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Death of a Journalist

Ryan Mark Hubble

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DEATH OF A JOURNALIST

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Ryan Mark Hubble

May 2015

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DEATH OF A JOURNALIST

English

Missouri State University, May 2015

Master of Arts

Ryan Hubble

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to capture through a novel the contradictory feelings of loss and hope the Millennial generation is experiencing as once-great institutions in the U.S., such as print journalism, are overcome by the rapid expansion of an increasingly connected, digital society. My thesis is the first six chapters of my novel, *Death of a Journalist*, and lays the foundation for the conflict between the past and the present the protagonist endures throughout the rest of the work. By focusing on the protagonist's inability to leave his own past and the dying newspaper at which he works, I hope to convey the sense of loss felt by a transitional generation whose job is to shed the weight of the past and usher in a new, modern era. My objective was not to speak for an entire generation, but to add to the discussion of the complex, symbiotic relationship our present and future moments have with our pasts.

KEYWORDS: journalism, past, loss, generation, hope

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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I dedicate this thesis to my family, who have been supportive of my passion since my first story.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FICTION AS A MEANS OF CONNECTING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT	1
DEATH OF A JOURNALIST	16
Chapter 1	16
Chapter 2	32
Chapter 3	54
Chapter 4	77
Chapter 5	86
Chapter 6	101
WORKS CITED	116

FICTION AS A MEANS OF CONNECTING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

Our histories trail behind us as a series of images woven together by threads that some would call fate and others would label as only time itself. Some threads fray and break entirely; others seem to strengthen the longer they become, tethering us to specific moments in the past, either to hold us back or remind of us something important we have learned. And it is these threads, be they fate or time or some symbiosis of the two, which mark our understanding of. It seems impossible not to include the past of a character in a work of fiction, be it an explicit history or a reference through dialogue to an event that occurred before the time of the story or novel, for the past is where our characters were born. It is the job of the writer to carve out the character as he is in that time in the story, but not without first recognizing and exploring the historical material from which the character is being retrieved.

My junior year of college, I was in an upper-level fiction workshop for the first time. I had written three stories by that point, all of them assigned from lower-level creative writing courses. Two had people dying and things blowing up and the world ending, and the other took the idea of star-crossed lovers to an unprecedented level of cliché. The summer before my junior year I spent at home in Quincy, Illinois. I bought a big stack of Hemingway novels and spent the summer reading during the day and fishing every evening, always watching the last flares of purple light trickle down through the stalks of corn in the field bordering the pond down the road. I read *The Sun Also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *In Our Time*, a few works by Peter Capstick who wrote about his life as a professional hunter in Africa, some Fitzgerald, some Steinbeck, and even some of Pound's poetry—which I'm still not sure I understand

entirely. By the end of the summer, I thought I understood what writing was and how to do it. Writing was work about life, not explosions or fantastical dreams. Sure, those things could be in there. But writing, as I saw it, said something about the reality readers lived in. It didn't necessarily add any new information, but was successful in prompting existential, ontological, social, political, and cultural questions never before considered. And all I had to do was write about what I saw in front of me. So, I bought a composition notebook and went to work.

For a long time, I struggled to fit a certain memory of Canada into a story. The memory: my dad and I had gone with some other students and their dads to Quetico National Park, just over the Minnesota border. We'd been in eighth grade. We didn't see another human for six days besides the ten of us in our group. We portaged and canoed all day long, until we could no longer move, struggling by the evening just to pull the canoes out of the water. One day, when things got bad and the whole group was caught out in the middle of a huge lake during a wind storm. I'll never forget how clear the sky was that day. How the wind kept coming. How blue the water looked. And how I knew we were going to tip over and have to swim for it. The waves were angled at us, nearly tipping our canoe every few seconds. But we made it. The whole group did. Something about that day stuck with me, and I wanted to know why exactly, so I started writing out the character in my story. By the time I was done, the story, "An Inescapable Nature," was the best thing I had written. I knew it was going to be published. I read it over and over and couldn't find one thing to change, and, more importantly, I felt like I had learned something about myself in the process of writing it.

Then I sent it to workshop. Some liked the story. Others didn't get it. One older lady said my writing was pretentious. I didn't care. Writing had allowed me to revive my past, place it inside more dramatic circumstances, and go deeper into my own conscious than I had ever done before. I had relived a memory and considered the fear and triumph I had experienced that day on the lake from a new perspective, one that made me feel like I truly understood what had happened.

We had to write four stories for workshop, that semester. I'm pretty sure all of mine took place in nature, attempting to parallel natural forces with social or familial dynamics I perceived I was experiencing. I was young. I didn't have much experience in life, and had spent the majority of my more youthful years outside hunting ducks and geese in the Mississippi River bottoms, or traveling all over the Illinois and Missouri country-sides, fishing every farm pond my dad and I could get access to. That had been life up until this workshop. And I realized too that the reason I had been so affected by writing "An Inescapable Nature" was because I had written it as true to my own life as I could. I had been honest with myself—avoided blowing things up or attempting to create a modern day Romeo and Juliet. By sticking to reality, I felt like I had matured. Like I was viewing the world from a perspective that was perhaps a little more elevated. Not exalted. Not above anyone else in any sociopolitical sense. Just a perch above the world from which I could better glimpse the intricacies of hope, despair, love, fear, loss... all of it. I realized the world was held together by stories. And all that had been needed to see such a thing was the new perspective I had discovered through writing.

Now, if I look behind me, sometimes it feels like I'm staring at a very distant star. I'm not sure what the stack of composition notebooks on my bookshelf really means. I

consider all the carefully-planned stories that never went to workshop, the half-finished ones that seem to run out of road to travel, the drunken ramblings barely legible but which seem to be stressing some great point I can't recall—It's difficult to look at these sometimes and realize I still feel a sense of detachment from the world, a certain disillusionment. Sometimes I wonder if the writing is the cause for this feeling, if I take things too far in stories and expect to be able to turn around and have life be the same as it is on the page: maybe not full of fate or reason, but at least containing, perhaps hidden somewhere within the space between seconds, a greater meaning. That's when the writing feels more like a rabbit-hole than a perch above the earth. I vacillate between the two, feeling like Sisyphus: striving upward only to tumble back down and start the climb all over again.

Similar to life, a work of fiction's meaning is not always clear, if available at all. The past is important to consider in fiction writing because a character's history can provide context for his actions. Knowing something about a character besides what he looks like, what he currently desires, or the relationship trouble he's having, can provide justification for a character's actions. By understanding the historical cause of a character's words or movements, a different perspective can be afforded and greater meaning established, thereby investing the reader in a story much bigger than the one she is reading. In *The Art of the Novel*, 1986, French author Milan Kundera claims that “[o]nly at the end (the end of a love, of a life, of an era) does the past suddenly show itself as a whole and take on a brilliantly clear and finished shape” (56), which is true not only in life, but in fiction as well. As mentioned before, readers don't know from the beginning what the author's intentions are for a work, the real meaning behind the events

in the story, and it is only after carefully reading a work many times and allowing time for the words to be processed in the subconscious that a reader is able, possibly, to derive some greater meaning. By ignoring the pasts of our characters, we miss minute but poignant moments in a character's life, because a reader isn't then allowed to truly grasp a character's motivation. In fiction, the past is a more accurate definition of a character than the present moment. We don't care as much about what characters do as why they do it.

All works of fiction deal with the pasts of its characters in one way or another. However, several works allow the past to take over the present moment in the story. An exploration of the past becomes the story itself. F. Scott. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is perhaps the most famous of these works. Only when Jordan tells Nick about Gatsby's past with Daisy do readers understand why Gatsby throws such lavish parties, and, more importantly, they are introduced to the struggle "against the current" of time driving the events in the novel. Other works, such as *The Shadow of the Wind* (2001) by Carlos Ruiz Zafron, or Harry Musilch's *The Assault* (1982) concern themselves with how the past is still alive and influential in the present. More will be discussed about those two novels later, for there is one work which, upon analysis, depicts the tumultuous relationship of the past and present as truly as can be done in a work of fiction—a work that has had a profound impact on the way I write.

Curzio Malaparte's *Kaputt*, 1944, follows Malaparte, the protagonist of his own novel, as he dines with the aristocracy of the Axis powers, as he walks through the decimated villages on the Ukrainian steppe, as he visits the Jewish ghettos in Poland, and, finally, as he returns to Italy, his homeland, during World War II. In all of his travels,

Malaparte finds himself a man apart, and humanity divided. In the many places he visits, there is one distinction, one common theme across Europe that keeps the continent and its population split: many of those in seats of power wish not to realize the true horrors of the war, wish not to be reminded of the suffering and the devastation their country's actions are causing. Malaparte cannot stand this. While many choose not to recognize the war or to leave the war on the battlefield, this bold journalist seeks to invade the peace of their sheltered lives and remind them of the true destruction taking place outside the walls of their palaces, of the history of violence and destruction they are leaving as their legacies. At every opportunity, he tells stories of the atrocities he has seen during his time on the Eastern Front, forcing those who wish to forget to be reminded of what humanity is doing to itself while at the same time trying to close the gap in a reality divided between the world of the past and the world of the present.

Before beginning the process of distinguishing the two worlds within *Kaputt*, it is necessary to understand what constitutes a fictional world in terms of possible worlds theory. Doing so will help to render a precise list of the constituents within each world, which will allow the two worlds to be defined within identical criteria, avoiding any discrepancies of validity. If one world possesses a particular trait, so, too, must the other world have a similar constituent, or distinctive lack thereof.

In *Heterocosmica*, Doležel identifies three specific “macrostructural” features of every fictional world: the world of states (W(S)), the nature force (NF), and the person (P), giving us the formula for any fictional world: W(P, NF, S) (32). In Doležel's words:

W(S) is a closed, atemporal, Parmenidean realm of stillness and silence... It is the world of eternal ideas and the universe of discourse of classical logic... The N-force, the effective form of the laws of nature, causes specific changes in the

states of the world, called nature events (N-events)... The person is an entity that possesses, in addition to physical properties, mental life... (32)

These are the basic components of a fictional world. W(S) entails the fundamental logical truths held by the universe itself, some of which we do not know, and others we are certainly familiar with. Nature plays a particularly important role, for it brings to the fictional world a dynamism that causes change by means of an “inanimate source” (Doležel 32). Last, the crucial constituent for fiction: the person(s), which introduce both physical and mental aspects to the world. The amalgamation of these three forces renders a fictional world in its most basic state, and it is on this general structure that we will begin to define and interpret the two worlds within “Horses.”

By defining the forces, W(S), NF, and P, in the two worlds, we can build a clear picture of each and see how the two are fundamentally different. We will start where Malaparte does: in the world outside the war. It must be kept in mind that this analysis is attempting to interpret the existence of two fictional worlds within the same novel. Similarities between the two worlds will be inevitable, however, the only notable similarity exists between the worlds of states W(S). *Kaputt* was written during Malaparte's time as an Italian journalist on the Eastern Front (the story of the manuscript in the preface of the novel being almost just as compelling as the novel itself), and was published during the war's end. We can safely assume that the time of the setting in the world outside the war is that of the time during World War II and that both worlds exist in Europe in the early nineteen-forties. Neither transcends reality into a world of complete magic and mysticism, nor does either leave our known universe, let alone early twentieth-century Europe. Therefore, the most basic component of possible worlds theory, the W(S), is the same for both fictional worlds in “Horses.” This is the only

shared trait between the two, and will serve to emphasize their individual natures when the division between them does occur.

Next, the nature force (NF) must be added to our picture of each world. Here lies the first and most severe distinction between the world outside the war and the world of the war. Outside the war, Malaparte is with Prince Eugene in the latter's drawing room in Stockholm. The two are looking out the windows at the sea, and it is here that Malaparte presents a beautiful but troubled picture of the NF of this detached world:

There is something strange in Swedish nature, the same sort of madness that is in the nature of horses... The equine character, the equine madness of the Swedish landscape is revealed not only in the great, solemn, incomparably green trees of the forests but also in the silky gloss of the vistas of water, woods, islands and clouds, in the light and deep airy vistas in which a transparent white lead, warm vermillion, cold blue, damp green and shiny turquoise compose a clear and elusive harmony... it possesses the same elusive tones, the same airy lightness and shine, the same changing gloss that is seen on the coat of a horse fleetly prancing along stretches of grass and leaves in the turmoil of the hunt beneath a gray and pink sky. (19)

The NF of the world outside the war, as represented by the Swedish landscape, is beautiful, but at the same time unsettling. Beneath the “clear and elusive harmony” lies a sense of “madness” and “turmoil,” as if life there is tinged by the chaos of the other world. There is an irrefutable tension in this world, which is representative of the inability of the characters residing there to remain completely apart from the war. Malaparte uses this tension to suggest a sense of inevitability, of the inability to deny the war forever. Still, he, like Prince Eugene and Axel Munthe, take away a sense of comfort and relief from the NF of this world as well, as shown by his description of the first sunset after the long summer: “...those first autumn shadows called [him] back to warmth, to rest, to a feeling of life serene, untainted by the continuous presence of death” (14). The NF of the

world outside the war is one of long-sought peace, but it is also a subtle reminder of the chaos just beyond its boundaries.

Now to the NF of the world of the war, and a most gruesome world it certainly is. To start, the NF in the world of the war is not only radically different from its reality-defying counterpart, but so ubiquitous and so powerful that all of the events which take place in that world are automatically predicated upon it. In the preface of *Kaputt*, “The History of a Manuscript,” found in the original nineteen forty-four Italian publication, Malaparte discusses how treacherous it was to write such a novel during the war under the eyes of a fascist government. He faced many dangers in keeping his manuscripts safe. Yet, he also mentions something else, something that allows us to understand clearly how hellish the world of the war truly was: “So in *Kaputt*, War is destiny. It does not appear on the scene in any other way. War is not so much a protagonist as a spectator, in the same sense that a landscape is a spectator. War is the objective landscape of this book” (3). The war has invaded this world and has become the NF. The destruction this force has inexorably wrought is everywhere in *Kaputt*, but, for the sake of brevity, we will look at one passage describing Malaparte's travels in the Ukrainian steppe in order to gain a clear picture of the NF of the world of the war:

Thick reddish clouds of dust passed low on the horizon like clouds escaping from a fire... And everywhere hung that smell of things rotting, of decomposing matter... The sun seemed to beat down hammer-like on the cast-iron plate of the lagoons... By the roadside, and here and there in the cornfields, were overturned cars, burned trucks, disemboweled armored cars, abandoned guns, all twisted by explosions. But nowhere a man, nothing living, not even a corpse, not even any carrion. For miles and miles around there was only dead iron. Dead bodies of machines, hundreds upon hundreds of miserable steel carcasses. The stench of putrifying iron rose from the fields and the lagoons... even the grass seemed to be permeated with that undefinable, strong and exhilarating smell of gasoline, as if the smell of men and beasts, the smell of trees, of grass and mud was overcome by that odor of gasoline and scorched iron. (37-38)

Malaparte shows that the war has replaced natural life, and that nothing but exploded steel and iron and the “strong and exhilarating smell of gasoline” remains. This broken world is the world of the war, of a time when humanity is consumed by its own depravity and the atrocities of global war.

Finally, the person entity (P) of each world must be added to complete the two worlds. Besides Malaparte, the world outside the war, as far as “Horses” is concerned, is not as populous as its counterpart. Malaparte's stories from the war are, for the majority of the time, narrated for Prince Eugene, but others whom he forces to listen include Axel Munthe, a well-known Swedish physician, and the Italian Princess of Piedmont. What is most important when considering the P of each of these fictional worlds is their ideologies. People add both a physical and a mental aspect to a fictional world, but it is the reality-defying paradigm of the characters in the world outside the war where the division between the two worlds is rooted. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on this aspect and define the mental perspective of those living in the world outside the war. By looking at their situations in the novel, it will become clear what distinguishes the population of the world outside the war from that of the world of the war. To do so, we can remain within the walls of Prince Eugene's drawing room:

In the large room where we stood... there still lingered a languid and discordant echo of Parisian estheticism as it was in those years around 1888, when Prince Eugene had a studio in Paris... Some of his early canvases were hung on the walls... I closed my eyes for a moment; it was really the scent of Provence, the scent of Avignon, of Nîmes, of Arles that I was breathing... (9)

Ironically, the most revealing part of this passage is the way in which it describes all of the memories and the tokens of years long-since passed behind which Prince Eugene has concealed himself. By surrounding himself in a time that predates the war, with all of its

pleasures and memories, he has barricaded himself in the past. He refuses the idea that the war is changing life for good, and instead has chosen to remain in a world it cannot touch. More importantly, what this reveals about the P constituent of the world outside the war is that the people there are deeply troubled by the idea of the war and reject its existence entirely, choosing instead to reside in a world where it does not exist.

While it is true that Prince Eugene does live in the time of the war, he cannot be considered a true representation of the world of the war's P constituent. This is for two reasons: (1) he is not a member of the massive, hate-inspired, ideologically-driven armies of the fascists and the communists, and (2) he does not represent the true victims of the war, the suffering civilians who find their lives completely destroyed. Yet, these reasons serve two purposes. Not only do they reveal why Prince Eugene can only be considered a part of the world outside the war, but they also give us the P constituent of the world of the war in relief. Millions of soldiers and helpless civilians populated the devastated landscape of World War II. Pitiless rulers such as Stalin and Hitler conducted an orchestra of death and chaos, removing all that was human from the continent with their powerful and relentless armies. So, for the sake of this analysis, we will posit these two groups as the P of the world of the war, providing us with the final piece to complete this world.

The world outside of the war is one portrayed through beautiful but tainted Swedish landscapes, where the glorious blues and whites of the North, representative of the tranquility its population is attempting to preserve, cannot fully mask the truth of the reality of the war. It is a world of false purity and rejection; a refusal of the war and a desire to remain in a world it, figuratively, cannot touch. Then we have the chaos that is

the world of the war; death is ubiquitous, and nothing human in nature remains. Colossal armies scar the earth with their impersonal killing machines, hoping to root out all they have deemed impure in Europe, while also destroying the continent itself. Yet, textual evidence alone cannot finalize this split. The division between these two fictional worlds must be accepted as valid by possible worlds theory as well. For this, it is necessary to turn to Marie-Laurie Ryan and the specifics of the divisions of fictional worlds in possible worlds theory outlined in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*:

...one set of values for accessibility relations is not always sufficient to classify a textual world. Narratives may present what Pavel calls a dual or layered ontology. In this case the domain of the actual is split into sharply distinct domains obeying distinct laws, such as the sacred and the profane, the realm of gods and the realm of humans, or the knowable and the unknowable. The lines that divide narrative worlds may be cultural and ideological as well as strictly ontological. (449)

Through possible worlds theory, it becomes clear that there are indeed two separate, co-existing worlds within the greater context of the fictional world that is *Kaputt*.

By distinguishing the world of the past from the world of the present in *Kaputt*, Malaparte is able to comment on not only the atrocities of the war, but also on how we as humans attempt to avoid our pasts, attempting to define ourselves by what we are doing instead of what we have done. Considering, though, that we are truly attached to our pasts, there is no escape; this comes to be the main point of Malaparte's novel. There is no such thing as forgetting.

It is important to remember that the reason we include the past of our characters in our stories is to refresh history, to brighten it with a new coat of paint, hopefully, in the process, not distorting the original story but reinforcing its significance through contemporary applicability. We still read great works like *Kaputt* and *The Great Gatsby*

because even though we don't perhaps relate with Malaparte or Gatsby on a professional level, we empathize with them as human beings in conflict with the past.

I read *Kaputt* my first year of grad-school. But I have been inclined to write about the past ever since I read *The Sun Also Rises* that summer before my first upper-level workshop. There was a tangible emotion between Lady Brett Ashley and Jake that, while subtle on the page, was, to me, the heart of the novel. I saw Jake's angst in his encounters with Brett (scenes in which he wants to run away, the scene on the bed, the scene in which he says he hates her, etc...), his injury both literally and figuratively preventing the past and the present from re-uniting, as symbolic of the entire Lost Generation's inability to find what they were looking for, to return to a wild dream they had once had. It wasn't just the unrequited love that defined Brett and Jake's relationship, but the effect of the past in the present in the novel that interested me. In scenes with Brett and Jake, I could feel those threads of the past pulling the characters back to some other time, even though those moments were never explicitly discussed by the two. Now, it's easy to see why I wanted to write "An Inescapable Nature" so badly: I was looking for a way, like Jake, not to forget, to be able to remember an important moment in my life. And while I've written a number of stories that deal with the past, quite a few about my childhood and many more about past relationships. I learn a little bit more about myself and what writing true and honest work really means. While I've tackled the past in short stories, my exploration into times-gone-by has been most cultivated in my novel, *Death of a Journalist*.

I received a minor in print journalism during my undergraduate career. I was majoring in creative writing and thought that maybe Hemingway and Orwell and all the others were onto something with the whole writer/reporter gig. Even though I never went

into the newspaper business, I'm still fascinated by it. I read newspapers for the same reason I visit Chicago every summer: there's something industrious to it, a watermark of the flourishing past—the early-twentieth century when America was growing and seen as great—traces of that history everywhere. But newspapers are dying, with advertising revenues for American papers declining forty-five percent between 2005 and 2012. I'd had this dream that I was going to be a reporter and then quit and become an author. That I would gain some life experience by working for a newspaper and have more than I could ever want to write about when I was done. I've never set foot in a newsroom as a paid employee, but I felt that dream had been important to me and I wanted to write about it in the way I saw it: as a dream that was fading, replaced by a society and its technology I had not expected to arrive so soon.

By the beginning of the summer of 2014, I had written one draft of *Death of a Journalist* and hated it. I threw the whole thing away and started over. Six months later in October, I had a manuscript I was proud of, even if it was never going to go the presses. In my re-write, I focused on intertwining the novel's two main story lines: the dying newspaper and the protagonist's past romantic relationship. I had known the first time I wrote the novel that the two were necessary for one another, that one could represent the other, but I didn't know how I was supposed to connect them. So I reread *Kaputt*. I went back to that book because of how seamless Malaparte is able to make the transitions from past to present. I adopted his structure of alternating scenes between the past and the present, except that I chose to alternate chapters instead of scenes. I was also interested in how Malaparte allows the past to invade the present and manipulate the characters (we would have never seen Prince Eugene crying had Malaparte not told his about the dead,

frozen Russian soldiers being used as signposts by the Germans (Malaparte 18)). In the same manner, I began to make the past more ubiquitous in my own novel, even in the chapters focused on the present. Like Malaparte, I brought the past to my characters, forcing them to consider it in the present, to remember not only what they had chosen to remember. I also reread *The Great Gatsby*; for the same reason readers want to know why Gatsby throws such extravagant parties, I wanted to know why my protagonist was refusing to leave his job at a dying newspaper. By the end of the second draft of the novel, I was exhausted. But I had dived deeper into my own past and how I felt about the world, and I had learned a great deal about the influence of my own past. The finished manuscript, in the words of Kundera, began to assume a more “clear and finished shape.” The story of my character and his past became a story instead a string of events loosely tied together by threads of history.

In the first creative writing class I ever took, the professor told us the goal of creative writing was to comment on the human experience. I’ve tried to keep that in mind, as I’ve worked through my stories and my novel, like it’s something I’m going to forget if I don’t keep reminding myself of what I’m attempting to do each time I put pen to paper. It is hard, though, to remember a writer’s job isn’t just to entertain, to make someone cry or laugh. Like readers recovering meaning from a text, a writer’s job is to recover their characters from their pasts, to contextualize a character’s actions in history and provide a motive for those actions, so that, hopefully, the reader can understand something more about themselves and their place in time.

DEATH OF A JOURNALIST

Chapter 1

When the train stopped, I was thrown forward into the back of the seat in front of me. I sat on the floor of the Amtrak with no idea where I was, how far I had traveled or how long I still had to go, let alone where I had been going in the first place. I picked myself up off the floor and sat back down. Pools of gold were scattered across the wet pavement of the open-air platform, perhaps the change from the deal with the devil I had just initiated.

There was a long line of people waiting on the platform to board, and as they filed up the stairs and spread through the cars I could feel the restlessness of the train underneath me. It was as if all of the clocks in the world had broken. They were still ticking, but somehow the gears had become jammed, stuck on one obstinate second inside eternity. And while there was no sound from the train, I could feel it pulsing, ticking off the same second over and over, relentless in its effort to strike away that unyielding moment that had stopped everything. The sun came in low and bright underneath the dark, fast-moving clouds, and I was even unsure of what time of day it was.

At the end of the line, several steps back from all of the others, was a man staring at the train. He couldn't have been more than thirty—a year or two older than myself. He was watching something I couldn't see. I looked at the people boarding, but no one was waving good-bye to him. A young woman with blond hair toward the end of the line turned. She smiled at him, the only person left on the platform. Then she gave the conductor her hand and stepped up into the car.

The train jerked and pulled out of the station. The man stood on the platform, his fists clenched at his side. When the tracks turned and headed along an empty, soggy cornfield, I looked back and saw the platform and the man still standing there. I was sure from the way he was standing that he would never move again.

I walked back to the dining car and bought a coffee. The train was noisier now, and I knew there was no chance I would be able to fall back asleep. My watch had broken the night before—I was still hungover—so I asked the man pouring my coffee how far we still had to go. He asked where I was going.

“Quincy.”

“That's the end of the line.”

I told him I knew.

“Another four hours.”

The trip from Chicago to Quincy was a little over five hours. As I walked back to my seat, I didn't know how I was going to survive the next four. Or why I wanted to get back so badly.

The copy of the *Tribune* I had bought at Union Station before leaving was gone. I'd left it in the elastic mesh bag on the back of the seat in front of me. The man across the aisle had the first section spread out before him.

“Mind if I borrow this?” he asked without looking up. “Forgot to pick up one before we left.”

“Little late to ask, isn't it?”

“Probably.” He set the paper down and pulled a silver flask out of his coat pocket. He handed it to me. “Here. Consider it rent. I'll give the paper back in a little bit.”

I took the flask and sat down. I drank some of the coffee, took the lid off, and poured what smelled like cheap bourbon into the cup. The whiskey swirled into the coffee like oil into water. I tasted it—definitely cheap bourbon. After I put the lid back on, I held the flask out over the aisle.

“Keep it,” he said, still not looking up. “I’ve got a whole bottle in my bag.”

“Thanks.”

“Thank *you*.”

The way he said it made me want to beat the hell out of him. I’ve got this temper I’m not proud of. It’s a trait I picked up from my father, along with a number of other things I still consider virtues, like my inability to ever be late for something, whether it’s a party or a meeting, along with an unbearable amount of hope which no amount of cynicism seems capable of routing. But you can’t pick and choose what you inherit, and I was dealing with temper the best I could. After taking a drink of the whiskey and coffee, I didn’t care about the man across the aisle anymore. I leaned back and rested my head against the cold window. There were slanted lines of water spots on the glass where the rain had dried some time before.

What I can only assume was about an hour later, the man returned my paper. He had put all of the sections back in order and refolded it. He tossed it on the seat next to me and stood in the aisle staring at me.

“From Chicago?” he asked.

“No.”

“No, I mean are you coming from Chicago?” It'd been a few hours since I'd had a cigarette, and the question pissed me off. Of course I was coming from Chicago. We were on a train from Chicago.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Business?”

He was still standing in the middle of the aisle.

“Something like that.”

“What do you do?”

“I'm a reporter.”

“Broadcast?”

“Print.”

“Good for you, ha-ha. Good luck with that.” He walked away. I thought about chucking the flask at him, but it was still half-full. I unscrewed the cap and poured more of the bourbon into my now cold coffee.

“Oh. Hi.”

A young woman stood in the aisle where the man had been. She was looking at the flask. Her eyes were a clouded blue. A thick layer of makeup across her face formed a line along the sharp edge of her jaw. My first thought was how generic her face was, how I'd seen that short blond hair and that cute round face with those big eyes and those thin, glistening lips so many times that weekend in the city. But she was still good-looking. What the hell, why not?

I picked up the paper and she took the seat next to me. I poured the rest of the flask into the coffee and handed her the cup. She took a sip and gave it back.

“It's cold,” she said.

“You're a little late.”

“Oh, I don't mind. I was just saying.”

I took a drink and didn't say anything. We sat there for some time, not talking, just passing the styrofoam cup back and forth. A large number of people got off in Peoria—I think. Then the train was quiet, as if there were no other people on board.

“Know what time it is?”

The girl took her phone out of her pocket. “Seven. Do you not own a phone?”

“It's in my bag.”

“Oh. You must not be very important, then.”

“And you?”

“Oh, I'm very important. I just thought everyone was. Isn't that why we all carry these around?”

“I think so. Most studies point to the world ending if we didn't.”

She laughed. “Are you from Chicago?”

“No.”

“What were you doing there?”

“Job interview.”

“On a Sunday?”

“I spent the weekend with some friends.”

“Drinking?”

“How did you know?”

A profligate smile thinned her lips further. It was as if I had suddenly become interesting to her. “You look like hell.”

She took a sip of the coffee and held the cup in both hands in her lap. “I would ask you where you're from,” she went on, “but you and I both know that if you're not from the city it doesn't really matter.”

“And why is that?”

“It just doesn't.”

“And you're from somewhere important?”

“No. Not really. I just came up here to breakup with someone.”

She frowned and I realized she was the woman from the station, the one the man had been staring at. I imagined the poor bastard still standing on the platform. And here she was, drinking whiskey with a stranger on a train that would never turn around. I felt jealous on his behalf.

“That's nice of you,” I said.

“Fuck off.”

“I mean it. At least you took the time to do it in person.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Her chin fell onto her chest. Her finger traced the edge of the cup.

“Well, I was cheating on him. Have been for a while. He still loves me, though. Said he wanted to work things out.”

“And you don't?”

That corrupt smile of hers came back and she lifted her head and looked at me like I was stupid. “Isn't that what everyone wants?” she asked. “Just to be wanted. We don't want to want anything. Just to have someone else want us.”

“That's a harsh way of looking at things.”

“Oh, don't be so naïve. It's the truth.”

I didn't say anything.

“Are you a romantic?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then what's your problem?”

“Tired, I guess.”

There was a heavy jolt underneath and the lights in the car flickered, as the tracks intersected with a narrow gravel road. The lights came back on but went off again a few seconds later and stayed off. I felt the train slowing. I looked out the window and saw that we were in between two empty fields. There was a small ditch on either side of the tracks lined with pin-oaks and tall, dead grasses. The train stopped. I looked out at the fields and imagined the iron wheels of the train sinking deep into the mud.

The conductor's voice came over the speaker, a hollow echo from somewhere far away, like the voice of God reporting a flaw in the universe itself. “Bear with us, folks. It seems we've lost a connection to one of our generators. I'm going to get out and have a look with one of the engineers. Shouldn't take too long. We'll let you know as soon as we can. Thank you for your patience.”

Let us know about what, I thought. I didn't know a damn thing about trains, and I imagined us being stranded there for hours, only a select few actually knowing what was going on, the rest of burdened by our own ignorance and lack of mechanical skills.

The girl put her knee on the seat and looked over the seats around us. She turned both ways and then sat back down. She pulled her hair back and made a short ponytail out of it.

“We'll be here for a while,” she said. “Might as well pass the time.” She put the coffee cup on the floor and started undoing my belt.

I stopped her. “No.”

“What?”

“No.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Yeah.”

“Why? Got a girl?”

She moved closer. She smelled like vanilla and honey. The outline of her small, upturned breasts—no bra—and narrow waist were visible through the almost transparent white shirt she wore. But all I could think about was taking my finger and dragging it through the makeup on her face like frosting on a cake.

“No,” I said. “I don't.”

“Then what the fuck does it matter?”

“C'mon. You just broke up with someone after cheating on him.”

“So? Are you serious, right now?”

“Yes. How about having a little dignity?”

“Go fuck yourself, asshole.” She stood up, grabbed the coffee cup off the ground and drained it in one gulp. She tossed the empty cup on the seat where she had been

sitting and walked away, pushing the man who had stolen my paper aside as they met in the aisle.

“She seemed classy,” he said. “What happened?”

“Go to hell.” I picked up the paper and tried to read it, but it was too dark and the light above my seat would not turn on.

We ended up being stopped in between those empty fields for almost two hours. With the power to the train gone, the heat stopped and the inside of the car grew cold as the sun set. It was fall—mid-October—and as we sat on the tracks, I stared out at the trees on the far edge of the field, the reds and golds blowing in the wind, as if there were a massive brush fire coming up over the horizon. On the other side of the train was the bruised sky of the night. I imagined the confluence of the two somewhere over the train. It had to have been right above us, because I could not see it.

I fell asleep, after a while. I don't know how long I was out, but it could not have been long because when I woke up we were still in between the two fields and the light outside had not changed. The man who had stolen my paper was standing in the aisle, holding a cup of coffee from the dining car in each hand. He offered one to me. I thanked him, and then he sat down next to me. I gave him his empty flask back. He pulled another one out and poured more whiskey into each of our coffees.

“How long have you worked for the *Post*?” he asked.

“Thanks. How'd you know I worked for the *Post*?”

“It's the only paper in Quincy, isn't it? Sort of like this crumbling memorial of days gone by, right?” He laughed. “I'm joking—well, kind of. I used to work there.”

“When?”

“Long time ago.”

I looked at the man. He had a long narrow face that was somehow thin and full at the same time. His eyes looked as if they had once been green, but had faded to gray, veins of color running out from his pupils like lightning trapped inside of a rock. There was some great force weighing him down. I could see it in the way his eyes were narrowed, his head turned down at the smallest angle, so that if you viewed him in profile it would seem he was never looking forward, but was trying to turn his head and see behind him, attempting to catch something that he had been too slow to notice. His hair was black and thin, streaks of white running through it like the foam that rides on top of waves right before they crash. Overall, he seemed too young to have them. As I sat there and talked to him, I couldn't help but get the feeling that even though this man could not have been over forty, his life had already been lived, that he had already suffered and experienced as much as he ever would in this life, and that both his body and mind knew that whatever happened next was simply epilogue.

“How long have you been at the *Post*?”

“Six years.”

“First job out of school?”

“Second.”

“Where did you go?”

“Urbana.”

“I went to Wesleyan. That, too, was a long time ago.” He laughed again. “But, it's nice to hear the paper is still running.”

“Yeah, well, it probably won't be for long. I'm getting the hell out of there as soon as I can.”

“Why's that?”

“Too small of a paper. No money. I wanted to be somewhere different by now.”

“Is that why you were in Chicago?”

“Yeah. I had a job interview with a firm that does PR work for Northwestern Memorial.”

“Sell-out.”

I smiled and took a sip of the coffee. “Self-preservation.”

“Oh, I know. I understand. Do you like reporting, though?”

“Love it. But as much as I'd like to think it's not about the money—.”

“It is about the money. Don't be self-righteous, it won't get you anywhere. Not today, at least. It's not about how hard you work, but how much you're willing to compromise your own integrity.”

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“Is your integrity gone?”

“I lost that even while I was still a fresh reporter, thinking I was out delivering truth and all that fucking nonsense to the public for the greater good.”

He took a drink of his coffee.

“That why you left the *Post*?”

He sighed and smiled at the same time. “No. We could be stuck out here forever, and I still don't think I could tell that story right.” He held out his hand. “Henry Bolinger, by the way.”

“Tom Wilson.”

“Nice to meet you, Tom.”

My curiosity was aroused, but I was still feeling like hell from the weekend—I had been drinking since Friday afternoon and it was now Sunday night—and I didn't bother to ask any deeper questions. Besides, he grew quiet after that and didn't speak for a long time. He just kept staring out the window at the light burning away over the field.

We sat there in silence for some time. Then Henry stood up. “You smoke?” he asked.

“Sure.”

“C'mon.”

I followed him to the front of the car and we went into the small space that connected us to the next car. Through the window I could see the blond girl talking to another guy. She was pulling her hair down from its ponytail. There were very few people left on the train. Henry slid open the door to the outside and poked his head out. But he brought it back in quick and shut the door as quiet as he could.

“They're all working on that side,” he said. He opened the opposite door and jumped out. I looked down the stairs. There was a steep gravel embankment that led to a ditch before the land rose again into the field. I wondered if it was worth it just for a cigarette, but I was tired of sitting on the train. I jumped down.

We sat on the gravel, smoking and watching the bleeding, swirling light play above the empty field as it drained out over the horizon. The cold air felt good and clean, and it woke me from the stupor I had been in on the train.

“Where are you going?” I asked him.

“Quincy. On business.”

“Are you still a journalist?”

“No.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m in business.”

He was quiet, and I was already tired of asking questions. I felt like I could have asked a hundred more and never gotten the answers I needed to fill out his story.

“Business in Quincy?” I asked.

He tossed out his cigarette and lit another one. “I can’t tell you,” he said. “Not right now, anyway. Everything is still under negotiation.”

I didn’t ask anymore. I wanted to know. But his business was his business and it was just the journalist in me wanting to know. I had always thought hearing about other people’s lives would make my own easier, but it never did. It just made things more complicated because I had more than I wanted to compare to my own experiences.

We sat there for a long time, smoking and not saying much. The last flares of purple light trickled down through the trees at the far edge of the field. Behind us, to the west, there were stars following, but neither of us was watching them. Henry sat there, his face blank but his eyes bound to something in front of us I could not see. They never

moved, and the longer we sat there, the more they appeared focused, so that I knew he was watching something.

When the light was all but gone, that afterglow in the sky like a flash from a camera that stays for just a second after the picture has been taken, there was a roar behind us. The train started moving.

“Shit.”

Henry took a long drag of his cigarette and threw it into the ditch. We took off running after the train. He was the first to reach the stairs, the train not moving very fast yet, and he climbed up. He held his hand out and pulled me onto the stairs. But I had only my right foot on the bottom step when the train shifted and picked up speed. I felt myself going backwards. I tried for the handle on the car, but I was already too far away.

I don't remember falling off the train, only the hard, sharp impact of the gravel, as if I had fallen on a bed of nails. Must have tumbled head over heels at least a few times. I was able to stop myself from rolling into the ditch, but by the time I was back on my feet the train was moving too fast. Henry's head was looking out the door of the train. He yelled something, but I could not hear him. I took off running, but it was no use. Soon, the train was gone, and I was left alone on the tracks in the dark.

I stood in the middle of the tracks, catching my breath. I had no idea where I was. My phone was in my bag on the train. There was no other option but to start walking, look for a farmhouse with a phone. All around were empty fields. I went along the tracks, reminding myself they would eventually lead to Quincy and hating Henry to pass the time. I should have just stayed on the damn train and waited. I enjoy solitude and silence, but out there on the tracks it was damn lonely.

Macomb was the next stop. Not a single fucking farmhouse along the way. The train station was the first thing I saw. It sat on the edge of town, mocking me. My mouth was dry, I was out of cigarettes, and I had not eaten since lunch. I jumped up onto the platform from the tracks and went to the ticket booth, but it was closed. The light from a streetlamp shone through the window. The clock above the desk said it was almost ten-thirty. It was a Sunday in a small rural city. Nothing was going to be open except for maybe a gas station.

I started out of the station and picked a street I thought might take me to somewhere I could make a call. I wasn't out of the station parking lot when a car pulled up and honked and flashed its lights at me. The car stopped and the driver's window came down. It was Henry.

“You all right?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“That was a hell of a spill.”

I walked around and got in the car. “Why didn't you tell the conductor to stop?”

“I did. He didn't believe me. Said it was too much of security risk, even if it was true.”

“Did you get my bags?”

He looked at me and then back to the road. “Didn't think of it,” he said. “Sorry. How many did you have?”

“Just one.”

“Call the train company tomorrow. I'm sure they have it.”

“Thanks.”

We stopped at the only gas station open. I felt a hell of a lot better after getting something to drink and eat. Macomb was an hour drive from Quincy. Henry and I didn't say much on the way back.

When he pulled up in front of my apartment, I thanked him again.

“You'll have to let me buy you a drink while you're in town.” I didn't mean to say it. I didn't really want to buy him a drink. I still blamed him for me having fallen off the train and having had to walk for almost three hours.

“Sure, that'd be great. Listen, Tom, were you serious about not wanting to be a journalist anymore?”

“It's not that I don't want to, it's just that I can't stand being *here* anymore. I had a plan after school and I don't want to get stuck here. Kind of feel like I'm in purgatory, you know?” I was tired and felt stupid for saying that after I did. It was impossible for me to say what I really wanted to do. I didn't even know if I would take the job in Chicago if I got it.

“I understand.”

“Why do you ask?”

He shrugged. “Just wondering. I'll get a hold of you before I leave town.”

“Thanks for the ride.”

Henry drove off. I walked up the two flights of stairs to my apartment and found my bed without turning on any of the lights and fell asleep.

I woke up once that night. I had a dream about when my cousins and I were kids and we would attempt to swim to the bottom of the lake at my grandparents' farm. After a while, the water was so murky I couldn't see anything in front of or around me, and the

water became freezing and I prayed to God I was still kicking in the right direction when I felt my face swelling as I started to run out of air. But nothing else happened in the dream. I just kept swimming toward the bottom until I ran out of air and woke up.

Chapter 2

The tolls of the bells of St. Anthony's church washed slowly over the city, as I lay in bed the next morning. Their sound came heavy and sudden, the church only a few blocks away. I got up and saw the early light hanging low and wet, dripping through the fog. The river was blue, but that was a mirage. The river was never blue. It was this muddy, pungent mixture of run-off and filth from all the states north of Quincy, and it only got worse the farther south you went. I had been told when I'd first arrived in Quincy that people came from all over the world to see the Mississippi. I never saw anything grand in it, although I'm sure at one time it had been something to look at it. Quincy had once been a great city on the river. Even Twain had written about it in *Life on the Mississippi*. But that was all gone and over with long before I had arrived.

I got up, dressed, and started to walk to work. I lived downtown in a small apartment above what had once been a furniture store. The place was empty now. I passed a dozen more abandoned, dilapidated buildings, all squeezed together, looking desperate to maintain some form of integrity in a city that had already reached its prime and was now progressing into old age, forgetting the world around it, content with its own functions and people, still thinking itself grand despite the crumbling brick and mortar of the history it was so proud of. I felt like I was walking through a bombed-out and forgotten city on those early mornings when there were still few cars or people out.

Besides being a reporter, I was also national editor, which granted me a reprieve from the mind-numbing county fair stories and having to cover area high-school sports. Sure, all I did was pull stories from the wire, but it kept me from having to interview anyone most of the time.

I entered the lobby of the *Post* and took the stairs up to the newsroom. It was still early and the majority of the few reporters left on staff had yet to show up. I didn't like seeing the newsroom that empty. It made me nervous.

Jimmy stepped off the elevator, a half hour later.

“What the fuck happened to you last night?” he asked.

I had forgotten about Jimmy. He was supposed to pick me up at the train station.

“Shit.”

“I called you.”

“Yeah, I lost my bag. I'll tell you later.”

“How'd the interview go?” he asked.

“Don't know. They said they'd call.”

“When?”

“They didn't say.”

The more I thought about Chicago and the interview, the more I wanted to leave Quincy. There was nothing holding me there except the need for money and a job. I could always go home to Kansas City, I thought. But that was too much of a cliché. Besides, I knew that if I went home I'd be stuck in the same kind of situation, just in a different place. But there was no guarantee that I would ever even hear back from the job in Chicago. Good-paying PR jobs like that heralded thousands of resumes from writers all

across the country, from people who actually had experience doing PR work. My chances were nothing. I had been a reporter for seven years, that was it. No real experience besides print journalism. I didn't even help manage our out-of-date website.

“You ever think we fucked ourselves getting into this job?” I asked Jimmy.

“Ha-ha. All the time, man. All of the fucking time.”

Jimmy went back to his desk, and I walked across the newsroom to Edgar's—our editor-in-chief's—office and knocked on the door frame. Edgar had his .44 out and was wiping it down with a greasy white rag. I could smell the gun oil from across the room. With a flick of his wrist, Edgar closed the wheel and pointed the revolver at me. He'd told me the story of the gun when I'd first been hired at the *Post*. His father had used it to kill Nazis in northern Africa at the start of World War II. When I had asked why he kept it in his desk, Edgar had smiled and said that even though the Nazis were gone there was still a hell of a lot of evil left in the world. Then he'd told some bullshit story about being able to hit a marble at twenty-five yards.

“How's your uncle?” he asked. He opened the wheel and went back to cleaning the chambers.

“Huh?”

“Your uncle. How was he?”

“Oh.” I'd lied to Edgar and said I was taking Friday and the weekend off to see a sick uncle in Chicago—I don't think any of my uncles have ever even visited Chicago. Edgar didn't know about the interview and I couldn't bring myself to tell him I was looking for a new job.

“Better,” I said. “And things here?”

“Oh, you know, they were what they were.” He looked up, still polishing the chambers. “Things'll turn around.”

That's real fucking comforting, I thought. I did feel bad for him. Edgar was sixty-seven. The owner of a century-old family newspaper—a relic in itself—that was doing worse in its fight against time and economics than he was in his battle with hereditary heart-disease and male-pattern baldness. And yet, there was this relentless hope he held, a blind faith in the future and whatever great wonder he thought it might contain. He always looked at me with this smile in his eyes, as if I were the one who was going to turn things around. It made me feel guilty. I just wanted to get the hell out of there. After months of looking, I had no real job prospects and yet was still making enough money to live on. I felt like I was on life support.

“I met someone on the train yesterday,” I said.

“Was she cute?”

“Well, yeah, but she was kind of a whore.”

“That's not always a bad thing.”

“Fair enough. No, I met someone who used to work here.”

Edgar looked up from his gun. “Who?”

“Guy named Henry.”

Edgar leaned back in his chair. “And?”

“Tall, dark hair. Said he used to be a reporter. Henry—.”

“Bolinger. Yeah, I know who he is. What did you think of him?”

I shrugged. “Nice enough, I guess. Came and picked me back up after I fell off the train.”

“You fell off the train?”

“Nevermind.”

“What did he tell you?”

“About what?”

“The paper.”

“Nothing.”

“Why do you want to know about him?”

“I just thought I'd mention it.”

“That all?” Edgar asked. He leaned forward and picked up the gun again.

“Yeah.”

I started to walk out.

“Where you goin'?” Edgar asked.

“To get a cup of coffee.”

“St. Anthony's is celebrating its hundred-year anniversary this week. You know the priest down there, right? Father Munson?”

“Murphy.”

“Whatever. Why don't you see if you can get an interview from him while you're out. How 'bout that? You work and not walk around getting coffee all day and I pay you. How's that sound?”

“Riveting.”

“I always said that when you're a journalist you're on the bleeding edge of time itself.” He snapped the wheel shut and looked down over the barrel. “That's powerful

stuff. When I first started working for the *Daily Mail*—back in, oh, seventy-four, I believe—we had this old boy that worked for us there that—.”

“I’m gonna go.”

“Fine,” Edgar called after me. “Be an ass. Hey. Hey, Tom.”

I stopped and turned around a few feet outside of his door. Edgar had the .44 pointed at me. I heard a rough *click* as he dry-fired the gun. “Don’t forget about that St. Anthony’s story.”

“Sure.”

I found Jimmy sitting on top of my desk with a giant banker’s box next to him.

“I signed for you,” he said. He tore off the envelope taped on top and handed it to me. “Open it.”

“What’s in the box?”

“A bunch of financial records.”

“For what?”

“I didn’t look at them that close.”

“Who brought them?”

“UPS. They came overnight. Jesus, just open the letter already.”

I opened the envelope and pulled out a letter. I recognized the handwriting as Father Murhpy’s from St. Anthony’s. He’d always sent me a Christmas card, along with a long, handwritten letter detailing his missionary travels of that year, any family news—he had a sister out in Wyoming or Washington, I think—how the church itself was doing, and even on occasion his trials with faith. I always wrote him a letter too. Typed them out on a 1920s era Corona typewriter I’d dug out of my grandparents’ basement and

painstakingly cleaned for several hours with gun oil, rubbing alcohol, and q-tips. I never hand-wrote my letters—I could barely read my own notes for stories.

Jimmy read the letter over my shoulder.

Tom,

You and I got to know one another well over the past six years. You are a son to me in ways that transcend religion. I hope that I have been able to provide you with at least some semblance of guidance in the time we have known each other. I trust you more than anyone else I know, so I'm leaving you with this information in the hopes that you will be able to show the truth about what has happened and what I have done. I don't have time to explain everything, but a brief glance at the documents I have sent you will shed light on my sins. I am sorry for what I have done. If you could ever find it in your heart to forgive me, I would be eternally grateful.

Dishonorably yours,

Father Murphy

“Jesus,” Jimmy said. I had forgotten he was behind me. “What the hell does that mean?”

I took the lid off the top of the box. There were hundreds of papers organized by month, going almost six years back.

“I don't know,” I said. I looked back at the letter. “I'll give him a call. Try and find out what he's talking about.”

Aaron—a junior reporter—ran past my desk and stopped at the elevator. He started pressing the down button repeatedly.

“Fuck it, man. Take the stairs.” Greg—one of our photographers—came running with his bag and camera slung over his shoulder.

Aaron bolted from the opening elevator doors and headed toward the stairwell by my desk.

Jimmy caught Aaron by the sleeve. “Where are you guys going?”

“Shooting down at St. Anthony's. Just came across the scanners.”

I locked the letter in my desk and we followed the two of them down the stairs. We ran the whole way to St. Anthony's—seven blocks.

The ambulance had already arrived, by the time we got there, along with one cop who was trying to hold a few spectators back. Two EMTs were kneeling next to a body on the church steps. Blood was dripping down the steps and pooling on the sidewalk.

Another squad car skidded sideways to a stop in the middle of the street. We stepped out next to the car to get a better look at the body. The head was angled down, pointing toward the street. I saw the black cassock and the white collar. A revolver—we would learn from the police report that it was a Smith & Wesson .38—was on the step below the bloody head.

“That him?” Jimmy asked. Greg started taking pictures.

“Yeah,” I said. “That's him.”

The EMTs slipped Father Murphy's body into a black body bag and shoved him into the back of the ambulance. Two more officers had arrived on scene. One took pictures of the steps while the other picked up the .38 and dropped it into a plastic evidence bag. We left when the fire engine arrived to wash away the blood.

Edgar stopped us as we got off the elevator.

“Did you get the church story?” he asked. The .44 was in a holster on his hip.

“Something like that,” I said. “Is that loaded?”

“Want to take a gamble?”

“I’ll pass.”

“Russian roulette is no different than what we do here every day. Hell, we could be finished tomorrow.”

“Comforting.”

I went over to my desk. The box was gone. I looked underneath my desk and everywhere else around it I could. Anna had the desk next to mine.

“Anna.”

“What?” She didn't look up from her desk.

“Anna.”

“What?”

“Anna, look at me. Look, Anna. Yes, look. Great. Look here. See this spot? The one on my desk? This big empty space?”

“Do you have to be a dick about everything?”

“Did you remove something from here?”

“Like what?”

“Like a giant box.”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Fuck off, Tom.”

“Anna, no. Did you see anyone come in and take anything?”

“I don't know. I've been over at Marie's desk all morning.”

“You're not even part of the city beat. What the hell? Did anyone you didn't recognize come into the newsroom today?”

“I don't know, Tom. No. There. Now, fuck off.”

My chest went cold and my neck burned. I ran over to Edgar's office.

“Did you take the box off my desk?”

“The what from where?”

“The box. There was a big banker's box sitting on my desk. Now it's gone. Did you take it?”

“Why the hell would I want your box?”

“God damnit. I need to look at the cameras in the newsroom.”

“It's all outsourced. You'll have to call the company.”

“Who is it?”

Edgar shrugged. “Ask Anna. I think she setup everything with them.”

It took me fifteen minutes to get the name of the company from Anna—we'd slept together once and I didn't think it was a big deal, but she apparently had. I spent another two hours waiting for the company, which was based all the way in St. Louis, to send me the footage. The only camera angle covering my desk was all the way on the other side of the newsroom. All that it caught was the stairwell door opening slightly, Anna walking away from her desk, and an unrecognizable figure emerging from the door and carrying off the box.

“Can you zoom in?” Jimmy asked.

“We're not the C.I.A.,” I said.

“Can't even really see his face.”

The figure on the tape was wearing dark clothes. The only thing noticeable was his light-colored hair, but it could have been blond, gray or white for all I knew.

I walked back over to Edgar's office.

“You ever think about maybe using that damn gun for actual protection once in a while?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Someone stole the box off my desk. It's on the footage. Can't tell who it is, though.”

“What was in the box?”

“A bunch of financial records Father Murphy sent me this morning. I hadn't actually looked at them yet.”

“That the priest who shot himself this morning?”

I nodded.

Edgar sighed. “Well, we can file a police report. Maybe they can get something from the cameras. But I guess you and I know how that'll probably go. It's up to you.”

“I'll deal with it.”

“That's what I thought. Just don't get arrested. I really don't have the money to bail you out again.”

“That's fair.”

I went back to my desk and sat there staring at the space where the box had been.

“What'd he say?” Jimmy asked.

“We can file a police report.”

Jimmy laughed. "What about the letter?"

I had forgotten about the letter. The drawer on my desk was still locked, the letter inside. I read over it a dozen more times, trying to find something to run with. But it was all ambiguous. The box had been the key.

"C'mon," I said.

"Where?"

"We're going back to the church."

We left the *Post* and cut across the small park in the middle of the square and headed up Maine. It was one of my favorite streets to walk along because there were these big oak and elms tree on either side that created a tunnel over the wide road. We passed the old mansions that lined the street on either side, their massive front yards rolling down to the street in long stretches of green. Most of them had been broken down into small apartment buildings.

A priest was standing out on the front steps of the church. His back was to the street and he was staring up at the steeple. He wore all black, and his clothes hung loose on his thin, weak-looking frame. His bald head shined in the sun. He didn't turn around, when he spoke.

"If you're from police, I've already spoken to one of you." Then he mumbled something about "god-less heathens."

"We're reporters," Jimmy said. "From the *Post*."

The priest turned around. It was a bright, clear day in the fall, and as he squinted through the sunlight, an intricate network of wrinkles appeared on his face, as if a magnifying glass had been placed over a map.

“Do you believe in God?” he asked.

“We're reporters,” Jimmy said without hesitating. “We're not supposed to take sides.”

“And when you stop being reporters, then will you believe in God?”

“We don't know what happens next. We're just reporting the news. We're not allowed to predict what might happen.”

“Your national counterparts don't seem to follow that rule.”

“We have integrity—that's almost as good as religion.”

“I suppose it's more than most have,” the priest said. “Although, I think claiming you have integrity might undermine that virtue a little bit.”

“We're full of paradoxes. It's a symptom of our generation.”

“That it is. That it is.”

The smile left the priest's face. He turned back around and looked at the church. Most of the shingles on the roof were peeling back, the effect of the sun and nearly a decade without maintenance. The red bricks of the building were faded, and the mortar was a sullen gray and was crumbling and even missing in some spots. A small circle of stained-glass, rimmed in chipped and flaking white wood, was still intact just below the peak of the roof. There were six tall stained-glass windows on the front of the church, three on each side of the double oak doors. Five more ran down each side. The concrete stairs leading up to the doors were cracked, and one side sagged down into the sidewalk. It was a miserable-looking old building. Its empty height made goosebumps appear on my arms, and I found myself staring and thinking what a waste, ashamed at the same time that the thought had come to mind.

The priest stood for some time in silence. Then he shook his head and stared down at the ground.

“What can I help you gentleman with today?” he asked.

“We're following-up on Father Murphy's suicide,” I said.

“What do you want to know?”

“Why did he do it?”

“Because no one believes in God anymore.”

“Yeah, I can't really put that as the reason.”

“Be a hell of a headline,” Jimmy said.

“And it'd be true,” the priest added.

I didn't say anything. The priest sighed and turned around. “Come in. We can talk.” He went through the front doors.

Father Bauer—that was the priest's name—took me to his office, while Jimmy snapped some photos. By the time we were done, all I had gotten from Father Bauer was that Father Murphy had been declining in mental health over the past few months and that Bauer had urged him to seek professional help.

“What about this?” I slid a copy of Father Murphy's letter—I'd left the original back in my desk—across the desk.

Father Bauer was hesitant to pick up the letter. I had not folded it, so that he could see it was from Father Murphy. I didn't stop staring at him until he picked it up and read it. When he was done, he placed the letter back on his desk and bowed his head.

“I told you: he was going mad. I tried to help him, I really did.”

“In the past two years, seven Catholic schools in Quincy have been consolidated into three. And St. Peter's—whose congregation was much bigger than this one—was forced to close six months ago because they couldn't afford to even pay the energy bill in the summer. The money has been going somewhere.” I started to leave.

“You've got a lot of nerve, you know that?” Father Bauer snapped. “Don't you ever step foot near my church again and accuse me of stealing. I've been a man of God for over fifty years. I've served my time. You have no right to accuse me of anything.”

“I wasn't accusing you. I'm simply trying to get the facts.”

“Are you from Quincy?”

“No.”

“Did you know this church was one of the first churches built in Quincy? It's true. This church was here before the city was even incorporated. You know what'll happen if you print that?” He pointed to the copy of the letter still on his desk. “The city will find some way to turn it against us. They've offered to buy this plot of land from the diocese for the past five years. They want to commercialize downtown. Build a movie theater where the church is now. You print this and that fight is gone and we lose everything.”

“I don't take sides. I'm just writing the story.”

Father Bauer took a step from behind his desk, a shadow blooming on his face like a storm cloud swelling in hot, dense air.

“Of course, you don't,” he said. “You have no reason to. But, you know, this whole not caring business is going to catch up with you and everyone else someday.”

“It's my job to be objective—.”

“That doesn't mean you have to be heartless.” He looked down at the letter.

“Write whatever you want. They're not going to believe you.”

I grabbed my recorder off of his desk, left the copy of the letter, and walked out. I found Jimmy out on the sidewalk smoking a cigarette.

“Did you get it?” he asked.

“Kind of. Cynical old bastard.”

“Can you blame him?”

We crossed the street and started back down Maine. It was beautiful out and there was a good breeze coming down through the trees, filling the air with that clean smell of fall.

Edgar was pissed. Jimmy and I were in his office. He had shut the door and closed the blinds after I had told him about my interview with Father Bauer.

“You have got to be more careful, Tom. I'm serious. You can't just leave things like that lying around. This is a real story. I didn't believe until you went down there. But now I do. And look, you've lost all of the evidence you needed.”

“I didn't lose it. It was stolen.”

“You left it out, like an idiot. This is the kind of shit that happened with that speed-trap story, isn't it?”

“Nobody stole anything from me then.”

“No, but you lost all credibility jumping on that god-damned train.”

“The story still ran.”

“But it didn't have the power it was supposed to have had, Tom. Jesus. You had the whole force by the balls and you blew it.”

“I still have the letter from Father Murphy,” I said. “I'll figure it out.”

“No, you won't. The other priest—what's his name? Bowler?”

“Bauer.”

“Whatever. He's going to come out against you and claim Munson—.”

“Murphy.”

“Sure. He's going to say Murphy was going nuts.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“We can't run this story, Tom. As much as you want to, we can't. There's nothing here. That letter means nothing.” Edgar sat down in his chair. “I'm sorry, Tom. This probably could have been a big story. You can dig around—whatever you want. But we're not running a story without hard proof. And I'd hope both of you would have the balls and the integrity to agree. Now, that's it. Get back to work.”

I wrote the story about Father Murphy's suicide. The one about the church's centennial, too. But I didn't have the satisfaction that always came when I submitted a story. To know my work was going to be in the next day's paper, to see it there—that's why I had stuck with being a journalist. I could see my work, hold it. Know that whatever I wrote one day could influence the events of the next. And all of it was true. No matter how tedious, no matter how boring—the fucking county fair stories I got assigned when I first arrived at the *Post* were hell—none of it mattered. I was writing true stories people wanted to read. That was all I cared about. And hitting the little red “Submit” button on a story had always brought with it a certain sense of accomplishment. But none of the good

feelings came when I submitted the two stories about St. Anthony's. One was a lie, and the other—the one about the centennial—was a cover-up in the form of misdirection. I had failed to write the truth. While I wasn't sure exactly what that was yet, I knew it was right there in front of me in the form of Father Murphy's letter. And yet I couldn't write a damn word of it.

After layout was over, I went back to my desk and searched our archives for past stories about St. Anthony's. Our system was a mess and it took twenty minutes to find just one story. I spent an hour searching the archives, through hundreds of irrelevant stories, but stopped when I saw Henry's by-line. It was a story from almost twenty years ago to the date over St. Anthony's eightieth anniversary. They'd held a parade. There were pictures of floats in front of the church, each one topped by a banner that read a different grade level, of the park full of people—I could see through the bare trees in the grainy photo a marquee for a drug-store on the other side of the park that I had never seen before. In one of the photos I could make out Henry's tall, lanky frame against the backdrop of the crowded street. He was standing next to someone. The two of them were smiling at the camera. There was no caption. But I knew it was Henry. As far as the other man, I had no idea. The longer I stared at the face, the more I began to think it was Edgar. A much younger Edgar. It had to be him. That same short, staunch figure, making him look like a boxer. Thin, dark hair. It was Edgar, all right. I turned around and saw him leaning on the door frame of his office, watching the newsroom empty, the .44 still on his hip. He was shorter. Wider. His thin hair had evaporated and he didn't look like a boxer anymore. Time had been hell on him.

Edgar watched the last of the staff board the elevator. When the doors closed, he turned to me and nodded and went into his office. I wondered what I would look like in twenty years.

Jimmy and I smoked down in the archives after work. Something we did at least once a week. Despite our archaic nature, the *Post* had once had enough money to digitize all of its paper and film archives. This had happened some time before I was there. But it had occurred at my previous paper in Danville, just as I was about to leave, and I remember thinking of the whole process as some sort of great casting-off of a final hope. As if the lifeboats had been lowered and the life-rings were being thrown overboard in a desperate attempt to save those who could not swim (the paper failed two months after I left). At least, I thought then, there will always be a permanent record. Everything is forever in the digital age. We had purchased a server that would back up the files twice any time something new was added. There was no way we could lose all of it. At the time, I had let that thought end there. But now I wondered what would happen when there would be no more electricity, when the world had reached that decrepit point in an inevitable future when nations have fallen and there are only factions, bombed back too far in time to have the technology, the education, or the means with which to power the servers (if they even still exist) upon which our archives are stored.

But there was of course no guarantee that there would ever again be a demand to read them.

Anyway, we used to search around down there, passing a blunt back and forth as we looked through the endless file cabinets of yellowing stories and blurring

photographs. I always preferred to look in the earliest sections from the 1920s, when the paper had first begun. There was something about going as far back as I could. I had the first issue—May 1, 1921—memorized, the picture on the front (the new ferry landing being built on the river), the headline (“Quincians Welcome New Ferry Landing”), etc... I liked to hold it in my hand and know there wasn't another person in this world—barring those in the newsroom upstairs and Jimmy, but he never went that far into the archives, and, honestly, I never saw another person down there in the years I was there—I liked to hold that first issue and know there wasn't another person who could hold it, that I was the only one who had seen it in decades and might be the last to ever do so. On the edge of time, I thought. There is no greater desire.

There was a large service elevator in the corner of the room. I assumed this was where the printed copies had been loaded after coming off the presses and sent up to the street where they were loaded onto trucks to be delivered. The elevator led up to our current loading docks. We got the elevator working once. But then it quit halfway through and we were stuck for almost half an hour, trying to get the heavy wooden door open enough to squeeze back into the basement. The elevator stayed stuck like that, halfway between two floors. But no one ever noticed, so Jimmy and I didn't say anything.

It was dusty and poorly lit down there in the basement. The ceilings were tall and the green paint, which I could almost guarantee to contain lead, was flaking off, shattered pieces of it lying in dusty piles against the walls like the crumbling walls of a castle. That was where the presses used to be housed. Some of the machinery was still there. Once, Jimmy and I tried to turn it on. There was a loud pop after we pressed a button, but nothing ever happened. After that, we kept trying, but I don't think all of the parts were

there; most of the missing or broken ones I was sure were irreplaceable, impossible to find today. So, we busied ourselves with the archives. It was too hot stay down there long. But it provided a safe place to smoke and a passage back into history I never would have been granted otherwise.

We were never looking for anything specific down there, as we followed those fragile pages back in time, those bare threads tied off at an end somewhere far away in another world. However, one night, Jimmy found his grandfather's obituary. He had never met his grandfather. The man had died before Jimmy was born, when his mother had still been a baby. The obituary stated that he had been shot while trying to prevent a robbery at a local liquor store.

“My mother always told me he was a drunk,” Jimmy said.

I looked at him in surprise.

“What? It's true. This proves it. If he wouldn't have been a drunk, he wouldn't have gotten shot. He wouldn't have been at the liquor store in the first place.”

Jimmy folded the copy and shoved it back into the banker's box he had been going through, labeled “1964 (7 of 24).” He put the box back on the shelf, handed me the blunt we had been smoking, and walked far away into another decade. I never said another word about it. And I never looked in that particular box, out of fear of it being brought up again. I thought that being able to do so was a luxury I, or no one else for that matter, was afforded in reality, even though I often wished I had such power.

Smoking down there gave us something to do instead of drinking, and there was never a chance that we would run out of cabinets or boxes to investigate. What's strange is that I'll never forget the smell. As we approached through the service stairwell—the

entrance of which was located in the back of the lobby next to a supply closet—I could feel the air getting heavy, the thick smell of the musty papers coming up the stairs as we walked down into the basement, along a narrow hallway, and through the third door on the right. I loved to stand there and breathe in the rich dust, letting my entire body be filled with that smell I can only compare with the air of an old empty church.

That night, I searched through the boxes from 1994 until I found Henry's story. There was still a hard copy of the paper. I hadn't been expecting to find one. I took the paper over to the work bench and removed the plastic sleeve.

“Whatcha got there?” Jimmy walked over and handed me the blunt.

I flipped to back of the paper. They'd run an entire feature on the parade and the church's anniversary. In the bottom corner of the second page was the photo of the parade with Henry and Edgar.

“Who's that?” Jimmy asked.

“That's the guy I met on the train, and that's Edgar.”

“How do you know?”

“Look.”

He leaned in closer to the photo.

“That's not Edgar. That's the priest we talked to earlier. Father Boomer.”

“Bauer. And, no, that's Edgar. Look. See. It even looks like him.”

“I don't see it.”

“It's Edgar. I'll ask him later.” I folded up the paper and slid it back into the sleeve.

“I bet it's not him.”

“How much?”

“Hundred bucks.”

“Done.”

Jimmy smashed the roach out on the workbench and we left.

“What are you going to do about the letter?” he asked, as we walked home.

“I don't know.”

“You've got to do something.”

“I will.”

But I was high, and I couldn't force myself to care about the letter anymore.

Quincy's politics were as bad as Chicago's: a vast maze only a few overseers could understand and manipulate. I was happy that night wandering through an old memory with a girl from college. We had walked down a similar sidewalk on a similar night. Her eyes had been green and her hair a deep purple and maroon. I don't remember much else.

Chapter 3

Jimmy and I ate lunch at a small cafe down on the square the next afternoon. It was a narrow, dimly-lit space with park benches for seats and old doors for tables. They served wine in stem-less glasses and large plates of multi-colored cheeses you could smell from the next table over. The cafe was full of people in suits from the offices downtown, a large group of old women in red hats and purple clothes, and a few tables with mother's trying to keep their toddlers corralled in their booths. Jimmy and I had a beer each at the bar while we waited for a table, but that led to whiskey and Cokes, and by the time lunch was over, we had each had four or five drinks.

“Who do you think the buyer is?” Jimmy asked. He shoved the last few homemade parmesan potato chips into his mouth and washed them down with the rest of his drink.

“Buyer for what?”

“The paper.”

“I didn't know it was for sale.”

“Edgar said someone was going to buy it.”

“Probably just saying that to make himself feel better.”

“He seemed certain about it.”

“When did he tell you about this?”

“Saturday, when you were gone.”

“He couldn't have been serious.”

“He pulled me aside and told me not to tell anyone else.”

“Are you just fucking with me right now, or are you being serious?”

“I'm serious.”

The waitress came over and took our empty plates away. Jimmy ordered two more whiskey and Cokes.

“He told me he had someone with a lot of money coming in, that the guy wanted to buy us. He was pretty damn happy about it.”

I didn't say anything. I had been at the *Post* for six years, and had only just started looking for a different job in recent months.

“Doesn't matter, though,” Jimmy said. “You'll get that job in Chicago. I'm moving back to Boulder in a few months. Fuck it. It's done. We had our time here, and it's over now.”

The waitress set the two new drinks in front of us but left the empty glasses.

“What if we stayed?” I asked.

Jimmy laughed. He was getting quite drunk. His cheeks were ruddy, and his eyes were beginning to glaze over.

“And you want to tell me Edgar is the most hopeful man there is. Christ, look at yourself. I think you have more hope than anyone. Listen, Tom.” Jimmy took a long drink before continuing. “Listen, I know you have your reasons for staying here, and I stuck it out with you because, well, I believe in that same kind of fight and we've known each other since we were fucking kids, but you gotta get out of here. We've got to get out of here. We were never meant to be here this long. Our time is up. None of that is ever coming back.”

He was approaching a dangerous subject with me and he knew it. But he kept going.

“It's all done and over with, man. Hell, it has been for the past four years. And that's even if we're only talking about the paper.”

“I want to finish this church story.”

“What church story?” Jimmy tried to signal to the waitress for another drink, but she walked past without noticing. “St. Anthony's? There's nothing to it. You don't even know what you really had in the first place. Could've been nothing.”

“It was something. It still is.”

“Well, you don’t have anything to run with.”

“I think Father Bauer was involved. Still is, maybe.”

“Why?”

“Because after he read the letter he looked away from me.”

“Fantastic. I’ll call the police right now.”

Jimmy took a drink and tried again to flag down the waitress.

“Piss off. I’m serious,” I said.

“You got anything else?”

“Not yet. I need to find out who does the accounting for the church.”

He laughed. His eyes were hazy. He looked at the last bit of whiskey in his glass and then back at me.

“And then what? Hm? You’ve got no ground to stand on, Tom. They’re not just going to let you look at their books, especially if they really have been fucked with. Think about it. Is this story even really worth it? You don’t like it here, Tom. You’re miserable. And you know what?” He was starting to yell. The conversation around us softened. “So am I. I’m fucking tired of it here, Tom. I hate it. And I’ve kept my mouth shut for a fucking long time now, but I’m done and it’s time to get the hell out of here.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Then you’re going to be one of those miserable assholes who never gets what he wants because he got caught up on something that, in the grand scheme of things, didn’t matter one goddamn bit.”

“Fuck you, Jimmy.”

The couple at the table next to us looked over.

“Yeah, fuck me. I should have left your ass here a long time ago.” Jimmy finished his drink and got up. He threw a twenty on the table. “I’ll see you at the office.”

I sat there, staring at the still-full drink in front of me. The waitress came over and put the bill on the table. I hadn't asked for it.

Jimmy wasn't in the newsroom when I got back. I made a phone call to the Historic Society and the diocese in Springfield to round-out a follow-up to the church centennial story. At two-thirty, I sent the story to Donnie—he was the city editor, a forty-five year-old short, heavysset man who had worked for the *Post* for twenty-five years and had a wife and three kids at home. I couldn't imagine being in his shoes. I barely made enough to take care of myself. I had no idea how he survived.

After sending the story, I left and crossed the park to city hall. The City Planning Department was on the third floor. I took the stairs and came out right by the door, trying to round the corner and the door at the same time and get by without talking to the secretary.

“He's busy, Tom,” she called after me as I went down the hallway.

“He's expecting me.”

Malcolm Eweling, the assistant director of the planning department, was on the phone when I walked into his office. He looked at me and gave me the finger and turned around in his chair. His office was full of Cubs memorabilia. There was a ball signed by Kerry Wood in a glass case on top of a filing cabinet, a bat signed by Mark Grace in the corner, a few pennants, a blue and red Cubs trashcan, and, high above his desk on the wall, a certified autographed Ernie Banks jersey. He'd worn it in '58, the year he hit his

career-high forty-seven home-runs. Malcolm loved it more than he did his wife, and he would never tell me where he got it. Only that he was still paying for it.

“Fine. Yeah. Sure. I'll talk to you later, Rich.” He hung up. “What do want, Tom?”

“That jersey.”

He turned around and looked at the jersey. My eyes went to his desk.

“I'll give it to you, if you get out of my office.”

There were a few reports from the electrical commission and an envelope from the mayor's office. Nothing much to go off of. Malcolm kept a tidy office.

“Really?”

“Would you really leave?” He turned around. I looked back up.

“I would,” I said.

He laughed. “How 'bout you just leave.”

“I just need to ask you a few questions.”

“For what story?”

“It's off the record. Just between you and me.”

He frowned and motioned for me to close the door. I did so, and then took the seat in front of his desk.

“What do you want to know?”

“Is the city still wanting to buy that lot St. Anthony's is on?”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Word is the mayor is looking to rebuild downtown. Start new. And from what I hear, the city has been offering to buy St. Anthony's for the past five years.”

“There's nothing there. And it's zoned for the church.”

“You could change all that.”

He laughed and leaned back in his chair. His phone rang. “What would we even do with it?”

He went to pick up the phone.

“Build a movie theater.”

His hand stopped. The phone kept ringing. He hit the mute button.

“Who told you that?”

“My source tells me the city has a standing offer of almost a quarter of a million for the land.”

He sighed and tapped his pen on his knee. “Still off the record?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“It's fifty. Not two-hundred and fifty-thousand.”

“And the theater?”

“It's an idea still in the pipeline.”

“So the city wants the land.”

“Between you and me—and I swear to God, Tom, if this shows up in the paper tomorrow I will come over there and I will beat you to death with that baseball bat.”

“It's off the record. I promise.”

“Then, yeah. The city wants it bad. We're trying to buy up as much as we can. The mayor does want to rebuild downtown. Restore the city to the whatever something great—he's got a word for it—it once was. Elections next fall. You know how it is. But you run any of this and I'll deny everything.”

“Restore downtown by destroying everything?”

“I’m just a city planner. I don’t make those decisions. Why do you ask about the church?” He picked up the papers on his desk and slid them into a drawer.

“I need to know the accounting firm for the church.”

His eyes narrowed. “I have no idea.”

“But you do. If the city wants that land so bad, they've done their homework. I just need the accounting firm. No one is ever going to know you gave me the name. It's off the record.”

“What's the story?”

“There's no story. Now, can you help me out or not?”

“Perhaps.”

“What do you want?”

Malcolm looked at the picture of his wife and two daughters he kept on his desk. “My oldest daughter’s seventh birthday is this weekend. I want her picture on the front page of the *Post*.”

“I’ll give you the front page of the national section. Section B.”

“Deal.”

He told me the name of the firm.

“Thanks,” I said. I got up and started to leave.

“I don't know who you are or what you were doing here,” he said, turning to his computer.

Flowers and Hayes was two blocks away on the second floor of the Western Christian Union. I called Anna on the way there and told her to reserve the entire front-page of our section on Saturday for a special story.

The firm was at the end of the hall in a large corner office. I didn't knock and just went in. There were only two desks in the room. An old man sat behind each—they could have been twins. On a leather couch against the opposite wall from the door was a man in a black suit and no tie. It was clear that I had interrupted a conversation by the way all three of them looked at me.

“Can I help you, sir?” one of the twins asked.

“Tom.”

I looked over at the man at couch. He stood up. It was Henry. He looked older. His hair was much more gray than I had remembered, especially after having seen him in the picture from twenty years before. His suit wrinkled—it looked like the same one he had been wearing the night I'd met him.

“What are you doing here?”

“Mr. Flowers and Mr. Hayes are my accountants,” he said, sitting back down. “I just stopped by to say hello. Why are you here?”

“I'm following up on a story.”

“A story led you here?” Mr. Flowers or Mr. Hayes asked.

All three of them were watching me. The two old men sat behind their desks. Their white collars glowing against their pink and purple shirts. Matching blue suits. A thin comb-over of salty hair on each of their heads, swiped in opposite directions so that

both pointed toward the center of the room. Henry had his arm on the back of the couch and his ankle resting on his knee.

“I received a letter from Father Murphy a few days ago. He also sent me a box of records,” I said.

“What kind of records?” the one in the pink shirt asked.

“They looked like financial records.”

“So how can we help you?” the other old man asked. They kept alternating speaking.

“I know you—the two of you do all of the accounting for the church—.”

“Young man, I’m going to stop you there,” the one in the pink shirt said.

“Surely,” the other added, “you can’t expect us to divulge information about our clients.”

“And I don’t know how you came to know that we provided financial services for the church, but I can assume that it was by means that were less than legal, if not entirely unethical.”

“So you’ll forgive us if we seem less than cooperative here.”

“Father Murphy’s letter said that he had sins that needed to be brought to light,” I said.

“Then let God bring them to light.”

“We’re accountants. Not angels.”

“I’m afraid we can’t help you.”

“You’ll be kind enough to show yourself out.”

I looked at Henry, but he didn't move. He just sat there on the couch. I took one of my cards from my wallet and threw it on the floor in the center of the room.

“You'll be kind enough to give me a call if you hear anything about Father Murphy.”

“We can't guarantee it.”

“I didn't think so.”

I turned around and left.

Back at the *Post*, I took the service stairwell up to the roof. The air was light and clean blowing in off the river. On the roof, I had a near-panoramic view of the city, but I always liked to look north, beyond the city where the river moved against the high face of the limestone bluffs, which glowed a heavy orange color in the intense light of the fall afternoon. All of the trees had begun to change, and the plains surrounding the river were an unorganized collage of vibrant reds and yellows with a patchwork of empty fields cut into them. Farther north, the fields took over and consumed the horizon. The wide river moved stoically in between the bluffs and the trees. A string of barges came around the corner to the north, and I imagined all of the different boats that had come around that same corner in the past. The tens of thousands that had rounded the trees and seen the city sitting on the bluffs, or the ones before that would have come and seen nothing and wondered how far the river really went over the land, and those, perhaps the first, who had exalted the power of the river and taken solace in the quiet strength of the dense woodlands on either bank. The barge was coming fast with the current. It slid across the steely, mottled surface of the river and maneuvered in between the concrete pylons of the cable-stayed bridge, and then it went on underneath the older bridge—a rusting mesh of

iron and flaking blue paint—until it slowed on its approach to the lock and dam just south of the city. I wondered what the river would have looked like without the bridges and the dam, the power it must have seemed to possess. I lit a cigarette and watched the water moving against the city, the streets running down off the bluffs to the river's edge, looking like the spokes of a gear the water was no longer strong enough to turn.

By the time I got back to the newsroom, the drunk from lunch was gone and I had remembered lunch with Jimmy and felt awful about it. I went to his desk, but he wasn't there. When I got back to mine, he was sitting on top of it.

“Sorry. I got a little drunk at lunch. Shouldn't have said that stuff,” he said.

“Yeah. I'm sorry, too.”

“I feel like hell. Wanna get a drink after work?”

“Sure.”

“Look who's here,” Jimmy said, nodding in the direction of Edgar's office. All of the blinds were shut on the windows and the door was closed.

“Who is it?”

“The buyer I was telling you about it.”

“I didn't think you were serious.”

“I didn't really believe it myself until he walked in just a few minutes ago.”

“Who is it?”

Jimmy shrugged. “Don't know. Never seen him before. It's just one person, though.”

“That doesn't make any difference.”

“Suppose not. I just always thought if you had enough money to do what he's about to do—I mean, something this stupid—well, you'd have enough money to have an entourage following you or something.”

“Maybe his driver is downstairs.”

“Maybe he needs a driver. Bet it pays better than this job.”

“Yeah, that's just what I want: to drive some old, rich asshole around. I'll stick with what we have now.”

“Told you you had too much hope. Is there really a difference?” Jimmy asked.

I didn't say anything.

“How long have they been in there?” I asked.

“Not long. I gotta get back to work.”

“Yeah, me, too. I have nothing for the national sections yet and it's already three.”

“Not like anyone is going to read them, anyways.”

“Thanks.”

For the next two hours, I worked harder than I had in the past few months. I had nowhere to go with the church story, but there was something about the idea of the paper being bought and being given a second chance. I knew what tended to happen with these kind of deals: the paper was bought, the building was sold, and the staff was reduced to one or two editors. What was once a newspaper would become some minimalist operation that only put out an electronic edition and instituted a pay-wall, overcharging readers for articles that were too general and usually not worth a damn. Unless you were owned by Gannett or some other media corporation—well, that was the only way once-independent newspapers could survive.

The newsroom was busy that day. We had less than twenty people still on staff, our circulation having dropped below fifteen-thousand for the first time in its history the month before. But the few that remained moved quickly and continually, as if running from death itself. Every few minutes, I glanced over at Edgar's office. No one went in or out. At five, Edgar and the mystery man were still in there talking. I sent all of my stories and photos to layout and made my way to the conference room.

Edgar's head appeared in his doorway, as I walked past. He kept the door only cracked. I could not see the mystery man inside.

“Run layout today,” he said. “I'm still finishing some stuff up in here. Can you do that for me?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks, Tom.” He moved his head. I caught a glimpse of the man sitting in one of the chairs in front of Edgar's desk, but couldn't get a good look before the door closed.

After the next day's paper was laid out, I went back to my desk, picked up my bag, and went to grab Jimmy. I was looking forward to another drink and was too hungry to think anymore.

“Did you see who it was?” Jimmy asked, as we headed toward the elevator.

“No.”

We crossed the park and walked up Maine. The streetlamps were on, and most of the stores were closed. There was a hollowness to the city. In the same way I could walk through and see the light from the lamps but not hold it in my hand, I saw the city but was unable to find anything tangible to grasp in it. I felt like I had had something there at one point, but had failed to comprehend what it was, and now all of it was gone. The

news stories still running through my head from that day now seemed as ephemeral as our fleeting shadows as we walked through the lights.

We turned off Maine onto a side street where there were no streetlamps, save for the one on the corner at the opposite end of the block. But it did not provide enough light, and we were guided only by the neon signs of a string of cheap bars advertising cold, flavorless beer and fried foods.

“How was Peter?” Jimmy asked. Peter was an old friend of ours from high school I had stayed with in Chicago.

“Better than most. Makes six figures, has an apartment in Lincoln Square. He drinks more than anyone else I've seen.”

“Even more than you?”

I laughed under my breath. “Sure.”

“Guess we should have just stayed in school and gone all the way and gotten our doctorates.”

“Yeah.”

“It was safe in school. God, we didn't have a worry in the world back then.”

“That was the problem.”

“Do you think we were coddled too much? Do you think that ruined us? I mean, neither of our parents had money—well, in the sense of actually having enough of it—but we didn't have hard childhoods, did we?”

“I think if you have to think about it, or even consider it, then, no, we didn't.”

“Yeah. That's probably true.”

“It was given to us, compared to most people.”

“Hey, I had a job in high-school.”

“You bagged groceries. I'm sure that was very hard for you.”

“You can be a real asshole sometimes, you know that, Tom?” He was being serious. I felt bad about saying it. Jimmy's dad had left before he was born, and his mom had died from cancer when he had been twelve. His life hadn't been easy from the beginning, and it caused me to hold more pity for Jimmy than I did for anyone else I knew. He'd struggled just to make it through high-school, one of those kids who had been too smart for his own good but had lacked structure and had somehow fallen through cracks, lost forever in the plain of normalcy when he could have probably been someone great.

“I'm sorry. C'mon, I'll buy you a drink.”

“You see, that's better. Why can't you be more compassionate all of the time?” He was joking, now. “Let some of that big heart you got come out.”

“Go to hell.”

We started back toward the square.

“I'm serious, Tom. Me, well, I don't have a big heart. I don't care about much at all. That's why I'm still here with you.” He looked at me. “I'm joking. Jesus, don't take things so seriously all of the time. No, but with me, I don't care. Never have. There's no need to. This life is all about having something wonderful and beautiful and then it being taken away. It's easy to see how grand it is. Letting it go and not being a sentimentalist about it all, that's the tricky part.”

“So I'm a sentimentalist, then?”

“No. You don't come off that way. Especially not on the outside. But you've got passion, something I'm not burdened with.”

“And, in the end, what does all that mean?”

“That you'll die a far more tragic death than I will. I'll go peacefully, while you'll fight with everything you have to stay alive in a world the reality of which you've constantly rejected and replaced with your own.”

“So now I'm delusional.”

We stopped in front of The Barley Room, a microbrewery on the southern side of the square.

“Sure, Tom. You're delusional.”

I shrugged. “Sounds better than being coward and never trying for anything greater.”

Jimmy's face changed, the corners of his mouth sinking just enough so that I knew I had hurt him. “You're a real asshole, you know that?”

“I know. I'm sorry. You want that drink now?”

“I want two.”

“Fine.”

The Barley Room was on the ground floor of an old three-story building that had once been a textile factory in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Black plaster ornamented the twenty-foot ceilings inside the former textile factory turned pharmacy turned soda shop turned pharmacy again turned, what it now was, refuge for journalists with two floors of loft apartments above. When you walked in, you were

inundated with that musty, asbestos-flavored smell, a reminder of the one-hundred and ten years the building had survived.

The bar was empty, save for the two people we had gone there to meet. Most of the reporters had stopped coming on weeknights, instead only going for lunch. Now that there weren't many journalists—well, I guess that explained why the place was empty all of the time. But it didn't matter. The Barley Room was owned by the wealthiest lawyer in town, Frank Elem. He didn't care if the bar made a profit or not. He had taken it over, after the previous owners had almost gone bankrupt. It had been a pet-project for his last girlfriend. Frank had been fifty-nine; she had been twenty-four. Surprisingly, she hadn't known a damn thing about the restaurant industry. But she had hired Kevin, a chef without training who could still make the best food in the city. Things at The Barley Room had gone well enough, until Frank and the girl—I have no idea what her name was—broke up. After that, Kevin had convinced Frank to keep it open. It turned enough customers during lunch now to stay open. But at night, it was empty.

Kevin was behind the bar, his forearms leaning on the edge, a cigarette in his left hand. Elena had a half-empty martini glass in front of her, along with several empty shot-glasses.

“Drink up,” Elena said as we walked in. “You're very far behind, and there isn't much left to celebrate. We're running out of excuses to drink.”

“We can drink to the fact that there's nothing left to celebrate,” Jimmy said.

“You don't need a reason to drink. You only need a reason not to drink. It makes more sense that way,” Kevin said.

“You're all nothing but a bunch of pessimists.”

“Realists,” Jimmy said.

“Realists are pessimists in disguise.”

“That's beside the point,” Kevin said. “We have no reason not to drink, and I'm fine with that.”

“How are you supposed to find reasons not to drink, if you're always drunk?”

“I thought that was the point: having as little to do with everything as possible.”

“And then you have nothing.”

“Exactly. And then you have nothing.”

“I think that sounds logical.” Jimmy nodded to Kevin. “The world doesn't like me, and I hate it for that,” he said as he raised his glass, spilling some of the beer Kevin had poured him onto the counter as he did. Kevin produced a towel from underneath the bar and wiped the small puddles up off the copper counter.

“Well then, *see*,” Kevin said to Elena. “He's perfectly justified in drinking. He has nothing.”

“What's the point, then?” she asked.

“Didn't anyone tell you? There isn't one.”

The front door opened. Edgar stopped just inside the doorway, when he saw us, still holding the door open behind him. But before he could say anything, someone pulled the door open farther and came in. It was Henry. He waved when he saw me and the two of them walked up to the bar. Edgar kept his hands in his pockets and would not look at me.

“You can buy me that drink now,” Henry said as they walked up.

“Sure,” I told him. He sat down next to me. Edgar sat on the other side of him. I feared the worst: that Henry had told him about my interview in Chicago. But I wasn't about to bring it up, just in case he hadn't.

“Guess we'll be seeing a lot more of each other,” Henry said. Kevin placed a beer in front of him.

“Oh?”

Henry turned to Edgar. “Am I ruining the surprise?”

Edgar looked straight ahead as he brought his beer to his lips. “He doesn't know.”

“You didn't tell him yet?”

Edgar didn't say anything. Henry turned back to me.

“I'm buying the paper, Tom, investing in the *Post* and trying to keep it going.”

“Why?” It came out all wrong, and I felt like shit after asking it so quick, especially with Edgar and Jimmy sitting right there.

“It's the first paper I worked at, too,” Henry went on. But he stopped and didn't say anything more.

“Well, that's great,” Kevin said. “Here.” He lined up six shot-glasses on the bar and filled them with bourbon. He raised his. “To the *Post*. Glad to see you guys will be sticking around for a little while longer.”

Everyone took their shots. Kevin smiled at me before we took ours.

“Congratulations, Tom.” Something turned inside of my stomach, and I had this feeling of being trapped, as I sat there between Jimmy and Henry. I took my shot. Whatever I had felt went away.

We ended up getting very drunk that night. For a while, I faded out, not thinking about anything, talking but having no idea what I was actually saying or where it was coming from. My mind had left my body to itself and was busy with something else. But whatever it was, it was hidden behind this massive dark wall, as if a curtain had been pulled shut somewhere and I was no longer allowed to see.

By midnight, I had forgotten about whatever it was that had been bothering me. I was happy that Henry was going to buy the newspaper. It meant I still had a job, for a little while at least. I felt guilty about the job interview, like I was abandoning everything before it was truly over, and had only decided to leave because it was the safe and responsible thing to do. That thought made me feel weak, like when I was a kid and had left school early after faking a stomachache, only to be taken home and put to bed, realizing while lying there how pointless it had been to skip. But I had yet to even be offered the job in Chicago—I most likely wasn't going to be—and there was nothing saying I had to take it, even if I did get it. I was still where I thought I wanted to be. I had just been given a second chance. The rest was in my head, and I let it all fall somewhere dark, so that I couldn't see it and didn't have to worry.

Edgar and Henry left a little after midnight. Jimmy, Elena, and I started to help Kevin clean up the bar.

“Fuck it,” Kevin said. “I'll get it in the morning. I just want to go to bed.” He slid all of the shot glasses off the counter into a plastic bin, some of them breaking as they tumbled in. He picked out four that weren't broken, washed them off and set them back on the bar. “Should we have one more before we go?”

We took one more. I set the glass on the bar and heard the front door open. Everything happened very fast, after that point, and I'm still not convinced any of it really happened. But when I turned, I saw Lydia standing in the doorway. There was a guy with her. It was obvious they were both drunk. For a long time—it could have been just mere seconds—nobody said anything. Lydia had this shocked look on her face. Then she and the guy turned and left. The door closed. I didn't bother turning around to see if anyone else had noticed. I could still hear glasses clinking together as they made a pile out of the empty ones. And I didn't turn around to find out if what had just happened had truly happened, or if I was just drunk. I threw it all out of my head, helped the others finish their pile of glasses, and we all left.

Jimmy and I walked Elena home. It was cold out so I gave Elena my jacket. She looked small and charming in it. We stopped in front of her place and she handed it back to me. Jimmy kept walking. He had a tendency not to pay attention to anyone else or forget what he was doing if it got too late and we were too drunk.

“Congratulations about the paper, Tom,” Elena said.

“Thanks.”

“You sure you're fine?”

“Why wouldn't I be?”

“All right, fine. I won't push it.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Tom.”

She went inside and I caught up with Jimmy.

“Think Henry will give us raises?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Really?”

“No.”

“It's bullshit. I haven't had a raise in two years. How's a man supposed to survive without being given raises?” He was very drunk. “That's what's supposed to happen, right? We get jobs, get raises, and keep progressing.”

“Sure.”

“We're not progressing are we, Tom?”

“Depends on your definition of progress, and what you want to progress toward.”

Jimmy shrugged. “Nothing in particular.”

“Then, sure. We're making damn good progress.”

“Good. I thought so.”

Jimmy lived across the hall from me. We went up the stairs and into our apartments in silence. I lay down on my bed but couldn't fall asleep. As drunk as I was, I should have been able to just pass out, but there was still something spinning inside of me, pouring out thoughts like a water wheel. But I couldn't hold a single drop.

It was almost one in the morning. Early, compared to the weekend in Chicago. There had been so much to do in the city. The only time we ever had gone back to Pete's apartment had been to sleep or smoke more weed. We were always walking somewhere new, taking the train into the city, eating outside at a cafe across the street from Grant Park and watching the city move by as we sat there and got drunk, or walking all the way from Pete's place to Montrose Beach where we drank the hoppy beer that was only available at few bars in Chicago. My only plans had been the interview and the museums,

and all of that had been accomplished within the first few hours of my arrival. There was something endless about Chicago, how I felt the old, industrial nature still running through the veins of El tracks splintering out across the city. The constant and dynamic noise of the people shifting as we walked along the sidewalks, like a radio dial crawling across the spectrum. There had been life in Chicago, at least a version of it I had not known before, one that seemed to heave itself up from the trenches of history while still preserving the importance of the past, the very foundations of the city itself. Moving forward while looking back at the same time, that's what I wanted.

I lay there, looking out the window at nothing. Then I remembered Lydia walking into the bar. How no one else had said anything about it. But, God, I did not want all of that in my head again. I closed my eyes and tried not to think. The people in the apartment below me were listening to music. I could feel it coming up through the floor. The song was indistinguishable, but the rhythm was calm and heavy. A slow, crying riff being strung out across a background of blues chords.

Chapter 4

I asked Lydia to have a drink with me before I got ready to leave work on a Friday night my third week in Quincy.

She said no—just a flat, soul-crushing, don't-ever-fucking-talk-to-me-again-no—and walked back to her desk. Ten minutes later, she came and sat on the corner of my desk. I could feel the heat from her leg on my arm. She didn't say anything. Her legs were crossed, the left one rocking like a dying metronome. She just stared at me. I kept cleaning up, trying to ignore her.

“I need a drink,” she said. “It's not a date, though.”

“I have plans,” I said without looking up.

“No, you don't.”

I shrugged.

“You'd like to think you have plans,” she said. “But, we both know that you're new and alone in this hell-hole, and that you have nothing better to do.”

I stood up and slung my bag over my shoulder. “You're a charmer, aren't you?”

“Darling, don't try to be witty. It doesn't work for you.” She got down off my desk. “Let's go.”

“I have plans.”

“*Fuck* your plans.” I watched her walk back to her desk and grab her coat. She was beautiful, I'd give her that. Calm. Austere. Acting like she never gave a damn about anything. She said good-bye to someone I couldn't see and started to walk back over. I had to admit that I'd been sore as hell when she'd said no. I'd waited too long to ask her and had let her build up too far in my head. I'd been turned down plenty of times before, but never I had actually walked away from a defeat like that and proceeded to lament over all I was missing out on. It was strange to consider it all. I'd had to know everything about her, after that.

We went to a small bar that no longer exists a few blocks away from the *Post*. The place was on Front Street, against the river. You could sit on the back patio, which was heated during the winter by tall lamps that looked like miniature streetlights, and smoke and watch the dirty river flow by and the barges coast between the pylons of the bridges, the spotlights from the wheelhouse sweeping over the muddy water in search of the green

buoys marking the sandbars and the main channel as they navigated that ancient and treacherous current. It was a clean place though. The lighting allowed you to see the person across the table from you, as opposed to those dark, dreary clubs and bars where I always felt like I was supposed to be hiding something about myself.

She told me about growing up in Quincy, what her high school days had been like and how much she'd hated everyone she'd gone to school with. She confided in me that she was always trying to avoid someone she might have known from then. That she turned the opposite direction in the store whenever she saw anyone she knew, and that she'd left bars early on Friday and Saturday nights out of fear of being recognized by a group of her former classmates who had never left Quincy.

I asked why.

“Everybody always wants to recall the past. And then they’re sore as hell when it comes back. Saves me the hassle of having to deal with anything already behind me.”

We talked about journalism, and what we thought we'd actually be doing at that point in our lives instead of what we had to do. She told me about wanting to move to Chicago, how she had a friend who lived up there. She told me that being in a big city would give her the anonymity to be the person she wanted to be. That nothing good would ever come from her staying in Quincy. She made me feel behind the curve, like she was forcing me to realize I was at party that had ended hours ago.

Afterward, I walked her back to her car. We stood in the parking lot and talked for some time. It was cold out, but she didn't seem to notice. She was smiling, that abrasive confidence gone. Even her eyes smiling. Her voice sweet and relaxed. The soft glare of the streetlights in the night playing in the shadows of her face as she rocked back and

forth on her heels. I don't remember what we talked about, just that I was forever running back to that moment after it had passed.

She said goodnight, but still stood there in front of me, biting her lower lip. Then she started to walk away. I knew I wouldn't be able to stand the idea of her leaving. I grabbed her elbow and turned her around and went to kiss her. She moved, as I closed my eyes. I stumbled, catching myself right as I was about to fall over. I felt my face flush and turned and saw her eyes smiling, her hand over her mouth as she shook her head.

“I'm so sorry,” she said.

“No. I shouldn't have done that. It was my own damn fault.”

She came closer, her smile moving fully into her eyes, which sparkled in the light from the street. She stopped, when my right foot was in between her own. She locked her wrists behind my neck and looked at me.

“Don't be in such a hurry, darling,” she said. “Life doesn't have as much to offer as you think it does.” Her eyes were still smiling. That was the first time I noticed her perfume. I would find out later it was supposed to be made from cherry blossoms. She sighed, looking at me and shaking her head. Her hands came from behind my neck and reached into my coat. She pulled the lighter and the pack of cigarettes from the inner pocket, lit a cigarette—the paper catching and flaring for a brief moment in the dark—and then dropped them both back into my pocket. She stood there, smoking and looking at me. Then, all at once, the smile was gone from her eyes and the corners of her mouth fell and she looked sad. I knew it was over. That little reserve of hope I'd kept myself from realizing I'd had was gone and I felt the hollow spot where it had been.

“Sorry,” she said. She looked down and then back up at me.

I didn't know it then, but I would later come to understand that she hated the thought of anything that had the chance of keeping her in Quincy. A relationship would have been the worst. She was never able to stand the idea of settling down in the same place where she'd been born. She would fail if she didn't leave and do something else.

She grabbed my face and kissed my left cheek. She took a long drag of the cigarette, placed it in between my lips, and walked away. The starting of her car broke the quiet. I stood there and listened to the soft hum of the engine burrow into the night. Then it was gone. The heavy emptiness of the parking lot settled back around me. I shoved my hands into my coat pockets, keeping the cigarette between my lips, and walked home.

It's impossible to go back to thinking what you thought were normal thoughts, let alone sleep, after leaving the woman you want to be with but can't. I thought about nothing but going back to that parking lot and those minutes before I had tried to kiss her, when it had been just the two of us talking, walking that razor's edge and ignoring it all in the same moment, and I'd had more hope than I did pacing back and forth between the living room and the kitchen in my apartment with a drink, trying to remember exactly how it had been and where it had most likely gone wrong. More than anything else, I thought about it because I didn't want to accept the idea that it was over. It had been nothing, a few drinks—two hours, at most. I wondered if it was her, or if I was just wanting someone because the excitement of a new job was beginning to wear away and I was coming to realize I had nothing else to hold onto in that little shit town. But I really didn't want it to be over. To have been so close, to know that she had at least considered

it—my chest burned and my stomach tightened, when I thought about that smile in her eyes.

I wasn't sitting there long before Jimmy knocked on the door and came in. I poured him a drink. He sat down on the couch, while I resumed pacing. After ten minutes, Jimmy had had enough.

“Stop! You're making *me* nervous. What the hell happened?”

I told him.

“Bummer.” He appeared disappointed by the story and didn't seem to think much of it at all. He pulled a joint from his pack of cigarettes. “Wanna smoke this and then head out? My friend's band is playing at midnight at this bar on the north end, near the college. Might take your mind off everything.”

I gave him an ashtray, but didn't smoke any. I didn't want my mind to leave everything that had happened with Lydia. I was content letting myself wander through that surreal mixture of ecstasy and misery, still feeling her lips on my cheek, still watching her walk away, still wanting to see her but knowing it wouldn't happen, and that making it all the worse.

I told Jimmy I'd go with him. We had another drink and left at a quarter till.

The bar was the first floor of an old apartment building two blocks north of QU. We walked in and paid the five-dollar cover and bought beers at the bar. The ceilings were high and dark. There was a wide bar running down the side with three tall arches carved out of the wood above the mirrors and bottles. The bar was crowded with college students: girls in short skirts, despite the fact that it was cold and windy outside; guys in frats with backward baseball hats on—the carnal apes of our generation; and also the self-

proclaimed intelligentsia of Quincy's immodest youth, those that would only drink beer not advertised on national television. The band playing had their amps turned up so loud you couldn't hear the singer's voice over the excessive whining of the lead guitar and the muddled notes the bass player appeared to be desperately plucking from his instrument.

We drank our beers at a table near the front door, behind the crowd in what felt like the back of the bar. When the band started breaking down and clearing the stage for the last group—Jimmy's friends—we moved up to a table with two girls Jimmy knew.

It was just the two girls and Jimmy and me. Jimmy started talking to the blonde one. And then I understood why I was there. The girl sitting next to me had black hair that was too straight and looked like it was standing up on her shoulders. She wore too much make-up around her already big and dark eyes. She was Hispanic, but I couldn't tell where she was from and didn't care to ask. I didn't want to be there anymore. I was only thinking about Lydia. The earlier part of the night seemed like another life I had led, and all I wanted was to go back to it.

The band started playing the last set of the night. They had a bluesy sound that didn't overwhelm the bar like the last band's had. A few people were moving tables and making room to dance, near the front of the stage. This was the local band everyone had anticipated. We drank two more beers each.

After the fourth song, I was feeling damn miserable. I knew I had let everything with Lydia go too far in my head, even before I had asked her out. I remembered how quickly her smile had left her eyes. But I was trying not to think about it because it was over, and you can never go back to something that is truly over.

Not thinking about it made me feel empty. She was all I wanted to think about. I didn't want to be in that goddamn college bar. I didn't want to be there with the two girls. I wanted no part of the night, save for what had ended two hours before. I hated everything around me.

Jimmy and the blonde walked up to the back of the crowd in front of the stage. The girl with the dark eyes looked at me and smiled.

“Wanna dance?” she asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

I didn't say anything.

“Are you always this big of an asshole?”

I didn't say anything. She finished the rest of her beer in one gulp and left and went to where Jimmy and the blond were standing. I went to the bar and drank another beer. The band was playing a long set. It was already a quarter after one.

By the end of the next song, I was feeling a little better. The lights above the stage flicked over to a deep blue. Jimmy and the blonde were pressed tight against each other and swaying back and forth. The girl with the dark eyes was dancing with a guy who had a curled mustache and wore red suspenders. I went outside and smoked a cigarette. When I came back in, the band was announcing their last two songs. I felt like it would take too much drinking and effort to get anymore more drunk than I was. I stood near the front door where we had started, tired, no longer wanting anything, not even to go home.

Then I saw Lydia dancing with someone near the stage. My stomach clenched like a fist about to hit a brick wall and my heart dropped. She had her head on his chest and

wasn't looking at anything, her eyes wide and empty. The band didn't stop playing, the music fading into the last song. I saw the bassist turn a knob on his amp. A dull hum quivered in the air around my head. The lead guitarist let out a heavy, clumsy riff, and the band's sound drowned out all other noise. And I was numb and over-sensitized at the same time.

Lydia and the man she was dancing with turned. Her eyes came back into focus. She lifted her head from his chest and started through the crowd. When she got to me, she grabbed my shoulders and brought me close, so that I could feel her breath on my neck.

“Don't be mad at me, darling,” she said. “It's not like anybody ever really knows what they want.”

I left Jimmy with the blonde and drove Lydia's car back to my apartment.

The next morning, she kept kissing me in between putting on pieces of clothing. Then she was dressed and said she had to leave. I got up to walk her out, but she pushed me back down and told me it wasn't necessary. Had I been back in college, I wouldn't have thought anything of it. I probably would have been happy she was leaving. But that wasn't true. It's always hard to get over the women you've had sex with, even if you thought you didn't give a damn at the time.

Lydia slipped her feet into her shoes. She kissed me again and walked out of the room. I heard the echo of her steps on the hardwood, but I couldn't tell if they were coming or going. I was worried because I hadn't had a condom. But she hadn't seemed to care. I thought about saying something more about it to her, but then I heard the sound of the front door being unlocked and opening. It slammed shut, and the room was quiet. A

radio somewhere below me was turned off, and I could hear the echoes of the music reverberating in the room.

Chapter 5

As I lay there, thinking about that first night and wondering why it still had such an effect on me, I was watching the shadow of light coming through window and spreading on the far wall. It looked as if a door was being opened. I stared hard, hoping to see what was behind it. The light expanded across the brick wall. Then it all came at once as the sun topped the buildings to the west, and the room was glaring and I could no longer see where the sharp line between the shadows had been. The light filled the room, smothering all of those truths the shadows had seemed to contain.

I got up and dressed, trying to throw it all out of my head, mad that I had even started thinking about it again.

On my walk to work, I took a detour and stopped in front of St. Anthony's church. It was cold that morning. The steeple looked strong and weak at the same time against the high blue sky, as if the remaining strength left in the structure was also killing it. I tried one of the side doors. It was unlocked. The lights in the vestibule were off, but I could see the ones from the chapel coming in under the next set of doors. I pushed one of the doors open, trying to be quiet, and went inside.

It was a big church. There were three large sections of pews in front of a white marble altar. The journalist in me guesstimated a seating capacity of roughly five-hundred, maybe six on Christmas. All of the lights were on, and there was a small, white candle burning on top of a long golden stem in front of each station of the cross, seven on

either side of the church. It was quiet. I had come in through a back corner. The confessional doors were to my left. Several coves of prayer candles were glowing below the pictures of various saints tucked in along the back wall. The ceilings on either side were no more than twenty feet tall, but in the center, they stretched to almost fifty. At the front behind the altar was a twelve-foot crucifix hanging against a backdrop of green marble. Organ pipes were strung out behind it on either side, looking like bronze steps leading to the top of the cross. And while it all felt serene and beautiful, filled with that heavy silence you only find in Catholic churches, there was a feeling of entropy in everything. The edges of the pews were chipped, the wood worn almost to white. Most of the candles in the prayer coves had been burned to stubs. Several stations of the cross were crooked, all of them covered in a thick sheet of gray dust. There was a white cloth over the altar, and even from where I was standing, I could see the yellowing of its fabric around the edges, creeping in like a stain or a cloud rising up and spreading like spilled coffee after it has dried. Even the candles around the podium where I assumed the priest gave his sermon—it had been a long time since I'd been in a church for a service—were low, thick strands of wax crawling over the candleabrams like icicles.

In a pew a few rows ahead of where I was standing, the kneeler was still on the ground. I walked forward, my footsteps echoing like two pieces of sandpaper being rubbed together as my feet moved across the dusty floor. The green leather of the kneeler was cracked, white threads poking out. I lifted the kneeler and put it back against the pew in the next row.

As I walked away, the kneeler fell again, crashing on the hard floor. The echo resounded in the vast empty space for a long time. I stood there for a moment, petrified

by the sound. I turned around and tried to set the kneeler upright again. It fell like a hammer.

“It won't stay up. Half of them are broken. The other half are still all right, but that's just from a lack of use.”

I turned and saw Father Bauer standing at the top of three steps leading up to the altar. He had to shout so I could hear him.

“What are you doing here?”

“Sorry,” I yelled back. The echoes of our voices collided in my head. I realized it was pointless to yell anymore and started toward where the priest was standing. He came down the steps and met me halfway.

“Are you here to accuse me of stealing from own congregation again?”

“Curiosity, I guess,” I said, looking around at the empty pews.

“They're empty because it's a Tuesday,” he said. “Church is usually held on Sundays.”

“Yes, I'm well aware of that.”

“So, then, tell me—Tom, right?”

I nodded.

“Tom, why are you here?”

“I don't know. I was on my way to work, and I just stopped in.”

“I know why you're here.”

“And why's that?”

“It won't do any good for me to tell you. You'll have to figure that one out on your own. It's really not that hard, if you consider everything. You might think I'm just a simple priest.”

“I don't.”

He looked down and shook his head, a small smile on his face noticeable only by the upturned corners of his mouth. “Of course you don't. Anyways,” he said, looking at me again. “I heard your newspaper is being given a second chance.”

“How did you know that?”

“God told me.” He smiled.

“That's a low joke, especially for a priest.”

“Oh, well, excuse me. I didn't realize we weren't allowed to have a sense of humor. And I'd watch critiquing the moral behavior of others when you yourself don't even believe in God.”

“You don't have to believe in God to be moral.”

“No, you'd just like to take credit for the idea when it wasn't yours in the first place.”

“I don't follow.”

“Nevermind.”

“How did you know?”

“I don't have time for another interview. But if you stop by on Sunday morning, maybe I'll have a little bit of time after the ten forty-five service.”

“Sure.”

“You won't come, will you?”

“I can't guarantee it.”

“And yet you still came into this church today seeking answers. Something is obviously on your mind, holding you here.”

“No, there's really not,” I said. “Thanks for your time.” I started back along the pews toward the doors I had come in.

“You were right,” the priest called after me. “You don't have to be a believer to be a moral person. It's just a shame most people aren't either. And I appreciate you not printing that nonsense from Father Murphy's letter. Better to preserve his image as he was: a man of God.”

“The story is not over yet, Father.”

I walked out of the church and headed to work. My phone rang, as soon as I got out onto the sidewalk.

“Is this Tom Wilson?” A woman's soft voice came over the phone. She sounded hopeful, and the melody of just those few words was enough to make me want to find whatever magical place she was calling from and go there, if for nothing more than for a glimpse at the beautiful woman I knew she was.

“It is.”

“Tom, this is Melanie Hutson. I'm Jack Kingsall's assistant.” I had a picture. Melanie—the one I had met—was damn beautiful. Jack Kingsall was the head of the firm I had applied to in Chicago. He had come in during the last five minutes of the interview, but had said nothing. “We were wondering if you had a chance to come up for a second interview.”

“When?”

“As soon as possible. Thursday afternoon is the earliest Mr. Kingsall has. He'd like to interview you personally.”

“I'll be there.”

“Great. We'll set it up for one o'clock. I'll email you your train ticket this morning. That is how you preferred to travel last time, isn't it?”

“Yes.”

“We'd be willing to buy you a plane ticket.”

“I'd prefer the train.”

Her voice dropped and became relaxed, as if she were confiding in me. “I don't blame you. I feel the same. There's something wonderful about riding the train.” I was falling in love with her without even having met her. She resumed her more formal tone. “Your ticket will be in your inbox—now. I'll—We'll see you Thursday, Tom.” She hung up.

I started along the street again. It felt like I had fallen back asleep into a bad dream.

I called Peter—the friend I had stayed with in Chicago over the weekend—and asked to use his couch again. He said that was fine and that he would meet me Thursday when I got into the city. When I hung up, I realized I should have been more excited about going back to Chicago, but there was something preventing me from accessing those sentiments, like seeing a coin at the bottom of a deep clear pond, too deep to reach in one breath.

Edgar and Henry were waiting for me at my desk when I got to the newsroom.

“You're late,” Henry said. There was no emotion on his face.

“I was following up on a story.”

“Oh. Well, good. That's the kind of work I like to see.” There was a faint smile across his face now. I couldn't tell if he had been serious with the late comment or not. But the fact that he had even said it made me want to punch him in the face.

“Do you have a minute?” From the sad look on Edgar's, I knew Henry had told him about my interview in Chicago.

“Sure.”

My heart started beating faster, and I wondered if they were already starting to fire people. I didn't actually have the job in Chicago yet. Still, the thought of not having my job at the *Post*—to be honest, I had probably been too comfortable with Edgar at the helm and had believed a little too much that I was indispensable—now, though, the idea of being let go took out the base of all my previous beliefs. I was ashamed I had become so arrogant, and how obvious it had been.

“We'll talk in my office,” Edgar said. The two of them headed in that direction, and I followed a few steps behind. I tried not to think about being let go. There were a hundred other reasons they could have needed to talk to me. When we got into the office, Edgar closed the door and shut all of the blinds.

“Take a seat,” Edgar said. He sat down in the chair behind his desk. Henry took one of the ones on the other side of the desk, and I took the one next to him.

“How long have you been here, Tom?” Henry asked.

“Six years. Seven in the spring.” I felt like I was already trying to convince them I deserved to keep my job.

“Where did you start?”

“Crime beat.”

“And then?”

“Then I moved to education, then I covered both, then I was promoted to national editor.”

“And what do you do now?”

“National editor, and I write a few city stories every week.” After saying that, I felt like I didn't do anything at all. And I realized, as I sat there, how dispensable my job truly was. I looked at Edgar, but he was staring at something on his desk, his hands folded across his bulging stomach, the skin around his neck looking swollen from the way his head was always turned downward.

Henry sighed, and he and Edgar made eye-contact for a brief second before Edgar looked away again.

“Tom, look—,” Henry began.

“I'd prefer if we just got to the point,” I said. “I have a lot of work to do. And, if I don't, well, I'd like to not be given a goodwill speech about the changing economy and how journalism is evolving. I'm well aware of both and don't need an explanation.”

“Actually, that's the part I'm interested in,” Henry said. “I want to know why you're still here. You're what, twenty-eight, twenty-nine?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Twenty-eight. You went to a good school, are a hell of a writer, based on what Edgar tells me about you, and you could probably go anywhere you wanted and make a hell of a lot more money than you do here.” He paused, as if he expected me to answer. But I kept quiet. I was already tired of the run-around, and I wasn't about to defend

myself and the decisions I had made to a man I barely knew. For a long time, no one said anything. Then Henry gave up.

“Well, anyway, Tom, why you're here doesn't really matter all that much to me—even though I think I know why.” I was getting the urge to hit him again.

I looked at Edgar. He was still staring at something in front of him, but I couldn't see what it was.

“All right,” I said.

“Have you heard back from the job in Chicago?” Henry asked.

Edgar was staring down at his lap.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

A smile pulled at the corners of Henry's mouth, but he restrained himself. I wondered if he was trying to set me up. It was clear he had told Edgar about my interview, but I didn't know what he was getting at. Whether or not he was just testing me in some cruel way or trying to get Edgar to let me go right there.

“You told me on the train that you had a job interview in Chicago, did you not?”

“Chicago was nothing. I took the interview as a favor for a friend. I didn't want him to think I was blowing him off.”

“Have you heard back from them?”

“No.”

That same smile curled up Henry's lips.

“You seem like a bright kid, Tom. Hard to believe someone would pass up hiring you.”

“Is that some fucking joke?”

“No, Tom. No, it's not. I just want to know if this potentially new job of yours has called you back yet. I think as your employer I'm entitled to that much information.”

“You're not.”

“Fine. Then as a friend. As someone who is trying to save this paper, the one you've worked at for the past six years. Jesus, I'm not asking that much.”

“It doesn't matter.”

“It does,” Edgar snapped. He was still staring down into his lap.

I looked at Edgar, hoping he'd look up. When he didn't, I turned back to Henry.

“I have a second interview on Thursday.”

Edgar picked his head up and looked at me. I thought he might cry.

“Will you take it if they offer it to you?” Henry went on.

“I don't know. No.”

“When will you know?”

“I said I don't know. They haven't even offered it to me.”

“But they gave you a second interview. That's got to say something about your prospects.”

“Henry, cut the shit and just tell him,” Edgar said. His voice was rough and dry, as if he hadn't spoken in years.

Henry turned in his chair to face me. “Look, Tom. We want to promote you.”

“I thought we didn't have any money. Now you want to give me a raise?”

“Well, see, that's the thing. We'd promote you, but you'd still be doing what you do now as well.”

I looked at Edgar. “Does he always talk around things like this?”

“I enjoy conversation,” Henry said.

“And I enjoy getting to the point.”

“And yet you can't even make a decision for yourself.”

I stood up. Fists clenched, ready to hit him. He was everything that was wrong with journalism. This idea of streamlining things, a business model centered on the number of clicks on a website instead of the actual stories being produced, devoting more time to an outrageous, misleading headline than the article itself, just to grab someone's attention. He was everything that was wrong with the world. And I felt like beating the hell out of him, if for nothing more than my own satisfaction.

“Sit down, Tom,” Edgar snapped.

“Look, Tom,” Henry went on. “I want this paper to last as much as you do. And while we might have different reasons for that, we both can still admit we want the same thing. Now, I'm not about to go firing everyone and changing the entire face of this paper just to save a few dollars and keep us on life support for a few more months. But a few things will have to change.”

I sat back down, still hesitant and still wanting to hit him.

“Here's my plan: I want to promote you to city editor—you'll keep the national editor position as well. You'll run both beats, getting a small raise in the process.”

“What about Donnie?”

“Some people will have to go. Now, before you get ready to hit me again, just realize that no matter what you do, some people will have to go. This paper simply can't afford to keep even the staff it has now.”

“So Donnie goes, if I accept this?”

“Donnie goes either way,” Edgar said. “He's been here too long. I'd have to pay him too much, if we gave him your position. Trust me, we considered it.”

“He's got three kids and a wife. I'm sure he wouldn't mind taking a cut, if it meant he got to keep his job. I'll go.”

I stood up.

“Even if you leave, Tom, Donnie still loses his job. He and a few other senior staff members simply have to go. They're too large of a percentage of the payroll,” Henry said.

“What about his retirement?”

“Whatever he has in 401(k). I'm sure it'll be enough until he finds another job.”

“You can't just let them go. They've put in more time than I have here. They stand to lose more than I ever could.”

“I can do whatever the hell I want. This is my paper. Now, do you want to be a part of this or not?” Henry's voice was still calm and relaxed, almost charming. He sat back in his chair as if he were in complete control of everything around him and had nothing to worry about. I knew he was testing me, to see if I really would be worth it if I stayed. But for some reason I could not think. I could not hold a thought for even a second.

“Take your interview on Thursday, Tom,” Edgar said. “You can decide after that. We need an answer by next Monday. That should give you enough time.”

“All right.”

“Great,” Henry said, slapping his knee as he got up. He held out his hand to me. I didn't shake it. “I hope you'll stay, Tom. It'd be great working together. Edgar, I'll see

you later. I have a few other things to take care of today. Have fun in Chicago, Tom.” He walked out of the office.

Edgar and I were quiet for some time. The sun had risen in full, by now, and there was a bright glare coming in through the windows behind him.

“This is my fault,” he said. “Shouldn't have let things get this bad.”

“I don't see it that way.”

He chuckled. “Well, thanks, but it's true.”

“What do you think?”

“It's your call, Tom. You didn't create this problem, you inherited it. And I'm sorry, but it's still all on you. Take some time and think about it. I'm sure I don't need to explain the gravity of the situation to you, and what it means for you either way.”

“Why didn't you tell me that Henry was buying the paper when you first knew?”

“Why didn't you tell me about your interview in Chicago?” Edgar sighed and looked back down at his hands, which were still folded in his lap. “I was never going to tell you. I thought you needed to get out of here as soon as you could.”

“And now?”

“I don't know.” He shook his head. “I don't know anything anymore. I'd like to be selfish and say this paper would do a lot better with you here, but I don't know what's kept you here this long and I know it might not be the best move for you.”

“What about Jimmy?”

“We've already talked to him. He knows he'll have a job here as long as he wants it.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing. I think he's waiting for you to decide, to see what you'll do. Not to add any extra pressure or anything,” Edgar smiled.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Just think about it for a little while. I've got some work to do.”

I walked out of his office and went back to my desk. The rest of the day went by quick. Jimmy wasn't around, and I worked through lunch. I stayed late, trying to get ahead on some work, so I wouldn't have as much to worry about on Thursday and Friday.

It was close to nine by the time I left. I said good-bye to Edgar and took a detour through the park on my way home. Halfway through, I stopped and took a seat on a small bench and lit a cigarette.

The whole situation was fucked. That was the only way I could think to put it. Maybe I was just tired. I lit another cigarette.

“Come here often?”

I looked up and saw Lydia walking down the sidewalk. She had on a tight pair of jeans and a thick wool sweater that looked to be blue when she passed underneath the lights lining the sidewalk, but I couldn't tell for sure. I thought she was beautiful.

She sat down. “Tell me your troubles, darling.”

“Don't call me that.”

“Sorry,” she said as she took the cigarette from my hand. “It's a habit. Comes naturally. I don't call anyone else that, you know.”

“Not even your boyfriend?”

“Don't be an ass.”

I took out another cigarette.

“Long day?” she asked.

“Something like that.”

“Heard your paper got bought.”

“Yeah.”

“That's good news. Good for news, too.”

I looked at her.

“Sorry,” she said. “Terrible joke.” She scooted closer, so that I could feel the warmth of her body against mine, even though we weren't touching. “Are you happy?”

“About what?”

“Your paper being bought. It's good, right?”

“I think so. Not really sure.” I looked back toward the *Post*. There was someone walking along the sidewalk and they stopped in front of the *Post*. Even though I could only see their shadow, I knew it was Henry, but I couldn't say why. He went in. I wondered what he was doing at the office so late, but I was too tired to think and couldn't convince myself that I cared.

Lydia's head fell on my shoulder, and she moved so that her whole body was against mine.

“Me neither,” she said.

“What?”

“You said you're not sure. Neither am I.”

“About what?”

“Anything. It's kind of nice, though, not knowing what you have to care about so you don't have to care or think about anything. It's a hell of a lot easier this way.”

“Must be nice.”

She picked her head up and looked at me. “You really are an ass, you know that?”

I kissed her. She held my face in her hands and let me kiss her for a long time.

Then she pulled away.

“Good luck with whatever you're struggling with, darling.” She walked away.

I looked at my watch, but it wasn't there. I tried not to think about my potential new job or Donnie losing his current one, as I sat there. Like Lydia had said: It was a hell of a lot easier that way.

Chapter 6

After that first night with Lydia, I didn't think I was going to see her again except at work. There was something ephemeral that permeated her entire character. A quality so fleeting I never could determine what it was, which made me speculate and want it that much more. And wondering gave birth to certain ideas about her—that her nihilistic tendencies would keep her young forever, and that no matter how long I knew her, I would never be able to know exactly who she was or why I was so drawn to her. All of which cultivated a formidable hope inside of me, one I became chained to as soon as I realized its existence. It was a hope for Lydia, for the future, a hope that everything was going to work out because of her and that I hadn't made the worst decision in my life by getting a degree in journalism and taking a job at a small newspaper in the middle of nowhere. The irony, though, is that kind of hope, that deep and true kind you have for the

women you fall for, the ones who stand for a hell of a lot more in your life than just love, is the same kind that kills you every second you have to hold on to it.

Lydia found me the day after the concert. I was sitting outside of a small bar on the square drinking a Manhattan I remember had been made with too much vermouth and not enough whiskey. I fished the cherry out of the bottom of the glass with a straw and tossed it onto the sidewalk.

I heard her footsteps first. The chair across from me was pulled out, its metal legs scraping on the concrete. Lydia sat down.

“You never stray far, do you?” She looked at me like she was anticipating a specific answer.

“It was quiet here just a moment ago.”

Her face shifted and then she gave up a weak smile. She looked down in her lap like she was praying, and the smoke from her cigarette looked like her prayers streaming up and breaking apart above her head. She went to say something but appeared to decide against it and took a long drag from her cigarette, still looking down at her folded hands. Maybe she had just been sighing.

The waitress came out of the cafe.

“Do you want a drink?” I asked Lydia.

“It's barely eleven.”

I didn't say anything.

“I'm sorry about last night—well, this morning.”

I ordered two whiskey and Cokes. The waitress left. I told Lydia it wasn't a big deal and went to light a cigarette but couldn't find my lighter. She slid hers across the table.

"I had a good time," she said.

The waitress brought the drinks. I finished my Manhattan and handed her the empty glass. Lydia took a drink and then refolded her hands in her lap. She maintained her usual careless poise. But I could tell it was forced. At least that she was fighting something. Whatever it was, I didn't think I was going to like whatever outcome it produced. She looked scared.

I asked her if everything was all right.

She looked at me like she had forgotten I was there.

I asked again.

"Yeah. Why?" She brought the drink up to her lips, looking around as she did so, as if she was being surrounded by something I didn't see. She was making me nervous. The drink was gone by the time she looked back at me.

"Want another?"

She was breathless, and she kept looking behind her at the park across the street. I thought she might have been looking at St. Anthony's. There was a funeral procession lined up in front of the church on the other side of the square. The pallbearers were carrying the casket down the front steps. Lydia watched them the whole time. But when they drove away, she was still staring across the park at the church and I wondered if she had noticed the funeral at all.

“I’ll take another drink,” she said without turning around. “Probably couldn’t hurt.”

I got the waitress’ attention and ordered two more whiskey and Cokes.

Lydia and I sat there not saying anything. She had turned back around and lit another cigarette.

The waitress brought the drinks but left the empty glasses.

I remembered not having a condom the night before and brought it up to Lydia. She choked on her drink and set the glass on the table.

A sparrow flew down from across the street and landed next to the cherry.

“I don’t think one or two drinks will hurt,” she said.

“That’s not what I was getting at.”

“I know.”

“So?”

“What? What do you want, Tom? It’s been—.” She looked at her phone. “It’s been twelve hours, if that. Want me to go pee on a stick now and give you the answer you’re looking for?”

The sparrow started to pick at the cherry, bouncing up and down around it, and flaring its wings.

“Are you worried?”

“Yes, I’m fucking worried. Why the hell wouldn’t I be?”

“Are you on birth—.”

“Please. Shut the fuck up, Tom.”

“I was only asking.”

“No, you weren't. You just wanted to make sure you weren't stuck. That you didn't have anything to worry about so you could leave. There's only one reason you would ask. And it's a selfish one.”

“Can you blame me?”

After a tense standoff, the sparrow picked at the cherry in a violent fashion and then flew away.

“Of course I can blame you, you selfish fuck! Who else would I blame? This is all your fault!” She started to cry. But she took a long drink, drew in a deep breath along with it, and exhaled a slow stream of whiskey-baked air, as if she were emptying her entire body. Her eyes flicked upward at me, her head still pointed down.

“This is your fault,” she repeated. “And it's mine. And it's this city's. And everyone who lives here. It's everyone's fault. It is too easy to feel alone, even when you're at home. Even when you come back to the place where you thought things still might matter, they never do. It's all always one step away. In those next few seconds I'm always falling short of. I'm always brought back here. Like I'm stuck. Like I'll never leave this place because nothing else will matter as much. And yet there is nothing left for me. There is nothing more to see. And just when I realize all of that in the most awful of ways you come along and put one more nail in me, keeping me to this place forever.”

The sparrow had broken open the cherry with its beak. The cherry looked like something dead and bloodied there on the sidewalk.

“So you think there's a chance that—.”

“Oh, go to hell!” She knocked her chair over as she got up. I threw a twenty on the table and caught up with her on the other side of the street. She held her fingers under her eyes to stop her mascara from running.

“It's fine,” she said. “Don't worry about it. I'll take care of it.”

“Wait.”

“Tom, we don't even know for sure and it was one night, so what the hell does it matter? You're making too big of a deal out of this.”

But I could not get the thought out of my head that, maybe, possibly, inside Lydia there was the chance that a life, in the most basic and fundamental form, was beginning to take shape. That she and I had created something together, and that she was just as much a part of me now as I was, potentially, of her.

“Just forget about it,” she said. “I took a Plan B, this morning, which didn't help my sister—she still got pregnant. Just don't worry. If it happens, I'll take care of it. But, for now, Tom, just let it go.”

Lydia started back toward the *Post*.

The waitress came running across the street and said I still owed her seven dollars. I gave her a ten and took the long way around the park.

When I got back to work, I asked Jimmy how long he had ever had to endure a pregnancy scare.

“Three months.”

“Forget it.”

“They know right away,” he said. “Right fucking away. I'm serious.”

“Forget it.”

“Google it,” he called after me.

“Go to hell,” I yelled over my shoulder.

I went back to my desk and started to wait.

The *Post* suffered a round of lay-offs at that time. Jimmy and I were the only two junior reporters to make the cut, besides Lydia, who had been there for two years longer than we had. Three weeks after that afternoon with her outside the bar, I began to break down. I was working seventy hours a week because we were so short-staffed. Lydia had not spoken to me since that afternoon. I don't know how, but I never saw her, except when she was far away at the other end of the newsroom and there was no chance of me catching up to her. I started to drink more. Drinking became the only way I could fall asleep at night.

“E-mail her,” Jimmy said.

I said something to the point that that wasn't the way I wanted to find out I was going to be a dad.

“Maybe she'll text you.”

It came to the point where Lydia was the only subject I was capable of contemplating, let alone considering, in a clear manner. Lydia herself—the woman I knew I could never have, the one who wanted so much to escape from everything, and because of that could stop her and I from being us, together—that was my problem. I didn't know if I actually might have fallen in love with her or if I just wanted her because I couldn't, but I didn't care. The impossibility of it all was what drove me mad. The world

with its seven billion people and infinite possibilities, like neurons and synapses, each thought, each word, each idea nothing more than the product a system forever in flux under its own strength, a perpetual wave-pool, an interminable string of lightning, a train never running out of track. And there I was, a member of the generation that was on the verge of a new age, a digital one where everyone and everything was connected. Yet I hoped for a career in an industry that would be a casualty of this new age I was supposed to be helping usher in, and I wanted the one person it seemed impossible to truly connect to.

I was determined to find her. Ask her about the baby as a means of starting a conversation—not that an unplanned pregnancy was a great way to start things. Had I thought about it twice, I might have taken the whole thing as an omen, a testament to some ill fate that lay ahead, surrounding my thoughts like the night does a train's headlight: nothing to see but the light itself and the fleeting seconds ahead, the next few feet of track.

I stayed late one night after work, hoping to talk to her.

“Want to come downstairs?” Jimmy asked. My desk was in the northeast corner of the newsroom, right next to the stairwell. Jimmy held the door open like he was a doorman at a hotel.

“I can't,” I said. “Have to finish some stuff up.”

He looked toward Lydia's desk. “Bad choice. That's a bad choice.”

“I'll catch up with you later.”

He walked down the stairs whistling, the first few bars of Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto echoing off the concrete walls of the stairwell and through the door,

which had become lodged halfway open. After seeing that Jimmy wasn't going to come back to get the door, I got up and yanked it shut. There was a loud grinding as the bottom of the door scraped across the concrete.

I sat back down at my desk and tried to focus on work. Anything to pass the time. I had yet to see Lydia leave, and I waited in desperate anticipation, my entire life paused, for the sound of her footsteps, the distinguishable, undeniable drum beat that would restore my heart to its normal pulse.

After five more minutes, I said to hell with it. I walked through the newsroom and around the corner to Lydia's desk. She was gone. It felt like every temperature of every day of the year had been compressed into a single wave that now fell through me like the cold burn of hot lead melting through my body.

Marie had the desk next to Lydia's. She had her earphones in and was browsing through pictures of the previous night's SAG awards for the fashion section.

“Marie.”

She didn't move. Her left hand was balled up in a fist and was holding up her chin. Her right hand was on the mouse, and she moved it across the screen as if it were an extension of her arm, a new hand. That blank, endless, deep, and yet so paradoxically shallow, stare at the photos in front of her. A portrait of the modern Thinking Man.

“Marie!” I slammed my fist down on her desk. She jumped so violently her earphones popped out and the mouse slid off the front of her desk.

“Fuck, Tom. Was that necessary?”

She was holding her earphones in her hand. The music was so loud that I could hear it from where I stood at the opposite end of the desk.

“Where's Lydia?”

Marie looked at Lydia's desk and then back at me and shrugged. “Didn't know she left.”

“You're a big help. Thanks.”

“Next time, just tap on my desk, asshole!”

I waved without turning back.

When I got to the lobby, I considered going downstairs and seeing Jimmy. I wanted to. That would have been a distraction, at least. Something that might have made me realize how dramatic I was being about the whole thing. But without knowing why, I went out the front door and started home.

It was late and cold and the whole way home I thought about how easy it was to turn around, go back through the front door, down a flight of stairs, and through another door and smoke with Jimmy. How that would erase all of the steps I had just taken.

Outside the door of my apartment, I stopped again and considered going back. Jimmy would still be there.

I turned the key and went through the door.

All of the lights in my apartment were on and there was the subtle scent of cherry blossoms hanging in the air like an aftertaste. Lydia was sitting on the couch. A glass of scotch in her hand. The bottle on the coffee-table in front of her.

“You shouldn't leave your door unlocked,” she said. “You never know what kind of thieves or murderers could get in.”

“Help yourself,” I said pointing to the bottle.

“I couldn't find a glass for water.”

I grabbed another tumbler from the cabinet in the kitchen, went back into the living room, and poured some of the scotch. It was only after that first sip that I realized I was lost—in every imaginable meaning of the word—as to how Lydia had come to be in my apartment.

“I know how much you make,” she said lifting the bottle by the neck and admiring it in the light. “How do you afford this stuff?”

I was still standing but thought what the hell and took a seat next to her on the couch. She turned to me, folding her right leg underneath of her, and repeated the question.

“I don't—can't, really,” I said. “I eat a lot of hot dogs and ham sandwiches.”

“And dry rye toast for breakfast?”

“Sometimes.”

She laughed. “God, you are an old man. But still. So, no, but be honest: this is a seventy-dollar bottle of scotch. How can you afford to have this just around? You've got another whole bottle in the cabinet.”

“How much did you snoop around?”

She took another sip. Her eyes widened and she smiled. Something hot was placed on the back of my neck and I felt the warmth melting down my back and pooling in my gut.

“Seriously, Tom. Why do you buy this?”

“Because it's good. Because my grandfather taught me that there are few things in this world that are as good as fine whiskey.”

“And your father? What did he teach you?”

That true, honest love was one of those things. That the love he had for my mother would always be better than a glass of the world's finest scotch. Mostly indirectly, of course. But I didn't say any of that.

“The same,” I said.

“You come from a line of drinkers.”

“I know. My mom doesn't let me forget it.”

“That you're fated to be a drunk?”

“That coming from a long line of drinkers doesn't make you an alcoholic. Drinking does.”

“Your mom sounds hopeful.”

“She is.”

We sat in silence sipping scotch. I was done trying to bring anything up. After I had found her in my apartment, I was sure she would talk about it if she wanted to—that was the only reason I could think she would be there. But I also knew that it had been roughly three and a half weeks and that getting her to talk about it might not produce the kind of conversation I wanted to have.

She told me she wasn't pregnant. As much as I didn't want to admit it, my heart dropped a little.

I told her that was good news.

“I thought you'd be happy,” she said.

“I am.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

She said she should leave. I asked if I could walk her home.

“No. Please don't worry about it, darling. There's no need.”

“Are you sure? It's dark out. How far do you have to go?”

“Not far,” she smiled. She put on her coat. She thanked me for the scotch and left before I could say anything else.

I finished my drink, put the two empty glasses in the sink and the bottle back in the cabinet and went to bed.

That night never did end. I lay there, trying not to picture Lydia walking home in the dark. How she probably wanted it that way for some inexplicable reason or another. I pictured a solitary shadow walking with determination down an endless street. The figure never even illuminated under the streetlights she faded in and out of. The flashing light of a camera, but never a true photograph. I saw the shadow as if I were looking over my shoulder. Watching her walk one way while I stumbled in the opposite direction.

I opened my eyes. It was very dark, and I wasn't sure my eyes were open until I rolled over and looked out the window. The streetlights below made it look like a bed of hot coals was glowing down on the street. The foundations of all the buildings burning under the twilight. Turning into molten rock that melted through the earth and took the entire city with it. The fire burning until the next day came and there was the blue-gray air of an ashy morning and everything started new on top of charred bones. My eyes focused on the glow. It reminded me of when I was a kid and how we always went camping with my grandparents on the weekends. I would try to stay up late with my father and grandfather while they drank whiskey and talked about every imaginable thing that had happened to them, me trying to stay up and listen, fighting sleep with heavy

swings of my head like a batter swinging at pitches, staring into the flickering coals of the fire, trying to listen until I was asleep and there was the feeling of me being lifted and falling into the fire and waking up to find that I was being carried to the camper. Falling on the foldout couch and smelling the smoke coming off my hair and clothes like dust. How warm it was under all of those blankets, knowing the cold was just on the other side of those thin aluminum walls and that making it all the warmer. The dead silence and knowing I was going to wake up and the three of us would take the boat out onto the cold, clear lake and we'd have to fish deep because the water was so clear in the fall, and then seeing the green of the bass flashing like emeralds in the crystal water as they struggled on the end of the line over ten feet down. The bass jumping and shattering the frigid water into thousands of diamonds that glinted in the hard, clear light coming from a pale yellow sun hung deep within a high blue sky, so there appeared to be no ceiling to the world at all and it felt like I could reach out and dip my hand into the nothingness of space if I wanted to.

It was still dark, when I woke up. The alarm clock showed 3:07 in blood-red letters that were fuzzy and hard to make out from across the room. I got up and showered and brushed my teeth and made two eggs, coffee and toast for breakfast. Even ironed a shirt for work. It was a quarter to four, by the time I was done. After putting on my jacket, I stepped out into the hall, made sure to lock my door, and went downstairs and outside.

When I reached the park, I turned east and started along the sidewalk toward St. Anthony's. At the next corner, I turned south. Then west. North. Finally east again. I kept this up for some time, my hands stuffed deep in the pockets of my coat, my head burning

through the cold still air. It must have rained because the streets were wet and glistening. I did not remember it raining and wondered how long I had actually been asleep.

Every time I passed the church on my route, I found myself looking at the stained-glass windows on the front of the building. They were dark. The glass a set of deep colors that shined like mix of oil paints. There were six windows. I looked at them consecutively, one on each lap, staring at one, trying to realize the image in the hazy light of the very early morning. Never did I slow down or stop. Never did I focus on but one scene each time. There were images of the Virgin Mary. A man I assumed to be Jesus. Another who was more than likely St. Anthony. And other people I did not recognize. They stood, locked in their respective poses in that delicate glass. The streetlight refracting off the glass like the glint that comes off melting ice in the sun, making it difficult to discern the constituents of each portrait.

I kept walking until I had made out all I could in each frame. By then, it was five. I took a tangential route out of my circuit and headed to work. The light in the sky was the feeble glow of a fluorescent bulb warming up.

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