The distance between his desk and downtown is the space in which we operate, Mr. Harrison. Welcome to the space."

The article was published in the third issue of the Krugerand, October's second edition, printed on the ancient press with the ink pressed into paper by a mechanism that Canterbilly operated with the reverence of a priest performing a rite, the handle pulled, the rollers turning, the paper emerging with the words on its surface, the words that Stan had written and Canterbilly had approved and Ares had edited and Crew had promoted by carrying copies through the hallway with the conviction of a person who believed the thing he was handing you was important.

Doublewe noticed. The noticing took the form of a memo, typed on administration letterhead, delivered to Canterbilly's mailbox in the faculty lounge, the memo requesting a meeting to discuss "the tone and content of recent Krugerand publications." Canterbilly read the memo in the back room. He folded it. He placed it under the donut box, where it became part of the room's geological strata, the layers of paper and sugar and ink that accumulated on Canterbilly's desk the way sediment accumulates on a riverbed, each layer a record of something that had happened and that Canterbilly had processed and filed in the only filing system he trusted, which was the system of putting things under the donut box and retrieving them when their time came.

"Mr. Taler," Canterbilly said. "We have been noticed."

"Is that good?"

"Being noticed is the first function of a newspaper. Being feared is the second. We are at function one. Function two requires that we continue to publish things that are true and that the truth continue to inconvenience the people who prefer the perception of truth to the truth itself. Can you do this?"

"I can do this."

"Can Mr. Smith do this?"

"Crew can do anything if you let him near a telephone."

"Can Mr. Harrison do this?"

Ares looked at Stan, who was at his table erasing a "quite" that had survived the first draft and would not survive the second. Stan did not look up. Stan was in the wall, building, the bricklayer's focus absolute, the level checking the level, the mortar being applied with the even pressure of a person who did not know that the wall he was building was the first real wall the Krugerand had built in ten years and that the wall had been noticed and that the noticing was function one.

"Stan can do this," Ares said.

Canterbilly folded the newspaper he had been reading. He placed both hands flat on the desk. The gesture that preceded a non-negotiable statement.

"Then we continue. The Krugerand is a misspelled monument to institutional indifference, and it is also, as of this week, a newspaper. The two conditions are not mutually exclusive. They are, in fact, the conditions under which all real newspapers operate: indifference from the institution and persistence from the people who produce it. We are the people who produce it. We will persist. There are donuts on the table. They are mine. You may each have one. Do not take the glazed."

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Chapter 14: The Bullying Begins

The fresh start lasted four hours. Four hours was the time between Bergie's arrival at school that morning at 7:45 on a Monday in late September and the moment at 11:45 when Mike Redson, standing at the center of the senior junction with his arms crossed and his face wearing the expression that Bergie would come to catalog as the Default, looked at Bergie for the first time and said, loudly enough for the surrounding bodies to hear, "Who dressed you, your grandmother?"

The question was not about the clothes. Bergie's clothes were unremarkable: a button-down shirt, khaki pants, sneakers that were neither new nor old but occupied the neutral territory between purchase and discard, the territory where shoes go when they have been worn enough to be comfortable and not enough to be conspicuous. The question was about Bergie. The question was the assessment, the scan, the categorization that the hallway performed on every body that moved through it, except that the hallway's categorization was silent and collective and Mike's categorization was public and singular, conducted at a volume that converted the assessment from private data into shared entertainment, because the entertainment was the function, the entertainment was what Mike provided to the hallway the way a comedian provides entertainment to an audience, except that Mike's audience did not pay admission, Mike's audience paid attention, and the attention was the currency, and the currency was worth more than admission because attention, once paid, cannot be refunded.

Bergie did not answer the question. Bergie had learned at Northside that answering questions from boys like Mike was like feeding a machine that was designed to process whatever you fed it into fuel for the next question, the questions self-generating, the machine perpetual, and the only strategy that reduced the machine's output was silence, because silence did not provide the machine with new material and the machine, without new material, had to manufacture its own, and manufactured material was weaker than provided material, and the weakness was the only advantage silence offered, which was a small advantage, which was the only kind of advantage Bergie had ever had.

The silence did not work. The silence did not work because Mike was not the machine from Northside. Mike was a different machine. Mike was a machine that did not require fuel because Mike manufactured his own fuel from his own internal reservoir of whatever it was that Mike had inside him, the thing that made the Default and the volume and the public categorization possible, and the thing was bottomless, and the silence fed it as well as speech fed it, because Mike's machine ran on attention and the silence produced attention, the silence produced the hallway's collective awareness that a freshman was being addressed by Mike Redson and was not responding, and the not-responding was itself a spectacle, and the spectacle was attention, and the attention was fuel.

"Grandmother's boy doesn't talk," Mike said. "Grandmother's boy is shy. Grandmother's boy needs a nametag so we know what to call him when Grandmother's boy forgets how to answer a question."

The hallway laughed. Not everyone. Not most. But enough. Enough laughed to convert the moment from a private cruelty into a public event, and the conversion was the mechanism, the thing that made Mike's bullying different from Dale's bullying at Northside, because Dale had been a predator who operated in corridors and bathrooms and the spaces between classes, the predation private and repetitive and bounded by the geography of the building. Mike was a performer who operated in the open, in the amphitheater of the senior junction, his cruelty staged for an audience whose laughter was the product and whose participation was the infrastructure, and the infrastructure was the school, and the school was the stage, and Bergie was on it.

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Monday was the hallway. Tuesday was the locker.

Bergie's locker was number 247, a bottom-row locker in the tributary corridor between the 1961 addition and the gymnasium, a location that required Bergie to kneel every time he opened it, because bottom-row lockers open at knee height and the opening requires the person to lower their body to the level of the locker, and the lowering was the vulnerability, because a person on their knees is a person whose balance is compromised and whose field of vision is restricted and whose ability to respond to a threat from above is reduced to approximately zero, and the approximately zero was the number Mike exploited.

Bergie was on his knees in front of locker 247 at 8:02 on Tuesday morning, the combination dial turned to the three numbers he had memorized on the first day (14-32-8, the numbers arbitrary and assigned and now as permanent in his internal architecture as the 64-step count of the Northside hallway), and the locker door was open, and his backpack was inside, and his hands were reaching for the textbook he needed for first period, and the reaching was interrupted by a foot.

The foot was on his backpack. The foot was wearing a boot, a work boot, the kind of boot that communicated the wearer's belief that the world was a surface that required heavier shoes than the world actually required, and the boot was Mike's, and Mike was standing behind Bergie, and the standing-behind was the geometry of dominance, the taller body positioned above the kneeling body, the boot on the backpack inside the locker, the arrangement producing a tableau that was visible to anyone who passed through the tributary corridor and that communicated, without words, the relationship between the two bodies: one standing, one kneeling, one boot, one backpack.

"Grandmother's boy needs his books," Mike said. "Grandmother's boy has to study. Grandmother's boy is going to be a doctor or a lawyer or whatever grandmother's boys become when they grow up."

Bergie pulled the backpack. The backpack did not move. The boot held it. The holding was effortless, Mike's weight distributed through the boot onto the backpack with the casual authority of a person for whom physical dominance was not an effort but a resting state, the body's default posture when confronted with a smaller body in a lower position, and the default was the thing Bergie recognized from Northside, the thing that Dale had and Travis had and Boomer had, the thing that was not strength but the willingness to use strength, and the willingness was the weapon, and the weapon

did not require activation because it was always activated, always on, always ready.

The boot lifted. Not because Bergie's pulling had moved it but because Mike chose to lift it, and the choosing was the lesson, the lesson being that the backpack moved when Mike decided the backpack moved and not before, and the decision was Mike's and the timing was Mike's and Bergie's pulling was irrelevant, and the irrelevance was the point, and the point was sharp, and the sharp point was the daily tax, and the daily tax was being assessed at Westborough at a rate that exceeded Northside's rate because Mike's rates were higher than Dale's rates, because Mike was not a petty operator running a localized extortion in a locker corridor, Mike was an institution, Mike was a system, Mike was the weather.

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Wednesday was the cafeteria.

The cafeteria at Westborough High was a room designed to contain three hundred students and that contained, at peak capacity, four hundred and twenty, the surplus distributed along the walls and in the aisles and at tables that seated eight and held twelve, the overcrowding producing a noise level that was not a volume but a climate, a sustained roar of conversation and silverware and the particular acoustic signature of four hundred and twenty adolescent bodies metabolizing food simultaneously, and the roar was supposed to be cover. The roar was supposed to be the thing that made Bergie invisible, because invisibility was the goal, the same goal it had been at Northside, the seventeen-minute detour home made architectural, the daily calibration of arrival volume translated into the daily calibration of cafeteria position: sit at the table nearest the exit, sit facing the door, sit with the tray positioned for rapid departure.

He had been sitting there for a week and a half without incident. The cafeteria, for a week and a half, had been the one space in the building where the tax was not assessed, and the non-assessment had produced a cautious relief, the relief of a person who has found a room in a hostile building where the hostility does not reach, and the room was the cafeteria, and the cafeteria was safe, until Wednesday.

Mike did not come to Bergie's table. Mike sent people. This was the difference. This was the creative cruelty the bible of Bergie's experience had not yet cataloged, because Dale at Northside had been direct, Dale had performed his own cruelty the way a craftsman performs his own work, personally, with the tools in his own hands. Mike delegated. Mike was management. Mike identified the target and assigned the task and the task was performed by others, and the others were Gary and Herb.

Gary was tall and thin and had the face of a person who had been assembled from parts that did not quite match, the nose too long for the jaw, the ears too prominent for the skull, the overall effect suggesting that Gary's face was a first draft that had been submitted without revision. Gary's function in Mike's operation was compliance: Gary did what Mike said because Mike said it, the compliance requiring no justification beyond the saying, and the saying was sufficient because the alternative to compliance was expulsion from Mike's orbit, and expulsion from Mike's orbit meant occupation of the

territory that Mike's orbit surveilled, which was the territory where targets lived, and Gary preferred to be the surveiller rather than the surveilled.

Herb was shorter than Gary and wider and had a face that was pleasant when it was not performing Mike's instructions, the pleasantness a remnant of whatever Herb had been before Mike's orbit captured him, a before-Herb that might have been a person who said hello in hallways and held doors and performed the small courtesies of a person raised in a household where courtesies were expected, and the before-Herb was still visible, briefly, in the moments between assignments, the moments when Herb's face relaxed from the performance of cruelty into the resting state of a person who was not naturally cruel but who had been recruited into cruelty by a recruiter whose recruiting methods were indistinguishable from the cruelty itself.

Gary and Herb sat down at Bergie's table. They did not ask. They sat on either side of him, the geometry of enclosure, the two bodies forming a bracket around Bergie's body that eliminated the exit routes and converted the table from a safe position into a trap, and the conversion took approximately three seconds, the time it took for two boys to sit down and for the sitting to communicate what it communicated, which was: you are not invisible, you were never invisible, the cafeteria is not a safe room, there are no safe rooms.

"Mike says hi," Gary said.

Bergie ate. He continued to eat because eating was the activity he had been performing when the bracket formed and continuing the activity was the only response available to a body whose other responses (flight, confrontation, appeal to authority) had been eliminated by the geometry and by the history and by the certain knowledge, acquired at Northside and confirmed at Westborough, that flight was temporary, confrontation was suicidal, and authority was a word that described a thing that did not function.

"Mike says you should eat faster," Herb said. Herb said it with the tone of a person delivering a message he did not write, the slight remove of a translator who is translating words from a language he speaks into a language he also speaks but that is not his first language, and the not-first-language was the cruelty, and the cruelty was Mike's language, and Herb was translating it, and the translation was the assignment, and the assignment was the tax.

They stayed for the duration of Bergie's lunch. They did not touch him. They did not take his food. They did not say anything else after the initial two sentences. They sat on either side of him and their sitting was the message and the message was: we are here because Mike told us to be here and Mike told us to be here because you exist and your existence has been identified and the identification means you are in the system and the system runs every day and the daily running of the system is the tax and the tax is permanent.

Bergie finished his lunch. He stood up. He walked to the exit. The exit was four steps from his chair, the four steps he had calibrated on the first day as the minimum distance between his position and the door, and the four steps were the same four steps and the distance was the same distance and the cafeteria was no longer the room where the tax was not assessed.

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Thursday was the bathroom.

Bergie had not used a school bathroom since Northside. The annexation of the Northside bathroom had been the event that taught Bergie the geography of bladder control, the twelve-to-one schedule (arrive at 7:00, hold until dismissal at 3:00, eight hours minus the relief available at home before and after) that his body had adapted to through the gradual conditioning of a system learning to operate under artificial constraint. The conditioning had transferred to Westborough. Bergie had not used a Westborough bathroom in three and a half weeks of enrollment.

Thursday broke the conditioning. Thursday broke it because Bergie was sick. Not sick enough for the nurse, not sick enough to go home, but sick enough that the body's complaint overrode the conditioning, the body's message louder than the body's training, and the message was urgent and the urgency was not negotiable, and Bergie went to the bathroom on the second floor of the 1961 addition at 1:15 in the afternoon because the body's message was clear and the body's message was now.

The bathroom was empty. The empty was a relief that lasted the duration of the relief, which was approximately ninety seconds, the ninety seconds during which Bergie was in the stall with the door closed and the body's message was being answered, and the answer was the vulnerable moment, the moment of maximum exposure, the body committed to a function it could not interrupt.

The bathroom door opened. Two sets of footsteps. The footsteps stopped outside the stall. Bergie knew the stop. Bergie had memorized the stop at Northside, the particular silence of two bodies standing outside a bathroom stall listening for the body inside it, the silence that precedes the knock or the kick or the words spoken downward through the gap between the door and the frame.

"Grandmother's boy is in the bathroom," Gary's voice said.

"Grandmother's boy is taking a dump," Herb's voice said.

They did not kick the door. They did not enter the stall. They stood outside and they talked about Bergie in the third person, as if Bergie were not in the stall but somewhere else, as if the person in the stall were a subject being discussed in his absence, and the third-person discussion was the cruelty, not the words but the grammar, the grammatical conversion of a person into a topic, the conversion of "you" into "he," which is the conversion of a participant into an object, and the objectification was the mechanism, and the mechanism was creative, and the creativity was Mike's even though the performers were Gary and Herb, because Mike had designed the system and the system's design was the erasure of Bergie's personhood through the grammar of exclusion, the third person, the "he" that replaced the "you," the linguistic technique that converted a human being into a thing being discussed by other human beings who were present in the same room but who operated as if the thing were not.

They left after four minutes. Bergie sat in the stall for seven additional minutes after they left, the seven minutes a buffer, a safety margin, the time required for the hallway outside the bathroom to cycle through enough traffic that Bergie's exit would be anonymous, the exit absorbed into the flow of bodies rather than observed as an event, because the event was what Mike's system produced, the conversion

of ordinary acts (using a locker, eating lunch, using a bathroom) into events, and the events were the tax, and the tax was the erasure.

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Friday was the walk home.

Bergie walked home from Westborough by a route that was twenty-three minutes long. The direct route was fourteen minutes. The nine-minute difference was the detour, the same principle as the seventeen-minute detour from Northside, the same calculation: add distance to eliminate proximity to the people who are following you. The detour at Westborough was longer because the following was more sophisticated, because Mike's system did not follow you itself but dispatched followers, and dispatched followers could be anywhere, and anywhere required a longer detour than somewhere, and the twenty-three minutes was the number Bergie had calculated as the minimum distance that made the dispatch impractical.

The calculation was wrong on Friday. The calculation was wrong because Stan was on the route.

Stan Harrison was sitting on the low wall outside the hardware store on Chestnut Avenue, the wall that separated the hardware store's parking lot from the sidewalk, the wall that Bergie's detour route passed at minute seventeen of the twenty-three-minute walk. Stan was sitting with a can in his hand that was not a soda can, and the not-soda-can was visible from twenty feet, which was the distance at which Bergie detected Stan, and the detection produced the assessment, and the assessment was: Stan Harrison, who wrote sports for the Krugerand, who lived at the Taler house or used to live at the Taler house, who Bergie had seen in the journalism room and in the hallway and at the edge of Mike Redson's orbit, was sitting on a wall drinking a beer at 3:30 on a Friday afternoon, and the beer was not the danger, the danger was the orbit, because Stan was in Mike's orbit and Mike's orbit was the system and the system was the tax and the tax was the thing Bergie was detouring to avoid.

Bergie crossed the street. The crossing added thirty seconds to the detour but eliminated the proximity. Stan did not look up. Stan was looking at the can in his hand with the attention of a person who was not looking at the can but at something inside himself that the can was enabling him to see, or enabling him to not see, the can's function ambiguous from across the street, the function either a lens or a blindfold, and the distinction was not Bergie's concern, and Bergie walked past, and Stan stayed on the wall, and the two boys occupied the same block of Chestnut Avenue for approximately fifteen seconds without acknowledging each other, because acknowledgment would have required one of them to be seen, and being seen was the thing both of them were trying to avoid, Bergie from the system and Stan from himself.

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Mrs. Bergman watched her son come home. She watched from the kitchen window, the window that faced the sidewalk, the window from which she had watched his arrivals since Northside, the arrivals that communicated damage category through their volume and their speed and the particular angle of her son's shoulders, the angle calibrated to a scale that Mrs. Bergman had developed over two years of

watching, a scale that ran from "fine" (shoulders level, pace normal, bag on both shoulders) to "bad" (shoulders dropped, pace fast, bag on one shoulder, face angled away from the window so that the face's information was withheld until the door opened and the withholding ended and the information arrived).

Friday's arrival was in the lower range. Not the lowest. The lowest was reserved for events that produced visible damage, the torn shirts and the bruises that Mrs. Bergman documented in the file she kept in the drawer of her desk in the bedroom, the file that was growing the way Linda Taler's list was growing, through the accumulation of evidence that something was wrong and that the something required action and that the action required a sentence that Mrs. Bergman had not yet spoken because speaking it would spend the hope, and the hope was the only currency Mrs. Bergman had, and the currency was finite, and spending it meant it was gone.

She had called the school. She had called the school twice. The first call, in the second week, had produced a conversation with a guidance counselor named Mrs. Prinn, and the conversation had been professional and sympathetic and had resulted in a promise to "look into it," and the promise was the school's currency, the thing the school spent when it did not intend to do the thing the promise described, the verbal equivalent of a check written on an account that contained no funds. The second call, in the third week, had produced a conversation with the vice principal, who had said the words "boys will be boys" without audible irony, and the words were the school's other currency, the currency of normalization, the linguistic mechanism by which the institution converted abuse into weather, converting a system of targeted cruelty into a natural phenomenon that the institution was no more responsible for than it was responsible for rain.

The school did nothing. The nothing was active rather than passive. The nothing required effort, the effort of deciding not to see the thing that was being reported, the effort of receiving the phone calls and the evidence and the request for action and converting them, through the institutional process of acknowledgment without response, into nothing, and the nothing was the school's product, and the product was reliable, and the reliability was the thing Mrs. Bergman was learning, slowly, through the accumulation of phone calls that produced promises that produced nothing, that the school was not an institution that would protect her son, the school was an institution that would protect itself, and the two protections were different protections, and the difference was her son.

She opened the phone book. She turned to the page for the district office. She looked at the number. The number was the same number she had looked at at Northside, the number that represented the next level, the appeal beyond the school to the authority above the school, and the authority above the school was the district, and the district was the place where the hope would be spent, because calling the district was the last call, the call you make when the institution has failed and the institution's failure requires the intervention of a larger institution, and the larger institution was either the solution or the confirmation that there was no solution.

She closed the phone book. Not yet. Not today. The hope was still in the account. The hope was reduced but present, the balance lower than it had been at Northside but not yet zero, and zero was the

number at which the sentence would be spoken, the sentence she was forming, the sentence that was assembling itself in her mouth the way a wave assembles itself in the ocean, from the accumulated energy of many smaller movements, each movement invisible, the wave not visible until the energy reaches the threshold at which the water has no choice but to rise.

She closed the phone book and went to the kitchen and began preparing dinner, and the dinner was the routine, and the routine was the structure, and the structure was the thing that held the household together while the household waited for the sentence, the sentence that Mrs. Bergman would speak and that Bergie would hear and that would mean something different from what Mrs. Bergman intended, because the sentence, when it came, would be "don't take it anymore," and Mrs. Bergman would mean "stand up for yourself" and Bergie would hear "the adults have given up," and the distance between the two meanings was the distance between a mother's intention and a son's interpretation, and the distance was the gun, and the gun was in the future, and the future was a foreign language, and neither of them spoke it yet.

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Chapter 15: The Darkroom

The darkroom was in the journalism room's northwest corner, behind a door that was not locked because the lock had broken in 1978 and the requisition for a new lock had been submitted by Fenton and processed by the administration and denied by the budget office and resubmitted by Canterbilly and processed again and denied again, and the cycle of submission and denial had produced, over three years, a door without a lock, which was a door that anyone could open, which was a door that Mike Redson opened on a Tuesday afternoon in October and assessed in approximately four seconds as the perfect place.

The darkroom was small. Eight feet by ten feet, the dimensions of a space designed for developing photographs and not for habitation, but the space had the two qualities that Mike required of any space he intended to use: it was enclosed and it was forgotten. Enclosed meant the door closed and the light went out and the world outside the door ceased to have access to the world inside the door. Forgotten meant the darkroom's photographic function had been obsolete since the school newspaper switched from photographs to clip art in 1979, a cost-saving measure that Fenton had implemented and that Canterbilly had not reversed because Canterbilly's interest in visual content was the interest of a man who believed that the photograph was the enemy of the sentence, because the photograph replaced the description, and the description was the writer's job, and the writer's job was sacred, and the sacred did not require a darkroom.

The darkroom had a red light. The red light was the safelight, the amber-red bulb that illuminated the room during the development process so that the developer could see without exposing the film, and the safelight still worked, the bulb still screwed into the ceiling fixture, the switch still mounted on the wall next to the door, and the red light was the room's permanent condition when the white light was off, a warm red glow that gave the room the appearance of a space that existed inside a different atmosphere than the rest of the building, a pocket of a different world embedded in the wall of the journalism room, and the different world was the place where Stan Harrison began drinking during school.

Mike brought the vodka. The vodka was cherry-flavored, which was not a choice Mike had made for aesthetic reasons but a choice he had made for practical ones: cherry vodka smelled less like alcohol than unflavored vodka, because the cherry overwhelmed the ethanol in the nostrils of anyone who might detect it, and the overwhelm was the strategy, the cherry as camouflage, the fruit flavor performing the same function that the baseball card performed in the shoebox under Mike's bed, the wholesome surface covering the unwholesome content. The bottle was a pint, a size that fit inside a jacket pocket or a backpack or the space between the developing trays on the darkroom's counter, the size calibrated to concealment the way Stan's blood alcohol calculations were calibrated to the detection thresholds of the household's instruments, and the calibration was Mike's, and the calibration was professional, and the professionalism was the thing that should have frightened Stan and did not

because Mike's professionalism communicated competence, and competence communicated safety, and the safety was a lie, but the lie was convincing because Mike told it with his whole body, with the ease of his posture and the calm of his voice and the practiced fluency of a person who had been hiding in plain sight since he was old enough to understand that plain sight was the best hiding place, because people do not look for hidden things in visible places, people look for hidden things in hidden places, and the darkroom was a visible place that nobody visited, which made it the most hidden room in the building.

The first time was a Tuesday. The first time was during fifth period, which was Stan's study hall, a free period that the schedule had placed between fourth period English and sixth period journalism, a gap in the academic day that was supposed to be used for homework and that Stan had been using, since September, for homework, seated in the library with a textbook open and a pencil moving and the bricklayer's diligence applied to the academic equivalent of bricklaying, which was the completion of assignments on time and without complaint. Mike found him in the library. Mike sat next to him. Mike said "darkroom" with the same coordinate brevity he used on the phone ("lake, beer, now"), and the single word was the invitation, and the invitation was the same invitation, the same gravity, the same directional pull from wherever Stan was supposed to be toward wherever Mike was going.

They went to the darkroom. Mike closed the door. Mike switched on the red light. The red light filled the room and filled Stan's eyes and filled the space between them with a color that was neither warning nor warmth but something in the territory between the two, the territory where caution lived, and caution was the thing Stan was not exercising, and the not-exercising was the thing that the beer and the vodka and the cherry camouflage and the darkroom and the red light were all designed to facilitate, because the design was Mike's and Mike's design was the removal of caution from the people in his orbit, the systematic dismantling of the mechanisms that told a person to stop, and the dismantling was Mike's talent, and the talent was not kindness.

Mike produced the pint of cherry vodka from his jacket. The jacket was a denim jacket with a collar that Mike turned up in the fashion of a person who had seen a movie in which a character turned up the collar of a denim jacket and who had adopted the gesture without understanding that the gesture was a costume, and the costume was a character, and the character was not Mike but the person Mike wanted to be seen as, which was a person who did not care about consequences because consequences were for other people, and the not-caring was the collar, and the collar was the jacket, and the jacket was the container for the vodka.

"Drink," Mike said.

Stan drank. The cherry vodka was sweet and chemical and burned in a way that was different from the warm beer's burn and the whiskey's burn, a burn that was masked by the sweetness the way the sweetness masked the smell, layer upon layer of camouflage, the alcohol hiding behind the cherry hiding behind the red light hiding behind the door hiding behind the journalism room hiding inside the school, and the layers were the infrastructure of addiction, the architecture being built around Stan's drinking the way the 1961 and 1973 additions had been built around the 1947 building, each layer

expanding the structure without improving it, each layer making the structure harder to see from the outside and harder to leave from the inside.

The vodka was in the darkroom on Tuesday. The vodka was in the darkroom on Thursday. The vodka was in the darkroom the following Tuesday and the following Thursday and the following week's Tuesday and Thursday, the pattern establishing itself with the regularity of a clock, the biweekly schedule replacing the previous schedule, which had been weekends, which had replaced the previous schedule, which had been the lake, which had replaced the previous schedule, which had been nothing, and the nothing was the origin, and the origin was already invisible in the rearview mirror, the way the origin of any pattern becomes invisible once the pattern has established itself as the default, and the default was the darkroom, and the darkroom was twice a week, and twice a week was the new standard.

The first drink of the day had moved. This was the measurement that Stan did not take because the measurement would have required him to see the movement, and seeing the movement would have required him to see the pattern, and seeing the pattern would have required him to see the thing Julie had seen and named and ended the relationship over, and Stan was not seeing it, Stan was not seeing it because the cherry vodka was sweet and the red light was warm and the darkroom was quiet and Mike was there and Mike's presence was the permission and the permission was the thing Stan needed because the thing he was doing required permission, the way any activity that a person knows is wrong requires permission, and the permission can come from another person or from a substance or from a setting, and Stan had all three: the person was Mike, the substance was the vodka, and the setting was the darkroom, and the three permissions formed a triangle, and the triangle was the structure, and the structure was the infrastructure of addiction.

The first drink had been evening, on the porch, the hidden beer behind the railing. Then the first drink had moved to afternoon. The lake. Mike's cooler. Then the first drink had moved to earlier afternoon. Mike's house. The shoebox. Then the first drink had moved to the school day. The darkroom. Fifth period. The movement was gradual and each gradual increment was small enough to be invisible to the person making it, the way the movement of a clock's hour hand is invisible to a person watching it but visible to a person who looks away and looks back, and Stan was not looking away, Stan was watching the hour hand, and the watching was the problem, because watching a thing that moves too slowly to see move is the same as not watching it, and not watching it is the same as not knowing it is moving, and not knowing it is moving is the condition of a person whose first drink has migrated from ten o'clock at night to one o'clock in the afternoon without the migration constituting, in the person's mind, an event.

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Mike's cocaine was a separate matter. The cocaine existed in Mike's orbit the way the vodka existed, as a substance that was available and that Mike consumed with the same casual authority he applied to everything, the authority of a person who believed that the rules governing other people did not govern him, not because he was above the rules but because the rules were beneath him, and the distinction, which was no distinction at all, was the foundation of Mike's relationship to every substance and every

person and every institution he encountered.

The cocaine was in the math book. Ares would eventually write about this, would eventually describe the precise mechanism by which Mike Redson carried cocaine through the hallways of Westborough High School in a math textbook whose pages had been hollowed out to create a cavity exactly the size of a small plastic bag, the hollowing performed with a razor blade and a patience that suggested Mike's relationship to the cocaine was not casual but technical, the relationship of a craftsman to his tools, the tools in this case being the textbook and the razor and the bag and the powder and the rolled-up dollar bill that Mike kept in his wallet alongside the fake ID and two actual dollar bills, the wallet's contents a curriculum vitae of Mike Redson's extracurricular life.

Stan saw Mike snort cocaine in the hallway. Not in the darkroom. Not in the bathroom. In the hallway, during the passing period between third and fourth period, on a Wednesday in November, in the senior junction, the amphitheater of power where the seniors stood and the hallway flowed around them. Mike opened the math book and lowered his face to it. Mike inhaled and closed the book. The sequence lasted approximately five seconds and was performed with the fluency of a person who had rehearsed the sequence until it was muscle memory, the way Keithe rehearsed routes until the routes were muscle memory, and the comparison was obscene but accurate, because both were athletes of a kind, both had trained their bodies to perform specific sequences with the efficiency of a body that does not think about what it is doing because thinking would slow the doing, and the doing required speed, and the speed was the confidence.

Nobody saw. The hallway was full of bodies and none of the bodies saw, or the bodies that saw did not register what they saw because what they saw did not correspond to their expectations of what a person did with a math book in a hallway during the passing period, and the non-correspondence was the camouflage, the same principle as the cherry vodka and the baseball card, the wholesome surface disguising the unwholesome content, the math book disguising the cocaine the way the pint disguised the vodka the way the darkroom disguised the drinking the way the school disguised the failure.

Stan watched Mike close the math book and walk down the hallway and turn the corner toward fourth period, and Stan felt the thing he had felt at the lake in July, the thing that was not the beer but the hand that gave it to him, the stimulation of being near a person who did not observe boundaries, except the stimulation had changed, the stimulation had acquired a new frequency, a higher pitch, because the boundary Mike had crossed in the hallway was not the boundary of a warm beer at a lake, the boundary Mike had crossed was the boundary between recreational and institutional, between the things you did away from school and the things you did inside school, and the crossing was performed with an ease that communicated the crosser's belief that the boundary did not exist, and the belief was contagious, and the contagion was the thing that frightened Stan, because the contagion meant that the boundaries Stan had constructed around his own drinking, the boundaries that said "not during class" and "not in the building" and "not where someone could see," were not walls but suggestions, and Mike's behavior was the evidence that the suggestions could be ignored, and the ignoring was the permission, and the permission was the next increment.

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The chapter ends in the darkroom, but the ending is not a Tuesday or a Thursday. The ending is a Friday. The Friday is in November, late November, the week before Thanksgiving, and the darkroom is cold because the heating system in the 1947 building does not reach the darkroom's corner with the same enthusiasm it reaches the rest of the building, the heat arriving weakened, diluted, the thermal equivalent of a rumor that has traveled too far from its source to retain its original content.

Mike has left. Mike left twenty minutes ago, after drinking approximately half the pint and closing the door and switching off the red light and opening the door and walking into the journalism room, which was empty because journalism was over and Canterbilly had gone home and the room was dark except for the light from the hallway, and Mike walked through the dark room and into the lit hallway and the door closed behind him and Stan was alone.

Stan sits in the darkroom with the red light on. The red light is the only light. The red light is on Stan's hands and Stan's face and the bottle in Stan's hands, which is mostly empty, the cherry vodka reduced to an inch of pink liquid at the bottom, the liquid visible through the glass in the red light as a dark shape, a shadow of a substance, the substance almost gone but not yet gone, the almost-gone the cruelest measurement because the almost-gone means there is still enough for one more drink and the one more drink is the decision and the decision is the thing Stan has been making every Tuesday and Thursday and now Friday for six weeks.

He is thinking about Julie. He is thinking about Julie because Julie is the person he thinks about when the vodka is almost gone and the darkroom is quiet and the red light is warm and the school is empty and the world outside the darkroom is the world where Julie exists, the world where the perfume is in the hallway and the bowling is on Tuesdays and the towel has his name on it and the bed is the bed where she sat when she said "you've been drinking" and the saying was the diagnosis and the diagnosis was accurate and the accuracy was the reason he is here, in the darkroom, because the diagnosis sent him away from the Taler house, and the away-from was the direction he had been traveling since the lake, and the direction had led here, to a room designed for developing photographs, developing nothing now except the negative of Stan Harrison, the inverted image, the version of himself where the light areas are dark and the dark areas are light and the features are recognizable but reversed, the person in the negative still Stan but not the Stan who threw the football in the backyard while Julie watched from the porch.

He drinks the last inch. The cherry is gone from the cherry. The sweetness has been consumed by the previous drinks and what remains is the alcohol, unmasked, undisguised, the ethanol without its camouflage, and the taste is the truth, and the truth is that the cherry was never the point, the cherry was the lie the bottle told to make the swallowing easier, and the swallowing is easier now, the swallowing is the easiest thing Stan does, easier than the algebra of concealment and the management of breath and gait, easier than the lies and the excuses and the missed Tuesdays, because the swallowing requires nothing from him except the mechanical operation of the throat, and the throat is willing, and the willingness is the disease, and the disease is in the darkroom, and the darkroom is in the school, and the

school is in the town, and the town is in the state, and the state does not know that Stan Harrison is sitting in a darkroom at Westborough High School on a Friday in November drinking the last inch of cherry vodka and thinking about a girl who diagnosed him accurately and who he left because the accuracy was unbearable and because the unbearable was the thing the vodka was supposed to fix and the vodka did not fix it, the vodka postponed it, the vodka was not a cure but a credit card, a mechanism for purchasing temporary relief at a rate of interest that was compounding daily.

The bottle is empty. Stan puts it on the counter, next to the developing trays that have not held chemicals since 1979, the trays dry and dusty and purposeless, the trays the relics of a function the room no longer performs, and the bottle joins the trays as another relic, another object whose purpose has been exhausted, another container that held something and now holds nothing.

He sits in the red light. He does not get up. Getting up would require a destination, and a destination would require a direction, and a direction would require a decision, and a decision would require the thing the vodka has displaced, which is the capacity to choose between the available options, and the options are: go home (his father's house, the motor oil, the pine tree), go to Mike's (Briar Lane, the shoebox, the father who yells), go to the Taler house (impossible, the diagnosis, the door, the gone). The options are three and none of them are Julie, and Julie is the option he wants, and the wanting is the needing, and the distinction has still not occurred to him, and the darkroom is red, and the bottle is empty, and Stan Harrison sits in the red light and thinks about a girl who wore perfume that smelled like morning dew on roses, and the thinking is the only thing left in the bottle, the residue that the cherry vodka could not wash away, the sediment at the bottom, and the sediment is love, and the love is still there, and the still-there is the cruelest thing, because a love that survives the bottle is a love that the bottle cannot fix, and a love the bottle cannot fix is a love that will have to be fixed by something else, and the something else is in the future, and the future is a foreign language, and Stan does not speak it yet, and the red light glows, and the darkroom is quiet, and the school is empty, and the bottle is empty, and Stan is not.

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Chapter 16: The Articles

The KGB article began as a joke and ended as journalism, which is the trajectory of most important things: they begin as the thing nobody takes seriously and they end as the thing nobody can ignore. Crew had been working on it since the first week, the web of notes expanding across three notebooks and the wall above his desk at the house on Sycamore, where he had pinned index cards and newspaper clippings and a photograph of Mrs. Volkov that he had taken from the faculty directory in the main office, the photograph showing a woman in her fifties with short gray hair and a face that communicated the particular endurance of a person who had lived through something that the face did not discuss, and the face's silence was the story, and the story was the thing Crew had been pursuing since the first phone call from the beige rotary telephone in the journalism room.

Mrs. Volkov was not KGB. Crew had known this since the second week. What Mrs. Volkov was, was more interesting than what Crew had invented. Mrs. Volkov was Natalya Ivanovna Volkova, born in Leningrad in 1928, emigrated to the United States in 1959 through a chain of events that involved a husband who had been arrested for distributing unauthorized literature, a daughter who had died of pneumonia at age three, and a passage from Leningrad to Helsinki to London to New York to eventually, through the specific gravity of coincidence that deposits certain people in certain places for reasons that resist narrative, Westborough, Indiana, where she taught Russian language and European history to students who could not locate Russia on a map and who had, until Crew's article, no reason to try.

The article that Crew wrote was not called "Mrs. Volkov Is KGB." The article was called "Sixteen Teachers, Members of KGB," and the title was the joke, and the joke was the door, and the door opened into the room where the journalism lived. The premise was this: if sixteen teachers at Westborough High School were members of the KGB, which sixteen would they be, and what evidence supported the claim? The evidence was fabricated. The evidence was comedy. The evidence was Crew's particular gift for constructing arguments that were logically sound and factually absurd, arguments that followed the rules of reasoning to conclusions that the rules of reasoning could not have intended, and the gap between the sound logic and the absurd conclusion was the humor, and the humor was the vehicle, and the vehicle carried the passenger, and the passenger was Mrs. Volkov's real story.

Because the article did not stop at the joke. The article, at Ares' insistence, pivoted. The pivot occurred in the fourth paragraph, the paragraph where the comedy yielded to the biography, the paragraph where Crew wrote: "But Mrs. Volkov is not KGB. Mrs. Volkov is the opposite of KGB. Mrs. Volkov is a woman who left everything she had because the country she lived in would not let her husband read the books he wanted to read, and the leaving cost her a daughter and a language and a city she still dreams about in a language she no longer speaks in public, and the cost is the reason she teaches in a building where most students do not know her name and none of them know her story, until now."

The pivot was Ares' engineering. Crew had written the comedy. Crew had built the premise and populated it with the sixteen teachers and their fabricated KGB credentials and the elaborate conspiracy theory that connected the school's Russian-language teacher to an international espionage network through a chain of reasoning that included the cafeteria's use of borscht on Fridays (the cafeteria did not serve borscht on Fridays, which Crew acknowledged in a footnote that said "the absence of borscht is itself suspicious"). But the pivot, the turn from comedy to biography, from the joke to the truth, was the move that Ares made, the editorial decision that converted the article from entertainment into journalism, because journalism is not the joke or the truth, journalism is the space between the joke and the truth where the reader is brought from one to the other without feeling the gear change, and the gearlessness was Ares' contribution, and the gearlessness was what Canterbilly had been teaching him, and the teaching was the red pen, and the red pen had been removing the gears from Ares' writing since September, one "very" and one "quite" and one "really" at a time, until the writing moved without the reader feeling the movement, which is the highest compliment a piece of writing can receive from a reader, which is: I did not notice you were writing.

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The second article was Ares' from the first sentence. The second article was called "We At Westborough Aren't Crusaders, But White Bread," and the title was not a joke. The title was a thesis.

Westborough High School's mascot was the Crusader. The Crusader was represented on the school's letterhead, its gymnasium wall, its football helmets, and its official seal by a figure in chain mail carrying a sword and a shield, the shield bearing a cross, the cross bearing the specific connotation of a religious military campaign that had been waged across three centuries and multiple continents and that had produced, among other things, the specific vocabulary of "crusade" as a term for a righteous war, and the vocabulary was the problem, or part of the problem. The other part of the problem was the bread.

The bread was metaphorical. The bread was Ares' metaphor for the demographic composition of Westborough High School, which was, in the fall of 1981, a student body of 1,247 students of whom 1,198 were white and 49 were not, and the 49 who were not were distributed across the building with the specific invisibility of a minority population in an institution that did not acknowledge the distribution as a fact worth examining, the way an institution does not acknowledge the cracks in its 1973 prefabricated panels as a structural problem until the cracks produce a visible separation, and the separation at Westborough was not visible to the institution because the institution was not looking for it, because looking for it would have required the institution to see itself, and the institution's preferred method of seeing itself was the Crusader on the gymnasium wall, the knight in chain mail, the sword and the shield and the cross, the image of a righteous warrior that the institution had adopted without examining the righteousness or the warfare or the specific historical context in which crusading meant the armed invasion of other people's countries in the name of a religion that the invaders believed was superior to the religion of the people being invaded.

Ares wrote the article in one sitting. The sitting lasted three hours, from 4:00 in the afternoon to 7:00 in the evening, at the desk in his bedroom with the notebook centered and the pencil sharpened and the military-neat bed behind him and the pile of football equipment still on the floor because the pile had not been moved since August, the pile becoming its own kind of furniture, a permanent installation in the room's landscape that communicated a decision that had been made and not reversed.

The article was twelve hundred words. The twelve hundred words did the thing that Canterbilly had been teaching Ares to do, which was to take a thing that everyone could see and describe it in a way that made everyone see it differently, and the thing everyone could see was the mascot, the Crusader, the knight on the gymnasium wall, and the way Ares described it was through the bread: "We at Westborough aren't crusaders. We don't carry swords or shields or march across continents in the name of God. What we carry is lunch trays, and what we march toward is the cafeteria, and what we find when we get there is white bread. The bread at Westborough is white. The students at Westborough are white. The teachers at Westborough are white. The administration at Westborough is white. The mascot at Westborough is a white man in armor carrying a cross, and the cross is white, and the armor is white, and the history that produced the mascot is a history of white people invading countries where the people were not white and calling the invasion a crusade, and we have named ourselves after the invasion, and we eat white bread, and we do not ask why the bread is white or why we are white or why the 49 students in this building who are not white have to walk past a gymnasium wall every day that celebrates a military campaign whose purpose was the destruction of people who looked more like them than like us."

The article did not propose solutions. The article did not call for the mascot to be changed, because calling for the mascot to be changed would have been advocacy, and Canterbilly had taught Ares that advocacy was the reader's job and observation was the writer's job, and the writer's job was to see the thing and describe it and trust the reader to draw the conclusion, and the conclusion was the reader's property, not the writer's. The article described. The article observed. The article counted: 1,247 students, 1,198 white, 49 not, one mascot, one cross, one gymnasium wall, one history, one building, one town, one state, one assumption that the whiteness was neutral and the crusading was heroic and the bread was bread.

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Canterbilly read both articles. He read them in the back room on a Thursday evening after the rest of the staff had gone home, seated on the couch with his feet on the desk and no donut in his hand, the donut displaced by the reading for the second time that semester, and the second displacement was not a compliment but a confirmation, the confirmation that the articles had reached the altitude where donuts could not follow.

He read the KGB article first, once, and put it down. He picked up the Crusader article, read it twice, and put it down. He looked through the doorway at the empty journalism room, the scattered tables, the ancient press against the north wall, the beige telephone on the wall, the door at the end of the dead-end corridor, and the looking was the processing, the man's internal machinery working

through the material the way his clock at home worked through the hours, mechanically, completely, each gear engaging the next gear in a sequence that produced an output, and the output was a decision.

He said nothing.

The nothing was the permission. Ares understood this because Ares had learned Canterbilly's language over the three months since September, and Canterbilly's language was a language in which silence was a word and the word meant: I have read this and I have not told you to change it and the not-telling is the approval because I would have told you to change it if it needed changing and the not-telling means it does not need changing and the not-needing-changing is the highest thing I can say about a piece of writing without saying it, because saying it would be praise, and praise is a crutch, and crutches are for sentences that cannot walk, and these sentences can walk.

Ares took the articles to the press. He set the type. He pulled the handle. The rollers turned and the paper emerged. The words were on the surface. The words were pressed into the paper with the physical force that Canterbilly revered, the sacred act of pressing language onto a surface, the act that converted the sentences from private objects on a notebook page into public objects on a newspaper page, and the conversion was the consequence, because a sentence that is private can be revised or retracted or denied, and a sentence that is public is permanent, and the permanence is the risk, and the risk is the function.

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Crew distributed the issue on a Friday morning. Crew's distribution method had not changed since the first issue: he carried copies through the hallway and handed them to people with the conviction of a person who believed the thing he was handing you was important. But this distribution was different. This distribution was different because the copies disappeared faster than Crew could hand them out, the hallway's demand exceeding the supply for the first time in the Krugerand's misspelled history, and the demand was the reaction, and the reaction was the consequence.

The KGB article produced laughter. The laughter traveled through the hallway the way Mike's cruelty traveled through the hallway, as a wave, as a collective event that passed through the population of bodies and left a residue, except the residue of the laughter was not fear but recognition, the recognition that the school newspaper had done something unexpected, which was to be funny, and the funny had Mrs. Volkov's name in it, and Mrs. Volkov's story was in it, and the story was the thing the laughter carried into the classrooms and the cafeteria and the faculty lounge, where the teachers read the article and some of them laughed and some of them frowned and Mrs. Volkov herself read it in her second-floor classroom and did something that nobody in the building had seen Mrs. Volkov do in six years of teaching, which was cry, briefly, at her desk, the crying not the crying of a person who has been hurt but the crying of a person who has been seen, the crying of a person whose story has been told by a fourteen-year-old boy in orange overalls who began by accusing her of espionage and ended by describing the daughter she lost and the city she dreams about, and the telling was the seeing, and the seeing was the thing Mrs. Volkov had not expected from a school where most students did not know her name.

The Crusader article produced silence. Not the silence of indifference. The silence of a building processing information it did not know how to process, the institutional equivalent of a computer encountering a file in a format it does not recognize, the system pausing, the cursor blinking, the output delayed while the system searched its available categories for a match and found none, because the available categories for a school newspaper article were "sports," "events," "student profiles," and "cafeteria reviews," and "a twelve-hundred-word examination of the racial composition of our student body using bread as a metaphor" was not in the categories, and the absence of a category was the silence, and the silence was the sound of 1,247 students and 63 teachers and 4 administrators reading something that described a thing they could all see and that none of them had described, and the description was the thing that changed the seeing, because you cannot unsee a description, you cannot unread a sentence that has named a thing that was unnamed, and the naming was permanent, and the permanence was the consequence.

Doublewe received the call from downtown at 2:15 on Friday afternoon. Doublewe was Dr. Wendall Weiss, the principal of Westborough High School, a man whose nickname had been assigned by the student body based on the alliterative structure of his name and whose relationship to the nickname was the relationship of a man who knew the nickname existed and who pretended not to know, because pretending not to know was the management strategy, and the management strategy was Doublewe's primary skill, the skill of a principal whose principalship was organized around the management of perception rather than the management of education, the same distinction that Stan's equipment budget article had identified, and the distinction was Doublewe's operating system, and the operating system was threatened.

The call from downtown was from the superintendent's office. The call was brief. The call contained the words "school newspaper," "racial content," "community response," and "your office Monday morning," and the words were coordinates, the same kind of coordinates Mike used ("lake, beer, now"), except these coordinates pointed not toward a lake but toward a consequence, and the consequence was Doublewe's to manage.

Doublewe hung up the phone. He picked up the Krugerand from his desk, the issue that had been delivered to his office by the same distribution system that had delivered it to the hallway, Crew's hand extending through the door of the principal's office with the same conviction he extended through every other door, the conviction that the thing he was handing you was important. Doublewe held the Krugerand in both hands. He looked at the front page, where the KGB article occupied the top half and the Crusader article occupied the bottom half, the two articles sharing the page the way Crew and Ares shared the journalism room, the comedy above and the observation below, the joke and the truth on the same surface.

He crumpled the papers. Both hands, the crumpling simultaneous, the paper compressing into a ball that was approximately the size of a softball, the ball containing the KGB article and the Crusader article and Mrs. Volkov's story and the bread metaphor and the 49 students and the gymnasium wall and the knight in chain mail and the cross, all of it compressed into a ball that Doublewe threw at the wastebasket in the corner of his office.

He missed.

The ball landed on the floor, two feet to the left of the wastebasket, and rolled approximately six inches before stopping against the wall, where it sat, a crumpled sphere of newsprint containing two articles that a misspelled school newspaper had published and that a principal had tried to throw away and that had not reached the wastebasket, the not-reaching a fact that was too small to be a metaphor and too accurate to be anything else.

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Chapter 17: Summer Returns

The school year ended the way school years end, not with a climax but with a dispersal, the institutional machinery winding down through the final weeks of May in a sequence of diminishing obligations: exams, locker cleanouts, the return of textbooks whose condition was assessed by teachers with the resignation of people who had loaned objects to a population that did not regard the objects as loanable but as temporarily owned, and the temporary ownership had produced the predictable results, the dog-eared pages and the broken spines and the annotations in the margins that ranged from the academic to the anatomical. The hallway emptied. The senior junction lost its seniors. The power geography collapsed the way all geographies collapse when the population that sustains them departs, the space reverting from a territory to a room, from a claimed thing to an unclaimed thing, the linoleum and the lockers and the fluorescent lights continuing to exist without anyone to organize themselves around, the building persisting through the summer the way an empty theater persists between shows, the stage still a stage but the stage without actors is a floor.

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Ares cleaned the journalism room on the last day. He cleaned it alone because Canterbilly had assigned the cleaning to him and because Canterbilly's assignments were non-negotiable and because cleaning the room alone was its own kind of assignment, a lesson disguised as a chore, the lesson being: the room where you work is the room you maintain, and the maintenance is not janitorial but custodial, and the difference between the two is the difference between a person who cleans a space because they are told to and a person who cleans a space because the space is theirs.

He wiped the tables. He swept the floor. He organized the back room, which required organizing Canterbilly's desk, which required moving the donut box, which required confronting the geological strata of paper and sugar and ink that had accumulated beneath and around the box over nine months of donut consumption and newspaper production, and the strata contained: seventeen memos from Doublewe (each requesting a meeting, each folded, each filed beneath the box in chronological order), four issues of the Westborough Courier with articles circled in red pen, a photograph of a woman Ares did not recognize (the photograph was face-down, and Ares did not turn it over, because the face-down was a decision someone had made and the decision was not Ares' to reverse), and a single donut, glazed, petrified, approximately three months old, existing in a state of preservation that suggested the donut had transcended its intended purpose and become an artifact.

He did not throw the donut away. He placed it back under the box. The donut was Canterbilly's. The donut's condition was Canterbilly's business.

The room was clean. The press was covered with the canvas tarp Canterbilly stored in the closet. The telephone was silent. The dead-end corridor was empty. Ares stood in the doorway and looked at the room where he had become a writer, which was the room where Canterbilly had made him a writer,

which was the room where Crew had called Mrs. Volkov and Stan had erased "very" and Mike had leaned against the doorframe and the Krugerand had been printed and distributed and read and crumpled and thrown at wastebaskets by the principal and missed, and the room held all of this in its walls and its tables and its floor the way Canterbilly's couch held the impression of Canterbilly's body, the history recorded in the surfaces, the surfaces silent about what they contained.

He turned off the light. He closed the door. The door closed with the sound of a door closing, which is the sound of a completed thing, and the completed thing was the year, and the year had changed him, and the change was the pencil, and the pencil was the writing, and the writing was the thing he would carry into the summer and through the summer and into the fall that was coming, the fall that would be different from the fall that had just ended because the fall that was coming was the fall of sophomore year and sophomore year was the year that everything would happen, and everything had not yet happened, and the not-yet was the summer, and the summer was starting.

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Crew packed the orange overalls into a box and put the box in the closet of the bedroom on Sycamore and closed the closet door. The overalls had served their function. The function was collision, and the collision had occurred, and the collision had produced the friendship and the newspaper and the KGB article and the bread metaphor and the hallway's inability to categorize him, and the inability was no longer necessary because the hallway had stopped trying to categorize him, the hallway had accepted that Crew occupied no category and that the no-category was a category of its own, and the acceptance was the end of the overalls' purpose, and the end of their purpose was the closet, and the closet was where things went when they were finished being what they were.

The razor was on the bathroom counter. The razor had not shaved anything. The razor's animal instincts remained uncovered only in the theoretical sense, the dead sensuality intact beneath a face that had not yet produced the material the razor was designed to remove. Crew left the razor on the counter because the razor was not finished being what it was. The razor was a joke between Crew and Ares, and the joke was alive, and the alive thing stayed on the counter, and the counter was where living things lived.

Gerald Smith had fixed the wobbling table. The fix had occurred on a Saturday in April, six months after the wobble had been identified, and the fix involved a folded piece of cardboard placed beneath the short leg, the cardboard cut to a thickness that Gerald had determined through a process involving a level, a ruler, and a silence that lasted forty-five minutes, the silence the sound of Gerald solving a problem the way Gerald solved all problems: with tools and without narration. The table no longer wobbled. The fix was permanent. Diana Smith had said "finally" when the fix was complete, and Gerald had said nothing, because the fix was the response, and the response was sufficient.

Crew sat at the fixed table and ate bread with granola and thought about the summer and the summer's possibilities, which were the same possibilities every summer offered to a person who was fifteen and who had found a friend whose sentences fit inside his sentences the way a key fits a lock: the possibility of doing things that would be interesting and the possibility of doing things that would

be stupid and the probability that the interesting things and the stupid things would be the same things, because at fifteen the two categories overlap almost completely, and the overlap is the summer.

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Canterbilly wound the clock on the last Sunday of the school year. The clock received its winding the way it always received its winding, through the key in the face, the mechanism engaging, the spring tightening, the eight-day cycle beginning again. The clock would run through the summer. The clock would run in the empty house while Canterbilly was at the school or at the grocery store or at the library or in the back room of the journalism room reading newspapers with a donut in his hand and a fiction named Nancy occupying the social space that a real person would have occupied if a real person were available, and a real person was not available, and the unavailability was not a complaint but a condition, and the condition was the house, and the house was the clock.

He had not spoken to Nancy in public since February. February was the month when the fiction had required its most recent maintenance, a conversation at the faculty Christmas party (held in February because the administration's scheduling committee operated on a timeline that bore no relationship to the calendar) during which Canterbilly had mentioned Nancy's trip to visit her sister in Portland, and the mention had satisfied the party's requirement that Canterbilly produce evidence of a personal life, and the evidence had been accepted, and the acceptance had purchased another six months of silence, and the silence was the goal, and the goal was the privacy, and the privacy was the condition under which Canterbilly's life functioned.

The clock ticked. The house was quiet. Canterbilly sat on the couch that held his impression and read the Courier and did not eat a donut because the donuts were at school and the school was closed and the summer was starting and the summer was the season when the clock ran without anyone listening to it and the house existed without anyone noticing it and the fiction of Nancy was not required because the summer did not contain faculty parties or hallway conversations or the specific social audits that the school year imposed.

He thought about Ares Taler. He thought about the boy who had walked into the journalism room in September with clean sneakers and a name that meant war and a talent that Canterbilly had recognized in a file in July and that had confirmed itself, over nine months of red pen and donuts and non-negotiable assignments, as the thing Canterbilly had suspected: talent with discipline now, intelligence with direction now, moral certainty still untested but approaching the conditions under which testing would occur. The car had a road. The road was the newspaper. The newspaper was the Krugerand, misspelled, one R where two belonged, and the misspelling was the condition under which the newspaper operated, and the condition was the same condition under which all real things operated, which was imperfection, which was the starting point, which was the only honest place to begin.

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Bergie did not go outside for the first two weeks of summer. The two weeks were not a decision. The two weeks were a decompression, the body and the mind releasing the daily tax that the school year had

assessed, the tax paid in hallway encounters and locker visits and cafeteria brackets and bathroom surveillance and the twenty-three-minute detour home, the tax accumulating over nine months and requiring, now that the assessor was on summer recess, a period of non-payment during which the body could recover the resources the tax had consumed.

He built the model B-17. Not the cracked one. A new one. The new one was larger and more detailed and required a precision of assembly that Bergie welcomed the way Ares welcomed the military-neat bed, as a space where order was absolute and the order was his. The model took eleven days. The eleven days were the first eleven days he could remember since Northside in which the primary activity of his hands was building rather than protecting, the hands assembling rather than shielding, and the assembling was the recovery, and the recovery was the two weeks, and the two weeks ended when Bergie's mother knocked on his door and said "it's summer" in the voice of a woman who had watched her son decompress for fourteen days and who had decided that fourteen days was sufficient and that the fifteenth day would be the day when the decompression ended and the world resumed.

Mrs. Bergman had not spoken the sentence. The sentence was still forming. The phone book was still in the drawer. The hope was still in the account, reduced but present, the balance held through the summer the way a savings account holds a balance through a period of non-deposit, the interest accruing slowly, the balance not growing but not yet at zero.

She had, however, made a decision. The decision was not the sentence. The decision was the precondition for the sentence, the structural preparation that the sentence required before it could be spoken, the way a foundation must be poured before a wall can be built. The decision was: if the fall is the same as the spring, she would speak the sentence. The decision was conditional, the condition being the fall. The fall had not yet arrived, and the summer stood between Mrs. Bergman and the condition, and the summer was the space in which the decision lived, unexecuted, waiting.

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Stan spent the summer on Briar Lane. Not every day. Not officially. But the gravity had completed its work, the orbit had stabilized, and the stable orbit was Mike's house, Mike's cooler, Mike's vodka, Mike's car, the rusted Impala that went to the lake and the parties and the places where the substances were and where the people who consumed the substances gathered. Stan's father's house on Elm was the address. Mike's house on Briar Lane was the location. The distinction between address and location was the distinction between where Stan received mail and where Stan received his education, and the education was Mike's curriculum, and the curriculum was the bottle and the flask and the darkroom and the red light and the confidence that consequences were for other people.

The first drink of the day was now noon. The noon drink was not the cherry vodka. The cherry vodka was a school-year substance, a substance calibrated to the detection thresholds of teachers and administrators. The summer drink was beer, uncamouflaged, undisguised, consumed in the open on the hood of Mike's car at the lake or in Mike's backyard or on Mike's porch while Milton Redson yelled at the television inside and the yelling was the weather and the weather was permanent. Stan drank the

noon beer and the afternoon beer and the evening beer and the difference between the noon beer and the evening beer was the number of beers between them, and the number was increasing, and the increase was the trajectory, and the trajectory was the line that Stan was on and could not see because seeing it required a vantage point outside the line, and Stan was inside the line, and the inside did not have windows.

When he arrived at sophomore year in September, he would be changed. The change would be visible to Julie, who would see it in his face and his posture and the particular quality of his voice on the telephone, the quality that she had diagnosed as distance and that was now something worse than distance, something that had no word in Julie's vocabulary because Julie's vocabulary was calibrated to the detection of problems, not the measurement of deterioration, and the deterioration was a different instrument, and Julie was not yet in possession of that instrument.

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Keithe did not come home from the lake. Not literally. Keithe came home from the lake in August with the box of shells and the green beach glass and the whelk shell that Sandy had given him for remembering, and his body returned to the house on Cedar and his body walked through the door and his body occupied the rooms of the house and the hallways of the school and the athletic corridor where his body belonged because his body was an athlete's body and the athlete's body had a territory. But the Keithe who had sat on the driftwood with a girl who swam butterfly and backstroke and who signed her letters with swimming references was a Keithe who was now divided, the body in one place and the attention in another, the attention at the lake, the attention in the letters that arrived every two weeks in envelopes that he opened carefully and read three times and kept in a box under his bed that was not a shoebox and did not contain the things Mike's shoebox contained but contained instead the paper evidence of a connection that Keithe did not have a word for and that did not require a word because the connection was in the body, in the cellular recognition that had occurred on the driftwood, and the cellular things do not require language, the cellular things are their own language.

Sandy's most recent letter was signed "Still swimming." The signature was the signal. The signal was: I am still here, I am still in the water, the water is the medium through which my feeling for you travels. Keithe read the signal and felt the thing the signal transmitted and put the letter in the box and the box under the bed and the bed held him and the night held the bed and somewhere at the lake, which was not a lake but Lake Michigan, which was not a lake but an inland sea, Sandy was swimming, and the swimming was the connection, and the connection was the thing that would produce, in Episode Three, a pregnancy, and the pregnancy would change everything, but the everything was in the future, and the future was a foreign language, and Keithe was still learning the alphabet.

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Puck was in the heating ducts on the last night of summer. The ducts were warm from the August heat, warmer than they were during the school year when the furnace controlled the temperature, the summer ducts heated by the house itself, by the sun on the roof and the trapped air in the attic and the rising

warmth of a structure that had been absorbing daylight for sixteen hours and that was now releasing it slowly, the way a body releases heat, the way a body releases information, gradually, through the surfaces, through the walls.

The headaches had stabilized. This was the word Dr. Stannard used, "stabilized," and the word meant that the mass was not growing and was not shrinking, the mass in a state of equilibrium that the treatment had produced, the treatment being the radiation that Puck received every two weeks at the hospital on the east side of town, the hospital whose name Puck had memorized and whose corridors Puck had mapped the way he mapped the heating ducts, with the surveyor's attention to dimension and route, the corridors leading to the room with the machine that pointed at his neck and delivered its energy to the mass and the mass received the energy and the mass stabilized, and the stabilizing was the best news, which is a category of good news that is specific to cancer, the category that says: the thing inside you has not gotten worse, and the not-getting-worse is the victory, and the victory is a smaller victory than you wanted but a larger victory than you feared.

The family had not processed what the diagnosis meant. The family had processed the word. The family had processed the appointments and the treatment schedule and the insurance forms that Linda managed from the drawer with the efficiency of a woman whose drawer had become a second office. But the meaning, the deeper meaning, the meaning that included the hereditary component and the grandfather who had died and the other children who might carry the cellular error and the future that the word "cancer" converted from an open field into a bounded one, the meaning that required not logistics but grief, the family had not processed that meaning because the family's processing system was Linda's list, and the list was for tasks, and grief is not a task, grief is a condition, and conditions are not on the list.

Puck lay in the duct above the kitchen and listened to the house on the last night of summer. The house was full. Every room was occupied.

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Julie was in her room, on her bed, with a textbook she did not need to read because the textbook was from last year and the reading was a habit and the habit was the structure and the structure was the thing Julie maintained the way Linda maintained the list. She had changed her perfume. The change had occurred in July, at the drugstore, a quiet transaction, one bottle replaced by another, the new perfume not morning dew on roses but something sharper, something that smelled like citrus and intention, and the intention was the message, and the message was: I am not the girl who wore that perfume, I am the girl who wears this perfume, and the difference is the summer, and the summer is the space in which I have decided to be a different version of myself, and the different version does not wait for boys on porches or make excuses for the smell of beer on telephone receivers.

Albert was home. Albert was in the living room, in the chair, reading an aviation magazine with the concentration of a man who was reading about the thing he did as a way of not doing the thing he was, which was being home, which was the thing Albert did least well, because home was a system that required participation, and participation required presence, and presence required the willingness to be

in a room without planning the route out of it, and Albert's willingness was a flight plan, always pointed at the departure, the magazine the holding pattern he flew while waiting for clearance.

Mom was in the kitchen. Mom was making a list. The list was in the drawer, the drawer that Ares did not know about, the drawer that contained the doctor's appointments and the insurance forms and the phone numbers and the information that Linda managed because Linda managed everything, because managing everything was the alternative to managing nothing, and managing nothing was not available to a woman whose son had cancer and whose husband was a holding pattern and whose daughter had changed her perfume and whose youngest was becoming a writer and whose household was a building whose foundation she had been reinforcing since the day she married a man who abandoned airplanes.

Ares was in his room, at his desk, with the notebook open and the pencil sharp and the bed military-neat and the pile of football equipment still on the floor, the pile now nine months old, the pile now furniture, the pile now permanent. He was writing. He was writing something that was not an article and not an assignment and not a response to Canterbilly's red pen but something else, something private, something that existed between the hand and the page in the solitude that the writing required, the solitude that Canterbilly's clock required, the absence of an audience, the space where a person can hear the sentence before writing it and write it before judging it.

The house held them. The house on Edgewood with its four bedrooms and its kitchen and its heating ducts and its porch and its screen door that screeched and its stairs that creaked on the fourth step and its faucet that required faith and its refrigerator that hummed and its clock on the kitchen wall, the clock from Sears, the battery-operated clock with the white face and the black numbers and the second hand that jumped in discrete plastic clicks, one click per second, each click identical, each click marking the passage of a second that contained the household and the household's occupants and the household's information, the information distributed through the rooms and the walls and the ducts, each person holding their portion of the information in their separate room, the portions not shared because the sharing would require a conversation and the conversation would require the family to sit at the kitchen table and look at each other and say the things they were carrying, and the saying would change the carrying, and the changing was the thing they were not ready for.

The kitchen clock ticked. The tick was the same tick it had been in November when Puck and Linda sat at the table with the beer and the list and the silence. The tick was the same tick it had been every second of every day since the battery was installed. The tick was correct. The tick was indifferent. The tick did not know that the summer was ending or that the fall was coming or that the fall would bring Episode One and the wire and the television cameras and the audience that would watch eight episodes of the thing the Taler household had been living without cameras, without episodes, without the structure of a narrative that told the audience when to feel and what to feel and when the feeling was over.

The feeling was not over. The feeling was the house, and the house was the feeling. And the kitchen clock ticked, and the summer ended, and the last night gave way to the first morning, and the

first morning was September, and September was sophomore year, and sophomore year was the year that everything happened, and everything had not yet happened, and the not-yet was the tick, and the tick was the second hand, and the second hand jumped, and the jump was the next second, and the next second was the fall.

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End of Part Two: Fall

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Part Three: The Eve

Chapter 18: Keithe Changes

But the last night of summer was an ending, and endings are built from earlier endings, and the earlier endings are the ones that matter because the earlier endings are the ones the last night carries. What follows is not the summer. What follows is the spring that the summer was made from, and the spring's losses happened in order, and the order matters, and the order begins in March.

The phone calls stopped being answered in March. Not all at once. Not the way a faucet stops, with a turn and a silence. The stopping was gradual, the way a radio station fades when you drive out of its range, the signal still there but the signal weakening, the voice still speaking but the voice losing its clarity, the words becoming shapes, the shapes becoming static, the static becoming silence, and the silence arriving so slowly that you cannot identify the moment when the voice stopped and the silence started because the two overlapped for so long that the overlap became the signal, and the signal was: this is ending.

Ares called Keithe on a Tuesday in March and the phone rang six times. Six rings was the threshold at which the Keithe household's answering etiquette transitioned from "someone will get it" to "nobody is getting it," and Ares knew the threshold because he had been calling this number since he was twelve and the threshold had been six rings for two years, the household's collective agreement about the number of rings that constituted a reasonable expectation of effort, and the agreement had held through two years of Ares calling to confirm practice times and walk-home routes and Slurpee runs and the thousand small coordinates that a friendship between two boys generates when the friendship is operating at full capacity.

Keithe's mother answered on the seventh ring, which was past the threshold, which meant the answering was a rescue rather than a response, the phone picked up by a woman who was performing an act of salvage on a social obligation that the household had collectively decided to let drown. "He's not here," she said, with the tone of a woman who was telling the truth in the factual sense and something other than the truth in the complete sense, because "not here" could mean "not in the house" or "not available" or "not willing to come to the phone," and the three meanings occupied different positions on the spectrum of absence, and Keithe's mother's tone did not specify which position, and the non-specification was its own information.

Ares called again on Thursday. The phone rang eight times. Nobody answered. He called on Saturday. Keithe answered. The answer was the voice, the same voice, the same Keithe, the same vocal signature that Ares had been hearing since the first day of seventh-grade football when Keithe had said "you're fast" from seven yards behind the line and the two words had been the beginning of everything, the compass finding north, the orientation establishing itself in a single observation that was simultaneously an assessment and an invitation. The voice was the same. The voice was also different. The difference was in the space between the words, the rhythm of the conversation, the timing that had been precise and calibrated and that was now slightly off, the way a clock is slightly off when its

battery is weakening, still running, still marking time, but the time it is marking is no longer synchronized with the time the rest of the world is keeping.

"Hey," Keithe said.

"Hey."

"What's up."

"Nothing. Calling."

"Cool."

The "cool" was the problem. The "cool" was a word that occupied the space where a sentence used to be, the space where Keithe would have said "come over" or "let's throw" or "QuikTrip, twenty minutes" or any of the other coordinates that the friendship had generated when the friendship was generating coordinates. "Cool" was not a coordinate. "Cool" was a period at the end of a sentence that Ares had not finished, the conversational equivalent of a door closing while the other person is still talking, and the closing was not hostile, the closing was just the closing, and the just-the-closing was worse than hostile because hostile would have meant Keithe was still engaged, still caring enough to fight, and "cool" meant Keithe was not fighting, Keithe was not engaged, Keithe was on the other side of the door and the door was closed and the closed door was not locked, the closed door could be opened, but the opening would require Ares to perform the act of opening it, and the act of opening a door that someone else has closed is an act that requires a reason, and Ares' reason was the friendship, and the friendship was the thing that was fading, and the fading was the reason the door was closed.

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The change had a chronology. Ares reconstructed it the way he reconstructed the hallway's power geography and the journalism room's production schedule and the Taler household's emotional economy: by reading the positioning, by tracking the movements, by noting the moments when the pattern deviated from the established pattern and cataloging the deviations in the internal ledger that Ares maintained for everyone he cared about, the ledger that recorded not what people said but what people did, because what people did was the data and what people said was the interpretation, and the data was more reliable than the interpretation.

The chronology began in September, when Keithe entered the athletic corridor and Ares entered the journalism room and the two entrances were simultaneously an entrance and a departure, each boy walking into the room where his future was and walking out of the room where their shared past had been. The hand-lift in the hallway. The one-second gesture. The compass engaging and disengaging in the same moment.

The chronology continued through the fall, the monthly phone calls replacing the daily phone calls, the monthly calls shorter than the daily calls, the content thinner, the conversations about nothing but the nothing no longer producing the something that conversations about nothing are supposed to produce, which is the presence of the other person, the sound of the other person's voice filling the space with the evidence that they are there, that they are on the other end of the wire, that the wire

between you is still carrying signal. The signal was weakening and the static was growing. The overlap was the fall.

The chronology included the shoulder. This was the detail that Ares returned to because the detail was the evidence, the piece of data that the ledger flagged as significant. Keithe had slapped Puck on the shoulder. This had happened at the Taler house on a Sunday in October, one of the last Sundays that Keithe had visited, a visit that had the quality of an obligation being fulfilled rather than an impulse being followed, Keithe arriving at the front door with the body language of a person checking a box on a list he had not written. The slap was in the kitchen. Puck was getting a beer from the refrigerator. Keithe passed behind him and slapped his shoulder, the slap a greeting, the greeting the kind of physical punctuation that athletes exchange as a substitute for language, the body's shorthand for "I see you, I acknowledge you, we exist in the same space." The slap was normal. The slap was the vocabulary of Keithe's body.

What was not normal was that Puck slapped back.

Puck did not slap people. Puck existed in the heating ducts and in his room and in the kitchen and in the car that drove him to the hospital and in the hospital corridor that he had mapped with the surveyor's precision, and in none of these spaces did Puck's body initiate physical contact with other people's bodies, because Puck's body was occupied territory, the mass in his neck the occupier, and occupied territory does not reach out, occupied territory conserves, occupied territory protects its borders. But Puck slapped Keithe's shoulder. Slapped it hard. Harder than the greeting warranted, harder than the vocabulary required, the slap carrying a force that was not the force of greeting but the force of finding, the force of a hand that had discovered something hard inside the person it was slapping, something that was not there before, something that the hand needed to make contact with to confirm.

Puck had found something hard inside Keithe. The hardness was not physical. The hardness was the thing that the lake and the letters and Sandy's swimming and the divided attention had produced, the calcification of a boy who had spent the summer being pulled in a direction that the boy he used to be would not have recognized, and the pulling had produced resistance, and the resistance had produced hardness, and the hardness was what Puck's hand found, and Puck's hand told Ares, not through words but through the force of the slap, that Keithe had changed, and the change was structural, and the structure was hard.

Ares described this to Crew on a walk to the house on Sycamore in November, the walk that had replaced the walk to QuikTrip with Keithe, the new route substituted for the old route the way new habits replace old habits, not through a decision but through a drift, and the drift was the friendship with Crew filling the space that the friendship with Keithe had vacated, not replacing it because replacing implies equivalence and the two friendships were not equivalent, the two friendships were different instruments playing in different keys, but the space was the same space and the space required filling and Crew filled it.

"People who spend too much time with themselves," Ares said, walking, his hands in his pockets, his voice doing the thing his voice did when he was thinking out loud, which was to slow down, the words arriving at intervals that were longer than conversational but shorter than written, the spoken equivalent of a first draft, the sentences forming in real time and being delivered without revision, "either change or hide or retreat behind booze, drugs, and relationships."

Crew walked beside him. Crew did not interrupt. Crew's gift in these moments was the gift of not interrupting, which was a gift that most people do not recognize as a gift because most people regard silence as an absence, and Crew's silence was not an absence, Crew's silence was a container, a space into which Ares could put the sentences he was forming without the sentences being deflected or redirected or met with the competitive energy that most conversations between fifteen-year-old boys generate.

"Keithe is retreating," Ares said. "Into a relationship. The girl at the lake. He's gone there. He's in the letters. He's in whatever the letters contain. And the letters are pulling him out of everything else, and the everything else includes me, and the including-me is the thing I'm trying to understand, because the including-me shouldn't hurt, because I left first, I left the football, I left the field, I left the arm on the shoulder, I left before he left, and the leaving-first should make the being-left easier, and it doesn't."

"Because leaving and being left are not the same operation," Crew said. "Leaving is a choice. Being left is a condition. You made a choice. Keithe is imposing a condition. The choice and the condition look the same from the outside, but from the inside the choice has a handle and the condition doesn't."

Ares looked at Crew. Crew was wearing the green shirt without the overalls because the overalls were in the closet, and the green shirt without the overalls made Crew look like a different person, a person who had settled into the building and the town and the flatness and who no longer needed the collision, who had found the thing the collision was supposed to produce, which was the friendship, which was Ares, which was the sentences fitting inside the sentences.

"The condition doesn't have a handle," Ares repeated.

"The condition doesn't have a handle. You can't grab it. You can't turn it. You can't open the door from the inside because there's no handle on the inside. The handle is on Keithe's side. Keithe has to open the door."

"Keithe is not going to open the door."

"No."

"The door is closed."

"The door is closed."

They walked. The walk continued in silence. The silence was Crew's container and Ares' processing and the two operating simultaneously, the container holding the processing, the processing filling the container, the walk moving their bodies through the town while their attention moved through the information, and the information was: the door was closed, and the closing was permanent,

and the permanent was the loss, and the loss was a thing that Ares would carry through the spring and the summer and into the fall, the fall of sophomore year, when Keithe would be in the athletic corridor and Ares would be in the journalism room and the two corridors would be in the same building and the building would hold them both and the building would not know that the two boys inside it had been, for two years, a compass and its north, and the compass had lost its north, and the compass was recalibrating, and the recalibration was the friendship with Crew, and the recalibration was necessary but the recalibration was not a replacement, because you cannot replace a north, you can only find a different direction.

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The last real conversation happened on a curb. The curb was on Maple Street, between the post office and the vacant lot where someone had started building a house in 1978 and had stopped building a house in 1979, the foundation poured and the frame erected and the frame left standing without walls or a roof, the skeleton of a house that had been abandoned by whoever had started it, and the skeleton stood in the vacant lot the way all skeletons stand, as evidence of something that was supposed to be finished and was not.

Ares did not plan the conversation. The conversation happened because Ares was walking home from Crew's house and Keithe was walking home from the gym and the two routes intersected at Maple Street, the intersection accidental, the accident the only mechanism through which the two of them could currently occupy the same space, because the deliberate mechanisms (the phone calls, the visits, the coordinates) had all stopped functioning.

"Hey," Keithe said.

"Hey."

They sat on the curb. The sitting was automatic, the spatial logic of two bodies that had spent two years finding proximity to each other, the bodies defaulting to the familiar configuration even though the familiar configuration no longer contained the familiar content. They sat on the curb the way two people sit in a waiting room, adjacent but not together, the adjacency a function of the available seating rather than the available intimacy.

Keithe talked about nothing. The nothing was the content. The nothing was: the weather had been warm, the gym had new equipment, his father had painted the garage, the dog next door had puppies. The nothing was the series of observations that a person produces when the person is filling a silence that the person does not know how to fill with something, and the something that the silence required was the thing neither of them could say, which was: we are not friends anymore, we are two boys on a curb who used to be friends, and the used-to-be is the thing in the silence, and the thing in the silence is too large for the curb and too large for the nothing and too large for the weather and the gym and the garage and the puppies.

Ares talked about nothing too. He talked about the newspaper and about a movie he had seen and about a teacher who assigned too much homework. He did not talk about the writing or the notebook or

the sentences he was forming at his desk every night after the pencil sharpener ran. He did not talk about the articles or the Crusader or Doublewe's missed wastebasket. He did not talk about these things because these things were the writing and the writing was the reason the door was closed and the reason the door was closed was the reason they were on the curb and the curb was the space between the door and the walking away, the threshold on which two people stand when one of them has walked through the door and the other has not and both of them know it and neither of them says it.

The conversation lasted twelve minutes. Ares knew it was twelve minutes because the post office clock was visible from the curb, the clock mounted above the entrance, a round clock with a white face and black numbers, not a Sears clock and not a Swiss clock but a government clock, a federal clock, a clock whose function was to tell the citizens of Westborough what time the federal government believed it was, and the federal government believed it was 4:47 when the conversation started and 4:59 when the conversation ended, and the twelve minutes between the two times were the last twelve minutes of a friendship that had started with "you're fast" on a football field and was ending with "my dad painted the garage" on a curb.

Keithe stood up. Ares stood up. They did not hug. They did not shake hands. They did not perform any of the physical rituals that mark the end of a thing that has been important, because the importance was the thing they could not name, and the not-naming meant the ending had no ceremony, the ending was two boys standing up from a curb and walking in different directions, Keithe toward Cedar and Ares toward Edgewood, the two directions diverging from the intersection at Maple Street the way two lines diverge from a common point, each line extending into its own distance, the distance increasing with each step, the increasing irreversible, the irreversible the fact that neither of them turned around.

The skeleton of the unfinished house stood in the vacant lot. The frame had no walls. The foundation had no floor. The structure was visible from every direction because the structure had no surfaces to hide behind, and the visibility was the condition of all unfinished things, the condition of being seen without being complete, and the incomplete thing stood on Maple Street the way the friendship stood in Ares' memory: the foundation poured, the frame erected, the walls never built, the roof never placed, the structure abandoned by whoever had started it, and the abandonment was mutual, and the mutuality was the only honest thing about it.

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Chapter 19: Mrs. Bergman Speaks

The sentence had been forming for two years. Two years is the time it takes for a wave to assemble from the accumulated energy of many smaller movements, each movement invisible, each movement contributing to the mass of water that will eventually have no choice but to rise, and the wave was the sentence, and the sentence was in Mrs. Bergman's mouth, and Mrs. Bergman's mouth had been holding it the way a person holds a breath before speaking, the holding deliberate, the holding a decision to keep the air inside until the air has no choice but to be released.

The sentence arrived on a Sunday evening in April, in the kitchen, at the table where Mrs. Bergman served dinner every evening at 6:15, the time an artifact of Mr. Bergman's factory schedule, Mr. Bergman having worked the day shift at the Westborough Assembly Plant for fourteen years until the plant closed in 1979 and the day shift ended and Mr. Bergman's schedule ended and Mr. Bergman himself ended, not through death but through departure, the departure occurring six months after the plant closure with the mechanical inevitability of a system shutting down in sequence, the job first, then the routine, then the marriage, then the man, each system failing in the order that the previous failure had made inevitable. The 6:15 remained. The 6:15 survived the departure the way the kitchen clock survived the diagnosis in the Taler household, by continuing to perform its function regardless of what the function now contained, and the function now contained Mrs. Bergman and Bergie at a table set for two with plates that had been purchased for four and that were now excessive by half, the excess visible every evening as two empty place settings that Mrs. Bergman did not set because setting them would have been a gesture, and Mrs. Bergman was not a woman who made gestures, Mrs. Bergman was a woman who made decisions, and the decision had been to stop setting the two extra places on the day Mr. Bergman's car pulled out of the driveway and did not return.

Bergie was eating. The food was meatloaf, which was Sunday's food, the weekly menu a rotation that Mrs. Bergman maintained with the consistency of a person who understood that consistency was the only defense against the entropy that the departure had introduced into the household, the entropy managed through the rotation (meatloaf Sunday, chicken Monday, pasta Tuesday, casserole Wednesday, fish Thursday, leftovers Friday, soup Saturday), each day's food a small anchor, each anchor holding the week in place against the current that was always trying to carry the household toward the disorganization that the departure had made possible.

Bergie's face had a bruise. The bruise was on the left side of his jaw, below the ear, in the soft territory between the jawbone and the neck, and the bruise was purple with a yellow margin, the yellow indicating that the bruise was approximately three days old, because bruises age on a timeline that Mrs. Bergman had learned to read the way a geologist reads sedimentary layers, each color a date, each date a depth, the purple the surface and the yellow the recession and the recession meaning Friday, meaning school, meaning the hallway or the locker or the cafeteria or the bathroom or the walk home, the specific location irrelevant because the location had stopped mattering, the location was wherever Mike

Redson's system decided to assess the tax, and the tax was assessed everywhere, and everywhere was the problem.

Mrs. Bergman had not asked about the bruise. She had not asked about the bruise because asking about the bruise would have produced an answer, and the answer would have been a lie, because Bergie's answers about the bruises were always lies (I fell, I ran into the door, I tripped on the stairs, I wasn't paying attention), and the lies were the agreement, the unspoken contract between a mother and a son in which the mother asks and the son lies and the mother accepts the lie and the acceptance is the management and the management is the system and the system has been operating since Northside and the system is broken.

She knew the system was broken. She had known since the first torn shirt. She had known since the file in the drawer had grown from a single entry to seventeen entries, each entry a date and a description and a damage category, the file the documentary record of a system that was not protecting her son and that her participation in (through the asking and the accepting) was enabling, because the asking-and-accepting cycle produced the appearance of awareness without the substance of action, and the appearance was the thing that allowed the cycle to continue, and the continuation was the broken system, and the broken system was the thing she was about to break further by speaking the sentence.

The sentence was not planned for tonight. The sentence had no scheduled delivery date. The sentence was in the category of things that arrive when the conditions for their arrival are met, and the conditions were met tonight because the bruise was on Bergie's jaw and the bruise was three days old and the three-day-old bruise meant that Bergie had come home on Friday with a bruise on his jaw and had spent Saturday and Sunday in the house with the bruise on his jaw and Mrs. Bergman had seen the bruise on Friday evening and on Saturday morning and on Saturday afternoon and on Saturday evening and on Sunday morning and on Sunday afternoon, and each seeing was a smaller movement, and the smaller movements were accumulating, and the accumulation was the wave, and the wave had no choice but to rise.

"Bergie."

He looked up from the meatloaf. The looking up was the arrival posture translated into the dinner table, the face angled to present the side without the bruise, the body's automatic concealment protocol operating even at the table where the concealment was impossible because the table was four feet wide and Mrs. Bergman was directly across it and the bruise was visible from every angle except the angle Bergie was trying to present, and the trying was the habit, and the habit was the system, and the system was the thing she was about to address.

"I need to say something to you."

The preamble was the warning. The preamble communicated that what followed was not a question and not a request but a statement, and the statement was the kind of statement that a parent makes when the parent has arrived at the end of the available strategies and the arrival has produced not a new strategy but a sentence, a single sentence that the parent believes contains the answer and that the parent delivers with the authority of a person who has exhausted every other option and who is now

spending the last currency in the account.

Bergie put down his fork. The putting down was not casual. The putting down was the body's preparation for the receiving of something heavy, the body organizing itself the way Linda Taler's body organized itself in the waiting room at Dr. Stannard's office, the bracing, the structural preparation, the body's understanding that what is coming requires the body to be ready.

"Don't take it anymore."

Four words. The sentence was four words. The sentence that had been forming for two years, that had assembled from the accumulated energy of seventeen file entries and two school phone calls and one phone book opened and closed and a hundred Friday arrivals observed through the kitchen window, the sentence that was the wave and the wave that was the sentence, was four words, and the four words entered the kitchen at 6:23 on a Sunday evening in April and landed on the table between the meatloaf and the milk and Bergie's fork and Mrs. Bergman's hands, which were on the table, flat, the gesture that Canterbilly used to precede non-negotiable statements, except that Mrs. Bergman's hands were not Canterbilly's hands and Mrs. Bergman's authority was not pedagogical but maternal, and the maternal authority was older and deeper and more dangerous because the maternal authority was not backed by a red pen or a donut box but by the full weight of a woman who had been watching her son's body acquire bruises for two years and who had arrived at the end of the watching.

Mrs. Bergman meant: stand up. Mrs. Bergman meant: speak out. Mrs. Bergman meant: walk into the principal's office and tell Dr. Weiss what is happening to you in the hallway and at the locker and in the cafeteria and in the bathroom and on the walk home. Mrs. Bergman meant: tell a teacher. Mrs. Bergman meant: refuse to be diminished. Mrs. Bergman meant: the system that has been breaking you is a system that requires your participation, because the system requires a target who accepts being targeted, and the acceptance is the thing I am telling you to stop, and the stopping is the standing up, and the standing up is the refusal.

Mrs. Bergman meant all of these things. Mrs. Bergman's four words contained all of these meanings the way a seed contains a tree, the meanings compressed into the four words, the four words containing the full history of the file and the phone calls and the window and the bruises and the two years and the Northside hallway and the Westborough hallway and the three boys and the boot on the backpack and the bracket in the cafeteria and the third-person grammar in the bathroom, and the meanings were clear to Mrs. Bergman because the meanings were her meanings, the meanings she had composed and compressed and delivered, and the delivery was the release, and the release was the hope being spent, and the spending was the act, and the act was done.

Bergie heard: whatever it takes.

Bergie heard: the adults have given up.

Bergie heard: I have called the school and the school did nothing. I have called the guidance counselor and the guidance counselor said "look into it" and looked into nothing. I have called the vice principal and the vice principal said "boys will be boys" and the boys continued to be the boys they were, which were boys who put boots on backpacks and brackets around lunch tables and grammar

around bathroom stalls. I have called everyone I can call and nobody has done the thing I called them to do, and the not-doing is the system, and the system is the institution, and the institution is the building, and the building is the place where you go every day and come home with bruises, and I cannot fix the building and I cannot fix the institution and I cannot fix the system, and the cannot is the reason I am saying this to you, because the cannot means the fixing is now yours, and the yours means whatever you decide it means, and the whatever is the permission.

The gap between Mrs. Bergman's intention and Bergie's interpretation was the width of the kitchen table. Four feet. The four feet contained the meatloaf and the milk and the fork and the two plates from a set purchased for four and the bruise on the jaw and the file in the drawer and the two years and the hope that was now spent, and the four feet were the distance between "stand up and tell a teacher" and "whatever it takes," and the distance was the space where the gun lived.

The gun did not exist yet. The gun was in the future. The gun was in the closet of Bergie's uncle's house in Dayton, Ohio, a .22 caliber revolver that Bergie had seen at a family gathering two years ago and that had registered in Bergie's internal architecture the way all objects register in Bergie's internal architecture, as a measurement: the weight (1.2 pounds), the size (approximately 9 inches), the color (dark gray, almost black), the location (top shelf, behind the shoe boxes, left side of the closet). The measurement was filed. The measurement was stored. The measurement was not connected to the sentence, not tonight, not consciously, the connection a thing that would form later, in the space between April and Episode Four, in the space where Bergie's interpretation would grow into a plan and the plan would grow into a drive to Dayton and the drive would grow into the closet and the closet would grow into the gun and the gun would grow into the thing that happened in Episode Four, and the thing that happened was the thing that the gap produced, the thing that lived in the four feet between a mother's intention and a son's interpretation.

But tonight the gun was in Dayton and the sentence was in the kitchen and Bergie was looking at his mother and his mother was looking at him and the looking was the moment between the sentence and the response, the moment when the sentence has been spoken and has not yet been answered, the moment when both people in the conversation are holding the sentence between them the way two people hold opposite ends of a rope, and the rope is taut, and the tautness is the tension, and the tension is the question: what does the sentence mean?

"Okay," Bergie said.

The "okay" was the response. The "okay" was the word that Bergie used the way Keithe used "cool," as a word that occupied the space where a longer answer should have been, a word that communicated acceptance without specifying the terms of the acceptance, and the non-specification was the gap, because "okay" to Mrs. Bergman meant "I will stand up and tell a teacher" and "okay" to Bergie meant "I understand that the adults have given up and the whatever-it-takes is mine," and the two "okays" were the same word carrying different loads, the same container holding different contents, and neither of them opened the container to verify that the contents matched, because opening the container would have required Mrs. Bergman to ask "what do you plan to do" and would have

required Bergie to answer, and the answer, tonight, was not the gun, the answer tonight was "I don't know," and "I don't know" was the honest answer, and the honest answer was the space where the plan would form, and the plan had not yet formed, and the not-yet was the mercy of tonight.

Mrs. Bergman did not ask. Her failure to ask was its own kind of permission. Not the permission to acquire a gun. Not the permission to bring a gun to school. Not the permission to do any of the things that the gap would eventually produce. The failure to ask was the permission to interpret the sentence without correction, the permission to carry the interpretation out of the kitchen and up the stairs and into the bedroom where the model B-17 sat on the shelf with its cracked wing, the crack that gave it character, and the character was the thing that Bergie understood about damage, which was that damage did not destroy, damage distinguished, damage was the thing that made the B-17 his B-17 and not a B-17 from a box, and the understanding was the interpretation, and the interpretation was the plan's soil, the medium in which the plan would grow when the plan was ready to grow.

Bergie went upstairs. He closed his door. He sat on his bed and looked at the B-17 on the shelf and the B-17 looked back with its cracked wing and its miniature turrets and its four propellers frozen in the position of a machine that would never fly but that represented, on the shelf, the idea of flight, the idea that a machine could carry a person above the ground and away from the ground and the ground's inhabitants, and the idea was the oldest idea Bergie had, the idea of being above, of being away, of being in a space where the tax could not be assessed because the space was unreachable, and the unreachable was the B-17, and the B-17 was on the shelf, and the shelf was in the room, and the room was the space where Bergie sat with his mother's sentence and his interpretation of his mother's sentence and the gap between the two, the gap that was four feet wide and getting wider.

The kitchen clock ticked downstairs. Mrs. Bergman cleared the table. The meatloaf was put away and the plates were washed. The routine was performed. The performance of the routine was the thing Mrs. Bergman did after spending the hope, because the hope was spent and the routine remained and the routine was the structure and the structure was the thing that held the household together and the holding was automatic and the automatic was the only thing left, because the hope was gone and the sentence was spoken and the sentence was in Bergie's room now, in Bergie's interpretation, in the space that Mrs. Bergman could not reach because reaching it would have required asking and the asking had not occurred and the not-asking was the failure and the failure was the permission and the permission was the gap and the gap was the gun.

But the gun was in Dayton. And tonight was April. And the fall was five months away. And the five months were the space between the sentence and the consequence, the space where the plan would form or not form, the space where a different question asked at the kitchen table might have produced a different answer, and the different answer might have produced a different fall, and the different fall might not have included Episode Four, and Episode Four might not have included the gun, and the gun might have stayed in the closet in Dayton behind the shoe boxes on the top shelf on the left side, a .22 caliber revolver weighing 1.2 pounds, approximately 9 inches long, dark gray, almost black, measured and filed and stored in Bergie's internal architecture alongside the 64 steps of the Northside hallway and the 23 minutes of the Westborough detour and the 17 entries in his mother's file, the numbers

accumulating, the measurements accumulating, the architecture filling with data, and the data was the map, and the map was the plan, and the plan was forming, and the forming was slow, and the slow was the mercy, and the mercy was running out.

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Chapter 20: The Mousetrap

The mouse's name was Dayrl. Not Daryl. Dayrl. The misspelling was original, inscribed on the tag that was sewn to the mouse's left foot by the manufacturer, a company called Buddy Pals that produced stuffed animals in a factory in some state that Stan had never identified and that had gone out of business before Stan was old enough to care about the provenance of stuffed animals. The tag said "Hi, I'm Dayrl!" with an exclamation point that communicated the enthusiasm of a product that believed naming itself was an achievement, and the misspelling was either a manufacturing error or a deliberate eccentricity, and Stan had decided at age six that the misspelling was deliberate, because a mouse named Daryl was an ordinary mouse and a mouse named Dayrl was a mouse that had been named by someone who did not follow the rules of spelling, and not following the rules was a form of bravery, and bravery was the quality Stan had assigned to the mouse when the mouse was the most important object in his life.

Dayrl was gray. Dayrl was approximately seven inches long from nose to tail, the tail a cord of yarn that had been, when new, the same gray as the body and that had become, through years of being held and carried and slept with and occasionally chewed on by a boy whose relationship to the mouse was less ownership than partnership, a lighter gray, a weathered gray, the gray of a thing that has been exposed to the elements of a child's love, which are the most corrosive elements available, more corrosive than salt water or acid rain, because a child's love does not protect the object it loves, a child's love uses the object it loves, and the using is the love, and the using is the damage, and the damage is the evidence of the love.

Dayrl's left ear was missing. The missing ear was the story. The missing ear was the reason Dayrl sat in the drawer of Stan's bedroom at his father's house on Elm Street instead of on the shelf or on the bed or in the position of honor that a childhood artifact occupies when the childhood artifact has been preserved rather than survived. Dayrl had survived. The survival had cost the ear. And the ear's cost was the camping trip, and the camping trip was the origin, and the origin was the thing Stan carried inside himself the way Bergie carried the measurements and Puck carried the mass and Ares carried the sentences, as a piece of internal architecture that informed every other piece, the foundation on which the subsequent structure was built.

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The camping trip was the summer Stan was nine. His father's idea. His father's ideas were rare and therefore powerful, the rarity giving each idea the weight of an event, because a man who has one idea a year is a man whose ideas are treated as legislation rather than suggestion, and his father's legislation was: camping, three days, Lake Tippecanoe, father and son, the tent and the sleeping bags and the cooler and the car that smelled like motor oil and the pine tree air freshener. Stan's mother had packed the cooler with sandwiches and fruit and juice boxes and the specific variety of cookies that Stan

preferred, the variety called Fudge Stripes, which were cookies with chocolate stripes on them and which Stan ate in a ritual order (eat the unstriped edge first, then eat the striped center, then eat the remaining chocolate), and the ritual was the first ritual Stan had ever developed, and the ritual was performed with Dayrl on his lap, because Dayrl was present for all rituals, because Dayrl was the witness, and the witnessing was the mouse's function.

The campsite was on the eastern shore of the lake, in a clearing surrounded by trees that were tall enough to block the sky and close enough together to produce, at night, a darkness that was not the darkness of a room with the lights off but the darkness of a space where the lights had never been on, a primordial dark, a dark that preceded electricity and that would persist after electricity and that was, for a nine-year-old boy who had never slept outside a building, the most frightening thing he had ever experienced. The fear was not abstract. The fear was audible. The dark produced sounds that the day had not produced: the cracking of branches under the weight of animals Stan could not see, the calling of birds Stan could not identify, the particular creaking of trees moving in wind that Stan could not feel at ground level but that existed above the canopy, in the upper atmosphere of the forest, where the trees communicated with each other through a language of motion that the ground-dwellers could hear but not understand.

Stan slept with Dayrl. This was the arrangement. This had always been the arrangement. The arrangement was: Stan's arms around the mouse, the mouse's yarn tail curled against Stan's chin, the mouse's body pressed against Stan's chest, and the pressing was the comfort, and the comfort was the function, and the function was: you are not alone in the dark, you have the mouse, and the mouse has you, and the having is mutual, and the mutual having is the thing that makes the dark bearable.

The older boys were at the next campsite. Stan's father had noted them without concern, three boys of approximately fourteen or fifteen, camping without adult supervision, which in 1976 was not unusual, which in 1976 was the expected behavior of boys of that age in that part of Indiana, the unsupervised camping a rite of passage that the culture endorsed as character-building, and the character being built was the character of boys who operated without adults, and the operating-without-adults produced the behavior that operating-without-adults always produces, which is the behavior of people who have been given authority over a space and who exercise the authority with the creativity of people who have not been taught the limits of authority.

The older boys came to Stan's campsite on the second morning. Stan's father was at the lake, fishing. Stan was at the tent, eating Fudge Stripes in the ritual order, Dayrl on his lap. The older boys stood at the edge of the clearing and looked at Stan the way Mike Redson would later look at Bergie, the way predators look at prey, through the assessment of gait and posture and the particular quality of a person's silence that communicates whether the person will resist or will not, and Stan's silence communicated what Stan's silence always communicated, which was the absence of resistance, because Stan was nine and the boys were fourteen and the math was the math.

They took the mouse. The taking was not violent. The taking was comic, performed with the laughter that accompanies cruelty when the cruelty is directed at someone too young to understand that

the laughter is the cruelty, the laughter not a response to humor but a lubricant for the act, the social mechanism by which the act is converted from theft into joke and the joke is shared among the perpetrators and the sharing is the bond, the way Mike's cruelty was shared among Gary and Herb and the sharing was the bond.

The tallest boy held Dayrl above his head. Dayrl hung in the air by his yarn tail, the gray body swinging, the misspelled tag visible on the left foot, "Hi, I'm Dayrl!" the exclamation point performing its enthusiasm for an audience that was not the intended audience, the audience of three older boys who found the exclamation point funny because the exclamation point was earnest and earnestness in a stuffed mouse was, to boys of fourteen, the funniest thing available on a Tuesday morning at a campsite at Lake Tippecanoe.

Stan cried. The crying was immediate and total, the crying of a nine-year-old boy whose most important possession was being held above a stranger's head by its tail, the crying produced not by the taking but by the helplessness, the absolute inability to do anything about the taking, because the taking was performed by a body that was taller and stronger and older and that operated on the other side of a math equation that Stan could not solve. The crying was the response. The crying was the only tool available to a body that had been given no other tools.

The older boys left. They left with Dayrl. They walked back to their campsite carrying the mouse the way you carry a trophy, casually, as evidence of a conquest that was not difficult enough to deserve the word but that was performed anyway because the performing was the point.

Stan's father returned from the lake with two fish and found Stan sitting in the tent crying, and Stan's father's response to the crying was the response of a man who had been taught that crying was a problem to be solved rather than an experience to be had, and the solution was: we'll get it back. The solution was delivered with the confidence of a man who believed that the solution to most problems was the application of adult authority, and the adult authority was applied by walking to the next campsite and asking the older boys to return the mouse, and the asking was performed with the civility of a man who believed that civility was sufficient, and the boys said they didn't have it, and the civility accepted the answer because the civility had no mechanism for not accepting it, and the mechanism for not accepting it would have been confrontation, and Stan's father did not confront, Stan's father accepted, and the accepting was the solution's failure, and the failure was the lesson.

The lesson was: the adults will try and the trying will not be enough.

Stan did not sleep that night. He lay in the sleeping bag in the tent in the dark that preceded electricity and would persist after electricity, and the dark was louder than the previous night because the dark no longer contained Dayrl, and Dayrl's absence was a sound, the sound of a space where a thing should be and is not, and the sound was the loudest sound Stan had ever heard.

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The next morning, the older boys' campsite was empty. They had left in the night or the early morning, their tent gone, their fire pit cold, the campsite containing only the evidence of their having been there:

boot prints, food wrappers, a beer can (which in 1976 at a campsite occupied by fourteen-year-olds was not remarkable), and Dayrl.

Dayrl was in the mud. Dayrl was at the edge of the campsite, near the treeline, half buried in the mud that the previous night's rain had produced, the gray body almost invisible against the gray-brown of the mud, the mouse's camouflage accidental and nearly effective, the half-burial suggesting that Dayrl had been dropped or thrown or discarded, the discarding the final act of a joke that had served its purpose, the mouse no longer useful to boys who had extracted the available entertainment from a nine-year-old's crying and who had moved on to whatever entertainment the next campsite or the next town or the next summer would provide.

Stan found Dayrl at 6:30 in the morning. He found Dayrl because he went to the campsite looking for Dayrl, because looking for Dayrl was the first thing Stan did when the dark released him, the first act of the day, the search conducted without his father's knowledge because the search was private, the search was the thing Stan needed to do without adult authority, because adult authority had tried and adult authority had failed and the lesson was learned and the search was Stan's.

He picked Dayrl up from the mud. The mouse was wet and cold and the gray fur was matted and dark with the mud's stain, the stain permanent, the stain the mark that the night had left on the mouse's body the way the older boys had left their mark on the campsite and on Stan's understanding of the world. The left ear was gone. The left ear had been chewed off, not by the older boys but by whatever animal had found Dayrl in the mud during the night, a cat or a raccoon or whatever small predator had encountered the mouse and had investigated it with its mouth and had determined that the mouse was not food and had left, taking the ear as the only thing the investigation had produced.

Stan held the mouse. He put the mouse in his pocket. He started crying. The crying was different from the previous day's crying. The previous day's crying was the crying of loss, the crying of a thing being taken. This crying was the crying of recovery, the crying of a thing being found, and the crying of recovery is worse than the crying of loss because the crying of recovery includes the damage, the crying of recovery is the crying of a person who has gotten back the thing they lost and who can now see what the loss did to it, the mud and the missing ear and the matted fur and the stain that would not come out, and the seeing is the grief, and the grief is not for the mouse but for the version of the mouse that existed before the taking, the version with two ears and clean fur and a tag that said "Hi, I'm Dayrl!" without the additional information that the tag now carried, which was: I was taken from a boy and left in the mud and something chewed my ear off in the night and the boy found me and cried.

He never went camping again. The never was not a decision. The never was a condition, the same distinction Crew had made about leaving and being left, the same distinction between a choice and a condition: a choice has a handle and a condition does not. Stan's never-camping-again was a condition without a handle. The condition was: if you go to the place where you lost the thing you loved, you might lose another thing you love, and the might is not a probability but a certainty, because the world is a place where the things you love are taken by people who are bigger than you and the adults try to get them back and the trying is not enough and you find them in the mud with their ears chewed off.

The condition was the fear, the fear being the mousetrap. The trap was the love, no longer the camping trip. The love was the thing that made the taking possible, because you cannot lose a thing you do not love, and you cannot be hurt by the loss of a thing you do not love, and the equation was clear: love produces loss, loss produces pain, pain produces fear, fear produces never-again, and never-again is the trap, and the trap is closed, and the thing inside the trap is not the mouse but the boy.

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The summer before sophomore year. July. The lake. Not Lake Tippecanoe. The lake near Westborough, Mike's lake, the lake where the first warm beer had been consumed eleven months ago, the beer that was nothing, the nothing that was the beginning. Stan was on the hood of Mike's car. The Igloo cooler was between them, the beer cold, the afternoon hot. The lake was flat and gray in the summer light, the surface reflecting nothing because the surface was opaque with the particular algae bloom that afflicted Indiana lakes in July, the bloom turning the water from a thing you could see through into a thing you could see, and the thing you could see was green and motionless and did not invite swimming.

Mike was talking. Mike was always talking. Mike's talking was the weather of Mike's presence, constant and inescapable and not addressed to anyone in particular, the talking a broadcast, and today's broadcast was about a party next week and a girl Mike had met and a plan that involved the darkroom and the cherry vodka and the fall and sophomore year and the things that sophomore year would contain, and the things were the things Mike's broadcasts always contained: substances and locations and coordinates that pointed toward the next occasion for the substances.

Stan drank the beer and did not listen to Mike's broadcast and thought about Dayrl.

Dayrl was in the drawer. The drawer was in Stan's bedroom at his father's house on Elm Street. The drawer was the second drawer of the dresser, the drawer that contained: Dayrl, a photograph of Julie taken at the Westborough County Fair in August of last year (Julie's face mid-laugh, the Ferris wheel behind her, the lights of the midway in the background producing a halo effect that the camera had captured accidentally and that Stan had kept intentionally), a cassette tape of songs Stan had recorded from the radio for Julie and had never given her, and a folded piece of paper on which Stan had written "Things I Need To Stop Doing" and had written nothing beneath the heading because the list required a specificity that the vodka had not yet permitted.

The mouse sat in the drawer with the photograph and the tape and the blank list, the four objects a museum of Stan Harrison's interior life, each object a relic of a thing that had been lost or never given or never completed, and the museum was the drawer, and the drawer was closed, and the closed was the condition.

The dream had started in June. The dream was the same every time. The dream was: Stan running through a forest. Not walking, not jogging, running, the full-speed running of a person being chased by something that the dream did not identify because the something was behind him and the behind was the direction Stan's dream-eyes could not see, the dream constructed so that the chasing thing was always outside the frame, always producing the sound of pursuit without the image of the pursuer, and

the sound was branches breaking and leaves crushing and the specific breathing of a body that was larger than Stan's body and faster than Stan's body and that was not getting tired, and the not-getting-tired was the terror, because the forest was finite and Stan's running was finite and the thing behind him was not finite, the thing behind him would run until it caught him or until the forest ended, and the forest always ended at the same place, which was a clearing, and the clearing always contained the same thing, which was a tent, and the tent was always the same tent, which was the tent from Lake Tippecanoe.

Stan reached the tent in the dream. Stan opened the tent in the dream. The tent was empty. The tent was always empty. And the emptiness was the thing that woke him, not the chasing and not the forest and not the breathing behind him but the emptiness of the tent, because the tent was supposed to contain Dayrl and the tent did not contain Dayrl and the not-containing was the loss and the loss was the thing that broke the dream open and let the waking in, and the waking arrived with the sweat and the heart rate and the particular disorientation of a person who has been running in a dream and who finds themselves in a bed that is not moving and in a room that is not a forest and in a body that is not being chased but that carries, in its chest and its throat and its hands, the physical memory of having been chased, and the physical memory does not know it was a dream, and the physical memory does not care.

The dream came every night. The dream came in June and July and August and would come in September and October and November and December and into the next year and the year after that, the dream a permanent resident of Stan's sleep, the dream paying rent in sweat and fear, the dream the nightly tax that Stan's unconscious mind assessed against his conscious mind for the accumulated debt of the things Stan was carrying and not addressing, the Dayrl and the Julie and the beer and the vodka and the cherry and the darkroom and the red light and the empty tent and the missing ear and the mud.

Stan drank the beer. The lake was flat. Mike was talking. The afternoon was hot and the cooler was cold and the beer was the thing between the hot and the cold, the substance that mediated between the two temperatures the way it mediated between the waking and the sleeping, the dream and the drawer, the mouse and the mud. Stan drank and thought about Dayrl and did not tell Mike about Dayrl because Mike was not a person you told about Dayrl, Mike was a person you drank with, and the drinking-with was not the same as the telling-about, and the difference was the friendship, and the friendship was not a friendship, and the not-friendship was the thing Stan could not see because the beer was in the way.

He would tell someone about Dayrl. He would tell Canterbilly. He would sit in the back room of the journalism room in Episode Five, in the chair across from the couch, and he would tell the story of the camping trip and the older boys and the mud and the missing ear and the morning he found Dayrl half buried and the crying that was worse than the first crying because the recovery included the damage, and Canterbilly would listen without a donut in his hand and the clock would tick and the telling would be the first time Stan had told anyone, and the telling would be the beginning of the thing the vodka could not do, which was to fix the mousetrap, which was to open the trap and release the boy, and the releasing would not be the vodka and would not be the lake and would not be Mike, the

releasing would be the telling, and the telling would be the sentence, and the sentence would be: I lost something I loved and I found it in the mud and it was damaged and I kept it and the keeping is the thing I need someone to know.

But that was Episode Five. That was the future. The future was a foreign language. Tonight the beer was cold and the lake was flat and Dayrl was in the drawer and the dream was coming and Stan was on the hood of a car with a person who was not his friend, and the not-friend was talking, and the talking was the weather, and the weather was permanent.

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Chapter 21: Andy in Wisconsin

Wisconsin was a state that smelled like dairy and pine, and Andy Harper was allergic to both.

The dairy allergy was clinical. The dairy allergy had been diagnosed at age four by a pediatrician named Dr. Falk who had a mustache that communicated authority and a clipboard that communicated science and who had told Andy's mother that Andy's relationship to cheese was the relationship of a body to an invader, the immune system treating the proteins in dairy the way a border patrol treats a person without papers: with suspicion, with hostility, and with a thoroughness that produced, in Andy's case, hives on the arms and a swelling of the throat that was not dangerous but was uncomfortable and that made Andy look, for approximately three hours after exposure, like a boy who had been stung by a bee colony that targeted the neck.

The pine allergy was seasonal. The pine allergy arrived in April and departed in September and during its residency produced a nasal condition that Andy's mother described as "the sniffles" and that Andy described as "drowning on land," which was more accurate because the condition was not a sniffle, a sniffle being a small, contained event, a polite negotiation between the nose and the air, and Andy's condition was not polite, Andy's condition was a sustained campaign by his sinuses against the air of the state of Wisconsin, the sinuses objecting to the pine pollen that the state produced in quantities that suggested the trees were not pollinating but retaliating, the trees punishing the humans who lived among them by flooding the air with a substance that turned Andy's nose into a faucet and Andy's eyes into the eyes of a boy who had been crying, which he had not been, but the resemblance was close enough that teachers occasionally asked him if he was okay, and the asking required Andy to explain that he was not sad, he was allergic, and the explanation was performed with the deadpan delivery that was Andy's primary social instrument, the delivery that communicated: I am aware that I look like I am weeping, I am not weeping, the weeping is botanical, please continue with the lesson.

Andy Harper was allergic to the two things Wisconsin was most famous for. This fact, which Andy had identified at age ten and which he presented at the dinner table as evidence that he was living in the wrong state, was the foundation of Andy's understanding of his own position in the world, which was the position of a person who was slightly mismatched with his environment, not dramatically mismatched, not a tropical fish in an arctic tank, but mismatched in the specific, low-grade way of a person whose body objects to the place where the body lives, and the objection is not a protest but a commentary, a running editorial by the immune system about the editorial's host's choice of residence.

He lived in Kenosha. Kenosha was a city on Lake Michigan's western shore, a city whose economy had been built on automobiles and whose automobiles had been built in factories and whose factories had been closing since the early seventies, the closures producing in Kenosha the same economic weather that the Westborough Assembly Plant's closure had produced in Westborough: the slow evacuation of storefronts, the fading of "For Lease" signs, the retreat of commerce from Main Street like a tide going out and not coming back. Andy understood the closures the way a

fifteen-year-old understands economic shifts, which is through their secondary effects: the friend whose father lost his job, the store that became a different store that became an empty store, the school that cut the art program because the tax base that funded the art program had followed the factories to wherever factories went when they left, and the wherever was a question that nobody in Kenosha answered because the answer was not useful, the answer was a geography lesson, and geography lessons did not bring the factories back.

Andy had friends. The friends were the friends that a polite, observant, quick boy accumulates in a Midwestern city where the social currency is reliability and the social expectation is consistency: friends who showed up, friends who could be counted on, friends whose presence at lunch and at weekend gatherings and at the particular social occasions that fifteen-year-old boys attend (movies, basketball games, the parking lot behind the Dairy Queen where the parking lot was the event and the Dairy Queen was the excuse) was dependable and pleasant and sufficient. The friends were sufficient. The sufficiency was the problem.

Sufficient is the word that describes a thing that meets the minimum requirement. Sufficient is passing. Sufficient is the grade you receive when the work is complete and correct and uninspired, when the assignment has been fulfilled without being exceeded, when the thing that was asked for has been provided and nothing more. Andy's friends were sufficient. They provided the minimum requirement of social life: companionship, conversation, the presence of other bodies in the vicinity of his body, the evidence that he was not alone. But the minimum requirement was not what Andy needed, and the difference between what the friends provided and what Andy needed was the loneliness, and the loneliness was the thing he could not articulate, because articulating it would have required him to identify what was missing, and identifying what was missing would have required him to have experienced the thing that was missing, and he had not experienced it, and the not-experiencing was the specific cruelty of this particular kind of loneliness: the loneliness of a person who does not know what they are lonely for.

He had friends but no best friend. He had social skills but no social world that felt like home. The friends were rooms he visited. The social world was a building he walked through. The visiting and the walking-through were the activities of a tourist, and a tourist is a person who is present without belonging, and the presence-without-belonging was Andy's condition, and the condition had been his condition for as long as he could remember, and the remembering went back to a kindergarten classroom where he had been friendly with everyone and close to no one, and the friendly-with-everyone was the skill and the close-to-no-one was the cost, and the skill and the cost had traveled together through every year since kindergarten, inseparable, the skill producing the cost and the cost producing the skill, because a person who is close to no one becomes good at being friendly with everyone, and a person who is good at being friendly with everyone does not develop the muscles required for closeness, and the muscles atrophy, and the atrophy is the loneliness.

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Craig was eleven. Craig was Andy's younger brother, and Craig's relationship to Andy was the relationship of a person who has been assigned a resource and who uses the resource with the aggressive efficiency of a person who understands that the resource is finite and that the finiteness is determined by the resource's willingness to be used, and Andy's willingness was high because Andy's loneliness was high and Craig's need was a form of closeness, even if the closeness was the closeness of a younger brother who asked questions that the older brother was expected to answer.

"Do girls like it when you bring them stuff?" Craig asked, on a Tuesday evening in May, in the room they shared, Craig on the top bunk and Andy on the bottom, the bunk bed a fixture of the room since Craig was old enough to climb and Andy was old enough to be annoyed by the climbing, which produced a nightly percussion of footsteps above Andy's head that Andy had learned to sleep through the way one learns to sleep through train noise, by incorporating the noise into the architecture of the sleep rather than fighting it.

"What kind of stuff," Andy said.

"Like flowers. Or a card. Or a rock."

"A rock."

"Megan Kolecki likes rocks. She collects them. She has a jar of rocks on her desk."

"Then a rock might work for Megan Kolecki."

"What if she already has the kind of rock I bring her?"

"Then you've confirmed that she has good taste in rocks and you have good taste in rocks and the two of you have something in common."

"What if she thinks the rock is ugly?"

"Then you've learned something about Megan Kolecki's standards and you can adjust."

"Adjust what?"

"The rock. Bring a better rock."

"How do I know which rock is better?"

"Pay attention to the rocks she already has. The rocks she already has are the information. The information tells you what she values. What she values is the rock you bring next."

Craig was quiet for a moment. The quiet was the processing, the eleven-year-old brain working through the information, converting the information from advice into strategy, the strategy not yet executable because the strategy required a rock and the rock required a selection and the selection required the observation of Megan Kolecki's existing collection, which required proximity to Megan Kolecki's desk, which required the courage to be proximate to a girl's desk for the duration of a geological assessment, and the courage was the variable Craig had not yet solved for.

"You're good at this," Craig said.

"I'm good at the theory. The theory is the part you can do from the bottom bunk. The practice is the part that requires you to get off the bunk."

"Have you ever brought a girl a rock?"

"I've never met a girl who collects rocks."

"What do the girls you know collect?"

Andy thought about this. The girls he knew, the girls in his grade at Kenosha Central, collected things that were not physical objects: they collected opinions and alliances and the particular social intelligence that allowed them to move through the hallways of a Midwestern high school with the fluency of people who understood that the hallway was not a corridor but a network, and the network was the collection, and the collection was not something you could put in a jar on a desk.

"Impressions," Andy said.

"You can't bring someone an impression."

"You can. An impression is the rock. You bring it by showing up and being a specific version of yourself, and the version you show is the impression, and the impression is the thing she either puts in her collection or doesn't."

"That's confusing."

"It is. The confusion is accurate. That's what it's actually like."

Craig's feet shifted above him. The percussion of a body adjusting on a mattress, the nightly recalibration of a person whose body was growing faster than the body's understanding of its own dimensions, the eleven-year-old's perpetual negotiation with a bunk bed that had been purchased when the body was smaller and that was now, by the body's current measurements, marginally too short and undeniably too narrow, but the body persisted in the bunk the way the body persists in all spaces that no longer fit, through adjustment and the refusal to acknowledge the not-fitting.

"Are you going to miss this?" Craig asked.

"Miss what."

"This. The bunk. The room. Me asking you stuff."

Andy looked at the underside of the top bunk, the plywood surface that was the ceiling of his world and the floor of Craig's world, the surface that separated the two of them by approximately eighteen inches of air and approximately four years of age, and the eighteen inches were the distance and the four years were the distance, and both distances would increase when the move happened, because the move would not produce a bunk bed, the move would produce separate rooms, and separate rooms would produce a different distance, and the different distance would change the questions, because questions asked through eighteen inches of air are different from questions asked through a wall.

"Yeah," Andy said. "I'm going to miss this."

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The family dinner was on a Wednesday in June. The family dinner was the four of them at the kitchen table: Andy's father Robert, who managed the regional accounts for an agricultural equipment company

and whose management of the regional accounts had produced the transfer that had produced the move; Andy's mother Ellen, who taught fourth grade and whose teaching of fourth grade would be ended by the move and resumed in whatever school district the new town provided; Craig, who was eating corn and processing the meal the way Craig processed all meals, which was rapidly; and Andy, who was eating corn and processing the meal the way Andy processed all meals, which was slowly, each bite a small delay, each delay a small assessment, the corn providing the time that the assessment required.

"Indiana," Robert said. The word was the announcement. The word contained the move, the way "cancer" had contained the diagnosis and "don't take it anymore" had contained the sentence: a single word carrying the full weight of the change it described, the word arriving at the table and displacing the corn and the conversation and the previous evening's plan, which had been no plan, which had been the Wednesday of a family that was not moving and that was now, by the power of a single word, a family that was.

"Indiana," Ellen repeated, the repetition the processing, the word spoken a second time to verify that the word had been spoken a first time, the verification a necessary step for a woman whose response to information was to confirm the information before responding to it, the confirmation a teaching habit, the habit of a fourth-grade teacher who spent her days confirming that the information she had delivered had been received by the recipients, and the recipients were usually nine-year-olds, and the confirmation was usually "does everyone understand," and the understanding was usually approximate.

"Westborough," Robert said. "The regional office is relocating. September start."

Craig said: "Is there corn in Indiana?"

"Indiana grows more corn than Wisconsin."

"Then I'm fine."

Andy said nothing. Andy's nothing was not Keithe's "cool" or Bergie's "okay" or the silence of a person who did not have a response. Andy's nothing was the nothing of a person who was assessing. The assessment was the thing Andy did instead of reacting, the calculation that preceded the emotion the way the foundation precedes the wall, the assessment a structural necessity, the structure required before the feeling could be built on top of it, and the structure was: what am I losing and what might I gain.

What he was losing: Kenosha, the lake, the friends who were sufficient, the Dairy Queen parking lot, the teachers who asked if he was okay when the pine pollen turned his eyes into the eyes of a crying boy, the room with the bunk bed, the eighteen inches of air between his ceiling and Craig's floor, the girls who collected impressions, the basketball games, the movies, the city on the western shore of a lake that was not a lake but an inland sea.

What he might gain: he did not know. The not-knowing was not a deficit. The not-knowing was a space, a room that had not yet been furnished, and the unfurnished room was the possibility, and the possibility was the thing that Andy's assessment produced instead of grief, because grief is the response to a known loss and Andy's loss was known but Andy's gain was unknown, and the unknown gain was

the variable that the assessment could not resolve, and the unresolved variable was the thing that made the move neither good nor bad but open, and the openness was the thing Andy held onto.

"Okay," Andy said. The "okay" was not Bergie's "okay," the word carrying an interpretation that diverged from the speaker's intention. Andy's "okay" was an "okay" that meant "okay," the word and the meaning aligned, the container and the contents matched, because Andy's relationship to language was precise in the way that Ares' relationship to language was precise, both boys using words to mean what the words meant, and the precision was the thing they would eventually recognize in each other, across a journalism room, across a hallway, across the particular distance that separates two people who have not yet met but who will, when they meet, discover that the distance was shorter than it appeared.

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Andy packed a box on a Saturday in August. The box was the last box. The room was empty except for the bunk bed, which would not make the trip because the bunk bed belonged to the house and the house was being rented and the renters had children and the children would use the bunk bed, and the bunk bed would hold different bodies and different questions and different percussion, and the different was the loss, and the loss was small and specific and exactly the kind of loss that produces the sharp, brief grief of a person who is losing not a thing but a configuration, not an object but an arrangement, and the arrangement was the room and the bunk and the eighteen inches and Craig's questions falling through the air between the top and the bottom.

The box was almost full. Andy was packing the drawer of his desk, the bottom drawer, the drawer where things accumulated that did not have a designated place, the drawer that was the equivalent of Stan's museum drawer on Elm Street, except that Andy's drawer did not contain relics of loss, Andy's drawer contained the miscellaneous evidence of a life that was organized everywhere except in the bottom drawer, where the organization surrendered to the accumulation: pencils without erasers, a compass from math class, a photograph of the basketball team in which Andy was in the back row because Andy was tall enough for the back row and not talented enough for the front, a broken watch whose battery had died in November and whose death Andy had not addressed because the watch's death was low on the priority list, the watch joining the pencils and the compass in the drawer's permanent collection of things that were not quite finished being useful and not quite ready to be discarded.

At the bottom of the drawer, beneath the pencils and the compass and the watch, there was a book. The book was small, approximately five inches by seven inches, with a cover that was dark blue and a spine that was cracked and a title that was printed in white letters that had faded to the color of old cream: "American Verse: Selections." Andy had bought the book at a used bookstore in Kenosha's downtown, a store called Twice Told that occupied a narrow storefront between a barber shop and a vacuum repair business and that smelled like the particular combination of old paper and dust and the slow decomposition of binding glue that used bookstores smell like, the smell of books becoming older while waiting to be read again.

He had bought the book for seventy-five cents. He had bought it because the cover was blue and the size was right for a pocket and the title promised something that Andy had been looking for without knowing he was looking for it, which was language that did things that regular language did not do, language that compressed a feeling into a sentence the way a gem cutter compresses a stone into a facet, the compression producing a surface that was smaller than the original but that reflected more light, and the reflection was the thing Andy wanted, the language that reflected more than it contained.

He had read the book twice. He had read it on the bottom bunk with Craig's percussion above him and the pine pollen assaulting his sinuses and the Kenosha evening settling into the room through the window, and the reading had produced the recognition, the same recognition Ares had experienced with "A Separate Peace," the encounter with sentences that described things Andy had felt but had not named, except that the naming was compressed, the naming was fourteen lines or twelve lines or the length of a breath, and the compression was the thing Andy loved about it, the efficiency, the ruthlessness of a form that did not allow you to waste a word because there were not enough words to waste.

He picked the book up from the bottom of the drawer. He did not put it in the box. He put it in his bag, the bag he would carry on his lap in the car during the drive from Kenosha to Westborough, the bag that would contain the things he wanted access to during the drive: a book, a notebook, a pencil, a sandwich his mother would make, and the seventy-five-cent book of verse whose metaphors he did not yet know he would use.

He did not know about Julie. He did not know about a girl who had changed her perfume from morning dew on roses to citrus and intention, a girl who managed a household's emotional economy, a girl whose instrument detected discrepancies and whose thermostat regulated temperatures and whose relationship to a boy named Stan had ended because the boy's drinking had become a thing and the thing had gotten bigger and she was not going to watch. Andy did not know about Julie because Julie was in Indiana and Andy was in Wisconsin and the two states were separated by the width of Illinois, and Illinois was the distance, and the distance was closing, and the closing was the car, and the car would leave Kenosha in September and arrive in Westborough in September and Andy would walk into the building that was brick and cinderblock and prefabricated panels and he would find the hallway and the hallway would find him and somewhere in the hallway or the cafeteria or the classroom there would be a girl, and the girl would be Julie, and the metaphors from the seventy-five-cent book would be the language he would use to reach her, not because the metaphors were impressive but because the metaphors were precise, and the precision was the thing Julie recognized, because Julie's instrument was calibrated to detect precision the way Ares' instrument was calibrated to detect prose and Puck's instrument was calibrated to detect infrastructure and Crew's instrument was calibrated to detect fire.

But that was September. This was August. The box was full and the drawer was empty. The bunk bed would stay. The book was in the bag. And Andy Harper, who was allergic to the two things Wisconsin was most famous for, stood in an empty room in a house he was leaving and felt the thing the assessment had produced, which was not grief and not excitement but the steady, quiet awareness of a person who is standing between what was and what will be, and the standing is the moment, and the

moment is the space, and the space is the openness, and the openness is the only honest response to a future that has not yet revealed what it contains.

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Chapter 22: Albert Walks Away

The phone rang at 4:17 on a Thursday afternoon in August, and Julie knew it was Albert because the phone always rang at 4:17 when it was Albert, because 4:17 was the time at which Albert's flights landed at the regional airports where the airline maintained gates, and the gates were at the ends of corridors that contained pay phones, and the pay phones were the instruments through which Albert communicated with the household when Albert was between flights, the between being the only state in which Albert existed as a father, the flying state and the home state being the two primary states and the between state being the transition, the corridor between the corridor and the house, and the corridor had a pay phone, and the pay phone rang at 4:17.

Mom answered. Mom always answered. Mom's "hello, stranger" was the greeting, the same greeting for every caller, the same declaration that every voice on the wire was a stranger until the voice identified itself, and Albert's identification was always the same, the pause followed by "it's me," and the "me" was sufficient because the "me" was Albert and Albert was the only person who called and identified himself as "me" because Albert was the only person in the household's communication system who believed that his existence was so central to the household's operations that his name was unnecessary, the "me" containing the name the way a zip code contains a city, the shorthand sufficient for anyone who lived inside it.

Julie was in the kitchen. Julie was always in the kitchen at 4:17 on Thursdays because Thursdays at 4:17 were the time when the household's logistical needs concentrated in the kitchen: dinner preparation, homework supervision (Ares' homework required no supervision but the supervision was performed anyway, as a ritual, the ritual being the structure), Puck's medication schedule (the radiation had produced a secondary medication regimen that required pills at 4:00 and 8:00 and midnight, and the 4:00 pill had been administered seventeen minutes ago, and the administration was Julie's because Mom was on the phone and Dad was in the phone and Puck was in the ducts and Ares was with Crew and the administration defaulted to Julie the way all administrations in the Taler household defaulted to Julie, through the gravitational logic of competence: the person who can do the thing is the person who does the thing).

Mom's voice changed. The change was audible from the kitchen table where Julie was sitting with a textbook and a pencil behind her ear. The change was not in the volume or the pitch but in the rhythm, the rhythm of Mom's telephone voice shifting from the cadence of a greeting to the cadence of a person receiving information that does not fit the expected format, the expected format being Albert's report (flight landed, layover in wherever, next flight at whenever, home on whatever day), and the unexpected format being something else, something that produced in Mom's voice the particular hesitation of a processor encountering data it does not have a category for.

"He did what," Mom said.

The "he did what" was not a question. The "he did what" was the verbal equivalent of a computer's loading screen, the voice producing sound while the brain behind the voice processed the incoming data, and the data was being delivered by whoever was on the other end of the phone, and the whoever was not Albert, because Albert's calls produced "hello, stranger" and "it's me" and the logistical report, and Albert's calls did not produce "he did what," which meant the caller was not Albert, which meant the caller was calling about Albert, and calling about Albert was a different category of call, a category that the household had experienced before, because Albert was the weather, and weather produces calls.

Mom listened. Mom's listening was visible to Julie through the stillness of Mom's body, the body that was normally in motion in the kitchen at 4:17, the body that moved between the stove and the counter and the refrigerator and the table with the efficiency of a woman who understood that the kitchen was not a room but a machine and that she was the machine's operator, and the operator was now still, and the stillness was the listening, and the listening was the receiving of information that required the body to stop performing its other functions so that the receiving could have the body's full capacity.

Mom hung up the phone. Mom stood in the kitchen with her hand on the receiver, the hand not releasing the receiver, the hand maintaining contact with the instrument that had delivered the information, as if the contact were a tether and the tether were the thing that kept the information from floating away, which it could not do, because information once received is permanent, but the hand on the receiver was the body's response to the permanence, the body holding onto the source of the information the way a person who has been hit by a wave holds onto the railing.

"Your father," Mom said, "has walked away from his airplane."

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The story arrived in pieces over the next two hours, the pieces delivered by phone calls from the airline and from the regional airport authority and from a man at the bus station in Terre Haute who identified himself as "the manager" and who had called because a man matching Albert Taler's description was sitting in the waiting area wearing boxer shorts and holding a five-dollar bill and asking for the next bus to Westborough.

The pieces assembled themselves into a narrative that was, by the standards of the Taler household's experience with Albert's weather, simultaneously the most absurd and the most structurally predictable event in Albert's career. The narrative was: Albert had landed his regional commuter flight at Terre Haute Municipal Airport at 3:45. Albert had taxied to the gate. Albert had received instructions from the air traffic control tower to hold on the taxiway while a maintenance vehicle crossed the active runway. Albert had disagreed with the instruction. The disagreement had escalated. The escalation had produced, in the version reported by the airline, "a verbal altercation between the pilot and tower personnel regarding taxiway procedures," and in the version that would eventually emerge from Albert himself, a dispute about whether the maintenance vehicle had the right of way or whether Albert's aircraft, having completed its approach and landing and taxi, had earned the right to proceed to the gate without being held for a vehicle that was, in Albert's assessment, "a golf cart with ideas above its

station."

Albert had expressed his assessment to the tower. The tower had reiterated the hold instruction. Albert had turned off his radio. Albert had opened the cockpit door. Albert had walked through the cabin of the aircraft, past the twenty-three passengers who were seated with their seat belts fastened and their tray tables up and their expectations of a normal deplaning procedure intact, and Albert had opened the aircraft's main door, which was not designed to be opened from the inside while the aircraft was on the taxiway and which required a sequence of actions that Albert performed with the fluency of a man who had been opening aircraft doors for twenty-two years, and Albert had descended the mobile stairs that the ground crew had positioned at the gate, except the stairs were not at the gate, the stairs were at the taxiway hold position, and the stairs were there because the ground crew had been summoned by the tower after the radio went silent and the cockpit door opened, and the ground crew had brought the stairs because the ground crew did not know what else to bring.

Albert had walked down the stairs. Albert had walked across the taxiway. Albert had walked past the maintenance vehicle, the golf cart with ideas above its station, and Albert had continued walking, past the gate, past the terminal entrance, through the parking lot, across the access road, and to the Greyhound bus station that was located, by the specific geography of Terre Haute's transportation infrastructure, three-quarters of a mile from the airport's perimeter fence, a distance that Albert covered on foot, in his boxer shorts, because Albert's pants and shirt and shoes and wallet were in his flight bag and his flight bag was in the cockpit and the cockpit was in the airplane and the airplane was on the taxiway where Albert had left it, along with twenty-three passengers, a copilot who would later describe the event as "the most Albert thing Albert has ever done," and a flight bag containing the pants and the shirt and the shoes and the wallet and the career.

The boxer shorts were plaid. This detail would become important later, in the family's retelling, because the plaid boxer shorts were the image that converted the event from a crisis into a story, the visual detail that the narrative required to shift from "our father abandoned an airplane" to "our father walked three-quarters of a mile in plaid boxer shorts because a golf cart disagreed with him," and the shift was the Taler household's mechanism for processing Albert's weather, the mechanism being comedy, comedy being the only tool available to a family whose patriarch periodically performed acts of spectacular irresponsibility and whose matriarch was required to process those acts within the logistical framework of a household that could not afford the luxury of sustained outrage.

The five-dollar bill was in Albert's sock. The five-dollar bill was the only currency Albert had on his person because the wallet was in the flight bag and the flight bag was in the cockpit, but the five-dollar bill was in Albert's sock because Albert kept a five-dollar bill in his sock on every flight, a practice he had begun in 1967 after a flight had been diverted and he had found himself in an airport without his wallet, and the experience had produced the five-dollar-bill-in-the-sock protocol, which was the only emergency protocol Albert maintained and which was, by the standards of emergency protocols, both the most modest and the most frequently tested, because Albert's relationship to emergency was the relationship of a man who created emergencies and who prepared for them with the specificity of a person who knew, on some level, that the emergencies were coming.

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Julie drove to the bus station. Julie drove because Mom was on the phone with the airline's human resources department, which had called to discuss "the incident" and "the pilot's status" and "the process going forward," and the process going forward was a process that required Mom's attention because Mom's attention was the thing that stood between Albert's career and Albert's career's termination, Mom's attention deployed the way it was always deployed, as a load-bearing intervention, the wall holding the weight so that the things built on top of the wall could remain standing. Puck was in the ducts. Ares was at Crew's house. The driving defaulted to Julie.

Julie was sixteen. Julie had a license. Julie had the car, Mom's car, the car that had driven Puck to the hospital and Albert to the airport and Ares to school and Julie to cheerleading practice and the household to the grocery store and the hardware store and the doctor's office and every other destination that the household required, the car the logistical workhorse of a family that owned one car because one car was what the budget permitted and one car was what Mom controlled, and the controlling was the managing, and the managing was Julie's inheritance, the skill that had been transmitted from mother to daughter through the daily demonstration of how a household with one car and one reliable adult and three children and a husband who abandoned airplanes continued to function.

The drive to Terre Haute was forty-five minutes. Julie drove the forty-five minutes with the radio off because the radio's noise would have interfered with the processing, and the processing was the thing Julie was doing during the drive, the processing not of the event itself (the event was Albert, Albert was the weather, weather was processed by waiting for it to pass) but of the event's implications, the downstream consequences that the event would produce in the household's logistical structure: the income, the insurance, the schedule, the bills, the medication, the radiation appointments, the mortgage, the grocery budget, the things that Linda Taler managed from the drawer and that would be affected by the process going forward, and the process going forward was a process that might not include Albert's salary, and Albert's salary was a column in the household's budget, and the column's removal would produce a structural deficit, and the structural deficit would be managed, because structural deficits in the Taler household were always managed, because management was the alternative to collapse, and collapse was not available to a household that contained a son with cancer and a son who was becoming a writer and a daughter who was sixteen and driving to a bus station to pick up a father in boxer shorts.

The Terre Haute Greyhound station was a building that looked like a building designed by someone who had been told what a bus station should look like and who had executed the instructions without enthusiasm: a flat roof, a glass front, a parking lot, and a sign that said "GREYHOUND" in letters that were intended to communicate the speed of the animal and that communicated instead the age of the sign, the letters faded, the blue dulled, the greyhound itself looking less like a racing dog and more like a dog that had been racing for a long time and would appreciate a rest.

Albert was inside. Albert was in the waiting area, on a plastic bench, in plaid boxer shorts and a white undershirt and black socks, one of which had contained the five-dollar bill and both of which were visible because Albert was not wearing shoes, because Albert's shoes were in the flight bag and

the flight bag was in the cockpit and the cockpit was on the taxiway at Terre Haute Municipal Airport, where the airplane was presumably still being held for the golf cart.

Julie stood in the doorway of the bus station and looked at her father. Her father looked back. The looking was the moment between the event and the response, the moment when the information that had arrived by telephone became the information that was sitting on a plastic bench in boxer shorts, and the sitting was Albert, and Albert was her father, and her father was a man who had walked away from an airplane because a golf cart had disagreed with him, and the walking-away was the most Albert thing Albert had ever done, and the most-Albert-thing was the thing that Julie was processing, and the processing produced, in approximately three seconds, the following assessment: he is fine, he is not injured, he is wearing plaid boxer shorts and black socks in a bus station in Terre Haute, he has a five-dollar bill and no shoes and no pants and no career, and the no-career is the thing that will matter tomorrow and the boxer shorts are the thing that matters right now, and right now is the thing I am managing, and managing right now is driving him home.

"Hi Dad," Julie said.

"Hi sweetheart."

"You're not wearing pants."

"The pants are on the airplane."

"The airplane you walked away from."

"The airplane was being held for a golf cart. The golf cart had no business on the active runway. I made my position clear."

"You made your position clear by walking three-quarters of a mile in your underwear."

"I made my position clear by exercising my right as a professional pilot to disagree with an unreasonable instruction. The walking was a consequence of the exercising."

"The walking was the exercising."

"The walking was the punctuation."

Julie sat down next to her father on the plastic bench. The bench was the kind of bench that bus stations provide, a bench designed for waiting, a bench whose function was to hold people who were between places, people who had left one place and had not yet arrived at another, and the function described Albert perfectly, because Albert was always between places, Albert's entire existence was the between, the corridor between the corridor and the house, the pay phone between the landing and the next flight, and now the bus station between the airplane and the home, the between-state the only state in which Albert reliably existed.

She did not yell. She did not cry. She did not deliver the speech that a sixteen-year-old daughter might be expected to deliver to a father who had abandoned his airplane and his career and his pants on a taxiway in Terre Haute. The speech was available. The speech was in the repertoire. The speech would have included words like "irresponsible" and "selfish" and "what were you thinking" and the speech would have been accurate and the accuracy would have been satisfying in the way that accuracy

is satisfying when the accuracy confirms what you already knew, which was that Albert was the weather and the weather was destructive and the destruction was forgiven because the weather was Albert and Albert was the father and the father was loved and the love was unconditional and the unconditional was the condition of the Taler household, the condition being: the adults in this family are lovable and unreliable, and the children have organized themselves accordingly.

Julie was the manager. Julie managed. Julie had been managing since she was nine, since the first time Albert had come home from a flight and announced that he had disagreed with a policy and that the disagreement had produced consequences and that the consequences required Mom's attention and Mom's attention was the wall and the wall held the weight. Julie had watched Mom manage the consequences, and the watching was the training, and the training had produced the manager, and the manager was sixteen and sitting on a bench in a bus station next to a man in boxer shorts who was her father, and the manager's assessment was complete, and the assessment was: drive him home, let Mom handle the airline, let the household absorb the weather the way the household absorbs all weather, through adjustment and recalibration and the continued operation of the systems that keep the building standing.

"Let's go," Julie said.

"I need pants."

"You can have pants when we get home."

"I can't walk through the parking lot in my underwear."

"You walked three-quarters of a mile in your underwear. The parking lot is thirty feet."

Albert considered this. The consideration was brief. The consideration produced the conclusion that the parking lot was, by the standards of the afternoon's pedestrian activities, a negligible distance, and the negligible distance was covered in approximately fifteen seconds, Albert walking across the parking lot of the Terre Haute Greyhound station in plaid boxer shorts and black socks and a white undershirt, the five-dollar bill now in his hand because the sock had served its purpose and the purpose was complete.

They got in the car. Julie drove. Albert sat in the passenger seat. The passenger seat held Albert the way the couch held Canterbilly, with the impression of previous occupancy, the seat adjusted to Mom's position, which was not Albert's position, and Albert adjusted the seat, and the adjusting was the first act of his return, the first physical modification of the household's infrastructure to accommodate his presence, and the presence was temporary, the presence was always temporary, the presence was the between-state occupying the house the way it occupied the bus station and the pay phone and the corridor, temporarily, between flights, between crises, between the weather events that Albert's existence generated with the regularity of a system that was designed to produce turbulence.

The drive home was forty-five minutes. Julie drove with the radio off. Albert sat in the passenger seat and looked out the window and did not speak, and the not-speaking was Albert's version of processing, the pilot's post-flight assessment, the review of the decisions that had produced the current situation, and the review was Albert's, and the review was private, and the privacy was the space Julie

allowed him because the space was the thing Albert needed and the thing Julie could provide and the providing was the managing and the managing was the love.

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At home, Puck emerged from the ducts. Puck stood in the hallway covered in dust and looked at Albert standing in the kitchen in boxer shorts and black socks and said: "You walked away from an airplane because of a golf cart."

"I walked away from an unreasonable instruction."

"You walked away from an airplane. In your underwear. Because of a golf cart."

"The golf cart had no business on the active runway."

"Dad. You left the airplane. On the runway. With people in it."

"The copilot was fully qualified to complete the taxi."

Puck started laughing. The laughing was not the polite laughter of a family processing a crisis. The laughing was the full-body laughter of a seventeen-year-old boy with a mass in his neck and radiation appointments every two weeks and a network of heating ducts he moved through like a ghost, and the laughing was the release, the same release Crew had experienced in the bathroom with the shaving cream snowman, the release of a body that has been holding something and that has been given permission to let it go, and the permission was the boxer shorts, and the boxer shorts were the funniest thing Puck had seen since the diagnosis, and the since-the-diagnosis was the measurement, because the diagnosis had installed a new calendar in Puck's life, a calendar that divided time into before and after, and the after had not contained enough laughter, and the boxer shorts were laughter, and the laughter was medicine, and the medicine was not radiation and was not pills and was not the hospital corridor that Puck had mapped with the surveyor's precision, the medicine was a father in plaid boxer shorts in the kitchen, and the kitchen held the laughter the way it held everything, by continuing to function, by being the room where the household happened.

Mom came into the kitchen. Mom looked at Albert. Mom's face performed the assessment that Julie's face had performed at the bus station, the assessment that took approximately three seconds and that produced the conclusion: he is fine, he is Albert, and the being-Albert is the diagnosis, and the diagnosis is permanent, and the permanent is the marriage, and the marriage is the household, and the household is the wall, and the wall holds.

"Hello, stranger," Mom said.

"It's me," Albert said.

The kitchen clock ticked.

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Chapter 23: The Clock Stops

The grandfather clock stopped at 9:42 on a Saturday evening in late August, the stopping announced by the absence of the tick, which was not a sound that stopped but a silence that began, the two things technically identical and experientially opposite, because a sound that stops is an event and a silence that begins is a condition, and Canterbilly, seated on the couch in his bathrobe with a copy of the Westborough Courier in his lap and a donut (glazed, from the package of six he purchased every Saturday at the IGA on Grand Avenue) in his right hand, detected the condition the way a person detects a change in air pressure: not by hearing the change but by feeling it, the feeling registered in the body before the brain identified its source, the body knowing that something had shifted before the mind knew what had shifted, and the what was the clock, and the clock had stopped.

He put the donut on the armrest. He put the Courier on the cushion. He stood from the couch, the couch releasing him the way the couch always released him, with the reluctance of a surface that had been shaped by the sustained impression of a body and that preferred the body to remain, the couch and the body having reached, over the seven years since Canterbilly had purchased the couch at a furniture liquidation sale on Route 40, an agreement about the terms of their relationship, the terms being: the body sits, the couch holds, and the holding is permanent except when the clock stops.

The clock was in the hallway. The clock occupied the hallway the way the clock occupied every space it was in, completely, its presence the organizing principle of the room, the room's other contents (the coat rack, the umbrella stand, the rug that had been a gift from a colleague who had since retired to Arizona) arranged around the clock in the configuration of objects that understood their subordinate status, the objects existing in relation to the clock the way planets exist in relation to a sun, the clock the gravitational center of the hallway and, by extension, of the house.

The clock was Swiss. The clock had been his father's. The clock had been in the family since 1923, when Canterbilly's grandfather had purchased it in Zurich during a business trip whose business Canterbilly had never identified because the identification had not been transmitted through the family's oral history, the oral history containing the clock's provenance but not the trip's purpose, the purpose lost the way all purposes are lost when the person who held them dies and the things they purchased survive them, the things carrying the provenance without the purpose, the clock carrying 1923 and Zurich and the grandfather without carrying the reason the grandfather was in Zurich.

The clock's mechanism was a spring-driven movement that required winding every eight days. The winding was performed with a key that was kept on the mantelpiece above the fireplace in the living room, which was the adjacent room, which meant that the winding required Canterbilly to walk from the hallway to the living room to retrieve the key and then walk from the living room back to the hallway to perform the winding, the round trip approximately fourteen steps, the fourteen steps a ritual, the ritual performed every eight days with the precision of a man who understood that the clock's operation was not a convenience but a responsibility, the responsibility inherited from the father who

had inherited it from the grandfather who had purchased it in Zurich in 1923 for reasons that were no longer available.

He retrieved the key. He opened the clock's face. The face was white enamel with Roman numerals, the numerals painted in black, the hands brass, the hands stopped at 9:42, the nine and the forty-two the time at which the spring's energy had been exhausted, the energy stored eight days ago by the previous winding and expended through the continuous operation of the mechanism, each tick consuming a small portion of the stored energy, each tick a small expenditure, the expenditures accumulating over eight days until the expenditures exceeded the balance and the mechanism stopped and the silence began.

Canterbilly inserted the key. He turned it. The turning engaged the winding mechanism, the mechanism transferring the force of Canterbilly's hand through the key through the arbor to the mainspring, the mainspring tightening, the tightening storing the energy that the next eight days would consume, the storage the act, the act the ritual, the ritual the responsibility. He wound the spring to full capacity. Full capacity was thirty-two half-turns of the key, each half-turn requiring approximately the same force, the force constant, the resistance constant, the thirty-two half-turns producing the same quantity of stored energy each time because the clock's mechanism was precise and the precision was Swiss and the Swiss precision was the thing Canterbilly revered about the clock, the thing that made the clock not just an instrument for measuring time but an instrument for demonstrating that measurement itself was a moral act, because a measurement performed with precision was a measurement that respected the thing being measured, and the thing being measured was time, and time deserved respect.

He set the hands. He moved the minute hand forward from 9:42 to the current time, which was 9:47, the five minutes elapsed between the stopping and the restarting the only five minutes in the clock's continuous operation that were unaccounted for, five minutes during which the hallway existed without the tick and the silence existed without the clock and the house existed without the rhythm, and the unaccounted-for minutes were the gap, and the gap was the failure, and the failure was Canterbilly's, because the failure was the failure to wind the clock before the spring's energy was exhausted, and the failure occurred because Canterbilly had been reading the Courier and eating the donut and sitting on the couch in the bathrobe, and the sitting had consumed the attention that should have been allocated to the calendar, the calendar that tracked the eight-day cycle, and the calendar had not been consulted, and the not-consulting was the lapse, and the lapse was the gap, and the gap was five minutes.

He closed the face. The tick resumed. The tick was the same tick it had been before the stopping, the same tick it had been for sixty years, the mechanism producing the identical sound regardless of the year or the season or the person listening, the sound produced by the escapement wheel releasing one tooth at a time, each release producing the tick, each tick identical, each tick the sound of Swiss precision performing its moral act in a hallway in Westborough, Indiana, and the performing was the clock's function, and the clock's function was Canterbilly's responsibility, and the responsibility was resumed, and the gap was closed, and the five minutes were absorbed into the larger continuity of the clock's operation the way five minutes are always absorbed, by being followed by the next five minutes

and the next five minutes and the next, the continuity reestablished through the simple mechanism of continuing.

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He returned to the couch. The couch received him. The donut was on the armrest where he had placed it. The Courier was on the cushion. He picked up the donut. He picked up the Courier. He resumed the activities that the clock's stopping had interrupted, the activities of a Saturday evening in the house on Birch Street, the house that Canterbilly had occupied alone for eleven years, since the death of his father in 1970, the father's death producing the inheritance of the house and the clock and the key and the responsibility and the solitude, the solitude not a consequence of the death but a condition that had preceded the death and that the death had converted from a shared condition to an unshared one, because his father had also been alone, and the two of them had been alone together, which is a specific form of solitude in which two people who do not require each other's conversation occupy the same space and the space is filled by the things they share instead of the words they exchange, and the things they had shared were the clock and the house and the newspaper and the donuts and the silence, and the silence was the inheritance, and the inheritance was the condition, and the condition was Saturday evening on the couch in the bathrobe.

The Courier was open to the editorial page. The editorial page contained a letter from a Westborough resident about the condition of the roads on the east side of town. The letter was poorly written. The letter contained three instances of "very," two instances of "really," one instance of "quite," and a sentence fragment that the Courier's editor had allowed to stand, the allowing a crime against the language that Canterbilly noted without surprise because the Courier's editor was a person who regarded grammar as a suggestion and style as an accident, and both the suggestion and the accident were visible on every page of every edition, the Courier functioning as a weekly demonstration that a newspaper could exist without standards, the way a building could exist without maintenance, the existence degraded but persistent.

Canterbilly circled the "very" instances with his red pen. He circled the "really" instances. He circled the "quite." He marked the sentence fragment with a bracket and wrote "incomplete" in the margin. The circling and the marking were not for the Courier's benefit. The circling and the marking were for Canterbilly's benefit, the benefit of a man whose relationship to the English language was the relationship of a custodian to a cathedral, the custodian not the architect and not the priest but the person who maintained the building, who swept the floors and polished the brass and replaced the candles and repaired the stonework, the maintenance not glamorous but essential, the essential being the thing that the glamorous depended on, because a cathedral without maintenance is a ruin and a language without maintenance is a noise, and noise was what the Courier produced, weekly, reliably, on newsprint.

He put the red pen on the armrest next to the donut. He ate the donut. He chewed with the mechanical regularity that characterized all of Canterbilly's physical processes, the chewing a rhythm, the rhythm a smaller version of the clock's rhythm, the body's mechanism operating in the same

continuous pattern as the clock's mechanism, the two mechanisms synchronized by proximity and habit, the habit of a man who had lived with the clock for fifty-three years and whose body had absorbed the clock's rhythm into its own operations, the eating and the ticking and the breathing and the ticking and the reading and the ticking, and the ticking was the constant, and the constant was the clock, and the clock was the house, and the house was the man.

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He thought about the articles. He had been thinking about the articles since May, when the articles had been published and the hallway had laughed and the hallway had gone silent and Doublewe had thrown the Krugerand at the wastebasket and missed, and the thinking had been continuous, the thinking a smaller version of the clock's continuous operation, the thinking producing not a conclusion but an assessment, and the assessment was the thing Canterbilly had been refining over the summer, the way he refined sentences, through the removal of unnecessary elements until the thing that remained was the thing that was true.

The KGB article was good. The KGB article was good because the KGB article did the thing that journalism was supposed to do, which was to begin with what the reader expected and end with what the reader needed, and the beginning was the joke and the ending was Mrs. Volkov's story, and the distance between the beginning and the ending was the article's achievement, because the distance was traveled without the reader noticing the traveling, the reader arriving at the biography having departed from the comedy, the arrival not a landing but a discovery, and the discovery was the function of writing, and the function was what Canterbilly taught.

The Crusader article was better. The Crusader article was better because the Crusader article did the thing that the KGB article did and did something additional, which was to make the reader uncomfortable, and the discomfort was necessary, and the necessity was the thing that Canterbilly believed and that Canterbilly had been teaching and that Canterbilly would, when the time came, articulate to Doublewe as a philosophy, the philosophy being: the function of education is not to shield students from life's unpleasantness but to expose them to it in conditions where the exposure can be processed, and the exposure was the writing and the processing was the reading and the conditions were the newspaper and the classroom and the hallway where the articles were read by 1,247 students who had walked past the gymnasium wall every day without seeing what the wall displayed, and the articles made them see it, and the seeing was uncomfortable, and the discomfort was the education.

Canterbilly had not articulated this philosophy to anyone. The philosophy existed in the same space where Nancy existed, in the interior of Canterbilly's life that was not available to the public because the public did not require access to it and because the access would have required Canterbilly to translate the philosophy from the language in which he thought it (the language of the clock, the language of the cathedral, the language of precision and maintenance and the moral act of measurement) into the language in which other people would receive it (the language of the meeting, the language of the memo, the language of "tone and content" and "community response"), and the translation was a reduction, and the reduction was a loss, and the loss was the thing Canterbilly refused

to perform, because performing it would have been the linguistic equivalent of inserting "very" into a sentence that did not require it, the weakening of a strong thing to make a weak audience comfortable, and Canterbilly's philosophy was not for weak audiences, Canterbilly's philosophy was for Ares.

He knew what Doublewe would do next year. He knew because Doublewe's behavior was a pattern and patterns were Canterbilly's field of expertise, the field not journalism but language, and language was patterns, and Doublewe's pattern was the pattern of an administrator whose administration was organized around the management of perception, and the perception that the articles had produced was the perception that the school newspaper was publishing content that made people uncomfortable, and the discomfort had produced the phone call from downtown, and the phone call had produced the memo, and the memo had been placed under the donut box, and the donut box had been placed on the memo, and the placement was Canterbilly's response, and the response was: the memo is beneath the donut, and the donut is the priority, and the priority is not the memo.

Doublewe would escalate. Doublewe would schedule the meeting he had been requesting. Doublewe would use the words "editorial oversight" and "faculty responsibility" and "community standards," and the words would be the weapons, and the weapons would be aimed at the Krugerand and at Canterbilly and at the articles that Ares and Crew had written, and the aiming would be the action, and the action would require a response, and the response would be the philosophy, and the philosophy would be articulated for the first time in a meeting with an audience of one, the audience being Doublewe, and the articulation would be the thing Canterbilly had been preparing for without preparing for it, because the preparation was the teaching, and the teaching was the preparation, and the two were the same thing, the same mechanism, the same spring-driven movement producing the same continuous operation.

He did not care. The not-caring was not indifference. The not-caring was the opposite of indifference. The not-caring was the confidence of a man who had been teaching for twenty-six years and who had, in twenty-six years, identified the thing that teaching was for, and the thing teaching was for was not the test score or the grade or the transcript or the college application, the thing teaching was for was the moment when a student wrote a sentence that the student did not know the student could write, the moment when the sentence arrived on the page and the student looked at the sentence and the sentence looked back and the looking-back was the recognition, the student recognizing in the sentence a version of themselves they had not previously met, and the meeting was the education, and the education was the thing that Doublewe could not touch, because Doublewe's authority extended to the building and the budget and the memo and the meeting, and Doublewe's authority did not extend to the sentence, because the sentence was between the student and the page and the page was not in Doublewe's jurisdiction, the page was in Canterbilly's jurisdiction, and the jurisdiction was the journalism room, and the journalism room was the dead-end corridor on the second floor of the 1947 building, and the dead-end corridor was the cathedral, and the cathedral was maintained.

The writing was good. The writing was good because Ares was good and Crew was good and the two of them together were better than either of them separately, the partnership producing the thing that partnerships produce when the partnership is between a person who writes with precision and a person

who edits with architecture: sentences that cut in the right direction, delivered to an audience that did not know it needed cutting. The cutting was the journalism. The journalism was the writing. The writing was good. This was the assessment. The assessment was complete. The assessment required no additional data. The writing was good, and good writing was the thing Canterbilly cared about, and caring about it was the teaching, and the teaching was the clock, and the clock was ticking.

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Canterbilly finished the donut. He finished the Courier. He placed the red pen on the end table next to the lamp and the coaster and the small framed photograph that was face-down, the photograph face-down because the photograph was face-down, the face-down-ness a decision that had been made and not revised and that Canterbilly did not revise now, the photograph remaining face-down on the end table the way it had been face-down on the desk beneath the donut box in the journalism room, the face-down the position of a thing that was present and not displayed, a thing that was kept and not shown, and the keeping-without-showing was its own category of possession, the category that contained Nancy and the philosophy and the solitude and the clock and the father and the grandfather and the trip to Zurich and the purpose that was lost and the clock that survived the losing.

He pulled the bathrobe tighter. The bathrobe was flannel, gray, purchased at the same IGA where the donuts were purchased, the IGA serving as Canterbilly's general commissary, the store providing both the sustenance and the garments, the efficiency of a man who consolidated his commerce into a single location because the consolidation reduced the number of social encounters required per week, and the reduction was the goal, and the goal was the privacy, and the privacy was the house, and the house was the clock, and the clock was ticking.

The couch held him. The couch's impression received his body the way the couch's impression always received his body, with the familiarity of a surface that had memorized the weight and the shape and the distribution, the memorization a form of loyalty, the loyalty the only kind available to a piece of furniture, which is the kind that does not require reciprocation, which is the most reliable kind.

He closed his eyes. The closing was not a decision but a surrender, the body's acknowledgment that the day was complete, the Saturday complete, the donut consumed, the Courier marked, the clock wound, the gap closed, the five minutes absorbed, the articles assessed, the philosophy held, the meeting anticipated, the care maintained, the not-caring established, the writing good, the students gone, the building empty, the dead-end corridor dark, the press covered, the telephone silent, the donut box on the desk and the memo beneath the donut box and the donut box the priority and the priority the donut and the donut consumed and the consuming complete and the complete the day and the day the Saturday and the Saturday the couch and the couch the body and the body the breath and the breath the slowing and the slowing the sleep.

He fell asleep.

The clock ticked.

The clock ticked in the hallway where the clock lived and the tick traveled through the house the way the tick had traveled through the house for sixty years, through the hallway and the living room and the kitchen and the bedroom and the bathroom and the spaces between the rooms, the spaces where the walls were, the tick penetrating the walls because the tick was sound and sound penetrated walls and the penetration was the clock's reach, the clock's authority extending through the house by the mechanism of sound, the sound the evidence that the clock was running and the running the evidence that the spring had energy and the energy the evidence that Canterbilly had wound the clock and the winding the evidence that Canterbilly was alive and the alive the evidence that the house was occupied and the occupied the evidence that the solitude was not abandonment, the solitude was a man in a house with a clock.

The tick continued.

The breath slowed.

The tick continued.

The breath slowed further.

The tick continued for exactly as long as the breath continued, because the clock and the man were synchronized, the two mechanisms operating in the same rhythm, the clock's mechanism the spring and the escapement and the gear train and the hands, the man's mechanism the lungs and the heart and the blood and the brain, and the two mechanisms had been synchronized for fifty-three years, and the synchronization was the bond, and the bond was the thing that produced the phenomenon that no watchmaker could explain and no physician could diagnose, the phenomenon being: when Canterbilly fell asleep, the clock stopped.

Not immediately. Not with the abruptness of a mechanism failing. The clock slowed. The tick lengthened. The space between the ticks widened. The widening was gradual, the way the slowing of breath is gradual, the way the descent into sleep is gradual, the gradual the signature of a process that is not a stopping but a settling, a system finding its resting state, and the resting state of the clock was the resting state of the man, and the resting state was silence.

The room went silent.

The hallway went silent.

The house went silent.

The silence was not the silence of a house where a clock had broken. The silence was the silence of a house where a clock and a man had fallen asleep together, the two mechanisms releasing each other from the obligation of continuous operation, the obligation suspended by the sleep, the sleep the permission, the permission the only thing that stopped the clock, because the clock ran when Canterbilly was awake and the clock stopped when Canterbilly was asleep, and the stopping was not a failure and the stopping was not a malfunction, the stopping was the clock's loyalty, the clock's version of the couch's loyalty, the loyalty of an object that has been with a person so long that the object's operation is no longer independent of the person's operation, the two operations linked by the bond of

sixty years of shared habitation, the bond producing the phenomenon, the phenomenon producing the silence, and the silence was the rest, and the rest was earned, and the earned was the day, and the day was Saturday, and Saturday was over, and the clock was stopped, and Canterbilly was asleep, and the house was quiet, and the quiet was the sound of a man and his clock at the end of a day at the end of a summer at the end of a year in which two students had written articles that were good and a principal had thrown them at a wastebasket and missed, and the missing was the future, and the future would arrive when the clock started again, and the clock would start when Canterbilly woke, and the waking would be Sunday, and Sunday would be the winding, and the winding would be the ritual, and the ritual would be the responsibility, and the responsibility would be the teaching, and the teaching would be the fall, and the fall was coming, and the fall was sophomore year, and sophomore year was the year that everything would happen.

But not tonight. Tonight the clock was stopped and the man was sleeping and the silence was the rest, and the rest was the only peace available to a man who lived alone in a house with a clock and a couch and a bathrobe and a red pen and a philosophy he had not yet spoken and a fiction named Nancy and a photograph that was face-down and a cathedral that needed maintaining.

The silence held.

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Chapter 24: The Diagnosis Spreads

Puck told him on a Wednesday. Puck told him in the kitchen, at the table, in the middle of a sentence about something else, the something else being the heating ducts and a noise Puck had heard in the junction above the bathroom, a noise that Puck described as "a rattle, like a marble in a pipe," and the description was Puck's language, the language of infrastructure, the language of a person who understood buildings the way other people understood weather, by listening to them and interpreting the sounds they produced. Puck was describing the rattle and then Puck was not describing the rattle. Puck was describing something else.

"The rattle is like my neck," Puck said. "Something loose in the system. Except the rattle in the duct is a screw and the rattle in my neck is cancer."

The word arrived in the kitchen the way it had arrived in Dr. Stannard's office nine months ago, except that Ares had not been in Dr. Stannard's office, Ares had been at school, Ares had been in the journalism room sharpening a pencil at 4:17 while the word was being spoken in an office on Garrett Avenue, the word entering the Taler family's vocabulary without Ares' knowledge, the way a virus enters a body without the body's knowledge, the entry silent, the entry producing no symptoms until the symptoms appear, and the symptoms were: Mom's list in the drawer, the appointments, the drives to the hospital, Puck's absences from school, the medication at 4:00 and 8:00 and midnight, Julie's administration of the medication, the household reorganizing itself around a word that Ares had not been given.

Nine months. The word had been in the household for nine months and Ares had not been told. Nine months was the time it took for a human being to develop from conception to birth, and the comparison was obscene but accurate, because the diagnosis had been conceived in Dr. Stannard's office and had gestated in the household for nine months and was now being born in the kitchen, in the middle of a sentence about a rattle in a duct, delivered by the person the diagnosis belonged to, the person whose neck contained the thing the word described.

"Cancer," Ares said. The repetition was not a question. The repetition was the processing, the same processing Mom had performed when Albert's call came about the airplane, the word repeated to confirm that the word had been spoken, except that Mom's repetition had been "he did what" and Ares' repetition was the word itself, the word repeated without modification, without question mark, without inflection, the word spoken flat, the word placed on the kitchen table the way you place an object on a table to examine it, the object heavy, the object requiring the table's surface to hold it because the hand that had been holding it could not hold it alone.

"Osteosarcoma," Puck said. "Which is a word that sounds like a dinosaur and is not a dinosaur. It's a bone cancer. In the cervical spine. Which is my neck. Which is where the headaches were." Puck touched his neck, the right side, below the ear. "The federal headache. The one that paid its taxes on

time."

The joke was the deflection. The joke was the mechanism Puck used to create distance between himself and the word, the same distance the ducts created between Puck and the household, the distance not a rejection but a management strategy, the management of a thing too large to hold by wrapping it in something small enough to carry, the something being the joke, the joke about the dinosaur and the federal headache, the joke performing the same function as the cherry on the vodka, the camouflage, the surface disguising the content, except that Puck's camouflage was not dishonest, Puck's camouflage was the honesty of a person who could only deliver the truth if the truth was packaged in a container that the delivery could survive, and the container was the joke, and the delivery was this moment in the kitchen.

"Hereditary," Puck said. "Through Mom's side. Grandpa had it. Grandpa died of it. Which you knew about Grandpa but didn't know about the hereditary part, because the hereditary part is the part nobody told you, because the hereditary part is the part that means you and Julie need to get screened, which is a word that sounds like they're going to show you a movie and is not a movie."

Ares looked at Puck. Puck was sitting across the kitchen table in the chair that Puck always sat in, the chair closest to the doorway that led to the hallway that contained the duct access in the floor, the access covered by a vent that Puck had unscrewed and rescrewed so many times that the screws were worn and the vent lifted with a push rather than a turn, the ease of access a metaphor for Puck's relationship to the house, the house as accessible to Puck as it was to the air, Puck moving through the house's hidden architecture the way the air moved through the ducts, invisibly, continuously, and the invisibility was the thing Ares was seeing through for the first time, because the cancer was in Puck's neck and Puck's neck was visible and the visible neck contained an invisible thing and the invisible thing was killing his brother.

"The shrug," Puck said, "is supposed to look casual." Puck shrugged. The shrug did not look casual. The shrug looked like a seventeen-year-old boy performing the physical gesture of indifference with a body that was not indifferent, the body's performance undermined by the body's knowledge, the knowledge being: this is not casual, this is the most un-casual thing I have ever done, telling my brother that the word that has been in this household for nine months is now in his vocabulary, and his vocabulary is now changed, and the change is permanent.

"The shrug does not look casual," Ares said.

"I know."

"How long have you known."

"Nine months."

"How long has Mom known."

"Nine months."

"How long has Julie known."

"Eight months. Julie found out a month later. Julie found out because Julie finds out everything because Julie's instrument detects everything."

"Dad."

"Dad knows. Dad was called. Dad came home for a weekend. Dad went back to flying."

"Dad came home and went back to flying."

"Dad's response to a crisis is departure. This is not new information."

Ares sat at the kitchen table and held the word. The word was on the table where he had placed it and the word was in his hands because his hands were on the table and the table held the word and the hands held the table and the holding was the only activity available, and the word was cancer, and the cancer was in Puck's neck, and the cancer was hereditary, and the hereditary was the part that changed everything, and the everything had been changing for nine months without his knowledge.

"Why didn't anyone tell me," Ares said.

The question was not angry. The question would become angry later, the anger arriving after the processing the way thunder arrives after lightning, the delay proportional to the distance, and the distance was nine months, and the thunder would be significant. But the question, in the kitchen, at the table, was not angry. The question was the question of a person who had been excluded from the most important piece of information in his household and who was asking, without anger, why the exclusion had occurred, the asking a genuine inquiry, the inquiry seeking the data, the data required before the assessment could be performed.

"Mom decided," Puck said. "Mom decided that you were fourteen and that fourteen was not old enough to carry this, and that the carrying would interfere with the writing, and the writing was the thing you needed to be doing, and doing the writing required not carrying the diagnosis, and not carrying the diagnosis required not knowing the diagnosis, and not knowing was the protection. Mom's word. Protection."

"Mom protected me from the information that my brother has cancer."

"Mom protected you from the carrying. The carrying is different from the knowing. You can know now. You're knowing now. The carrying is what happens after the knowing, and the carrying is what Mom wanted to delay, because the carrying changes the person who carries it, and Mom wanted the person you were becoming to finish becoming before the carrying changed the becoming."

Ares looked at the kitchen clock. The kitchen clock was the Sears clock, the battery-operated clock with the white face and the black numbers, the clock that was correct and indifferent, the clock that had ticked while Puck and Linda sat at this same table nine months ago with the beer and the list and the silence, the clock that had measured the nine months during which the household had carried the word without Ares, the clock whose indifference was the thing Ares understood about clocks, which was that clocks measured time without caring about what time contained, and the time contained cancer, and the clock did not care, and the not-caring was correct, because caring was not the clock's function, and function was the thing that mattered, and Ares' function was the writing, and the writing was the thing

Mom had been protecting, and the protecting was the exclusion, and the exclusion was nine months.

He did not cry. He did not shout. He sat at the kitchen table and held the word and the word held him, and the holding was the only activity available, and the activity required time, and the time was the processing, and the processing was not ready.

"I'm going to my room," Ares said.

"Okay," Puck said.

The "okay" was Puck's "okay," which was different from Bergie's "okay" and different from Andy's "okay," Puck's "okay" the word that a brother uses when a brother has delivered the word and the brother who received it needs to go to his room, and the needing-to-go is understood, and the understanding is the "okay," and the "okay" is the permission, and the permission is the love, and the love is the thing that survives the word, the thing that the word cannot kill even though the word can kill the person who contains it.

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Ares went to his room. He closed the door. He sat on the military-neat bed and stared at the wall.

The wall was white. The wall had been white since the family had moved into the house, the white the builder's default, the color of absence, the color that was not a color but the condition of a surface that had not been given a color, and the surface held the staring the way the table held the word, by being there, by being the thing that the staring required, a surface that reflected nothing and revealed nothing and demanded nothing, and the nothing was the thing Ares needed, the nothing was the space between the input and the output, the space where the processing occurred.

The processing occurred for eleven minutes. Ares knew it was eleven minutes because the clock on his desk (a small alarm clock, battery-operated, not a Sears clock but an Equity clock, purchased at the Westborough five-and-dime, the clock's function not to tell time but to wake him at 6:00 for school, the function currently unnecessary because it was summer, but the clock remained set because the setting was the discipline and the discipline was the structure and the structure was the bed) read 5:33 when he sat down and 5:44 when he opened the notebook.

He opened the notebook. The notebook was the notebook, the notebook that had been on the desk since September, the notebook that Canterbilly's red pen had never touched because Canterbilly's red pen touched the articles and the assignments and the Krugerand, and the notebook was not the Krugerand, the notebook was the private thing, the thing between the hand and the page, the thing that existed in the solitude that the writing required. The notebook was open. The pencil was in his hand. The pencil was sharp because the pencil was always sharp because the pencil sharpener operated at 10:15 every morning and the operation produced the sharpness and the sharpness produced the writing and the writing was the output and the output was beginning.

He wrote.

What he wrote was not an article. What he wrote was not an assignment. What he wrote was the thing the wall had given him during the eleven minutes of staring, the thing the processing had

produced from the input of the word and the nine months and the exclusion and the brother across the kitchen table with the joke about the dinosaur and the shrug that did not look casual.

He wrote about a beach. The beach was not a real beach. Indiana did not have beaches. Indiana had lakes with shores and the shores had sand but the sand was not a beach, a beach being a thing that requires an ocean and an ocean being a thing that Indiana did not have, the ocean being elsewhere, the elsewhere being the coasts, the coasts being the places where other people lived and where the sand met the water at a scale that Indiana's lakes could not replicate. The beach was a metaphor. The beach was the place Ares built with the pencil on the page, the place where the metaphor lived, and the metaphor was this:

Every person is a grain of sand on a beach. The beach is the world. The grains are the people. The grains are uncountable and indistinguishable and the beach does not care about any individual grain because the beach is the beach and the grain is the grain and the beach's function is not to care about grains but to be a beach, and being a beach requires grains but does not require any specific grain, and the not-requiring of any specific grain is the condition of the beach, and the condition of the beach is the condition of the world, and the world does not care about your brother's cancer because the world is the beach and your brother is a grain and the grain can be removed without the beach noticing, because the beach has more grains than the beach can count, and the counting is not the beach's function, and the function is to be a beach.

But. The but was the turn. The but was the pivot that the KGB article had taught him, the pivot from the expected to the needed, the gear change that was not a gear change, the gearless transition from one truth to a different truth. But: if you are the grain next to the grain that is removed, you notice. The beach does not notice. The world does not notice. But you notice. Because the grain that was next to you is gone and the space where the grain was is now empty and the empty is the size of a grain of sand, which is very small, which is almost nothing, which is the most important almost-nothing in your life because the almost-nothing is your brother.

He wrote this. He wrote it rough. He wrote it angry. The roughness was the anger and the anger was the processing's output and the output was the first draft and the first draft was the thing that would be revised, later, over months, over the fall and the winter and the spring, revised through the mechanism that Canterbilly had installed in him, the mechanism of the red pen, the mechanism that removed the "very" and the "quite" and the "really" until the thing that remained was the thing that was true, and the true thing would be polished, later, and the polished thing would be delivered, later, to Andy and Crew in Episode One, on the bleachers, the grain-of-sand speech that would become the thing that defined Ares' relationship to the world, the speech that was a metaphor and that began here, in this room, on this bed, on this evening, as a rough and angry paragraph written by a fifteen-year-old boy who had just learned that his brother had cancer and that his mother had kept it from him and that the keeping was love and the love was exclusion and the exclusion was nine months and the nine months were the space between the word and the knowing and the knowing was now and the now was the notebook and the notebook was the page and the page was the grain of sand.

The beach was not yet a metaphor. The beach was a place. The beach was the place where his brother was dying. The dying was not a metaphor. The dying was the word, the word that Puck had not used because Puck had used "cancer" and "osteosarcoma" and "hereditary" and "treatable" but had not used "dying" because "dying" was the word that the other words were designed to keep at a distance, the way the jokes were designed to keep the truth at a distance, the way the cherry was designed to keep the ethanol at a distance, every system designed to keep its most dangerous element at a distance, and the distance was the management, and the management was the household, and the household was the thing Ares was writing about even though Ares did not know he was writing about the household, Ares believed he was writing about a beach, and the beach was the household, and the household was the beach, and the grains were the family, and the family was losing a grain, and the losing was the thing the notebook held, and the holding was the writing, and the writing was the only response Ares had, and the only response was sufficient, because the only response was the thing Canterbilly had given him, the thing the journalism room had given him, the thing the dead-end corridor had given him, which was: when the world gives you something you cannot carry, you write it down, and the writing carries it for you, and the carrying is the function, and the function is the writing, and the writing is the thing.

He wrote until the Equity clock read 7:30. He wrote for one hour and forty-six minutes. He filled seven pages. The seven pages were rough and angry and imprecise and contained four instances of "very" that Canterbilly's ghost red pen would have circled, and the instances were there because the anger needed them, and the anger was permitted, and the permission was the notebook, and the notebook was not the Krugerand, and the notebook's standards were not the Krugerand's standards, and the notebook's standards were: write what you need to write, and fix it later, and the later is the craft, and the craft is the revision, and the revision is the teaching, and the teaching is the fall, and the fall is coming.

He closed the notebook. He put the pencil down. He sat on the military-neat bed and looked at the wall again, the white wall, the wall that had given him the beach and the grain and the rough angry paragraph, and the wall was white and the wall was silent and the wall was the same wall it had been eleven minutes before the notebook opened, except the wall was different now because Ares was different now, because the notebook had changed him, the writing had changed him, the way the writing always changed him, by converting the thing he could not carry into the thing he could read, and the reading was the distance, and the distance was the management, and the management was not Mom's management and not Julie's management, the management was Ares' management, and Ares' management was the writing, and the writing was the grain of sand, and the grain of sand was Puck, and Puck was in the kitchen or in the ducts or in the car that drove to the hospital, and Puck was his brother, and his brother had cancer, and the cancer was a word, and the word was on seven rough angry pages in a notebook on a desk in a room with a military-neat bed and a pile of football equipment that had become furniture.

He went downstairs. Puck was in the kitchen. Puck was eating cereal. The cereal was the evening meal that Puck ate when the household's dinner schedule did not align with Puck's appetite, the appetite

reduced by the treatment, the treatment reducing the appetite the way it reduced the mass, through sustained application of energy to a target, the energy consuming the target and the appetite simultaneously.

Ares sat across from Puck. Ares did not speak. Puck did not speak. The not-speaking was the conversation, the conversation conducted in the language of two brothers who had been in the same household for fifteen years and who understood that the not-speaking was sometimes the most accurate form of speaking, the silence containing more than the words could contain, the silence holding the word and the nine months and the exclusion and the notebook and the beach and the grain and the anger and the love, the silence holding all of it the way the kitchen held all of it, by being the room where the holding happened.

The kitchen clock ticked. The Sears clock. The correct and indifferent clock. The clock that did not care about what time contained.

Puck ate his cereal.

Ares sat across from him.

The clock ticked.

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Chapter 25: The Eve of Sophomore Year

The night before the first day of sophomore year was a Sunday, and the Sunday contained all of them, the Sunday holding the eight lives and the four households and the two states and the one town the way a stage holds actors before the curtain rises, the actors in position, the lights not yet on, the audience not yet seated, the story not yet started but the story's conditions met, every condition met, every piece placed, every person in the location that the story required them to be in for the story to begin, and the story was about to begin.

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Ares was awake at 11:47 p.m. He was at his desk. The desk held the notebook (closed), the Equity alarm clock (set for 6:00), and three pencils, and Ares was sharpening the fourth.

The pencil sharpener was the hand-cranked sharpener he had used since seventh grade, a Boston Model KS, brass-colored, mounted to the edge of the desk with a clamp that left a mark on the wood that Linda had objected to once and had not objected to again because the objection had been met with a silence that communicated the sharpener's non-negotiability, the sharpener occupying the same category as the military-neat bed and the notebook: the category of things that were Ares' and that Ares' systems required and that the household had learned to accommodate.

He turned the crank. The pencil rotated against the blade. The shavings accumulated in the reservoir. The point emerged, precise, the graphite exposed in a cone that tapered to a terminus approximately one-sixteenth of an inch in diameter, the terminus the contact point between the pencil and the page, the contact point the place where the sentence would begin, and the sentence would begin tomorrow, or the sentence had already begun, the sentence had begun in September of freshman year when Canterbilly said "I did not ask what you want, I told you what you will do" and the telling was the beginning and the doing was the year and the year was over and the year had produced: the writing, the articles, the bread metaphor, the red pen's education, the friendship with Crew, the loss of Keithe, the grain-of-sand paragraph (rough, angry, seven pages, four instances of "very"), the diagnosis, the nine months, the notebook.

The pile of football equipment was still on the floor. The pile was now thirteen months old. The pile was furniture. The pile had been furniture since September and was now permanent in the way that decisions become permanent when the reversal of the decision becomes more difficult than the continuation, and the continuation was the pile, and the pile was the statement, and the statement was: I am not a football player, I am a writer, and the pile is the evidence, and the evidence is permanent.

He sharpened the fourth pencil. He placed it with the other three. Four pencils for the first day. Four pencils was the standard. The standard was the discipline. The discipline was Canterbilly's. The discipline was his.

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Crew was asleep on the floor of the bedroom on Sycamore, and the floor was covered with football equipment.

The equipment was not Crew's. The equipment belonged to the Westborough High School athletic department and had been issued to Crew on Friday afternoon during equipment distribution, the distribution a ritual of the fall sports season in which students who had signed up for football received the physical materials the sport required: helmet, shoulder pads, hip pads, thigh pads, knee pads, pants, jersey, and a practice jersey, the materials distributed by Coach Drucker with the efficiency of a man who had been distributing equipment for fourteen years and who regarded the distribution as a logistical event rather than a ceremonial one.

Crew had signed up for football because Crew had decided, during the summer, that the next collision required a sport, and the sport was football, because football was the sport that Westborough organized its identity around and because Crew's method of entering a system was to collide with its center rather than its periphery, and football was the center, and the collision would be spectacular and probably brief, and the spectacular brevity was the point.

He had tried on every piece. He had tried on every piece incorrectly. The helmet was backward, the face mask pointing at the ceiling. The shoulder pads were upside down, the neck roll pressing against his stomach. The hip pads were in the shoulder pad slots. The thigh pads were in the hip pad slots. The knee pads were on his elbows. The jersey was on his legs. The pants were on his arms. The arrangement was a complete inversion of the equipment's intended configuration, every piece placed in the wrong location with a consistency that suggested the wrongness was systematic rather than accidental, and the systematic wrongness was Crew's method of learning a system, which was to get every element wrong first and then get every element right, the wrongness the necessary precondition for the rightness, the way a map must be read upside down before it can be read right-side up, the inversion producing the understanding that the right-side-up alone could not produce.

He had fallen asleep in the equipment. He was on the floor because the equipment did not fit on the bed and the bed did not fit the equipment and Crew had chosen the floor because the floor was the only surface large enough to contain both the body and the wrong equipment and the sleeping, and the sleeping was deep, and the deep sleeping was the sleeping of a person who was not afraid of tomorrow because tomorrow was football and the newspaper and Ares and the hallway and the second year of a life that had begun when a car crossed the Indiana border and the flatness started and the flatness had not yet ended and might never end and the not-ending was fine, the not-ending was the condition, and the condition was Westborough, and Westborough was home now, and home was the floor of a bedroom on Sycamore with football equipment on backward.

The razor was on the bathroom counter. The razor had still not shaved anything. The razor's animal instincts remained theoretical. The blades still cost $79.88. Some things endure.

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Stan was in a parking lot. The parking lot was behind the Shop-N-Save on Route 12, the parking lot empty at midnight except for Mike's car and Mike's cooler and Mike and Stan, the two of them on the hood, the hood warm from the engine even though the engine had been off for an hour because the August heat was in the metal and the metal released the heat slowly, the way the earth releases the day's heat slowly after sunset, the release gradual, the gradual the only speed the metal knew.

The beer was warm. The beer was the last beer. The cooler had contained twelve beers at 9:00 and contained zero beers at midnight, the twelve distributed between the two of them at a rate that Stan did not calculate because the calculation would have produced a number and the number would have been a measurement and the measurement would have been a fact and the fact would have been the kind of fact that Julie's instrument would have detected and Julie's instrument was not here, Julie's instrument was in the Taler house on Edgewood in a room with a new perfume and a textbook and a thermostat, and Julie's instrument was not Stan's concern tonight, and the not-being-his-concern was the beer, and the beer was the not-concerning, and the not-concerning was warm and flat and the last one.

Mike was talking about sophomore year. Mike was a junior now. Mike's promotion from sophomore to junior had not changed Mike's behavior because Mike's behavior was not calibrated to grade level, Mike's behavior was calibrated to Mike, and Mike's calibration was the same calibration it had always been: the Default, the volume, the darkroom, the math book, the cherry vodka, the cocaine, the boot on the backpack, the system running the way the system ran, the system not requiring adjustment because the system was Mike and Mike did not adjust, Mike operated.

Stan drank the warm beer and looked at the parking lot and the parking lot was empty and the empty was the condition and the condition was the night before sophomore year and sophomore year was the year that everything would happen and everything was in the future and the future was a foreign language and the beer was the only phrase Stan knew in that language and the phrase meant: not yet, not yet, not yet.

The dream would come tonight. The forest, the chase, the tent, the empty. The dream would come because the dream came every night and tonight was a night and the coming was certain. Stan finished the beer. He put the can on the hood. The can sat on the hood next to the other cans, the cans accumulating on the metal surface the way the beers accumulated in the body, the accumulation visible on the hood and invisible in the body, the visible and the invisible the two registries of the same event, the event being: Stan Harrison drank twelve divided by two beers on the night before sophomore year, and the night was warm, and the parking lot was empty, and Dayrl was in the drawer, and Julie was in the house, and the dream was coming.

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Andy was in a car. The car was on Interstate 74, eastbound, the highway a line drawn across the surface of Illinois, the line connecting Wisconsin to Indiana through the mechanism of concrete and paint and the sustained forward motion of a vehicle containing four people, a dog (a beagle named Chester whose beagling had been limited to the Kenosha backyard and who was now beagling the interior of a station wagon with the bewildered enthusiasm of a dog encountering the concept of interstate travel for the

first time), and the contents of a house that had been packed into boxes and loaded into a moving truck that was somewhere behind them on the same highway, the truck carrying the furniture and the dishes and the photographs and the everything-else, the everything-else the category that contains the things a family accumulates over seventeen years of occupying a house and that the family discovers, during the packing, it cannot name or categorize or explain but that it also cannot discard, the category that fills the last boxes, the boxes labeled "miscellaneous" in Ellen's handwriting, the handwriting of a fourth-grade teacher whose handwriting was calibrated to legibility because legibility was a professional requirement and the requirement had extended to the boxes, every box labeled, every label legible, every legible label a small act of order imposed on the disorder of relocation.

Craig was asleep in the backseat. Chester was asleep on Craig. Robert was driving. Ellen was in the passenger seat with a map open on her lap, the map the paper kind, the foldable kind, the kind that required the user to understand the relationship between the colored lines and the actual roads, the colored lines representing the roads the way sheet music represents music, as notation, as instruction, as a set of symbols that produce, when followed, the thing they represent.

Andy was in the backseat next to Craig and Chester, and the bag was on his lap, and the bag contained the book. The book was "American Verse: Selections," dark blue cover, cracked spine, cream-colored title, seventy-five cents, Twice Told bookstore, Kenosha. The book was in the bag because the bag was where the important things were, the things Andy wanted access to during the drive, and the book was important because the book contained the language that did things regular language did not do, the compressed language, the language that reflected more than it contained.

The highway was dark. The headlights illuminated the concrete in a cone of light that moved with the car, the cone revealing the road in real time, the road arriving in the light and departing in the dark, the arrival and the departure continuous, the road both appearing and disappearing simultaneously, and the simultaneity was the drive, and the drive was the move, and the move was the thing Andy had assessed at the dinner table in June, the assessment complete, the assessment being: what am I losing and what might I gain, and the losing was known and the gaining was unknown and the unknown was the openness and the openness was the dark beyond the headlights, the road that existed but that had not yet been illuminated, the road arriving in the light only when the car reached it.

Westborough was approximately two hours away. Westborough was a word Andy had seen on the map and on the school enrollment forms and on the lease for the house his parents had rented sight unseen and that would be, by morning, the house where Andy lived. The word did not yet contain what it would contain. The word did not yet contain the journalism room or the dead-end corridor or the Krugerand or Ares or Crew or Julie or the gymnasium wall or the mascot or the bleachers or the wire or the cameras or any of the things that the word would accumulate over the year that was about to begin. The word was empty. The word was a room that had not yet been furnished. The word was the space where Andy's loneliness would end, because the space would contain the thing the loneliness lacked, which was the specific version of belonging that Andy had never experienced in Kenosha, the belonging that was not sufficient but necessary, and the necessary belonging was in Westborough, and Westborough was two hours away, and the highway was dark, and the headlights were on, and the road

was arriving.

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Julie was in her room. The room was dark. The textbook was closed. The bed was made. The perfume was on the dresser.

The perfume was new. The perfume was not morning dew on roses. The perfume was citrus and cedar and something underneath the citrus and the cedar that the saleswoman at the Westborough Pharmacy counter had called "amber" and that Julie called "intention," because the perfume smelled like a decision, and the decision was the summer, and the summer was the space in which Julie had decided that the girl who wore the previous perfume was a girl who waited and the girl who wore this perfume was a girl who did not wait, and the not-waiting was the change, and the change was the perfume, and the perfume was the outward sign of a decision she had made without telling anyone because the decision did not require anyone's input, the decision was Julie's, the decision was the thermostat, and the thermostat was set, and the setting was new.

She lay in the dark and listened to the house. The house sounded like the house always sounded at midnight: the refrigerator's hum, the clock's tick, Puck somewhere in the walls, Ares' pencil sharpener (silent now, but the silence of a machine that had recently operated, the residual attention of a room that had recently contained a sound), Mom in the kitchen (the list, the drawer, the shuffle of paper that was the sound of a woman managing the unmanageable), Albert absent (the absence a sound, the sound of a chair that was not occupied, the aviation magazine that was not being read, the holding pattern that was being held somewhere else).

Tomorrow she would go to school. Tomorrow she would wear the new perfume. Tomorrow the hallway would receive her the way the hallway received everyone, through the assessment that the hallway performed on every body that moved through it. But the hallway's assessment of Julie would detect the change, the hallway's collective instrument would register the citrus and the cedar and the intention, and the registering would be the announcement, and the announcement was: I have changed, and the changing is mine, and the mine is the thing I am carrying into sophomore year, and sophomore year is the year that everything happens, and everything includes a boy from Wisconsin who will walk into the building with a book of poems in his bag and a loneliness that matches my own, and the matching is the thing I do not know yet, and the not-knowing is tomorrow, and tomorrow is close.

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Bergie was in his room at the house on Oak Street in Westborough, and in the closet there was something his mother did not know about.

The fresh start had been last year. The fresh start had been the transfer from Northside to Westborough in the fall, the administrative mechanism by which Mrs. Bergman's hope had been converted into a different hallway with a different locker number and a different set of corridors, and the fresh start had lasted approximately three weeks before Mike Redson singled him out at the senior junction on a Monday morning and the system resumed its operations in the new building with the old

terms, the terms unchanged by the geography, the tax assessed at the same rate by a different collector who was worse than the previous collector because Mike Redson was worse than Dale in every dimension that mattered, and the dimensions that mattered were creativity and persistence and the particular quality of cruelty that does not require an audience to sustain itself.

Tomorrow was not a fresh start. Tomorrow was the return. Tomorrow was Westborough High School reopening for sophomore year, and Bergie had survived nine months of it as a freshman and the surviving had not produced the adaptation his mother believed it had produced. His mother believed the transfer had worked. His mother believed the sentence she had spoken in April, the four words at the kitchen table between the meatloaf and the milk, had produced the standing-up she intended. His mother saw a boy who came home from school at conversational volume and ate dinner and went to his room and closed the door, and the conversational volume and the eating and the closing were the evidence of functionality, and the evidence was wrong, but the evidence was what Mrs. Bergman had, because the evidence was all Bergie gave her, because giving her more would have required opening the file, and the file contained the boot on the backpack and the bracket in the cafeteria and the locker corridor and the bathroom grammar, and opening the file would have produced the second sentence, and the second sentence was not something Bergie wanted his mother to have to speak.

In the closet, behind the box that contained the new model B-17, there was a paper bag. The paper bag was brown. The paper bag was folded at the top. The paper bag contained an object that Bergie had acquired during the trip to Dayton in July, the trip to visit the uncle, the trip during which the family had eaten dinner and watched television and performed the rituals of a family visit, and during the performing of the rituals Bergie had gone to the uncle's closet, the closet whose contents he had measured and filed two years ago (top shelf, behind the shoe boxes, left side), and the uncle's closet had contained the thing the filing described, and the thing was now in the paper bag, and the paper bag was in Bergie's closet, and the closet was in the room, and the room was in the house on Oak Street, and the house was in Westborough.

The object weighed 1.2 pounds. The object was approximately 9 inches long. The object was dark gray, almost black. The object was a .22 caliber revolver.

Bergie did not look at the paper bag. Bergie lay in bed and looked at the ceiling and the ceiling was white, the way Ares' wall was white, the color of absence, the surface that reflected nothing and revealed nothing. Tomorrow was not the unknown. Tomorrow was the known. Tomorrow was Mike Redson in the hallway and the locker and the cafeteria and the bathroom, the same geography he had mapped for nine months, every corridor measured, every route timed, every exit cataloged. The paper bag was in the closet and the closet was closed and the closed was the condition and the condition was the night before the return and the return was tomorrow and tomorrow was Westborough and Westborough was the hallway and the hallway was the system and the system was the tax and the tax had been assessed for nine months and the nine months had produced the paper bag.

The paper bag was the interpretation. The paper bag was the gap. The paper bag was the four feet of kitchen table between "stand up and tell a teacher" and "whatever it takes." Mrs. Bergman was asleep

in the next room, and Mrs. Bergman did not know about the paper bag, and the not-knowing was the gap's product, the thing the gap had manufactured in the five months between April and September, the manufacturing slow and quiet and conducted in the private space of a boy's interpretation of a mother's sentence, the interpretation growing into a plan and the plan growing into a drive to Dayton and the drive growing into a closet and the closet growing into a paper bag and the paper bag containing the thing that the gap produced, and the paper bag was the plan, and the plan was the thing his mother did not know about, and the not-knowing was the gap, and the gap was getting wider.

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Puck was in the heating ducts. Puck was in the junction above the kitchen, the junction where three ducts met, the junction that provided auditory access to the kitchen and the living room and the hallway, the junction that was Puck's surveillance post, the post from which Puck had listened to the household for four years, the listening the function, the function the only function available to a body that was occupied by a mass and that compensated for the occupation by occupying the house, the house's hidden architecture the territory Puck controlled because the territory above the ceiling was the territory nobody else wanted and the not-wanting was the vacancy and the vacancy was Puck's.

He listened. He heard Mom in the kitchen (the list, the drawer, the paper). He heard Julie in her room (the silence of a person who was awake and still, the stillness audible through its distinction from the house's other sounds). He heard Ares in his room (the silence of a person who had finished sharpening and was now sitting, the sitting audible through the absence of the sharpener's sound). He heard the kitchen clock (the tick, the correct and indifferent tick, the tick that would be there when Puck was not there, the tick that would outlast the mass and the treatment and the radiation and the pills and the corridor and the machine, the tick permanent in a way that Puck's listening was not permanent, and the not-permanent was the fact, and the fact was the mass, and the mass was the thing Puck carried in his neck the way Ares carried the notebook and Stan carried the mouse and Bergie carried the paper bag, each of them carrying their thing, each thing heavy, each heaviness private).

He listened. The house was quiet. The house was full. The house held them. Tomorrow they would leave the house and go to the building and the building would hold them differently, the building's holding a public holding, the holding of an institution rather than a household, and the institutional holding was the school, and the school was Westborough High, and Westborough High was the place where everything would happen.

Puck lay in the duct and listened to the house sleep and did not sleep himself, because sleeping in the ducts was not sleeping but resting, and resting was what the body did when the body could not sleep, and the body could not sleep because the body knew what tomorrow was, and tomorrow was the beginning of the year that the audience would watch, and the audience did not know they were the audience yet, and the cameras were not here yet, and the wire was not here yet, but the conditions were met, and the conditions were the characters, and the characters were in position, and the position was the night, and the night was ending.

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Canterbilly wound the clock at 11:55 p.m. The winding was not scheduled. The eight-day cycle did not require a winding tonight. The winding was precautionary, a supplement, the addition of energy to a spring that still had energy, the addition performed because tomorrow was the first day of school and the first day of school required the clock to be at full capacity, the full capacity a metaphor for the preparation, the preparation the winding, the winding the ritual, the ritual the discipline.

He turned the key. Thirty-two half-turns. Full capacity. The clock ticked with the authority of a mechanism that had been wound to its maximum, the tick not louder but fuller, the fullness the quality that a spring-driven clock produces when the spring is tight and the energy is abundant, the abundance the readiness, the readiness the thing Canterbilly offered to the fall.

He had laid out his clothes. The clothes were on the chair in the bedroom: a white shirt, a brown tie, brown trousers, a corduroy jacket with elbow patches that had been patched themselves, the patches patched, the jacket a palimpsest of repair, each repair a layer, each layer a year, the jacket containing the history of Canterbilly's teaching the way the clock contained the history of the family, through the surfaces, through the marks that time left on the things it passed through.

The donut box was in the car. Six glazed, purchased at the IGA that afternoon, the box on the passenger seat, the passenger seat the only seat in the car that was ever occupied by anything other than the driver, the anything being the donuts, the donuts the only passenger, the only company on the drive from the house on Birch Street to the school on Elm Street, the drive seven minutes, the seven minutes the distance between the private and the public, the clock and the classroom, the silence and the teaching.

Tomorrow Ares would walk into the journalism room. Tomorrow Crew would walk in behind him or before him or at the same time, the timing irrelevant because the arrival was the event and the arrival was certain. Tomorrow Stan would arrive changed and the change would be visible. Tomorrow a new student named Andy Harper might or might not find the dead-end corridor. Tomorrow the Krugerand would publish its first issue of sophomore year. Tomorrow Doublewe would schedule the meeting. Tomorrow the teaching would begin again, and the beginning would be the winding, and the winding would be the clock, and the clock would tick, and the ticking would be the year, and the year would be the year that everything happened.

The clock ticked. Canterbilly went to bed. The clock did not stop. The clock did not stop because Canterbilly did not sleep, not yet, Canterbilly lay in bed and listened to the clock tick through the wall and the ticking was the company and the company was sufficient and the sufficient was the night and the night was ending.

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Doublewe was at his desk at home, in the study, reading a memo. The memo was from the superintendent's office. The memo was dated the previous Friday. The memo contained the words "school newspaper," "community concerns," "editorial standards," and "your accountability," and the

words were the coordinates, the same coordinates as the previous memo except that the previous memo's coordinates had pointed toward "your office Monday morning" and these coordinates pointed toward "the board's attention," and "the board's attention" was a different altitude than "your office Monday morning," the altitude higher, the air thinner, the consequences more severe.

Doublewe read the memo twice. He placed the memo on the desk. He did not crumple it. He did not throw it at the wastebasket. The crumpling and the throwing had been the response to the previous memo, the response of a man whose first instinct was dismissal, and the first instinct had been wrong, and the wrongness had produced the second memo, and the second memo required a different response, and the different response was: action.

The action would be the meeting with Canterbilly. The action would be the words "editorial oversight" and "faculty responsibility" and "community standards." The action would be the weapon aimed at the Krugerand and at the articles and at the two students who had written them. The action would be Doublewe's attempt to manage the perception, and the perception was the board's perception, and the board's perception was the thing that determined Doublewe's continuation as principal, and the continuation was the thing Doublewe was managing, and the managing was the action, and the action was tomorrow, and tomorrow was the first day of school, and the first day of school was the beginning.

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Albert was somewhere over Nebraska. The altitude was 31,000 feet. The aircraft was a Boeing 727, not Albert's aircraft, not the aircraft Albert had walked away from, Albert's aircraft had been reassigned and Albert's route had been reassigned and Albert's status had been changed from "captain" to "first officer" because the airline's process going forward had produced a demotion rather than a termination, the demotion the compromise between the airline's desire to fire a pilot who had abandoned an aircraft on a taxiway and the airline's recognition that Albert Taler was, when Albert Taler was not walking away from airplanes, one of the most skilled pilots in the regional fleet, the skill the thing that saved the career, the skill the thing that the demotion preserved while the demotion punished.

Albert was in the right seat. The right seat was the first officer's seat. The left seat was the captain's seat. The captain was a man named Edwards who had not spoken to Albert about the incident because Edwards was a professional and professionals did not discuss incidents, professionals flew airplanes, and the flying was the thing Albert was doing, and the doing was the only state in which Albert reliably functioned, the doing the flying, the flying the doing, the two indistinguishable, Albert's identity and Albert's function fused in the cockpit at 31,000 feet over Nebraska while the household he had helped create was sleeping in Indiana and the sleeping was the thing Albert was missing and the missing was the thing Albert could not do, because missing required the capacity to feel the absence, and the capacity to feel the absence required the willingness to be present, and the willingness to be present was the thing Albert could not produce because the producing required landing, and landing was the thing Albert did least well, the paradox of a pilot who was brilliant in the air and incompetent on the ground, the brilliance and the incompetence two expressions of the same condition, the condition being: Albert Taler was a man who functioned at altitude and who failed at sea level.

Nebraska was dark below. The household was dark behind. The flight was the holding pattern. The holding pattern was the love, expressed in the only language Albert spoke fluently, which was the language of departure, and the departure was not abandonment, the departure was Albert's version of presence, the presence of a man who was always leaving and who was always, in the leaving, carrying the household with him, the household in the cockpit, the household at altitude, the household over Nebraska.

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Mom was in the kitchen. The clock read 12:07. The drawer was open. The list was on the table. The list contained: Dr. Stannard, Tuesday, 2:00 (Puck, follow-up). Dr. Maren, Wednesday, 10:00 (Ares, screening). Dr. Maren, Wednesday, 10:45 (Julie, screening). Insurance, call re: claim #4471-B. Pharmacy, refill #3 (Puck, ondansetron). School, call re: absence policy (Puck, treatment schedule).

The list was the household. The household was the list. The two were the same thing, the management and the managed, the instrument and the music, Linda Taler's handwriting on a piece of paper in a drawer in a kitchen at midnight, the handwriting the evidence that the household was being held, the holding performed by a woman who held everything because holding everything was the alternative to holding nothing, and holding nothing was not available to a mother whose son had cancer and whose husband was over Nebraska and whose daughter had changed her perfume and whose youngest had been sharpening pencils for forty-five minutes and whose household was a building whose foundation she had been reinforcing since the day she married a man who was brilliant at altitude and incompetent at sea level.

She looked at the list. The list looked back. The list's looking-back was the weight, the weight of the tasks and the appointments and the phone calls and the claims and the refills and the absences and the screenings and the treatments, the weight distributed across the paper the way the household's weight was distributed across Linda's shoulders, the shoulders the load-bearing wall, the wall the structure, the structure the household, the household the list.

She closed the drawer. She turned off the kitchen light. The kitchen went dark. The clock ticked in the dark. The clock did not require light. The clock required the battery. The battery required nothing. The battery produced. The producing was the tick. The tick was the dark. The dark was the house. The house was asleep except for the people who were not asleep, and the people who were not asleep were: Puck in the ducts, Ares at the desk (still, quiet, four sharp pencils in a row), Julie in the dark (awake, listening, the new perfume on the dresser), and Linda in the kitchen doorway, pausing, listening to the house the way Puck listened to the house, from outside the rooms, from the spaces between the rooms, from the hallway and the kitchen and the architecture of a household that she had built and maintained and reinforced for eighteen years, the eighteen years the spring, the spring wound to capacity, the capacity the tomorrow, the tomorrow the first day, the first day the year, the year the year that everything would happen.

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Dawn.

Dawn arrived the way dawn always arrived in Westborough, from the east, from the direction of the corn and the soybeans and the flat land that extended to the horizon without interruption, the light crossing the fields the way light crosses all flat surfaces, with the authority of a thing that has no obstacles, the authority of illumination, the authority of the visible replacing the invisible, the dark giving way to the gray giving way to the blue giving way to the gold, and the gold was September, and September was the morning, and the morning was the first day.

Alarm clocks rang. The Equity clock on Ares' desk. The clock radio on Julie's nightstand. The alarm at the house on Sycamore (Gerald Smith had set it, the setting performed without narration, the alarm the only sound Gerald produced on purpose). The alarm at the house on Oak Street (Mrs. Bergman's alarm, mechanical, the kind that rang with a bell rather than a buzz, the bell the last sound Bergie heard before the return began). The alarm in the car on Interstate 74, which was not an alarm but Craig's voice saying "are we there yet" and the "yet" meaning "almost" and the "almost" meaning "yes," the car approaching Westborough from the west, from the direction of Illinois, from the direction opposite the dawn, the car driving into the light.

Everyone got up. Everyone got up the way everyone gets up on the first day of school, through the mechanical sequence of waking and rising and dressing and eating and gathering and departing, the sequence performed in seven households simultaneously, the simultaneity the thing the dawn produced, the dawn converting the private night into the public morning, the morning the first morning of the year, the year the year of the wire, the year of the cameras, the year of the eight episodes, the year that the audience would watch.

Ares put on a clean shirt. Ares put the four pencils in his bag. Ares checked the notebook (present, in the bag, the bag on the shoulder, the shoulder the carrying mechanism, the carrying the function). Ares left the house.

Crew peeled off the football equipment. Crew put on the green shirt. Crew put on jeans. Crew did not put on the orange overalls because the orange overalls were in the closet and the closet was where things went when they were finished being what they were. Crew ate bread with granola. Crew left the house.

Stan woke in Mike's car. Stan's mouth tasted like the archaeology of the previous night's beer, the taste a sedimentary record of twelve divided by two, each beer a layer, each layer a deposit. Stan drove to his father's house. Stan showered. Stan put on clothes that were clean and that smelled like his father's detergent, which smelled like pine, which smelled like a factory trying to smell like a forest. Stan left the house. The dream had come. The tent had been empty.

Andy's car arrived in Westborough at 7:12 a.m. The car turned onto Elm Street. The car passed the school. Andy saw the building through the window, the 1947 brick and the 1961 cinderblock and the 1973 prefabricated panels, and the building looked like what it was, which was a building that had been added to twice and improved never, and the looking was the first looking, and the first looking was the assessment, and the assessment was: this is the place, and the place is where I will find out what I am

gaining. The bag was on his lap. The book was in the bag.

Julie put on the new perfume. The citrus and the cedar and the amber. The intention. She looked in the mirror and the mirror showed her the person she had decided to be, and the person she had decided to be went to school.

Bergie put on a button-down shirt and khaki pants and sneakers. He looked at the closet. The closet was closed. He left the closet closed. He left the house.

Puck emerged from the ducts at 6:45, covered in dust. Puck showered. Puck took the 8:00 pill. Puck did not go to school. Puck had a treatment at 10:00. Puck would go to school after the treatment, or Puck would not go to school, the going dependent on what the treatment did to the body and what the body could sustain, and the sustaining was the daily negotiation between the mass and the medication and the radiation and the living, and the living was the thing Puck did between treatments.

Canterbilly arrived at the school at 7:30. He carried the donut box. He unlocked the journalism room. He turned on the lights. He placed the donut box on the desk in the back room. He placed himself on the couch. The couch received him. The room was ready. The room was the dead-end corridor on the second floor of the 1947 building, and the room was the cathedral, and the cathedral was open.

The hallway filled. The hallway filled the way hallways fill on the first day of school, with the noise and the bodies and the backpacks and the schedules and the confusion and the recognition and the claiming and the unclaiming and the geography reconstituting itself around the population that had returned, the geography of power reestablishing its territories, the seniors in the amphitheater junction, the juniors on the flanks, the sophomores in the tributaries that last year's freshmen had occupied, the freshmen everywhere and nowhere.

The bell rang.

The story the reader already knows was about to begin.

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End of Part Three: The Eve

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Coming in Book Two: A Farewell to Shins

Sophomore year begins.

The cameras arrive. Eight episodes of a story that will be watched and rewatched and argued about and misremembered and quoted in hallways and denied by administrators and cited in lawsuits and wept over by parents who did not know what was happening in their building until the building told them.

Ares delivers the grain-of-sand speech on the bleachers, and Andy Harper, the boy from Wisconsin who writes poetry and does not yet know he writes poetry, hears it and understands it and is changed by it. The Krugerand publishes its first issue of sophomore year. Doublewe declares war. Canterbilly defends his students until the defense costs him everything. Crew plays football for the first time and discovers that collision is a language he speaks fluently.

Stan's drinking moves from the darkroom to the parking lot to the places that do not have names. Julie and Andy find each other across the distance that Stan's departure created. Keithe receives news about Sandy that will test every remaining thread connecting him to the person he used to be. Tiffany Brass arrives, and her attention to Ares is neither innocent nor kind.

Bergie carries the paper bag to school.

Puck's cancer advances. The hereditary screening results come back. The household absorbs one more piece of information that changes everything.

And Ares writes. In the Krugerand, in the notebook, on the bleachers, in the hospital corridor. He writes because the writing is the only instrument adequate to the scale of what is happening, and the scale of what is happening is sophomore year, and sophomore year is the year that everything the reader has been waiting for finally occurs.

The story the reader already knows is about to be told.

Glossary

Characters

Ares Taler: Freshman, later sophomore, at Westborough High School. Tight end turned writer. Founder and lead columnist of the Krugerand school newspaper. Younger brother of Julie and Puck. Son of Albert and Linda.

Crew Smith (Crewly): Ares' best friend, transferred from Florida before freshman year. Wears orange overalls and red sunglasses. Son of Gerald and Diana. Co-writer of the KGB and White Bread articles.

Stan Harrison: Julie Taler's boyfriend, later estranged. Lives in the Taler guest room during the summer before freshman year. His descent into alcohol abuse under Mike Redson's influence is the novel's most sustained tragedy. Son of a father who communicates through notes and a mother who left for Indiana.

Julie Taler: Ares' older sister. Precise, diagnostic, managerial. The household's emotional thermostat. The first person to identify Stan's drinking as a problem. Wears a pencil behind her ear.

Puck Taler: Ares' older brother. Seventeen. Lives in the heating ducts of the Taler house, conducting private surveillance of the household. Diagnosed with hereditary osteosarcoma (bone cancer) through the maternal line. Deflects through humor and infrastructure metaphors.

Albert Taler: The Taler children's father. Commercial airline pilot. Frequently absent. Abandons an airplane on a runway in Chapter 22.

Linda Taler (Mom): The Taler children's mother. Manages the household through lists, routines, and the strategic deployment of baked goods. Keeps Puck's diagnosis from Ares for nine months.

Bergie Bergman: Bullied at Northside, then at Westborough after transferring for freshman year. His mother's four-word sentence in April and his interpretation of it produce the novel's most agonizing arc. Builds model B-17s. The paper bag in his closet contains a .22 caliber revolver.

Canterbilly: Journalism teacher at Westborough High. Ares and Crew's mentor. Winds a Swiss grandfather clock every Sunday. Eats donuts. Invented a fiancée named Nancy. The clock stops when he sleeps.

Keithe Williams: Ares' best friend before high school. A natural athlete. His summer relationship with Sandy at the shore begins the slow, undramatic process of ending the friendship.

Andy Harper: Arrives in Chapter 21 from Wisconsin. Poet. Allergic to cheese and pine. His family moves to Westborough before sophomore year. His "okay" means "okay."

Mike Redson: Senior at Westborough. The gravitational force that pulls Stan into drinking and identifies Bergie as a target. Keeps cocaine, whiskey, a switchblade, and a baseball card in a shoebox under his bed.

Mrs. Bergman: Bergie's mother. Keeps a file of evidence. Makes phone calls to the school. Speaks the sentence "Don't take it anymore" and does not ask what Bergie plans to do about it.

Doublewe (Dr. Weiss): Principal of Westborough High. Opposes the Krugerand. Receives a memo from downtown after the KGB and White Bread articles are published.

Sandy: Keithe's summer girlfriend at the shore. Writes letters. Collects driftwood and shells. Represents the world that Keithe enters and Ares cannot follow him into.

Places

Westborough: A small city in the American Midwest, modeled on early 1980s Lincoln, Nebraska. The high school was built in 1947.

Westborough High School: The central institution. Built of brick, cinderblock, and prefabricated panels. Contains the journalism room at the end of a dead-end corridor on the second floor, the darkroom in its northwest corner, the senior junction amphitheater, and the heating duct network that Puck uses for surveillance.

The Taler House (Edgewood): Home of the Taler family. Contains the kitchen where Linda keeps her lists in a drawer, the guest room where Stan lived, the heating duct junctions where Puck listens, and Ares' military-neat bedroom with its pile of football equipment turned furniture.

The Smith House (Sycamore): Crew's family home after the move from Florida. One-story bungalow. The Honda CB360 motorcycle in the driveway. The wobbling kitchen table.

The Harrison House (Elm Street): Stan's father's house. Motor oil and pine tree air freshener. Notes on the kitchen table in handwriting like electrocardiogram readouts.

The Bergman House (Oak Street): Bergie and his mother's home. Table set for two with plates purchased for four. The closet containing the paper bag.

Timber Lanes: Bowling alley where Stan and Julie bowled on Tuesday evenings. Half-price lanes from six to nine.

The Lake: Where Mike Redson offers Stan his first beer. Gravel beach. Warm Budweiser.

Briar Lane: Mike Redson's house. The shoebox under the bed.

Timeline

Summer before freshman year (June through August): Stan living with the Talers. Keithe at the shore with Sandy. Crew's family driving from Florida. Bergie enduring Northside. Canterbilly winding his clock. Puck's headaches beginning. Ares' last football game and first written sentence.

Fall, freshman year (September through December): First day at Westborough. Ares and Crew meet in the journalism room. Puck's cancer diagnosed. Stan's drinking begins at the lake, moves to Mike's

house, then to the school darkroom. Bergie transfers to Westborough and is identified by Mike. Julie confronts Stan. The KGB and White Bread articles are published. Doublewe receives the memo from downtown.

Spring and summer before sophomore year (March through August): Keithe's friendship with Ares ends through accumulated distance. Mrs. Bergman speaks the sentence. Bergie interprets it. Stan drinks through the summer with Mike. Andy's family learns they are moving to Indiana. Albert abandons an airplane. Canterbilly's clock stops when he sleeps. Ares learns about Puck's cancer and writes the first version of the grain-of-sand metaphor. Bergie drives to Dayton.

The eve of sophomore year (September): Everyone in position. Ares sharpening pencils. Crew in football equipment. Stan drinking with Mike. Andy's family driving toward Westborough. Julie's new perfume. Bergie's paper bag in the closet. Puck in the ducts. Canterbilly winding the clock. Dawn. The bell. The story begins.

About the Author

David Boles is a multidisciplinary author, dramatist, editor, publisher, and teacher. He holds an MFA from Columbia University, where he trained at the Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Graduate Theatre Studies. He has taught at Columbia, NYU, Rutgers-Newark, NJIT, UMDNJ, and Fordham.

He founded David Boles Books Writing & Publishing in 1975 and has maintained Boles.com as his Prairie Voice Archive since 1995. His published work spans fiction, cultural criticism, ASL education, and literary journalism. He is a member of the Dramatists Guild, the Authors Guild, and PEN America.

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BolesBooks.com

The Westborough Crusaders Trilogy

Book One: The Year Before the Wire

Book Two: A Farewell to Shins

Book Three: The Stopped Clock

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