

ABANDONED IN PLACE

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David Boles

*David Boles Books Writing & Publishing
New York City*

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The events described in this book are based on the author's life and observations. Some identifying details of private individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

Cover design by David Boles Books

For Janna

The one who arrived and never left.

The counter-argument to every chapter in this book.

“One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

— Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

“What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one’s own self.”

— Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951)

“What cannot be said to the mother cannot be said to the self.”

— John Bowlby

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Author's Note

This book began with a number. Five. The number of days a judge determined my father was required to remain in the home after my birth before he could return to the woman he had chosen over my mother and me. I have carried that number for more than five decades, not as a grievance but as a lens, and the lens has shown me things about the world that I do not believe I would have seen without it.

I want to be direct about what this book is and what it is not, because the opening chapters will place me in the first person, and the first person, in a book about abandonment, invites assumptions I need to correct before they take hold.

The book is not a memoir. The personal material that opens it and returns at intervals throughout is not the subject. It is the instrument. Some writers call this form autotheory: the use of the self as a diagnostic lens trained on the world. I was born into abandonment. The abandonment sharpened my perception. The perception produced this book. The book is about what the perception reveals, not about the biography that ground the lens. But I will not pretend the lens and the biography are fully separable, because they are not, and the pretending would violate the book's central commitment to the active voice and the honest account.

This is not a self-help book. There are no steps, no programs, no exercises, no worksheets. There is no recovery narrative. The therapeutic language of healing and closure, which saturates contemporary American discourse about loss, is not the language of this book. This book argues that the therapeutic language is itself a component of the problem it claims to address, and that argument will be developed in full in Chapters 3 and 9. I should add, because the argument will be forceful, that I am not dismissing the practice of self-examination, which is the oldest philosophical discipline and one this book practices on every page. I am interrogating the industry that has organized itself around that practice and, in organizing it, redirected it from structural clarity to personal management. The distinction matters. Readers who are looking for comfort will not find it here. Readers who are looking for clarity may.

This book is polemical, in the sense that it argues a position and does not pretend to neutrality. It is not partisan. The abandonment I document crosses every ideological boundary. The left has abandoned its working-class constituencies. The right has abandoned its commitment to civic provision. The center has abandoned its claim to represent the common interest. I do not exempt any faction from the analysis, and I do not align this book with any party, platform, or political identity. The pattern is bipartisan. The grammar is bipartisan. The damage is universal.

What this book is, is a map. It maps the territory of abandonment from the personal to the institutional to the political to the existential, using a set of analytical tools that I develop in the early chapters and apply consistently throughout. The tools are: the three elements of abandonment (the one who leaves, the one who is left, the narrative constructed afterward); the grammar of leaving (the passive voice, the euphemism, the appeal to inevitability, the therapeutic displacement); the social contract (the mutual agreement between citizens and institutions whose breach constitutes abandonment's political form); and the governing metaphor of the title, Abandoned in Place, the engineering designation for a structure whose function has departed while its form remains.

The map is drawn from the interior country of a person who was abandoned on the sixth day of his life and who has spent the subsequent decades refining the instruments of detection. The instruments are imperfect. The map is incomplete. But the territory is real, and the territory is larger than anyone has admitted, and the people who inhabit it deserve a map that names the features the grammar was designed to hide.

I have tried, in every chapter, to rebuild the passive constructions in the active voice, to restore the actors to the sentences from which the grammar removed them, and to call the leaving what it is. If the calling sometimes sounds angry, the anger is not personal. It is grammatical. The active voice, when applied to acts that have been narrated passively for decades, sounds like accusation. It is not accusation. It is accuracy. And accuracy, in a territory mapped almost exclusively by the people who abandoned it, is the first form of respect available to the people who remained.

David Boles
New York City
March 2026

Part One: The Wound

Chapter 1

Day Six

A judge I never met decided how long my father would be required to love me. The answer was five days. Not five years, not five months, not even five weeks. Five days. One hundred and twenty hours of court-mandated proximity between a man and the infant he had made, after which the obligation expired and the man was free to return to the woman he had chosen over the woman who was carrying me. The judge, whose name I do not know and whose reasoning I have never read, determined that this interval was sufficient to “help the mother.” Not to bond with the child. Not to establish the first threads of paternal attachment. To help the mother. I was, in the legal architecture of my own arrival, an ancillary concern, a complication in the logistics of one man's departure. The five days were not for me. They were the minimum bureaucratic courtesy extended to a woman who had just given birth and was about to be left alone with the result.

My father honored the letter of the order. I have no reason to believe he did not. He stayed for five days. On the sixth day, he left. He returned to the woman with whom he had conducted the affair that ended his marriage, the affair that began while my mother was pregnant, the affair whose discovery initiated the divorce proceedings that produced the judge who produced the number five. The sequence is worth tracing because it reveals something essential about how abandonment operates: it is never a single act. It is a chain of decisions, each one made by a specific person at a specific moment, each one framed in the language of necessity or reason or regret, and the cumulative effect is that a newborn infant wakes up on the sixth morning of his life in a house with one fewer person in it, and no one in any courtroom or any church or any family gathering will ever call that what it is.

What it is, is abandonment. I have spent most of my life developing the vocabulary to say so.

I am not seeking closure, a word I distrust on principle, because it implies that wounds have doors and that doors have locks and that

someone, somewhere, holds the key. Nobody holds the key. The wound does not close. It calcifies. It becomes load-bearing. You build on top of it, and if you are lucky, or stubborn, or sufficiently angry, what you build is a life that functions well enough that most people cannot see the foundation. But the foundation is there, and it determines the angle from which every subsequent structure rises.

I was born into abandonment the way some people are born into wealth or poverty or a particular language: it was the condition that preceded consciousness, the water I was swimming in before I knew what water was. It registered as the nature of things. The world is a place where people leave. Institutions make promises they will not keep. The structures that appear solid are hollow. Someone is always about to go, and the only question is whether you will see it coming.

In my case, the story was simple. My parents' marriage did not work out. These things happen. My father found someone else. People move on. The divorce was handled through the courts. There were procedures. The judge was fair. Five days was reasonable. My mother would manage. She was young. She would remarry. And she did remarry, and I did grow up, and my father did build another family, and from the outside, the narrative resolved itself into something that looked like normalcy distributed across two households. But the story, as stories of abandonment always do, omitted the essential fact: that a man looked at his pregnant wife and his unborn child and decided that his desire for another woman was more important than his obligation to either of them, and that a court, rather than naming this decision for what it was, gave it a number and called it help.

I am not angry at my father in the way people assume. But I will not pretend that precision and anger are incompatible. What I hold is the cold, precise anger of a person who has mapped the mechanics of the departure and who has decided that the mapping, performed with care, is more useful than either the outrage or its suppression. The house did not collapse. The house redistributed. My mother bore the weight, or more precisely, she bore the structure of the weight: the housing, the feeding, the transporting, the enrolling, the daily mechanics of keeping a child alive. What she did not bear, because the system that abandoned her had not left her the resources to bear it, was the warmth that the mechanics were supposed to contain. I will have more

to say about my mother in the next chapter, and what I say will complicate the image of her as the enduring counterweight to the absent father, because the complication is what the book's honesty requires. For now, it is sufficient to note that staying is not the same as caring, and that the distinction between the two would become the most consequential lesson of my childhood, more consequential even than the father's departure, because the father's absence was clean and legible and could be named, and what replaced it was not clean, and was not legible, and could not be named, and the unnamed thing was worse. The community reclassified us. I adapted. And adaptation, in the economy of abandonment, is not healing. It is the scar tissue forming itself into a shape that can bear weight.

In the late 1960s, in a small American town, divorce was not just a legal status. It was a social verdict. The phrase in common use was "broken family," and the word "broken" was not a metaphor. It was a diagnosis. A broken family was a family that had failed at the one thing families were supposed to do, which was to remain intact, and the failure was understood to be contagious. You did not want your children playing with the children of broken families. You did not want your husband spending time with the divorced woman down the street. You did not invite the broken family to the church picnic, or if you did, you seated them at the far table, the one near the trash cans, where their contamination could be contained.

My mother was twenty-three years old. She had a baby. She had no husband. She had, in the parlance of the era, "been left," and the phrasing itself tells you everything about where the culture located the agency. She had not "been wronged" or "been betrayed" or "been walked out on by a man who broke his oath." She had been left, a passive state, something that had happened to her in the way that weather happens or illness happens, without a perpetrator and therefore without a grievance worth pressing. To have been left was to have failed at the fundamental task of being worth staying for, and this inversion of responsibility, so casual, so embedded in the syntax that nobody noticed it operating, is the first and most durable lesson abandonment teaches: the fault belongs to the one who remains.

In the taxonomy of small-town social life in 1960s America, my mother occupied a position somewhere between pitiable and suspect.

Pitiable because she had been left, and the community was not entirely without sympathy for the left, provided the left accepted their diminished status with appropriate gratitude and silence. Suspect because a young woman without a husband was, by definition, a disruption in the social order, a reminder that the order itself was fragile, that any marriage could break, that any husband could leave, and that the community's wholeness depended on the suppression of that knowledge.

The suppression was accomplished through classification. My mother and I were not abandoned. We were "a broken family." The phrase transferred the agency from the one who left to the unit that remained. The family was broken, as if breakage were a quality of the family itself rather than the result of a specific man making a specific choice. The passive voice removes the actor. It converts a decision into a condition. It places the burden of explanation on those who remain rather than on those who left.

We remained. My mother remained. I remained. And remaining, in a community that had classified us as broken, meant occupying a specific position in the social architecture: visible but excluded, present but uncounted, tolerated but not embraced. We were abandoned in place. The phrase, which gives this book its title, comes from engineering and aerospace, where it designates a structure too large or too embedded to remove, so it is simply left standing, marked with a small notation that says, in effect, this was once meant to hold something together, but no one is coming back to restore it. That was us. The function we were supposed to serve had been vacated, and the community's response was not to reintegrate us but to mark us and move on.

The temptation here is to sentimentalize, to divide the cast into victims and villains. The community was not a collection of small-minded villains. The mother was not a saint enduring in silence. Abandonment is produced by functional systems, not by bad people, and the people inside the systems perform what the systems require. The neighbors who excluded us were operating within a system of social classification that predated them. It had only a protocol for reclassification, and reclassification meant exile at the near distance. You could see the community from where we stood. You could hear its music and smell its cooking. You simply could not participate in it as a

full member.

I think about the other mothers in that town, the ones whose families were officially intact, whose husbands came home every evening to the same address, whose Christmas cards featured the correct number of smiling faces. I think about what they saw when they saw my mother at the grocery store with an infant on her hip and no ring on her finger and the particular quality of silence that would fall over a conversation when she entered a room. That silence was not cruelty, exactly. It was the sound of a system performing its maintenance function. The intact families needed the broken families the way a map needs its borders: to define where the territory ends. My mother's visible aloneness was not just her problem. It was a public service. It told the other women what the cost of failure looked like, and it told the other men what they would be leaving behind if they left, and it told the children that the world was divided into families that held and families that didn't and that the difference was visible to everyone and carried consequences that no one would explain but everyone would enforce.

The enforcement was ambient. It did not require meetings or policies or explicit exclusions. It required only the slight turning of a shoulder, the invitation that was never extended, the play date that was never arranged, the seat at the church supper that was always at the far end, near the kitchen, where the broken families could eat without contaminating the main table. My mother did not narrate this to me as injustice. She narrated it, insofar as she narrated it at all, as the way things were. I understand now that the narration was not stoicism. It was the grammar internalized so completely that the person inside it could no longer distinguish between the condition and the weather. When the abandoned accept their reclassification as natural, the system no longer needs to enforce the boundary. The boundary has been internalized.

What the community offered, instead of inclusion, was sympathy. The sympathy came from other parents and from other children, and it had a quality I could detect even then, though I lacked the vocabulary to name it: it was performed. It was the sympathy of people who needed my condition to remain visible so that their own conditions could remain concealed. The parents who told me they were sorry I

didn't have a father said it with the particular softness reserved for objects of pity, and the softness was a form of distance, and the distance was the point. I knew, because children who grow up scanning for the machinery behind the scenery develop an early and reliable inventory of the scenery's defects, that many of the fathers in my community were drunks. Some of them were violent. Some of them were conducting the same kind of affairs that had produced my own fatherless condition, except that the affairs had not yet been discovered, or had been discovered and absorbed, because the cost of acknowledging them would have been reclassification, and reclassification was the thing the community feared more than the affairs themselves. The intact family was the unit of social currency. The currency could be counterfeit, and often was, but the counterfeit was accepted at face value as long as it maintained its shape, and the broken family, my family, existed in part to demonstrate what happened when the shape was not maintained.

I developed a rote answer for the sympathy. When other children or their parents expressed their sorrow that I did not have a father, I said: "You can't miss what you never had." The sentence was designed to end the conversation, and it worked, because it contained no purchase for further sympathy and no opening for further questions. It was also, I recognize now, the avoidant attachment style compressed into eight words: the denial of need, the performance of sufficiency, the refusal to reach for what is not being offered. I meant it as a fact. It functioned as a wall. And the wall, like all the walls I would build over the following decades, served two purposes simultaneously: it kept the sympathy out and it kept the knowledge in, and the knowledge was that the sympathy was counterfeit, offered by people whose own domestic arrangements would not have survived the scrutiny they applied to mine.

My father, in the years that followed, made intermittent efforts at contact. He picked me up on Saturdays. Not every Saturday. I was very young. What I remember, with a specificity that has not faded in fifty years, is the gifts. Each time he arrived, there was a gift in the back seat of the car. A toy train. A tin fire engine. A carved bunny rabbit. I can see them now. I can see the seats they sat on and the wrapping they came in and the weight of them in my hands. I cannot see him. I cannot see his face as it was then, or the car he drove, or the places we

went, or anything we did together on those Saturday afternoons. I remember every gift and no giver. I looked forward to my Saturday gifts, not to my Saturday-only father, and the distinction, which I could not have articulated at the time, is the avoidant attachment style performing its function with textbook precision: the object is reliable, the person is not, and the child's attention organizes itself around what can be counted on.

Then the visits stopped. I did not know why at the time. I understand now that he was starting his new family, that three new children require a father's Saturdays, and that the Saturdays he had been giving me were borrowed against a future in which I was not the principal investment. The visits did not end with a conversation or an explanation. They simply stopped, the way the five-day clock stopped, by expiration rather than by announcement, and the child who had been looking forward to the gifts stopped looking forward, and the stopping was absorbed into the model as one more confirmation that the model was accurate.

Years later, when I was older, he wanted to reconnect. We met once at his office and played cards, which was a strange thing to do with a child who had never played cards in his life and who sat across the desk from a man he barely knew, holding a hand of cards he did not understand, performing a social ritual for which he had received no preparation. After that, the terms changed. He would see me, but only in the company of his new family. The individual Saturdays were over. The gifts in the back seat were over. What was on offer was not a relationship between a father and his first child but an integration of the first child into the replacement household, and the integration was conducted on the household's terms, not the child's.

I remember the first visit to his house. I dressed for it the way you dress for an occasion that matters and that you do not understand: polished shoes, a suit coat, a tie. I was a child presenting himself for inspection by a family that was not his, in a house he had never entered, and the formality of the clothing was my armor and my credential, the only way I knew to say: I am here, and I am worth the effort of receiving properly. The first thing we did was wash his car. He called me over, dressed in my church clothes, and put me to work on the car with a bucket and a sponge, and the image of that child,

standing in a driveway in a suit and tie, washing the car of the man who had left him, is the image that ended the visits. I did not articulate it as humiliation at the time. I articulated it to my mother as simply being finished. I told her I did not want to go back. She did not argue. She did not insist. She did not, then or ever, speak of my father, not to criticize him, not to praise him, not to explain him, not to excuse him. He was absent from her language the way he was absent from the house: completely, as if the absence were a settled fact that required no narration. I suppose he was nothing to her, too.

I know my father, in later years, blamed my mother for the distance between us. He would have told his new family, and perhaps told himself, that she had poisoned me against him, that she had denied him access, that the estrangement was her doing. The accusation is false. My mother did not need to poison me against a man who picked me up on Saturdays with a gift in the back seat as a substitute for a presence in the home, who stopped coming when the new children arrived, who reconnected by playing a card game the child did not know, and who greeted the child's first visit to his new house by handing him a sponge. The man poisoned himself, by the method that every institution in this book will demonstrate: he maintained the structure of the obligation while evacuating its function, and when the child, who had been trained since day six to detect exactly this gap, detected it and declined to participate in the fiction, the man blamed the person who had stayed rather than the person who had left. The grammar of leaving, applied to a family, sounds exactly like this.

He had built a new family: a new wife, new children, a new household organized around the premise that the previous household had been a false start and this one was the real thing. I was invited, occasionally, to participate in this real thing, to meet my step-brothers and my step-sister, to blend into the new configuration as if the original severance had been merely logistical, a matter of adults reorganizing their domestic arrangements, and children, being resilient, being adaptable, being fundamentally interchangeable, would simply adjust.

I did not adjust. I declined the step-siblings. I declined them completely, without negotiation, without ambiguity. Two step-brothers and one step-sister, their names and faces present in my memory but their claims on my kinship absent from my accounting. I never called

them brother or sister. I never accepted the premise that my father's second family was my family. I was his first child. I was the child who made him a father. And he was the first person in my life to legally and emotionally walk away from me, and I was not going to pretend that the walking away had produced a larger, happier family rather than a smaller, more damaged one.

I recognize, now, that this refusal was itself an act of abandonment. I abandoned three children who had done nothing to deserve it, whose only crime was being born to the man who had left me. The step-siblings did not choose their father any more than I chose mine. They did not design the configuration that placed us in proximity. They were, in the most literal sense, innocent bystanders in a chain of decisions that began before any of us had language. And I refused them. I refused them not because I disliked them, not because they were unkind, but because accepting them would have required me to accept the narrative that the new family was whole, and accepting that narrative would have required me to accept that the old family's breaking was an acceptable cost, and I could not accept that cost because I was the cost. I was what had been broken. And the broken thing does not ratify the breaking by joining the new arrangement as if nothing was lost.

This is how abandonment propagates without malice. The father did not leave in order to damage the son. The son did not refuse the step-siblings in order to damage them. Each person acted within the logic of their own wound, and the logic produced further wounds, and the further wounds produced further logic, and the chain extended forward through decades without anyone intending harm and without anyone accepting responsibility. The pattern requires only two things: an original severance and the absence of any counter-narrative strong enough to interrupt the replication. No counter-narrative was offered. The judge offered a number. The community offered a classification. The father offered a replacement family. And I offered, in return, the only thing the abandoned have to offer: refusal.

When I was in the second or third grade, my mother remarried. The social architecture of a small midwestern town in the early 1970s exerted a gravitational pressure on single mothers to become non-single, and the pressure did not inquire into the quality of the

available candidates. The second marriage lasted approximately a year and a half. It was not good. I will leave it at that, because the details serve no analytical purpose here and the man is still alive. What serves this book is the structure: my mother, having been abandoned by one man, married another, and the second left too. His departure was, in a phrase I have never been able to improve upon, a beautiful abandonment: the one leaving that made things better rather than worse, the one door closing that let the air back in. Not all abandonment is loss. Some of it is relief. And the recognition that abandonment can be a gift is one of the complications this book must hold without resolving.

There were two step-brothers during that second marriage. None of us pretended we were a family. None of us tried. We started abandoned to each other and we ended abandoned from each other, and the symmetry was so complete that it barely registered as an event. It was the background radiation of the arrangement, detectable but unremarkable, because by then I had already learned that the domestic unit was a temporary structure and that the people inside it were provisional.

The name, however, stayed. When my mother married this man, I was assigned his surname in the manner of small-town convention: the child takes the name of the household. The convention did not consult me. The convention did not ask whether I wished to carry the name of the man from that second marriage. The convention simply operated, the way conventions do, as if the bureaucratic act of renaming a child were an administrative detail rather than an identity amputation. I went from carrying the name of the man who left on day six to carrying the name of the man who left after eighteen months, and the second name was not an improvement on the first. It was a lateral transfer from one abandoner to another, executed by a system that did not distinguish between the two because the system's function was not to protect the child but to regularize the paperwork.

My classmates did not understand. They had known me by one name, and now I had another, and children in small towns notice this the way they notice a new scar or a missing tooth: with open curiosity that has not yet learned to disguise itself as tact. They asked why my name changed. I told them what I knew, which was not much and

which I delivered as a cold fact rather than a bid for sympathy: I wasn't a Boles. But I wasn't really an Isherwood, either. I was sort of a nothing in-between. The phrase was not self-pity. It was an accurate description of a condition that the community's naming conventions could not accommodate, because the conventions assumed that a child belonged to the name of the household, and the household kept changing, and the names kept being reassigned, and the child at the center of the reassignment was not a participant in the process but its object, moved from one column to another in a ledger he did not write and could not read.

The court notified my birth father of the name change. He was outraged. The outrage is worth noting, because it reproduces the five-day pattern with uncanny fidelity: the man who was not committed enough to stay in the home past day six was angry enough about the name change to object but not committed enough to fight it. The outrage was a performance of paternal investment that required no actual investment. It cost him nothing to be angry. It would have cost him something to petition the court, to hire a lawyer, to demonstrate the ongoing relationship that would have justified the petition. He chose the anger and declined the action, which is the emotional equivalent of the judge's five-day order: a gesture toward obligation that expires before it becomes inconvenient.

When I was fifteen, I had the name legally formalized. I am not certain, fifty years later, why I did this. Convenience, perhaps. The name was what I had been called for years. The school records carried it. The social identity was built on it. To change it again would have required an explanation, and the explanation would have required a narrative, and the narrative would have placed me back in the category the community had already assigned: the boy from the broken family, now broken twice, carrying the wrong name for reasons that could not be discussed in polite company. So I kept it. I carry it now. The name on the cover of this book is the name of a man from a marriage that lasted eighteen months and ended badly, and the carrying is not an act of honor or affection or filial loyalty. It is an act of bureaucratic inertia, a residue of a convention that prioritized the tidiness of the paperwork over the accuracy of the record, and the inaccuracy has persisted for half a century, and the persistence is itself a small, daily instance of

being abandoned in place: still wearing the shape of a structure whose function departed decades ago. Later in life, the name became a brand. It appears on books and websites and business cards and the masthead of a publishing company. It is recognizable in certain circles as the name of a person who writes and teaches and publishes. None of that recognition changes what the name is, which is a label assigned by a convention that did not care what it was labeling, carried forward by inertia, and converted, over decades, from an identity I did not possess into a professional instrument I did not choose. The brand is real. The identity behind it is the nothing in-between.

The name is one kind of residue. The refusal of the step-siblings, which I described earlier, is another. Both illustrate aspects of the central paradox of living inside abandonment: the abandoned person's available responses all reproduce the original pattern.

There were grandmothers. I should mention them, because the grandmothers complete the picture of the family as a set of structures whose functions had departed at every generational level. My maternal grandmother held me when I was a month old. There is a photograph of that moment: a woman holding an infant, the infant unaware that the holding was both first and last, because the woman died shortly after the photograph was taken. I never knew her. She is an image in a frame, a pair of arms in a photograph, and the arms are the only grandmother arms I remember from the maternal side, and they held me once.

My paternal grandmother, a divorcee herself a generation earlier than my mother, which means the pattern on the father's side predated me by at least one cycle, would arrive at our home exactly once a year, during the week of Christmas, to give me a gift. Usually a book. Sometimes a blanket she had crocheted. The visits were brief and strange and saturated with the awkwardness of a woman performing a grandmotherly obligation she had no framework for fulfilling, in a home her son had vacated, toward a child she did not know and who did not know her. I never understood the visits while they were happening. I understand them now as the annual version of the Saturday gifts: the minimum viable gesture, the structure of kinship maintained at the lowest possible frequency, the obligation honored in form and abandoned in substance.

Years later, a doctor in New York told me I needed my father's family medical history. Half of my history was missing, and the missing half was the half that might contain the information that could, at some future date, save my life or explain my death. My mother had me call my paternal grandmother. I called. I asked about the family's health. The only thing she told me was: "We have good teeth." That was it. The entirety of the paternal medical history, transmitted across the generational divide in four words. The teeth were good. Everything else was none of my business, or unknown, or too deeply buried in the grammar of a family that had been practicing abandonment for at least two generations to be excavated by a phone call from a grandson who had been assigned the wrong name and given the right question at the wrong time.

Then, strangely, about a week later, the phone rang. I was standing in my apartment in Alphabet City at 4:31 in the afternoon. I remember the time because the time is the kind of detail that the avoidant mind records when the emotional content is too large to process: the nervous system, unable to hold the feeling, holds the fact instead, the way the child held the tin fire engine instead of the father. It was my father. I had not spoken to him in approximately thirty years. He was sobbing. I was calm. I stood in my apartment and listened to a man I barely knew cry into the phone and repeat my name, and I felt nothing that I could identify as feeling, and the nothing was the avoidant architecture performing its function at full capacity: the wall was up, the scanning was active, the cortisol was presumably elevated, and the display was flat. He choked out enough words that I understood he was trying to give me his family medical history, which means my grandmother had told him about my call, which means the family that had spent thirty years not contacting me had, in the span of a week, activated a chain of communication on my behalf, and the activation felt less like concern than like a system responding to an input.

He told me he wanted to get back in touch. He told me I had a whole family waiting for me. I remember the flatness of my own voice, the meticulous quality of it, the way the words came out pre-sorted and pre-measured, as if I had been rehearsing the conversation for thirty years, which in a sense I had, because the interior country had been mapping this moment since the Saturday visits stopped. I said: "Answer

one question for me first. Tell me why you left me alone with my mother. Why did you get out, but you left me behind?"

He did not answer. He said he did not know.

I said: "When you know, call me back and tell me. If not, I understand, and goodbye."

He never called back. The question I asked him is the question this book asks every institution in every chapter: why did you leave? When the question is asked directly, in the active voice, with the actor present and unable to deflect, the answer is silence.

The child who cannot prevent the father from leaving can refuse the father's new family. The worker who cannot prevent the factory from closing can refuse to invest loyalty in the next employer. Each refusal is an act of counter-abandonment, and each one, while psychologically coherent, reproduces the original pattern. The abandoned become abandoners. Not out of cruelty. Out of fluency.

I did not understand any of this at the time. What I understood was that I was different from the other children in ways that had nothing to do with intelligence and everything to do with the angle from which I saw the world. I saw the conditional nature of belonging before I had a word for it. I saw that the families around me were not organic units but performances. I saw that the community's warmth was rationed, that it had edges, and that I was standing just outside them.

This seeing is what psychologists would later help me understand as the hypervigilance of the avoidantly attached child, the constant scanning for signs that the next departure is imminent, the inability to trust stability because stability was never the original condition. But I did not experience it as pathology. I experienced it as acuity. I saw more than the other children saw. I saw more than most adults saw. I saw the machinery behind the scenery, the pulleys and ropes and counterweights that kept the stage set standing, and I saw that the stage set could collapse at any moment because I had already watched it collapse once, on day six, when the counterweight walked out the door and did not come back.

I became, in time, what the personality taxonomies call an INTJ and what the educational taxonomies call a polymath. These labels arrived much later than the condition they describe. Long before anyone tested me or classified me, I was building what I can only call an interior

country: heavily fortified, richly furnished, intellectually omnivorous, capable of sustaining a single occupant for extended periods without external resupply. The construction began early. A child who cannot rely on the permanence of the people around him learns to rely on the permanence of what he can carry inside his own skull. Books do not leave. Ideas do not file for divorce. The periodic table does not wake up one morning and decide it prefers a different student. Knowledge, unlike family, is not conditional. It does not require you to perform the correct domestic configuration in order to access it. It simply waits, in libraries and classrooms and the silence of your own room at night, for you to come and take it, and it does not punish you for taking too much, and it does not reclassify you when your circumstances change.

I read everything. I studied everything. I moved from medicine to law to dramatic literature to publishing to teaching, not because I could not commit to a single discipline but because every discipline offered a different vantage point on the same phenomenon, and the phenomenon was always the same: the gap between the promise and the performance, the structure and the function, the ceremony and the reality. Medicine showed me how bodies fail when the systems meant to sustain them withdraw their support. Law showed me how justice is administered in units of five, how obligation is given a number and an expiration date and called fairness. Dramatic literature showed me how human beings narrate their own departures, how every play is, at some level, about someone leaving and someone remaining and the distance between what is said and what is meant. Publishing showed me how stories are selected, how some narratives are amplified and others are suppressed, how the market decides whose abandonment is interesting and whose is merely sad. Teaching showed me how institutions promise formation and deliver sorting, how the young arrive expecting to be made whole and leave carrying debt and credentials and the quiet understanding that the institution's primary loyalty was never to them.

I was looking for abandonment everywhere because abandonment was the first thing I learned, and what you learn first you see most clearly, and what you see most clearly you spend your life trying to name.

This book is the naming.

It is a map of a territory that most people inhabit without recognizing it, the territory of the abandoned, which is much larger than anyone has admitted and much more consequential than the therapeutic language of “healing” and “closure” and “moving on” has allowed us to see.

I did not choose to be born into this. No one chooses the curriculum of their first education. But I was born into it, and the education took, and it has informed everything I have seen and everything I have built and everything I have refused to pretend about for the past five and a half decades.

This is not a grievance. This is a qualification. The surgeon who has been cut open understands the knife differently than the surgeon who has only held it. I have been both cut open and trained in the use of the knife, and this book is the result.

The judge gave my father five days. My father took all five. On the sixth day, the obligation expired, and the man who had made me a fact of the world walked out of the world he had made and into another one, and the door closed, and the story was over, except that it was not over, because it is never over, because abandonment is not an event.

It is an education. And class is always in session.

Chapter 2

The Interior Country

In 1958, a British psychiatrist named John Bowlby published a paper that would, over the next two decades, restructure the scientific understanding of what happens to a human being who is separated from the person they need most. The paper was not about divorce or infidelity or the domestic arrangements of small-town America. It was about infants in hospitals and orphanages, children separated from their mothers by illness or war or institutional policy, and what Bowlby observed in those children was not sadness but reorganization. The children who were separated from their primary attachment figures did not simply grieve and recover. They changed. Their nervous systems recalibrated. Their expectations about the world shifted at a level deeper than language, deeper than memory, deeper than anything that could be addressed by reassurance or comfort, because the recalibration happened before reassurance and comfort had any meaning. The body learned, before the mind could, that the person who was supposed to be there was not there, and the body adjusted accordingly, and the adjustment became permanent.

Bowlby called this attachment theory, and over the three volumes of his masterwork, published between 1969 and 1980, he mapped the consequences of that early adjustment with the kind of clinical precision that leaves no room for sentimentality. The child who loses the primary attachment figure does more than experience loss. The child develops an internal working model of relationships, a set of unconscious expectations about whether other people can be relied upon, whether proximity is safe, whether the world will provide what is needed or whether the self must provide it alone. These models, once established, are extraordinarily resistant to revision. They do not update easily in response to new evidence. A person who was securely attached in infancy tends to expect reliability from others throughout life, even when reliability is not forthcoming. A person who was insecurely attached tends to expect abandonment, even when abandonment is not imminent. The model was built before the person

had the cognitive apparatus to examine it, and it operates below the threshold of conscious awareness, which means it cannot be argued with, cannot be reasoned away, and cannot be healed by the simple provision of what was originally missing, because what was originally missing was not a thing but a timing. The absence happened when the architecture was being laid. You cannot go back and pour a foundation under a building that is already standing.

I was born in the same decade Bowlby was publishing his early work, and I find this temporal coincidence worth noting, not because it is meaningful in any mystical sense but because it illustrates a particular kind of irony that recurs throughout the history of abandonment: the knowledge of what was happening to me existed, in the scientific literature, at the precise moment it was happening to me, and it made no difference. The judge who ordered five days of paternal presence did not consult Bowlby. The community that reclassified my mother and me as a broken family did not read the *British Journal of Medical Psychology*. The understanding that early separation restructures the self was available, in print, in English, in the very years my self was being restructured, and nobody applied it, because the knowledge that abandonment damages children has never, at any point in history, been sufficient to prevent adults from abandoning them. The knowledge exists in one domain. The decisions are made in another. And the gap between those domains is itself a form of abandonment: the abandonment of the known in favor of the convenient.

Bowlby's student Mary Ainsworth refined the theory in 1978 with an experiment so elegant in its cruelty that it has become the foundational text of developmental psychology. She called it the Strange Situation. The procedure was simple. A mother and her infant, typically twelve months old, were placed in an unfamiliar room. A stranger entered. The mother left. The mother returned. Ainsworth was not interested in what the infant did when the mother was present, or what the infant did when the stranger appeared. She was interested in what the infant did when the mother came back. That moment, the reunion, was where the internal working model became visible.

The securely attached infants were distressed by the mother's departure and comforted by her return. They cried when she left, they

reached for her when she came back, and within a few minutes they were calm again, ready to explore the room, confident that the base was secure. These were the infants whose mothers had been consistently responsive, who had learned, through thousands of small interactions, that the person who was supposed to be there would be there, and that distress was a signal that would be answered.

The avoidantly attached infants were different. They showed little distress when the mother left. They showed little interest when she returned. They did not reach for her. They did not cry. They appeared, to the untrained eye, to be remarkably self-sufficient, remarkably composed, remarkably resilient. And the untrained eye was wrong. Ainsworth's physiological measurements revealed that the avoidant infants were not calm. Their heart rates were elevated. Their cortisol levels were high. They were experiencing the same distress as the securely attached infants, the same flood of alarm and need and protest. They had simply learned not to show it. They had learned, before they could walk or speak or form a conscious memory, that showing distress did not result in comfort. It resulted in nothing, or in something worse than nothing, because the mother who did not respond to the cry taught the infant that the cry was pointless, and pointlessness, once established, extends outward from the specific to the general. If crying does not bring the mother, then perhaps nothing brings the mother. And if nothing brings the mother, then perhaps the mother is not coming. And if the mother is not coming, then the self must be enough.

I read Ainsworth's study for the first time in my thirties, and I recognized myself in it the way you recognize your own handwriting on a document you do not remember signing. The avoidant infant's strategy was my strategy. The apparent self-sufficiency that masked the elevated heart rate. The refusal to reach for the returning figure. The composition that was not composure but withdrawal, not strength but the absence of hope, which looks like strength if you do not know what you are looking at. I had spent three decades performing this strategy without knowing it had a name, without knowing it had been catalogued and measured and published in a peer-reviewed journal, without knowing that the thing I experienced as my personality was, in the clinical literature, classified as an adaptation to inadequate care.

That last phrase is important: inadequate care. Not monstrous care. Not abusive care. Inadequate care. The care that is present but insufficient, that shows up for five days and then departs, that exists on paper but not in practice, that maintains the structure while evacuating the function.

D.W. Winnicott, another British psychoanalyst working in the same period, introduced a concept that has haunted me since I first encountered it: the “good enough mother.” Winnicott's argument was that an infant does not require a perfect mother. It requires a mother who is good enough, meaning a mother who is present enough, responsive enough, attuned enough to the infant's needs that the infant can develop a secure sense of self. The threshold is not perfection. It is adequacy. And the devastating corollary, the one Winnicott did not emphasize but that his framework makes unavoidable, is that when the mother is not good enough, when the primary caregiver is absent or inconsistent or overwhelmed or simply not there because a judge gave her five days of help and then sent the help away, the infant does not develop a secure sense of self. The infant develops a contingent sense of self, a self that is always provisional, always conditional, always aware that the ground beneath it may shift without warning, because the ground has already shifted once, at the very beginning, when the ground was all there was.

The phrase “the interior country” could sound romantic, and romance is not what I am describing. The interior country is a survival strategy that happens to produce, as a secondary effect, a certain kind of intellectual richness. The child who cannot rely on the external world builds an internal one. This is not a choice in any meaningful sense of the word. It is an adaptation, the way a plant that cannot find sunlight in one direction will bend toward whatever light is available, even if the light is thin and the angle is awkward and the resulting shape is nothing like what the plant was designed to be. The interior country I built was not the country I would have built if the external one had been reliable. It was the country that was possible given the materials available, and the primary material available was my own mind, and the primary activity available to that mind was learning, because learning was the one form of acquisition that did not depend on another person's willingness to stay.

The child learns to transfer the attachment that should have been directed toward people onto the domain of ideas, and the transfer works, after a fashion. It provides stimulation, structure, purpose, and the illusion of companionship. What it does not provide is warmth. An idea has never held anyone. A book has never looked at you and known, without being told, that you are afraid. The interior country is a real country, with real resources and real borders and a real capacity to sustain life. But it is a country of one, and the population never increases, and the silence at night is the silence of a place that was built to be inhabited alone.

The trajectory toward polymathy, which from the outside looks like restless curiosity or intellectual ambition or a failure to commit, is from the inside something much simpler: it is the compulsive mapping of every available domain in search of the pattern that was imprinted on the first day.

Each discipline was a different instrument trained on the same frequency. The frequency was abandonment. And each discipline confirmed what the original experience had taught: that the gap between what is promised and what is delivered is not an anomaly. It is the standard operating condition. The father promises to be a father and delivers five days. The school promises to educate and delivers a ranking. The church promises salvation and delivers a building fund. The government promises protection and delivers paperwork. The employer promises security and delivers a severance package, and the word "severance" tells you everything you need to know about what is actually being transacted, because the word means cutting, and the institution has the decency, in this one instance, to name the act for what it is.

The INTJ classification, which I encountered in my adult life through the Myers-Briggs framework, is not a category I place much stock in as a scientific instrument. The Myers-Briggs has well-documented limitations, and personality typing in general tends to flatten the very complexities it claims to map. But I mention it here because it describes, with surprising accuracy, the behavioral signature of the adaptive strategy I have been describing. The INTJ profile is characterized by a preference for solitary analysis over social engagement, by strategic thinking that prioritizes long-term pattern

recognition over immediate emotional response, by a skepticism toward authority and convention, and by a tendency to build elaborate internal frameworks for understanding the world rather than relying on external consensus. Every one of these traits is legible, through the lens of attachment theory, as an adaptation to an environment in which the external world proved unreliable at the earliest possible moment. The preference for solitary analysis is the avoidant infant's refusal to reach for the returning mother, scaled up to adult proportions. The strategic thinking is the hypervigilant scanning for signs of departure, redirected toward intellectual problems where the variables are stable and the outcomes are predictable. The skepticism toward authority is the entirely rational response of a person whose first experience of authority was a judge who quantified love in units of five. And the elaborate internal frameworks are the interior country itself, the structure the abandoned person builds to replace the structure that was supposed to be provided and was not.

I do not say this to reduce my intellectual life to a symptom. The interior country is real. The work I have done inside it is real. The books I have written, the plays I have produced, the students I have taught, the websites I have built, the arguments I have made and the positions I have taken and the body of work that constitutes, at this point, a half-century of sustained creative and intellectual output: none of this is diminished by the observation that it was produced by a mind whose architecture was shaped by early abandonment. A tree that grows at an angle because the wind has always blown from one direction is still a tree. Its wood is still hard. Its roots are still deep. Its canopy still provides shade. The angle does not make the tree less real. It makes the tree more specific. And specificity, in a world that prefers the generic, is its own kind of achievement.

But the interior country does not merely sustain. It also replicates. The avoidant strategy, once installed, does not confine itself to the relationship that produced it. It generalizes. It extends outward from the absent father to the present step-siblings, from the unreliable institution to the reliable one, from the specific wound to the general posture. The child who learned not to reach for the returning mother does not, as an adult, suddenly begin reaching for the returning colleague, the returning friend, the returning community. The lesson

was learned too early and too well. And so the avoidant person does something that looks, from the outside, like a personality trait and is, from the inside, a compulsion: he declines connection before connection can decline him.

The step-siblings, whom I declined in the previous chapter, deserve examination as a psychological mechanism. My father's new family represented, in attachment-theory terms, an offer of new connection.

I could have accepted them. Many children in my situation do accept them. The blended family is a common enough arrangement, and the therapeutic literature is full of advice about how to make it work: give it time, be patient, focus on what you have in common, do not force intimacy but do not foreclose it. The advice is reasonable. It assumes that the child in question has the psychological infrastructure to risk new attachment, that the internal working model includes, somewhere in its architecture, a provision for the possibility that this time the connection will hold. My model included no such provision. My model said: the last person who was supposed to stay did not stay. These new people are connected to the person who did not stay. Accepting them means accepting the premise that his departure was an acceptable cost, that the new arrangement is as good as or better than the old one, that the breaking was a necessary step toward a superior configuration. I could not accept that premise. The breaking was not necessary. It was chosen. And I was what was broken.

So I declined. I declined without drama, without negotiation, without the kind of adolescent rebellion that can be attributed to hormones or developmental stage or the ordinary friction of growing up. I simply did not attach. I visited when required, I was polite when present, and I left no thread of connection behind when I departed. The step-brothers and the step-sister remained, for me, evidence of my father's second life rather than participants in my first one, and the boundary I drew between those two categories was absolute and, I suspect, bewildering to them. Children do not understand why another child will not play with them. They understand it even less when the refusal is quiet rather than hostile, when the other child is not angry but simply absent, not cruel but simply elsewhere, somewhere behind his own eyes, in a country they cannot see and have not been invited to enter.

I recognize this now as the propagation of the pattern. My father abandoned me. I abandoned the step-siblings. Neither of us intended harm. Both of us caused it. And the mechanism that transmitted the harm from one generation to the next was not malice or negligence or even indifference. It was the internal working model, Bowlby's invisible architecture, the set of expectations about connection that was installed before I had the capacity to examine it and that operated, for decades, below the threshold of my awareness. I did not decide to decline the step-siblings. The decision was made by the model, which said: connection is conditional, connection is temporary, connection will be withdrawn, and the only rational response is to withdraw first.

But I would be dishonest if I did not acknowledge the cost of the interior country more broadly. It sustains its occupant, but it also isolates him. The same walls that protect against the next abandonment also prevent the kind of unguarded connection that most people describe as intimacy, or belonging, or home. Home, for the person who was abandoned in the first home, is a word that always carries a conditional clause. Home is where you are until someone decides you are not. Home is the five-day country. Home is the structure that remains after the function departs. I have built many homes in my life, literal and figurative, and every one of them has been built with an exit strategy embedded in the foundation, not because I plan to leave but because the earliest available lesson taught me that someone always does, and the only protection against the shock of departure is the foreknowledge that departure is the default condition.

This foreknowledge, this chronic expectation of the next leaving, is what Bowlby would recognize as the internal working model of the avoidantly attached person in its mature expression. The model does not say: I am afraid of being left. The model says: people leave. That is what people do. The question is not whether but when, and the only rational response is to build a life that does not depend on their staying. The response produces, from the outside, what looks like independence, self-reliance, even admirable self-sufficiency. From the inside, it produces a particular kind of tiredness: the tiredness of a person who has been standing watch for five decades without relief, scanning the horizon for the next departure, maintaining the walls of the interior country against a siege that may or may not be coming but

that certainly came once, at the beginning, and once is enough to establish the expectation permanently.

Winnicott, had he been consulted, would have pointed out that the “good enough” environment I did eventually receive, through my mother's endurance, through the ordinary provisions of food and shelter and school and the passage of time, did provide something. It provided survival. It provided the raw materials from which the interior country could be built. But the environment was not a straight line from abandonment to stability. There was an intervening chapter, a second marriage, the one that brought the name I still carry. The man my mother married when I was in the second grade was not good enough. The marriage was not good, as I noted in the previous chapter. He lasted a year and a half before he, too, departed, and his departure was the only gift he gave, and the gift confirmed the model with devastating efficiency: the person who arrives is not necessarily better than the person who left, and the arrival does not repair the architecture that the original departure damaged. The avoidant walls I had already begun to build were not softened by the stepfather's presence. They were reinforced by it. The original lesson said: people leave. The second lesson said: the people who replace them may be worse, and they will also leave. By the time the second husband was gone, the interior country had received its most thorough fortification yet, and I was seven years old.

My mother did fail me. I have protected her in this book for as long as I could, and the protection has lasted two chapters, which is longer than it lasted in life. The clinical language of attachment theory, with its emphasis on the primary caregiver's responsiveness, reads as an indictment of the mother, and in my case, the indictment is earned, and I have spent most of my adult life unable to say so, because the grammar of the family operates the same way the grammar of every other institution in this book operates: it protects the structure by silencing the person inside it.

My mother stayed. That fact is true and it is the fact I have been presenting as the counterweight to the father who left. But staying is not the same as caring, and presence is not the same as warmth, and endurance is not the same as love. My mother stayed because a young divorcee in a small midwestern town in the 1960s had no mechanism

for not staying, and the child she stayed for was the evidence of the trap, and she punished the evidence for the trap's existence, and the punishment lasted a lifetime. She was loved in public. She performed for the community with the precision of a woman who understood that the community's classification depended on appearances, and her appearances were meticulous. The other mothers saw a woman managing a difficult situation with grace. The child saw something else. The child saw the public performance end when the door closed, and what replaced it was not grace but fury, the fury of a woman who had wanted to be something other than what the pregnancy and the abandonment and the small town had made her, and the child was the reason she could not be that something else, and the child knew it, and the knowing was the third lesson in the curriculum of abandonment, after the father's departure and the community's reclassification: the person who stays can abandon you from the inside, and the inside abandonment is worse than the outside one, because there is no door to mark the departure, no day six to point to, no court order to cite. The structure remains. The function has not departed. The function was never there.

I do not say this to condemn her. I say it because the book's argument requires it, and because protecting her at the expense of the argument would be the kind of pretending the book has spent twelve chapters refusing to do. My mother was abandoned by the same system that abandoned me. She was twenty-three, divorced, with a baby, in a community that had classified her as broken and a culture that offered her no viable alternative to the domestic role she did not want. She was a woman who wanted to be a princess and was given a mop and a child, and she carried both for decades, and the carrying was performed with visible competence and invisible resentment, and the resentment was transmitted to the child the way the avoidant attachment style is transmitted: not through a single act but through the accumulated atmosphere of ten thousand interactions in which the child's presence was tolerated rather than welcomed, managed rather than enjoyed, endured rather than loved. She was a slave to a teaching career that lasted thirty-five years, and the word "slave" requires qualification, because the career was also a rescue. A woman principal named Mrs. Morrow, at the school across the street from where we lived, offered

my mother a full-time position with benefits after seeing her work as a substitute. My mother told me, years later, that Mrs. Morrow saved us, and the saving was real: a woman principal, rare in that era, extending a lifeline to a young single mother with no husband and no other economic option. The job provided. The job sustained. The job also required my mother to perform, eight hours a day, five days a week, for thirty-five years, the role of a competent, composed, caring professional, and the performance consumed everything she had. Teaching was her duty, not to me but to the gaze of society, and she performed it well. She masked all day. She smiled. She corrected papers. She attended faculty meetings. She was, in the eyes of the community, a woman who had pulled herself together after a difficult start. The community saw the mask. It did not see the evenings, when the mask came off and the cost of the performance was discharged on the only person present, which was the child. My night terrors were her intermissions. The person the community admired during the day and the person I knew after dark were not the same person, or rather they were the same person performing two different functions in two different registers, and the register the child occupied was the one the community never heard.

I ran. I ran to the theatre, which is a community of wounded and broken people seeking validation in the applause of strangers, and I recognized my tribe the moment I walked through the stage door. Mike Nichols once told me, during a rehearsal visit as a show prepared for its Broadway opening, that actors are wounded people, all of them, incomplete in ways they cannot fully comprehend, and that they arrive on stage not hoping to heal what is broken but to get the approval of their parents. I heard this and recognized the diagnosis as my own, because the stage was the one place where the performance was acknowledged as performance, where the mask was the point rather than the concealment, where the wounded could stand in front of strangers and be seen without the pretense that the seeing was anything other than what it was: the desperate, nightly, renewable petition for the attention the home did not provide. I ran to radio, where the young men and women I worked with were older than me but gentle, and teaching, and present in a way that the home was not. The theatre and the radio station were not institutions in the formal

sense. They were escape hatches, alternative families organized around shared work rather than shared blood, and the warmth I found in them was the warmth that Winnicott would have called the good enough environment, provided not by the primary caregiver but by a collection of strangers who happened to notice that the kid who showed up every day after school needed to be noticed, and who noticed him, and the noticing was enough.

The final twenty years of my mother's life, we did not speak. The silence was mutual, arrived at without negotiation, maintained without discussion. I do not know what she told people about the estrangement. I do not know what grammar she used. I know only that the silence was the most honest period of our relationship, because the silence did not pretend to contain what it did not contain, and the years of speech that preceded it had been an extended performance of a connection that existed structurally but not functionally, and when the performance ended, what remained was nothing, and nothing, honestly acknowledged, was preferable to the something that had been a lie.

I did not cry when I buried her. I performed my duty and rightly put her back in the ground. The sentence sounds cold, and it is cold, and the coldness is the product of the mechanism this book has been describing for two chapters: the avoidant attachment style, installed on day six by the father who left, reinforced by the community that reclassified, fortified by the second marriage that failed, and confirmed, day after day for decades, by the mother who stayed and made the staying feel like punishment. The coldness is not a character flaw. It is an adaptation. And the adaptation, like all the adaptations documented in this book, is the scar tissue forming itself into a shape that can bear weight.

If there was a “good enough” parent in this story, it was not a parent at all. It was the theatre. It was the radio station. It was the classroom where the teacher did not care about my domestic configuration. It was the library. It was, in every case, an institution rather than a person, and the institutions, as this book will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, would themselves eventually fail to keep their promises. But they kept them longer than the family did, and they kept them without resentment, and for a child whose home was a performance of obligation without warmth, the institutional warmth,

impersonal and impermanent as it was, was the closest available approximation of the secure base that Bowlby described and that the family was supposed to provide and did not.

There was one institutional attempt to fill the space where the father was supposed to be. My mother enrolled me in Big Brothers Big Sisters, the mentorship program that matches fatherless children with adult male volunteers. A kind man showed up. He may have shown up twice. The encounters felt awkward and forced, the way encounters feel when two people have been administratively paired because a form was filed and a box was checked and a program's metrics require that a match be made. I do not remember his name. I do not remember his face. I remember the feeling, which was the feeling of a transaction being performed on my behalf by a system that had identified my condition (fatherless) and prescribed a treatment (male presence) without understanding that the condition was not the absence of a male body in the room. The condition was the architecture that the original absence had already installed. The avoidant walls were poured. A stranger, however kind, arriving on a schedule, performing connection as a volunteer obligation, could not penetrate walls that had been built specifically to prevent penetration. The Big Brother departed, as people do, and the departure confirmed the model, as departures do, and the program checked its box and moved on to the next fatherless child, and the child, my self, absorbed the episode as one more data point in the accumulating evidence that the structures meant to help were structures meant to appear to help, which is a different thing, and the difference is the distance between the institution's report and the child's experience, and the distance is the territory this book maps.

What my mother's environment did not provide, and what no subsequent environment has fully provided, is the original security that Bowlby described as the secure base: the unshakeable conviction that someone is there, that the cry will be answered, that the ground will hold. That conviction, once missed, is not installable after the fact. You can learn to behave as if you have it. You can build relationships that function as if it were present. You can even experience moments of genuine connection that feel, for their duration, like the thing itself. But the moments end, and the model reasserts itself, and the scanning begins again, and the walls of the interior country, which had briefly

become transparent, solidify once more.

I am describing this not to elicit sympathy but to establish a diagnostic framework that will operate throughout the rest of this book. When I examine the abandonment of congregations by their churches, I will be examining the same dynamic at a larger scale: the institution that was supposed to provide the secure base, that promised permanence and reliability and unconditional welcome, failing to keep the promise and leaving the congregation to construct meaning from the absence. When I examine the abandonment of students by their schools, I will be examining the avoidant attachment style reproduced at the institutional level: the school that appears to function, that maintains the structure and the schedule and the ceremony, while the educational mission, the actual formation of the young, has been quietly evacuated and replaced with sorting and credentialing. When I examine the abandonment of citizens by their government, I will be examining the internal working model of an entire population: the expectation, now so deeply embedded that it barely registers as an expectation, that the institutions meant to sustain us will not sustain us, and that the only rational response is the same one the avoidant infant adopts: do not reach. Do not cry. Do not expect the returning figure to return. Build the interior country and live in it alone.

The psychological literature describes these adaptations in the language of pathology. Avoidant attachment is a disorder, a deviation from the norm, a failure to achieve the developmental milestone of secure bonding. And the literature is correct, as far as it goes. The avoidant strategy does close off possibilities. It does prevent certain kinds of connection. It does produce a characteristic loneliness that no amount of professional accomplishment or intellectual richness can fully address, because the loneliness is not a product of insufficient stimulation. It is a product of the original lesson: that the person who was supposed to be there was not there, and the resulting expectation that no one will be.

But the literature does not go far enough, because it treats avoidant attachment as a personal condition rather than a social symptom. The avoidantly attached person is not an anomaly. The avoidantly attached person is a reasonable product of an environment that systematically fails to keep its promises, and the environment is not limited to the

individual family. The environment includes every institution documented in this book: the court, the community, the economic system, the political system, the entire architecture of modern life, which promises belonging and delivers classification, promises permanence and delivers increments, promises a secure base and delivers instead the instruction to build your own.

The interior country is not a retreat from the world. It is a reconstruction of the world according to the evidence available. And the evidence, as I will demonstrate in the chapters that follow, is extensive, consistent, and damning. The institutions of the world abandon. They do it repeatedly, across every domain, with a consistency that suggests structure rather than accident. The question is not whether the pattern will recur but whether you will see it clearly when it does, and what you will build in the territory that remains after the function departs.

I built a country. It is the country you are standing in now, as you read this book. It has no borders that any cartographer would recognize, but it has been surveyed and resurveyed over fifty years, and its topography is precise. Here is the place where the father left. Here is the place where the community reclassified. Here is the place where the step-siblings were declined. Here is the place where the name was assigned. Here is the place where the child stopped reaching for the returning figure and began, instead, to read. And here, in every direction from this high point, extending outward through churches and schools and factories and governments and the silent apartments of the self-abandoned, is the territory this book will map.

The map begins with the wound. The wound begins with the infant. The infant begins with the absence of the father on the sixth day. And the absence, as Bowlby understood and Ainsworth measured and Winnicott lamented and I have lived, does not end. It becomes the architecture. It becomes the lens. It becomes, if you are stubborn enough and angry enough and honest enough, a way of seeing that is worth more than the comfort it replaced, because comfort can be faked, but sight cannot, and this book is written in the conviction that seeing clearly, however much it costs, is preferable to the alternative.

Chapter 3

The Grammar of Leaving

Every abandonment has a sentence, and the sentence is almost always in the passive voice.

Jobs were lost. Communities declined. The congregation dwindled. The neighborhood changed. The factory relocated. The program was discontinued. The services were reduced. The position was eliminated. The relationship ran its course. These things happen. It is what it is. Time to move on.

Listen to the grammar. In every case, the subject of the sentence is the thing that was abandoned: the job, the community, the congregation, the neighborhood, the factory, the program, the service, the position, the relationship. In no case is the subject of the sentence the person or institution that did the abandoning. The jobs were not taken by a board of directors who calculated that Indonesian labor was cheaper. The jobs were lost, as if they had wandered off on their own, as if employment were a set of car keys that had slipped behind the couch cushions through nobody's fault. The community did not decline because a county commission rezoned the affordable housing or because a hospital chain closed the only clinic within thirty miles. The community declined, as if decline were a weather pattern, as if gravity had simply exerted its natural pull on a population that was always destined to sink. The congregation did not dwindle because the bishop redirected parish resources to settle lawsuits or because the new pastor replaced the old hymnal with a projection screen and a fog machine. The congregation dwindled, as if parishioners were a nonrenewable resource that had been mined to exhaustion.

The pattern is so consistent that it cannot be accidental. One passive construction is a stylistic choice. A hundred passive constructions, deployed across every domain of institutional life, in every boardroom memo and press release and county commission report and severance letter and school closure announcement in the country, is a system. And a system, unlike a stylistic choice, has a function.

The language is engineered. The passive voice, in the context of abandonment, is not a stylistic weakness. It is a political instrument. It removes the actor from the sentence in the same way that the actor removed himself from the obligation: quietly, without fanfare, and in a manner that makes it structurally difficult to assign responsibility. You cannot hold a subject accountable when the sentence has no subject. You cannot demand that someone return when the grammar of the departure has been constructed to make it appear that no one left. And this grammatical disappearing act, this conversion of a decision into a condition, is the first and most durable technology of abandonment. Before the leaving is complete, the language is already in place to ensure that the leaving will never be named as leaving. It will be named as change, transition, evolution, the market, the times, the way things are now. And the people who remain, the ones who were left, will adopt this language because it is the only language available, and in adopting it, they will participate in the erasure of their own abandonment.

The mechanism needs a name, because the rest of this book depends on the reader's ability to recognize it when it appears. I call it the grammar of leaving. The grammar of leaving is the set of rhetorical, linguistic, and narrative conventions by which an act of abandonment is converted into a condition of the abandoned. It includes the passive voice. It includes the euphemism. It includes the appeal to inevitability. It includes the therapeutic instruction to "move on." And it includes, at its most sophisticated, the complete inversion of agency, in which the person who was left is recast as the person who failed to adapt, failed to keep up, failed to make themselves worth staying for.

The euphemism is the most visible component. When my father left, the community did not say, "That man abandoned his pregnant wife and his newborn child." The community said, "Their marriage didn't work out." The difference between these two sentences is not just tonal. It is structural. The first sentence has a subject (the man), a verb (abandoned), and objects (the wife, the child). It assigns responsibility. It identifies an actor and an action. The second sentence has a subject (the marriage) that is an abstraction, a verb (didn't work out) that implies organic failure rather than chosen departure, and no objects at all, because when a marriage "doesn't work out," nobody is done to. Nobody is acted upon. The marriage simply failed, the way an engine

fails or a crop fails, through some internal insufficiency that belongs to no one in particular.

This is the function of the euphemism: to replace the specific with the general, the active with the passive, the chosen with the inevitable. “Downsizing” replaces “we have decided that your labor is no longer worth what we agreed to pay for it.” “Restructuring” replaces “we are breaking the organizational promises that were the basis of your employment.” “Transitioning” replaces “we are leaving, and we would prefer that you not use the word leaving.” “Right-sizing” replaces “we hired more people than we needed because it was profitable at the time, and now that it is no longer profitable, we are correcting our own error at your expense, and we have given this correction a name that implies it was always the correct size and you were the deviation.” Each euphemism performs the same operation: it takes an act of departure and reformats it as a process of optimization, as if the people being left behind were not people but inefficiencies, not lives but line items, not the abandoned but the excess.

The appeal to inevitability is subtler and more dangerous. The euphemism merely renames the abandonment. The appeal to inevitability denies that it was an abandonment at all by asserting that no alternative was possible. “Globalization made it necessary to move the factory overseas.” “The changing demographics of the congregation made consolidation inevitable.” “The fiscal realities of the state budget made the service cuts unavoidable.” “The evolution of the market made the layoffs a matter of survival.” In each case, the actor, the corporation, the diocese, the legislature, the employer, is not presented as having made a choice. The actor is presented as having responded to a force, and the force is always named with a word that implies magnitude, impersonality, and the impossibility of resistance: globalization, demographics, fiscal realities, the market, evolution, progress, the times.

But these forces are not weather. Globalization did not happen to corporations. Corporations created globalization through a series of trade agreements, lobbying campaigns, regulatory captures, and board-level decisions, each one made by specific people in specific rooms on specific dates for specific reasons, all of which can be identified, documented, and named. The changing demographics of the

congregation did not happen to the diocese. The diocese made decisions about resource allocation, about which communities to invest in and which to divest from, about where to build and where to close, and these decisions reflected priorities that were chosen, not imposed. The fiscal realities of the state budget did not happen to the legislature. The legislature created the fiscal realities by choosing which revenues to collect and which to forgo, which expenditures to fund and which to cut, and the choices consistently reflected a preference for certain constituencies over others, a preference that can be mapped with some precision onto the question of who is abandoned and who is not.

The appeal to inevitability is the most effective component of the grammar of leaving because it transforms the abandoner from an agent into a victim. The corporation did not choose to close the factory. The corporation was forced to close the factory by globalization, by the market, by competitive pressure, by forces beyond its control. The diocese did not choose to close the parish. Demographics required it. The legislature did not choose to cut the program. Fiscal realities demanded it. In each case, the entity that did the leaving is positioned as having suffered the leaving alongside those who were left, as if the board of directors and the laid-off worker were both swept away by the same tide, as if the bishop and the abandoned parishioner were both carried off by the same demographic current, as if the difference between the one who decides and the one who is decided upon were merely a matter of seating arrangement on the same lifeboat.

This is a lie. It is a very effective lie, and it is told so often and so fluently that it has acquired the force of common sense, but it is a lie. The corporation was not forced. The corporation chose. The diocese was not compelled. The diocese prioritized. The legislature was not constrained. The legislature allocated. And in each case, the choice, the priority, the allocation could have been made differently, and the reason it was not made differently is that the people who would have been inconvenienced by the alternative were more powerful than the people who were inconvenienced by the decision, and power, in the grammar of leaving, is the one word that is never spoken.

The therapeutic displacement is the final component, and it is the one that completes the circuit. Once the abandonment has been renamed (the euphemism), once the abandonment has been declared

unavoidable (the appeal to inevitability), the therapeutic displacement instructs the abandoned to participate in their own erasure by “moving on.” The phrase is so common as to be invisible, but it repays examination. “Move on” is an instruction to leave. It tells the abandoned person to do to themselves what was done to them: to depart from the scene of the abandonment, to vacate the emotional territory, to stop standing in the place where the promise was broken and start walking toward some unspecified destination where the breaking will no longer be visible. “Find closure.” “Let it go.” “Don't dwell on it.” “It's time to heal.” Each instruction locates the problem not in the abandonment but in the individual's response to the abandonment.

Consider the precision of this operation. The father leaves. The community says, “These things happen.” The therapist says, “You need to process this and find closure.” The self-help book says, “You cannot control what others do; you can only control your response.” At each stage, the aperture narrows. The father's decision is first universalized (these things happen), then naturalized (it was inevitable), and finally privatized (it is now your personal psychological problem to solve). The abandonment, which began as an act committed by a specific person, has been converted, through a series of grammatical operations, into an interior condition of the person it was committed against. The man who left has disappeared from the sentence entirely. What remains is a woman with a baby who has a problem with closure, and a child who will, in time, be told that his feelings about his father's absence are “something to work through,” as if the absence were a thicket the child must hack through alone rather than a hole that someone else dug and walked away from.

The problem is not that you were left. The problem is that you are still here, still standing in the place where you were left, still pointing at the empty space where the person or institution used to be, still insisting that the leaving happened and that it mattered and that someone should answer for it. The therapeutic displacement says: your continued presence at the scene of the abandonment is the problem. Your refusal to move on is what is causing your suffering. The suffering is not caused by the man who left, the factory that closed, the church that consolidated, the government that withdrew. The suffering is

caused by your failure to accept, adapt, and relocate.

This is the moment at which the grammar achieves its full effect. The person who was left, having been told that the leaving was nobody's fault, having been told that it was inevitable, is now told that the appropriate response to the leaving is to leave as well. To move on. To vacate the premises. To stop being abandoned by ceasing to notice that one has been abandoned. And the extraordinary thing, the thing that makes this grammar so much more effective than any physical coercion or legal prohibition, is that most people comply. They move on. They find closure. They stop talking about the factory, the church, the school, the marriage, the father. They adopt the grammar as their own internal language, and the abandonment, having been renamed, declared inevitable, and therapeutically dissolved, ceases to exist as a grievance and becomes instead a personal characteristic. "She's still hung up on that." "He can't let go of the past." "They need to accept reality." The grammar has converted the act of being abandoned into the character flaw of noticing.

I should pause here to introduce the phrase that gives this book its title, because it is the antidote to the grammar I have been describing.

"Abandoned in Place" is an engineering designation. It appears in the records of the United States military, in NASA's infrastructure documentation, in the vocabularies of civil engineering and demolition. It designates a structure that has been decommissioned but not removed. A launch pad that will never launch another rocket but that is too massive to tear down. A missile silo whose warhead has been extracted but whose concrete walls remain embedded in the prairie. A building whose tenants have departed but whose demolition would be more expensive than its continued existence. The structure is marked with a small plaque or notation. The notation says, in effect: this is still here. It is no longer functioning. No one is coming to restore it. But it is still here, and it will remain here, and its presence is a fact that cannot be dissolved by the grammar of moving on.

I first encountered the phrase while researching the missile silos of the Great Plains, those underground cathedrals of the Cold War that were dug into the Nebraska and Kansas and Montana prairie during the 1960s, the same decade I was born into my own particular silo. The silos were built to hold something terrible and essential. They were

built with the full resources and attention of the most powerful nation on earth. And when the strategic calculus changed, when the missiles were decommissioned, when the warheads were removed and the launch protocols were deleted, the silos were not filled in. They were not restored to farmland. They were left. The concrete caps remain. The access roads remain. The chain-link fences remain. If you drive through the right parts of the prairie, you can see them, low mounds in the wheat fields, marked with small signs that say, in the flat language of bureaucratic finality, that this structure has been abandoned in place. The structure does not care that it has been abandoned. The structure simply stands, as structures do, in the shape it was given by the people who built it for a purpose they no longer require.

I take this phrase as the governing metaphor of the book because it refuses every component of the grammar of leaving simultaneously. It is not a euphemism: it uses the word “abandoned,” which is the word that every other formulation is designed to avoid. It is not an appeal to inevitability: it does not explain why the structure was abandoned, does not offer a narrative about market forces or demographic shifts or fiscal realities, does not position the abandonment as anyone's destiny or no one's fault. It is not a therapeutic instruction: it does not tell the structure to move on, to find closure, to accept its decommissioned status and rebuild itself as something more modern, more efficient, more compatible with the current configuration. It simply names the condition. Abandoned. In place. Still here. Still visible. Still taking up the space it was designed to take up, even though the purpose for which it was designed has been withdrawn.

This is the posture of this book. I am not moving on. I am not finding closure. I am standing in the place where I was left, not because I am stuck but because the place where I was left is the place from which the view is clearest. The person who moves on cannot see the pattern. The person who finds closure has closed the door on the evidence. The person who heals, in the therapeutic sense, has accepted the grammar as the true account of what happened and has agreed to stop contesting it. I am not contesting it from a place of anger or self-pity. I am contesting it from a place of precision. The grammar is wrong. The passive voice is a lie. The euphemisms are camouflage. The inevitability is manufactured. And the instruction to move on is the final, most

elegant mechanism of control, because it recruits the abandoned into the project of their own forgetting.

I am not forgetting. I am translating. Every passive construction in this book will be rebuilt in the active voice, with the actor restored to the sentence and the decision restored to the record. Every euphemism will be unpacked and the original contents displayed. Every appeal to inevitability will be answered with the names of the people who sat in the room where the decision was made. And every therapeutic instruction to move on will be answered with the same two words: still here.

This translation project requires one more analytical tool, and that tool is the social contract. I use the phrase deliberately, because what I have been describing in the personal chapters, the father's departure, the community's reclassification, the judge's number, is more than a family drama. It is the social contract in miniature. The father made a promise, implicit in the act of conception and explicit in the act of marriage, and he broke it. The community made a promise, implicit in the concept of neighborliness and explicit in the rituals of belonging, and it withdrew the promise when the conditions of membership were no longer met. The court made a promise, implicit in the concept of justice and explicit in the concept of the child's best interest, and it honored the promise with five days. In each case, an agreement existed, a party to the agreement departed, and the departure was administered with enough procedural dignity to prevent the abandoned party from recognizing the breach for what it was.

The phrase "social contract" has a specific intellectual history, running from Hobbes through Locke through Rousseau, and I will sketch that history briefly here because it provides the framework for everything that follows.

The social contract, in its simplest formulation, is the idea that governance is a mutual agreement. The individual surrenders certain freedoms, the freedom to use violence, the freedom to take whatever can be seized by force, the freedom to live entirely according to private judgment, and in exchange, the governing authority provides certain protections: security, order, the administration of justice, and the collective provision of goods that no individual can provide alone. Roads. Schools. Courts. Armies. Hospitals. The infrastructure of shared

life. The contract is not written on paper. It is written in behavior, in the daily exchange of compliance for provision, taxation for services, civic participation for civic benefit.

What happens when one party to this contract simply stops performing? Not with a revolution, not with a formal repudiation, not with a declaration of war against the citizenry. With something quieter. With the slow, grinding withdrawal of services, attention, and investment. With the closure of the hospital. The defunding of the school. The privatization of the water supply. The elimination of the bus route. The replacement of the pension with a 401(k), which transfers the risk of retirement from the institution that promised stability to the individual who was promised stability, a transfer so enormous in its consequences and so quiet in its execution that most people did not notice it happening until it had already happened.

This is the breach of the social contract, and it is the subject of the middle chapters of this book. The breach does not look like a breach. It looks like policy. It looks like budget adjustment. It looks like modernization, efficiency, the responsible stewardship of public resources. It looks, in other words, like the grammar applied at the institutional level: the passive voice (services were reduced), the euphemism (right-sizing, consolidation, fiscal responsibility), the appeal to inevitability (the budget reality, the market conditions, the demographic trends), and the therapeutic instruction (adapt, retrain, relocate, move on). Every component of the grammar that was applied to my mother in her small town in 1969 is applied, daily, to millions of citizens whose institutions have quietly walked out of the room while leaving the building standing.

Hobbes would have recognized this. Hobbes, who wrote the *Leviathan* in 1651, argued that the social contract was the only alternative to the state of nature, which he described with the famous phrase: the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. What Hobbes did not anticipate, because the mechanisms of institutional abandonment had not yet been refined to their current sophistication, was that the state of nature could be reinstated selectively. That it could be imposed on specific populations while the rest of the social order continued to function. That the social contract could be honored for some citizens and breached for others, and that the breach could be

administered so gradually and narrated so skillfully that the citizens who were being returned to the state of nature would not recognize what was happening to them until the water was already poisoned, the school was already closed, the factory was already gone, and the grammar of leaving had already persuaded them that the loss was their own fault.

Locke would have recognized it too. Locke, who argued in 1689 that the legitimacy of government derives from the consent of the governed, and that when a government fails to protect the natural rights of its citizens, the citizens have the right to alter or abolish it. But Locke assumed that the failure would be visible, that a government that broke the contract would do so in a manner that the citizens could identify and resist. He did not anticipate the grammar of leaving. He did not anticipate that the failure could be renamed as progress, that the breach could be narrated as inevitability, that the citizens' right to resist could be dissolved by the therapeutic instruction to move on. In Locke's framework, the people rise up when the contract is broken. In the contemporary framework, the people move on. And the difference between rising up and moving on is the difference between a population that has identified its abandonment and a population that has been grammatically prevented from doing so.

Rousseau, who argued in 1762 that the social contract should produce a general will that serves the common good, would have seen in the contemporary arrangement the precise inversion of his ideal: a general will that has been captured by particular interests, a common good that has been redefined as private profit, a social contract whose terms are set by the parties who benefit from its selective enforcement and whose violations are absorbed by the parties who have no recourse. Rousseau's social contract was a pact among equals. The contemporary social contract is a pact between the powerful and the expendable, and the grammar is the instrument by which the expendable are persuaded that their expenditure is nobody's fault.

These are the tools. The three elements of abandonment: the one who leaves, the one who is left, the narrative constructed to explain the leaving. The grammar of leaving: the passive voice, the euphemism, the appeal to inevitability, the therapeutic displacement, and the inversion of agency. The social contract: the mutual agreement between citizens

and institutions whose selective breach constitutes the political form of abandonment. And the governing metaphor: Abandoned in Place, the designation that refuses every component of the grammar by naming the condition in the active voice and declining to move on.

With these tools in hand, we leave the personal and enter the institutional. Part One of this book has established the viewport: the infant who was given five days of fatherhood and a lifetime of pattern recognition, the interior country built to sustain a single occupant, the grammar that was used to convert his abandonment into a condition rather than an act. Part Two will take this viewport and train it on the institutions that were supposed to hold the social fabric together and that have, one by one, quietly and with excellent grammar, walked out of the room.

The reader will recognize the grammar immediately. It is the same grammar, deployed at scale. The passive voice will be the same passive voice, applied to congregations instead of families, to student bodies instead of infants, to workforces instead of wives. The euphemisms will be the same euphemisms, tailored for each domain but performing the same function: converting an act of departure into a condition of the departed. The appeals to inevitability will invoke the same impersonal forces, globalization in the factory chapter, secularization in the church chapter, fiscal reality in the government chapter, but the structure of the appeal will be identical: the actor was not an actor, the choice was not a choice, the leaving was not a leaving, and the people who remain have no legitimate claim against the people who left, because nobody left. Things simply changed. The way things do. The way they always have. The way they always will.

And at the end of each chapter, the same two words will be waiting, the same two words that the grammar was designed to prevent anyone from saying: still here.

The pew is empty. The schoolhouse is locked. The factory is shuttered. The square is hollow.

The structures remain. The functions have departed. And the plaques that nobody reads say the same thing in every case: Abandoned in Place.

Part Two: The Pattern

Chapter 4

The Empty Pew

The first time I understood that a church could leave its people, I was sitting in one.

I do not remember the denomination. I do not remember the sermon. I remember the building, which was small and wooden and painted white in the manner of midwestern churches that were built to hold a congregation the size of a neighborhood and to serve that neighborhood with the constancy of a utility. The church was as permanent as the water tower. It was as reliable as the grain elevator. It opened its doors on Sunday morning the way the post office opened its doors on Monday morning: not as a favor but as a function, as the fulfillment of an obligation so fundamental that nobody discussed it, the way nobody discusses whether the floor will hold when you step on it. You stepped on it. It held. You walked into the church. It was there. The pew was solid. The hymnal was in the rack. The pastor knew your name and your mother's name and the name of your dead grandfather, and when he said "we," he meant the people in the room, and the people in the room believed him, because the people in the room were the church, and the church was the people in the room, and the distinction between the institution and the community it served had not yet been introduced.

That distinction would be introduced, across thousands of congregations in the decades that followed, with devastating efficiency. The institution and the community would be separated, slowly and then quickly, the way a man separates from a pregnant wife: first in intention, then in fact, then in the narrative constructed afterward to explain why the separation was necessary and nobody's fault. The church would remain standing. The steeple would still punctuate the skyline. The doors would still open, somewhere, on Sunday morning. But the function, the actual covenant between the institution and the people who trusted it, would depart, and the departure would be administered with the same grammar that governs every abandonment: passively, euphemistically, inevitably, and with the therapeutic

instruction that the faithful should find a new church, adjust to the new reality, move on.

This chapter is not an argument against religion, or against faith, or against the impulse to gather in a room and sing together and hear a word of encouragement and place money in a plate and believe that the gathering matters. The impulse is real. The need is real. The gathering, when it functions as it was designed to function, provides something that no other institution provides in quite the same way: the assurance that you are known, that you are counted, that your absence would be noticed, and that the community will hold you when you cannot hold yourself. That is a covenant. It is perhaps the oldest covenant available to human beings, older than the social contract, older than the nation-state, older than the written law. People have been gathering in rooms to be held by something larger than themselves for as long as there have been people and rooms, and the power of the gathering is not diminished by the failures of the institutions that administer it.

But the institutions have failed. They have failed spectacularly, systematically, and with a consistency that suggests not isolated error but structural design. In the case of religious institutions, the one who leaves is the institution itself, departing from its original promise to its congregation while maintaining the physical and ceremonial infrastructure of that promise. The building is still there. The cross is still on the wall. The organ still plays. But the covenant has been quietly renegotiated, and the new terms favor the institution over the community, the brand over the believer, the survival of the organization over the nourishment of the souls it was organized to nourish.

Let me begin with the most visible failure, because it illustrates the mechanism in its most concentrated form.

In January 2002, the Boston Globe published the first of what would become hundreds of reports documenting the systematic sexual abuse of children by priests of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, and the systematic concealment of that abuse by the archdiocese's leadership. The reporting, conducted by the Globe's Spotlight team, revealed that Cardinal Bernard Law and his predecessors had known for decades that priests under their authority were raping children, and that their response, consistent, deliberate, and documented in internal correspondence, was not to protect the children but to protect the

institution. Abusive priests were transferred to new parishes. Victims were silenced with settlements that included nondisclosure agreements. The police were not called. The congregations were not informed. The parents who entrusted their children to the care of the church were not told that the person baptizing their infant, hearing their child's first confession, teaching their child's catechism class, had a documented history of predation that the archdiocese had chosen to manage rather than end.

The grammar of leaving is legible in every element of this history. The passive voice: "mistakes were made." The euphemism: the abusive priests were "reassigned," the abuse was a "failing," the institutional response was "inadequate." The appeal to inevitability: the problem was systemic, it was cultural, it was a product of the times, it was the consequence of celibacy requirements or seminary culture or the particular pressures of the clerical life. And the therapeutic displacement: the victims were offered counseling, were told to heal, were given settlements calibrated to purchase silence and rebrand the crime as a wound that could be closed with money and therapy rather than an ongoing act of institutional betrayal that demanded institutional accountability.

But the abandonment goes deeper than the abuse itself, because the abuse was the symptom and the abandonment was the cause. The Catholic Church abandoned its congregations the moment it decided that the institution's survival was more important than the safety of the people the institution existed to serve. That decision was not made in a moment of crisis. It was made as a matter of policy, implemented across decades, across dioceses, across national boundaries, by men who understood exactly what they were doing and who calculated, correctly, that the institution's authority was sufficient to suppress the consequences. The calculation was this: the faithful will continue to come. The pews will continue to fill. The plate will continue to circulate. The parents will continue to deliver their children to our care. Because the church is the church, and the alternative to the church is nothing, and the faithful, having been raised to believe that the institution and the faith are the same thing, will not be able to distinguish between the building and the God it was built to house.

This calculation held for a remarkably long time. Decades. Generations. The abuse continued, the concealment continued, the faithful continued to come, and the institution's leadership learned from this continuity exactly the lesson it should not have learned: that accountability was unnecessary because loyalty was unconditional. And this lesson, this fatal misreading of the relationship between the institution and its people, is the template for every form of institutional abandonment I will examine in this book. The institution that concludes its people have nowhere else to go is the institution that will treat them as captives rather than congregants. The employer that concludes its workers have no alternatives is the employer that will cut wages and benefits. The government that concludes its citizens have no recourse is the government that will withdraw services. The pattern is the same at every scale: the institution abandons its obligation to the community because it has calculated that the community's dependence is sufficient to absorb the abandonment without consequence.

The consequence, when it came, was not a revolt. It was a departure. Catholics left. They left by the millions, across the United States and across the world, and they left not primarily because of the abuse, which many of them had not experienced directly, but because of the concealment, which violated the one thing the church was supposed to provide above all else: the assurance that you were known, counted, and safe. The concealment told the faithful something that no amount of subsequent reform could unsay: the institution valued its own continuity more than it valued you. Your child was an acceptable casualty in the preservation of the brand. Your trust was a resource to be managed, not a covenant to be honored. And when the concealment was revealed, the institution did not repent in the manner it required of its congregants. It lawyered. It settled. It transferred the financial cost to the diocesan insurance portfolio and the emotional cost to the victims, and it continued to open its doors on Sunday morning as if the doors were the thing that mattered rather than what was supposed to happen behind them.

The financial dimension of the Catholic response deserves examination, because it reveals the institutional calculus with unusual clarity. Across the United States, dioceses facing abuse-related lawsuits declared bankruptcy. The Archdiocese of Portland in 2004. The Diocese

of Tucson in 2004. The Diocese of Spokane in 2004. The Diocese of Davenport in 2006. The Diocese of San Diego in 2007. The list extends through the following two decades and across dozens of jurisdictions. The bankruptcy filings were presented as regrettable necessities, as the unavoidable consequence of the legal exposure created by decades of abuse. They were narrated in the grammar of leaving: the diocese “faced” financial difficulties, the settlements “required” restructuring, the resources “were insufficient” to meet the obligations. The passive voice did its work. What the passive voice concealed was that the bankruptcy filings were strategic decisions, made by bishops and canon lawyers, to limit the institution's financial exposure by placing the assets of the diocese under court protection. The practical effect was that the money the faithful had given, the tithes and offerings and bequests of generations of parishioners who believed they were funding the work of God, was shielded from the claims of the children those same parishioners had entrusted to the institution's care. The institution used the community's money to protect itself from the consequences of its betrayal of the community. And then it closed the parishes that the community had built, sold the buildings the community had paid for, and told the displaced congregants to find a new church home.

The parish closures that accompanied and followed the abuse crisis represent the most literal form of religious abandonment available for examination. In 2004, the Archdiocese of Boston, the same archdiocese at the center of the original Spotlight investigation, announced the closure of sixty-five parishes. In the years that followed, dioceses across the country enacted similar consolidations. The closures were presented as necessary responses to declining membership, aging infrastructure, and financial constraint. Each of these factors was real. But each of them was also, in significant measure, a consequence of the institution's own prior abandonment. Membership declined because trust was broken. Infrastructure aged because maintenance was deferred in favor of legal costs. Financial constraint was produced by the same scandal that produced the membership decline and the deferred maintenance. The institution's failures created the conditions that the institution then cited as justification for further failures, and the circularity of this logic was concealed by the grammar of leaving,

which presented each closure as an independent response to an independent circumstance rather than as the latest iteration of a pattern that began when the first bishop chose to transfer a predator rather than report him.

But the Catholic abuse crisis, for all its enormity, is only the most visible instance of a pattern that operates across the entire landscape of American religious life. The pattern does not require criminal predation. It requires only the gradual, almost imperceptible substitution of institutional interest for communal covenant. And this substitution has occurred in denominations that have never been accused of harboring predators, in congregations whose pastors are decent people, in traditions whose theology is sound and whose intentions are good. The mechanism does not require bad actors. It requires only the same structural logic that operates in every other domain of abandonment: the institution slowly redefines its mission in terms that prioritize its own survival, growth, and brand coherence over its original obligation to the specific community it was built to serve.

Consider the megachurch. The megachurch is, architecturally and operationally, the opposite of the small white church I described at the beginning of this chapter. The small church was built to hold a neighborhood. The megachurch is built to hold a market. The small church's pastor knew your name. The megachurch's pastor knows his brand. The small church asked what the community needed. The megachurch asks what the consumer wants. And the difference between a community and a market, between a need and a want, between a covenant and a transaction, is the difference between a church that can abandon you and a church that was never yours to begin with.

The megachurch model, which began to proliferate in the 1970s and reached its full commercial maturity by the early 2000s, is organized around a set of principles that would be immediately recognizable to anyone who has studied retail franchising. Location is chosen for traffic volume and demographic density, not for proximity to an existing community in need. The physical plant is designed for throughput: large auditoriums, efficient parking, minimal lingering space, because lingering produces intimacy and intimacy produces obligation and

obligation is expensive. The service is designed for consumption: professional music, polished speaking, controlled emotional arcs, clear calls to action, seamless exits. The pastor is not a shepherd; the pastor is a performer, a content creator, a brand ambassador whose face appears on the website and the billboard and the book cover and whose personal narrative of triumph over adversity has been refined into a marketing asset. The congregation is not a flock; the congregation is an audience, and the audience is measured not by the depth of its attachment but by the frequency of its attendance and the size of its contribution.

I do not doubt that many people who attend megachurches experience something they identify as spiritual nourishment. The music is moving. The message is encouraging. The anonymity is, for some, a relief after the claustrophobia of the small church where everyone knew your business. But anonymity is the opposite of the covenant I described at the beginning of this chapter. The covenant says: you are known. Anonymity says: you are welcome to attend. The covenant says: your absence would be noticed. Anonymity says: your seat will be filled. The covenant says: we will hold you when you cannot hold yourself. Anonymity says: we offer resources for personal growth. The difference is the difference between a community and a service, between a family and a subscription, and the megachurch, by design and by necessity, provides the latter while using the language of the former.

The megachurch phenomenon, which accelerated dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s, coincided with and was enabled by the closure of thousands of neighborhood churches across the United States. The closures were narrated in the grammar of leaving: the congregation had dwindled, the building was aging, the demographics had shifted, the costs were unsustainable. Each of these explanations contains a kernel of truth, and each of them, on close examination, conceals a decision. The congregation dwindled because the denomination redirected resources away from small congregations and toward large ones, following the same consolidation logic that drives corporate mergers. The building aged because maintenance budgets were cut to fund expansion elsewhere. The demographics shifted because the denomination decided to pursue younger, wealthier, more mobile congregants rather than serve the older, poorer, less mobile ones who

were already there. And the costs were unsustainable because the institution calculated sustainability in financial terms rather than covenantal ones, and a small church full of elderly people who tithe modestly is, by financial calculation, a worse investment than a megachurch full of young professionals who tithe generously and volunteer for the building campaign.

The closures were administered, in many cases, by the same denominational authorities who were investing in the megachurches that would absorb, or fail to absorb, the displaced congregants. The faithful were told to find a new church home. The phrase itself reveals the grammar at work: “church home,” as if a church were a house that could be swapped for another house of equivalent value, as if the decades of shared life, shared grief, shared celebration, shared meals in the fellowship hall, shared knowledge of who was sick and who was grieving and who needed a ride on Sunday morning, were fungible assets that could be transferred from one ledger to another without loss. They were not fungible. They were specific. They were irreplaceable. And the institution that closed the building knew they were irreplaceable and did it anyway, because the institution's definition of its mission had shifted from serving the community to growing the brand, and the brand required a different kind of building with a different kind of occupant.

The prosperity gospel represents the logical endpoint of this shift. The prosperity gospel, in its various formulations, replaces the covenant between the church and the community with a transaction between the believer and God, mediated by the pastor. The transaction is simple: give money, receive blessings. Give more money, receive more blessings. The poverty of the congregant is not a condition to be addressed by communal care; it is a spiritual failing to be corrected by increased giving. The wealth of the pastor is not a scandal; it is proof that the transaction works. The church, in this framework, does not exist to hold the community. The church exists to process contributions, and the community exists to generate them, and the relationship between the institution and the faithful has been reduced to the relationship between a vendor and a customer, except that the vendor is selling an intangible product whose nondelivery can always be attributed to the customer's insufficient faith.

The theological obscenity of the prosperity gospel has been well documented by better theologians than I am, and I will not rehearse the exegetical arguments here. What interests me is the structural function the prosperity gospel performs in the economy of abandonment. It does not merely fail to serve the poor. It redefines poverty as the poor person's fault, which is to say it performs, in theological language, the same inversion of agency that the grammar of leaving performs in secular language. The factory worker whose job was shipped overseas is told he failed to adapt. The prosperity gospel congregant whose prayers for financial relief go unanswered is told she failed to believe. In both cases, the institution that broke the promise has relocated the blame to the person to whom the promise was made, and the relocation is so thorough that many of the people to whom it is applied accept it. They believe they did not believe hard enough. They tithe more. They attend more services. They buy the pastor's book. And the pastor, whose private jet and gated compound are visible evidence of a covenant being honored for someone, accepts their tithes and writes another book about the blessings of faith and does not visit the sick and does not feed the hungry and does not notice the woman in the third pew because the woman in the third pew is not in the third pew. She is in her apartment. She cannot afford the gas to drive to the megachurch. And nobody is coming.

This is abandonment in its purest theological form. The church has abandoned the poor, the sick, the grieving, and the struggling, which is to say the people Jesus of Nazareth specifically and repeatedly identified as the church's primary constituency, and has replaced them with the aspirational, the upwardly mobile, and the willing-to-pay. The building is larger than ever. The parking lot is full. The production values are extraordinary. The pastor's name is on the marquee, and the marquee is on the highway, and the highway leads to a campus that looks like a corporate headquarters because it is a corporate headquarters, and the cross on the roof is a logo, and the logo is a brand, and the brand is a business, and the business is booming, and somewhere in the city, in a neighborhood the highway bypassed, the small white church is boarded up, and the old woman who used to sit in the third pew on the left is watching television alone in her apartment because no one from the megachurch has come to check on her,

because the megachurch does not know she exists, because the megachurch's definition of ministry does not include knowing the name of every person in the third pew.

The mainline Protestant denominations, which have neither the scandal of the Catholic hierarchy nor the spectacle of the prosperity gospel, have enacted a quieter, more genteel, and in some ways more disheartening abandonment. The mainline churches, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, the Congregationalists, were for most of the twentieth century the institutional backbone of progressive social engagement in the United States. They built hospitals. They funded schools. They marched for civil rights. They operated food banks and homeless shelters and addiction recovery programs. They did this not as a marketing strategy but as a theological commitment: the belief that the church's mission extended beyond the sanctuary door, that serving the community was not an ancillary activity but the central purpose for which the institution existed.

That commitment has been in retreat for decades, and the retreat has been narrated, predictably, in the grammar of leaving. Membership declined. Resources contracted. Priorities shifted. The culture changed. Each of these explanations is true in the way that all explanations constructed by the grammar of leaving are true: they describe the condition without identifying the actor. What they do not say is that the mainline denominations made choices. They chose to invest in institutional maintenance over community engagement. They chose to fight internal theological battles over sexuality and ordination while the food banks closed and the homeless shelters consolidated. They chose to adopt a corporate governance model that prioritized financial sustainability over mission fidelity. They chose, in denomination after denomination, to behave as if the institution's survival were the mission rather than the means by which the mission was accomplished, and in making that choice, they walked out of the room with the same quiet, grammatically impeccable efficiency as every other institution in this book.

The theological battles deserve particular attention, because they illustrate a specific mechanism of institutional abandonment: the diversion of communal energy from outward service to inward contest.

The United Methodist Church spent the better part of three decades arguing about the ordination and marriage of LGBTQ members. The argument consumed conferences, budgets, committee hours, denominational press cycles, and the emotional bandwidth of millions of members. In 2024, the denomination formally split, with the more conservative congregations departing to form the Global Methodist Church. The split was narrated as a theological disagreement, which it was, but it was also an enormous diversion of institutional attention away from the communities those congregations were supposed to serve. While the denomination argued about who could stand behind the altar, the food bank behind the church ran out of funding. While the committees debated the definition of marriage, the marriage counseling program was discontinued for lack of volunteers. While the bishops negotiated the terms of separation, the neighborhood around the church grew poorer, more isolated, more in need of exactly the kind of communal presence the church was too consumed by its internal drama to provide.

The faithful who were not primarily invested in the theological debate, who came to church on Sunday not to take a position on ordination but to sing a hymn and hear a word of comfort and feel, for one hour, that they belonged to something larger than their own household, were abandoned in the crossfire. Their church did not close. It did something worse: it remained open but redirected its attention from the community to itself, from the outward mission to the inward argument, from the covenant with the neighborhood to the contest over doctrine. The building was still there. The bulletin was still printed. The order of worship was still followed. But the energy that should have been directed toward the third pew and the woman sitting in it, the energy of noticing and knowing and holding, was directed instead toward denominational politics, and the woman in the third pew, who had been coming every Sunday for forty years, found that the church she attended was no longer attending to her.

This is the abandonment that leaves no bruise. No priest assaulted anyone. No prosperity preacher bilked the congregation. No bishop sold the building. The institution simply turned its gaze inward, became fascinated by its own structure, and forgot that the structure existed to serve the people who were sitting in it. The people noticed. They

always notice. They may not have the vocabulary to name what happened, they may not identify it as abandonment, they may simply say that church “isn't what it used to be” or that they “don't feel connected anymore,” but these phrases, homely and imprecise as they are, describe the same phenomenon that Bowlby described in the infant and Ainsworth measured in the Strange Situation: the primary attachment figure has withdrawn its attention, and the dependent party, having protested without result, has begun the process of detaching.

The faithful who remain in these denominations, the ones who still sit in the pews on Sunday morning, who still put money in the plate, who still volunteer for the committee, who still believe that the gathering matters even when the gathering grows smaller each year, are abandoned in place. They are the human equivalent of the missile silo: still standing, still shaped by the purpose for which they were built, but decommissioned, marked with the small notation that says this was once meant to hold something together.

I think about these people often, because they are the clearest available image of what abandonment looks like when the abandoned do not leave. They come on Sunday because they have always come on Sunday. They sing because they have always sung. They sit in the pew where their mother sat and their grandmother sat and the wood is worn smooth by the faith of people who believed the institution would outlast them, and the institution did outlast them, in the sense that the building is still standing, but it did not outlast them in the sense that matters, because the function, the covenant, the assurance that you are known and counted and held, has departed, and what remains is the structure, and the structure without the function is a monument, and a monument without a plaque is a ruin, and a ruin that people still visit on Sunday morning out of habit and loyalty and the inability to imagine an alternative is the saddest thing in this book, because it means the abandonment was so complete that even the abandoned do not recognize it as abandonment.

They think the church is still there because the building is still there. They think the covenant is still in force because the doors still open. They confuse the structure with the function, the ceremony with the commitment, the building with the God it was built to house. And

the confusion is not their failure. It is the final product of the grammar, which has done its work so thoroughly that the people who were left do not know they were left, and the institution that left does not know it has gone.

There is an additional cruelty in this that should not go unnamed. The faithful who remain are often the most vulnerable members of the community: the elderly, the immobile, the people for whom the neighborhood church was not one option among many but the only viable gathering place within walking distance or a short drive. When the denomination closes the neighborhood church and directs the displaced congregants to a larger church across town, the directive assumes a mobility and a flexibility that the most faithful members do not possess. The eighty-year-old woman who has attended the same church for sixty years does not have the social energy to start over in a new congregation where no one knows her name. The man who relied on the church's informal care network, the casseroles after surgery, the rides to the doctor, the phone call on Tuesday to check in, does not have an alternative source for those provisions, because the provisions were not a program. They were the byproduct of a community that knew its members by name, and that community was dissolved when the building was closed, and no denominational restructuring plan includes a line item for the replacement of love.

The faithful do not protest. They do not march. They do not write letters to the bishop. They do what the abandoned have always done: they absorb the loss, they adjust their expectations downward, and they tell themselves the story the grammar provides. The church had to close. The numbers didn't support it. These things happen. The denomination is doing its best. And the denomination is doing its best, with excellent procedure, impeccable documentation, and no awareness that the thing being administered is not justice or stewardship or responsible governance but the organized withdrawal of care from the people who needed it most and had the least power to prevent its withdrawal.

I promised in Chapter 3 that I would translate every passive construction into the active voice. Here is the translation for this chapter.

Religious institutions in the United States abandoned their congregations. They abandoned them by prioritizing institutional survival over congregational care. They abandoned them by concealing abuse and silencing victims. They abandoned them by closing neighborhood churches and redirecting resources to megachurches. They abandoned them by replacing the covenant with the transaction, the community with the market, the pastor who knows your name with the brand that knows your demographic. They abandoned them by retreating from social engagement while narrating the retreat as demographic inevitability. They abandoned them by confusing the building with the mission, and when the mission departed, they kept the building and called it faithfulness.

The faithful did not dwindle. The faithful were abandoned. The pew is not empty because the people left. The pew is empty because the church left first, and the people, eventually, noticed.

Some of them are still sitting there. Still here. Abandoned in place.

Chapter 5

The Locked Schoolhouse

The school was supposed to be the correction.

That is the promise embedded so deeply in the American civic mythology that it barely registers as a promise anymore. It registers as fact, as bedrock, as the one proposition about which the left and the right, the urban and the rural, the wealthy and the poor, have historically agreed: that education is the mechanism by which a child born into disadvantage can be lifted out of it, by which a child born into ignorance can be led toward knowledge, by which a child born into a broken family in a small town in the late 1960s can be given the tools to build a life that the circumstances of his birth did not provide. The school is where the social contract makes its most explicit promise to the individual. We will take your child. We will form your child. We will return your child to you equipped to participate in democracy, to earn a living, to think critically, to contribute to the common good. Send us your child. We will do the rest.

I believed this promise. I believed it with the particular intensity available to a child for whom the promise was not academic but existential. The school was the one institution in my early life that did not classify me by my domestic configuration. The school did not care, or was not supposed to care, whether I came from an intact family or a broken one, whether my father was present or absent, whether my mother was married or divorced. The school cared, or was supposed to care, about what I could learn, what I could do, what I could become. And for a child whose primary experience of institutional life had been the community's reclassification of his family as defective, the school's apparent indifference to his domestic status was a form of liberation. In the classroom, I was not the child of the broken family. I was a student. I had a desk. I had an assignment. I had a grade, and the grade reflected something I had done rather than something that had been done to me, and that distinction, between a status that is earned and a status that is imposed, was the most important distinction the school could have taught me, more important than any subject in the

curriculum.

The school taught me to read, which meant the school gave me the interior country's first and most essential building material. It taught me to write, which meant it gave me the only form of agency that does not depend on another person's permission. It taught me that the world contained more than I could see from my particular position in it, and that the more I learned about the parts I could not see, the less power my particular position would have to define me. This is what education does when it functions as it was designed to function. It does not just convey information. It reorganizes the relationship between the self and the world. It tells the child: you are not what happened to you. You are what you can understand. And understanding is available to anyone who is willing to do the work, regardless of what the community has decided about your family or your father or your prospects.

I say all of this not to sentimentalize the schools I attended, which were ordinary public schools with ordinary limitations and ordinary teachers, some good and some not. I say it to establish the magnitude of the betrayal that this chapter will document. When an institution that has the power to correct the damage done by every other institution chooses instead to replicate that damage, the betrayal is more than institutional. It is civilizational. And the American school system, at every level from kindergarten through the doctoral program, has enacted precisely this betrayal, not by accident, not by neglect, but through a series of deliberate decisions made by identifiable people for identifiable reasons, all of which can be traced, documented, and named.

The first decision was to redefine the mission.

The American public school, as conceived by Horace Mann in the 1830s and 1840s and institutionalized through the common school movement of the nineteenth century, was designed as an instrument of democratic formation. Its purpose was not primarily vocational. It was civic. The common school was supposed to produce citizens: people capable of self-governance, people who could read a newspaper and evaluate a political argument and serve on a jury and participate in the public life of their community with the informed judgment that democracy requires. Mann understood that democracy cannot function if its citizens cannot think, and he understood that the capacity to think

is not innate but cultivated, and he understood that the cultivation must be universal, that it must reach every child regardless of station, because a democracy in which only the wealthy can think is not a democracy but an oligarchy with a voting mechanism.

This conception of education as democratic formation held, with varying degrees of fidelity, for roughly a century and a half. It survived two world wars. It survived the Depression. It survived the integration battles of the 1950s and 1960s, which were themselves an argument about who the school's promise extended to and an insistence that it extend to everyone. The civil rights movement's demand for integrated schools was not primarily a demand for better facilities, though better facilities were needed. It was a demand that the covenant be honored universally, that the school's promise to form citizens be extended to Black children and Brown children and poor children with the same seriousness and resources that it was extended to white children and wealthy children. The demand was a testament to the promise's power. People do not fight to be included in an institution they do not believe in. The marchers in Little Rock believed in the school. They believed in the covenant. They believed that the school, if it could be made to honor its promise, was the one institution capable of correcting the accumulated abandonments of every other.

The redefinition began, with identifiable precision, in 1983, with the publication of a federal report titled "A Nation at Risk." The report, commissioned by the Reagan administration's Secretary of Education, argued that American public education was failing, that American students were falling behind their international peers, and that the failure constituted a threat to national economic competitiveness. The report's language was martial. It spoke of a "rising tide of mediocrity." It warned that if a foreign power had imposed the American educational system on the United States, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war." The language was designed to provoke, and it provoked. It also performed a substitution so fundamental and so consequential that the American school system has never recovered from it: it replaced the civic mission of education with the economic mission.

The shift did not happen overnight. It happened across decades, through a series of policy decisions, each one presented as reform,

each one narrated in the grammar of accountability and excellence and standards and rigor, and each one moving the school further from its original covenant. The school was no longer in the business of forming citizens. The school was in the business of producing workers. And the difference between a citizen and a worker, between a person who can think and a person who can perform, between a mind that has been formed and a skill set that has been trained, is the difference between an education and a sorting mechanism, and the American school system, beginning in the 1980s and accelerating through every subsequent decade, chose sorting.

The word “reform” requires examination, because it is the educational equivalent of the euphemisms I catalogued in Chapter 3. In ordinary language, reform implies improvement, the correction of a deficiency, the restoration of a function that has been impaired. In educational policy language, reform has meant something quite different. It has meant the imposition of external metrics on a process that was previously governed by professional judgment. It has meant the elevation of measurable outcomes over unmeasurable ones, of quantifiable performance over unquantifiable formation, of data over wisdom. Every wave of reform since 1983 has followed the same logic: identify what can be counted, count it, reward the high counts, punish the low counts, and declare the counting to be accountability. What cannot be counted, the moment when a child first understands that a poem is talking about something the child has felt but never been able to name, the hour when a student's question opens a door that neither the student nor the teacher knew was there, the slow, invisible, unquantifiable process by which a mind learns to think for itself, is not merely uncounted. It is, in the reformed system, nonexistent, because what is not measured is not funded, and what is not funded is not prioritized, and what is not prioritized is eliminated, and the elimination is called efficiency.

The sorting was accomplished through testing. The standardized test, which had existed in various forms since the early twentieth century but had occupied a relatively modest position in the educational infrastructure, was elevated in the 1990s and 2000s to the position of primary arbiter of educational quality. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, signed by George W. Bush with broad bipartisan

support, required annual standardized testing in reading and mathematics for every student in grades three through eight and once in high school. Schools whose students did not demonstrate “adequate yearly progress” on these tests were subject to escalating sanctions: public identification as “failing,” mandatory restructuring, potential closure. The tests did not measure democratic formation. They did not measure critical thinking, ethical reasoning, aesthetic sensitivity, civic engagement, or the capacity for self-governance. They measured the ability to select the correct answer from a set of predetermined options on a specific day under specific conditions, and this measurement, this narrow, reductive, pedagogically impoverished measurement, became the metric by which schools were judged, teachers were evaluated, budgets were allocated, and children were sorted.

The sorting produced predictable results. Schools in wealthy districts, whose students arrived with the accumulated advantages of stable housing, adequate nutrition, educated parents, and access to supplementary resources, performed well on the tests and received the rewards: increased funding, public recognition, the self-reinforcing spiral of institutional success. Schools in poor districts, whose students arrived with the accumulated disadvantages of poverty, housing instability, food insecurity, trauma, and the compounding effects of every other form of abandonment documented in this book, performed poorly on the tests and received the sanctions: public identification as failing, budget restrictions, staff turnover, the self-reinforcing spiral of institutional collapse. The test did not measure the school's contribution to the child's development. It measured the child's pre-existing relationship to the resources the school was supposed to provide, and it punished the schools that served the children who needed the most by labeling them failures for serving the children who had the least.

The teachers bore the weight of this system the way every frontline provider in this book bears the weight of the institution's decisions: by being present, by enduring, and by being blamed for the outcomes produced by decisions they did not make. The teacher in the underfunded school, the teacher whose classroom had thirty-four students and outdated textbooks and a leaking ceiling, was evaluated by the same test score metrics as the teacher in the suburban school

with seventeen students and a Smart Board and a parent volunteer in the room. When the scores diverged, as they inevitably did, the divergence was attributed not to the divergence in resources but to the divergence in teacher quality. The grammar of leaving performed its customary inversion: the institution that had underfunded the school was not held accountable for the underfunding. The teacher who had been sent into the underfunded school with insufficient tools was held accountable for the results the insufficient tools produced. Teachers left the profession. They left by the hundreds of thousands, not because they did not care about children but because the system in which they cared about children had been redesigned to punish them for the caring. The caring was not measurable. The test score was measurable. And the system measured what it measured and discarded what it did not, and the teachers, who had entered the profession because they believed in the covenant between the school and the child, discovered that the covenant had been replaced by a contract between the school and the testing corporation, and the contract did not include a provision for the child in the third row whose father left and whose mother works two jobs and who comes to school hungry and sits quietly at his desk and does not perform adequately on the state assessment and thereby reduces the teacher's evaluation score and the school's funding allocation and the district's standing in the newspaper's annual school ranking, and nobody in the entire chain of causation, from the legislator who wrote the law to the superintendent who implemented the policy to the principal who delivered the evaluation, asks the question that the teacher asks every morning when the child walks through the door: what does this child need, and how can I provide it?

This is abandonment administered through the vocabulary of accountability. The grammar is perfect. The schools did not fail the children. The schools “failed to meet standards.” The children were not sorted by wealth. The children “demonstrated inadequate progress.” The teachers were not driven out of the profession by impossible mandates and demoralizing metrics. The teachers “were held accountable.” Every sentence is passive. Every agent has been removed. The decisions made by legislators, by testing corporations, by education policy consultants, by think tank analysts, by governors and school board members and superintendents who chose to implement a

system designed to produce exactly the results it produced, have been converted, through the grammar of leaving, into conditions that simply exist, as if the test appeared from nowhere, as if the sanctions imposed themselves, as if the children sorted themselves into those who matter and those who do not.

The arts were the first casualties. When the test measures reading and mathematics and the school's survival depends on the test scores, the subjects that are not tested become, in the institutional calculus, expendable. Music. Art. Theater. Creative writing. The subjects that teach a child to see the world from an angle that has not been predetermined, to express what cannot be quantified, to make something that did not exist before, to stand on a stage and speak in a voice that is not their own and thereby discover something about the voice that is. These subjects were cut. Not everywhere. Not all at once. But systematically, consistently, and with the same grammar that accompanies every institutional abandonment: the budget required it, the priorities shifted, the standards demanded focus, the resources were insufficient. Each explanation is true enough to be plausible and false enough to be a lie, because the budget was a choice, the priorities were set by people who made decisions about what counted, and the standards were written by the same people who defined the tests that the standards were designed to measure, and the entire apparatus was a closed loop of self-referential justification that produced exactly one outcome: the removal of the subjects that taught children to think in ways the test could not capture.

I take this personally, not because I am sentimental about the arts but because I know what the arts did for me, and I know what their absence does to children who are in the position I was in. The child of the broken family, the child whose domestic life is a landscape of absence and reclassification, needs the arts more than the child whose domestic life is stable, because the arts provide something that no other part of the curriculum provides: the experience of making meaning from the materials of your own interior life. A child who writes a poem about loss is not being indulgent. That child is performing the most essential cognitive and emotional operation available: converting experience into language, converting chaos into form, converting the unspeakable into the spoken. A child who plays a role in a school play is

not wasting time. That child is discovering that identity is not fixed, that the self is more capacious than the community has told the self it is, that there are other ways to be in the world besides the way the child's circumstances have imposed. A child who draws or paints or sculpts is making visible something that was previously invisible, and the act of making the invisible visible is the act of refusing the classification that has been imposed from outside. The arts do not just enrich the curriculum. They are the curriculum's answer to abandonment: the place in the school day where the child is not sorted, not tested, not measured, but seen.

When the arts are cut, the school has abandoned the very children who need the school most, and it has done so in the name of serving those children better, because the test scores, which are the only metric the system recognizes, will theoretically improve if the time previously spent on music and theater is redirected to test preparation. The theory is a lie. The scores do not reliably improve. But even if they did, the improvement would not be worth the cost, because the cost is the elimination of the one space in the institutional day where the child of abandonment could be re-attached to the possibility that the world is larger and richer and more responsive to the child's agency than the child's experience has so far indicated.

I teach. I have taught at the university level for decades, at institutions ranging from community colleges to major research universities, and I have watched the same pattern reproduce at the postsecondary level with the same grammar and the same consequences. The university, which was founded on the premise that higher education was a public good, a contribution to the intellectual and civic life of the nation funded by the public and accountable to the public, has been redefined as a private investment, a transaction between the student-consumer and the institution-vendor, in which the student purchases a credential and the institution delivers the credential in exchange for tuition that has increased, in inflation-adjusted terms, by more than 1,200 percent since the 1980s.

The language of the university has changed in ways that map precisely onto the language of the megachurch I described in the previous chapter. Students are "customers." Education is a "product." The degree is a "value proposition." The university markets itself with

the same techniques and the same consultants that consumer brands employ, because the university has become a consumer brand, and the competition for student-customers has produced an arms race of amenities, a spiral of construction and branding and recruitment spending that has driven the cost of attendance upward while the educational experience, the actual encounter between a student and a teacher and an idea, has been systematically diluted. Class sizes have grown. Adjunct instructors, who are paid per course at rates that often work out to less than minimum wage when preparation and grading are included, have replaced tenure-track faculty as the primary deliverers of undergraduate instruction. The tenure-track positions that remain are evaluated primarily on research output rather than teaching quality, because research output generates prestige and prestige generates rankings and rankings generate applications and applications generate tuition revenue, and the student sitting in the lecture hall, the student who came to the university because the covenant said the university would form her mind, is the last consideration in a chain of institutional priorities that begins and ends with the institution's own survival and growth.

The adjunct instructor deserves a moment's attention, because the adjunct is the teacher's equivalent of the gig worker I will describe in the next chapter: a professional who performs the institution's core function without receiving the institution's core protections. The adjunct teaches the same classes, grades the same papers, holds the same office hours, and faces the same students as the tenured professor. The adjunct does not receive health insurance, a living wage, job security, or a retirement plan. The adjunct is hired on a semester-by-semester basis and can be dismissed without cause, without notice, and without the institutional grievance process that tenure was designed to provide. The adjunct is, in the vocabulary of this book, abandoned in place: still performing the function, still standing in the classroom, still holding the institution together by doing the work the institution depends upon, while the institution has quietly withdrawn every form of support and recognition that the function was supposed to carry. The university has not eliminated teaching. It has eliminated the institutional commitment to teachers, which is a different act that produces a different set of consequences, the most

significant of which is that the students are now taught primarily by professionals who have been abandoned by the same institution that is charging the students \$50,000 a year for the privilege of being taught.

The tuition increase deserves the same active-voice treatment I applied to the church closures in the previous chapter. The tuition did not increase. Universities increased tuition. They increased it because state legislatures reduced public funding for higher education, and the legislatures reduced public funding because they chose to allocate revenues elsewhere, to prisons, to tax cuts, to corporate incentive packages, to the other priorities that the political calculus of the moment favored over the formation of the young. The reduction in public funding was not inevitable. It was chosen. And the choice was made by specific legislators in specific sessions for specific reasons, all of which can be identified, and none of which were “the university got too expensive,” because the university got too expensive precisely because the public funding that was supposed to prevent it from getting too expensive was withdrawn.

The student debt crisis is the financial expression of this abandonment. As of this writing, Americans carry approximately \$1.7 trillion in student loan debt. The number is large enough to be incomprehensible, so let me make it personal. The student who borrowed \$40,000 to attend a public university in the reasonable expectation that the degree would provide economic stability sufficient to repay the loan is not a person who made a bad decision. That student is a person who honored the covenant. The covenant said: attend school, get an education, earn a degree, join the economy, prosper. The student did everything the covenant required. The student attended. The student studied. The student graduated. And the student emerged into an economy in which the degree did not provide what the covenant promised, in which the entry-level salary was insufficient to service the debt, in which the interest accumulated faster than the payments reduced the principal, and in which the phrase “student loan forgiveness” became a political football thrown back and forth between parties that had both participated in creating the conditions that made forgiveness necessary.

The student was not forgiven. The student was abandoned. The institution that sold the credential walked away from the promise the

credential was supposed to represent. The legislature that withdrew the funding walked away from the public investment that was supposed to make the credential affordable. The economy that absorbed the graduate walked away from the wage structure that was supposed to make the debt serviceable. And the student, having honored every term of the covenant, having done everything the system instructed, was left holding a document that cost more than a house and was worth less than the paper on which it was printed, and the grammar of leaving said: you should have studied something more practical. You should have gone to a cheaper school. You should have worked your way through. The grammar, as always, converted the institutional failure into the individual's character flaw, and the individual, having no alternative grammar available, often accepted the conversion.

The rural school closure is the geographic expression of the same abandonment, and it intersects with the material I have explored in *Prairie Voice* about the systematic depopulation of the American interior. When a rural school closes, the community does more than lose an educational institution. The community loses its last institutional anchor. The church may already be closed. The post office may already be reduced to three days a week. The grocery store may already be gone. The school is the final gathering place, the last building where the community assembles as a community, where the children see each other daily, where the parents meet at pickup, where the Friday night basketball game provides the only shared civic experience remaining in a town that has been stripped of every other shared civic experience by the same forces of consolidation and withdrawal that are now coming for the school.

The closure is administered with the grammar of fiscal necessity. The student population has declined. The cost per pupil is unsustainable. The state funding formula does not support a school of this size. The district must consolidate. Each of these statements is true in the narrow sense, and each of them conceals the prior chain of abandonments that produced the conditions they describe. The student population declined because the factory closed and the families left. The cost per pupil is unsustainable because the tax base eroded when the factory closed. The state funding formula does not support a school of this size because the formula was designed by legislators

representing urban and suburban districts whose schools are not at risk. The district must consolidate because every other option was foreclosed by decisions made at levels of government that the community had no power to influence. The school closure is not the first abandonment. It is the last one. It is the final act in a sequence that began when the factory left and the tax base followed and the church closed and the post office reduced its hours and the grocery store was replaced by a Dollar General, and the school, the last structure still performing its function in a community that has been systematically abandoned by every other structure, is now told that it, too, must go, and the children are put on a bus, and the bus drives them forty-five minutes to a consolidated school where nobody knows their name, and the building in the town where they live is locked, and the playground is chained, and the parking lot grows weeds, and the grammar says: the demographics required it. The numbers didn't work. These things happen.

The children on the bus know better. They know it the way I knew, sitting in a classroom that did not care about my domestic configuration, that the school was the one place where the pattern might be interrupted. And they know, without having the vocabulary to say so, that the pattern has followed them onto the bus. The school was supposed to be the correction. The school was supposed to be the place where a child born into abandonment could be re-attached, where the broken thread could be picked up and woven into something that held. And the school, in case after case, in district after district, in decade after decade, has chosen to replicate the pattern rather than interrupt it, to sort rather than form, to measure rather than teach, to consolidate rather than sustain, to abandon rather than stay.

The child I was, sitting in an ordinary public school in an ordinary midwestern town, discovering that books do not leave and ideas do not file for divorce. That child was rescued, in a real sense, by the school. Not by the institution. By the act of learning itself, by the encounter with knowledge that was available to anyone willing to reach for it, regardless of what the community had decided about the child's family or prospects. The rescue was possible because the school, at that moment, still believed its own covenant. The teachers were not yet evaluated by test scores. The curriculum was not yet stripped of the

arts. The funding was not yet contingent on performance metrics designed to reward the already advantaged. The school was still, however imperfectly, in the business of forming citizens rather than producing workers, and the formation was available to the child of the broken family on the same terms as the child of the intact one.

That school no longer exists. Not the physical building, which may or may not still be standing. The mission. The covenant. The belief that every child who walks through the door deserves to encounter the full range of human thought and expression, not as preparation for employment but as preparation for life, for citizenship, for the kind of independent thinking that democracy requires and that the sorting mechanism has systematically replaced with the kind of compliant performance that the economy demands.

The active voice, applied to the history of American education, produces sentences that the grammar of accountability was designed to prevent. American educational institutions abandoned their students. They did it by redefining education as economic preparation. By replacing teaching with testing. By cutting the arts to fund the metrics that measured the cutting's success. By transferring the cost of higher education from the public to the individual and calling the transfer an investment. By closing rural schools and putting the children on a bus and calling the bus ride progress. By producing a generation carrying approximately \$1.7 trillion in debt for a promise that was broken before the first payment was due.

The schoolhouse is locked because the mission left, and the students, having been sorted and measured and credentialed and indebted, were told to move on. Some of them are still carrying the debt. Some of them are still riding the bus.

Chapter 6

The Shuttered Factory

On September 19, 1977, a Monday, the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company announced the closure of its Campbell Works facility in Youngstown, Ohio. Five thousand workers lost their jobs in a single day. The day would become known as Black Monday, and the name would stick, not because it was the worst single-day closure in American industrial history, though it was among them, but because it marked the beginning of a sequence that would, over the following decade, eliminate approximately forty thousand manufacturing jobs in the Mahoning Valley and convert Youngstown from a working city into a case study in what happens when the economic foundation of a community is removed and nothing is put in its place.

The grammar of the closure was impeccable. The company cited foreign competition. The steel market had shifted. Cheaper imports from Japan and Germany had eroded profitability. The plant was aging. The capital investment required to modernize was prohibitive. The decision was, in the word the company used, “necessary.” Not chosen. Not preferred. Not the result of a calculation made in a boardroom by executives who would continue to draw their salaries from the company's remaining operations. Necessary. As if the closure were a medical procedure, something regrettable but unavoidable, performed for the health of the patient, and the patient was the corporation, and the five thousand people who walked out of the Campbell Works for the last time on that Monday morning were not the patient but the disease, or at best the symptom, or at very best the tissue that had to be excised so that the organism could survive.

I begin with Youngstown because Youngstown is the template. Everything that has happened to the American worker since 1977 happened first in the Mahoning Valley, and it happened with such concentrated force that the pattern is visible in a way that later, slower, more distributed versions of the same pattern are not. Youngstown did not decline gradually. Youngstown was abandoned in a sequence of discrete, identifiable acts, performed by specific corporations on

specific dates, and the acts were narrated in the same grammar that narrates every abandonment in this book: passively, euphemistically, inevitably, and with the implicit instruction that the abandoned should adapt, retrain, relocate, and move on.

The Youngstown workers did not move on, or rather, many of them could not move on, because the instruction to move on assumes a mobility that the instruction itself has destroyed. A steelworker in 1977 was not a free agent in a flexible labor market. A steelworker in 1977 was a person whose entire life, whose house and mortgage and children's school and spouse's job and aging parents and church membership and bowling league and sense of self, was organized around the fact of the mill. The mill was not merely an employer. The mill was the gravitational center of an entire social system, and when the gravitational center was removed, the system did not smoothly reorganize around an alternative. The system collapsed. Property values fell because no one wanted to buy a house in a city without jobs. The tax base eroded because property values fell and workers left and businesses that served workers closed. The schools deteriorated because the tax base eroded. The infrastructure crumbled because the municipality could not fund maintenance. The churches emptied because the congregations dispersed. And the workers who remained, the ones who did not relocate to Houston or Phoenix or wherever the jobs were supposed to be, lived in the wreckage and were told, by the same grammar that had narrated the closure as necessity, that their continued presence in the wreckage was a failure of adaptation.

The psychological dimension of the collapse is inseparable from the economic one, and this is the dimension that the grammar of economic inevitability is most determined to erase. A steelworker is not just a person who performs a set of tasks in exchange for compensation. A steelworker is a person who knows what he does, who can explain what he does to his children, who carries in his body the accumulated skill of years of practice, who walks into a bar after a shift and is recognized by other men who do the same work and who understand, without discussion, what the work requires and what it provides. The work provides identity. Not in the shallow, therapeutic sense of "finding yourself" but in the structural sense of knowing where you stand in the social order, knowing what you contribute, knowing that the thing you

contribute is necessary and recognized and compensated at a level that permits you to sustain a family and a household and a position in the community. When the mill closes, the worker does more than lose income. The worker loses the framework within which the self was organized, and the loss is not temporary, because the retraining program that is supposed to provide an alternative framework provides, at best, a new set of tasks, not a new identity, and the difference between tasks and identity is the difference between a job and a vocation, and the grammar of economic abandonment does not recognize that difference, because recognizing it would require acknowledging that what was taken from the worker was not merely a paycheck but a life, and a life cannot be replaced by a workforce development grant.

The mortality data confirms what the psychological analysis suggests. The epidemiologists Anne Case and Angus Deaton, in their landmark 2015 study and the subsequent book “Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism,” documented a startling rise in mortality among white, non-college-educated Americans, driven by three causes: drug overdose, alcohol-related liver disease, and suicide. The deaths were concentrated in precisely the communities that had been subjected to the pattern I am describing: the deindustrialized towns, the hollowed-out counties, the places where the factory closed and the covenant was broken and the grammar said adapt and the workers could not adapt because the thing they were being asked to adapt to was not a new economy but the absence of an economy, and the absence of an economy is not a condition you adapt to. It is a condition you survive or do not survive, and an increasing number of Americans are not surviving it, and the deaths are called “deaths of despair” because that is what they are, and despair is the emotional name for the condition that this book calls abandonment: the knowledge that the structures meant to sustain you have departed, that no one is coming to restore them, and that the grammar in which the departure was narrated has left you with no language in which to protest, because the grammar has already determined that the departure was nobody's fault and your continued suffering is your own problem.

The word “adaptation” deserves the same scrutiny I applied to the word “reform” in the previous chapter. In the grammar of economic

abandonment, adaptation means the acceptance of terms that the abandoned did not negotiate and would not have agreed to. It means retraining for a job that pays half what the previous job paid, in an industry that did not exist when the worker began his career, in a location the worker did not choose, at an age when the neurological and financial costs of starting over are highest. It means converting a forty-year-old steelworker with a mortgage and two children in high school into a forty-year-old student at a community college, studying information technology or medical billing or some other field selected by a workforce development program whose funding depends on placement rates and whose placement rates depend on funneling displaced workers into whatever sector happens to be hiring, regardless of whether the sector will still be hiring by the time the retraining is complete. Adaptation, in the grammar of economic abandonment, is the instruction to the abandoned to bear the full cost of the abandonment and to do so cheerfully, as an investment in their own future, as if the future were a product the worker had purchased and the product's failure to perform as advertised were a warranty issue rather than a fraud.

The fraud was not perpetrated by the workforce development programs, which were generally staffed by well-intentioned people operating within impossible constraints. The fraud was perpetrated by the system that made the programs necessary: the system that permitted corporations to withdraw from communities without absorbing any of the cost of the withdrawal. The Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company did not pay for the collapsed property values. It did not fund the schools that deteriorated. It did not rebuild the infrastructure that crumbled. It did not compensate the workers for the decades of productive life that remained after the mill closed and the skills the mill had developed were rendered worthless. The company closed the plant, reported the savings to its shareholders, and continued to exist as a corporate entity while the community it had organized its operations around for the better part of a century was left to absorb the consequences alone. The technical term for this arrangement, in which the profits are privatized and the costs are socialized, is not one I need to define for the reader, because the reader already knows it, because the reader has been living inside it for the past fifty years, and the

arrangement is not a market failure. It is the market functioning exactly as designed: to concentrate gains among those who have the power to command them and to distribute losses among those who do not have the power to refuse them.

Youngstown was not an anomaly. It was a prototype. In the decades that followed Black Monday, the same pattern reproduced across the American industrial landscape with the regularity of a franchise operation. Gary, Indiana. Flint, Michigan. Detroit. Cleveland. Pittsburgh. Akron. Buffalo. Camden. The cities differed in their particulars, their specific industries, their racial compositions, their geographic positions, their relationships to the broader regional economy. But the structure of the abandonment was identical in every case. A corporation that had organized a community around its operations decided that the operations were no longer sufficiently profitable in that location. The corporation departed. The community absorbed the cost. The grammar narrated the departure as inevitability. And the workers were instructed to adapt.

The departure, in many cases, was not to nowhere. It was to somewhere cheaper. The jobs that left Youngstown did not disappear from the earth. They reappeared in Mexico, in China, in Indonesia, in any jurisdiction where the labor was cheaper, the regulations were lighter, and the workers had even less power to negotiate the terms of their employment than the Youngstown steelworkers had. The offshoring of American manufacturing, which accelerated dramatically after the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 and the normalization of trade relations with China in 2000, was not a natural phenomenon. It was a policy decision, made by specific legislators who voted for specific trade agreements after receiving specific campaign contributions from specific corporations that stood to benefit from the ability to replace American workers with foreign workers at a fraction of the cost. The grammar of inevitability was, as always, deployed: globalization was presented as a force of nature, as the tide of history, as the irresistible logic of comparative advantage, as if David Ricardo's nineteenth-century trade theory were a law of physics rather than a model whose assumptions, perfect competition, full employment, immobile capital, bore no resemblance to the conditions under which it was being applied.

The promises made during the trade debates are worth recalling, because they illustrate the covenant-and-breach structure with particular clarity. NAFTA, its proponents argued, would create jobs. It would open new markets. It would raise wages. It would reduce prices. It would lift all boats. The metaphor of the rising tide was deployed with the same confidence that the church deploys when it promises salvation and the school deploys when it promises formation: the absolute assurance that the institution knows what it is doing and that the people who trust the institution will be rewarded for their trust. The workers who opposed NAFTA, who marched and testified and wrote to their representatives and predicted, with remarkable accuracy, exactly what would happen to their industries and their towns, were told that they did not understand economics, that they were protectionist, that they were clinging to the past, that they needed to adapt. The condescension was a component of the grammar: the workers' objections were not engaged as arguments. They were diagnosed as symptoms, as evidence of a failure to comprehend the new reality, as the irrational attachment of simple people to obsolete arrangements.

The workers' predictions proved correct. Between 1994 and 2020, the United States lost approximately five million manufacturing jobs. Not all of these losses were attributable to trade agreements; automation played a significant role, and the distinction between jobs lost to trade and jobs lost to technology is important and should not be collapsed. But the trade agreements created the conditions under which the losses accelerated, and the promises made during the debates, the rising tide, the new jobs, the shared prosperity, did not materialize for the communities that bore the cost. The tide rose, but it rose in the financial markets, in the corporate profit margins, in the compensation packages of the executives who negotiated the offshoring deals. It did not rise in Youngstown. It did not rise in Gary. It did not rise in the hundreds of small and mid-sized manufacturing towns across the Midwest and the South whose factories were closed not because they were unproductive but because the same production could be performed elsewhere at a lower cost, and the cost differential, the gap between an American wage and a Mexican or Chinese wage, was the entire point of the arrangement, and the arrangement was designed by the people who benefited from the differential and

approved by the legislators those people funded.

The workers who had been told to adapt to the closure of the factory were now told to adapt to the disappearance of the entire industrial sector. The workers who had been told to retrain for the information economy were now told that the information economy was also offshoring, that the call center jobs and the data processing jobs and the customer service jobs that were supposed to absorb the displaced factory workers were themselves being relocated to Bangalore and Manila and wherever the next pool of cheaper labor could be found. The instruction to adapt became a perpetual motion machine: an endlessly receding horizon of the next thing the worker was supposed to become, in the next industry that was supposed to hire, in the next location that was supposed to provide the stability that each previous location had failed to provide because each previous employer had abandoned each previous location for the same reason and with the same grammar.

The pension is the clearest contractual evidence of what was promised and what was withdrawn. The defined-benefit pension, which was the standard retirement provision for American workers from the postwar period through the 1980s, was not a gift. It was a contract. The worker agreed to provide labor for a specified period, and the employer agreed to provide a guaranteed income for the remainder of the worker's life after retirement. The contract was specific. It named the parties. It specified the obligation. It created a claim that the worker could enforce, because the promise was written down and signed by both parties, and a written promise signed by both parties is, in any other legal context, binding.

The replacement of the defined-benefit pension with the 401(k), which began in the 1980s and accelerated through the 1990s until the pension was effectively eliminated from the private sector, was the most consequential breach of the economic covenant in postwar American history, and it was accomplished so gradually, so quietly, and with such masterful grammar that most of the people it affected did not recognize it as a breach. It was presented as an upgrade. The 401(k) was "flexible." It was "portable." It gave the worker "control." Each of these words performed the same function: the disguise of abandonment as empowerment. Flexible meant the employer was no longer

committed to a specific amount. Portable meant the employer expected you to leave. Control meant the risk of retirement, the risk that the market would crash, the risk that the savings would be insufficient, the risk that the worker would outlive the money, had been transferred from the entity that had the resources to absorb it, the corporation, to the entity that did not, the individual worker. The 401(k) was not an improvement in the worker's retirement security. It was the abolition of the employer's retirement obligation, dressed in the language of freedom and choice, and the worker, who had been promised a pension and received a brokerage account and a pamphlet about asset allocation, was told that the new arrangement was better, and many workers believed it, because the grammar was that good.

The Great Plains is where I have done the most sustained reporting on the economics of abandonment, and the Great Plains reveals a dimension of economic abandonment that the Rust Belt narrative, focused as it is on heavy industry and urban decay, tends to miss: the abandonment of communities that were never industrial, that were agricultural or pastoral or extractive, whose relationship to the economy was not organized around a factory but around a resource, and whose abandonment occurred not when the factory closed but when the resource was exhausted or redirected or simply taken.

Lexington, Nebraska, is a meatpacking town. It became a meatpacking town in 1990, when a company then known as Iowa Beef Processors, later acquired by Tyson Foods, opened a large processing facility in the town. The facility's arrival was, for Lexington, the equivalent of the steel mill's arrival in Youngstown two generations earlier: it reorganized the community around itself. Housing was built to accommodate the workers. Schools expanded to accommodate the workers' children. Businesses opened to serve the workers' needs. The town's population grew, its tax base expanded, and the economic life of the community became, in a remarkably short period, dependent on the plant in the same way that Youngstown's economic life had been dependent on the mill.

The workforce the plant recruited was, from the beginning, a workforce that had already been abandoned by something else. The meatpacking industry, which had once employed unionized workers in major cities like Chicago and Omaha and Kansas City at wages that

supported a middle-class life, had spent the 1970s and 1980s relocating to small towns and rural areas precisely to access a labor force that had fewer alternatives and less bargaining power. The workers who filled the Lexington plant were disproportionately refugees and immigrants, people who had been abandoned by their countries of origin and who arrived in central Nebraska with the legal status, the language barriers, and the economic desperation that made them ideal employees for an industry whose defining characteristic is the systematic extraction of maximum labor at minimum cost. The company did not recruit these workers out of humanitarian concern. The company recruited them because they would accept conditions and wages that American-born workers in unionized urban plants would not, and the recruitment was itself a form of abandonment: the abandonment of the previous workforce, the unionized workers in the cities, who were replaced not by automation but by human beings whose vulnerability made them cheaper.

The Lexington plant operated for decades. It employed approximately 2,400 workers. It processed thousands of cattle per day. It was, by any economic metric, productive and profitable. And in 2023, Tyson Foods announced the closure of the Lexington facility. The announcement cited operational efficiency. The company was consolidating its processing operations. The Lexington plant, despite its productivity, did not fit the optimized production footprint the company was pursuing. The closure eliminated 1,200 jobs.

The grammar was the same grammar it had been in Youngstown in 1977. The company cited market conditions. The decision was necessary. The workers were offered assistance with relocation and retraining. The community was thanked for its partnership. And Lexington was left to absorb the cost: the collapsed property values, the empty houses, the reduced tax revenue, the school enrollment decline, the cascade of secondary business closures that follows whenever the gravitational center of a small town is removed.

The specific cruelty of the Lexington closure lies in the double abandonment it inflicted. The workers who lost their jobs were disproportionately the same refugees and immigrants who had been recruited to Lexington precisely because they had nowhere else to go. They had built lives in a town they did not choose, in a state most of

them had never heard of before the recruiter arrived, in a community that had initially resisted their presence and only gradually, over decades, begun to accommodate it. They had enrolled their children in the schools. They had opened small businesses. They had established churches and mosques and cultural organizations. They had done what the adaptation mandate instructs the abandoned to do: they had adapted. And the adaptation, which cost them everything, was now rendered pointless by the same corporate calculus that had brought them to Lexington in the first place. The community that had rebuilt itself around the plant was now required to rebuild itself around the plant's absence, and the resources for that rebuilding would not come from the corporation that had organized the community around itself and then walked away. The resources would come from the community itself, which is to say from the people who had the least, because the people who had the most, the shareholders and executives of Tyson Foods, had already moved on to the next optimization, the next consolidation, the next efficiency, and Lexington, like Youngstown before it, was left standing, still shaped by the purpose for which it had been organized, no longer serving that purpose, abandoned in place.

The Ogallala Aquifer runs beneath the Great Plains from South Dakota to Texas. It is one of the largest underground freshwater reserves in the world, and it has been drawn down, over the past seventy years, at a rate that far exceeds its natural recharge. The water that took millions of years to accumulate is being extracted in decades to irrigate the crops and water the cattle that sustain the agricultural economy of the Plains. When the aquifer is depleted, and in portions of Kansas and Texas it is already functionally depleted, the agriculture will cease, the towns that depend on the agriculture will lose their economic foundation, and the communities that were built on the assumption that the water would always be there will discover that the assumption was wrong, and the people who profited most from the extraction, the large agricultural operations, the corporate feedlots, the commodity traders, will have moved their investments elsewhere, and the people who remain, the small farmers, the town residents, the families who cannot afford to leave, will be living above an empty aquifer in a landscape that can no longer support them.

This is economic abandonment operating on a geological timescale, and the grammar is identical: the aquifer was depleted, as if depletion were a natural process rather than the result of pumping decisions made by specific agricultural operations operating under specific regulatory frameworks established by specific legislatures influenced by specific lobbying interests. The aquifer was not depleted. The aquifer was drained. It was drained by people who calculated that the short-term profit of irrigated agriculture was worth more than the long-term viability of the communities that depended on the water, and who further calculated that by the time the consequences arrived, they would be somewhere else. The grammar of inevitability will frame the aquifer's exhaustion as a natural disaster, as the tragic but unavoidable consequence of agricultural necessity, as the price of feeding the nation. The grammar will be wrong. The exhaustion was a decision, and the decision was made by the same calculus that closed the Youngstown mill and the Lexington plant: the calculus of extracting maximum value from a resource, human or natural, and departing before the cost of the extraction comes due.

The gig economy is the final expression of the pattern this chapter has traced, and it deserves examination because it represents not the failure of the economic covenant but its formal abolition. The factory worker in Youngstown had a covenant, however imperfectly honored. The covenant said: you give us your labor, we give you a wage, a benefit, a pension, a schedule, a future. The covenant was broken when the factory closed, and the breaking was an abandonment, a unilateral departure from agreed-upon terms. The gig worker has no covenant to break. The gig economy has replaced the covenant with a transaction so minimal, so stripped of obligation, so explicitly designed to eliminate the employer's responsibility for the worker's welfare, that the word "employer" itself has been abolished. The gig worker does not have an employer. The gig worker has a "platform." The gig worker is not an employee. The gig worker is an "independent contractor." The gig worker does not receive wages. The gig worker receives "earnings." Each substitution performs the same function: the removal of the relational language that would imply obligation, commitment, and the possibility of breach.

The language of independence is worth pausing on, because it performs the same inversion that the 401(k) performed on the pension: the disguise of abandonment as freedom. The independent contractor is “free” in the same way that the 401(k) holder has “control.” The freedom means: nobody is responsible for you. The independence means: you are on your own. The flexibility means: there is no schedule because there is no commitment, and there is no commitment because the platform has determined that commitment is a cost, and costs are what the platform exists to eliminate, and the cost it has most successfully eliminated is the cost of treating workers as human beings with ongoing needs rather than as inputs to be activated and deactivated according to the algorithm's calculation of demand.

The gig worker is the steelworker's grandchild, and the progression from one to the other tracks the trajectory of economic abandonment with genealogical precision. The grandfather had a union, a contract, a pension, and a factory that closed. The father had a weaker union, a weaker contract, no pension, and a service-sector job that paid half what the factory paid and offered no path to the stability the factory had provided. The grandchild has no union, no contract, no pension, no employer, no schedule, no benefits, no guarantee of hours, no assurance that the work available today will be available tomorrow, and a phone application that rates the grandchild's performance on a five-star scale and can terminate the grandchild's access to the platform without notice, without cause, and without the word “terminated,” because the grandchild was never employed and therefore cannot be terminated, because the relationship was never a relationship and therefore cannot be ended, because the covenant was never made and therefore cannot be broken.

The economic system has not failed to provide. It has perfected its capacity to extract labor without providing anything in return except the payment for the specific task performed. The factory owner who closed the Youngstown mill at least had the decency to break a promise. The platform that deactivates the gig worker's account has arranged its terms of service so that no promise exists to break. The abandonment has been pre-installed. It is not an event that occurs at some future point when the corporation decides to leave. It is the permanent condition of the arrangement, built into the structure from

the first login, and the worker who accepts the terms accepts, simultaneously, the condition of perpetual, contractual abandonability. The worker is always, already, abandoned in place: performing the function, maintaining the structure, waiting for the departure that is not a departure because the arrival was never an arrival.

Here is the chapter translated into the active voice, which is the voice the grammar was built to suppress. American corporations abandoned their workers, their towns, and their regions. They closed factories and relocated production to jurisdictions where labor was cheaper and regulation was lighter. They lobbied for trade agreements that facilitated the relocation and then narrated the relocation as globalization, as if globalization were weather rather than policy. They extracted the productive years of workers' lives and discarded the workers when the extraction was complete, offering retraining as a consolation and adaptation as a mandate. They recruited vulnerable populations into meatpacking towns and closed the plants when the optimization calculus shifted. They drained the aquifer and called it agriculture. They abolished the covenant between employer and employee and replaced it with a platform, an algorithm, and a five-star rating that can be revoked without notice.

The factory is shuttered because the corporation left, and the workers, and the town, and the aquifer, and the children riding the bus to the consolidated school, were left to absorb the cost of a departure that was always called something else. Some of them are still standing in the parking lot, looking at the locked gate.

Chapter 7

The Hollow Square

In April 2014, the city of Flint, Michigan, switched its municipal water supply from the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department to the Flint River. The decision was made by an emergency manager, Darnell Earley, who had been appointed by the state governor, Rick Snyder, under Michigan's emergency manager law, which granted the appointed manager authority to override the elected city government in matters of fiscal management. The switch was a cost-cutting measure. The city was under financial emergency. The Detroit water was expensive. The Flint River was cheaper. The switch would save approximately five million dollars over two years.

The Flint River water was corrosive. The city did not apply the corrosion control treatment that federal regulations required and that would have cost approximately two hundred dollars per day to implement. Without the treatment, the river water corroded the lead pipes through which it was delivered to Flint's residents. Lead leached into the drinking water. For eighteen months, the residents of Flint, a city that is approximately fifty-four percent Black and in which more than forty percent of the population lives below the poverty line, drank, bathed in, and cooked with water that was contaminated with lead at levels that exceeded the federal action level by factors of two, five, and in some homes, twenty or more. Children drank the water. Pregnant women drank the water. Infants were bathed in the water and mixed the water with formula and consumed the lead that would, in the years to come, manifest as developmental delays, behavioral problems, and neurological damage that is, in the medical consensus, irreversible.

I begin with Flint because Flint is the most literal instance of governmental abandonment available for examination in contemporary American life. Every metaphor I have used in this book, the structure that remains while the function departs, the covenant that is quietly renegotiated, the grammar that converts a decision into a condition, becomes, in Flint, physically embodied. The structure remained: the pipes were still in the ground, the treatment plant still operated, water

still flowed from the tap. The function departed: the water was no longer safe to drink. The covenant was renegotiated: the citizens were still paying their water bills, still fulfilling their obligation under the social contract, while the government had unilaterally ceased to fulfill its obligation to provide a basic, non-poisonous public service. And the grammar was impeccable. The switch was a “cost-saving measure.” The contamination was a “water quality issue.” The response was “under review.” The situation was “being addressed.” At no point did anyone in authority say what had actually occurred: the government of the state of Michigan, acting through its appointed agent, had decided that the health of Flint's predominantly Black, predominantly poor residents was worth less than five million dollars in savings, and had implemented that decision by poisoning their water supply.

The decision chain is worth tracing with the same precision I applied to the chain that led from my father's affair to the judge's five-day order, because the precision is the point. The decision was not made by the Flint River. The decision was not made by lead pipes. The decision was not made by fiscal reality or demographic change or the inevitable decline of a post-industrial city. The decision was made by Governor Rick Snyder, who signed the emergency manager law that stripped the elected city government of its authority. The decision was made by the emergency manager, Darnell Earley, who authorized the water source switch. The decision was made by the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, whose officials failed to require corrosion control treatment and then, when residents began complaining about the water's color, taste, and smell, told them the water was safe. The decision was made by every official at every level who received a complaint, reviewed a test result, or attended a meeting at which the contamination was discussed and who chose, in each case, to minimize, deflect, or deny rather than to act.

The residents knew. This is the detail that converts the Flint water crisis from a bureaucratic failure into a parable of abandonment. The residents knew the water was wrong. They could see it. The water was brown. It smelled. It tasted metallic. It caused rashes. They brought bottles of the brown water to city council meetings and held them up and said: this is what is coming out of our taps. They were told the water was safe. They were told the discoloration was temporary. They

were told to run the tap for a few minutes before drinking. They were told, in the grammar of institutional reassurance that is the governmental equivalent of the therapeutic displacement, that the problem was manageable, that the authorities were aware, that the situation was being monitored, that patience was required. The reassurance was a lie, and the people delivering the reassurance knew it was a lie, or should have known, because the test results were available and the test results said the water was poisoned and the people delivering the reassurance chose not to read the test results or chose to read them and disbelieve them or chose to read them and believe them and deliver the reassurance anyway, and every one of these choices was a choice, not a condition, not an inevitability, not a bureaucratic oversight, but a decision made by a specific person to prioritize something other than the welfare of the people the government existed to serve.

What was prioritized? The answer is not complicated, though the grammar of governmental discourse works very hard to make it appear complicated. What was prioritized was money. Five million dollars over two years. The cost of not poisoning the residents of Flint was five million dollars, and the state of Michigan decided the residents of Flint were not worth five million dollars. The state did not say this. The state said “fiscal emergency.” The state said “structural deficit.” The state said “difficult choices.” But the difficult choice, translated from the grammar of leaving into the active voice, was this: we have calculated the cost of providing safe water to this city, and we have calculated the savings of not providing it, and we have chosen the savings, and the people who will absorb the cost of our savings are poor and Black and politically powerless and live in a city whose elected government we have already overridden with an appointed manager, which means they cannot vote us out, which means the cost of abandoning them is, in political terms, zero.

This is the social contract in its most naked form of breach. Hobbes argued that the purpose of government was to protect citizens from the state of nature. In Flint, the government returned citizens to the state of nature by contaminating their most basic natural resource. Locke argued that when a government fails to protect the natural rights of its citizens, the citizens have the right to alter or abolish it. In Flint, the

citizens' right to alter their government had already been abolished by the emergency manager law, which replaced democratic accountability with appointed authority. Rousseau argued that the social contract should serve the general will. In Flint, the general will of the citizens, expressed through complaints, petitions, public testimony, and the physical evidence of brown water held up in bottles at city council meetings, was overridden by the fiscal will of a state apparatus that had determined the citizens' welfare was an acceptable cost of its budgetary convenience.

The aftermath of the crisis is as instructive as the crisis itself, because the aftermath reveals the limits of accountability even when the abandonment is undeniable. Criminal charges were brought. Some charges were dropped. Some officials pled to misdemeanors. The governor was charged with willful neglect of duty; the charges were eventually dismissed. The legal proceedings dragged on for years while the residents continued to drink bottled water delivered by volunteers and national guard troops, a spectacle that was simultaneously a humanitarian response and a visual confirmation of the government's failure: the state could mobilize the military to distribute water but could not manage to provide safe water through the infrastructure it was obligated to maintain.

A \$626 million settlement was reached in 2021, distributed among the approximately 90,000 affected residents. The math is worth doing. Divided equally, which it was not, the settlement amounts to roughly \$6,900 per person. For a child whose neurological development was permanently impaired by lead exposure, \$6,900. For a family that could not bathe, cook, or drink safely in their own home for years, \$6,900. For a community whose trust in every level of government was destroyed by the demonstrable evidence that the government would rather poison them than spend two hundred dollars a day on corrosion control, \$6,900. The settlement was presented as justice. The settlement was the grammar applied to the resolution: the matter was "settled." The community was "compensated." The case was "closed." Each passive construction performed its final function: the conversion of an ongoing abandonment into a completed transaction, as if trust, once purchased back at the rate of \$6,900 per person, could be considered restored.

Flint is not an anomaly. Flint is the grammar of governmental abandonment rendered in lead and water, but the grammar operates in every municipality, every state capital, and every federal agency in the country, in forms that are less dramatic than lead poisoning but no less structural. The forms are fiscal. They are bureaucratic. They are architectural. And they share a common mechanism: the slow, deliberate withdrawal of public provision from the people who depend on it most, narrated as fiscal responsibility, efficiency, or the unfortunate but unavoidable consequence of budget constraints that are themselves the product of prior political choices.

The Veterans Administration is the bureaucratic expression of this mechanism. The promise made to the American veteran is among the most explicit covenants in the entire structure of the social contract: you serve, you sacrifice, you risk death, and in exchange, the nation will care for you when you return. The promise is made publicly, ceremonially, with flags and speeches and the full rhetorical apparatus of national gratitude. It is made in recruiting offices, where the benefits of service are enumerated with the same specificity a real estate agent brings to a property listing: educational benefits, healthcare for life, housing assistance, career training, preference in federal hiring. The promise is made so explicitly, so repeatedly, and with such institutional solemnity that anyone observing from outside would conclude it was the most reliable promise the American government makes to any citizen.

The promise is then broken quietly, administratively, in waiting rooms and phone queues and claims backlogs and denied applications and medical appointments scheduled six months in the future for conditions that are deteriorating today. The breaking is not announced. It is not acknowledged. It is experienced individually, by each veteran who calls the claims hotline and is placed on hold for forty-five minutes and then disconnected, by each veteran who drives ninety minutes to the nearest VA medical center and waits three hours to be seen for fifteen minutes, by each veteran who files a disability claim and receives a denial letter written in language so bureaucratically dense that it requires a veterans' service organization to translate it into the English in which the promise was originally made.

The VA scandal of 2014, which revealed that veterans at the Phoenix VA hospital and other facilities had died while waiting for care that the system was too understaffed, underfunded, and administratively paralyzed to provide, was not a malfunction. It was the system functioning according to its actual priorities, which were budgetary rather than medical. The specific mechanism revealed in Phoenix was the maintenance of secret waiting lists, unofficial records that tracked the true wait times while the official records showed wait times that met the Department's performance targets. The discrepancy between the official records and the secret records is a perfect instance of the grammar of leaving operating within a single institution: the official record said the system was performing. The secret record said the system was failing. The official record was shared with Congress and the public. The secret record was kept in a desk drawer. The gap between the two records was the gap between the promise and the performance, and veterans died in the gap, and the grammar said: the system was "overwhelmed." The demand was "unprecedented." The resources were "insufficient."

The VA was funded at a level insufficient to meet the demand created by two decades of war, and the insufficiency was not an accident. It was a series of appropriations decisions made by specific members of Congress in specific sessions, in which the cost of adequately funding veteran care was weighed against the cost of tax cuts, defense procurement contracts, and the other budgetary priorities that competed for the same dollars, and the veterans lost, repeatedly, in a competition they did not know they were entering, because the promise had already been made and the promise, in the grammar of governmental obligation, was supposed to be binding.

The irony is structural and deserves to be named. The same Congress that voted to send troops into combat voted, in subsequent sessions, to fund the care of those troops at levels that guaranteed the care would be inadequate. The flag was raised for the deployment. The budget was cut for the return. The ceremony of sending was lavish and public. The bureaucracy of caring was stingy and hidden. And the veterans, who had honored every term of their covenant, who had gone where they were ordered and done what they were asked and survived what they survived, returned to discover that the nation's gratitude was

rhetorical rather than fiscal, and that the difference between a speech and an appropriation was the difference between being honored and being served, and the nation was willing to do the first indefinitely while declining to adequately fund the second.

The veterans who waited were doing what the social contract instructed them to do. They were filing their claims. They were showing up for their appointments. They were navigating the bureaucracy with the same discipline the military had trained into them. And the bureaucracy, which was supposed to serve them, was instead managing them, routing them through a system whose primary function was not the delivery of care but the management of demand, the reduction of visible backlogs through administrative manipulation, the creation of an appearance of adequacy that bore no resemblance to the reality of a system that was sending veterans home to wait and sending some of those veterans home to die.

The grammar: wait times were “addressed.” The backlog was “reduced.” The system was “reformed.” Access to care was “improved.” Each passive construction performed its function: the removal of the agent, the conversion of the decision into a condition, the transformation of a political failure into an administrative challenge. The veterans were not abandoned by their government. The system was “overwhelmed.” The demand was “unprecedented.” The resources were “insufficient.” Nobody abandoned anyone. The waiting list simply grew, the way a river rises, the way a population ages, the way things happen that are nobody's fault and nobody's responsibility.

Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria in September 2017 represents the colonial dimension of governmental abandonment, the dimension in which the social contract is not breached so much as revealed to have never existed in the form the abandoned believed it did. Puerto Rico is a United States territory. Its residents are American citizens. They serve in the American military at rates that exceed many states. They pay federal payroll taxes. They are subject to federal law. And when a Category 4 hurricane destroyed the island's electrical grid, contaminated its water supply, collapsed its infrastructure, and killed, by the most credible estimates, approximately three thousand people, the federal response was a masterclass in the grammar of selective abandonment.

The response was slow. It was inadequate. It was accompanied by presidential commentary that blamed the island's fiscal management for the severity of the crisis, as if a territory's bond rating determined whether its citizens deserved to have their power restored. The Army Corps of Engineers took months to restore electricity. Thousands of residents went without clean water for weeks. The official death toll was initially reported as sixty-four, a number so absurdly low that it constituted its own form of abandonment: the refusal to count the dead accurately, the administrative erasure of mortality, the grammatical reduction of nearly three thousand deaths to sixty-four because sixty-four was the number that made the response appear adequate rather than catastrophic.

The contrast between the federal response to Hurricane Maria and the federal response to hurricanes that struck the mainland United States in the same period is itself a form of evidence. The contrast does not require commentary. It requires only documentation: how much money was allocated, how quickly it arrived, how many personnel were deployed, how long the emergency was treated as an emergency rather than as a chronic condition the territory was expected to manage on its own. The documentation reveals what the grammar conceals: that the social contract, for Puerto Rico, was always conditional, always contingent on the mainland's willingness to recognize the island's residents as full participants in the national community, and the mainland's willingness, when tested by disaster, was found to be insufficient, and the insufficiency was not a logistical failure. It was a political calculation, made by specific officials who determined that the political cost of abandoning Puerto Rico was lower than the fiscal cost of adequately serving it, and who were correct in that calculation, because the residents of Puerto Rico cannot vote in presidential elections, which means, in the arithmetic of American power, that their suffering carries no electoral consequence, which means their suffering carries no political cost, which means their suffering is, in the grammar of governance, optional.

The aftermath confirmed the calculation. In the years following Maria, Puerto Rico experienced the largest population decline in its modern history. Hundreds of thousands of residents left the island for the mainland United States, carrying with them the skills, the labor, the

tax contributions, and the communal networks that the island needed to rebuild. They left not because they wanted to leave but because the infrastructure that would have allowed them to stay had not been restored, because the federal assistance that would have rebuilt the infrastructure had not arrived in sufficient quantity or with sufficient speed, because the government that was constitutionally obligated to provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare had determined that Puerto Rico's portion of the general welfare was negotiable. The departures were narrated, in the grammar of migration studies, as "population outflows." The grammar, as always, removed the agent. The people did not flee a disaster that their government failed to remedy. The population "outflowed."

Those who remained on the island rebuilt with what they had. Neighbors helped neighbors. Communities organized themselves. Mutual aid networks formed in the absence of institutional provision, the same organic solidarity that appears wherever the formal structures of support have been withdrawn. This solidarity is real. It is admirable. And it is a symptom of abandonment rather than a cure for it, because the necessity of mutual aid is itself evidence that the institution whose job it was to provide has stopped providing, and the community's capacity to fill the gap, however impressive, should not be mistaken for evidence that the gap does not exist.

The quieter forms of governmental abandonment do not make headlines, but they affect more people, more consistently, and more irreversibly than any single crisis. The defunding of public libraries. The closure of rural post offices. The elimination of public bus routes. The sale of public parks to private developers. The reduction of public health department hours. The privatization of public utilities. Each of these is a withdrawal of shared space, a removal of the physical and institutional infrastructure through which citizens encounter each other as citizens rather than as consumers, and each of these withdrawals is narrated in the grammar of fiscal responsibility, as if the question of whether a community should have a library or a park or a post office were an accounting problem rather than a democratic one.

Robert Putnam documented this withdrawal in "Bowling Alone," published in 2000, and the book's central observation remains the most comprehensive empirical account of civic collapse available. Putnam

measured what he called “social capital,” the networks of trust, reciprocity, and associational life that enable communities to function, and he documented its decline across virtually every metric: civic participation, club membership, church attendance, dinner parties, informal socializing, trust in neighbors, trust in institutions. Americans were doing less together. They were joining fewer organizations. They were eating alone more frequently. They were less likely to know their neighbors' names. The bowling league, which gave Putnam his title, was merely the most emblematic casualty: Americans were still bowling, but they were bowling alone, without the associational structure that had once turned a recreational activity into a civic one.

Putnam documented the what. This chapter insists on the why. The bowling alleys did not close because Americans spontaneously decided they preferred solitude. The civic organizations did not empty because the human need for association suddenly atrophied. The trust did not evaporate because citizens independently and simultaneously concluded that their neighbors were untrustworthy. Something withdrew. Something was removed. And the something was the institutional infrastructure that made civic life possible: the public spaces where people gathered, the shared services that created common cause, the governmental commitment to provision that gave citizens a reason to believe they were participants in a shared project rather than isolated consumers navigating a market.

The rural post office illustrates this with particular clarity. The United States Postal Service is mandated by the Constitution. It is the only institution explicitly named in the founding document of the American republic, and the founders included it for a specific reason: they understood that a democracy requires a communication infrastructure that reaches every citizen regardless of location, wealth, or political influence. The post office was not a business. It was a covenant: the government will connect you to the rest of the nation, no matter where you live, no matter how remote your farmstead, no matter how small your town. The mail will come.

The mail is coming less frequently. Since 2011, the Postal Service has operated under legislative constraints, imposed by Congress, that require it to prefund its employee retirement benefits seventy-five years in advance, a requirement imposed on no other federal agency

and no private corporation in the country, a requirement whose practical effect was to create an artificial fiscal crisis that justified the closures, consolidations, and service reductions that followed. The requirement was not an accident. It was a policy decision, made by specific legislators, whose effect was to cripple the Postal Service financially and then cite the financial crippling as evidence that the Postal Service was unsustainable. The circularity is identical to the circularity I identified in the school chapter: the institution is defunded, the defunding produces failure, the failure is cited as evidence that the institution cannot function, and the conclusion drawn is not that the defunding should be reversed but that the institution should be further reduced, privatized, or eliminated.

The rural communities that lose their post offices lose more than a mail delivery service. They lose the building where the mail carrier knew everyone by name. They lose the counter where the elderly resident who lives alone has a conversation with another human being three times a week. They lose the physical evidence that the federal government acknowledges their existence, that the national project includes them, that the social contract extends to the end of the gravel road. The loss is measured in fiscal terms by the Postal Service and in human terms by the community, and the discrepancy between those two measurements is the discrepancy between a government that sees citizens as cost centers and a government that sees citizens as participants, and the former has been winning that argument for decades.

Public transit is another expression of the same withdrawal. When a municipality eliminates a bus route, the elimination is experienced differently by different citizens. The citizen with a car experiences nothing. The citizen without a car, the elderly resident, the disabled resident, the minimum-wage worker whose shift starts before the remaining bus routes begin running, experiences the elimination as a severance: the physical disconnection from the job, the grocery store, the medical appointment, the community. The eliminated bus route does not appear in the newspaper. It does not generate congressional hearings. It is a line on a budget spreadsheet, a small reduction in a municipal transit authority's operating costs, and the people who depended on the line are expected to find another way, which means, in

practice, that they are expected to spend money they do not have on a car they cannot afford, or to walk distances that their bodies cannot sustain, or to simply not go, not to the job, not to the doctor, not to the grocery store, and the not-going accumulates, day after day, into an isolation that is indistinguishable from the isolation Putnam measured and attributed to a decline in social capital, when in fact the decline in social capital was produced, in significant measure, by the decline in public infrastructure that social capital depends upon.

The public library deserves particular attention, because the library is, in many communities, the last remaining institution that fulfills the original promise of the social contract without qualification. The library does not require proof of income. It does not charge a fee. It does not test or sort or credential. It does not care whether your family is intact or broken, whether your father stayed or left, whether your mortgage is current or in default. The library provides access to knowledge on the same terms to everyone who walks through the door, and this universality, this unconditional welcome, is so rare in contemporary American institutional life that many people do not recognize it when they encounter it. The library is the common school as Horace Mann conceived it, the church as it was supposed to function, the public square as the founders imagined it: a space where the social contract is honored without asterisks or exceptions.

The defunding of public libraries is therefore the defunding of the last institution that practices what every other institution only preaches. When a municipality reduces library hours, closes branches, cuts programming, or eliminates positions, the municipality is making a statement about the value of unconditional public provision that is more eloquent than any budget document can express. The statement is: we cannot afford to give everyone something. And the statement, translated into the active voice, is: we have chosen not to give everyone something, because giving everyone something is expensive, and the people who would benefit most from the giving are the people who have the least political power to insist on it, and so the giving will be reduced, and the reduction will be called efficiency, and the people who depended on the library for internet access because they cannot afford it at home, and for a warm place to sit during the day because their apartments are cold, and for children's story hour because the school

cut its reading program, and for the simple human experience of being in a public place where they are welcome without condition, will absorb the loss the way the abandoned always absorb the loss: quietly, without protest, without the vocabulary to name what has been taken, because the grammar has already determined that nothing was taken, that the hours were simply “adjusted,” and the branches were “consolidated,” and the budget was “balanced,” and nobody abandoned anyone.

This chapter completes Part Two of this book. The four institutions examined, the church, the school, the factory, and the government, do not exhaust the catalogue of institutional abandonment, but they establish the pattern with sufficient clarity that the reader can now apply the analytical tools independently. The three elements are always present: the one who leaves, the one who is left, the narrative constructed to explain the leaving. The grammar of leaving is always deployed: the passive voice, the euphemism, the appeal to inevitability, the therapeutic instruction to move on. And the social contract is always breached in the same direction: the institution withdraws while the citizen continues to perform, the function departs while the structure remains, and the gap between what was promised and what was delivered is filled with grammar.

Part Three of this book will ask the question that Part Two has been preparing: who benefits? The pattern I have traced across four domains is too consistent, too systematic, and too well-served by its grammar to be accidental. Someone designed the grammar. Someone profits from the fragmentation. Someone has determined that abandonment, far from being a failure of the social system, is the social system functioning exactly as intended.

I promised to translate every passive construction into the active voice. Here is the translation for this chapter.

American governments abandoned their citizens. They abandoned them by poisoning their water and telling them it was safe. They abandoned them by sending them to war and then underfunding the care they were promised when they returned. They abandoned them by treating their hurricane-shattered territory as a fiscal problem rather than a humanitarian emergency. They abandoned them by closing their libraries, their post offices, their parks, and their bus routes, and calling the closures fiscal responsibility. They abandoned them by

privatizing the services that the social contract obligated them to provide and then charging the citizens for what had previously been given. They abandoned them by replacing the public square with the private transaction and then wondering why civic life declined. They abandoned them by honoring the social contract for some citizens and breaching it for others, and by ensuring that the citizens for whom it was breached were the citizens who had the least power to enforce it.

The square is not hollow because the citizens left. The square is hollow because the government left first, quietly, through a thousand budget lines and a thousand passive constructions, and the citizens, having paid their taxes and filed their claims and voted in every election and carried their bottles of brown water to city council meetings and waited six months for a medical appointment and rebuilt their houses after the hurricane with money the federal government promised and did not send, were told that the hollowing was nobody's fault.

Some of them are still standing in the square. Still paying their taxes. Still holding up the bottles. Still here. Abandoned in place.

Part Three: The Mechanism

Chapter 8

The Useful Loneliness

The previous four chapters documented abandonment. This chapter asks the question that the documentation makes unavoidable: who benefits?

The question sounds paranoid. It sounds like the kind of question asked by people who see conspiracy where there is only incompetence, who attribute to malice what can be adequately explained by stupidity or neglect. The objection is understandable, and the answer to the question is not a conspiracy theory. It is an observation about incentive structures, and the observation is this: an abandoned population is, from the perspective of anyone who wishes to govern it, employ it, sell to it, or extract from it, the most cooperative population available. Not cooperative in the sense of willing. Cooperative in the sense of unable to resist. An abandoned population does not organize. An abandoned population does not bargain collectively. An abandoned population does not march on the capital or occupy the factory floor or vote in a bloc or demand accountability from the institutions that have withdrawn from it. An abandoned population does something much more useful to the people who benefit from its abandonment: it fragments. It turns inward. It blames itself. It develops the precise psychological profile I described in Chapter 2, the avoidant attachment style scaled up to the level of an entire community or class, and the behavioral signature of that profile is not rebellion but resignation, not solidarity but isolation, not collective action but individual coping.

This is not an accident. This is a design feature.

The word “design” implies a designer, and the implication invites the conspiracy accusation that I wish to avoid. I do not mean that a group of powerful people sat in a room and decided to manufacture loneliness as a strategy of social control. I mean something more structural and more durable than any single decision: that the systems that produce abandonment, the economic system that closes the factory, the political system that defunds the school, the religious system that consolidates the parish, the governmental system that

poisons the water, are designed to prioritize the interests of those who control them over the interests of those who depend on them, and that one of the consequences of this prioritization, a consequence that the systems have no incentive to correct because it serves the interests of those who control them, is the systematic production of a population that is too fragmented, too isolated, too demoralized, and too busy surviving to challenge the systems that produced its condition.

The consequence is not a side effect. It is a benefit. And the benefit accrues to the same people, at every level and in every domain, who made the decisions I documented in the previous four chapters: the corporate executives who closed the factories, the legislators who defunded the schools, the bishops who consolidated the parishes, the governors who appointed the emergency managers. These are not shadowy conspirators. They are identifiable actors operating within identifiable systems, and the systems reward them for producing the fragmentation that this chapter examines.

The distinction between conspiracy and incentive structure is essential, because the conspiracy theory can be dismissed and the incentive structure cannot. A conspiracy requires coordination, secrecy, and a unified plan. An incentive structure requires only that each actor, pursuing his own interest within his own domain, produces the same outcome. The factory owner does not need to coordinate with the school board member. The school board member does not need to coordinate with the bishop. The bishop does not need to coordinate with the governor. Each one, operating independently, responding to the pressures and incentives of his own system, produces the same result: the withdrawal of institutional support, the fragmentation of the community, and the isolation of the individual. The convergence is not planned. It is structural. And structural convergence is more dangerous than conspiracy, because conspiracy can be exposed and dismantled, but a structure that produces harmful outcomes through the ordinary operation of its incentives continues to produce those outcomes indefinitely, because nobody is responsible for the convergence, because the convergence is nobody's intention, and because the grammar has already ensured that the convergence will not be named.

Hannah Arendt understood this before anyone else, and she understood it with a specificity that remains unsurpassed. In “The

Origins of Totalitarianism," published in 1951, Arendt argued that the precondition for totalitarian rule was not poverty, not injustice, not military defeat, not any of the conditions that conventional political analysis identified as the causes of authoritarianism. The precondition was isolation. Totalitarianism did not arise in societies that were oppressed. It arose in societies that were atomized, in which the bonds between people had been severed, in which the individual stood alone before the state without the mediating structures of family, community, association, and civic life that in functioning societies provide a buffer between the person and the power. The totalitarian movement, Arendt argued, did not need to destroy these mediating structures. It needed only to find a population in which the structures had already been weakened, in which the loneliness was already present, in which the individual's desire for belonging, having been denied every ordinary outlet, could be redirected toward the movement, the leader, the ideology, the mass.

Arendt drew a distinction that is critical to this chapter: the distinction between solitude, isolation, and loneliness. Solitude, in Arendt's framework, is the productive condition of being alone with oneself, the condition in which thought occurs, in which the individual engages in the interior dialogue that is the basis of moral judgment. Isolation is the political condition of being cut off from others in the sphere of action, of being unable to act in concert with fellow citizens, of being denied the capacity for collective political life. Loneliness is the existential condition of being abandoned by all human companionship, of experiencing the self as superfluous, of losing the sense that one's existence matters to anyone at all. Solitude can be chosen and is often fruitful. Isolation can be imposed and is politically dangerous. Loneliness is the condition in which both solitude and isolation become unbearable, because the self that would engage in solitary thought has lost its ground, and the citizen who would act in concert with others has lost his companions, and what remains is a person who is available, in a way that the solitary and the merely isolated are not, for any movement, any ideology, any leader who promises to dissolve the loneliness by submerging the individual in the mass.

Arendt's analysis was directed at the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century, at Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. She was not writing about the United States in the twenty-first century. But the analytical framework she constructed fits the contemporary American situation with an accuracy that should alarm anyone who has read the previous seven chapters of this book. The mediating structures have been weakened. The church has consolidated. The school has sorted. The factory has closed. The government has withdrawn. The civic associations that Putnam documented have dissolved. The bowling league is gone. The union hall is gone. The neighborhood church is gone. The post office is closing. The library's hours have been reduced. And in the space where these structures used to stand, where the community used to gather, where the individual used to encounter other individuals as fellow members of a shared project, there is now a void, and the void is not empty. The void is populated by screens, and the screens are populated by algorithms, and the algorithms are designed not to connect but to engage, and engagement, in the vocabulary of the attention economy, means the stimulation of emotional response, and the emotional response that generates the most engagement is not joy or curiosity or solidarity. It is outrage.

Guy Debord, writing in 1967 in "The Society of the Spectacle," anticipated this with a precision that was dismissed as paranoia at the time and looks, from the present vantage, like prophecy. Debord argued that modern capitalism had replaced lived experience with representation, that the direct relationships between people had been mediated and ultimately replaced by relationships between images, and that the spectacle, the total saturation of life by mediated images, was not just a feature of the economy but its governing principle. The spectacle did not inform. The spectacle did not connect. The spectacle occupied. It filled the space where direct human relationship had once existed with a continuous stream of images and narratives and manufactured experiences that simulated connection while preventing it, that gave the isolated individual the sensation of participation without the substance, that created audiences where there had once been communities and consumers where there had once been citizens.

Debord was writing before the internet. He was writing before social media. He was writing before the smartphone placed the

spectacle in every pocket and the algorithm learned to calibrate the spectacle to the individual's precise psychological vulnerabilities. What Debord described as a condition of the society has become, in the decades since he wrote, a condition of the nervous system. The spectacle is no longer out there, on the television screen, in the magazine advertisement, in the billboard by the highway. The spectacle is in here, in the hand, in the pocket, in the first thing seen upon waking and the last thing seen before sleep, and the spectacle's function has not changed since Debord identified it: it occupies the space where direct relationship would otherwise occur, and by occupying that space, it prevents the formation of the bonds that would enable the occupied to recognize their occupation.

Social media deserves specific attention as the most refined instrument of manufactured loneliness yet devised, because social media performs a trick that no previous medium accomplished: it produces the sensation of connection while systematically preventing the condition of connection. The distinction between sensation and condition is everything. The person who scrolls through a social media feed experiences a continuous low-grade stimulation that feels like social engagement. Faces appear. Names appear. Updates on the lives of people the user knows or once knew or wishes he knew flash past at a speed calibrated to maintain attention without permitting depth. The user likes, comments, reacts, shares. The user performs the gestures of social interaction without any of the substance: no eye contact, no vocal tone, no physical presence, no vulnerability, no risk, no silence, no boredom, no friction, none of the uncomfortable, effortful, and indispensable elements of actual human relationship that make connection real rather than simulated.

The simulation is not a failure of the technology. It is the technology's product. The social media platform does not profit when users form deep, lasting relationships that reduce their need for the platform. The platform profits when users remain on the platform, and users remain on the platform when their social needs are stimulated but not satisfied, when the itch is scratched just enough to be endured but never enough to be relieved, when the simulation of connection provides enough dopamine to keep the user scrolling but not enough actual connection to permit the user to close the app and call a friend.

The engineering is precise. The behavioral psychology is sophisticated. The business model is aligned, at every point, with the production and maintenance of exactly the loneliness that the platform claims to cure. And the platform's users, who number in the billions, who spend hours each day performing the gestures of social life on a surface that provides none of its substance, are the largest population of lonely people ever assembled in one place, except that they are not assembled in one place. They are each alone, in their separate rooms, performing connection to a screen, and the screen is performing connection back to them, and neither party is connected to anything except the transaction itself.

Byung-Chul Han, the Korean-born German philosopher whose work has become the most incisive contemporary analysis of the psychology of late capitalism, extends Debord's analysis into the domain of the self. In "The Burnout Society," published in 2010, Han argues that the contemporary subject is not oppressed from without, as the subjects of Arendt's totalitarian states were oppressed. The contemporary subject oppresses himself. The contemporary subject has internalized the demands of the system so thoroughly that external coercion is no longer necessary. The worker does not need to be commanded to work. The worker commands himself to work, to optimize, to perform, to produce, to measure his output and calibrate his worth against the output and find himself perpetually insufficient, perpetually behind, perpetually failing to achieve the level of productivity that the system demands, and the exhaustion that results from this perpetual self-coercion is not a malfunction. It is the system's ideal state, because an exhausted person is an obedient person, and an obedient person is a useful person, and a useful person is a person who does not have the energy to question the system that exhausted him.

Han's analysis maps precisely onto the psychology of abandonment that I described in Chapter 2. The avoidant attachment style produces a person who does not reach for help, who does not expect institutional support, who has internalized the lesson that the self must be sufficient. The burnout society produces a person who does not stop working, who does not rest, who has internalized the lesson that the self must be productive. The two lessons are the same lesson, delivered through different channels: you are on your own.

Consider the American worker who wakes at five in the morning to check email before commuting to a job that provides no pension, no union, no guarantee of continued employment, and that evaluates his performance through metrics he did not design and cannot influence. He spends his day performing tasks that are measured in units of productivity that do not capture the complexity of what he does or the competence with which he does it. He returns home to an apartment where no one is waiting, opens an app that delivers a simulation of social life to his nervous system without any of its substance, orders food from a platform that classifies the person who delivers it as an independent contractor, and falls asleep with the screen still glowing, having spent the entire day participating in systems that extract his labor, his attention, his data, and his money while providing, in return, none of the connection, stability, security, or belonging that the systems he was promised were supposed to provide. This person is not a character in a dystopian novel. This person is a statistically representative American adult, and his daily life is organized, at every point, around the management of his own abandonment, and the management is so total, so exhausting, and so normalized that he does not recognize it as management. He recognizes it as Tuesday.

He knows he is on his own because the father left and the community reclassified and the school sorted and the factory closed. The burned-out person knows he is on his own because the economy has replaced the covenant with the platform and the pension with the 401(k) and the employer with the algorithm. Both persons arrive at the same destination: a state of isolated self-management that is mistaken for autonomy but is, in fact, the most complete form of social control available, because the controlled subject does not know he is controlled. He believes he is free. He believes his isolation is independence. He believes his exhaustion is ambition. He believes his loneliness is the price of self-reliance, and he is willing to pay it, because the alternative, the admission that he has been abandoned by every institution that was supposed to sustain him, is more painful than the loneliness itself.

I taught a student once, years ago, at a community college in New Jersey. She was in her late thirties. She had returned to school after losing a clerical job that had been outsourced. She was studying

medical billing because the workforce development program said medical billing was hiring. She sat in the back of the classroom and did her work and said almost nothing for the first six weeks of the semester. One evening after class, she stayed behind and told me she had not had a conversation with another adult, outside of class and the grocery store checkout, in four months. Her mother had died the previous year. Her ex-husband lived in another state. Her children were grown. She had no church, no organization, no neighbor she spoke to with any regularity. The workforce development program had given her a tuition voucher and a career assessment and a list of job openings in the medical billing field. Nobody in the program had asked whether she spoke to anyone. Nobody had asked because the program's metrics did not include a field for human connection, and what is not measured does not exist, and what does not exist is not funded, and what is not funded is not addressed. She was efficient, from the program's perspective. She was enrolled. She was progressing toward a credential. She was, by every metric the system recognized, being served. She was also, by every metric the system did not recognize, disappearing.

I do not know what happened to her. I lost track after the semester ended, which is what adjunct instructors do, because adjunct instructors are themselves abandoned in place, and the relationships they form with students are built on the same impermanent foundation as every other institutional relationship documented in this book. But I have thought about her often, because she is the person this chapter is about: the person whose isolation is useful to the systems that produced it, and whose usefulness is invisible to the systems that benefit from it, and whose invisibility is the point.

The beneficiaries have names. This book has promised to provide them and to avoid the trap of generalized accusation.

The political operator benefits from manufactured loneliness because a lonely electorate is a manipulable electorate. The citizen who belongs to a community, who has relationships with neighbors, who participates in civic organizations, who encounters people whose experiences differ from his own, is a citizen who is difficult to manipulate with fear, because his daily experience provides a check on the narratives that the political operator wishes to impose. If the

television tells you that immigrants are dangerous and your neighbor is an immigrant who brought you soup when your mother was sick, the television's narrative collides with your experience, and the experience wins. If the politician tells you that the other party's voters are your enemies and you sit next to one of those voters at the PTA meeting every month and you have watched her volunteer at the food bank and you know her children's names, the politician's narrative collides with your knowledge, and the knowledge wins. Community is a fact-checking mechanism. It corrects the abstractions that power depends upon with the specificity that power cannot survive.

The citizen who is isolated, who gets his information from a screen, who has no neighbors he speaks to regularly, who belongs to no organization that brings him into contact with people unlike himself, is a citizen whose understanding of the world is entirely mediated, entirely constructed by the sources he consumes. He has no neighbor to check the television against. He has no PTA meeting to complicate the politician's narrative. His understanding of immigrants comes entirely from the screen, and his understanding of the other party's voters comes entirely from the screen, and the screen, whether it is a cable news broadcast or a social media feed, is increasingly selected not by editorial judgment but by algorithmic optimization, and the algorithm optimizes for engagement, and engagement is maximized by outrage, and outrage is maximized by fear, and fear is maximized by the perception that the world is dangerous and other people are threats and the only safety is in the strong leader or the pure ideology or the closed border or whatever narrative the political operator is selling today.

The political operator does not need to create the loneliness. The political operator needs only to exploit the loneliness that the economic and institutional systems have already produced. The factory closure created the isolation. The school sorting created the hierarchy. The church consolidation removed the gathering place. The government withdrawal removed the shared project. The political operator enters a landscape that has already been cleared and plants whatever crop serves his purpose, and the crop grows easily, because the soil has been prepared by decades of institutional abandonment, and the lonely voter, having been abandoned by every institution that was supposed to

provide him with a sense of belonging, is desperate for belonging, and the political operator offers belonging in the only form the lonely voter can access: the rally, the online community, the identity, the us-versus-them that replaces the actual community with an imagined one and replaces actual solidarity with manufactured outrage.

The description maps the American political landscape as it exists in the third decade of the twenty-first century. The correlation between civic disengagement and political radicalization is documented. The correlation between loneliness and susceptibility to authoritarian messaging is documented. The correlation between the decline of mediating institutions and the rise of populist movements that promise to replace community with identity, solidarity with loyalty, and civic participation with devotion to a leader, is documented. Arendt documented it in 1951. Putnam documented it in 2000. Every researcher who has studied the relationship between social isolation and political behavior in the decades since has documented the same pattern: lonely people are easier to govern badly, because lonely people have no independent basis for evaluating what they are told, and the institutions that would have provided that independent basis, the church, the school, the union, the civic association, the neighborhood, the family, have been systematically weakened by the same forces that benefit from the weakening.

A lonely workforce is a compliant workforce, and compliance is what the corporation requires. The worker who belongs to a union is a worker who can bargain collectively, who can withhold his labor in concert with other workers, who can demand terms rather than accept them. The worker who is isolated, who is classified as an independent contractor, who has no colleagues with whom to compare conditions and no organization through which to negotiate, is a worker who accepts whatever terms are offered, because the alternative to acceptance is not collective action but individual destitution, and individual destitution is a more powerful motivator of compliance than any supervisor's directive. The decline of American unionization, from approximately thirty-five percent of the private workforce in the 1950s to approximately six percent today, is not a natural phenomenon. It is the result of specific legislative actions, specific corporate strategies, specific judicial decisions, and specific cultural campaigns designed to

associate collective bargaining with inefficiency, corruption, and the obstruction of individual freedom. The campaigns were effective. The unions declined. The workers were atomized. And the atomized worker accepted the terms that the non-atomized worker would have refused: the stagnant wages, the eliminated benefits, the gig contract, the algorithmic management, the five-star rating system, the perpetual insecurity that the system calls flexibility and the worker calls life.

The corporate benefit extends beyond labor compliance into the domain of consumption. The lonely person is a better consumer than the connected one, because consumption is, for the lonely, a substitute for the connection that consumption cannot provide. The purchase fills the void for the duration of the transaction and the brief dopamine release that follows, and then the void returns, and the next purchase is required, and the cycle of consumption and emptiness and further consumption is the engine of an economy that depends on perpetual demand, and perpetual demand depends on perpetual dissatisfaction, and perpetual dissatisfaction is the psychological signature of loneliness. The marketing industry understood this before the social scientists did. Every advertisement for a product that promises to make you feel less alone, the car that connects you to the open road, the phone that connects you to your friends, the dating app that connects you to your future, the streaming service that provides the parasocial companionship of fictional characters whose lives are more eventful than yours, is an advertisement that identifies the loneliness, promises to address the loneliness, and delivers a product that temporarily occupies the space where the loneliness resides without reducing the loneliness by a single unit, because the loneliness is structural and the product is individual, and no individual purchase, however satisfying, can repair a structural condition.

Vivek Murthy, the United States Surgeon General, published a report in 2023 declaring loneliness a public health epidemic. The report documented what the epidemiological literature had been accumulating for years: that loneliness and social isolation are associated with increased risk of heart disease, stroke, dementia, depression, anxiety, and premature death, and that the magnitude of the health risk is comparable to smoking fifteen cigarettes per day. The comparison is striking and is worth sitting with. The nation spent

decades and billions of dollars on anti-smoking campaigns, on legislation restricting tobacco advertising, on taxation designed to reduce consumption, on public health infrastructure designed to help smokers quit. The nation has spent almost nothing on addressing loneliness, despite the comparable health risk, and the reason it has spent almost nothing is that smoking is caused by a product sold by an industry, and the industry could be regulated, and loneliness is caused by a system that benefits too many powerful interests to be regulated, because the system is not a product. The system is the economy itself, the political structure itself, the institutional arrangement itself, and to address loneliness structurally rather than therapeutically would require addressing the abandonment that produces it, and addressing the abandonment would require reversing the factory closures and the school defundings and the church consolidations and the governmental withdrawals that I documented in the previous four chapters, and reversing those would require confronting the people who benefit from them, and the people who benefit from them are the people who fund the campaigns and hire the lobbyists and own the media companies and sit on the boards, and they have no incentive to reverse the conditions that serve them and every incentive to maintain them, and so the loneliness is declared a public health epidemic and addressed with the same therapeutic displacement that accompanies every other form of abandonment: the lonely person is told to practice self-care, to download a meditation app, to schedule a coffee date, to join a support group, as if the loneliness were a personal deficit rather than a structural product, as if the cure for decades of institutional withdrawal were a better morning routine.

A lonely audience is an addicted audience, and addiction is the media ecosystem's business model. The person who has friends to talk to, community events to attend, associational activities to participate in, is a person who is not available to the screen for twenty-four hours a day. The person who has none of these things, who returns from a job that provides no community to an apartment that contains no community, is available to the screen for as many hours as the screen can hold his attention. The screen has been engineered by some of the most sophisticated behavioral psychologists and software engineers in the world to hold that attention for as long as possible, because

attention is the commodity the screen extracts, and the extraction is monetized through advertising, and the revenue increases in direct proportion to the loneliness of the person from whom the attention is extracted. The lonely person has nothing to turn to when he turns away. So he does not turn away. The hours accumulate. The outrage accumulates. The isolation accumulates. The screen, which promised connection, delivers the parasocial relationship: the one-directional simulacrum of intimacy that feels like being known without requiring anyone to know you, that feels like belonging without requiring anyone to show up in person and look you in the eye and tell you that you are wrong about something and still be there the next morning.

A lonely person generates more data than a connected one, and data is what the broker sells. The person who has a community, whose social needs are met through direct interaction, whose information about the world arrives through conversation and observation and the firsthand testimony of people he trusts, does not need the screen to mediate his experience, and therefore generates less data for the systems that profit from the mediation. The lonely person generates data with every click, every scroll, every search, every purchase, every late-night query that reveals more about his fears and desires and vulnerabilities than he would reveal to any human being, because the screen does not judge, and the algorithm does not gossip, and the data broker does not care about the person whose data it is brokering except insofar as the data can be packaged and sold to the advertiser or the political operator or the employer or anyone else who wishes to reach the lonely person with a message calibrated to his precise psychological state. The lonelier the person, the more data. The more data, the more precise the calibration. The more precise the calibration, the more effective the message. And the message, whatever its content, always performs the same function: it occupies the space where direct relationship would otherwise form, and by occupying that space, it prevents the formation of the relationship, and by preventing the formation of the relationship, it ensures the continuation of the loneliness, and by ensuring the continuation of the loneliness, it ensures the continuation of the data stream, and the cycle is self-sustaining, self-reinforcing, and self-concealing, because the lonely person does not recognize the cycle. The lonely person

recognizes only the screen, and the screen, glowing in the dark apartment, is the last light on in a building full of people who are all, simultaneously, alone.

I want to return, one final time in this chapter, to the infant in the Strange Situation experiment. The avoidant infant, remember, does not reach for the returning mother. The avoidant infant appears self-sufficient. The avoidant infant's heart rate is elevated, the cortisol is high, the distress is real, but the display is calm, and the untrained observer concludes that the infant is fine, that the infant does not need the mother, that the infant is independent in a way that the crying, reaching, securely attached infant is not. The observer is wrong. The avoidant infant is not fine. The avoidant infant has learned that reaching does not work, and the lesson, once learned, generalizes across all later relationships and institutions.

The analogy between the infant and the citizen is not perfect, and I am aware that scaling a psychological mechanism from a single nursery to a nation of three hundred and thirty million people requires a modesty that the rhetorical momentum of this chapter might resist. Not every American is avoidantly attached. Not every institution has failed. The pattern I am describing is a pattern, not a law, and the difference matters. But the pattern is visible in a significant and growing proportion of the population, people who have learned, through direct experience with the institutions documented in this book, that reaching does not work. The church will not hold you. The school will not form you. The factory will not employ you. The government will not protect you. The union is gone. The bowling league is gone. The library is closing. The post office is reducing its hours. The pension has been replaced with a brokerage account. The employment contract has been replaced with a terms-of-service agreement. Every structure that was supposed to mediate between the individual and the void has been weakened, hollowed, or removed, and in the space where the structures stood, there is now the screen, and the screen is not a structure. The screen is a surface. And a surface, however bright, however engaging, however precisely calibrated to the user's emotional state, cannot bear weight.

The analogy between the infant and the citizen is not metaphorical. It is structural. Bowlby demonstrated that the attachment system, the

neurological apparatus that governs the human being's relationship to connection and security, does not disappear in adulthood. It matures, it becomes more complex, it transfers from the parent to the partner, the friend, the community, the institution. But it remains the same system, operating according to the same principles: when the environment provides reliable connection, the system relaxes and the person can explore, create, take risks, engage with the world. When the environment fails to provide reliable connection, the system activates, the person becomes vigilant, defensive, and organized around the management of threat rather than the pursuit of possibility. An entire nation whose institutional environment has systematically withdrawn reliable connection is an entire nation operating in a state of chronic attachment activation, an entire nation whose citizens are spending their cognitive and emotional resources on the management of insecurity rather than on the creative, civic, intellectual, and social activities that a secure population produces. The useful loneliness is useful because it converts an entire population's energy from production to survival, from creation to coping, from collective action to individual management, and the conversion frees the systems that produced the loneliness to continue operating without challenge, because the people who might challenge them are too busy managing the consequences of their operation to examine the operation itself.

The infant who does not reach grows into the adult who does not organize. The adult who does not organize grows into the citizen who does not participate. The citizen who does not participate grows into the voter who does not vote, or who votes in the grip of a fear that no community exists to correct, or who votes for the candidate who promises to restore the very belonging that the candidate's policies will further destroy. The cycle is not a conspiracy. It is an incentive structure. And the incentive structure rewards, at every level, the production and maintenance of a lonely, fragmented, exhausted, and therefore governable population.

The systems I have described are not total. Resistance is possible. The fact that I am writing this book is evidence that the system is not total. The fact that you are reading it is further evidence. The fact that the loneliness can be named, analyzed, traced to its sources, and recognized as structural rather than personal is the first condition of

any response that might be adequate to the problem. The system depends on the loneliness remaining unnamed. The system depends on the lonely person believing that his condition is personal, accidental, his own fault. The naming is the first crack in the surface.

This is the useful loneliness. This is what abandonment produces when it is administered at scale, across every institution, for a sufficient duration. Not rebellion. Not revolution. Not the organized resistance that the powerful fear. Something much quieter and much more profitable: a population of individuals, each one managing his own abandonment in his own apartment with his own screen, each one convinced that his loneliness is personal rather than structural, each one blaming himself for the isolation that was produced by decisions made in rooms he was never invited to enter, each one too tired and too alone to recognize that the person in the next apartment, and the person in the apartment below, and every person on every floor of every building in every abandoned town and hollowed city in the country, is experiencing the same thing, for the same reasons, produced by the same systems, and that the shared experience of this loneliness, if it could ever be named and recognized and spoken aloud, would constitute the most powerful political force in the nation.

But it cannot be spoken aloud, because the grammar has done its work. The loneliness is personal. The isolation is a lifestyle choice. The fragmentation is the price of freedom. The abandonment is nobody's fault. And the person who sits alone in the glow of the screen, heart rate elevated, cortisol high, reaching for nothing because reaching has never worked, is the ideal citizen of the system that produced him: quiet, compliant, self-managing, and too exhausted to ask the question that this chapter has attempted to answer.

Who benefits?

Everyone who has a reason to prefer that the question is never asked.

Chapter 9

The Narrative of Inevitability

This chapter examines the grammar as a technology, as an engineered apparatus that is manufactured, distributed, maintained, and refined by identifiable industries and professionals whose function is to ensure that abandonment, once committed, is never recognized as abandonment by the people it was committed against.

I use the word “technology” deliberately. A technology is a tool designed to produce a specific outcome, and the narrative of inevitability is a tool designed to produce a specific outcome: the conversion of an act of departure into a condition of the departed. The tool has components. It has operators. It has a maintenance schedule. It has, over the decades, been upgraded, refined, and adapted to new environments. And it works. It works so well that most Americans, confronted with any of the abandonments documented in this book, will reflexively deploy the narrative of inevitability on the abandoner's behalf, without prompting, without compensation, and without any awareness that they are performing an operation that serves the interests of the person or institution that left them.

This chapter will examine how the narrative is constructed, who constructs it, and how it is distributed.

The construction begins with the press release. I start here because the press release is the foundational document of the narrative of inevitability, the text from which all subsequent coverage, commentary, and public understanding derives. When a corporation announces a factory closure, the announcement does not arrive in the form of an honest statement. It arrives in the form of a carefully drafted document, produced by a communications department staffed by professionals whose training is in the management of perception, and the document is engineered to accomplish a specific set of objectives: to announce the departure, to preempt the accusation of abandonment, to provide journalists with the language in which the departure will be described, and to position the departing entity as a responsible actor responding to forces beyond its control.

The language is remarkably consistent across industries, across decades, and across the full range of institutional abandonment. I have collected examples over the years, and the patterns are so stable that they constitute a dialect, a specialized form of English designed to describe the act of leaving without using any word that means leaving. The corporation does not close the factory. The corporation “announces a strategic realignment of its operational footprint.” The diocese does not close the parish. The diocese “announces a pastoral planning initiative to strengthen its presence in the region.” The school district does not close the school. The district “announces a consolidation plan to improve educational outcomes.” The government does not cut the program. The government “announces a modernization of its service delivery model.” In each case, the verb is positive: strengthen, improve, modernize, realign. In each case, the object is abstract: footprint, initiative, outcomes, model. In each case, the people who will be affected by the departure, the workers, the parishioners, the students, the citizens, are absent from the sentence. They will appear later, in a subordinate clause, as the beneficiaries of the departure rather than its casualties. The realignment will “position the company for long-term growth that benefits all stakeholders.” The pastoral initiative will “better serve the faithful of the diocese.” The consolidation will “provide students with enhanced educational resources.” The modernization will “improve the citizen experience.”

The press release is not written for the people who will be affected. It is written for the people who will narrate the affecting: the journalists, the analysts, the editorial boards, the commentators who will translate the press release into the articles and broadcasts that the public will consume. And the translation, in the majority of cases, preserves the press release's grammar with minimal alteration. The journalist does not have the time, the resources, or in many cases the institutional support to independently investigate whether the “strategic realignment” is, in fact, a decision made by a board of directors to increase shareholder value by eliminating labor costs. The journalist has a deadline. The journalist has a press release. The journalist writes a story that begins with the press release's framing and adds local color: a quote from the mayor expressing disappointment, a quote from a worker expressing concern, a

description of the community's history with the departing institution, and a closing paragraph that notes the company's statement about severance packages and retraining assistance. The story is balanced. The story is factual. The story is, in every particular, a faithful reproduction of the narrative of inevitability, because the narrative was designed to survive the journalistic process intact, to pass through the filter of professional skepticism without triggering the alarm that would prompt deeper investigation, and the design works, because the press release's grammar is the grammar of objectivity, and the journalist who reproduces it is not being credulous. The journalist is being professional. The professional standard is the reproduction of what the parties say, and what the parties say has been engineered to ensure that what the journalist reproduces is the narrative of inevitability.

The blame does not belong to journalists. The decline of local journalism is itself a form of abandonment, and it is directly relevant to the narrative apparatus I am describing. When a local newspaper employs a staff of reporters who live in the community, who know the factory manager and the union steward by name, who have covered the plant for a decade and understand its relationship to the town's economy in granular detail, that newspaper has the institutional capacity to challenge the press release's grammar. The reporter can say: I know that the company's claim of competitive necessity is complicated by the fact that the plant was profitable last quarter, and that the CEO received a \$12 million compensation package last year, and that the company recently authorized a \$500 million stock buyback program, and that these facts suggest the closure is not a response to competitive pressure but a reallocation of resources from labor to capital. But the local newspaper that employed that reporter no longer exists, or has been acquired by a hedge fund that has reduced its staff to three people, or has been replaced by a digital outlet that aggregates press releases and rewrites them with a local dateline. The decimation of local journalism since 2000, the closure of more than 3,500 newspapers and the elimination of approximately two-thirds of all newspaper jobs in the United States, has removed the one institution whose professional function was to scrutinize the grammar of leaving and has replaced it with an information landscape in which the grammar arrives pre-packaged, pre-processed, and pre-legitimized, and

the community that is being abandoned has no independent source of information about its own abandonment.

The loss of the local newspaper is the loss of the community's capacity to narrate its own experience in its own language. Without the newspaper, the community's understanding of the factory closure comes from the press release, from the national media's thirty-second summary, from the think tank's policy brief, and from the social media feed's algorithmic selection of content designed to provoke rather than inform. None of these sources speak the community's language. None of them know the community's names. None of them understand that the plant closure is not a data point in a trend line but the end of something specific and irreplaceable, and the absence of that understanding, the absence of a narrator who can say what the closure means to the people who are living through it, is itself a component of the narrative of inevitability, because inevitability depends on the absence of specificity, and specificity is what local journalism provided.

The think tank is the second node in the distribution network. If the press release provides the initial framing, the think tank provides the intellectual legitimacy. The major policy think tanks of the United States, from the Heritage Foundation on the right to the Brookings Institution on the center-right to the various progressive policy organizations on the left, produce a continuous stream of papers, reports, briefings, and commentary that provide the analytical framework within which specific abandonments are understood. The think tank does not say "the factory should be closed." The think tank says "the competitive dynamics of the global manufacturing sector require firms to optimize their production footprints in response to comparative advantage, and the policy environment should facilitate rather than obstruct this optimization." The think tank does not say "the school should be defunded." The think tank says "educational outcomes are best served by accountability mechanisms that align resource allocation with measurable performance indicators." The think tank does not say "the government should withdraw services from this community." The think tank says "fiscal sustainability requires the modernization of service delivery through public-private partnerships that leverage market efficiencies."

Each of these formulations performs the same function as the press release, but at a higher level of abstraction. The press release provides the language for the specific departure. The think tank provides the conceptual framework that makes the specific departure appear to be an instance of a general principle, and general principles, by their nature, are not subject to the objection that can be raised against specific acts. You can argue with a board of directors. You cannot argue with comparative advantage. You can protest a school closing. You cannot protest measurable performance indicators. You can object to the elimination of a bus route. You cannot object to fiscal sustainability. The think tank's function is to elevate the specific to the general, to convert the decision into the principle, and to ensure that any challenge to the decision is perceived not as a legitimate objection to a specific act of abandonment but as an ignorant or sentimental resistance to the operation of forces that are, by definition, larger, more rational, and more inevitable than any individual community's desire to remain intact.

The academic economist plays a specific role in this apparatus that deserves particular scrutiny, because the authority of the economist is the authority of the scientist, and the authority of the scientist is, in the public mind, the authority of truth itself. When an economist at a major university publishes a paper demonstrating that trade liberalization produces net welfare gains, the paper is reported as a finding, as a discovery, as the scientific equivalent of the physicist's measurement of gravity. The paper's methodology may be sound. Its data may be accurate. Its conclusions, within the constraints of its model, may be valid. But the model, like all models, is a simplification, and the simplification determines the outcome. The model measures "net welfare gains," which means it measures the total economic output of the system after the trade liberalization and compares it to the total output before. If the total is larger after, the liberalization produced gains. The gains are "net," meaning they are calculated by subtracting the losses from the gains and observing that the remainder is positive.

The word "net" conceals the most important fact about the calculation: that the gains and the losses are not distributed to the same people. The corporation that offshored its production to Mexico gained. The shareholder who held the corporation's stock gained. The

consumer who purchased the cheaper product gained. The worker who lost his job in Youngstown lost. The community that lost its tax base lost. The school that lost its funding lost. The family that lost its health insurance lost. The “net” calculation treats these gains and losses as fungible, as if the shareholder's gain and the worker's loss were entries in the same ledger, as if a dollar gained by a person who has ten million dollars is equivalent to a dollar lost by a person who has forty thousand, as if the destruction of a community's economic foundation can be offset by the reduction in the price of a television set. The “net” is not a neutral calculation. It is a moral position disguised as a mathematical one, and the moral position is this: the gains of the powerful count the same as the losses of the powerless, and since the gains exceed the losses, the operation was justified.

The economist who publishes this finding is not, in most cases, deliberately serving the interests of the corporation that offshored its production. The economist is operating within a disciplinary framework whose assumptions, rational actors, efficient markets, welfare maximization, have been established by prior economists who were operating within the same framework, and the framework is self-reinforcing: it produces the conclusions that validate its assumptions, which validates the framework, which produces further conclusions. The economist is a professional. The economist is rigorous. The economist is also, without intending to be, a component of the narrative of inevitability, because the economist's finding, reported in the press, cited by the think tank, referenced by the legislator, and invoked by the corporation's press release, provides the scientific authority that converts the corporation's decision to close the factory from a choice into a fact. The corporation did not choose to offshore. The economics required it. The comparative advantage demanded it. The net welfare gains justified it. Science has spoken. And the worker who objects to the closure is objecting not to a decision but to a fact, and you cannot object to a fact, and the grammar has once again performed its function: the conversion of an act of departure into a condition of the universe.

The political consultant is the most operationally visible component of the narrative machinery. The political consultant does not produce academic papers or think tank reports. The political consultant

produces messages, and the messages are designed with a precision that the academic economist would recognize as methodological and the think tank analyst would recognize as strategic. The political consultant's function is to translate the narrative of inevitability into the language of electoral politics, to provide the candidate or the party with the specific words, phrases, and rhetorical structures that will enable the abandonment to be presented as governance and the governance to be presented as strength.

The vocabulary is specialized and revealing. When a political consultant advises a candidate to describe the closure of a government program as “right-sizing,” the consultant is not choosing a word at random. The consultant is choosing a word that has been tested, in focus groups and polling samples, for its capacity to neutralize the objection that the closure will harm the people who depend on the program. “Right-sizing” implies that the previous size was wrong, that the program was bloated, that the closure is a correction rather than a cut, and the focus group data confirms that voters respond more favorably to “correction” than to “cut,” because “correction” implies competence and “cut” implies pain, and the voter's preference for the word that implies competence over the word that implies pain is not irrational. The voter does not want pain. The voter wants to believe that the people in charge know what they are doing. And the political consultant's function is to provide the voter with the language that enables this belief, regardless of whether the belief is warranted by the facts.

The therapeutic industry, which I introduced in Chapter 3 as the source of the therapeutic displacement, is the final major component of the narrative apparatus. The therapeutic displacement is the instruction to the abandoned to manage their response to the abandonment rather than to challenge the abandonment itself: move on, find closure, let go, heal, practice self-care. The therapeutic industry produces this instruction through books, articles, podcasts, workshops, retreats, apps, and professional counseling sessions, and the instruction is delivered with genuine compassion by practitioners who genuinely wish to alleviate suffering. The practitioners are not agents of the narrative of inevitability. They are its products. They have been trained within a framework that locates the problem in the

individual's response rather than in the system's action, and the framework is so deeply embedded in the profession's self-understanding that most practitioners do not recognize it as a framework at all. They recognize it as reality. The client is suffering. The suffering is caused by a loss. The loss cannot be reversed. Therefore the task is to help the client process the loss and move forward.

The self-help industry, which is the therapeutic industry's commercial wing, generates an estimated ten to thirteen billion dollars in annual revenue in the United States, depending on how the category is defined. Billions of dollars spent annually on books, courses, apps, retreats, and coaching sessions whose collective message is: the problem is inside you, and the solution is inside you, and if you purchase this product, you will be given the tools to manage the problem that is inside you, and the management of the problem that is inside you will make the problem bearable, and the bearability of the problem will be called growth, and the growth will be called empowerment, and the empowerment will be called healing, and at no point in this sequence will anyone suggest that the problem might not be inside you at all, that the problem might be outside you, in the system that closed the factory and defunded the school and consolidated the parish and poisoned the water, because suggesting that the problem is outside you would suggest that the solution is also outside you, and a solution that is outside you is a solution that cannot be purchased, and a solution that cannot be purchased is a solution that does not generate billions in annual revenue.

I am not dismissing the value of therapy. I am a person who was abandoned at the beginning of his life and who has spent five decades building an interior country from the materials the abandonment left behind. I understand the value of understanding oneself. I understand the value of examining the patterns that early experience inscribed on the nervous system. I understand that the person who recognizes his avoidant attachment style as an adaptation rather than a personality trait has gained something real, something that changes the relationship between the self and the world. But I also understand that the therapeutic framework, however valuable for the individual, performs a political function that the individual practitioner does not

intend and that the individual client does not recognize: it privatizes the damage. It converts a structural problem into a personal one. It takes the product of decades of institutional abandonment and repackages it as an individual's psychological condition, and the repackaging is so seamless, so compassionate, so genuinely helpful in its immediate effect, that the client does not notice that the most important question has been answered before the first session begins. The question is: why are you suffering? And the answer the therapeutic framework provides is: because of something inside you. And the answer the therapeutic framework does not provide, because it is not equipped to provide it, is: because the institutions that were supposed to sustain you decided you were not worth sustaining, and the narrative that followed was designed to make you believe the same thing.

But the loss can be reversed. The factory can be reopened. The school can be refunded. The parish can be restored. The government can provide the service it withdrew. These are choices that can be made by the same actors who made the opposite choices. The narrative of inevitability says they cannot. The narrative says the closure was necessary, the defunding was unavoidable, the consolidation was required, the withdrawal was dictated by forces beyond anyone's control. And the therapist, operating within a framework that accepts the narrative of inevitability as given, focuses on the client's response to the loss rather than on the system's production of it. The therapy is genuine. The compassion is real. And the effect, however unintended, is the completion of the narrative's circuit: the person, having been left, having been told the departure was inevitable, is now helped to adjust to the inevitability, to accept the loss, to find meaning in the wreckage, and the adjustment is called healing, and the healing is called progress, and the progress is measured by the abandoned person's ability to stop protesting the abandonment and start performing the normalized condition of having been abandoned.

I should draw a distinction here that the force of the critique might otherwise obscure, because the distinction is essential to the book's integrity. The practice of self-examination, the act of turning the mind's attention inward and asking what has happened and why, is not the enemy. That practice is as old as Socrates. It is what Montaigne performed in his tower. It is what Epictetus taught his students. It is, in

a real sense, what this book performs across twelve chapters. The enemy is not the practice but the industry that has industrialized the practice and, in industrializing it, redirected it. The therapist who helps a client recognize the avoidant pattern and trace it to its origins is performing an act of structural clarity. The industry that packages that recognition as a consumer product, monetizes it at billions of dollars per year, and frames the structural damage as a personal condition to be managed rather than a political fact to be contested, is performing the opposite. Gabor Mate, whom I cite extensively in the next chapter, operates within the clinical sphere and yet his entire body of work is a sustained argument that the clinical sphere has misidentified the source of the conditions it treats. The practice and the industry are not the same thing. The confusion between them is itself a product of the narrative apparatus.

The components work together. Trace a single instance of abandonment through the full apparatus, from the initial decision to the completed internalization, and the machinery becomes visible.

In Lexington, Nebraska, a meatpacking company closed its plant. The press release announces a “strategic optimization of processing capacity.” The local newspaper, which is now a three-person digital operation owned by a media conglomerate based in another state, reports the closure using the press release’s language, adding a quote from the mayor and a profile of a displaced worker. A think tank publishes a brief noting that “the economics of protein processing require continuous adaptation to shifting supply chain dynamics.” An economist at a land-grant university publishes a paper demonstrating that consolidation in the meatpacking industry has produced “net efficiency gains” in the sector. A political consultant advises the governor to describe the closure as “an unfortunate but necessary adjustment that reflects the realities of the global marketplace” and to announce a workforce retraining initiative that will provide displaced workers with “the skills they need to compete in the twenty-first-century economy.” A therapist in the town’s only remaining mental health clinic helps a client whose husband lost his job at the plant to “process the transition” and “develop coping strategies for the adjustment period.” The client’s pastor, whose church may itself be on the diocesan consolidation list, offers a sermon about trust in God’s

plan and the opportunity that lies within every adversity.

At no point in this sequence does anyone use the word “abandonment.” At no point does anyone identify the company's decision as a choice. At no point does anyone name the specific actors who sat in the specific boardroom and made the specific calculation that the town's economic foundation was less important than the next quarter's earnings report. At no point does anyone suggest that the closure could have been prevented, that the community deserved a voice in the decision, that the company owed the town something more than a press release and a severance package. The narrative has been constructed, distributed, legitimized, translated, and internalized without a single participant in the process recognizing the full scope of what the process has accomplished: the complete conversion of a corporate decision to abandon a community into the community's personal problem.

And the woman in the therapist's office, the woman who is being helped to “process the transition,” does not know that what she is processing is not a transition. It is an abandonment. She does not know that the coping strategies she is developing are strategies for coping with the consequences of a decision made by people who will never sit in this therapist's office, who will never need to develop coping strategies, who will never experience the “transition” as anything other than a line item on a quarterly report.

She knows only that her husband is home during the day now, and the mortgage payment is due, and the school is talking about cuts, and the church is talking about consolidation. The therapist is kind. The sessions are helpful. The self-help book on the nightstand says that resilience is a muscle that can be strengthened through practice. She is practicing. She is being resilient. She is coping and processing and transitioning.

She does not know that every hour she spends coping is an hour she does not spend asking why the coping is necessary. Every dollar she spends on therapy is a dollar not spent on organizing. Every unit of emotional energy she invests in acceptance is a unit not invested in resistance. The narrative of inevitability achieves its final and most elegant function here: the conversion of energy from outward challenge to inward management, from political action to personal growth, from

the question “who did this to me?” to the question “how do I heal?”

The judge who gave my father five days to “help the mother” was performing the same operation in 1969, in a family court in a small town, with none of the institutional apparatus I have just described. He did not have a press release. He did not have a think tank. He did not have an economist or a political consultant or a therapeutic framework. He had only the grammar, the passive voice, the euphemism, the assumption that what was being administered was help rather than abandonment. And the grammar was sufficient, because the grammar is always sufficient. The apparatus that has grown up around it, the press releases and think tanks and economists and consultants and therapists, is not the cause of the narrative's effectiveness. It is the amplification of an effectiveness that was present from the beginning, in the first passive construction, in the first euphemism, in the first moment when someone looked at an act of leaving and called it something else.

The victim-blaming inversion is the narrative's most toxic product, and I have deferred its full examination until now because it is the component that converts the narrative from an external apparatus into an internal condition. The victim-blaming inversion occurs when the narrative of inevitability has been so thoroughly absorbed that the person who was left adopts the narrative as his own self-explanation. The factory worker who was abandoned by the corporation that closed the plant says: “I should have gotten more education.” The student who was abandoned by the university that charged her \$200,000 for a credential that does not pay says: “I should have studied something more practical.” The parishioner who was abandoned by the diocese that closed her church says: “I should have given more.” The citizen who was abandoned by the government that poisoned his water says: “I should have moved.” In each case, the person has converted the institution's failure into his own, and the conversion is complete, and the institution, having produced both the abandonment and the narrative that disguises it, has achieved the perfect crime: a crime in which the victim confesses.

This is not metaphorical. The language of personal responsibility, which is one of the most powerful rhetorical instruments in American political life, operates as the final stage of the narrative of inevitability.

The language says: you are the author of your own circumstances. The language says: your choices produced your condition. The language says: the successful adapted and the unsuccessful did not, and the difference between the two is a matter of character, not of structure. The language is deployed by politicians, by pundits, by motivational speakers, by the same self-help industry that generates billions per year by selling the abandoned the tools to manage their own abandonment. And the language works, because the language flatters. It tells the successful person that his success is the product of his own virtue, which is a story every successful person wants to believe. And it tells the unsuccessful person that his failure is the product of his own deficiency, which is a story that the unsuccessful person, having been marinated in the narrative of inevitability for his entire life, is tragically prepared to accept.

The acceptance is the narrative's completion. When the person blames himself for the condition that was imposed on him, the narrative has achieved its full effect, and no further maintenance is required. The person will not organize, because he believes his condition is his own fault. He will not protest, because he believes his protest would be an admission that he failed to adapt. He will not reach for the returning figure, because the avoidant attachment style, installed in infancy and reinforced by every subsequent institution, tells him that reaching does not work and that the appearance of self-sufficiency is the only dignity available. The narrative of inevitability has converted the external act into an internal condition, and the internal condition is self-sustaining, and the system that produced it can continue to produce further abandonments without fear of accountability, because the accountable party, in the abandoned person's own reckoning, is himself.

The narrative of inevitability is the most successful propaganda operation in the history of the modern world, and it is successful because it is not recognized as propaganda. It is recognized as common sense. It is recognized as the way things are. It is recognized as the language that reasonable people use to describe events that no one could have prevented and that everyone must accept. The factory closed. The church consolidated. The school was defunded. The government withdrew. These things happened the way weather happens, the way gravity happens, the way time passes. Nobody did

anything to anyone. The world simply changed, and some people were ready for the change and some people were not, and the people who were not ready should have been, and their failure to be ready is their own problem, and their own problem requires their own solution, and the solution is therapy, or retraining, or relocation, or simply the passage of time, which heals all wounds, they say, though they do not say who inflicted them.

This book says who inflicted them. This book has been saying who inflicted them, in every chapter, in the active voice, with the actors restored to the sentences from which the grammar removed them. The corporation inflicted the closure. The bishop inflicted the consolidation. The legislature inflicted the defunding. The governor inflicted the withdrawal. The judge inflicted the five days. And the narrative of inevitability, constructed and distributed by the apparatus this chapter has described, inflicted the forgetting.

The forgetting is not complete. If it were complete, this book would not exist, and you would not be reading it. The narrative is powerful, but it is not omnipotent. People remember being left. People know, however faintly, however buried under the grammar and the therapy and the retraining and the passage of time, that what happened to them was not weather. It was a decision. Someone sat in a room and made a calculation, and the calculation did not include them, and the result of the calculation was their abandonment, and the narrative that followed was designed to ensure they would never say so.

This chapter is designed to ensure that they can.

The next chapter examines what happens when they cannot, when the narrative has done its work so thoroughly that the person, having internalized the abandoner's logic, begins to abandon himself.

Chapter 10

The Abandoned Self

There is a moment, in the progression from being abandoned to living as an abandoned person, when the direction of the verb reverses. The abandoned person stops being acted upon and starts acting. The father left. The community reclassified. The church consolidated. The school sorted. The factory closed. The government withdrew. Each of these is something that was done to someone. But at a certain point, after sufficient repetition, after the pattern has been inscribed deeply enough and confirmed often enough and narrated inevitably enough, the person begins to do the leaving himself. Not by walking out a door. By walking away from the expectation that any door will remain open.

This is self-abandonment, and it is the subject of this chapter, and it is the darkest material in this book, because self-abandonment is the point at which the system I have been describing becomes self-sustaining. External abandonment requires external actors: a father, a judge, a corporation, a legislature, a bishop. External abandonment can, in principle, be opposed: the actor can be identified, the decision can be challenged, the grammar can be translated into the active voice. Self-abandonment requires no external actor. Self-abandonment is the person performing the abandonment on himself, using the tools that the external abandonment provided: the internal working model that says connection is unreliable, the grammar that says the condition is inevitable, the therapeutic displacement that says the management of the condition is his own responsibility, and the victim-blaming inversion that says the condition is his own fault. When these tools have been fully internalized, the system no longer needs to abandon the person. The person abandons himself, and the abandonment is attributed not to the system that produced it but to the person who performs it, and the person, having been trained by decades of institutional abandonment to accept responsibility for conditions he did not create, accepts this attribution as well.

Gabor Mate, the Hungarian-born Canadian physician whose work on the relationship between trauma and addiction has become the most

comprehensive clinical account of self-abandonment available, describes the mechanism with a clarity that this book has been building toward. Mate argues, in "The Myth of Normal" and in his earlier work "In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts," that addiction is not a disease of the brain, though it affects the brain. Addiction is not a failure of willpower, though it depletes willpower. Addiction is not a genetic destiny, though genetic factors influence susceptibility. Addiction is a response to pain, and the pain is the pain of disconnection, and the disconnection is the product of the conditions that this book has documented: early attachment disruption, institutional failure, communal dissolution, economic abandonment, and the narrative apparatus that converts each of these from a structural condition into a personal problem.

The addicted person, in Mate's framework, is not self-destructing. The addicted person is self-medicating. The distinction is essential, because self-destruction implies a death wish and self-medication implies a survival strategy. The person who drinks to quiet the cortisol that has been elevated since infancy is not choosing death. That person is choosing the only available relief from a nervous system that was organized, before memory, around the expectation of abandonment, and that has been confirmed in that expectation by each institution that followed. The drink works. The drug works. The screen works. The compulsive purchase, the compulsive relationship, the compulsive overwork that Han described in the previous chapter, the compulsive consumption of information and outrage and entertainment: each of these works, for the duration of its effect, to reduce the signal that the activated attachment system is broadcasting, which is the signal that says you are alone, you are unsafe, the structure has departed, and no one is coming.

Mate traces the connection between early attachment disruption and adult addiction with a specificity that complements Bowlby's work. The infant whose attachment system was not adequately regulated by a responsive caregiver does not develop the internal capacity for self-regulation that the securely attached infant develops. The capacity for self-regulation, the ability to manage distress, to tolerate frustration, to delay gratification, to calm the nervous system without external assistance, is not an innate trait. It is a learned skill, and the learning occurs in the thousands of interactions between the infant and

the caregiver in which the caregiver's response to the infant's distress teaches the infant that distress can be managed, that it has a beginning and a middle and an end, and that the end is not oblivion but comfort. The infant who does not receive this teaching, the infant whose caregiver is absent or inconsistent or overwhelmed, does not learn the skill. The infant develops instead a nervous system that is chronically dysregulated, chronically activated, chronically searching for the external regulation that was supposed to be provided by the caregiver and was not. And the substance, whether it is alcohol or opioids or nicotine or sugar or the dopamine hit of the social media notification, provides exactly the external regulation the nervous system is searching for. It provides it chemically rather than relationally, temporarily rather than durably, destructively rather than constructively. But it provides it. And the provision, however brief and however costly, is rational, because the alternative, the unregulated distress of the chronically activated attachment system, is intolerable, and the intolerance is not a weakness. It is the accurate perception of a person whose nervous system is performing exactly the function it was designed to perform, which is the broadcast of a signal that says: I need help, I am alone, and no one is coming.

The relief is temporary. The signal returns. The dose must be increased. The cycle accelerates. And the acceleration is itself a form of abandonment: the person who is addicted is abandoning, with each dose, the parts of himself that the addiction destroys. The drinker abandons his liver, his clarity, his morning. The opioid user abandons his wakefulness, his employability, his capacity for unmediated experience. The compulsive scroller abandons his attention, his depth, his ability to sustain a conversation or a thought that lasts longer than the interval between notifications. Each act of self-medication is a small abandonment, and the small abandonments accumulate, and the accumulated abandonments produce a diminished self, and the diminished self requires more medication, and the medication produces further diminishment, and the spiral tightens until the person at the center of it is living in a space so narrow that the only remaining choice is between the substance and the pain, and the pain is the pain of abandonment, and the substance is the last thing that addresses the pain, and the substance is also the thing that is completing the

abandonment by destroying what remains of the person who was abandoned in the first place.

Mate would not describe this as a moral failure. I would not describe it as a moral failure. The moral failure, if there is one, belongs to the system that produced the pain and then withdrew the institutional support that might have addressed it and then provided the narrative that ensured the person would blame himself for the pain's existence and then, in the final cruelty, criminalized the self-medication that the person resorted to in the absence of any other available response. The War on Drugs, which has been the United States' primary policy response to addiction for more than fifty years, is the grammar of leaving applied to the self-abandoned: the addicted person is not a person who was abandoned by his family, his community, his economy, and his government. The addicted person is a criminal. The addicted person chose his condition. The addicted person's incarceration is not the abandonment of a person in pain. It is the responsible management of a public safety threat. And the language, as always, performs its function: the active voice assigns agency to the addicted person, the passive voice removes agency from the systems that produced the addiction, and the person, having been abandoned by every external institution and having abandoned himself in response, is now abandoned one final time by the criminal justice system that places him in a cell and calls it accountability.

Anne Case and Angus Deaton gave this phenomenon a name in 2015 that this book has been circling since its first chapter: deaths of despair. The name is precise and should not be softened or expanded. Deaths of despair are deaths caused by drug overdose, alcohol-related liver disease, and suicide. They are not deaths caused by poverty in the traditional sense, not deaths caused by famine or exposure or the material deprivation that kills in the developing world. They are deaths caused by the specific form of material and social deprivation that the richest country in the history of the world has managed to produce within its own borders: the deprivation of meaning, of connection, of purpose, of the sense that one's existence matters to someone or something beyond oneself. They are, in the vocabulary of this book, deaths caused by abandonment, and the population in which they are concentrated is the population that has been most systematically

abandoned: white, non-college-educated Americans in the regions where the factory closed, the church consolidated, the school sorted, the government withdrew, and the narrative of inevitability explained that none of this was anyone's fault.

Case and Deaton's data is stark. Between 1999 and 2017, Case and Deaton estimated that approximately 600,000 excess deaths occurred among Americans in this demographic, deaths that would not have happened had the prior decades' mortality improvements continued. The causes were drug overdoses, alcohol-related liver disease, and suicide. The number has continued to climb. By the early 2020s, drug overdose deaths alone exceeded 100,000 per year. The trend is unique among wealthy nations. In every other comparable country, mortality in this demographic has been declining. In the United States, it has been rising, and the rise is concentrated in the places where the institutional abandonment documented in this book has been most severe: the deindustrialized counties, the hollowed-out towns, the communities where the structures remain and the functions have departed and the plaques that nobody reads say Abandoned in Place.

The geography of deaths of despair is the geography of this book's chapters. Map the overdose deaths by county and you will find them concentrated in Appalachian West Virginia, in the Rust Belt counties of Ohio and Pennsylvania, in the former manufacturing towns of New England, in the rural South, in the Great Plains communities where the meatpacking plant closed or the aquifer declined or the farm economy consolidated. Map the suicide deaths and you will find them concentrated in the same regions, with an additional concentration in the rural West, where the distances between people are measured in miles and the distances between institutions are measured in hours and the nearest hospital that offers psychiatric care may be in the next state. Map the alcohol-related deaths and the pattern repeats. The deaths cluster where the abandonments cluster. The abandonments cluster where the institutions withdrew. The institutions withdrew where the profit was insufficient to justify their presence or the population was too small to generate political consequence for their absence.

Case and Deaton are careful economists, and they resist the temptation to reduce the data to a single causal narrative. They note

that the deaths are associated with the decline of manufacturing employment, with the erosion of social institutions, with the loss of the structured life that stable employment provided, and with the replacement of that structured life with the unstructured, precarious, gig-inflected economy that Chapter 6 described. But they also note something that the purely economic explanation cannot fully capture: that the deaths are concentrated more than among the poor but among the people who expected not to be poor, who grew up in communities where the factory provided and the church gathered and the school formed and the government maintained and the future, while not guaranteed, was at least imaginable. The deaths of despair are deaths of people whose expectations were abandoned, and the abandonment of expectations, the discovery that the covenant was not what you were told it was, is a different and in some ways more devastating experience than never having had the expectation in the first place. The person who was promised a middle-class life and received a gig economy is not merely poor. That person is betrayed. And the betrayal, which is the word that the grammar of leaving works hardest to prevent, is the specific mechanism of despair that distinguishes deaths of despair from deaths of poverty.

The opioid crisis is the most visible expression of this data, and it deserves examination not as a drug problem but as an abandonment problem. The crisis began in the 1990s, when pharmaceutical companies, most notably Purdue Pharma and the Sackler family that owned it, marketed OxyContin to physicians as a safe, non-addictive pain medication. The marketing was fraudulent. The medication was addictive. The prescriptions were distributed with extraordinary liberality, often in precisely the communities where the need for pain relief was highest because the conditions of life were hardest: the rural towns, the former factory towns, the communities where physical labor had damaged bodies and institutional abandonment had damaged everything else. The pharmaceutical company did not target these communities because it wished to harm them. The company targeted them because they represented a market, a population in pain, and the pain was real, and the medication addressed the pain, and the medication was also addictive, and the addiction produced a secondary market that was even more profitable than the primary one, because

the addicted patient does not stop purchasing. The addicted patient is the ideal consumer: a person whose demand is not a preference but a compulsion, whose price sensitivity is zero because the alternative to purchase is withdrawal, and whose lifetime value to the supplier is limited only by the duration of the life, which the product is simultaneously shortening.

The Sackler family's role in the opioid crisis has been extensively documented and adjudicated, and I will not rehearse the legal history here. What interests me is the structural parallel between the pharmaceutical company's abandonment of its patients and the institutional abandonments I documented in Part Two. The company made a promise: this medication will relieve your pain safely. The company broke the promise: the medication was addictive and the company knew it. The company profited from the breaking: the addiction produced ongoing demand. The company narrated the breaking in the grammar of inevitability: the addiction was the patient's fault, the opioid crisis was a public health challenge caused by complex factors, the company was cooperating with authorities to address the situation. And the people who were broken by the breaking, the patients who became addicts, the addicts who became corpses, the families who buried them and the communities that emptied, absorbed the cost while the profits were distributed to the shareholders and the family members whose name now adorns the wings of museums and the facades of university buildings, and the buildings, like the churches and the schools and the factories, remain standing while the function they were supposed to serve, the health of the patients, the education of the students, the employment of the workers, the nourishment of the faithful, has departed.

Self-abandonment operates in less dramatic but more pervasive forms than the opioid crisis, which, like the Flint water crisis, is an extreme instance of a pattern that operates at lower intensities in millions of lives that will never be documented by epidemiologists or adjudicated in bankruptcy courts.

Self-abandonment is, in its everyday form, the slow withdrawal of care from the self. It is not suicidal. It is not dramatic. It does not announce itself. It operates in the accumulation of small decisions, each one rational in isolation, each one a tiny concession to the internal

working model's conviction that the self is not worth the effort of maintenance, because the structures that were supposed to help maintain the self have all demonstrated that the self is not their priority. The concessions accumulate. The person eats worse because cooking for one is an act of self-regard that the internal model does not support. The person sleeps less because sleep requires the surrender of vigilance, and vigilance is what the avoidant attachment style demands. The person exercises less because the body, which is the one structure that cannot walk away, is nevertheless treated with the same indifference that every external structure has modeled: present but unattended, functional but unmaintained, abandoned in place.

The person who stops going to the doctor is abandoning himself. The appointment is available. The condition is worsening. The person does not go, not because he does not know the condition is worsening but because the expectation that institutions will help him has been so thoroughly extinguished that the act of presenting himself to an institution for assistance feels, in some way he cannot fully articulate, pointless. The institution will not care. The institution will process him, bill him, and return him to the same conditions that produced the illness. The waiting room will be long. The appointment will be short. The physician will be overworked and will not know his name and will not ask about his life and will prescribe something and send him home and the home is the same apartment and the apartment is the same emptiness and the prescription, if he fills it, will manage the symptom without addressing the cause, because the cause is not inside his body. The cause is inside the system that arranged his life so that every institution he encounters treats him as a transaction rather than a person, and the body, having absorbed this arrangement for decades, is now expressing it as illness, and the illness is real, and the person who does not go to the doctor is not being irresponsible. He is being consistent. His entire experience has taught him that reaching does not work. He does not reach. The condition worsens. The condition that worsens is his body, and his body is the last structure he inhabits, and the last structure he inhabits is being abandoned in place.

The person who stops maintaining relationships is abandoning himself. He does not call the friend. He does not attend the gathering. He does not respond to the invitation. Not because he does not want

connection but because the cost of connection, the vulnerability, the risk, the exposure to the possibility of another departure, is greater than the benefit, and the calculation, performed unconsciously by the internal working model that was installed before memory, always produces the same result: safer alone. The person who is safer alone is not safe. The person who is safer alone is dying more slowly than the person who is addicted, but the mechanism is the same: the withdrawal from the conditions of life, the abandonment of the expectation that life will provide what it is supposed to provide, the slow contraction of the self into a space so defended and so narrow that nothing can get in, including the things that sustain.

The person who stops voting is abandoning himself as a citizen. The person who stops believing that any politician will honor any promise is not cynical. That person is responding rationally to a lifetime of evidence that promises are not honored. But the rational response produces the condition that the system prefers: a non-participant, a person who has removed himself from the one mechanism, however imperfect, through which collective will can be translated into collective action. The non-voter is not apathetic. The non-voter is avoidantly attached to democracy: heart rate elevated, cortisol high, appearing not to care, having learned that caring does not produce results. And the system that produced the non-voter benefits from his non-participation, because the non-voter's absence from the electorate makes the electorate more manageable, more predictable, more susceptible to the manipulation that Chapter 8 described, and the manipulation produces further abandonment, and the further abandonment produces further non-participation, and the cycle, as always, is self-sustaining.

The person who abandons his ambition is performing the most invisible and perhaps the most consequential form of self-abandonment. The child who learned, in the school that sorted rather than formed, that his potential was limited by his test score and his zip code and his family's configuration, does not grow into an adult who believes that the world is responsive to his effort. That child grows into an adult who has internalized the sorting as truth, who believes the ranking, who accepts the credential's verdict as a measure of his actual capacity rather than as a measure of the institution's willingness to

invest in his development. The adult who has internalized the sorting does not try. Not because he is lazy, not because he lacks ability, but because the internal working model, reinforced by every institution that was supposed to correct the model and instead confirmed it, says: the world does not reward your reaching. The world sorts. The world ranks. The world has already determined your position, and your position is the position of the abandoned, and the abandoned do not rise, because rising requires the belief that someone is paying attention, and nobody is paying attention, and the evidence for this belief is so extensive, so consistent, and so personally experienced that the belief is not a belief at all. It is a fact. And the fact is self-enforcing: the person who does not try does not succeed, and the failure to succeed confirms the model that said trying would not work, and the model is strengthened, and the person contracts further into the defended space, and the defended space is the interior country I described in Chapter 2, except that the interior country I built was furnished with books and ideas and the compulsive acquisition of knowledge. Not everyone's interior country is furnished. Some of them are bare rooms. Some of them are empty. And the emptiness is the final form of self-abandonment: the person who has abandoned every expectation, every ambition, every attachment, every hope that the structures might hold, and who sits in the center of the emptied self the way the decommissioned missile sits in the center of the emptied silo, still present, still shaped by the purpose for which he was made, no longer functioning, no longer expecting to function, abandoned in place.

I have been writing this chapter in the third person, describing self-abandonment as something that happens to other people, and the avoidance is itself a demonstration of the mechanism. I, too, have abandoned parts of myself. I abandoned the step-siblings, as I described in Chapter 1, and the abandonment was a form of self-severance as much as a form of counter-abandonment. I carry the name of a man from a failed eighteen-month marriage, not because I chose it but because the convention assigned it and the inertia preserved it, and the carrying is its own quiet form of self-abandonment: the daily inhabitation of an identity that does not belong to me, imposed by a system that did not ask and never corrected

its error. I built the interior country, and the building was an act of self-provision but also an act of self-enclosure: I furnished the country richly but I also walled it heavily, and the walls, which were built to protect against the next departure, also prevented the arrivals that might have made the protection unnecessary.

I have managed my own abandonment with the tools of the polymath: books, ideas, work, the construction of an intellectual life so comprehensive and so self-sustaining that the absence of the structures that were supposed to sustain me became, over decades, barely noticeable. The management has been successful, by most external measures. The books were written. The plays were produced. The students were taught. The life was lived. But the management was also, in ways I am only now able to articulate, a form of self-abandonment: the abandonment of the expectation that life would provide warmth as well as stimulation, connection as well as knowledge, the held feeling as well as the understood one. I traded vulnerability for acuity. I traded connection for perception. I traded the risk of being left again for the certainty of never being left, because you cannot be left if you never allow yourself to be held, and I never allowed myself to be held, because the first person who was supposed to hold me put me down on the sixth day and did not come back, and the second person who was supposed to hold me, the mother who stayed, held me the way a cage holds a bird: structurally, without affection, with the door locked from the outside.

There is an exception, and the exception is the dedication of this book. My wife arrived and did not leave. The sentence is simple and the fact is not, because the arrival of a person who does not leave into the life of a person whose entire operating system is organized around the expectation of departure produces a collision that no paragraph can fully describe. What she provides, the caring, the warmth, the absence of harshness, the presence of a steadiness that does not require performance or payment, is what the primary attachment was supposed to provide and did not, and the provision, performed daily over decades without interruption and without withdrawal, has not repaired the architecture. The architecture does not repair. But it has provided something adjacent to the secure base, something the interior country had never contained: the evidence that the model, however

accurate it was at the beginning, is not a universal law. One person can contradict a lifetime of data. The contradiction does not overwrite the data. It exists alongside it, and the coexistence, which is uncomfortable and ongoing and never fully resolved, is the closest available approximation of the thing that Bowlby described and that every institution in this book was supposed to provide and did not. Her upbringing was rough in its own ways, physically and emotionally, and the roughness produced its own adaptations, and the two of us, carrying our separate architectures into the same household, discovered that the architectures fit, not because they matched but because they compensated, and the compensation, performed daily over decades, is what the book's final chapter will call sufficient ground.

We chose not to have children. The choice was deliberate and mutual and made at twenty-three, when we each ran from the Midwest, and the choice has held for the duration of the marriage, and the holding is the one instance in this book where the cycle of propagation was interrupted by a conscious decision rather than continued by an unconscious compulsion. The avoidant attachment style propagates. The father left. The son declined the step-siblings. The pattern reproduces through the adaptive logic of the wound. But the pattern can be stopped, if the person carrying it sees it clearly enough to refuse to transmit it, and the refusal to have children was, for both of us, the refusal to risk repeating what we had each escaped. The risk was not theoretical. The risk was the specific, documented, clinically demonstrated probability that a person who was not adequately held will not adequately hold, and the probability, honestly assessed, was not one we were willing to impose on a person who did not yet exist and could not consent to the imposition. The choice cost us something. It also prevented something. And the prevention, which will never be visible because the thing prevented does not exist, is the only form of counter-abandonment in this book that does not reproduce the original pattern.

I am not unique in this. I am not even unusual. I am a specific instance of a general condition, and the generality of the condition is the point. The polymath who walls himself inside an interior country of books and ideas is performing the same operation as the factory worker

who walls himself inside a bottle, which is the same operation as the burned-out professional who walls herself inside a schedule so dense that no unstructured time remains for the feelings to surface, which is the same operation as the teenager who walls himself inside a screen because the screen does not require the vulnerability that people require. The materials differ. The architecture differs. The furnishings differ enormously: some interior countries are libraries, and some are prisons, and some are both. But the operation is identical: the construction of a defended space in which the self can survive without depending on any structure that might depart, and the cost of the construction is the self's progressive isolation from the conditions that would allow it not just to survive but to live.

The difference between surviving and living is the difference between the interior country and the world, between the defended space and the open one, between the person who has managed his abandonment and the person who has been freed from the necessity of managing it. I do not know what the second condition feels like. I have imagined it. I have read about it. I have witnessed it in others. But I have not experienced it, because the internal working model that was installed at the very beginning does not permit the experience, and the model, as Bowlby demonstrated, does not update easily in response to new evidence. You can know that the model is a model. You can understand its origins, its mechanics, its limitations. You can see, with the acuity that the model itself produced, that the model is not the world but a map of the world drawn by an infant who had reason to believe the world was a place of departure. You can know all of this and still be unable to fold the map and look up. The model was installed before the person who carries it had the cognitive apparatus to examine it, and the examination, however thorough, does not reach the place where the model is stored, which is below language, below memory, below everything that this book, which is made of language, can touch.

The observation is diagnostic, not confessional, offered in the first person because the first person is the only honest voice for this particular territory. Self-abandonment cannot be described from the outside without becoming a clinical category, and a clinical category, as I argued in Chapter 9, is a component of the narrative apparatus that

converts structural damage into personal pathology. I am not pathological. I am adapted. The adaptation has costs. The costs are real. And the costs are not mine alone. They are the costs of a system that produces, in millions of people, the same adaptation: the contraction of the self, the withdrawal from expectation, the abandonment of the hope that the structures will hold, and the construction, in the space where the hope used to be, of whatever makeshift shelter the individual can build from the materials available, which are sometimes books and sometimes bourbon and sometimes both, and the difference between the two is the difference between an interior country and an empty room, and the difference is real but the mechanism is the same.

The abandoned self is the system's final product. It is the person who has absorbed the abandonment so completely that the abandonment is no longer visible as an external condition. It is the person whose abandonment has become his personality, his lifestyle, his character, his "issues," his diagnosis, his identity. It is the person the narrative was designed to produce: a person who manages his own condition without challenging the system that produced it, who blames himself for the damage without naming the source, who copes and adapts and moves on and heals and never, at any point, says the words that would break the grammar's spell: I was abandoned, and the abandonment was not my fault, and the people who abandoned me had names, and the institutions that administered the abandonment had addresses, and the narrative that explained the abandonment as inevitable was a lie, and the lie was told by identifiable people for identifiable reasons, and I am still here, and I am not moving on, and I am not finding closure, and I am not healed, because healing implies that the wound was accidental, and the wound was not accidental. The wound was administered. And the administered wound does not heal. It calcifies. It becomes load-bearing. You build on top of it. And what you build, if you are stubborn enough, is this book.

But the cycle is not the end of the story. If it were, there would be no book, because a person who has been fully consumed by self-abandonment does not write books. He does not analyze systems. He does not trace patterns through five decades of lived experience and ten chapters of structural argument. He sits in the defended space

and manages the damage and does not look up.

I looked up. Not because I am exceptional but because the pattern, once seen, cannot be unseen, and the acuity that the abandonment produced is also the instrument that detects the abandonment, and the detection is the first refusal to participate in the cycle's continuation. Part Four of this book asks whether that refusal can become something more than individual stubbornness, whether the shared experience of abandonment can constitute a form of belonging, and whether the self, today, and the refusal to pretend, can be sufficient ground. The questions are real. The answers are not guaranteed. But the asking is itself an act of counter-abandonment, and the act is worth performing, and the next chapter begins.

Part Four: The Reckoning

Chapter 11

The Fellowship of the Left Behind

In a church basement in any American city, at any hour of any day, a circle of folding chairs holds a group of people who have been abandoned by the same thing. The thing is alcohol, or it is opioids, or it is gambling, or it is the compulsive behavior that Chapter 10 identified as self-medication for a nervous system that was never taught to regulate itself. The people in the chairs are not there because they chose to be addicted. They are there because the addiction brought them to a point where the defended space collapsed, where the interior country ran out of provisions, where the self-abandonment became so total that the alternative to the circle of folding chairs was the end of the self altogether. They are there, in other words, because they have nowhere else to go.

And the remarkable thing, the thing that the therapeutic industry has studied and the sociological literature has documented and the people in the chairs understand without needing to study or document anything, is that it works. Not the program, exactly, though the program helps. Not the steps, exactly, though the steps provide structure. What works is the room. What works is the circle. What works is the experience of sitting among people who have all been left by the same thing and who are, by virtue of having been left, unable to pretend. The pretending is over. The grammar of leaving, which has narrated every other abandonment in their lives as inevitable and their own fault, does not operate in this room, because everyone in this room knows that the grammar is a lie. They know it not because they have read this book or any book. They know it because they have lived it, because the self-medication that brought them to this basement was the body's honest response to a dishonest situation, and the honesty of the body, however destructive, is more trustworthy than the dishonesty of the narrative, and the people in the room share this knowledge the way survivors of a common disaster share the knowledge that the building was not safe, regardless of what the inspection report said.

This is belonging. It is not the belonging that the institutions promised. It is not the belonging of the intact family, the thriving congregation, the secure workplace, the functioning government. It is the belonging that forms in the absence of those things, in the wreckage of those things, among people who have been failed by those things so thoroughly that the failure itself has become the common ground. And the common ground, however littered with debris, is ground. You can stand on it. You can stand on it with other people. And the standing, which is the only thing the people in the folding chairs have left to do, turns out to be the thing that the institutions, in all their elaborate infrastructure, were supposed to provide and did not: the experience of being in a room where your presence is noticed, your absence would be registered, and no one is going to tell you to move on.

This form of belonging requires careful examination, because it is the form on which the final argument of this book depends, and the argument must be honest about what this belonging can and cannot do.

Alcoholics Anonymous, which is the oldest and most studied model of belonging-through-shared-abandonment, was founded in 1935 by two men, Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, who had both been abandoned by alcohol and by every institution that had attempted to treat their alcoholism. The medical establishment had failed them. The churches had failed them. Their families had, in many cases, given up. And in the absence of institutional support, they discovered something that the institutions, with all their resources and expertise, had not provided: the simple, irreducible power of one person who has been through the thing talking to another person who is going through the thing, without the mediation of a professional, without the grammar of clinical detachment, without the narrative of inevitability, and without the therapeutic displacement that instructs the suffering person to manage his response rather than name his condition.

AA's core mechanism, which has been replicated in dozens of other recovery programs and mutual aid organizations, is not a treatment. It is a relationship. The relationship is between equals. The person who has been sober for twenty years and the person who has been sober for twenty minutes sit in the same circle, on the same folding chairs, and the twenty-year veteran does not treat the twenty-minute newcomer.

The veteran tells his story. The story is specific. It includes the drinking, and the reasons for the drinking, and the things the drinking destroyed, and the moment when the destruction became visible, and the choice to walk into this room instead of walking into the next bar. The story is told in the first person. It is told in the active voice. It does not employ the grammar of leaving. It does not say "mistakes were made." It says "I made mistakes." It does not say "things fell apart." It says "I fell apart." And the newcomer, hearing the story, recognizes it, not because the details are the same but because the pattern is the same, and the recognition is the moment of belonging, and the belonging is not based on shared success or shared identity or shared ideology. It is based on shared wreckage.

The institutional treatment model, by contrast, reproduces the structure of the very institutions that produced the abandonment. The patient enters the system. The system assigns a diagnosis. The diagnosis determines a treatment protocol. The protocol is administered by professionals who are credentialed by institutions and compensated by insurance companies and evaluated by metrics that measure compliance and discharge rates and readmission statistics. The patient is the object of the system's attention, not the subject of his own recovery. The patient receives. The patient is processed. The patient is discharged. And the patient, having been processed through a system that resembles, in its structure if not its intent, every other system that has processed him and found him wanting, returns to the conditions that produced the addiction, carrying a discharge summary instead of a relationship, carrying a medication adjustment instead of a recognition, carrying the system's assessment of his progress instead of another human being's acknowledgment that the progress is his and that the wreckage was not.

I am not dismissing institutional treatment. The clinical management of withdrawal is a medical necessity. The pharmacological treatment of opioid addiction saves lives. The psychiatric treatment of co-occurring disorders is essential. But the institutional treatment, by its nature, is a service provided by a system to a patient, and the patient, when the service ends, is alone again, and the aloneness is the condition that produced the addiction, and the service did not address the aloneness because the aloneness is not a clinical condition. The

aloneness is a structural one. And the structural condition requires a structural response, and the only structural response that has demonstrated durable effectiveness across decades of observation is the response that the people in the folding chairs provide to each other: the mutual recognition of shared abandonment, performed without professional intermediation, in the active voice, at no cost, for as long as the people in the chairs continue to show up.

The showing up is the mechanism. The showing up says: I am still here, and you are still here, and neither of us has anywhere better to be, and the nowhere-better-to-be is not a defeat. It is the honest acknowledgment of a condition that the institutions were supposed to prevent and did not, and the acknowledgment, shared between two or more people who have stopped pretending, is the beginning of something that the institutions, for all their resources, could not provide: the experience of being known by someone who has been through the same thing and who does not require you to narrate your experience in any grammar other than your own.

The question this chapter must answer honestly is whether belonging based on shared wreckage is real belonging or merely its shadow. The question is not rhetorical. The answer is not obvious. And the answer matters, because if the only form of belonging available to the abandoned is the fellowship of the wreckage, then the book's final argument, that the self and today and the refusal to pretend must be enough, rests on a foundation that might be insufficient, and the insufficiency must be acknowledged.

The case for the prosecution first.

The critic of wreckage-based belonging would argue that it is reactive rather than generative. It forms in response to damage rather than in pursuit of creation. The people in the folding chairs are there because they have been broken by the same thing, and the bond between them is the bond of shared breaking, and shared breaking, however powerful in the moment, does not build anything. It does not create a community in the full sense of the word: a group of people who share a common project, a common future, a common stake in something that has not yet been built. The recovery meeting provides support. It provides recognition. It provides the invaluable experience of being seen by someone who understands. But it does not provide a

church, a school, a workplace, a government, a civic infrastructure, a set of institutions whose function is the sustaining of shared life over time. It provides a room and an hour and a circle, and when the hour is over, the people leave the room and return to the same conditions that brought them to the room, and the conditions have not changed, and the belonging, however real it was in the room, does not follow them home.

The critic would also argue that wreckage-based belonging carries a structural limitation: it requires the wreckage to continue. The identity of the group depends on the condition that formed it. The recovery meeting requires that its members remain in recovery, which is to say that its members remain in relationship to the thing that abandoned them. The veteran's solidarity requires that its members remain veterans, which is to say that its members remain in relationship to the institution that sent them to war and failed to care for them when they returned. The fellowship of the left behind requires that its members remain left behind, and the remaining is a form of identity that, however honest, forecloses the possibility of a belonging that is not organized around absence. Can you belong to something other than your wound? Can a person build a life that is not structured by the abandonment? Or does the fellowship of the left behind, for all its authenticity, trap its members in the condition that brought them together, the way the grammar of leaving traps its subjects in the passive voice?

These objections are serious. I take them seriously. And I will now make the case for the defense, which is the case on which this book stands.

The defense begins with the observation that the critic's standard, the standard of generative, forward-looking, institution-building belonging, is the standard of the institutions that failed. The church was supposed to provide generative belonging. It consolidated. The school was supposed to provide forward-looking belonging. It sorted. The factory was supposed to provide institution-building belonging. It closed. The government was supposed to provide civic belonging. It withdrew. Every form of belonging that meets the critic's standard has been tried, and every form has been abandoned by the institutions that were supposed to sustain it, and the critic who demands that the

abandoned replace their wreckage-based belonging with something more constructive is demanding that they build, with no resources, no institutional support, and no reason to trust the next structure any more than they trusted the last one, the very thing that was supposed to be provided for them and was not.

The demand is unreasonable. More than unreasonable, it is another instance of the victim-blaming inversion: the abandoned are told that their form of belonging is insufficient, that they should aspire to a better form, that the better form is the form the institutions promised and did not deliver, and that their failure to produce the better form from the wreckage of the inferior one is their own responsibility. The grammar of leaving has entered the room, and it is evaluating the folding chairs and finding them wanting.

The folding chairs do not care. The folding chairs are sufficient for the purpose they serve, which is the purpose of holding a human being in a room where other human beings are present and honest and not going anywhere for the next hour. This is not the belonging of the cathedral. It is not the belonging of the tenure-track position. It is not the belonging of the thirty-year mortgage and the pension and the Friday night bowling league. It is the belonging of the actual, the available, the real. And the real, in a society that has systematically dismantled every form of institutional belonging while maintaining the rhetorical commitment to belonging as a value, is all that is on offer.

The defense continues with the observation that wreckage-based belonging has a quality that institutional belonging often lacks: honesty. The church that concealed its abuse was not honest. The school that sorted its students while claiming to form them was not honest. The factory that called its closure a strategic realignment was not honest. The government that called its withdrawal fiscal responsibility was not honest. Every institution documented in this book lied about what it was doing, and the lies were the grammar of leaving, and the grammar was designed to prevent the people who were being abandoned from recognizing the abandonment. The recovery meeting does not lie. The veteran's gathering does not lie. The circle of folding chairs does not lie. The people in the room say what happened to them, in the active voice, with the actors named and the consequences acknowledged, and the honesty is not therapeutic in the

clinical sense. It is therapeutic in the structural sense: it restores the active voice to people who have been living in the passive, it restores agency to people whose agency was grammatically removed, and it restores the possibility of connection to people for whom connection was foreclosed by the pretense that the disconnection was their own fault.

The political dimension of this honesty should not be overlooked, because it is the dimension that transforms the fellowship of the left behind from a support mechanism into a potential force. When the people in the folding chairs say "I was abandoned," they are performing an act of political speech, whether they recognize it as such or not. They are contesting the narrative. They are restoring the actor to the sentence. They are saying, in the only forum available to them, that the passive voice is a lie and the euphemism is a disguise and the appeal to inevitability is a fraud. They are saying that someone did this, and the someone had a name, and the name was a corporation or a government or a church or a family, and the thing that was done was not a natural process but a decision, and the decision was wrong, and the wrongness is not a matter of opinion but a matter of observable consequence, and the consequence is visible in every person sitting in every folding chair in this room.

This speech does not, in most cases, generate political action in the conventional sense. The people in the folding chairs do not typically form a political party or draft a platform or march on the capital. But the speech creates the precondition for political action, which is the shared awareness that the condition is structural rather than personal. As long as each person believes that his condition is his own fault, collective action is impossible, because the fault, if it is personal, requires a personal solution, and personal solutions are managed individually, in therapy and retraining and relocation and the other mechanisms of the therapeutic displacement. The moment one person recognizes, in the face of another, that the condition is shared, the personal narrative collapses, and what remains is the structural one, and the structural narrative has a different set of implications, because structures can be challenged, systems can be changed, and the people who benefit from the abandonment can be identified and held to account.

Whether this potential will be realized is a question this book cannot answer, because the answer depends on whether the fellowship of the left behind can sustain itself long enough, and with sufficient clarity about its own condition, to move from shared recognition to shared action. The historical record is mixed. Some movements born in the wreckage of institutional abandonment have produced lasting change. The labor movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a fellowship of workers who had been abandoned by the economy and who organized their shared abandonment into collective bargaining power. The civil rights movement was a fellowship of citizens who had been abandoned by the social contract and who organized their shared abandonment into political demands that reshaped the nation. Other fellowships have not produced lasting change. They have provided comfort, solidarity, and the invaluable experience of honest recognition, and they have done so without altering the systems that produced the conditions they were organized to address.

This book does not promise that the fellowship of the left behind will produce political transformation. This book promises only that the fellowship is real, that it is honest, and that it is available, and that the availability of honest belonging in a society saturated with dishonest belonging is not a small thing. It may be the only thing.

There is a moment in the small town of my childhood that I have never described in this book but that belongs here, in this chapter, because it is the earliest example I can recall of the fellowship of the left behind. My mother, pushing a stroller through the grocery store, encountered another young woman pushing a stroller. The other woman was also divorced. The other woman was also reclassified. The other woman was also seated at the far table at the church picnic. And the two women looked at each other, and the look was a recognition, and the recognition required no language, because the language that would have been required was the language the community had denied them. They could not say “we have been abandoned” because the community's grammar did not include that sentence. They could only look, and in the looking, acknowledge that they both knew what the community refused to name, and the acknowledgment was a form of solidarity so small and so silent that no sociologist would measure it

and no policy analyst would fund it and no politician would campaign on it, but it was real, and it was the only belonging available to them at that moment, and it was enough. Not enough to change their circumstances. Not enough to rebuild the institutional support that had been withdrawn. Not enough to satisfy the critic who demands that belonging be generative and forward-looking and constructive. But enough to survive the afternoon. Enough to push the stroller to the checkout line and drive home and feed the child and get through the evening. Enough.

I have thought about that look for fifty years. I did not see it at the time. I was an infant in the stroller. But my mother described it to me later, not as a significant event but as a detail of the landscape, and the detail lodged itself in my memory with a weight that was disproportionate to its scale, because the detail was the first evidence I had that the pattern I had been tracing, the pattern of abandonment and recognition and silent solidarity, was not something I had invented. My mother, whatever else she was and was not, had felt the abandonment. She had felt the reclassification. And she had felt, in the grocery store aisle, the moment of recognition that told her she was not alone in what she felt, even though the community had arranged itself to ensure that she believed she was. That the recognition did not save her, that the solidarity of the grocery store aisle did not prevent her from transmitting the damage to the child in the stroller, is itself evidence of the limits of the fellowship of the left behind, and the limits must be acknowledged here, because this chapter claims that shared recognition is real and sufficient, and the claim is true, and the truth does not require that the recognition repair everything. It requires only that the recognition be honest. My mother's look at the other woman in the grocery store was honest. The twenty years of silence that ended her relationship with her son were also honest. Both things are true. The book must hold both.

The look between two women in a grocery store in the late 1960s is not the stuff of political movements or institutional reform. It is the stuff of survival. And survival, for the abandoned, is the first act of resistance, because the system that produces the abandonment does not require the abandoned to die. It requires only that they fragment, isolate, and stop contesting the grammar. The two women in the

grocery store, by recognizing each other, by exchanging a look that said we both know what happened to us and we both know it was not our fault, were performing a small act of refusal. They were refusing to fragment. They were refusing to be alone in their knowledge. They were refusing the grammar, not with words but with eyes, and the refusal, however small, was the seed of everything this chapter describes: the recovery meeting, the veteran's hall, the mutual aid network, the fellowship of the left behind.

The veteran who sits with other veterans at the VFW hall on a Tuesday afternoon is not building an institution. He is surviving his abandonment in the company of other people who are surviving theirs, and the shared survival, the mutual acknowledgment that the thing that was supposed to sustain them did not sustain them, is the most honest form of human connection available in a society that has made dishonesty the default mode of institutional communication.

Veterans bond over shared betrayal more than shared glory. This is a fact that the institutional narrative of military service works very hard to obscure, because the institutional narrative requires that the veteran's experience be framed as service and sacrifice and honor, and the framing, while not untrue, omits the element that the veterans themselves, when they are alone with each other, identify as the defining experience: the discovery that the institution that sent them did not care for them when they returned. The veteran who waited six months for a VA appointment and the veteran who was denied disability benefits and the veteran who came home to a community that did not understand what he had been through and an economy that did not value the skills the military had trained into him: these veterans do not bond over the flag. They bond over the gap between the flag and the reality, between the ceremony and the care, between the promise and the performance. And the bond, because it is based on shared knowledge of the gap rather than on shared acceptance of the narrative, is more durable than anything the institution provides, because the institution's provisions can be withdrawn and the shared knowledge cannot.

The bond between veterans is often described, by civilians, as something mystical, as a brotherhood forged in combat, as a connection that transcends ordinary friendship. The description flatters

the institution by attributing the bond to the service rather than to the abandonment that followed the service. The bond is not forged in combat, or not only in combat. It is forged in the VA waiting room. It is forged in the unemployment line. It is forged in the moment when the veteran realizes that the nation's gratitude is a speech, not a commitment, and that the only people who understand this realization are the people who have had it themselves. The VFW hall on Tuesday afternoon is a room full of people who have all been left by the same thing, and the thing they were left by was not the enemy. It was their own government, and the acknowledgment of this, spoken or unspoken over coffee and cards and the slow passage of a weekday afternoon, is the same acknowledgment that operates in the recovery meeting: we were promised, and the promise was broken, and we are still here, and the being still here is the only credential that matters in this room.

The mutual aid network that forms in the Puerto Rican neighborhood after the hurricane is not a replacement for FEMA. It is the community's honest response to FEMA's dishonest absence, and the response, however improvised, however underresourced, is built on a foundation of shared reality rather than shared fiction, and shared reality, in a world saturated with the fictions documented in Chapter 9, is a scarce and valuable commodity. The neighbors who cleared each other's roads, who shared generators, who cooked communal meals over propane stoves, who checked on the elderly and the sick when the government did not, were not performing charity. They were performing the function that the social contract was supposed to guarantee and did not. They were the social contract in its original, pre-institutional form: I will help you because you are here and I am here and we are both in the same condition and the condition requires that we act or perish.

The mutual aid tradition has deep roots in communities that have been chronically abandoned by formal institutions. The Black church in America was not originally a church in the institutional sense. It was a mutual aid society that used the structure of worship to organize the provision of care that the white institutional structure refused to provide. The immigrant benevolent associations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the landsmanshaftn of the Jewish diaspora, the tongs of Chinese immigrants, the mutual benefit societies of Italian

and Irish and Polish communities, were not social clubs. They were survival networks, organized by people who had been abandoned by the institutions of their countries of origin and who were excluded from the institutions of their country of arrival, and who determined that the only reliable provider of care was the community of the similarly excluded. The tradition is old. It is tested. And it is activated, reliably and predictably, whenever the formal institutions withdraw, because the withdrawal creates the vacuum and the vacuum creates the need and the need creates the network and the network, for as long as the need persists, provides what the institution did not.

The fellowship of the left behind is not a prescription. I am not arguing that the solution to institutional abandonment is more folding chairs in more church basements. I am arguing that the belonging that forms in the wreckage is real, that it is honest, that it is available, and that it is, in many cases, the only form of belonging that the abandoned can access without being required to accept the grammar that disguises their abandonment as their own fault. I am arguing that the two women in the grocery store, looking at each other over their strollers, were performing an act of resistance that was more consequential, in its own small way, than any policy initiative or institutional reform, because the act of recognition, the act of seeing another person's abandonment and naming it silently as abandonment rather than as personal failure, is the act that breaks the grammar's hold. The grammar depends on each abandoned person believing that his condition is unique, personal, and his own fault. The moment two abandoned people recognize each other, the grammar fails. The moment is small. The grammar is enormous. But the moment is real and the grammar is a lie, and in the contest between the real and the lie, the real has the advantage of being true, and the truth, however small, however fleeting, however poorly furnished, is sufficient ground.

This is the argument that the final chapter will complete. The fellowship of the left behind is not sufficient to rebuild the institutions that were destroyed. It is not sufficient to reverse the abandonments that were committed. It is not sufficient to restore the social contract that was breached. But it is sufficient to establish, between one abandoned person and another, the shared recognition that the abandonment was real, that it was not their fault, and that they are still

here. And the being still here, together, in the full knowledge of what was done and who did it and what grammar was used to disguise it, is a form of belonging that does not depend on any institution's willingness to provide it, because it is provided by the abandoned to each other, at no cost, with no intermediary, in the active voice, and it cannot be withdrawn, because it was never given by the people who do the withdrawing. It was given by the people who remain.

Still here. In the folding chairs. In the grocery store aisle. In the VFW hall. In the neighborhood after the hurricane. In the pages of this book.

The fellowship of the left behind does not solve the problem of abandonment. But it names the problem. And the naming, as this book has argued from its first page, is where everything begins.

Chapter 12

Sufficient Ground

I am writing this in a room in New York City. The cats are on the desk. The coffee is cold. The morning light comes through a window that faces east, and the light does not care whether I am the child of a five-day father or the child of a king.

The previous chapter ended in a room full of folding chairs, among people who had recognized each other's abandonment and named it in the active voice. That recognition is the outward form of the refusal to pretend. But before you can sit in those chairs, before you can look at another abandoned person and see the pattern instead of the pathology, you must have arrived at something inside yourself: the solitary lucidity that makes the recognition possible. The fellowship of the left behind is what happens when the lucidity is shared. This chapter is about the lucidity itself, the private ground on which the public recognition stands. You cannot give what you do not have. You cannot name the pattern in another person's life until you have named it in your own. And the naming, performed alone, in the early morning, before the folding chairs are set up and before anyone else has arrived, is the foundation of everything that follows.

The light arrives. It arrives every morning. It arrived the morning after my father left, and it arrived the morning after the factory closed and the morning after the church consolidated and the morning after the government poisoned the water and the morning after the last patient died on the VA waiting list and the morning after the gig worker's account was deactivated without notice. The light does not consult the grammar of leaving. The light does not employ the passive voice. The light does not appeal to inevitability or instruct anyone to move on. The light arrives, and the room is illuminated, and the person in the room is visible, to himself if to no one else, and the visibility is the beginning of the argument this chapter will make.

The argument is this: the self, today, and the refusal to pretend are sufficient ground. Not sufficient to undo what was done. Not sufficient to rebuild what was destroyed. Not sufficient to hold accountable the

people who made the decisions documented in this book. Sufficient only to stand on, and standing, for the person who has been abandoned at every scale by every institution that was supposed to hold him upright, is not a small achievement. It is the only achievement that does not require another person's permission, another institution's approval, another system's cooperation. It requires only the decision to remain present, to see clearly, and to decline the grammar that would convert the remaining into a failure and the seeing into a pathology and the declining into a refusal to heal.

The argument sounds, at first hearing, like the therapeutic displacement I spent Chapter 9 dismantling: the instruction to find the resources within yourself, to practice resilience, to be your own secure base since none was provided. The objection is fair, and the distinction between the therapeutic instruction and the philosophical position I am advancing is the difference between the book's failure and its success.

The therapeutic instruction says: you must be enough because there is nothing else. It locates the imperative in the absence. It says, in effect, the institutions failed you, so you must succeed yourself, and the succeeding is called healing, and the healing is measured by your ability to function within the same system that produced your damage, and the functioning is called recovery, and the recovery is called progress, and the progress is the system's final demand: that you absorb the cost of your own abandonment and present the absorption as personal growth. The therapeutic instruction is the grammar in its most intimate register, whispered into the ear of the abandoned by a well-meaning voice that does not know it is completing the circuit.

The philosophical position I am advancing says something different. It says: the refusal to pretend is not a consolation. It is a stance. The grammar demands pretending. The grammar is a lie. The lie has cost you everything it is possible to lose, and the refusal to continue paying is the first honest act available. It is a position taken against the full weight of the narrative apparatus, against the press releases and the think tanks and the economists and the political consultants and the therapists and the self-help books and the entire eleven-billion-dollar industry of managed forgetting. The refusal to pretend is not self-help. It is self-respect. And self-respect, for the person who has been systematically told that his condition is his own fault, is the most

radical act available.

The distinction is between sufficiency as a coping mechanism and sufficiency as a philosophical commitment. The first is reactive. The second is chosen. The first accepts the framework and tries to survive within it. The second rejects the framework and builds on the ground that remains after the framework has been cleared away. And the ground that remains, the ground I am calling sufficient, is not much. It is the self, and it is today, and it is the refusal to narrate the self's diminishment in the language of the diminisher. But it is ground. It is real. And it is the only ground that has never been withdrawn, because it was never provided by the institutions that do the withdrawing.

What do I mean, concretely, by "the self, today, and the refusal to pretend"? because these are easy words to say and difficult conditions to inhabit, and the difficulty should be acknowledged rather than glossed.

The self is not a triumphant entity. The self I am describing is not the self of the self-help book, the optimized, actualized, fully realized self that has overcome its obstacles and emerged stronger. The self I am describing is the self that remains after the obstacles have done their work, the self that was shaped by the abandonment the way a river is shaped by the canyon it carved: not by choice, not by design, but by the persistent application of force over time. The self that remains is marked. It is scored. It carries the record of every departure, every reclassification, every euphemism, every expiration of obligation that the self was too young to contest. This self is not whole in the way the therapeutic framework defines wholeness. It is whole in the way a tree that has survived a lightning strike is whole: still standing, still growing, still producing canopy, but bearing the scar from crown to root, and the scar is visible, and the scar is permanent, and the tree does not apologize for the scar because the tree did not cause the lightning.

Today is not a metaphor. Today is the only unit of time that a person shaped by abandonment can inhabit without either grieving what was taken (yesterday) or fearing what will be taken next (tomorrow). The relationship to time, for someone shaped this way, is the relationship of the hypervigilant: always scanning the past for the pattern, always scanning the future for the next departure, rarely present in the

present, because the present is the one tense in which the abandonment is not actively occurring, and the nervous system, trained since infancy to expect the departure, does not trust the absence of departure. It interprets the absence as the interval before the next one. The philosophical commitment to today is the commitment to override this interpretation, not by denying its accuracy, because the interpretation is, historically, accurate, but by choosing to inhabit the interval rather than scan through it. The interval is the only space in which the self can act rather than react, create rather than defend, be rather than brace. The commitment to today is not optimism. It is a tactical decision made by a person who understands that the past cannot be revised and the future cannot be controlled and the present, however narrow, is the only ground on which the feet can actually stand.

The refusal to pretend is the hardest of the three, because the pretending is ambient, continuous, and socially enforced. The refusal to pretend means declining to accept the narrative of inevitability when it is offered, which means declining to accept the common-sense explanation that the factory closed because of globalization rather than because of a board meeting, that the church consolidated because of demographics rather than because of a bishop's decision, that the father left because the marriage didn't work out rather than because the father chose another woman over his pregnant wife. The refusal to pretend makes you difficult. It makes you the person at the dinner party who will not agree that these things happen. It makes you the person in the meeting who asks who made the decision rather than accepting the passive construction. It makes you the person who is described, by the people who prefer the grammar, as angry, or bitter, or unable to let go, because the grammar has no category for the person who sees clearly and insists on describing what he sees. The grammar has categories for the healed (who have accepted the narrative), the damaged (who have not yet accepted it), and the angry (who are refusing to accept it for emotional reasons). It does not have a category for the person who refuses to accept the narrative because the narrative is false, and the person's refusal is based not on emotion but on evidence, and the evidence is in every chapter of this book.

It was there before the father left. It was there before the community reclassified. It was there before the school sorted and the factory closed and the government withdrew and the grammar explained that none of this was anyone's fault. The self was there, on the first day, before the five-day clock began, and the self is here now, writing this book, and the self will be here tomorrow morning when the light comes through the window, and the presence of the self, the stubborn, irreducible, unwithdrawable presence of the person who was abandoned and who remains, is the foundation on which the rest of this argument stands.

The Stoics understood this. Epictetus, who was born a slave and who spent his life articulating the distinction between what is in our control and what is not, would have recognized the argument of this book immediately. The father's departure: not in your control. The community's reclassification: not in your control. The school's sorting, the factory's closure, the government's withdrawal, the church's consolidation: not in your control. The narrative that was constructed afterward to explain the departures: not in your control. The only thing in your control, Epictetus would say, is your response, and the response he recommended was not the therapeutic response of acceptance and adaptation but the philosophical response of clarity: see what is happening, name it accurately, refuse the false narrative, and tend to the one domain that cannot be taken from you, which is the domain of your own judgment.

Epictetus was not offering comfort. He was offering a technology of survival under conditions of extreme constraint. He was a slave. His body was not his own. His movements were not his own. His time, his labor, his physical existence were the property of another person. And in those conditions, which are the conditions of the most extreme abandonment available, he identified the one thing that the master could not touch: the slave's capacity to see the situation clearly and to refuse, internally, the master's account of the situation. The master said: you are a slave because you are inferior. Epictetus said: I am a slave because you have the power to enslave me, and the power does not make you right, and my slavery does not make me inferior, and the clarity with which I see this distinction is the one freedom you cannot confiscate.

The argument is not that slavery was acceptable, or that the abandoned should be satisfied with their condition. The argument is that the clarity, the refusal to accept the abandoner's account of the abandonment, is the precondition for any subsequent action, and the precondition is itself a form of action, and the form of action is available to anyone, at any time, regardless of what has been done to them and regardless of whether the doing will ever be reversed.

Montaigne understood something adjacent but distinct. Writing in the sixteenth century, in a France convulsed by religious wars and political chaos, where the institutions of church and state were busy demonstrating the same capacity for betrayal that their American descendants would demonstrate four centuries later, Montaigne withdrew to his tower and invented the essay, and the essay was, in its original form, exactly the technology this book has been deploying: the application of a single, alert, unsentimental intelligence to the examination of its own experience, not as therapy but as knowledge. Montaigne did not write to heal. He wrote to see. He wrote because the seeing was valuable in itself, because the examined life, however painful the examination, was preferable to the unexamined one, and the preference was not a matter of taste but a matter of philosophical commitment. The unexamined life, for Montaigne, was the life lived in the grammar of other people's accounts, the life narrated by the church and the state and the community and the convention, and the examined life was the life that had been reclaimed from those narratives by the simple, radical, and endlessly renewable act of sitting in a room and asking what you actually know, as opposed to what you have been told.

The word "essay" itself is instructive. It comes from the French *essayer*, which means to try, to attempt, to test. The essay is not a treatise. It does not claim to have arrived at the truth. It claims only to be attempting the truth, to be testing the available evidence against the available intelligence and reporting the results with as much honesty as the essayist can muster. The essay is, in this sense, the literary form of the philosophical position I am advancing: it does not promise certainty. It promises effort. It promises the commitment to keep looking, to keep testing, to keep asking whether the account that has been provided matches the evidence that is available, and when the account does not match, to say so, in writing, with the essayist's name

attached, so that the saying cannot be retracted or denied or grammatically dissolved.

Montaigne's tower is the interior country. Montaigne's essay is the map of the interior country drawn by its sole inhabitant. And Montaigne's discovery, which is the discovery of every abandoned person who has turned the acuity produced by the wound toward the examination of the wound itself, is that the interior country, however small, however solitary, however built from the wreckage of the external country that was supposed to sustain it, is real, and its reality does not depend on anyone's permission, and the knowledge produced within it is valid, and the validity does not require institutional certification.

The examination has produced this book, and the book is the map, and the map says: the territory of the abandoned is larger than anyone has admitted, and the abandonment was not accidental, and the grammar that explains the abandonment as inevitable is a lie, and the people who told the lie had reasons, and the reasons served their interests, and their interests were not yours, and the clarity with which you see this is not a consolation prize. It is the prize. It is the only prize that the system that abandoned you cannot withdraw, because the system did not provide it. You provided it. From the wreckage. With your own hands. On the sixth day, when the obligation expired and the door closed and the grammar began its long, patient work of explaining that the closing was nobody's fault.

Camus understood this better than anyone, and I have saved him for last because Camus is the philosopher who arrived at the position this book is built on and stated it with a clarity that I cannot improve upon, only apply. In "The Myth of Sisyphus," published in 1942, Camus posed the question that he called the only serious philosophical question: whether life is worth living. He posed it not as a question about depression or mental illness or the conditions of wartime France, though all of these were relevant. He posed it as a question about the structure of human existence itself: given that the universe does not provide meaning, given that the institutions we build to provide meaning are contingent and fragile and, as this book has documented, prone to abandonment, given that the narrative we construct to explain our existence to ourselves is, at its foundation, a fiction whose

relationship to reality is, at best, approximate, is the existence itself sufficient to justify its continuation?

Camus answered yes. And the yes was not a therapeutic yes, not a yes that depended on the provision of comfort or the achievement of happiness or the restoration of the institutions that had failed. It was a philosophical yes, a yes grounded in the observation that the absurdity of the situation, the gap between the human need for meaning and the universe's refusal to provide it, does not require resolution. It requires only acknowledgment. And the acknowledgment, the clear-eyed refusal to pretend that the gap is not there, is itself a form of meaning, because the pretending is the only alternative, and the pretending is a lie, and the lie is the thing that the absurd demands and the honest person refuses.

The absurd, in Camus's framework, is not despair. This distinction is critical and has been widely misread. The absurd is the condition of lucidity. It is the condition of the person who has seen through the narratives, who has recognized that the promises were not kept, who has stopped expecting the universe or the institution or the father to provide what was promised, and who has discovered, in the space where the expectation used to be, not emptiness but freedom. The freedom is specific: it is the freedom to act without the requirement that the action produce the outcome the narrative promised. It is the freedom to write the book without the requirement that the book change the world. It is the freedom to teach the student without the requirement that the school honor the teaching. It is the freedom to love without the requirement that the love be reciprocated on terms that guarantee its permanence. It is, in the vocabulary of this book, the freedom of the person who has been abandoned and who has stopped waiting for the return.

The stopping is not resignation. Resignation is the passive acceptance of the condition, the therapeutic instruction to make your peace and move on. The stopping Camus describes is active. It is the decision to inhabit the condition lucidly, to perform the act knowing the boulder will roll back, to build the life knowing the structures may fail, to love knowing the love may be withdrawn, and to do all of this not in spite of the knowledge but because of it, because the knowledge is the truth, and the truth, however uncomfortable, is the only ground that

does not shift.

Camus imagined Sisyphus pushing his boulder up the hill, watching it roll back down, and walking down the hill to push it again, and he said we must imagine Sisyphus happy. The happiness he described was not the happiness of the person whose boulder stays at the top. It was the happiness of the person who sees the situation clearly, who knows that the boulder will roll back, who knows that the institutions will fail and the grammar will explain and the abandoned will be told to move on, and who pushes anyway, not because the pushing will change the outcome but because the pushing is the act, and the act is the self's refusal to be defined by the outcome, and the refusal is the one freedom that the absurd cannot confiscate.

My boulder is this book, and the hill is the narrative of inevitability. I do not imagine myself happy in Camus's sense. I prefer a word the grammar has not yet learned to disguise: awake. I am awake. I have been awake since the sixth day, since the pattern was inscribed on me before I had language to describe it, since the first institution I encountered demonstrated that the structure remains but the function departs, and the awakens, whatever else it has cost me, has been the instrument that produced every observation in this book, and the observations are accurate, and the accuracy is sufficient.

One last time, the infant.

The infant did not choose to be abandoned. The infant did not choose the avoidant attachment style that the abandonment installed. The infant did not choose the interior country, the polymathy, the INTJ classification, the hypervigilance, the refusal to reach for the returning figure. All of these were adaptations to a condition the infant did not create and could not prevent. But the infant grew into a man, and the man, having spent five decades examining the adaptations and their origins and their consequences, makes a choice that the infant could not: the choice to see the pattern clearly, to name it in the active voice, to refuse the grammar that disguises it, and to stand on the ground that remains after the grammar has been stripped away.

The infant became a man who studied medicine and law and dramatic literature and publishing and teaching, not because the man was restless but because the man was looking for the pattern in every available domain, and the pattern was there in every available domain,

because the pattern is the organizing principle of the world the infant was born into, and the organizing principle did not change when the infant grew up. It was confirmed. The institutions the man encountered as an adult, the churches and schools and economies and governments, reproduced the pattern with the same fidelity that the family had demonstrated at the beginning: the promise was made, the promise was broken, the grammar explained the breaking, and the man, having learned to read the grammar before he could read anything else, saw through it every time. The seeing was the wound's gift. The wound did not intend to give a gift. The wound intended nothing. But the acuity it produced, the sensitivity to the gap between what is promised and what is delivered, is the instrument that made this book possible, and the book, whatever else it accomplishes, accomplishes at least this: the translation of a lifetime of pattern recognition into a document that other abandoned people can hold in their hands and say: yes. That is what happened to me. That is what was done. And the grammar that told me it was nobody's fault is a lie. And the lie has a structure, and the structure has been mapped, and the map is in my hands.

The ground is small. I will not pretend otherwise. The ground is the self, and today, and the work, and the cats on the desk, and the coffee that has gone cold, and the light through the east-facing window, and the knowledge that the light will come again tomorrow, and the knowledge that the institutions will continue to fail, and the knowledge that the grammar will continue to explain the failures as nobody's fault, and the knowledge that the abandoned will continue to be told to move on, and the refusal, repeated every morning, to move on, to find closure, to heal, to accept the narrative, to pretend that the wound was accidental when the wound was administered, to pretend that the structures are intact when the functions have departed, to pretend that the leaving was inevitable when the leaving was chosen.

The ground is small, but the ground is mine. It was not given to me by the father who left or the judge who numbered the leaving or the community that reclassified the result or the school that sorted me or the church that consolidated or the economy that closed the factory or the government that withdrew. It was built by me, from the wreckage, with the acuity the wreckage provided, on the foundation of the wound that the wreckage produced, and the building has taken fifty years, and

the building is this book, and the book is the map, and the map says: you are here.

You are here. Not because you healed. Not because you found closure. Not because you moved on or adapted or retrained or relocated or any of the other verbs the grammar provides to disguise the condition of remaining in the place where you were left. You are here because you remained. Because the structures departed and you did not. Because the grammar told you to move on and you declined. Because the narrative said the abandonment was your fault and you knew it was not. Because the institutions walked out of the room, one by one, the father and the church and the school and the factory and the government, and you watched them go, and you noted their departures, and you refused to call the departures anything other than what they were, and you are still standing in the room, and the room is not empty, because you are in it, and your presence is a fact that the grammar cannot dissolve and the narrative cannot explain away and the therapeutic displacement cannot redirect.

The presence is the thing. The presence is the ground. The presence, the stubborn, irreducible, unwithdrawable presence of the person who was abandoned and who remains, is the foundation on which the rest of this argument stands, and the argument does not require anyone's agreement, and the agreement was never going to be offered, and the not-offering is the final form of the abandonment, and the final form of the abandonment is the one you survive by standing, not by being held.

Epictetus would recognize this. Montaigne would recognize this. Camus would recognize this. The two women in the grocery store would recognize this. The people in the folding chairs would recognize this. The veteran at the VFW hall, the neighbor in Puerto Rico who fired up the generator, the teacher who stayed after the test scores were posted, the librarian who kept the doors open on reduced hours, the wife who arrived and did not leave: all of them would recognize this, because all of them have stood on the same ground, and the ground held, not because the ground is strong but because the standing is the strength, and the strength is not provided by any external structure. The strength is the irreducible fact of the person who remains.

This book has been building toward a single sentence. The sentence has been present, in one form or another, on every page, in every chapter, in every translation from the passive voice to the active, in every refusal to accept the grammar's account of what happened and why. The sentence is this:

The abandoned person who sees clearly and refuses to pretend is the only honest actor in a room full of institutions that have forgotten what they promised.

That is the claim. It is not a comfortable claim. It does not offer a program or a set of steps or a path to recovery. It does not promise that the institutions will return, that the social contract will be restored, that the father will come back on the seventh day with an apology and an explanation. It promises only that the seeing is real, and the refusal is real, and the person who sees and refuses is standing on ground that nobody gave him and nobody can take, and the ground is sufficient, and sufficient is enough, and enough is what there is, and what there is, honestly acknowledged and clearly seen and stubbornly inhabited, is a life.

A life that remained. That was abandoned by everything except itself, and that found, in the self's refusal to abandon the self, the only ground that held.

I am still here. The light is coming through the window. The cats are on the desk. The coffee is cold. The book is finished. And the ground, which is the self, and today, and the refusal to pretend, holds.

Abandoned in place. Still standing. Sufficient ground.

Endnotes

Chapter 1: Day Six

The legal framework governing paternal obligations during divorce proceedings in the 1960s varied by state and by individual judicial discretion. The court-ordered five-day period described in this chapter reflects the author's family history as communicated by his mother. Divorce statistics for the period indicate that approximately 25 percent of American marriages formed in the early 1960s ended in divorce, a rate that would nearly double by the late 1970s.

The social stigma attached to divorce and single motherhood in small-town America during the 1960s is extensively documented in the sociological literature. The phrase "broken family," which functioned as a classification mechanism in the author's community, was standard usage in both popular and professional discourse during this period. Its gradual replacement by "single-parent family" in the 1970s and 1980s reflects a shift in rhetoric, though the underlying social dynamics the phrase described persisted.

The biographical material in this chapter, including the father's Saturday visits and gifts, the car-washing scene, the step-siblings from both the father's second marriage and the mother's second marriage, the paternal grandmother's annual Christmas visits, the maternal grandmother's death in infancy, the classmates' response to the name change, the father's reaction to the court notification, the phone call approximately thirty years later, and the "We have good teeth" exchange, is drawn from the author's personal history. The stepfather's second marriage is described in general terms; the man is still living.

Chapter 2: The Interior Country

Mike Nichols's observation about actors and parental approval was communicated verbally to the author during a rehearsal visit for "The Will Rogers Follies" as it prepared for its Broadway opening. Nichols directed the production, which opened at the Palace Theatre on May 1, 1991. The observation is paraphrased from the author's memory of the conversation.

The account of Mrs. Morrow, the woman principal who offered the author's mother a full-time teaching position, is drawn from the author's family history as communicated by his mother.

The material concerning the author's mother, including her public performance as a teacher, the private cost of that performance, the twenty years of estrangement at the end of her life, and the author's account of her burial, is drawn from the author's personal history. The author's mother is deceased.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America was founded in 1904 (as Big Brothers) and has operated as a youth mentoring organization in the United States for more

than a century. The author's enrollment in the program is drawn from personal and family history.

The author's early involvement in theatre and radio is drawn from personal history. The connection between these environments and the concept of alternative attachment structures is the author's own analytical framework, informed by the attachment theory literature cited below.

John Bowlby's attachment theory was developed across three major volumes: *Attachment* (1969), *Separation: Anxiety and Anger* (1972), and *Loss: Sadness and Depression* (1980), published collectively as *Attachment and Loss* by Basic Books. Bowlby's early papers on maternal deprivation, published in the 1950s through the British Journal of Medical Psychology and the World Health Organization, laid the groundwork for the theory.

Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation experiment was first described in *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation* (1978), co-authored with Mary Blehar, Everett Waters, and Sally Wall, published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. The experiment identified three primary attachment styles: secure, avoidant, and anxious-ambivalent. A fourth category, disorganized attachment, was later added by Mary Main and Judith Solomon in 1986.

D.W. Winnicott's concept of the "good enough mother" was developed across several papers and books, most notably *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment* (1965), published by the Hogarth Press. Winnicott argued that the infant does not require perfect caregiving but "good enough" caregiving, meaning caregiving that is sufficiently responsive to allow the development of a secure sense of self.

The physiological measurements referenced in the discussion of avoidant infants in the Strange Situation (elevated heart rate, elevated cortisol despite calm outward demeanor) have been documented in multiple studies, including work by Mary Main and colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley, and by Gottfried Spangler and Klaus Grossmann in the 1990s.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, referenced in the discussion of the INTJ classification, was developed by Katharine Cook Briggs and Isabel Briggs Myers based on Carl Jung's theory of psychological types. The instrument's psychometric limitations have been extensively documented, including concerns about test-retest reliability and the absence of bimodal distributions in the traits it claims to measure. The INTJ classification is used in this chapter as a behavioral description rather than a clinical instrument.

Chapter 3: The Grammar of Leaving

The social contract tradition referenced in this chapter draws from three primary texts: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651); John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (1689); and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762). The

specific interpretations offered are the author's own, applied to the contemporary phenomenon of institutional abandonment.

The linguistic analysis of the passive voice as a political instrument draws on a tradition of rhetorical criticism that includes George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" (1946), which identified the passive voice and the abstract noun as tools of political obfuscation.

Chapter 4: The Empty Pew

The Boston Globe's Spotlight investigation of the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston was published beginning in January 2002. The investigation, conducted by reporters Walter Robinson, Michael Rezendes, Sacha Pfeiffer, and Matt Carroll under editor Ben Bradlee Jr., revealed systematic concealment of clergy sexual abuse. Cardinal Bernard Law resigned in December 2002.

The Archdiocese of Boston's closure of sixty-five parishes was announced in 2004 as part of the archdiocese's reconfiguration plan. Diocesan bankruptcy filings referenced in this chapter include the Archdiocese of Portland (2004), the Diocese of Tucson (2004), the Diocese of Spokane (2004), the Diocese of Davenport (2006), and the Diocese of San Diego (2007), among others.

The United Methodist Church's formal division over LGBTQ inclusion culminated in 2024, when the denomination's General Conference ratified the departure of conservative congregations that formed the Global Methodist Church. The theological and institutional disputes preceding the split had consumed denominational resources and attention for approximately three decades.

Chapter 5: The Locked Schoolhouse

The report "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform" was published in April 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, appointed by Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell under the Reagan administration.

The No Child Left Behind Act (Public Law 107-110) was signed by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002, with broad bipartisan support. The act mandated annual standardized testing in reading and mathematics for students in grades 3 through 8 and once in high school, with escalating consequences for schools that failed to demonstrate "adequate yearly progress."

Horace Mann's common school movement is documented in his annual reports as Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education (1837-1848), which argued for universal, nonsectarian, publicly funded education as essential to democratic governance.

The figure of approximately \$1.7 trillion in outstanding student loan debt reflects Federal Reserve data current as of the writing of this book. The inflation-adjusted increase in college tuition since the 1980s has been documented

by the College Board's annual "Trends in College Pricing" reports and by the National Center for Education Statistics.

Chapter 6: The Shuttered Factory

The closure of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company's Campbell Works on September 19, 1977, "Black Monday," is documented in Staughton Lynd's *The Fight Against Shutdowns: Youngstown's Steel Mill Closings* (1982) and in Sean Safford's *Why the Garden Club Couldn't Save Youngstown* (2009). Approximately 5,000 workers lost their jobs on that day, and approximately 40,000 manufacturing jobs were lost in the Mahoning Valley over the following decade.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed by President Bill Clinton on December 8, 1993, and entered into force on January 1, 1994. The normalization of permanent normal trade relations with China was signed into law on October 10, 2000. The figure of approximately five million manufacturing jobs lost between 1994 and 2020 is drawn from Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

The Tyson Foods closure of its beef processing plant in Lexington, Nebraska, was announced in 2023 as part of the company's operational consolidation strategy. The plant had employed approximately 2,400 workers at its peak. The history of the meatpacking industry's relocation from urban to rural locations, and its recruitment of immigrant and refugee labor, has been documented extensively, including in Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001) and in the author's own reporting for Prairie Voice.

The Ogallala Aquifer's depletion rates and the consequences for Great Plains agriculture have been documented by the Kansas Geological Survey, the United States Geological Survey, and in numerous academic studies. The aquifer's water level has declined by more than 150 feet in some areas of western Kansas and the Texas Panhandle.

Anne Case and Angus Deaton's research on "deaths of despair" was first published as "Rising Morbidity and Mortality in Midlife Among White Non-Hispanic Americans in the 21st Century" in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (November 2015) and expanded in their book *Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton University Press, 2020).

The replacement of defined-benefit pensions with 401(k) plans accelerated following the Revenue Act of 1978, which included Section 401(k). The shift has been documented by the Employee Benefit Research Institute and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In 1980, approximately 38 percent of private-sector workers participated in a defined-benefit plan; by 2020, the figure had fallen below 15 percent.

Chapter 7: The Hollow Square

The Flint, Michigan, water crisis began with the switch to the Flint River as the city's water source in April 2014. The decision was made by Emergency Manager

Darnell Earley under the authority granted by Michigan's Emergency Manager Law (Public Act 436 of 2012), signed by Governor Rick Snyder. The corrosion control treatment that would have prevented lead leaching was estimated to cost approximately \$200 per day, as reported by the Flint Water Advisory Task Force. The \$626 million settlement was approved by a federal judge in November 2021.

The VA healthcare scandal of 2014 was first reported by CNN in April 2014, revealing that veterans had died while waiting for care at the Phoenix VA Health Care System and that the facility had maintained secret waiting lists to conceal actual wait times. The subsequent investigation by the VA Inspector General confirmed systemic problems across multiple facilities.

Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, as a Category 4 hurricane. The official death toll was initially reported as 64 by the Puerto Rican government. A subsequent study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in May 2018, led by researchers from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, estimated the excess mortality at approximately 4,645, with a 95 percent confidence interval of 793 to 8,498. The Government of Puerto Rico later revised its official estimate to approximately 2,975, based on a study commissioned from George Washington University.

The Postal Service prefunding mandate was established by the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act of 2006 (Public Law 109-435), which required the USPS to prefund retiree health benefits for 75 years, at an annual cost of approximately \$5.5 billion. This requirement was unique among federal agencies and private corporations. The Postal Service Reform Act of 2022 subsequently repealed the prefunding requirement.

Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* was published by Simon and Schuster in 2000. The book documented declines across multiple metrics of civic engagement and social capital from the 1960s through the 1990s.

The decline of local journalism referenced in this chapter has been tracked by the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University, which has documented the closure of more than 3,500 newspapers since 2005 and the elimination of approximately two-thirds of newspaper jobs since 2000.

Chapter 8: The Useful Loneliness

Hannah Arendt's analysis of the relationship between isolation, loneliness, and totalitarianism appears primarily in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), particularly in the final chapter, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government." The distinction between solitude, isolation, and loneliness referenced in this chapter is drawn from that text.

Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle (La Société du spectacle)* was published in 1967 by Buchet-Chastel in Paris. The English translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith was published by Zone Books in 1994.

Byung-Chul Han's *The Burnout Society (Müdigkeitsgesellschaft)* was published in German in 2010 and in English translation by Stanford University Press in 2015. His related works include *The Agony of Eros* (2012) and *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power* (2014).

United States Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared loneliness a public health epidemic in a May 2023 advisory titled “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.” The advisory cited research comparing the health effects of loneliness to smoking fifteen cigarettes per day, drawing on a meta-analysis by Julianne Holt-Lunstad and colleagues published in *PLOS Medicine* in 2010.

The decline of union membership from approximately 35 percent of the private workforce in the 1950s to approximately 6 percent in the 2020s is drawn from Bureau of Labor Statistics data. The specific legislative, judicial, and corporate strategies that contributed to the decline are extensively documented in Jake Rosenfeld's *What Unions No Longer Do* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

Chapter 9: The Narrative of Inevitability

The eleven-billion-dollar figure for the American self-help industry is drawn from market research reports by IBISWorld and Grand View Research, which estimate the industry's value at between \$10 billion and \$13 billion annually, depending on which products and services are included.

The analysis of the academic economist's role in the narrative apparatus draws on a tradition of methodological critique within economics itself, including work by Dani Rodrik (*Economics Rules: The Rights and Wrongs of the Dismal Science*, 2015) and by Ha-Joon Chang (*Economics: The User's Guide*, 2014), both of whom have examined the gap between economic models' assumptions and the conditions under which they are applied.

The decline of local newspapers referenced in this chapter is further documented in Penelope Muse Abernathy's series of reports on “news deserts” for the Hussman School of Journalism and Media at the University of North Carolina.

Chapter 10: The Abandoned Self

Gabor Mate's work on the relationship between trauma, addiction, and disconnection is developed across several books: *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction* (2008) and *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture* (2022), co-authored with Daniel Mate. The framework connecting early attachment disruption to adult addiction is synthesized across both texts.

The figure of drug overdose deaths exceeding 100,000 per year in the United States is drawn from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data, which reported 106,699 overdose deaths in the twelve-month period ending June 2023.

Purdue Pharma's role in the opioid crisis, including the marketing of OxyContin and the Sackler family's involvement, has been documented in

numerous sources, including Patrick Radden Keefe's *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty* (2021) and in the legal proceedings that resulted in Purdue Pharma's bankruptcy filing in 2019.

Chapter 11: The Fellowship of the Left Behind

Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935 by Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert Smith in Akron, Ohio. The organization's history and methods are documented in *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (first published 1939, commonly known as “The Big Book”) and in Ernest Kurtz's *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (1979).

The tradition of mutual aid societies in marginalized communities, including landsmanshaftn, Chinese tongs, and immigrant benevolent associations, is documented in David Beito's *From Mutual Aid to the Welfare State: Fraternal Societies and Social Services, 1890-1967* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Chapter 12: Sufficient Ground

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), was published in 1942 by Gallimard in Paris. The English translation by Justin O'Brien was published by Hamish Hamilton in 1955. The philosophical position described in this chapter is the author's application of Camus's framework to the specific conditions of institutional abandonment.

Epictetus's *Discourses* and *Enchiridion* were recorded by his student Arrian in the early second century CE. The texts establish the distinction between what is “up to us” (eph' hemin) and what is not, which this chapter applies to the conditions of abandonment.

Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* were first published in 1580, with expanded editions in 1588 and posthumously in 1595. The essay form as a technology of self-examination is discussed in this chapter as a parallel to the analytical method of the book itself.

Glossary of Terms

Abandoned in Place: An engineering designation for a structure that has been decommissioned but not removed. Used in this book as the governing metaphor for institutions, relationships, and social contracts whose function has departed while their form remains. The phrase originates in United States military and NASA infrastructure documentation.

Abandonment-as-Education: The concept that abandonment, when experienced early and reinforced institutionally, does not register as a discrete event but as a curriculum, a set of ongoing lessons about the nature of the world that the abandoned person absorbs continuously and applies universally. Contrasted with abandonment-as-event, which treats abandonment as a specific, bounded occurrence that can be processed and overcome.

Appeal to Inevitability: A component of the grammar of leaving in which the act of departure is narrated as the product of impersonal forces (globalization, demographics, fiscal realities, the market) rather than as a decision made by identifiable actors. The appeal transforms the abandoner from an agent into a fellow victim of the same forces, obscuring the distinction between the person who decides and the person who is decided upon.

Avoidant Attachment: One of the insecure attachment styles identified by Mary Ainsworth in the Strange Situation experiment. The avoidantly attached individual appears self-sufficient and unaffected by separation but demonstrates physiological indicators of distress (elevated heart rate, elevated cortisol). Used in this book as a model for the behavioral signature of institutional abandonment at the individual and population levels.

Counter-Abandonment: The act of abandoning something in return, performed by the person who was left as the only available assertion of agency. Examples in this book include the author's refusal of the step-siblings and the broader pattern by which the abandoned decline connection before connection can decline them. Counter-abandonment provides a sense of control but reproduces the original pattern.

Euphemism (as instrument): A component of the grammar of leaving in which the specific language of departure (closing, firing, abandoning, withdrawing) is replaced with language that implies optimization (restructuring, right-sizing, consolidation, modernization). The euphemism

does more than rename the act; it reformats the act as a positive development, converting casualties into inefficiencies and abandonment into progress.

Fellowship of the Left Behind: The form of belonging that emerges among people who share the experience of institutional abandonment. Characterized by honesty, mutual recognition, and the use of the active voice. Distinguished from institutional belonging by its basis in shared wreckage rather than shared aspiration. Examples include recovery communities, veteran solidarity networks, and mutual aid organizations.

Grammar of Leaving: The comprehensive rhetorical system by which an act of abandonment is converted into a condition of the abandoned. Components include the passive voice, the euphemism, the appeal to inevitability, the therapeutic displacement, and the victim-blaming inversion. The grammar operates across every domain of institutional life and is maintained by a distributed apparatus including press releases, think tanks, academic economics, political consulting, and the therapeutic industry.

Interior Country: The self-constructed intellectual and psychological territory built by the abandoned person as an alternative to the external structures that were supposed to sustain and did not. Characterized by self-sufficiency, intellectual richness, and the defensive architecture of the avoidant attachment style. The interior country sustains but also isolates.

Internal Working Model: John Bowlby's term for the set of unconscious expectations about relationships that are established in infancy through interactions with the primary caregiver. The model determines whether the individual expects reliability or abandonment from others and is extremely resistant to revision once established. Used in this book as the mechanism by which early abandonment structures all subsequent institutional encounters.

Narrative of Inevitability: The fully developed rhetorical apparatus that ensures the abandoned do not recognize their abandonment. Includes the press release, the journalistic reproduction, the think tank legitimization, the academic certification, the political translation, and the therapeutic internalization. The narrative's success depends on its invisibility: it is recognized not as propaganda but as common sense.

Passive Voice (as political instrument): The grammatical construction that removes the actor from the sentence, converting "the corporation closed the factory" into "the factory was closed" or "jobs were lost." In the context of abandonment, the passive voice is not a stylistic weakness but a political technology whose function is to prevent the assignment of responsibility.

Propagation Without Malice: The mechanism by which abandonment reproduces itself across generations and domains without requiring conscious intent. The abandoned child declines the step-siblings. The defunded school produces graduates who distrust public institutions. The abandoned worker teaches his children not to trust employers. The pattern replicates through the adaptive logic of the original wound.

Secure Base: John Bowlby's term for the caregiver or caregiving environment that provides the infant with the security necessary for exploration and development. The secure base is characterized by reliable responsiveness: the caregiver is consistently available and attuned to the infant's needs. Used in this book to describe what the institutions documented in Part Two were supposed to provide and did not.

Self-Abandonment: The internalization of the abandoner's logic, in which the abandoned person begins to perform the abandonment on himself. Manifestations include the abandonment of health, relationships, civic participation, ambition, and the expectation that institutions will honor their promises. Self-abandonment is the system's final product: the point at which external maintenance of the abandonment is no longer required.

Sufficient Ground: The philosophical position advanced in the final chapter: that the self, today, and the refusal to pretend constitute a foundation that does not require another person's permission to stand on. Distinguished from therapeutic sufficiency (which accepts the framework of inevitability and manages the damage within it) by its character as a chosen philosophical commitment rather than a reactive coping mechanism.

Therapeutic Displacement: A component of the grammar of leaving in which the abandoned person is instructed to manage his response to the abandonment rather than to challenge the abandonment itself. Common formulations include "move on," "find closure," "let it go," and "practice self-care." The displacement locates the problem in the individual's response rather than in the system's action, completing the grammar's conversion of structural damage into personal pathology.

The Three Elements: The structural components present in every instance of abandonment, from the personal to the civilizational: (1) the one who leaves, (2) the one who is left, and (3) the narrative constructed afterward to make the leaving seem rational or inevitable. Introduced in Chapter 1 and applied consistently throughout the book.

Victim-Blaming Inversion: The final stage of the grammar of leaving, in which the abandoned person adopts the narrative of inevitability as his own self-explanation and attributes the consequences of the abandonment to his own failures. Formulations include “I should have gotten more education,” “I should have adapted,” and “I should have made better choices.” The inversion completes the grammar's circuit by recruiting the abandoned into the project of their own forgetting.

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David Boles is an author, dramatist, editor, publisher, and teacher based in New York City. He has been publishing since 1975 and writing for the web since 1995. He holds an MFA from the Oscar Hammerstein II Center for Theatre Studies at Columbia University and is a member of the Dramatists Guild, the Authors Guild, and PEN America.

His teaching career spans more than three decades and includes appointments at Columbia University, New York University, Rutgers University-Newark, the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Fordham University, and the City University of New York, where he founded the ASL Program at the School of Professional Studies. His subjects have included dramatic literature, directing, acting, theatre theory, public health, English, and American Sign Language.

His theatrical philosophy holds that playwrights must direct their own work, a position he has argued and practiced throughout his career. His web constellation includes Boles.com, BolesBooks.com, BolesBlogs.com, UnitedStage.com, PrairieVoice.com, HumanMeme.com, and ScriptProfessor.com.

He has hosted the Human Meme podcast since 2016, exploring consciousness, human existence, and the mechanisms of perception with what he describes as “mindfulness with teeth.”

He lives in New York City with his wife, Janna Sweenie, a Deaf ASL performer, educator, and co-author, and their two British Shorthair cats, Percy and Lotty.

This is his first book-length work of cultural criticism.

The abandoned person who sees clearly and refuses to pretend is the only honest actor in a room full of institutions that have forgotten what they promised.

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