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I LOVE YOU, GO AWAY (A NOVEL)

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty in the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

By
John Matthew Steinhafel

August 2020

I LOVE YOU, GO AWAY (A NOVEL)

Date Recommended 06/15/2020



Dr. David J. Bell, Director of Thesis



Dr. Tom C. Hunley



Dr. Sandra Hughes

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Dean, Graduate School

Date

For
My dog, Ms. Luna Bear

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Works Cited.....	12
I Love You, Go Away (A Novel).....	13

I LOVE YOU, GO AWAY (A NOVEL)

John Matthew Steinhafel

August 2020

253 Pages

Directed by: Dr. David J. Bell, Dr. Tom C. Hunley, and Dr. Sandra Hughes

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

I Love You, Go Away, a novel set in Milwaukee, tells the story of a twenty-two-year-old nobody, Gabriel Driscoll, who meets and befriends a middle-aged, drug-addicted, recluse actor, Beau Brooks. But less than six months into their friendship Beau commits suicide. At the funeral Gabriel meets a twenty-nine-year-old corporate executive, Michelle, the daughter of Beau's long-time girlfriend. Gabriel and Michelle bond over their mutual grief and quickly strike up a romance. At the same time, Gabriel's semi-estranged mother, Sadie, a recovering heroin addict, reaches out to him in an effort to rebuild their relationship. What follows for Gabriel is a tumultuous journey through love and grief as he struggles to find meaning in life's sufferings.

Introduction

I am a writer of fiction with many literary influences. My novel is similar to those of postmodern authors such as Don DeLillo and David Foster Wallace. At the same time, my novel contains themes, characterization, and a largely understated, detached style reminiscent of writers whose work John Barth calls, “Post-Alcoholic Blue-Collar Minimalist Hyperrealism” (qtd. in Baym 2827), also referred to more simply as “Dirty Realism” (2827). This movement includes writers such as Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, and Richard Ford, among many others. I would also throw in Denis Johnson and Cormac McCarthy, though some aspects of their respective styles differ from those of the Dirty Realists.

A theme that situates my novel as undeniably postmodern is the quest for meaning. The protagonist of my novel fails to find meaning in and/or make sense of the fundamental sufferings of the human condition. Ultimately, the narrative serves as an exploration of nihilism, both on a cultural and personal level. Similar to the works of Wallace and DeLillo, I examine matters of philosophy and, albeit subtlety at times, religion. Perhaps the most prominent theme addressed within is the loneliness and the overall sense of spiritual isolation resulting from cultural nihilism and its consequent personal nihilism—how can one find meaning in his or her life while living within a culture that (collectively) espouses the idea that life is inherently meaningless? My characters suffer from and respond to existential loneliness in very different ways, to varying degrees of success.

Engagement with philosophical questions of existentialism and nihilism is central to the postmodern novel: “Instead of the modernist quest for meaning in a chaotic world,

the postmodern author eschews, often playfully, the possibility of meaning, and the postmodern novel is often a parody of this quest” (Sharma and Chaudhary 189).

Postmodernists reject the notion that there is an inherent meaning to life, and thus, their fiction likewise resists interpretation, resists meaning. Much of the philosophical inquiry contained within enacts this quest for meaning, sometimes sincerely and sometimes parodically. Ultimately, my novel does not provide a clear sense of how to might find meaning; unlike a modernist novel, there is no existential silver lining. Though, I would argue that the narrative is nonetheless spiritually valuable. Although it may not show the reader how to find meaning, it does show the reader how *not* to find meaning, which may be even more valuable than some artificial, existential silver lining. In fact, I believe this is precisely what a great deal of postmodern novels do, whether intentionally or merely by accident.

Another crucial aspect of postmodern fiction is its engagement with paranoia, which appears in my novel as well. Postmodern society does not possess a coherent shared reality or any agreed-upon, objective truths. As a result, the culture at large is paranoid, unable to trust or subscribe to any singular grand narrative. Paranoia results from the slippery nature of truth as well as the overabundance of technology and information. The slippery nature of truth is reflected by means of my novel’s engagement in the types of discussions prevalent in contemporary American politics. For example, a presidential candidate, Ross Gallon, argues the need for an objective, unifying reality in order to eliminate subjective notions of truth and the resultant divisiveness comprising the current political climate. As a result, in perhaps the novel’s most overt form of satire, Ross Gallon argues that humanity’s love for dogs and dogs’ love for humanity together

provide the foundational, objective truth upon which we can rebuild and unify contemporary society. Subsequently, members of the press mock and ridicule him for this idea.

Paranoia likewise appears in my novel's engagement with North Korean nuclearization, and global politics in general. Although my handling of these themes may at times seem fabricated or hyperbolic, they are based in current realities. For example, the missile-alert false alarm is reminiscent of a similar event that occurred in Hawaii in January 2018. Further, this event "simulates" an impending nuclear apocalypse, which underlies another prominent theme in postmodern fiction: the notion that simulated realities and actual reality become increasingly intertwined and indecipherable. The notion of simulated realities also underlies Beau's decision to quit acting—once he becomes aware of the fact that he is, in effect, simulating ordinary life, he is no longer able to decipher where his "real" self (Leonard) begins and where his curated persona (Beau Brooks) ends. As he states, "It's the toughest role I've ever had—being Leonard" (86).

My engagement with simulated realities can also be seen in Gabriel's refusal to use social media, which he despises precisely because it is a simulation, which he believes lacks genuine humanity and thus makes it difficult for him to decipher where a person's true identity begins and where their simulated, projected self ends. In effect, technology simulates and replaces the real. There is likewise a certain level of simulation at play within his fascination for photography. While taking photos, he is more of an observer of reality as opposed to a participant. Relatedly, the postmodern novel seeks to replicate the role that technology plays in our contemporary lives. Postmodern fiction

emulates what life looks like in the information age: “People are inundated with information, technology has become a central focus in many lives, and our understanding of the real is mediated by simulations of the real” (Sharma and Chaudhary 197). The way my narrative incorporates technology is therefore reflective of much of postmodern literature. Podcasts and radio broadcasts, for instance, get their own lines of dialogue the same way that television and film get their own lines of dialogue in DeLillo’s *White Noise*. Accordingly, YouTube videos, films, and photographs viewed by Gabriel likewise receive their own passages of text, the same way film and television viewed by characters become their own passages, and sometimes even entire chapters, in Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. This type of technological presence expands the reader’s experience of the fictive world presented within the written word.

Two more techniques of postmodern literature, which also serve to expand narrative scope, are metafiction and poioumena. In a metanarrative, the reader is made aware of the fact that they are reading a piece of writing. That is, often the characters understand that they are characters, or the text or the characters are self-referencing. Somewhat akin to this is Beau’s biggest struggle, which is to become more than just a character. More broadly, metafiction is often employed “to undermine the authority of the author, for unexpected narrative shifts, to advance a story in a unique way, for emotional distance, or to comment on the act of storytelling” (Sharma and Chaudhary 195). In this sense, metafiction and poioumena are sometimes acts of parody, and therefore go hand-in-hand with the irony so fundamental to the postmodernists, which I will discuss toward the end of this introduction. Metafiction reflects the postmodern world, because, according to the postmodernists, “all human systems operate like language, being self-

reflexive rather than referential systems” (Ermarth). As such, the postmodern novel attempts to imitate this conception of human systems. In my novel, for example, the way the reader learns Beau’s story is through other characters’ acts of storytelling—the sources of Beau’s narrative are limited to flashbacks from Gabriel’s perspective, or Gabriel’s discussions with Michelle, Maloney, and Tug. The novel forces readers to consider how the essence of a person’s life is contained within the stories that get told about that person. Further, the subjective nature of truth is likewise emulated by the multiple, subjective accounts of Beau. Ultimately, the text refuses to provide an “objective” or singular grand narrative of the life of Beau Brooks. Similarly, the way the reader learns of Beau’s narrative—through Gabriel’s narrative—is emblematic of *poioumena*, a specific type of metafiction where the narrative is about the process of its own creation. These types of nuance and literary layering also characterize the postmodern novel’s engagement in intertextual allusions.

Intertextuality and pastiche are two more characteristics of the postmodern novel that likewise appear in my novel. Intertextuality can be “a reference or parallel to another literary work, an extended discussion of a work, or the adoption of a style” (Sharma and Chaudhary 194). Postmodernists are keen to cite other texts in their writing because the philosophy states that contemporary culture does not create anything new, but rather references and combines cultural products and ideas that already exist. My novel makes reference to poets, musicians, photographers, and philosophers, the most prominent of these allusions being to Friedrich Nietzsche, whose ideas express the existential crisis inherent in the West post-Enlightenment—a central theme of my novel. Similarly, the narrative grounds itself in real-life settings. A number of the settings are places the reader

could actually visit, especially the ones mentioned in descriptions of urban exploring; however, some are completely made up. Important to note is the fact that the postmodern notion of a “text” is not necessarily limited to written works but also comprises any and all cultural products. Therefore, real-life locations that hold stature in the metaphorical public square also constitute the postmodern notion of a text. Accordingly, my novel blurs the line between fictional and real-life settings, making “intertextual” references to places that actually exist while also completely fabricating some. Even readers familiar with the noteworthy places referenced within may find it difficult to know where the novel’s representation of the reality of such sites begins and ends. The opening disclaimer, in effect, announces the fictional nature of the writing; however, the fictional nature is simultaneously challenged by frequent intertextual references to real-life cultural products. Such intertextual allusions enhance the verisimilitude of the writing.

Pastiche is also a fundamental element representative of the postmodernist’s sense of intertextuality. The Oxford English Dictionary defines pastiche as “a novel, poem, painting, etc., incorporating several different styles, or made up of parts drawn from a variety of sources” (“pastiche” def. n.1.a.). The reason it is so difficult to clearly define postmodern literature is because it is by its very essence an amalgamation of different genres and literary styles. For example, a work of postmodernism might contain elements of realism, absurdism, science fiction, mystery, et cetera. Sometimes postmodernists pay homage to past styles, and sometimes they parody those styles. Intertextuality and pastiche are two techniques used by the postmodernists to represent the “chaotic, pluralistic, or information-drenched aspects of postmodern society” (Sharma and Chaudhary 194). This is precisely how I use them, refusing to provide readers with a

clear plot, a clear setting, or an immediately-recognizable structure, style, or genre.

The pluralistic, information-based aspect of postmodern society is also reflected in plot structure. The overall structure of a postmodern narrative is often extremely fragmented and nonlinear. Time may “overlap, repeat, or bifurcate into multiple possibilities” (Sharma and Chaudhary 196). This bifurcation can be seen in Gabriel’s multiple accounts of Beau’s moment of suicide as well as the various premonitions of his mother’s death. Ultimately, the novel does not settle on one interpretation of these key events. In postmodern novels plotlines are often dropped and then returned to later on, or just dropped entirely. As a result, there is seldom a cohesive plot extending throughout the work as a whole, and if there is, it is often quite difficult for readers to notice or find without doing a lot of work. The point of such fragmentation is, again, to eschew the idea of a grand narrative. In composing fragmented narratives, postmodernists purposefully undermine their own authorial authority. Although much of my novel’s underlying structure is, at least in terms of the current timeline, linear, it does not really accumulate into a clear, overarching plot, at least not in a traditional sense. If there is one overarching plot, it is fairly abstract in nature, focusing on Gabriel’s search for meaning. Although he does advance “linearly,” in this quest, his progress does not depend on cause-and-effect relationships but instead develops nonsensically and randomly with moments of epiphany followed by moments of regression. That is, if and when he undergoes a transformation, it is one that occurs randomly and almost immediately disintegrates.

The sections of flashback, which at times seem to progress linearly, also underlie Gabriel’s haphazard transformations. Flashbacks are in present tense, which reflects the chaotic nature of time’s passing: memories, which are, in effect, simulations of a past

reality blur together with the reader's experience of the current timeline, making it difficult to differentiate which is more immediate, more real—the current timeline or Gabriel's recollections of past events. Rendering flashbacks in the present tense highlights their essential simulative quality while simultaneously revealing their perceived hyperrealness. For Gabriel, memories have more immediacy than the immediacy of day-to-day life, which contains an inescapable banality that, in effect, provides a layer of distance. The choice to render the current timeline in the past tense accomplishes exactly this—greater narratorial distance. Gabriel is detached from his day-to-day life and more connected to his memories of past experiences—his psychological simulations are more real than reality, because he is paralyzed by existential angst.

Irony and black humor also heighten themes of existential angst. Significantly, many of the first postmodernists were actually labeled black humorists (Sharma and Chaudhary 193). The postmodern novel's use of irony provides frustration for characters and dark humor or amusement for readers. Postmodern writers often use irony to point out the general absurdity of life. That is, irony is a tool used to demonstrate the absurd and the hyperbolic. On first glance the postmodernist might not seem to be operating within the realm of realism, yet many postmodernists argue that they are—they are simply demonstrating the absurd and hyperbolic nature of the world they currently occupy. (For the sake of posterity, I feel compelled to briefly state that this thesis is being presented to the university just a few months after the World Health Organization characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11, 2020. The need to demonstrate the absurd and hyperbolic nature of the world has become especially germane as humanity responds to this global health crisis. Our current reality is not entirely dissimilar to the

one that *White Noise* portrays by means of its “Airborne Toxic Event” (DeLillo 105). In fact, I have repeatedly quipped that it feels as if we are currently living in a Don DeLillo novel.) An example of the interplay between black humor and irony in my novel can be seen in Tug’s attempts to articulate how to live a meaningful life, which result in frustration because he realizes he sounds like a caricature of an evangelical preaching about how to live a meaningful life, at which point the authenticity and credibility of his message becomes entirely undermined—he cannot espouse profound spiritual truths without risking being perceived as the sort of person who feels qualified to espouse profound spiritual truths. The more genuine he tries to be, the less genuine he becomes. Another instance of irony occurs in Gabriel’s reaction to the apocalyptic scenario in Florida. Throughout the novel Gabriel struggles to attain the sense of peace that accompanies the belief that one’s life has some sort of inherent, underlying meaning. It is only when he thinks that his life is about to end that he finally feels at peace, which is to say that not searching for meaning in his life provides him with the peace only a sense of meaning in one’s life can provide—he finds the answer when he no longer feels the urge to look for it. As soon as he realizes he’s not going to die, his existential angst returns and with it he begins anew his quest for meaning.

Alongside these many postmodern elements, my novel also contains a sense of minimalism not all that common in postmodernism. My use of minimalist elements is similar to those of the Dirty Realists but also quite different. That is, I use minimalism where it is appropriate and maximalism where it is appropriate, whereas the Dirty Realists entirely reject the notion that maximalism is a valid craft technique. In essence, minimalism is very surface in its description, lending readers more of a role in creating

the aesthetic experience of the story. Minimalism avoids the use of meaningless details and instead focuses just on the general context, leaving room for the reader's imagination to shape the unimportant aspects of a story. There are portions where I choose a more maximalist approach because of the juxtaposition it creates with the novel's minimalist sections. The novel is grounded in a maximalist's sense of setting where setting is important, but where the setting is merely backdrop, I tend to focus less on the aesthetic experience of the space in order to signal to readers that the abstract qualities of that passage—which may be difficult for the average reader to follow—are far more significant to the experience of the novel than are the concrete aesthetic qualities of the particular scene. I do not want readers to become distracted by the concrete sensory experience of a passage containing significant and revealing philosophical elements—the minimalism signals that the abstract elements of such scenes are far more significant. The use of minimalism to enhance a narrative's engagement in philosophical discourse occurs often in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. Wallace relegates entire chapters to phone conversations, ignoring entirely or only intermittently interjecting sensory, or setting details into long passages of dialogue. This, in part, characterizes how I employ the use of minimalism.

Works of literary minimalism also typically revolve around unexceptional characters and thus tend toward "slice of life" stories. This is true of the Dirty Realists and is likewise the case in my novel. The most exceptional character, Beau Brooks, is the character who is most frustrated by his own exceptionalism. He is also the only character who is already dead in the novel's opening sentence, as if he's too exceptional even to be alive in a piece of writing with such an intense focus on the unexceptional. Tug is perhaps one of the novel's more exceptional characters, but he is, ironically, exceptional

precisely *because* he is so unexceptional: “The craziest thing about Tug is that he’s not crazy” (147). What also makes my novel representative of Dirty Realism is my focus on addiction and substance abuse. Dirty Realism often chooses to tell the stories of characters representative of the underbelly of American society: drug addicts, the homeless, unwed or teenage mothers, criminals, husbands or wives who abandoned their family, blue-collar factory workers, service-industry workers who smoke two packs a day—or as I like to think of them, *interesting* people. In terms of characterization, then, my novel is heavily influenced by the Dirty Realists. To me, the connection between matters of the soul, i.e. the meaning of life, and substance abuse is fairly obvious: the former creates the necessary conditions in the existential soil for the latter to hellishly bloom.

Ultimately, the blending of Postmodernism with Dirty Realism is natural and harmonizing both from a thematic and craft standpoint. All the aforementioned elements represent my novel’s blend of Postmodernism and Dirty Realism. Here is an introduction of my novel in one sentence: if the Dirty Realists and the Postmodernists had intellectual intercourse and their lovechild was born somewhere between 2018-2020, the offspring of that literary, philosophical coitus would be my novel, *I Love You, Go Away*.

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“He who has a Why to live can bear almost any How.”
—Friedrich Nietzsche

CHAPTER ONE

On Monday, January 7, 2019—the day they found Beau Brooks dead—his manager, Mark Maloney, called me to share the news. Until Tug told him, Maloney had no clue that Beau had been hanging out with me, a random twenty-two-year-old kid from Milwaukee’s East Side. When Maloney heard about me he must’ve thought: what did a forty-eight-year-old recluse actor want with a college-aged nobody?

A couple days later Maloney flew in from Los Angeles. A few hours after he landed I met him at The Jive Java, a coffeehouse on Farwell Ave near The Shorecrest. It was a small place, maybe ten two-person tables in total. Jazz was their thing. Not performances, just records, which played through the speakers hanging in each corner of the tiny space. Written in big letters on their window: *THE JIVE JAVA: CAFFEINE... AND ALL THAT JAZZ.*

Having ordered a cup of coffee, I wished we were meeting at a bar instead. Before Maloney arrived I took out the flask Beau had given me just days before. On one side of the flask was a large engraving of a pinup girl. The silver was dented in some spots and the engraving was a little off here and there. It was obvious the image had been crafted by hand, without the precision of a machine. I poured some Jim Beam into my cup. It felt appropriate given the circumstances.

I sat there and imagined how Beau’s death might’ve gone down. I saw his long, messy beard obscuring the creases in his face. His dark hair standing up and sprouting in all directions, unruly from having worn his winter hat many showerless days in a row. I saw him in his apartment, still intoxicated from hanging out with me earlier in the night. In my version of events, he looks at the picture of him and his German shepherd. He

starts crying as he places it on his nightstand. Then he goes to the front door and props it open by wedging a Nike sneaker between the bottom of the door and the carpet. With a bottle of Ambien and a bottle of whiskey, he returns to his bed. What kind of whiskey? Maybe Woodford Reserve, the same kind we had that time we went swimming in Lake Michigan. He plays some music on his cell phone—what kind of music? What is the last album Beau listens to? Maybe there is no music. No, he prefers silence, wants to leave this world quietly. He chugs the bottle of whiskey, stopping only to swallow Ambien after Ambien. On his back, on top of the blankets and the tightly tucked sheets, he lies gazing at the ceiling, waiting to drift away.

It was easy for Maloney to spot me because we were the only customers in The Jive Java. Even if we weren't the only ones, I'm a pretty spotable person—I told him I'd be the tallest guy there.

We had gotten pounded with a couple feet of lake-effect snow the night before, so it was no surprise the coffeehouse was empty. Much of the city was still getting back on its feet, struggling to melt the ice and clear the sidewalks and roads. I was surprised that they were even able to land Maloney's flight. But The Jive Java probably would've been quiet without the inclement weather. It was one of those establishments that made you wonder how they even managed to stay in business.

"Gabriel Driscoll?" Maloney had bright red hair cut in a buzz the same length as his red beard. I hadn't really known what to expect but somehow his appearance surprised me.

I stood up and reached out my hand. His eyes followed me up as I towered over

him. He had a firm grip.

“How tall *are* you?” Maloney asked.

“About six-four.”

“Jeez.” He sat down across from me.

The waitress-barista-owner arrived. She was a middle-age woman who always looked tired. Not a good advertisement for a place that sold caffeine. Maloney ordered a cup of coffee from her. She nodded at Maloney and then retreated behind the counter.

“I can’t believe he’s gone,” I said.

The table wobbled as Maloney rested his elbows on it. He looked at the coffee-ringed stains on the surface and then leaned back in his chair. The absence of his weight caused the table shift again.

“So you were pretty close with him?” Maloney asked.

“I guess so,” I said. “I hung out with him a lot over the last four, five months or so. I was going to shoot his documentary.”

“Documentary?”

“He wanted me to shoot this documentary he was going to make about his life. We hadn’t even started recording.”

“You were with him every week for months and didn’t record anything?” Maloney asked.

“He didn’t want to start recording until he’d told me all about his life. He said going over everything ahead of time would allow us to know what we should put in and how we should go about filming.”

“That’s not normally how documentaries are made,” Maloney said.

The waitress set a cup on the table, which wobbled again, spilling some coffee onto the surface. Maloney looked at her. “Thanks,” he said.

She nodded at him and rushed away.

“Normally you just start filming and then when you think you have enough you put it together,” Maloney said. “Seems like you guys were doing it backwards.”

“I guess.”

“Didn’t you find that kind of strange?” Maloney asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I never made a documentary before.”

“What all did he tell you about?” Maloney asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Everything. His whole life.”

“He told you about Mica?”

“Yes. The baby. His childhood. How he got into acting. His problems with drugs.”

“Jesus. I was his manager since he was eighteen—thirty years. You got closer to him in the last year than I did in the last thirty. Everything I know I practically had to waterboard out of him.”

He emptied a single serving of half-and-half into his cup and stirred it.

I didn’t know what to say.

“I don’t think he really wanted to make a documentary,” Maloney said. “He probably just wanted somebody to talk to. Somebody to hang out with. He just needed a pretense.”

I’d considered that. But I’d never really considered that for very long. Whatever his reasons were didn’t really matter to me. Thinking about it now made me feel both

lucky, as if I'd been the chosen one, and used, as if he knew that I was dumb enough not to figure it out, or perhaps lonely enough myself not to care if I had.

“Look,” Maloney said, “I’m sorry if it seems like I’m being insensitive. It’s just that none of this makes any sense.”

“I know,” I said.

We sat there in silence for a moment or two. Drinking our coffees. Then Maloney said, “You’re pretty lucky that that neighbor of his—that elderly black gentleman—saw him come home alone. That he was the last one to see him and not you.”

“Warren?” I asked. Warren was an insomniac. He always spent his nights at the front door of The Shorecrest, just standing there, looking out at the traffic on Prospect Ave.

“If you’d been the last one to see him all of this might come across as a little too convenient,” Maloney said.

“Are you implying that I could’ve had something to do with it?” How could he smirk like that? “He left his door wide open. He was hoping he’d be found. Don’t you think if somebody were trying to kill him they’d at least close the door on the way out?”

“Whoa, I’m not saying that,” Maloney said, his hands up in front of him as if I had a gun pointed his direction. “I’m just saying the authorities always start with the last person... I mean let’s be real, suicide is not too far-fetched given his history. As shocked as we are nobody’s really all that surprised.”

“How could you suggest something like that?”

“I’m sorry,” Maloney said. “I was just trying to lighten to mood. I was just trying to say it could be worse.”

“Jesus,” I said, shaking my head.

That was all Maloney and I spoke about that day, that and the details of the funeral. He must’ve felt sorry for me after that because his tone was all different, more sensitive to the situation. He arranged for me to attend the funeral with him, which was not open to the public. He even offered me some money to buy myself a suit. I thanked him but politely declined. I didn’t need his money. I already had a suit from working weddings with Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy.

After I left The Jive Java I thought about Tug. How was he handling this? I had to go see him.

CHAPTER TWO

It's the middle of June. 2018. It's hot outside, but not too bad. It's still early enough in summer that a little shade and the breeze coming off the lake provides enough relief to keep from sweating too much.

After venturing around the city taking photos, I ride the Gold Line from Marquette University to the East Side. I'm standing in the aisle of the bus when I see him. Right away I know it's him—Beau Brooks, the Hollywood actor. I squish through the crowded aisle and make my way toward the back where he's sitting. He's wearing a baseball cap with the brim low. He's hunched over, seemingly trying to keep his head down and blend in. He looks different than in the pictures and the movies. His beard is a lot thicker, a lot more unkempt.

This is the first time I've ever seen Beau Brooks in person, and it's pure luck, or fate, or whatever you want to call it. I just happen to be in the right place at the right time. Nobody even recognizes him. I guess that makes sense, though. I mean think about it: you see Beau Brooks on the Gold Line and immediately you think, that's not actually him, there's no way he's just riding the bus. There's no way he's in Milwaukee. That's just some guy who bears a striking resemblance.

But *I* know it's him.

I know his face better than the average person. Despite his troubled past, to me, Beau Brooks is a local legend. He is an inspiration, proof that somebody from this small Midwestern city can actually be something. Proof that Wisconsin can produce something of cultural value aside from beer, milk, and cheese.

He looks up at me and, upon noticing my smiling face and my camera hanging

around my neck, says, "I'm not who you think I am."

"Who would that be?" I ask.

I sit down in the empty seat next to him.

"I don't know, man. People get me confused with that Hollywood guy. I'm not him." He speaks with an unusual cadence, as if trying to emulate the way a hippie might talk.

"Fair enough," I say.

He ignores me.

"I'm not going to cause a scene," I whisper. "I know it's you."

"Look," he mutters, keeping his head down. "If you leave me alone, I'll let you get a photo when I get off."

"Deal," I say.

But the truth is I don't want a photo. Though as a photographer I can't help but wonder if I could sell some photos of him to the tabloids or something, the way paparazzi do.

We sit there for almost fifteen minutes. Still, nobody recognizes him. People just go on with their lives unaware that there is a celebrity, and a local legend at that, right here among us. Beau gets off at the corner of Prospect Ave and Brady St. I follow behind him. He's walking at a brisk pace, almost as if he's trying to lose me. I allow him some distance, but I continue following him. We walk like this for a couple blocks.

Outside of St. John's On The Lake, the retirement home on Prospect Ave, Beau turns around and looks at me. I'm only a few yards from him now.

"Well," he says, "go ahead." He takes off his baseball cap. The unusual cadence

in his voice has disappeared.

It really *is* Beau Brooks.

I look into the viewfinder and focus in on him.

“Please,” he says, “just don’t let people know I was on the bus.”

“Why not?”

“Tell them I was coming out of here.” He points to St. John’s. “Tell them that after visiting an old family friend I went for a walk down to the lakefront. I’m only in town for a few days.”

“Sure,” I say. I snap a few more photos. He is nice enough to play along, looking at the camera with a smile. A few passersby recognize him and stop to photograph him with their phones. He allows them to take selfies with him.

“What are you doing in Milwaukee?” one of them asks.

“Just visiting some old friends,” Beau says.

After a few minutes the small crowd lets him go.

“Thanks, Mr. Brooks,” I say.

“Now please, be decent and leave me alone.” He puts his hat back on, and walks away.

I feel the urge to continue following him, to find out where he’s really going. He’s been so cooperative—I can’t stand to bother him anymore. But the fear of letting him walk away, of giving up the opportunity to photograph him again is too overwhelming.

I put my camera in my backpack and start following him again. I wait until he is barely within sight and then I cross to the opposite side of Prospect Ave. I maintain some distance between us. He walks along Prospect Ave, which sits atop a bluff overlooking

the lakefront and Lincoln Memorial Drive. After a few blocks he disappears into an apartment building. From where I am it's hard to tell which building he enters, but my gut tells me it's The Shorecrest, an old hotel once ran by the Italian Mafia. It's just apartments now, pretty shabby ones.

I go to The Jive Java on Farwell Ave—the one-way street running parallel to Prospect whose traffic flows in the opposite direction, south toward downtown. I pull out my MacBook Pro and upload the photos and then begin editing them. I research and research until I find a tabloid to sell them to. In the end I decide not to. I don't even post them online. I don't share them with anyone. He didn't seem to like that I'd even taken them in the first place. It feels weird even having them.

The next few days I ride the Gold Line from Marquette University to the Lower East Side, at approximately the same time, mid-afternoon, in hopes of seeing him again. I even walk to The Shorecrest where I sit outside and wait for him, just hoping that he walks out, praying that he's still in Milwaukee.

CHAPTER THREE

After I left the meeting with Maloney at The Jive Java, I took the Gold Line downtown to look for Tug.

On the bus I thought about the whole of Beau's life—how at thirty-three years old, at the height of his career, it all fell apart. He completely spiraled after Mica. He met her when they were both in their early twenties. She worked as a production assistant for the studio that made *Superb Herb*, a stoner comedy starring Beau Brooks and Sid Reed about two lowlifes who stumble upon a CIA lab growing a top-secret strain of cannabis. Mica and Beau dated for a while around that time, but it didn't last too long. Beau told me after Sid died "his head and his heart were out of alignment."

Then years later when Beau was in his late twenties he did another comedy for the studio, the sequel, *Superb Herb 2: Anoint The Joint*. Unsurprisingly, he ran into Mica on set. Their fling picked up right where it had left off. Only now his head and his heart were no longer out of alignment. He had gotten off the heroin and stopped dabbling around with other drugs. He even quit drinking. He was the cleanest he'd been since boyhood—all he did was smoke weed.

Not long after that Mica got pregnant and they moved to Milwaukee. Then around eight months into the pregnancy Mica went into labor and the child, a boy, was stillborn. Mica was never the same after losing the baby. She looked at Beau as if he was the one to blame. The divide planted itself between them and grew larger with each passing day. Within months they called it quits.

A few years later Beau, having been back in Los Angeles for quite some time by then, was using heavily again. Mica had remained in Milwaukee. Beau hadn't made a

movie in years. All of Hollywood pretty much figured his career was over. According to Beau this was perhaps the worst time in his life, at least in terms of his chemical consumption. Every once in a while he would show up in the tabloids looking absolutely lifeless. I hate to make the comparison, but he said it himself—he looked like he was living in Auschwitz.

After Mica died in that head-on collision with the semi Beau fell even further into the depths of his despair. He overdosed on heroin a few days after her death. Upon detoxing and recovering from the event, he went to Malibu where he completed a number of rehab programs. His career was temporarily rebirthed when, three months into his sobriety, he was cast on the reality TV show, *Rehab With The Stars*. That was the last on-camera project he ever did, now over a decade and a half ago. He stayed sober for much of the last fifteen years. He did a few plays here and there but no films, at least not that I know of. He started using again not long before I met him, upon moving back to Milwaukee. For most people Beau's story is that of another failed child star—the perfect example of the old Hollywood cliché.

I got off the bus at Sixth and Wisconsin and headed to MacArthur Square.

MacArthur Square is somewhat hidden. It's a green space about a block or two in size sitting above a one-level parking structure. It's only accessible on foot so it's relatively out of sight from street traffic and fairly quiet. It's basically a courtyard that lies east of the Courthouse, south of the Police Department and County Jail, and north of the Milwaukee Public Museum. Nowadays it's a homeless camp where a number of tents are pitched even in the middle of winter. It makes sense why a homeless person would choose that spot. The courthouse is just blocks from St. Benedict the Moor, which serves

a hot meal six nights a week. There're also community centers nearby where a person can get a hot shower, such as Guest House of Milwaukee and Milwaukee Women's Center.

With it being January, there were only maybe a dozen or so tents remaining in the snow-covered square. Of course, when it's cold outside most homeless prefer the warmth of a shelter. But for Tug staying at a homeless shelter makes him feel like he is homeless.

I arrived at the Square and saw that Tug was sitting at the wooden picnic table outside of his orange, two-person tent, sipping something from a red Solo cup.

"Gabriel," Tug said. "Gabriel, he's gone." He shook his head.

He stood up and gave me a hug. He wrenched on my torso, his face soaking my winter jacket. The top of his head barely reaching my chest. His body odor washed over me but I didn't let go of him. And as he cried I began to feel jealous. I needed to do that, but for some reason I wasn't. I couldn't.

Tug and I sat down across from one another at the wooden picnic table.

"I'm so glad you came to see me, Gabriel. I would've reached out to you, but I didn't know how."

"I heard from Maloney," I said.

As Beau's emergency contact, Maloney had been first to get the news. He called everyone he knew to call, including Tug. When Maloney learned that Tug's phone had been disconnected he tracked down the number for his mother, who then showed up at MacArthur Square. Tug said when he saw his mother he knew right away something bad must've happened.

"I take it you're the one who told Maloney about me?" I asked.

Tug nodded. "I had to make sure you'd be included in the funeral. It's this

Sunday.”

“I know,” I said. “I met with Maloney today. He filled me in. I’ll be there.”

I pulled out my flask and took a long swig and then passed it to Tug.

“It just became too much for him,” Tug said, shaking his head.

I nodded.

Tug took a swig from the flask and then chased it with a sip from his red Solo cup.

“I wish you could’ve been the one to tell me,” I said.

“I know,” Tug said. “I’m sorry.”

“I guess it doesn’t really matter,” I said. “It’s the same either way. But you should get yourself a phone, Tug.”

“I know. You’re right.” He looked at me with a half-smile. “Probably should.”

CHAPTER FOUR

It's been almost a week now since I met Beau Brooks. I still can't believe it was actually him. I mean I knew it was him right away. But I still can't believe it. I wonder what he's really doing here in Milwaukee.

I sit and wait around outside The Shorecrest all day, but I never end up seeing him. I decide to give up and head home once it gets dark.

I spend the rest of the night sitting at my desk in my bedroom, surfing the Internet on my MacBook Pro. The smell of spaghetti permeates the whole house. Aunt Cindy has had her tomato gravy going in the crockpot since this morning. I can hear Uncle Toby's and Aunt Cindy's muffled voices coming from the kitchen downstairs. A podcast plays over their conversation: "With just under two years until the election, third-party candidate Ross Allen Gallon officially announced he's entering the Presidential race. Gallon is not a politician but a nonprofit CEO for a company that works with humane societies across the country..."

Right now I'm rabbit-holing through urban exploring videos on YouTube.

I spend a lot of time on YouTube now that I'm no longer on social media. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat—none of it. I deleted all my accounts. It's been about a month. I used to spend so much time following the lives of other people—people I used to know, people I barely know, people I've never even met. It made me feel like a loser looking at other people's lives and being constantly reminded of how different, how seemingly unexciting my life is by comparison. I realize that the lives people project online are nowhere near the reality of their day-to-day lives. It's merely a facade, which they've carefully crafted and curated in order to make themselves seem interesting and

exciting. But still. Knowing that doesn't make a difference. It affects me the same regardless.

Nobody deserves the amount of attention they get from others on social media. I know I certainly don't. Maybe everyone realizes this on some level. But still. It doesn't make a bit of difference. Maybe it's somewhat self-absorbed for me to not want to follow other peoples' lives, but being on social media and posting the events of my own life also makes me feel self-absorbed. Everyone's broadcasting their life to one another and I get to see everyone's lives but somehow it makes me feel even more alone. It seems counterintuitive that the more connected I am the more disconnected I feel.

I don't know, though. Maybe it's just me.

There's also the political situation on social media. It's a dumpster fire. Every day there's some shitstorm brewing. Or so it seems.

I used to be into politics. I used to be *so* into politics.

Uncle Toby's fairly conservative and Aunt Cindy's pretty liberal. Uncle Toby's religious, born and raised Catholic. Aunt Cindy's a fervent atheist. Uncle Toby goes to Sunday Mass by himself. Sometimes I'll go with him just to get out of the house. He'll bribe me with brunch afterward.

Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy have discussions at the dinner table about what's going on in the world. I used to participate. Nowadays I just tune them out. Although they seldom agree, they never get heated with one another, at least not about politics. Both of them are genuinely interested in the way the other one thinks, even though Uncle Toby, for the most part, just goes with whatever the Vatican says on an issue. Though, this latest Pope has been giving him a run for his money. Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy

know that regardless of their disagreements, at the end of the day they'll fall asleep in the same bed, right next to each other. They don't have to agree with one another in order to love each other.

The three of us joke that they're probably the last married couple on the planet that are on opposite ends of the political spectrum. But to be fair, both of them are somewhat moderate, at least by today's standards. They're both extremely reasonable people, even in their differences.

I never pick a consistent ideological stance, especially when I used to debate people online. They couldn't peg me as being either conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat. For some reason people don't like that. I'd get called a charlatan, a troll, a shit-stirrer, a contrarian. Eventually I just stopped voicing my opinions because it never ended well. I'd still read other people's debates and I'd feel the urge to get involved. But eventually I just stopped.

People criticize Millennials and Generation Z for being apathetic when it comes to politics. I don't think it's true that we don't care. I think the problem is that we care too much. At a certain point we have to detach from it. And there's no turning it off unless you turn it off for good. It's like there's no way to be *sort of* politically active. It's either a huge part of your identity or you live on Mars, completely unaware of anything within the realm of politics.

I used to be a part of the former. Now I'm a part of the latter. And I'm totally aware that my being ignorant of politics is an example of my privilege as a white, cisgender, heterosexual male. And a part of me feels really guilty about that. So it turns out that ignorance has its own set of psychological and spiritual costs. There's actually

nothing blissful about it, at least not when it comes to politics.

So I don't know how much better off I really am without social media or politics, because I've just replaced the time I spent on social media and politics with time spent on YouTube and other corners of the Internet. When it comes down to it, it's probably all the same.

The other week, for example, I found a channel on YouTube where these two guys, probably not much older than me, explore various abandoned sites, filming the whole thing and then editing the footage into twenty-five minute videos, sometimes shorter if the place is not that big. I find these abandoned structures—malls, prisons, insane asylums, amusement parks, stadiums, hotels, factories, et cetera—so fascinating.

In the video I'm watching right now, they're exploring an abandoned subway system in Cincinnati. Sometimes I get so curious to learn why these sites have been abandoned that I supplement the videos with my own research. I learn, for example, that the subway system in Cincinnati started getting built sometime before the Great Depression. When the stock market crashed the city ran out of money and had to abandon construction. They didn't get the funds to revisit the project until after World War II and by then the interstates were getting built. The city decided a subway was no longer needed. Most people had cars by then. The interstates were more worthy of the investment. To this day there are subway stations and tunnels running below the streets of Cincinnati. The stairs that lead to the various subway platforms sit covered by giant metal doors, right in the middle of the sidewalks. People walk over them all the time, completely unaware what lies below.

I don't know why I'm so hooked on these videos. I suppose it has something to do

with the fact that these people are sort of like anthropologists. It's as if I get to catch a glimpse of what it will be like for future anthropologists to scour the remains of our civilization.

But what purpose does this knowledge serve me? How does knowing about the abandoned subway system in Cincinnati change my day-to-day experience of life? I have no idea. But it *is* interesting. And it beats sitting on social media, arguing about gun control or healthcare or immigration or abortion or the tax code or whatever the hot topic is today.

Although I should care about that stuff, I don't. I can't.

CHAPTER FIVE

The day before the funeral, Saturday, I walked into the house with my suit on a hanger. I had gotten it dry-cleaned for the funeral.

Uncle Toby saw it and raised his eyebrows. “What’s with the duds, Mr. Hotshot?”

“It’s a long story,” I said. “I have to go to a funeral tomorrow.” I had yet to even tell Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy about Beau, not only his death, but also the fact that I’d been hanging out with him these past months. They knew I had made a new friend, and they even knew that his name was Beau, but they had no idea it was *the* Beau Brooks.

“A funeral?” Aunt Cindy asked. She was standing over the sink, washing the dishes by hand. “Oh my gosh, Gabriel. Who is it?”

I came clean. I told them all about Beau Brooks and how I’d become friends with him.

Uncle Toby just sat there at the kitchen table, unlit cigar hanging out of his mouth, newspaper spread out in front of him, his face blank.

“That guy from *Two Shakes of a Lamb’s Tail*?” Aunt Cindy asked.

“Yes,” I said, “Beau Brooks.”

“What’s the meaning of this?” Uncle Toby asked, his tone a bit angry. “Trying to fool us or something?”

“It’s unbelievable. I know,” I said. “That’s why I never bothered trying to tell you guys.” It always felt too strange to be true. A part of me worried that if I told them, then just like that Beau wouldn’t want to hang out with me anymore, as if telling them would suddenly make it too real, as if telling anyone would wake me from the dream that had become my life.

“Bullshit,” Uncle Toby said. “The boy is making it up.”

“Why would he lie about something like that?” Aunt Cindy asked.

“I can’t tell you that,” Uncle Toby said. They were speaking to one another as if I were not right there sitting at the table. “I don’t believe it.” He flipped through the newspaper to an article written about Beau. “You’re not the *unidentified friend* who was with him that night?” Uncle Toby pointed to the paper.

“I’m the one,” I said.

“Jesus,” Uncle Toby said.

Aunt Cindy was practically in shock. She didn’t say anything after that.

Beau was buried the Sunday following his death—January 13, 2019. The visitation and the burial, which were supposed to be kept secret, were both well attended, not by people who knew him but by people who knew of him. In terms of people who knew him, only a handful made the trip to Wisconsin to see him off. I’d heard that many celebrities tweeted about what a tragedy his death was, and how much his work had meant to them, but apparently it didn’t mean enough for them to actually inconvenience themselves by attending the funeral. Word had obviously gotten out about where and when it was, because the media was in attendance, too, though security did a decent job of keeping fans and paparazzi at a distance. It was strange being there and seeing all those people outside. I couldn’t help but think that I should’ve been out there with them.

At the visitation, I stuck by Maloney pretty much the whole time, every once in a while sneaking shots out of my flask. At one point Maloney noticed me taking a swig and said, “You don’t have to hide that. Today is a day of mourning.”

I nodded and took another swig.

Maloney was a nice enough guy, but he was also kind of slimy. It was clear he cared a lot about Beau, but it seemed like he was still on the job. Like he was there as an employee and not as a friend. He was the one running the visitation, the person next to the casket talking to everybody as they walked up and said their goodbyes. I lingered close by, but I didn't want to be close enough that it would appear as though I was also running the visitation. It was strange. Now and then Maloney introduced me to someone. I met a lot of people I had no business meeting or knowing.

As I stood there next to Beau's lifeless body, I replayed the night of his death in my mind. I reached the point where we said goodbye to one another and then I imagined how his suicide might've gone down. I see Beau in his apartment, very drunk from hanging out with me earlier in the night. He looks out the bay window onto Lake Michigan. He contemplates how to best accomplish his task. Initially he wants to hang himself with a belt, but he decides not to. He's a user. It only seems fitting that his last moments should be spent in glorious intoxication—one more trip on the way out. He goes to the front door and props it open, wedging a Nike sneaker underneath the door. He returns to his bed with a bottle of Ambien and a bottle of Johnnie Walker Red. He's been saving it for this moment. He's had this planned for a while, though he didn't decide on this night until that morning. He finally feels ready. And he finally has enough courage to go through with it. He turns on the TV and watches the news. When the coroner arrives the next day, it'll still be on. He chugs the bottle of whisky, stopping only to swallow Ambien after Ambien. He sits at the end of his bed, staring at the TV. He watches a young blond anchorwoman talking about the government shutdown and what it means for

the country. Slowly, his life closes in on him.

As I was standing there, a beautiful woman walked up. She couldn't have been much older than me, though, it was clear she was not my age. She was wearing a black dress that ended just above her knees. Her hair was dark and short, not 1920s-short but pretty short. She had these big, doughy blue eyes.

She hugged Maloney, and said, "I can't believe the asshole did this."

Maloney smiled somberly, his eyes pointed at the floor. "It's a shame."

I was still standing in Maloney's shadow, a little ways off to the side. The woman looked at me.

"Come here," Maloney said. I walked over. "This is Gabriel Driscoll," he said, placing his hand on my back.

"You're the one who was hanging around with him?" the woman asked.

"That's right," I said.

The woman extended her hand toward mine. "Michelle Dorsey," she said. It was a sweaty handshake. I'm not sure if it was her or me who had the wet palms.

"Of course," I said. "I've heard so much about you."

I had no idea who she was, but I got the impression that I was supposed to know.

"I'd love to chat with you, if you get a chance."

"Of course," I said. "Whenever you want."

She smiled and then continued to the casket. She reached out and grabbed Beau's lifeless hand, and then cried a peaceful, dignified cry.

I whispered to Maloney, "Dorsey?"

“Mica’s daughter,” Maloney said. After examining the expression on my face he continued, “From her marriage... You *do* know Mica was married before meeting Beau? Surely he must’ve told you about Michelle?”

I shook my head.

As I was standing there I became distracted trying to do the math in my head. How old was Michelle? Twenty-five? Twenty-six? Certainly not over thirty. If Beau was forty-eight when he died, and in his early thirties when Mica died, how old was Michelle when Mica died? Somewhere between ten and fifteen years old? All of sudden I began feeling really sorry for Michelle. Mica’s death seemed even more heartbreaking now that I knew she’d left behind a daughter.

And then Tug showed up. I was so relieved. Finally, somebody I actually knew. He was with his mother, Leanne. Tug had on an expensive-looking suit. I asked him about it and he told me that he’d already had it. It didn’t make much sense to me why he would have such a nice suit, but I didn’t press the issue.

After the visitation we drove to the graveyard. Leanne couldn’t stick around for the burial. She had to return to the office. So Tug rode with Maloney and me in Maloney’s rental, a Mustang convertible.

Before we got into the car, Tug called out Maloney: “Who the hell rents a convertible in Wisconsin during winter?”

I laughed.

The ride was quiet, not much conversation, but the engine was loud.

Somebody had to say something. The lack of conversation was uncomfortable, so I asked, “Why didn’t Beau tell me about Michelle?”

“I have no idea,” Maloney said. “For years Beau was practically her stepfather. Sure, he distanced himself after the split. But after Mica’s death he reached out to her and they kept in touch. Beau even put her through college. Marquette. That’s not a cheap school, you know. You sure he never mentioned her? Not even once?”

“I would remember if he did.”

“I have so many questions,” Maloney said.

“You and I both.”

“He didn’t like talking about that part of his life,” Tug said. “I’m surprised he even told you about Mica.”

“But why would he tell you about Mica and not Michelle?” Maloney asked.

Nobody could answer that.

Maloney had settled on Union Cemetery. Beau’s childhood home had been over on that side of town. Not to mention that’s where his Aunt and Uncle were buried. There were a lot fewer people at the burial than at the visitation. Well that’s not true. A lot of people were there, but again they were mostly paparazzi and fans. Again, security did a decent job of keeping them at a distance, behind a fence that had been temporarily installed just for the occasion. But the amount of people inside the fence was far fewer than I would’ve expected, maybe twenty people total.

I felt the urge to cry when they were lowering the casket into the ground, but I held back. I had just met the guy, at least relatively speaking. It felt wrong that I should be as distraught as people who had known him a lot longer. Not many people did cry, but Michelle did. I tried not to watch her but I kept stealing glances of her. It sounds weird to admit this, but the way she cried was very pretty. She wasn’t blubbery or melodramatic

about it. She cried the way people ought to cry: as if unaware that it's even happening.

CHAPTER SIX

Over a week goes by without me spotting Beau Brooks outside of The Shorecrest. Then one day he finally appears. He walks out of The Shorecrest, and I cross the street to intercept him.

“Mr. Brooks!” I shout, but he keeps walking.

Eventually I catch up to him.

“Mr. Brooks,” I say. “Remember me?”

“I’m not who you think I am,” Beau says, with that same unusual cadence.

“Mr. Brooks, it’s me—the Gold Line a couple weeks ago—remember?”

He turns and looks at me. “Jesus. You followed me.”

“No,” I say. “I just came from a friend’s on Farwell. Purely coincidence.”

He continues walking.

“I didn’t follow you.”

“Well, you are now,” Beau says. “Just take a picture and leave me alone.”

“You don’t believe me? You know, I could’ve shot you on the bus that day.”

“What’s your point?” Beau asks.

“I didn’t.”

He continues at a brisk pace.

“I’m a decent person,” I say.

“Then why’re you following me?” Beau snaps.

“I didn’t tell anyone you ride the bus, either.”

We reach Farwell Ave.

“I don’t want your picture,” I say. “I was hoping I could buy you a beer.”

“Jesus, kid,” Beau says, laughing. “Are you insane? I should file a restraining order.”

“Just one drink.”

“Look, kid, you do your job and I do mine. That’s as far as this goes.”

“I’m not paparazzi,” I say. “I’m just an amateur photographer. I didn’t even sell those photos or post them online or anything.”

“So what?”

“Just one drink,” I say. “Then I’ll leave you alone.”

“Fine,” Beau says. “But I can’t right now. I’ve got somewhere to be.”

“You won’t keep an appointment with me,” I say. “I’m not that naïve.”

“Look, kid, tonight at The Mountain Bar. Eleven. Take it or leave it.”

“Deal.” I hold out my hand, but he ignores me.

I want to follow after him, but I figure it’d be an act of good faith to let him go. A part of me knows he just wants to get away from me.

That night, the first night I get a drink with Beau, I arrive at around ten thirty at The Mountain Bar, which is on Farwell Ave, just a few blocks from The Shorecrest. I sit down at the bar and order a whiskey old fashioned. By eleven o’clock I am already two drinks in. By eleven thirty I am three drinks in. I wait until midnight before I decide he isn’t coming. I order what must be my fourth drink. At twelve thirty I get up and walk outside.

There he is.

“I didn’t think you were coming,” I say.

“I wasn’t,” Beau says. “But then I figured if I didn’t you might be waiting outside my building with a gun some day.”

“I’m no Mark David Chapman,” I say.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Gabriel Driscoll.”

We walk inside and the hostess immediately recognizes Beau. She welcomes us, unaware that I’ve been here for the last two hours. She escorts us to a small, isolated booth near the back of the bar. She places red ropes connecting the end of the bar to the end of the table. Beau sits facing the wall, his back to the rest of the patrons. I sit across from him.

“So you live at The Shorecrest?”

“Just moved back to town a few weeks ago.”

“You’re here to stay?”

“For the time being. But please, don’t let people know. I’d like to try to remain as anonymous as possible.”

If I weren’t so drunk, I would probably be more nervous. But in my intoxicated state I simply feel as if this occasion is completely natural. I belong here.

The bartender brings Beau a martini, and another old fashioned for me.

“So,” Beau says, taking a sip. “What the hell do you want from me?”

“I just wanted to have a drink with you,” I say. “Maybe chat about the Packers. I know you’re a big fan.”

“You went through all this to talk to me about football?” he asks.

I hadn’t thought about it until now, but I guess I did. I don’t know what made me

follow him, what made me ask him if I could buy him a drink. I guess I just did. I grew up watching all of his movies, and then there he was in front of me, in the flesh. It just felt like the thing to do.

“I just wanted to know what it would be like to have a drink with Beau Brooks.”

“I’m not Beau Brooks,” he says. “That’s a stage name.”

Every once in a while somebody at the bar peeks over at us, as if trying to see if they recognize us.

“So, what’s your story?” Beau asks.

“I live with my aunt and uncle on the East Side right now. I graduated from high school almost four years ago now. Still trying to figure out my next move. I’d like to be a photographer. I mean like a real one. But I have no idea how to make money doing that.”

“Well, you’re still young. Keep working at it.”

“Why do you ride the bus?” I ask.

“I just want a normal life.”

“Is that why you quit acting?”

“I didn’t quit acting. I stopped doing movies.”

“Don’t you hate riding the bus? It’s disgusting.”

“I like it,” Beau says. “It’s what normal people do.”

“Sometimes normal people have drinks with strangers,” I say.

“I suppose they might.”

“So are you friends with a lot of celebrities?” I ask.

“I know a lot of celebrities,” Beau says. “But I wouldn’t call them friends.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not good at maintaining friendships, or any relationship for that matter.”

“Don’t you ever get lonely?” I ask.

He shrugs. “There are worse things than being lonely.”

Just then a middle-aged man holding a cell phone approaches the ropes. “Excuse me, Mr. Brooks,” the man says.

The bartender steps between the man and our table, “Sir, I’m going to have to ask you not to bother the other patrons.”

“It’s okay, Roy,” Beau says.

“Can I get a picture with you? I’m a huge fan.”

“Make it quick,” Beau says.

The man steps over the ropes and leans in next to Beau to take a selfie. Beau smiles. It’s the same forced smile he gave me when I photographed him on the street.

“Thank you so much!” the man says, retreating back over the ropes.

“Now the flood gates will open,” Beau says. “Let’s get out of here.”

He places a one hundred dollar bill on the table. We walk out of The Mountain Bar. He heads toward Prospect Ave.

“You coming with?” Beau asks.

“I don’t want to impose,” I say. “I’ve taken up enough of your time.”

“Suit yourself,” he says.

Why I don’t go with him, I don’t know. And I don’t know what made him come and meet me. I like to think it’s because he saw something in me. What that could be, I have no idea. But it must be something. Maybe it’s because I’m a normal person, at least compared to him. I make him feel as unimportant as he makes me feel important.

In the weeks that follow I want so badly to wait outside his building, to see him again, but I can't bring myself to do it. The man got a drink with me. He kept his word. I feel obligated to keep mine, as difficult as it is. So I return to my everyday life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

After the burial about a dozen of us went to a bar in Riverwest, somewhat of a midpoint between the cemetery and downtown. Of course, Maloney was there, along with Beau's agent. Tug had taken off after the burial. I tried to talk him into joining us but he said he couldn't stand to be around those people. I understood why. I didn't know any of them. I mean, I'd met some of them during the visitation, but I'd forgotten what their names were or how they were connected to Beau. I think they worked for his agency or some studios or something like that. Either way, I was relieved to be at a bar with somebody else picking up the tab.

I suppose in a way that was the last time Beau bought me drinks.

I was sitting alone at the end of the bar when Michelle sat down on the stool right next to me. "I'll take a Manhattan," she announced to the bartender, and then turned to me. "Gabriel, tell me about yourself. How did you meet Leonard?"

I laughed. "*Leonard?*"

"You call him Beau?" Michelle asked. "I figured since you were so close with him..."

"I mean I know his real name is Leonard, but I never thought to call him that."

"Okay, how did you meet *Beau*?"

"It's quite the story."

Michelle nodded. "I have time."

"Actually, it's really not all that interesting. I just came to know him."

"How old are you, anyway?" she asked.

"Twenty-two," I said. "Why? How old are you?"

“That’s rude.” She smiled. “Twenty-nine.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You didn’t have to answer that.” I ordered another drink before finishing the one in my hand. I didn’t belong here.

“It’s okay. So you were with him that night?”

“Yeah. We were out drinking. I was just a drinking buddy of his. I only knew him for about four, five months or so. We’d get together once, sometimes a few times a week.”

“So how much do you know about me? What all did he tell you?” Michelle asked.

The bartender finished making my old fashioned. I chugged the rest of the one in my hand and he replaced it with the fresh one.

“Well, I know you’re Mica’s daughter. And that you went to Marquette.”

“...”

“Beau really loved your mother—their split devastated him.”

“He told you that?”

“Sure,” I said. “He also told me about the phone call where your mother told him she was pregnant with the baby that didn’t end up making it. Beau was on the set for his latest movie: *Hurricane Tides*, that action film about the Coast Guard. Although they hadn’t been trying to conceive, Beau reacted like they had been. He was ecstatic. He started laughing hysterically, prompting your mother to start laughing as well. Apparently, each time one of them tried to say something the other one would burst out in a giddy chuckle.”

Michelle smiled.

“He told me that the possibility of seeing your mother regularly was what

prompted him to make the sequel to *Superb Herb*, and that when they started dating again it was as if their love had grown in the absence of one another. He recalled those years as being the happiest of his life.”

“He convinced her that the Midwest was *the* place to raise a family,” Michelle said. She was staring me right in the eyes. I had her full attention. I took a sip of my drink but she wasn’t drinking hers. It was still as full as when the bartender had pushed it in front of her.

“The terror in the scream of your mother’s sobbing when they lost the baby—he told me all about that. A piercing shrill which he said continued to haunt him the rest of his life. He had this recurring nightmare about it. In the dream the baby is crying and Beau weeps with joy, having witnessed the miracle of its birth. Then the baby’s sobbing gets louder and louder until finally it merges with the sound of your mother’s wailing. Beau looks at your mother and notices that it’s her screaming, not the baby. Then he looks back at the baby in his arms and realizes that it’s lifeless.”

Michelle’s big eyes peered down into her drink. Her face was tense, as if resisting the urge to cry.

“Your mother and Beau, they argued over what to name the baby. She wanted to name him something Russian, after her father.”

“Vladimir?” Michelle asked.

“That’s it. Vladimir. She wanted to name him Vladimir, and Beau wanted to name him Sidney, after his late friend. Your mother eventually conceded. She came to believe that this was what cursed the baby. Had they not chosen the name of a drug addict, she argued, they would’ve had a healthy baby boy. That hurt Beau, but he couldn’t fault her

for it, as superstitious and misguided as it seemed. He told me he understood how trauma changes people, makes them say and do things they don't really mean. Not long after that they called it quits. Beau maintained that it was mutual, but I don't know how true that is. He admitted that after they lost the baby he started dabbling around with heroin again. That must've been the last straw for your mother."

"It was," Michelle said. "At least the way I understand it. You know he didn't even come to her funeral."

"Yeah. He brought that up a lot. He beat himself up pretty good over that." I felt terrible. This was all so strange for me. I couldn't imagine how strange it must've been for her. "You already knew about that stuff, though, didn't you?" I asked, as if reminding her of that fact would somehow make it less emotional, less immediate, less real.

"More or less. But it's different hearing it from his perspective. I didn't know about the nightmare. And I wasn't aware of how he found out about Mom's pregnancy—they laughing like that."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have told you all that."

"No," Michelle said, "I'm glad you did. Maybe they're all together somewhere in the afterlife—Leonard, Mom, and Baby Sidney."

"That's beautiful," I said.

For a moment or two neither one of us said anything. Then Michelle said, "You want to get out of here?"

"Yes," I said. "I do."

I finished my drink.

Michelle chugged hers.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It's been three weeks since I got that drink with Beau Brooks. I'm in my bedroom watching urban exploring videos on YouTube. Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby are downstairs, presumably making lunch. I can hear Aunt Cindy's podcast playing: "Political polarization—the vast gap between liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats—is a defining feature of American politics today, and one the Pew Research Center has documented for many years..."

As much as I try to avoid politics, I can't. It's everywhere.

The video I'm watching right now is an urban exploring video of an abandoned insane asylum. Watching this video reminds me of a place I heard of in high school: Sanctuary Woods, a big forest in Wauwatosa, a neighboring suburb of Milwaukee, where there are countless remnants of an old insane asylum that once stood there from the 1880s to the 1980s.

I get text on my phone, so I pause the video. It's from Sadie. My mother. It says: *Gabey Baby I know you probably won't respond, but I just wanted you to know I'm thinking about you. I love you. Hope all is well.*

With nothing to do I decide to go check out Sanctuary Woods and take some photos. I have to take a transfer to get there. On the bus ride I have plenty of time to think. Too much, it turns out. My mind wanders to Sadie. Scenes of what it'll be like getting the news of her death frequently intrude my thoughts: Usually it's Uncle Toby or Aunt Cindy who tells me. Sometimes a random person from a hospital or a "friend" of hers calls me with the information. Then the scene cuts to a funeral home and I'm wearing my suit, hovering over an open casket, over Sadie's lifeless body. Aunt Cindy's

next to me crying. Uncle Toby's next to her unperturbed, his head bowed in solemn contemplation. The only thing that varies in these scenes is my reaction. Sometimes I'm relieved. I have one less thing to worry about. Sometimes I'm angry, believing her deserving of her fate. Sometimes I'm sad, empathetic, remembering an idealized version of her, remembering only positive qualities. Sometimes I regret not letting her be a bigger part of my life. Often it's some combination of these.

Then I remembered it hasn't happened yet.

The walk from the bus stop to sanctuary woods takes a while, but I get some good shots of the grounds when I get there. There's a lot to see. I get a photo of train tracks that run right through the woods. They're completely overgrown. I stand right in the middle of the tracks when I take the photo. They run into the distance, getting narrower and narrower as they stretch toward the horizon, but they disappear before they do, obscured by the dense forest.

One of my favorite photos is of a tennis court, which must've been used for recreation by the patients. The cement of the court, like an old person's heel, fissures and crevices in all directions. Lush green sprouts from the cracks, almost knee-high in some spots. The lines of the court have long since washed and weathered away. All that remains of the net are two wooden pillars on either side.

I also take a picture of a set of monkey bars in the middle of the woods. The wooden structure rotted and the metal bars rusted. I have to search for the right angle in order to get a shot of them unobstructed by thick vegetation. A person could easily pass right by without even noticing them.

I've heard there's a tunnel system underground, which used to connect the various buildings for utilities and what not, and also for people to travel back and forth during winter. I can't find any traces of it, though not for lack of effort.

I can't help but imagine the people who once populated this facility. Who were they? What about the people who worked here? What were they like? What stories did they have about their time here? Have their lives been forgotten? Only traces of evidence now remain.

What evidence will remain from my life? Maybe I don't need to live forever. Maybe I just need somebody to witness my existence, or the traces of my existence. Maybe that's enough.

I wonder if that's what draws me to urban exploring. In part, it's probably because I get to serve as a witness to these people's lives. I may not ever be able to know the individuals who populated these places, their hopes and dreams, their fears and anxieties, their struggles and triumphs, but I at least get to serve as a witness for a part of their life, even if it is only a small, seemingly insignificant part. Then again, who knows? Maybe all these thoughts are just bologna.

I don't know. Either way the pictures are pretty cool.

The next day I work a wedding with Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy. The wedding is held at a venue on Farwell Ave.

Everybody at the wedding looks so happy. I can't imagine ever being as happy as these people look. Are they really *that* happy for this couple? A part of me feels like weddings are so fake. These people are so full of shit. They have to be. There's no way

anybody really cares *that* much about two people getting married. I mean maybe they do care, but there's no way they care as much as the pictures of them seem to suggest.

I don't know. I don't get it. It's like: hey look at us and how much we love each other, look at how great our lives are, look at how great they're going to be. But we all know she'll be yelling at him about the toilet seat within a week. He'll find reasons to work late. He'll find reasons to get out of the house and grab a drink with his buddies, just to get away from her for a couple hours. She'll start to resent him. And then he'll resent her for resenting him. And maybe they'll split or maybe they'll stay together—for the kids—and both lead miserable lives. We all know this is likely to be the outcome, more likely than not, but we all sit here and pretend to be happy for them. We congratulate them.

Maybe I'm looking at it all wrong. Maybe they really are soulmates. Maybe all the arguing and resentment and general state of mutual misery is worth it. I mean it has to be, right? People get married all the time. There's no shortage of weddings. People stay married, at least some of the time. Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby are still married. But I don't see myself ever getting married. Even if I met the perfect girl I'd still like to know that I could wake up one morning and walk away if I felt like it. I'd like to be able to know that I could just leave whenever I want and not have to hire a lawyer to do it.

CHAPTER NINE

Sex with Michelle was incredible, though I do wish I'd lasted longer. But she was really sweet about it. When I finished she smiled at me and said, "It's okay, we can try again in a little bit," then she got up and went to the bathroom.

I felt bad leaving her hanging like that. When she crawled back into bed, I kissed her neck, her breasts, her stomach.

"You're already ready again?" she asked.

"I might be able to make the wait worth your while." I made a trail of kisses all the way down her stomach, to the inside of her legs.

Michelle coached me through all of it. I don't know if she realized I was inexperienced, or if she was just open and expressive of her desires. Either way, I followed her directions carefully, putting my tongue exactly where she wanted, moving it how she wanted, for the exact duration she wanted. I paid attention to her every kink and quirk. Her legs rattled and gripped my head. She pulled my hair as she moaned, still continuing to coach me, keeping me attuned to the build of her sensations. It was satisfying to satisfy her.

I'd only ever had sex with one other person—Cora. And while not inaccurate, to call Cora a woman didn't feel accurate. Cora and I had been friends all through middle school and high school. It was the typical prom-night story. And then routine experimentation in the months before she left for college. It wasn't that Cora wasn't a pretty girl, she was. It was just that Michelle was so much more than Cora. Michelle was a woman.

At some point, Michelle asked me if I was ready and without having to check I

could feel that I was. The second time around I lasted longer.

When it was over, Michelle looked me right in the eyes and said, “Now *that* was something.”

I felt happy.

Sex with Cora wasn't the passionate kind like it was with Michelle. With Cora it was as if we were fascinated more by the idea of sex than the idea of sex with each other—it was curiosity and practice. With Michelle it was an intimate connection manifesting through this physical act. As I was realizing this I began to worry. I didn't want this to come to an end. Michelle was older than me, and so much more than I was. I couldn't imagine she'd ever want to see me again.

Michelle's apartment was in a posh old building on Prospect Ave, not far from Beau's. We lay in her bed, still naked. She lit up a cigarette and asked me if I wanted one. Although I didn't smoke, I said yes. It seemed like the thing to do—a cigarette after sex. She gave me hers and then lit up another one.

I inhaled a drag and started coughing, which made Michelle laugh. “Do you not smoke?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “I don't know what made me want one.” I put it out in the glass ashtray resting between us on the bed.

“Virgin lungs,” she giggled. “Cute. How'd you say you met Beau?”

“At a bar. He was a regular there and so was I. What do you do for a living?”

“I'm an account executive at IBM.”

“Business must be good.” I looked out the window at the lake, the foamy caps of the waves flaunting the wind, which in Milwaukee never ceases but instead pauses to

shift the direction of its approach.

“It’s good,” she said. “Do you know if Leonard was using again? I mean I assume he was. But do you know for sure?”

“He never did in front of me. At least not *right* in front of me.”

“I always thought it’d be an overdose that killed him,” Michelle said.

“It was,” I said.

“I mean an *accidental* overdose. I thought he was going to go out like Sid.”

“He talked a lot about Sid. Especially about the night he died.”

“What’d he say?”

I told Michelle the story the same way Beau had relayed it to me.

He and Sid were in their early twenties. It was the night of the release of *Superb Herb*. After the premiere, Beau and Sid and the rest of the crew went out for some drinks at a Hollywood nightclub, The Cameo.

Sid and Beau were both in pretty rough shape then. They’d been using heroin all through filming, which the studio must’ve known. Beau said they didn’t do anything about it, though, because he and Sid were supposed to look high for their roles. They must’ve chalked it up to their intense approach to method acting or something. Anything to enhance the film.

But Beau and Sid had made a pact that they were going to get clean together. When the movie was done filming, they’d be done using. They continued using all the way up until a week before the premiere, long after filming had wrapped. That night at The Cameo, they were both in full withdrawal. Beau said they weren’t even going to go to the premiere, because they felt like such shit, but it was in their contract that they had

to make an appearance. Plus, they figured it might distract them from their physical agonies.

The after-party was in a private room, with a bunch of other people from the set: supporting actors, studio personnel, the film crew.

“Your mother must’ve been there too,” I said to Michelle.

She nodded.

I continued telling the story of that night.

Beau was mingling, having a good time, or at least trying to. At some point he looked around and noticed that Sid was missing. At first he didn’t think much of it, because they both had had the shits.

Michelle giggled when I mentioned that.

Beau figured that Sid must’ve been in the bathroom. But then after a while Beau started to panic. He rushed around, looking for him, yelling out his name. When Beau recounted this to me he was pretty angry with himself. He admitted that he should’ve never let Sid out of his sight.

Michelle shook her head, as if in disbelief. She stubbed her cigarette in the ashtray and then lit up another one.

Beau stumbled into the bathroom and looked under the stalls for Sid’s shoes—vintage alligator-skin cowboy boots—that detail I couldn’t forget. It was so peculiar.

Beau found those boots in the second-to-last stall. He shouted out Sid’s name and without even waiting for a response he climbed over the top of the stall door and found his buddy, Sid Reed, pale as a ghost, cold as the tile, sitting on the toilet—his pants still up—with a needle sticking out of his forearm. Upon noticing that there was still some

dope left in the syringe, Beau pulled it out of Sid's arm and stabbed into his own. He walked out of the bathroom and found help, knowing that it was already much too late to save his friend.

Michelle's eyes were wide. "He finished the dose?"

"Isn't that something?"

"Jesus," Michelle said.

"*Jesus* is right."

We sat there in silence for a few moments, both of us apparently still processing the story.

"So... how are *you* handling all of this?" Michelle asked.

Nobody had even bothered to ask me, and so I hadn't yet been forced to reflect on my own feelings.

"I don't know," I said. "It's all still so strange. I'm still coming to terms with the fact that I even knew the guy in the first place, let alone the fact that he's dead now. How about you?"

She let out a huge smoke-infused sigh through her nostrils. She sat up in bed and the sheets fell below her chest, exposing her breasts. "It's been so long since I last spoke to him. Our relationship was already in the past. I'm not sure if that makes it easier or harder, though."

She put out the cigarette, placing the ashtray on the nightstand beside the bed. Then she snuggled up next to me, her naked body pressed against mine. I ran my hand along her spine, the smoothness of her skin. I hadn't noticed until then that she had freckles on her shoulders.

I thought about how nice this was, being so close to Michelle, feeling her so close to me. For a moment I forgot all about Beau. I forgot all about the circumstances that had brought Michelle and me together, to this moment in her apartment. I began to feel myself relax for the first time that week. I wanted to live inside the silence and warmth of this moment.

“Gabriel,” she said, “tell me about yourself. Where do you live? What was your childhood like? It’s not fair that you know so much about me and I know nothing about you.”

“To be fair, I still don’t know much about you,” I said. “But I was raised by my aunt and uncle.”

“Just like Leonard,” Michelle said.

“Yeah, sort of,” I said. “Though, the circumstances of how my aunt and uncle got custody of me are somewhat different than Beau’s story. My mother got pregnant with me when she was in high school, and instead of giving me up for adoption to some random person, she gave me to my aunt, who was already married and living in the old family house on the East Side. Nowadays I see my mother from time to time but it’s always weird. She’s more of a distant aunt figure than a mother figure. She acts too young to be my mother.

“My aunt and uncle are good to me. I love them more than children love their parents, because I know what it’s like to be a child and not have parents, at least not biological ones. Uncle Toby—he’s the one who taught me all I know about photography. He’s a wedding photographer. He runs his own business with Aunt Cindy. They do all right for themselves, mainly because Uncle Toby’s fascination with all things

technological keeps them on the cutting-edge of wedding cinematography.”

“So you never knew your father?” Michelle asked.

“Nope,” I said. “I’m not really sure my mother even knew. Aunt Cindy says she was pretty promiscuous in high school. It could’ve been any number of men. And to tell you the truth, it doesn’t matter much to me. Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy are my real parents.”

“Don’t you ever get curious?” Michelle asked. “I mean, do you ever wonder where your genes come from?”

“I buy my jeans from the store,” I said. “Just like everyone else.”

“Ha-ha,” Michelle said, not even budging a smile. “Very funny.”

I leaned my head toward hers and gave her a kiss. I could taste the cigarette in her mouth, and a part of me liked it. It wasn’t a kiss that was staged or planned, preceded by a mint or a piece of gum. It was raw and it was real.

We lay there for a while in silence. And then she fell asleep, her head resting on my chest. I was too excited to sleep, but I lay perfectly still, pretending that I was, so as not to wake her. At some point in her sleep she rolled the other way and I spooned her. I laced my fingers through hers. Her grip tightened and she eased her body against mine. As we cuddled, I tried my best to attach myself to the warmth of the moment. It was one of those moments that I knew was going to end too soon, so I tried my best to absorb every ounce of it, already aware that the memory of it would not compare.

I didn’t end up sleeping at all. I just lay there the whole night, holding her and thinking to myself. At some point early in the morning, Michelle rolled over to face me. The sun was rising.

“You awake?” she asked.

“I guess,” I said, pretending her words had stirred me from slumber.

“I have to get ready and go to work.”

“Can I see you again?” I asked.

She smiled at me. “If you’re lucky.”

CHAPTER TEN

It's July now—over a month since I got that drink with Beau Brooks. That night with Beau has been replaying in my mind like a dream.

I decide to get out of the house today and take some photos. While I sit down in the family room to put on my shoes, I hear Aunt Cindy's podcast playing from the kitchen: "It's been less than a year since North Korea launched its most recent intercontinental ballistic missile test. That missile, the Hwasong-15, or KN-22, is believed to have a range capable of hitting the entire continental United States, according to estimates from the Missile Defense Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies..."

Today I head to the Milwaukee River. We live within walking distance of the Oak Leaf Trail, a cement bike path along a clearing that used to be a railroad. It sits atop a bluff that follows the river. There's also a footpath down below the bluff that runs right along the riverbank. Along this footpath the weathered and crumbling foundations of a number of old buildings remain. They're heavily graffitied, making them fun to photograph. The graffiti and the remains remind me that despite the beauty of the natural scenery, the lush greenery of the forest, I'm still in an urban setting. That and the occasional homeless camp. Or the ash of an impromptu fire pit. Or the occasional litter of beer cans and empty bottles of liquor.

I don't spend much time east of the river. Instead I bike across the Locust Street Bridge to Riverwest, to Gordon Park. Near the riverbank in Gordon Park are the remains of a retaining wall from the old Gordon Park Bathhouse, a swimming destination that opened in the early 1900s. All that remains now is one giant retaining wall. It's a big

architectural structure, a mass of concrete spanning maybe a hundred yards or so in length and ten feet or so in height, maybe a few feet thick. There are gaps where staircases line the wall, each with about a dozen or so steps leading down to a field of tall grass—the river’s edge no longer reaches as far as it once did. They used to dam the river to make it extend farther in the days of the bathhouse. The steps led to a shallower, enclosed area, one side of which was the giant retaining wall. I read online that this enclosed area was intended for children and elderly persons to be able to dip in the water safely. There were also a couple of diving platforms extending out far beyond the enclosed area. I’ve even seen one photo with a slide leading right into the water.

Nowadays the river is brown and smells like shit. I can’t imagine swimming in it.

The retaining wall is completely covered in graffiti—the illegible, calligraphic tags of local artists. I wander up and down, taking pictures from different angles, trying to match the angle of the historical photographs of the bathhouse I’ve seen online. It requires a lot of imagination to picture it as it once was, a giant two-story structure. I get a pretty cool looking out from atop one of the staircases. It’s from the POV of a person about to descend, as if about to enter the water. A giant tree branch cuts across the frame from the left side. The branch follows the retaining wall along the interior of the staircase and then extends down into the middle of the photo, hanging directly above the dozen or so steps and the rusted metal handrail dividing the frame. Along the interior sides of the staircase are more spray-painted tags. In the top-center of the photo is the long, knee-high grass where the water would’ve been. The entire image is casted in the dark shadows of the surrounding, overgrown trees. The few beams of sunlight that shine through the canopy provide an eerie sense of lighting.

I spend over a half-hour sitting on the top step, looking through my photos of the remains.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The morning after I spent the night with Michelle I went home and fell into a deep, deep sleep. Around the time Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby were getting home from work, I got out of bed and went downstairs.

“Hey, Mr. Hotshot,” Uncle Toby said, sitting at the kitchen table, chewing on an unlit cigar. “How was the funeral?”

“It was interesting,” I said.

“Where’d you sleep last night?” Aunt Cindy asked. “I was worried about you.”

“I met a woman,” I said.

“Hey, good for you,” Uncle Toby said. He turned and looked toward Aunt Cindy. “He spent the night with a woman.”

“Gabriel,” Aunt Cindy said. “I understand you’re a grown man now, but please, spare us the details.” She walked out of the kitchen into the laundry room off the back of the house.

“Spare *her* the details,” Uncle Toby said. “Tell *me* everything.”

“It was unusual, Uncle Toby,” I said. “You ever heard of Mica Dorsey?”

“Who?”

“She was Beau Brooks’ longtime girlfriend—it’s a long story. Anyway, the woman I spent the night with was Mica’s daughter, Michelle.” A part of me felt that I shouldn’t be sharing this with anyone. I had that same feeling of resistance that I had about sharing the fact that I’d met Beau. What if sharing this stuff would cause me to wake up? Still, I couldn’t help myself. I was too excited about it all. “She’s incredible, Uncle Toby,” I said. “She’s twenty-nine.”

“What the hell does she want with you?”

“I have no clue,” I said. “I think it’s because I know so much about Beau.”

“You going to see her again?”

“I hope so,” I said. “I don’t know what to do, though. I mean she gave me her number. But I want to play it cool, you know? I don’t want to call right away.”

“That’s smart,” Uncle Toby said. “Give it some time. Let the memory of you linger. There’s no rush.”

Aunt Cindy walked into the kitchen carrying a crate of laundry. “Gabriel,” she said. “You used to always come home. No matter how late, you’d always come home. These last few months I wake up and you aren’t in your bed. If you’re going to be gone *all* night, you’ve got to let me know. I worry about you. All I’m asking for is a text.”

“I know, Aunt Cindy,” I said. “I’ll let you know from now on.” I got up from the table and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“I don’t know where those lips have been,” Aunt Cindy said. “Go brush your teeth.”

“Listen, buddy, we got a wedding in Green Bay this weekend. I could really use an extra guy for this one. It’s a big one. Can I count on you?”

“Sure thing.” Normally, I would’ve said no. I didn’t really like doing weddings, but I was feeling so good that it didn’t seem like too big a deal. I felt I owed somebody something. Why not let Uncle Toby be that somebody?

“It’ll be good for you,” Uncle Toby said. “You’ve got to keep yourself busy. Otherwise the blues will creep in.”

I went upstairs and brushed my teeth. As I looked at myself in the mirror, I

couldn't help but think about how lucky I was. In that moment, the love I felt for Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby overwhelmed me. At twenty-two, most kids probably catch heat from their parents about the need to move out, get a real job, or at the very least pay some of the bills. Not with Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby. They always made it clear to me that I could live with them as long as I wanted to. That I should help pay for only what I felt was appropriate. And I did pay for some stuff, at least when I had the money. I shared with them willingly because my whole life they shared with me. In my mind, I owed them more than I could ever repay them.

Last time I got a check from Uncle Toby after a wedding we worked, I took them out to dinner at their favorite restaurant, a little white-tablecloth Italian joint down the street. At the end of the meal Uncle Toby still tried to grab for the bill. I had to practically rip it out of his hands. Everybody deserves to have folks like that.

It made me think of Beau and how he didn't have folks like that. Like me, Beau was also raised by his aunt and uncle. Except from what I know about them, they weren't as nice or as loving. They were the ones who forced him into acting at "the tender age of twelve"—those are the words he used. And when he got his first national ad campaign, they pulled him out of school and moved to Hollywood. They worked him around the clock, sending him to audition after audition, until he finally got that role in the sitcom, *Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail*.

Like me, Beau also never knew his father. His father was a drug dealer. He ended up getting shot and killed over a few kilos of cocaine. His mother was pregnant with him at the time, but she was keeping it a secret. Beau's father never even knew of his existence. Much the same with mine.

His mother made it work by herself for a few years, hustling and working, passing Beau around to whichever friend agreed to keep him alive while she went out and got high or went to work a shift at the diner. In talking about these years Beau would joke, “It takes a village.” But it was clear, especially to me, that he didn’t find those circumstances very funny. When he was around five years old or so his mother dropped him off at her brother’s house and never came back for him. When Beau confessed this to me and I told him my story, about how I never knew my father either, about how my mother got rid of me, he said, “I knew there was something about you. Something that made you similar to me—us downtrodden and rejected have to stick together.” He held up his glass and I clanked mine against it.

After I brushed my teeth, I stripped off my clothes and took a shower. I washed my hair and, perhaps for the first time, my beard. As I was lathering conditioner into the scruff, Sadie intruded my thoughts again. I tried to dismiss the scene but couldn’t: I’m on the bus with my camera, going somewhere to take pictures or returning home afterward. My phone rings and I answer it. It’s some man, a hospital employee with a voice grainy from age and an unsettling but not artificial gentleness, which seems to belie his experience. This is certainly not the first time he’s made a call like this. He’s compassionate, albeit somewhat distant but in no way detached. Somebody stumbled upon Sadie, he says. She was in the bathroom of a convenient store, unresponsive. She had been there for quite some time before being discovered. She’s dead. Though he doesn’t say it directly, his tone seems to say: *You will be okay. This is tragic. But you will overcome this. You are okay.* And it is because of his voice that I am able to begin the process of absorbing my new reality. Cut to a funeral home. I’m wearing my suit, holding

a bouquet of flowers, an arrangement of different kinds, of which the only names I know are tulips and roses, both white. I place them in an open casket. I look at her, trying to envision an animated person. Aunt Cindy stands beside me. Uncle Toby beside her. I look at Aunt Cindy and she whispers, "I'm so sorry, Gabriel." The only thing that varies in these scenes is my reaction. This time I'm terrified. A concrete, physical anxiety lodges itself somewhere between my diaphragm and my lungs. The sensation intensifies with each movement of my breath, in and out.

Then I remembered it hasn't happened yet. But the feeling in my chest remained.

Later that night as I sat at the table eating dinner with Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy, I placed my hand on my chest, still sensing that nameless, inexplicable dread with each breath. In and out. I expressed my gratitude to them, as I do sometimes on special occasions, though there was nothing special about this night. It was just a regular Monday night. I didn't realize it until then that I hadn't had a drink all day. Boy, could I use one.

"Gabriel, what's gotten into you?" Aunt Cindy asked. "You're emotional about Beau, aren't you?"

"I don't know," I said. "I suppose that's part of it." In and out.

"He's feeling all warm and fuzzy 'cause he got laid last night," Uncle Toby said.

"Toby!" Aunt Cindy shouted. "Spare me. We're eating dinner for Christ's sake."

"I just want you guys to know how much I love and appreciate you. Some children are raised by terrible people. Not everybody is as fortunate."

"You've given us more than we've given you," Aunt Cindy said.

Uncle Toby nodded in agreement. "If you really cared about us, though, you'd

join the family business. I mean seriously join, not just when we beg you to help out.”

“Oh don’t start in on that,” Aunt Cindy said. “You’re ruining the moment.”

“This is cause for celebration,” Uncle Toby said, walking over to the wine rack. He came back to the table with three glasses and a cheap bottle of red. I was excited to have a glass. After he poured us each one, he raised his high in the air and Aunt Cindy and I followed suit.

“To Gabriel’s big score,” Uncle Toby said.

“God damn it.” Aunt Cindy shook her head.

I couldn’t help but laugh. It felt nice to be recognized for something.

Later that week, on Thursday evening, I got a call from Michelle. A surge of adrenaline and anxiety ran through my veins when I saw her name appear on my phone.

“How was work?” I asked.

“Eh,” she said. “You want to come over?”

“Seriously?” I asked.

“No, I’m joking.”

I didn’t know what to say. I immediately regretted doubting her sincerity. Up until then, I’d managed to play it cool. But it was hard to stifle the overwhelming sense of infatuation I felt toward her.

“Yes, I’m serious.” Michelle giggled.

“I’ll head over right now.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

It's mid-July now.

I'm watching a video of a guy exploring the abandoned Northridge Mall on 76th and Brown Deer. This is an urban-exploring subculture in its own right—dead malls. There are entire websites and forums dedicated solely to now-abandoned shopping malls. These people are really nostalgic about them. They've made it their life's duty to document and catalog these sites. Mention Amazon on one of these forums and you're likely to incite a lot of rage. It makes me happy to know that this kind of work is being done. It's a thankless endeavor and when you think about it, generations from now, historians will be happy that some people had the forethought to do this work, if for nothing else to give future generations a glimpse into what these structures were like and how their demise impacted surrounding communities.

The next day I decide to go check out Northridge Mall for myself. It takes multiple transfers to get there by bus, but I bring a skateboard with me so I have a quick way in and out when I get there.

Northridge opened in 1972 but got a makeover in the late 80s. It eventually closed its doors in 2003. It's like walking into a time warp. The signage. The display cases. The Miami Vice color palate of the tiles and paint on the now-empty fountains of the atrium next to the Sears. In my mind, I can hear the 1980s electronic synthesizer music that might've played over the speakers. There's even a giant gift-wrapped box that must've been leftover from a Christmas display. Everything's been preserved so well and it looks fairly pristine, aside from some graffiti here and there. My favorite tag I see is outside on the main entrance, which has been boarded up. In big black spray-painted letters, it says:

I'M INVISIBLE.

My favorite part of the mall is the movie theatre, known simply as *the movies*—just like that, all lowercase. It looks original to the 1970s, with a brown and orange color palate that would've been outdated even by the 1980s. I'm never quite sure how much mold is in these places so I always make sure to bring my respirator with me. I typically wear it at all times while inside. A respirator is a must-have for any urban explorer.

Inside the offices of the mall security I find a binder with a bunch of Polaroids in the sleeves of page protectors. They're sort of mug shots—on the blank space beneath the film is the offender's name, the date of birth, the crime committed, and the date of the offense. For example, one is of an elderly woman, who seems visibly unenthused. In the blank space below the film it says:

Brombat, Martha 10-11-41

R Theft 12/21/95

There are hundreds of such photos.

I end up spending a few hours just wandering around inside. The most frustrating part of these kinds of explorations is the fact that there's so much left behind. I mean the signs and the outdated electronics and the other random odds and ends are actually worth something, not just from the perspective of historical preservation. There is a real market for this kind of stuff. People collect these things and here they are just sitting around collecting dust and mold. When and if they decide to tear down this place, all of it—collectibles and all—will get thrown away and end up in a landfill somewhere.

I contemplate this on the bus ride back downtown.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Michelle opened the door and gave me a hug and a kiss. The touch of her lips against mine was overwhelming. It was as if my bones were on fire—not an excruciating a fire but a warm one. She smelled really good, like flowers of some kind, like maybe she'd just gotten out of the shower, but her hair wasn't wet. She wasn't wearing as much makeup as she had on at the funeral, and although I noticed the difference, I liked it. Unadorned, she looked even more beautiful. Her eyes were so big that I almost feared they might fall out of her skull. They seemed so much larger without eye shadow or mascara.

She walked over to the bed and sat down pretzel-legged, her back leaning up against the headboard. Then she lit up a cigarette.

I sat down at the end of the bed, turning to look at her. Even though I was almost a foot taller than her, I felt intimidated by her. Physical intimidation has nothing to do with the physicality of the situation, at least not for me.

We sat there silently. She kept smoking her cigarette. I stared at her like a dog wanting to be pet.

“How come you didn't call me?” Michelle asked. “How come *I* had to be the one to reach out?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I guess I was just trying to play it cool.”

“Did you want this to be a one-night stand? Is that your normal routine?”

“Not at all,” I said. I wanted to admit to her that I'd never even had a one-night stand before, that she was only the second person I'd ever been with, but I felt somewhat flattered by her assumption. Compared to her idea of me, the real me was such a loser.

“I don’t like that, Gabriel,” Michelle said. “Don’t *play it cool* with me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Look,” Michelle said, setting the cigarette in the ashtray, “I don’t do one-night stands. That’s not my normal routine.”

“It’s not mine, either,” I said.

We sat there just looking at each other, both of us apparently contemplating our next move. I cracked a smile at her, and then she loosened up and smiled back at me.

“Come here,” she said, arms extended. I fell into her warm embrace.

I kissed her.

“I just smoked a cigarette,” she said. “My breath is gross.”

“I don’t mind,” I said.

“But I do.” She pushed me away from her. “Have you eaten yet? I’m starved.”

“I could eat.”

We walked down the block to get a slice of pizza. As we were walking, she grabbed my hand and I held onto hers, graciously. I couldn’t help but wonder if passersby took us for a couple—were we a couple? Despite what she’d said, I knew I still had to play it cool with her. Michelle must’ve mistaken me for a bright, mature, twenty-two-year-old man. The truth was that I was a naïve, twenty-two-year-old boy.

“So how old were you when your mother died?” I asked. I realized I still didn’t know much about her. And it was turning out that she was much different than I thought.

“Fourteen,” Michelle said. She must’ve been able to tell I was confused trying to do the math in my head, because she continued, “My mom was eighteen when she got pregnant with me. Twenty-three when she first met Beau—I was five. And I was around

nine or ten when they dated again, when it actually got serious, when she got pregnant with baby Sidney. And fourteen when she died.”

“You were a teenager when she died,” I said. “That must’ve been really tough.”

“Yeah, the hardest part was going to live with my dad. I mean he’s a good guy and everything, but he was not ready to be a father fulltime. And I was not ready to leave Milwaukee.”

We arrived at a little pizza stand only five or six blocks from her building. “I love this place,” she said. She peeked into the window, and an older gentleman with a gray mustache peered down at us from inside.

“What can I get you guys?”

“I’ll have a slice of pepperoni.” Michelle turned and looked at me.

“I’ll have the same,” I said. “And a large Coke.”

“Two pepperonis and a large Coke, coming right up. That’ll be ten dollars and twenty-four cents.”

Michelle reached inside of her purse.

“I’m paying,” I said.

“Such a gentleman.” She smiled.

We stood leaning up against the building, eating our slices.

“So tell me about your father,” I said. Michelle wasn’t really interested in talking, though. She was too busy eating her pizza. She stopped only to take sips of Coke.

“I’m sorry to pig out like that,” she said after she had finished. “I haven’t really eaten all day.” The way she was so unabashed was cute. She wiped her hands with the napkin and then used a separate one to wipe her face.

“Thanks for the pizza,” she said. “What was it you asked?”

“Your dad,” I said. “What’s he like?”

“He was in real estate,” she said. “Owned his own business. He’s retired now. Wasn’t really a part of my life all that much, aside from holidays and special occasions. But when Mom died I had to go live with him in Florida and it was weird for like the first year. But he got used to it—I guess we both did.”

“You still see him now?”

“He still lives in Florida. Sometimes he’ll come visit for holidays and stuff. Special occasions, just like how it used to be. Or I’ll go down there, especially during winter. He’s remarried now.”

We stopped inside the Walgreens on the way back to her apartment. While Michelle was in the candy aisle I bought her some flowers—I don’t even know what kind they were but there were a couple different kinds with different colors—white, red, yellow. I figured she had to like at least one of them. I waited for her outside in front of the store. She came out tapping a pack of cigarettes against the open palm of her hand. I presented the flowers to her, which I’d been holding out of sight behind my back.

“Oh my God, you’re so fucking adorable,” Michelle said.

I smiled at her. “I *was* going to play it cool, but I figured what the hell.”

She smiled and smelled them. “Good man.”

When we got back to Michelle’s apartment she wanted to watch one of Beau’s movies. She had most of them on DVD. We watched *The Days Run Away*, an indie drama about a dairy farmer from rural Wisconsin, played by Beau, who loses his way of life when a natural gas company starts buying up all the property in town. The woman

working for the gas company, played by Annie Sutcliffe, strikes up a love affair with the farmer and she ends up manipulating him into selling out. It's widely regarded as one of Beau's best performances, and it helped to establish him as more than just a comedic actor.

At the part where the farmer realizes that the woman was using him I looked over at Michelle and noticed she was crying. She must've seen the scene before, but she reacted as if watching it for the very first time. I had my arm around her. She leaned into me, and I couldn't help but feel teary myself, but not because of the scene in the movie. Suddenly, I was pulled out of the film and back into reality. I realized that the person on screen was not a dairy farmer from Wisconsin. It was an actor. It was my friend, Beau Brooks.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

One day around late September, many months after that first night with Beau, I happen to be on the Gold Line headed downtown to shoot some photos when I spot him again. I can't believe it. It must be providence, or destiny, or whatever you want to call it. I mean, what are the odds? But there he is, standing, wearing a sweatshirt with the hood up, hunched over, trying to keep his head down and blend in. His beard is even longer now. Apparently, he's given up on shaving, which is hard to do in the summer, even in Milwaukee where the summers are relatively mild. He looks up at me and, upon noticing my smile and the camera hanging around my neck, says, "You."

"It's me."

"Gabriel, right?"

"You have a good memory," I say.

He gets off at the next stop and I follow him off the bus.

On the street, he walks right beside me. "You know," Beau says. "I've been thinking about making a documentary. Is that something you'd be able to help me with?"

"Are you serious?" I ask. "It'd be a dream come true."

"I want people to know the real me."

"And you want me to direct and edit it?"

"I'll direct it," he says. "I need you to film and edit it. Is that something you can do?"

"Of course," I say. "Why me, though? Why not hire somebody in the industry?"

"You want it or not?"

"Of course," I say.

“You can even keep the profits,” Beau says. “I’m not interested in the money. I just want people to know the real me.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I say. “Just pay me the going rate.”

“Jesus, kid,” he says. “You’re poor. What’s your gripe with making some money?”

“I don’t have a problem with it,” I say.

“Meet me at The Mountain Bar at eleven. We can discuss the details.”

From that night on, we hang out regularly, drinking at The Mountain Bar together at least once a week. Some weeks he’s traveling, or just doesn’t show up for whatever reason. But every Tuesday, at eleven o’clock, I’m there at the Mountain Bar, waiting for him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

That Friday, January 18th—eleven days after Beau died—I met with Maloney again at The Jive Java. He wanted to see me again before heading back to Los Angeles. I arrived there before he did. I pulled out my flask and admired it. Then I poured some whiskey into my coffee—“a little snakebite.” That’s what Beau would say when he poured whiskey into coffee.

“The Trust is still being settled in probate.” Maloney chuckled. “You know what it said in his will?”

“...”

“He wants all his wealth to go to The Actors of Tomorrow. You know what that is?”

“No idea,” I said.

“Yeah, I had no clue either. I had to look it up. It’s some nonprofit that hosts programs and camps to teach poor kids how to act. Keeps them off the streets and out of trouble. They’re going to use some of the money to build a theatre in his name.”

“That’s a good cause, though, isn’t it?” I asked.

“I guess,” Maloney said. “It’s just sad that he didn’t have anybody close to him to leave it to. I’m not saying it should’ve been me. But it’s sad that some organization is getting all of his money and not a friend or loved one, don’t you think?”

“I guess so,” I said. “But maybe he thought all that money was too big a burden to give to somebody else. *Especially* a friend or loved one.”

“He was always the kind of person to buy people things. He wouldn’t go out of his way to think of gift ideas for people, but anytime somebody he knew mentioned a

financial problem, he would fix it.”

“Doesn’t surprise me,” I said. “He bought Tug that expensive sleeping bag.”

“You hear about the time he gave that valet guy his brand new Impala?”

“Uh-uh.”

“The guy worked for Cosmic Pictures, the studio that made *Hurricane Tides*.

Every day Beau would show up on the lot and this valet guy would park his car. One day Beau showed up and had to park his car himself because the guy wasn’t there. The next day Beau asked him where he had been the day before and the guy explained that his car had broken down and that he’d had to catch the bus. Beau threw him the keys and said, keep it—it’s yours. Of course, the guy laughed, assuming Beau was kidding. But Beau took a taxi home that day. The next day Beau showed up in one of his other cars with the pink slip to the Impala, which was still parked on the lot from the day before. The valet guy was perplexed.”

“...”

“There are a lot of stories like that. Plus, he didn’t stray away from spending money on himself, at least until he moved out here. I was always worried that he wouldn’t have enough to sustain him over the long run. But now I see that was a foolish thought.”

That day I took the Gold Line back to the East Side. There was a guy on the bus who looked like Beau, wearing a sweatshirt with the hood up, hunched over, head down, blending in. And I thought, there he is.

Then I remembered.

It’s not him.

I pulled out my flask and took a long swig.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I'm sitting at The Mountain Bar waiting for Beau, thinking about the day I first ran into him on the Gold Line almost six months ago, and then how lucky I am to have run into him again just a few months after that in September. It's November now and it's very cold. On nights where I get there before Beau, I tell the bartender, Roy, that Beau will be arriving shortly, that we'll need the booth for the night. He sets it up for us, roping it off to the end of the bar. I never even have to ask him to make me an old fashioned. He just brings it to me.

Eventually Beau walks in with his hair all over the place, crumbs and lint in his beard. "Gabriel," Beau says. "That's a biblical name isn't it?"

"Yeah," I say. "I believe it is." I don't know for sure, but that sounds right.

"It is. The archangel. Who gave you that name?"

"I think my Aunt Cindy came up with it."

"Women always come up with the best names," Beau says. "It was my aunt who came up with my stage name."

"*Beau Brooks*," I say. "Has a ring."

"Fuck her. She was a rotten lady. I was her pet more than I was her child. As soon as I turned eighteen, I got the hell away from her. She was so pissed about it. She was still my manager at the time so I had to go behind her back and hire a lawyer just to get control of my money and terminate her contract."

"Is she still around?"

"Hell no," Beau says. "She died of a heart attack about a decade ago. I didn't even bother going to her funeral."

“Do you feel like you owe her something for kickstarting your career?”

“That’s why I hated her guts,” Beau says. “I don’t thank her for it—I blame her for it. I missed out on childhood—a normal life—because of that greedy bitch. She was a failed actress and that’s why she pushed me into it. It was her dream. She wanted the money and the fame. Not me.”

“You don’t like acting?” I ask.

“I love it,” Beau says.

“Then why don’t you do it anymore?” I ask.

“Oh, I do.”

“...”

“Well, after I stopped doing movies I did those Broadway plays for a few years. But it’s just not what it used to be.”

“You mean the industry?”

“After I did that long stint in rehab I figured out what it is I liked about it. It was like I saw behind the curtain.”

“I don’t get it,” I say.

“I wanted so badly to be somebody else. You really *do* lose yourself in the role you’re playing. Method acting isn’t about a sincere performance, at least not for me. It’s a portal into somebody else. It’s a way to get out of your own headspace. The best escape there is.”

“Then why not continue?”

“Once I saw behind the curtain it wasn’t the same anymore. For me it’s an escape, but I never even realized that I was escaping—it was just who I was and what I’d always

done.”

“...”

“After rehab, when I was on Broadway, no matter how immersed I was, there was always this part of me looking at myself from the outside. I could be present, fully engaged in the moment, but there was always this small part of me watching from outside myself. It’s hard to explain.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” I say.

He took a sip of his martini.

“So you sucked at it after getting clean?” I asked.

“I didn’t suck,” Beau says. “I mean, for the most part the critics and reviewers praised my performances. Touted my newfound success as another version of The Great American Comeback Story. But the acting just felt like torture all of a sudden.”

“I guess if you don’t enjoy it then you *shouldn’t* do it.”

“It’s like I’ve spent my whole life being somebody else, going from one role to the next. I don’t want to be a character in someone else’s story anymore. I just want to be me. That’s what I’m trying to do now. It’s the toughest role I’ve ever had—being Leonard. I’m really good at being Beau. Now I just want to be Leonard.”

Some time passes before either of us speaks again.

“Let’s get out here,” Beau says. “I got an idea. Something I want to show you.”

Beau pays Roy and then we leave The Mountain Bar and take a bus downtown.

“Lucky’s Gentlemen’s Club,” Beau says to me. We’re standing in front of a brick, three-story building with tinted windows. Without the sign hanging over the door it’d be impossible to know the nature of this establishment.

I've never been to a strip club before—never wanted to. I feel really uncomfortable, but I don't want Beau to think any less of me. We walk in and the bass of the music is perceptible in my chest. It drowns out the vibration of my own heartbeat. Beau is handing people money left and right as a bouncer leads us to a private booth sunken into the floor on the side of the main stage. It's secluded, surrounded by red felt curtains, except for the opening facing the stage.

I feel gross looking at all the beautiful, scantily dressed women walking around. A lot of them look my age. I can't help but imagine that they could've been in high school with me just a few years ago. I keep envisioning them in normal clothes, sitting at the desk next to me while some teacher stands at the front of the room lecturing us about the proper use of a semicolon.

"This is weird," I yell at Beau. He places his hand up to his ear, and I yell again, "Let's get out of here. This is weird."

"First time?" Beau says, I can't hear him, but I read as his lips form the words. He leans over the table between us and I turn my head so that my ear is facing him. "Don't worry," he shouts. "We'll just sit back and watch."

He is very generous with his money. Every time a woman comes up to us he slips her some money, and she begins performing for him. But then he whispers in her ear and she shrugs her shoulders and walks away, counting the bills. We watch a few routines on the main stage. We have drink after drink and the more I drink the more fun I'm having, but simultaneously the more I feel ashamed for having fun. But it does seem like the women performing are genuinely having fun, too, but still I can't help but feel sad for them. Then I feel judgmental for feeling sad for them. No matter how much I drink, I

can't shake the feeling that I don't belong here.

I get up to use the restroom and as I walk around looking for it I notice the other people at the club. They are all dressed fairly well, better than I would've imagined: a lot of suits and loosened ties, as if these men just left their day jobs. There are even some couples here, men and women out celebrating who knows what, drinking champagne. I watch a girl in a red dress get a lap dance while a man, who must be her boyfriend, sits back drinking champagne and observing.

After an hour or so, Beau taps the table to get my attention and then he points toward the door. We emerge onto the street and the sounds of the city, loud in their own right, feel like an escape from the thumping of the club music. We start strolling down the sidewalk, destination unknown. It seems we both want to walk for a bit.

"That was interesting," I say.

"That, kid, was a lesson in presence," Beau says.

"..."

"Those girls deserve Oscars."

"You think they enjoy doing that?" I ask.

"That's beside the point," Beau says. "The point is that they make you believe they enjoy doing it. They make you believe what they are doing is the work of God."

"I don't know if I'd call that the work of God."

"You're telling me you didn't have fun?" Beau asks. "Don't lie to me. I saw that smile sneak onto your face. You came around. You enjoyed yourself."

"Yeah, I guess so," I say, unsure if I'm telling the truth or merely reciting what Beau wants to hear.

“Those girls are the true performers. The *true* actors. They leave the dressing room and once they hit the floor they become a different person—totally immersed. They even use a different name. The only time you feel shame is when *you* fall out of the role that you’re playing. Don’t get it twisted, the customer is playing a role, too. Everybody in that place—performers, bartenders, bouncers, customers—everybody is acting. And they’re all so comfortable. At least they fool us into thinking that.”

“Can’t you say that about almost any consumer situation? I mean isn’t every person acting to some extent.”

Beau’s eyes just about double in size. “Exactly!” he says, holding up his hands as if framing an image. “Now you’re seeing the big picture.”

“You go to get a cup of coffee and the barista doesn’t give a shit about you or your latte,” I say, “but they pretend that they do because their livelihood depends on it. Everyone’s acting.”

“Exactly,” Beau says. “But a strip club is an elevated form of the kind of acting that all of us do on a daily basis. Walking into a strip club is like walking into another dimension entirely. You check your day-to-day self at the door with your coat and for the time being, you’re somebody else too. You’re playing a role. And there’s a sort of honesty in it, because more so than other consumer situations everybody involved is aware of the role that they’re supposed to play and they all agree to play it, at least for the time being. There is no pretense or deception. It’s very clear to everyone. It’s like the most real, most genuine place on earth.”

“I never realized a strip club could be so magical.”

“It’s alive with the same energy that created the universe,” Beau says. “It’s the

work of God at play.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When I got home after meeting with Maloney, Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby were already back from work. I walked through the front door and they were sitting at the kitchen table, seemingly waiting for me.

Aunt Cindy's podcast played from the speaker on the kitchen table: "Ross A. Gallon announced that he's running as a part of his newly established political party, The Canine Party. Part of his platform includes improving access to and lowering the costs of pet-adoption services. He plans to change the tax code as a way incentivizing Americans to own more pets—"

Aunt Cindy turned off the podcast.

"Have a seat, son," Uncle Toby said. "We need to talk."

Aunt Cindy wouldn't even look at me.

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Just have a seat, Gabriel," Aunt Cindy snapped.

I pulled out the chair and sat down.

"It's your mother," Aunt Cindy said.

"She called to speak to you," Uncle Toby added.

"That's it?" I asked. "That's what all this is about?" I backed the chair up and started to stand. Uncle Toby grabbed my wrist and squeezed it, nodding at me. I sat back down.

"There's more," Aunt Cindy said. "You know she's six months clean now."

"So what?" I asked. "That doesn't mean anything."

"You ought to see her, Gabriel." Uncle Toby said. "She's coming tomorrow

morning. You can stay home. We'll find a way to manage the Green Bay wedding by ourselves."

I didn't say anything. If I'd had it my way, I'd never have to see her again, but every once in a while, Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy would arrange something with her. It was mostly Uncle Toby's doing. Aunt Cindy, like me, felt nothing but hostility toward her. But Uncle Toby was convinced that we owed it to her to let her have some time with me. "A person like her needs hope," he'd say.

I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out an envelope, sliding it onto the table.

"What's that?" Aunt Cindy asked.

Uncle Toby opened the envelope and examined some twenty-dollar bills. "What's the meaning of this?"

"I pulled some money out of my savings. I *was* going to take us out for a nice dinner. But now it feels weird."

I got up and grabbed the envelope and then went upstairs to my bedroom. I grabbed the bottle of whiskey hidden under my bed. I refilled my flask and then drank all of it, the whole flask's worth. After an hour or two of watching YouTube videos I called Michelle and asked her if she wanted to grab some drinks. She was already out with some friends. She asked me if I wanted to join them, but I declined. I sat there and watched YouTube videos until I went to bed.

The next day, Saturday, I awoke to Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy knocking on my bedroom door.

“Gabriel,” Uncle Toby said, walking into my room. They were both dressed in their wedding attire—Uncle Toby in a black suit with a white bowtie and a cumber bun, and Aunt Cindy in a long cream-colored dress. “We’re heading to the gig now. Get up and take a shower, your mother will be here in a couple hours.”

Aunt Cindy walked over to my bed and kissed my forehead. “Try to be nice to her, Gabriel. Remember, it’s not easy for her, either,” she said.

“Life’s equally hard for everyone,” Uncle Toby said.

“I love you,” Aunt Cindy said.

“Love you, buddy,” Uncle Toby yelled out, already descending the stairs.

Within a minute or so the front door slammed and they were gone. I got up and showered.

As I left the bathroom and walked into my bedroom, bath towel wrapped around my waist, my phone rang. It was Michelle. We had plans to go to brunch together. When I’d heard Sadie was coming for a visit, I figured I’d let Michelle be there for it. I knew if I were to ask her she would likely say no. Michelle and I had only just met, after all. But I wanted to have a third person there, somebody who could fill the awkward silences with meaningless conversation.

“I’m at the address you gave me,” Michelle said. “I’ve been here for the last five minutes ringing the doorbell.”

I went downstairs and let her in. “Sorry,” I said. “The doorbell’s broken. I was in the shower.” My towel was still around my waist. Michelle leaned in and kissed me. Until then I had been feeling hungover and emotionally numb, but Michelle’s lips lit a fire inside me and suddenly I was awake—the dread of my mother’s visit blended with

the excitement of seeing Michelle, creating an agonizing neurochemical cocktail.

She followed me up the stairs, playing my butt cheeks like bongos with every step. “Do we have time to fool around before we go?” Michelle asked.

“I’m not in the mood.” I forced a smile.

“That’s all right,” she said. “Just trying to cheer you up.”

She sat in my little twin-sized bed, surveying my room. “So this is your lair? It looks like a thirteen-year-old boy lives here.”

“Look,” I said, walking over to the dresser in my closet, “we’re not going to brunch. Well, I mean, we can. But Sadie, my mother, is coming to visit me. She’s a drug addict. I haven’t seen her in a while. I forgot she was coming today and I didn’t want to blow off our brunch date. I’m sorry, Michelle. Maybe the three of us could go together?”

I pulled out a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt, dropping my towel to get dressed.

“You want me to meet your Mom? I wish I would’ve known beforehand. I should’ve brought something for her. Flowers or something. Oh my God, this is a lot of pressure.”

“She’s not my mom. She’s my mother. Big difference. No pressure. All the pressure is on her. Trust me. *You* have nothing to be nervous about.”

“Are you sure you want me here? We can go to dinner tonight instead. This feels like a big step.”

“Yes,” I said. I sat down on the middle of the bed to face her. She had taken off her shoes and was seated pretzel-legged, leaning against the headboard. “Please, stay. It’ll be so much easier on both of us if you’re there. You’d be doing me a huge favor. Plus, it’s not even that big of a deal. Like I said, I don’t really see her that often. It’s not like

you're meeting Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby. It's just Sadie."

"Okay," Michelle said, smiling. "But I should've brought her something."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Sadie's opinion of you means nothing to me. Save the gifts for Aunt Cindy."

Still snooping around, Michelle found the envelope on my nightstand. "What's this?" she asked, opening it.

"Money from my savings," I said. I had saved up a couple grand from all the weddings I'd done with Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy. I'd pulled out five hundred dollars.

"I want to take us out to a fancy dinner tonight," I said. "My treat."

Michelle smiled.

"By the way," I said. "Don't mention anything to Sadie about Beau." I took the envelope from Michelle, folded it in half, and then placed it in the front pocket of my jeans.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Promise me you won't," I said.

"All right," Michelle said.

"Promise me."

"All right, I promise." Grinning, she traced the shape of a *t* across her breasts.

"Cross my heart."

"Let's go wait downstairs. I'll make us a pot of coffee."

Sadie showed up at noon, right on the dot. She looked terrible, especially for forty. Her skin wrinkled and sagged around her chin and neck, aged well beyond her

years. Her hair was greasy and thin, a large percentage of it split ends. It had been only a year or so since I'd last seen her. She looked like she had aged five.

"Gabriel," she said, reaching out to hug me. "My Gabey Baby."

"Hello, Sadie," I said, letting her hug me.

"Look at your scruff." She placed her hand on my cheek. I hadn't shaved since the day of Beau's funeral. She looked at Michelle, who was standing next to me, hands crossed behind her back.

"This is Michelle. She's a friend of mine."

"Hello," Michelle said, reaching out her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Sadie grabbed her hand and smiled. "Gabriel, she's so pretty."

"Thank you," Michelle said. "That's really sweet. I love your shoes." Sadie was wearing her customary black Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars. She had a frayed hoodie on that was covered in splatters of white paint.

"Thank you, sweetheart," Sadie said, then she looked back over to me. "Did you grow another couple inches?"

"Nope. Been around six-four for about the last five years now."

"I bet you did. You seem taller."

"I made some coffee," I said, leading her into the kitchen, where she immediately sat down at the table. I grabbed three cups and poured us each one. Michelle sat down across from her. I grabbed the creamer from the refrigerator and then joined them at the head of the table. As I was sitting down it dawned on me that there was only eleven years of age between Michelle and my mother. It seemed like so much more than that.

"I've been trying to work a lot," Sadie said. "I've been keeping my nose clean,

you know.” She pulled her keys out of her purse and flashed a blue Narcotics Anonymous tag. “Over six months now. I’m working the steps again.”

“That’s good to hear,” I said. “Good for you.”

“Congratulations,” Michelle said, smiling.

“I do wish I could see you more,” Sadie said. “You know it took me over three hours to get here on the train.”

“Chicago’s not as close as you’d think.”

“Anyway,” Sadie said, “catch me up. What have you been up to? How’d you meet Michelle?”

“It’s a long story.” I looked at Michelle, as if to say, *don’t engage her*.

“Believe it or not, we met at a funeral,” Michelle said.

“We don’t have to tell her about that,” I said.

“Why not?” Sadie said. “I want to hear all about it.”

Michelle looked at me for a moment. Then she turned to Sadie and said, “Have you heard of Beau Brooks?”

“Yeah, that actor who just offed himself. He’s come up at just about every meeting this last week or two.”

“We met at his funeral,” Michelle said.

“All right, that’s enough,” I said. “We don’t need to tell her about all this. What else is new with you?” I looked to Sadie.

“Hold on a minute,” Sadie said. “Why can’t I know how you guys met? Is it that embarrassing?”

“It’s not embarrassing at all,” Michelle said. “Gabriel was a friend of Beau’s.”

There was no stopping it. I got up and left the table, walking into the family room where I turned on the TV. Michelle proceeded to tell Sadie everything about Beau—how I'd been hanging out with him, how I was with him the night he died, how she and I met at the funeral. She went on and on while I sat there on the couch in the next room watching sports highlights.

At some point the two of them walked into the family room. Michelle sat next to me on the couch. Sadie sat in Uncle Toby's La-Z-Boy recliner.

"Sadie," Michelle said, "what do you do for work?"

They were acting like they'd known each other for years, like two old friends catching up.

"I got a job through the halfway house. I'm a custodian at an office building. It's pretty boring but it keeps me out of trouble."

I got up and headed toward the stairs. The two were so engrossed in their conversation that they barely noticed me leaving. I went up to my bedroom where I sat on my bed reading a magazine. I took the opportunity to fill up my flask, which I kept hidden in the front pocket of my hoodie. About fifteen minutes later Michelle walked in.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I told you not to mention anything."

"Yeah, but I don't understand why it matters. She's curious about what's going in your life. Why is that a bad thing?"

"You didn't pick up on my hints to change the subject?"

"What does it matter?" Michelle asked. "What's the big deal?"

"She's my mother, not yours. I don't want her knowing that stuff."

“I’m sorry.” Michelle crossed her arms over her chest. “Come back downstairs. I won’t say anything else.”

“This is all wrong,” I said. “I shouldn’t have invited you over for this.”

“You probably shouldn’t have. Why invite me if you’re going to censor me? Maybe I shouldn’t have stayed. But here I am. And Sadie’s downstairs and she’s come all this way to see you. And here you are hiding like a scared little boy.”

That stung.

“Gabriel, I’m sorry for mentioning Beau. I didn’t realize it was that big of deal.”

“Well, you should have.” I tried not to look at her. It was hard to be angry with her—she looked so cute. Somehow in that moment I felt bad for her. Like I was making a big deal out of nothing. Like she’d gotten the worst of this whole situation. “I guess it’s not really a big deal. I just don’t like being around her.”

Michelle nodded. Then she left the room and walked back downstairs. I followed behind her. Sadie was sitting on the couch reading a magazine. She’d just come back inside after smoking a cigarette. I could smell the menthol from the bottom of the stairs.

“Is everything all right?” Sadie asked.

“Yes,” I said, sitting down on the recliner.

Michelle grabbed her purse and headed toward the front door. “Excuse me, I’m going to go smoke.” I could see her a moment later through the window of the front door, puffing away and swaying back and forth.

“Should we go grab a bite to eat somewhere?” Sadie asked.

“I’m not hungry, Sadie,” I said.

“I wish you’d call me *Mom* like you used to.”

“Aunt Cindy is my mom,” I said.

“She may have raised you. But I birthed you.”

I walked out of the room and into the kitchen to refill my cup. “Need a refill?” I asked.

Sadie nodded. “How did you manage to become friends with a movie star?”

In the kitchen I pulled out my flask and poured some whiskey into my coffee. “Right place, right time,” I said, walking back into the family room with the coffee pot. I filled her mug.

“Thank you,” Sadie said. “You know, you ought to be careful with that one.”

Sadie looked toward the front door. “She’s using you for something.”

“Give me a break,” I said.

“What’s she want with you?” Sadie asked. “She’s older than you, richer than you. What’s she need you for? You’re too young for her.”

Michelle walked back into the house. She smiled at the two of us and then headed toward the kitchen. “Anybody need a refill?” she asked.

“We’re all set,” I said. “The pot’s in here if you want more.”

“I’m all right,” Michelle said. She was going to the kitchen not to get more coffee but to wash out her mug. Normally I would’ve told her not to bother, just set it in the sink and I’ll wash it later. But for some reason in this moment I didn’t stop her, my guest, from cleaning up after herself. The lack of etiquette in that was not lost on me.

Once Michelle’s back was turned to us, Sadie looked at me and raised her eyebrows, as if to say Michelle wasn’t worth that effort.

We finished our coffee and then walked to a nearby diner. At the diner Michelle

and Sadie continued to do most of the talking. I hated listening to them. I would have much rather gone to the wedding with Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy. Somehow the two of them together made me feel out of place.

As Sadie perused the menu, she said, “Twelve dollars for a breakfast burrito? At that price it should be the size of a newborn. These hipsters might get away with overcharging the college kids but they can’t expect working folks to pay that much.”

I found it hilarious that she considered herself working folk.

After we finished, when the checks came, Michelle offered to pay.

“It’s all right,” I told Michelle. “I got it.” I wasn’t planning on paying for Sadie but I *was* planning on paying for Michelle. Now I’d gotten roped into paying for both of them.

“No, please, Gabriel. It’s my treat,” Michelle said.

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Sadie said, refusing to even feign resistance.

“Michelle, really, I got it,” I said. I couldn’t let Sadie take advantage of her like that.

“Gabriel. Enough. I’m paying. You didn’t let me buy her flowers. I’m buying the meal.”

I was helpless so I nodded. Michelle flashed a cute, victorious smile. It was so adorable. I loved merely observing her. The smallest of things about her absolutely delighted me, and now, even in the presence of Sadie, I couldn’t help but enjoy Michelle’s idiosyncrasies—the way she signed the bill, tipping 25%, crossing out all other copies except for the merchant’s copy, leaving a little note of thanks and a smiley face for the server. Before the check had even arrived, while we sat there waiting for the

server, Michelle had taken her paper placement from underneath her plate and tore it and folded it into the most complicated origami flower, which she placed atop the bill for the server.

Out on the sidewalk in front of the diner, Sadie gave me a hug and then shook Michelle's hand.

"Finally," I muttered, as Sadie walked down the block and disappeared from our sight.

Michelle leaned in and kissed me. "Have you been drinking? You smell like whiskey."

"I can't stand her," I said. "I had to add some medicine to my coffee."

"Gabriel." Michelle shook her head, smiling. "I would've never figured you for a day drinker."

"Today I am," I said.

"Not impressed." She shook her head. Her smile evaporated.

That stung. I didn't know how to respond.

"Speaking of which," I said, "let's go get a couple pints and then head downtown."

"Beer only. Then we'll go to that nice dinner."

I nodded in agreement.

After we drank a couple beers apiece at a hole in the wall on the East Side, we took the Gold Line downtown and then took a walk along the lakefront. The wind was whipping off the lake with a vengeance, aggressive. But it was nice because it forced Michelle to lean against me for warmth as we strolled. I was feeling nice and drunk, but

not as drunk as I wanted to be. As of late it took more and more drinks to get where I wanted to go. We made it to McKinley Marina and I realized we weren't too far from The Mountain Bar. I hadn't gone back since that last night with Beau.

“Want to see where I would meet with Beau?” I asked Michelle. “We're not too far from it.”

“More drinks?” Michelle asked. “I thought you were going to take me out to dinner.”

“It's still early,” I said. “We have all night.”

“Lead the way.” Michelle smiled, her arm hooked through mine.

Although I knew Beau wasn't going to be there, I felt as excited as I did those nights when I'd go to meet him. But a part of me also dreaded going back. It was hard to believe that it had only been eleven days. Everything was so different now.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It's been a couple months since I got that drink with Beau Brooks. It's August now and it's hot outside. Today I'm home alone. Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby are out working an event, a birthday party or something like that. I'm supposed to mow and weedwhack the lawn. I'm sitting in my room watching YouTube videos—more urban exploring videos. The one I'm currently watching is of an abandoned college campus, Knoxville College.

The place in this video reminds me of a place I've heard about not too far from here. I had a friend in high school whose older brother had been there before. It's in Mequon, overlooking Lake Michigan. I've driven by it many times in the past without even giving much thought as to what's inside. It's an abandoned Catholic boarding school called Our Lady of the Lake. It opened in the 1950s and has been shutdown since the 1980s. Given the fact that it was a school for boys run by the Catholic Church, rumors abound as to why it was finally closed.

I don't have a solid plan to explore it today, or in the near future for that matter. But it's definitely a bucket-list location. I know I will check it out some day. First I have to do more reconnaissance work. Luckily there's the Internet, filled with urban exploring forums.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We walked into The Mountain Bar and it was a relief to see how dark it was on the inside. And it felt nice to get out of the cold. We sat down at the bar. I thought about sitting in the booth, but it didn't feel right. As far as I was concerned nobody should be allowed to sit there anymore.

The bartender had his back to us, cleaning glasses by hand in the three-sink system. He looked up at us in the mirror. Then he turned around. It was Roy.

"Gabriel?" Roy asked. "How the hell are you doing? I'm so bummed to hear about Beau. I saw the paper. You were with him that night, weren't you?"

"Yes," I said. "Yes I was."

"I got an old fashioned coming right up for you," Roy said. "And what can I get for you, Miss?"

"I'll take a Manhattan," Michelle said. Then she looked at me, forehead wrinkled.

"Michelle, this is Roy," I said. "He's the regular bartender here. He's the one who always served me and Beau. Roy, this is Michelle. She was pretty close with Beau, too."

"Oh no," Roy said. "My condolences. He was a hell of a guy. Easily my favorite regular. We're going to miss him around here."

"He *was* something," Michelle said.

Roy busied himself making our drinks.

"So this is it?" Michelle asked. "This is the place?"

"This is it." I pointed out the booth, and explained how Roy would rope it off for us and how Beau would always sit with his back to the bar and the rest of the patrons.

We sat there in an eerie silence.

“So, Gabriel, can I ask you something?” Roy said.

“Shoot.”

“You still going to make that documentary?”

“Afraid not,” I said. “Not much was actually recorded.”

“That’s too bad,” Roy said. “I would’ve loved to see what came of it.”

“You and I both,” I said. “I hate to say this, Roy, but I probably won’t be able to come here very often anymore. Without Beau I can’t afford to pay fifteen dollars for a handmade cocktail.”

“Jesus,” Michelle said. “Do you guys milk an alcoholic to get this liquor?”

Roy laughed.

“I will say this, though—Roy, you’re an artist. These are easily the best cocktails in Milwaukee.”

Roy nodded and then returned to his duties at the sink.

“Gabriel,” Michelle said. “Can you promise me something?”

“Depends what it is.”

“Promise me you won’t try to drink through your grief. I know it’s probably tough for you and all, and it’s all right to have a few drinks and let loose. But just make sure you’re doing it for the right reasons.”

“I know to mind myself. I’m not like Sadie.”

“I’m worried about you is all.” Michelle ran her hands through my hair. “You can talk to me you know. I’m here for you.”

“You don’t have to worry,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“Promise me?” Michelle asked.

I traced the shape of a *t* across my chest. “Cross my heart.”

“You like pleasing me, don’t you?”

I smiled. The fire lit itself in the marrow of my bones. I wanted to leave and be alone with her. I wanted to have her taste in my mouth. “I love pleasing you.”

The smile on her face disappeared. Her face was serious and her voice stern. “Then take care of yourself. Don’t be like him. Men like him don’t please anybody but themselves. They end up alone.”

I knew she meant my drinking. I’d quit for the rest of my life if it meant I could have her. She was better than alcohol, any drug.

I nodded and her face eased.

“Why are you so hard on your mom?” she asked.

“She’s not my mom. She may be my mother, but Sadie is not my mom. Aunt Cindy is my mom... You don’t get it, Michelle.”

“That’s why I’m asking you to explain it to me.”

She does this all the time, I told Michelle. She makes a run at sobriety and she gets some clean time under her belt and then she shows up and acts like nothing happened. Like I owe it to her to be nice to her. I see her regularly for a little bit, and then she falls off the wagon and starts using again. She goes on and on until she’s strung out and hits the bottom, whether that means getting arrested, getting fired, overdosing, you name it. Then she swears to get clean, swears that she’s going to make a healthy life for herself. And she does, for a little bit. And then the cycle repeats itself. It’s exhausting. Aunt Cindy and I are over it. We’ve pretty much given up all sense of hope that she will ever turn her life around. But Uncle Toby falls for it every time. If he’s got one flaw, it’s

that he's too forgiving. He badgers us on Sadie's behalf, talking about how this could be the one time, talking about how people *do* get clean for good sometimes, sure it's rare, but it can happen, talking about how we owe it to her to give her another chance. And so we do, just to appease him, and the same old shit always happens. Again and again. Over and over.

Michelle stared at me with her big doughy eyes.

"You can be nice to her, because you have the benefit of having just met her," I said. "I've known her too long. I know her too well."

"Yeah, well, that's how I feel about Leonard," Michelle said. "That man was stuck in that same hopeless cycle. You just happened to meet him at the right time, before you'd seen too much. I can't help but feel relieved that he's dead now, because that cycle *is* exhausting. Especially for the people on the outside looking in. At least he's done pushing the boulder up the hill."

I knew Beau had had a rough time of it, too. But I'd never seen Beau hit the bottom. I mean sure, he was well on his way all those months I was with him. But he never lost control around me. He was always so great to me.

Until then, I had never even made the comparison between him and Sadie. But Michelle was right. Beau was more like Sadie than I cared to admit. Michelle had seen Beau fall off, had seen him hit the bottom, the same way I'd seen Sadie do it. Michelle looked at him the way I looked at Sadie—a person whose case was completely and utterly hopeless, a person whose timer was counting down fast.

It was much easier to feel bad for Beau than it was to feel angry. And it was easier to feel angry toward Sadie than it was to pity her. But the two emotions are like

cousins—they come from different parents but they share some of the same genes.

Michelle pointing out the similarities between Beau and Sadie made me transfer emotions back and forth between the two of them. A part of me now felt pity for Sadie and another part of me now felt angry with Beau. And then I felt guilty for having felt angry because the anger I felt toward them contradicted the pity I felt—another one of those agonizing neurochemical cocktails, agonizing enough to make me want to order another drink.

I needed Roy to make me another old fashioned and I needed Michelle here next to me. And yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that I didn't belong here. It's not just that I didn't belong at The Mountain Bar—I didn't belong in this situation. Everything in my life had become so complex since I'd met Beau. Whereas before I thought it was the greatest thing that had ever happened to me, now I considered it to be the worst. The only good that had come out of it was Michelle. But I wanted to go back to being alone. To not knowing her. I didn't realize how alone I'd been before meeting Beau and Michelle. I'd spent almost all my time by myself, watching videos on YouTube. But it never bothered me then. I liked being alone, loved it even. It was a much simpler time. It was boring at times, sure, but it was peaceful. There really *are* worse things than being alone. Now I had Michelle, and although I cared deeply about her, something just didn't feel right. I didn't belong here. And I didn't belong with her. One way or another both of us knew it.

I chugged the rest of my old fashioned. "I'll have another," I said.

Roy smiled. "Coming right up."

"I guess I will too," Michelle said.

Roy nodded.

“Is your mom on any medications?” Michelle asked.

“Not sure if she is at the moment,” I said. “But she’s Bipolar, so she ought to be. She normally takes mood-stabilizers when she gets sober.”

“When Leonard was at his best he was on antidepressants, those years with my mother, the years he told you were his happiest. He was on Prozac or Nardil or something like that. I don’t remember which one because at some point he switched from one to the other. And when he started getting sober he was taking Naltrexone.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Have you ever heard of Antabuse?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“Yeah. It’s kind of like that but it’s supposed to work for opiates *and* alcohol.”

“And it worked for him?” I asked.

“Yeah it worked,” Michelle said. “Well kind of.”

“...”

“There was this one time he tried using while on it and he got really fucked up and ended up in the hospital. But then after that he felt so full of regret because he’d nearly killed himself and hadn’t even felt the effect of whatever it was he relapsed on.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. The irony of it was at once both sad and comical.

“Crazy stuff,” Michelle said, smiling. “But that’s why my mom left him. He refused to take his meds after Baby Sidney died and my mom knew better than to trust a person like Leonard when he wasn’t on his meds. She knew it’d only be a matter of time until he’d self-medicate.”

“I wonder if he was taking any meds this last year,” I said.

“That’s why I asked you if he was using,” Michelle said.

“Who knows? I never thought to pay attention to that.”

I felt bad lying to Michelle. But what was I going to say? Telling Michelle would only make things worse for her and myself. At least that’s what I figured.

“It doesn’t matter now anyway,” Michelle said. “Look, Gabriel, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way.”

“...”

“But you know these things are genetic, right? There’s a genetic component to mood disorders and addiction and all that stuff.”

“Yes,” I said. “But you don’t have to worry about me. I’m not like them.”

“I know,” Michelle said. She looked as though she was going to say something else, but was holding back.

“I’m fine,” I said. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

She gave me a forced smile. “We did have a lot of fun with Leonard, though. I mean that man spoiled us rotten. When I was ten, he took us to Disney World. I had never been there before. He made us so happy... until he didn’t.”

“I’ve never been to Disney World.”

Michelle’s jaw fell open. “You’ve never been to Disney World? That’s practically child abuse.”

“Whatever,” I said. “It’s not that big a deal. Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby don’t like to travel.”

“Maybe we could go there together sometime,” Michelle said.

“Yeah right. The last thing I want to do is go to Disney World as an adult.”

“Why not?” Michelle asked. “People do it all the time.”

“Yeah, predators, maybe. Not normal people.”

“That’s not true. Normal people do it all the time.”

As it got darker and darker outside, The Mountain Bar got more and more crowded. Roy came back around to check on us, and I asked for two shots of tequila and the check.

“I don’t want a shot of tequila,” Michelle said. “Are you crazy?”

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll take both of them.”

“I can’t keep up with you.” She placed her forehead on the bar, trying to hide her smile.

“No one said you should try.”

“Fine,” Michelle said. “I’ll do the shot but then we’re going to get something to eat.”

Roy brought us two shots of tequila, two limes on a napkin, and a saltshaker.

“Roy,” I said. “Pour yourself one. On us.”

“That’s awfully kind of you.” Roy grabbed another shot glass, another lime, and poured one for himself.

I licked my hand on the webbing connecting my thumb and forefinger and poured some salt on it. Then I passed the saltshaker to Michelle. She did the same and then passed it to Roy.

“To Beau Brooks.” I held up the shot, looking over to the empty booth in the corner.

“To Beau,” Roy said.

“To Leonard,” Michelle said.

The three of us clinked our glasses together, tapped them on the bartop, licked the salt off our hands, poured the tequila down our throats, and sucked on the limes.

“Ah!” I said. “Sweet, sweet agave.”

“Thanks guys,” Roy said, handing us the bill.

I paid in cash, leaving a twenty for Roy. It wasn't as much as Beau would've tipped but at least it was something. We left The Mountain Bar and walked down the empty, icy sidewalk holding hands, arms braided together. The tequila lit a fire in my stomach. Noticing this warmth, I couldn't help but think that maybe I did belong here, right here with Michelle.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Having eaten a tab and a half of LSD I am out of my mind. I have left my normal, routine, ossified plane of existence and arrived in a new one, not inherently better or worse, but definitely different. And what's amazing, surprising even, is that I'm still lucid. In fact, I'm extremely coherent. It's like I've become aware of the dream while stuck inside of it. I'm at a level of consciousness that I've never reached before: the further I travel down the road of perception, the more I realize that there are still a number of turns along the way. What I thought was a dead end before is actually just a bend. It's like every time I made it this far in the past I must've stopped and turned around, believing it to be the end. But now I reach what I think is the end and I can see further, way out beyond the road into the darkness of the forest—for me it's new and uncharted territory, but I follow Beau's lead because it's clear he's been here enough times to have it all mapped out in his mind.

Walking helps me to feel in control, and when I tell this to Beau he laughs because he says it makes him aware of how out of control he actually is. We're strolling along the lakefront for so long, so long it feels as though we'll never make it to The Shorecrest. I never realized how big the skyline of Milwaukee is until now. It feels as though I've lived a thousand lives in the time it is taking to reach Beau's place. We're singing 80s ballads, stopping only to laugh and then catch our breaths, my arm around Beau's shoulder and his arm around my back because I'm that much taller than him, afraid that if we let go of each other we'll fly off the surface of the earth into the deep dark unknown. I'm having so much fun, but a huge part of me feels deeply anxious and terrified, and as soon as I stop to think about this feeling it changes, morphs into its

opposite and then vibrantly becomes itself again. I'm completely unaware of what led me to this time and place and I have no awareness of what will come in the next moment, and what's more, I have no interest in considering the possibilities, the odds, or the outcomes of the next moment. Right now the only thing on my mind is the current step, the current lyric of the song. But then, suddenly, as if I awoke from a dream within the dream, I am aware of the strangeness of existence. Right now the entire universe seems so funny. I think about the cosmic lottery that was played and won in order to lead matter toward the way of consciousness and the absurdity of it all is at once beautiful and frightening, but more than that it's hilarious. It's the best joke that's ever been told and right now I'm tuned in to the punch line eternally echoing, ricocheting off infinity. I laugh so hard having become aware of this and the laughing continues until I forget what it is that was so funny in the first place—the punch line escapes me and I panic while I wait for it to return.

Suddenly I'm sitting in an overstuffed chair in an apartment. It's Beau's apartment. As I realize this, my momentary lapse in memory is instantaneously filled with all the moments between then and now: the sensation of finally reaching the marina, of seeing The Shorecrest in the distance atop the bluff, of realizing that the mirage was in fact a real, solid structure. Of seeing another resident, a tall, thick, elderly black gentleman with a mustache, standing next to the front entrance of The Shorecrest, looking out at the street. Beau recognizes him. "Hey Warren," he says. "How's the night treating you?"

"Oh, restless like usual," Warren says. Warren's wearing a blood-red winter hat and a silly set of pajamas with monkeys crashing cymbals printed all over it, attire which

makes me laugh uncontrollably. Beau apologizes to him, tells him that I've had a bit too much, that I need to go sleep it off. Warren replies with a hearty chuckle, saying, "You guys must've stumbled upon a good time tonight," and he is filled with so much goodwill that at once I love him, want the best for him, hope that he lives a long healthy life full of happiness and warmth and love. The elevator ride rushes back to me, a ride which, though not as long as the walk along the lake, feels long in its own right because of the claustrophobia and the realization that the doors may never open again, that we could spend the rest of our lives in this five-by-four-by-nine cube. The hallway of the ninth floor is long and narrow and the wallpaper jumps off and switches places with the crested patterns on the carpet until the edges of both are blurred into one dimension, differentiated only by the wooden doors of each apartment. We finally reach a door that Beau has a key to and he unlocks it and I rush inside, taken aback again by the sudden change in scenery, the sudden change of energy accompanying it.

Beau slams the door behind him and turns the deadbolt and like that I'm back here in the overstuffed chair in the center of the carpeted room. Beau dims the lights and the warmth and the silence of this place is such a relief. His apartment seems to be designed with this experience in mind, as if decorated specifically for this occasion. There are pictures leaning against the wall, pictures of abstractions as opposed to people or landscapes. The one picture that's not some abstraction is of a dog, a German Shepard. The dog's sitting, looking directly at the camera with its tongue hanging out. The pictures are spaced perfectly so that each one does not distract from the one next to it, so that an observer is able to fully admire and absorb each one before moving on to the next. Two of the four walls are lined with shelves, which are, in turn, lined with books, some

vintage, some new. They release an odor similar to that of a library or museum—the fragrance of time itself. Seemingly out of nowhere, a hand appears in front of me. It is Beau handing me a glass of whiskey with ice in it and then he floats across the burgundy area rug atop the off-white carpet to a record player attached to two giant speakers at either end of the room. Music pours out of them, the soft drone of an electric guitar with a piano filling the spaces in between. The sound and texture of both instruments wrap themselves around my body, providing something beautiful, mathematical even, on which my mind can fixate. I look out the window and realize how far above the ground we are and I am both intrigued and scared. I feel the urge to walk over to the picture window and peer down onto the lake below but cannot find the energy to remove myself from this chair. I've decided that I will stay right here inside of this chair for the remainder of this experience, perhaps even the remainder of my life. I smell an interesting, pungent aroma, it's one that I recognize but cannot immediately recall until a hand appears again in front of me. It is Beau's. He hands me a joint. As I reach out to grab the joint the sound of a metal ashtray ricochets off the end table between my chair and an identical, overstuffed chair right next to it. Smoke fills the air in front of me and as I hold the joint between my thumb and my forefinger, I notice the dim light bleeding through and reflecting off the cloud of smoke and at once I am hypnotized. "Puff it or pass it," I hear a voice say. I turn my head toward the direction of the voice but cannot immediately remove my eyes from the position on which they have adhered. Finally, my eyes dart to an image of Beau lying back in the chair with his feet up on an ottoman, and again I hear his voice saying, "Come on dude, puff it or pass it," and like that I become aware of what I am supposed to do. I take a long drag and let it out quickly, so as not to

cough, and it works as I hoped it would—I don't cough but I'm doubting that I even inhaled any so I take another long drag and this time I hold it inside my lungs until I do begin coughing, loudly, violently, offering up the joint to Beau, who takes it out of my hand while giggling. "I knew that was coming," Beau shouts, struggling to talk over the compulsive urge to giggle. "I knew that was coming. I saw it happen before it happened!" I'm still coughing and I bend over and stick my head between my legs, which makes the urge to cough dissipate but it also makes breathing more difficult and by the time I'm done coughing I sit back up and am out of breath. I turn to Beau and smile. On the table next to the ashtray I find the glass of whiskey I was sipping and I take a nice long drink, and then at once I realize it.

Again, I am elsewhere.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The next morning was Sunday. We were naked in Michelle's bed. She sat pretzel-legged with her bare shoulder blades pressed against the headboard, smoking a cigarette. I loved Michelle's shoulder blades, and the way her neck ran into her back, the contour of her spine. I lay on my back staring up at the white popcorn ceiling, noticing the webs of dust collected between the blades of the ceiling fan, which probably hadn't been switched on since August or September. I felt absolutely wrecked: headache, nausea, deadlegs—thoroughly hungover. I tried to focus my attention on the webs in hopes of overcoming the urge to get up and run to the toilet and release the contents of my stomach.

Michelle scrolled through Instagram on her phone. As I lay there Sadie intruded my thoughts. I tried to ignore the scene but it was impossible. My brain was held hostage. Each time I tried to resist, to look away from the images on the screen, they started over. The only way to free myself was to watch it play itself out: this time I'm in the kitchen, sitting at the dinner table across from Aunt Cindy, who's got her head buried in the palms of her hands. She's making primitive, guttural sounds. Uncle Toby hovers nearby, places a hand on my shoulder. Says Sadie's dead. Then the scene cuts to a funeral home and I'm wearing my stiff suit, standing over an open casket housing Sadie's body. She looks more alive in death than she did in life. Her color is better. Aunt Cindy's standing beside me, emitting soft whimpers punctuated by intermittent sniffles. Uncle Toby, teary-eyed but otherwise reserved, stands beside Aunt Cindy. This time there's a new reaction—I feel nothing. I'm completely numb to it all.

Then I remembered it hasn't happened yet.

I lay there, still staring up at the ceiling. For the time being I felt as though my fixating on one point in the webs of the fan was working to stifle the I'm-going-to-uke-at-any-moment sensation, which although still lingering seemed to be improving.

“You know I saw him last winter,” Michelle said.

“Huh?”

“At first I hadn't thought much about it, but in the days since he's died I've thought about it more and more.”

I turned onto my side and looked right into her big fat eyes to let her know she had my full, undivided attention. If I were going to puke because of my shift in gaze then so be it. At least then I would perhaps receive a brief period of relief until the next wave of nausea arrived.

Michelle had been at the cemetery, she told me, and Beau showed up while she was there. It was the fifteenth anniversary of Mica's death, and Michelle had gone to visit the grave and place some flowers—lilies. Michelle's not sure what kind of flowers her mother liked best, so each time she visits she brings a different kind. She hadn't gone back there since the ten-year anniversary.

As Michelle knelt on the frozen ground before the tombstone, shielding her eyes from the morning sun, she thought about how fast the last five years had passed, wondering how they'd come and gone so quickly, how nothing had seemed to change but how still everything seemed so different. She felt guilty about not having gone back in so long, but she also knew that visiting a cemetery was a waste of time. Her mother was gone and there was nothing that softened it or changed it or reconnected them—the essence of somebody's life, and for that matter their death, cannot be contained in any

physical object.

It was early January, one of those rare winter days of clear skies and sunshine—too beautiful a day to spend being sad, but still, Michelle felt very sad.

“Fancy meeting you here,” Beau said.

“Leonard! What are you doing in town?”

“I was feeling sad,” Beau said, “so I thought I’d fly in to visit your mother.”

“And you weren’t going to call me?”

“I was planning on it,” Beau said, but the way he said it was merely reflex.

“You didn’t fly all the way here just to visit a cemetery,” Michelle said. “What are you *really* doing in Milwaukee?”

“I’m thinking of moving back,” Beau said. “Doing some apartment hunting.”

“Why would you move back? What on earth would you do here?”

“I just miss it... I want to be back. I want to come home.”

According to Michelle, Beau seemed to be in pretty good shape, as if he’d been taking care of himself. He asked her out to lunch but Michelle made up an excuse not to go. She told me there was an awkwardness between them, and although she believed they both felt regret about that awkwardness, she knew it was undeniable and unshakeable and that spending time with each other would dredge up old memories that neither one of them would be equipped to handle. Michelle told me that some things are just meant to be left behind, and although their sudden recurrence is nostalgic, the beauty of the past often tortures more than it assuages. Still, knowing all this, Michelle left that day feeling even sadder, debating whether or not she *should’ve* spent some time with Beau.

Before she left, they hugged, which Michelle said was the least awkward part of

the whole interaction. She couldn't help but think that in hugging her, Beau was attempting to hug Mica, as if he could somehow reach through Michelle to her dead mother, back to when they were all together, the three—and then almost four—of them, a family.

After telling me all this, Michelle smiled half-heartedly and said, "Nostalgia is a drug. No matter how painful it is you always want more, even if it's no good for you."

"*Especially* when it's no good for you," I said. "Maybe not telling you that he was coming back was his way of protecting you."

Michelle shrugged.

I turned onto my back and again stared up at the webs in the ceiling fan.

Then, still naked, I rolled off of the bed and onto the ground. Like a sprinter at the start of a race when the gun goes off, I lunged forward and ran to the bathroom.

"You okay?" Michelle asked.

I closed the door behind me, turned on the fan, carefully but swiftly got down onto my hands and knees. My forearms rested on the cold toilet seat as a projectile of whiskey and bile cannonballed into the bowl.

I released a huge sigh as the dopamine flooded my brain.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

It's the first day of 2019. I'm sitting with Beau on a bench at the walking path between the lake and the art museum, the windows of which are directly behind us. We've been at it since midnight, drinking and every once in while when Beau believes the time is right snorting little bumps of cocaine off of one of his keys. I'm amazed at how little exhaustion I feel, and how I still want to drink more whiskey from the flask, which travels back and forth between us.

It's early morning and the first rays of the sun have started to appear on the horizon, bringing with them slight but significant warmth. The lake lies east of the city, so Milwaukee does not get the sunset over water that is so glamorized on the west coast. Instead we get a sunrise over water. Beau and I discuss this, and speculate that this, in addition to the inherent Midwestern ethic, may be why people in Milwaukee are such hard workers: early-risers are rewarded with the beauty of a sunrise over Lake Michigan, if they're into that sort of thing. It's not much, but in the dead of winter it might be enough to get some people through days with only nine hours of sunlight. Again, that is, if sunsets and sunrises are where they find beauty.

For me, that's the hardest part of winter. I can handle the blistering wind whipping off the lakefront. I can handle the below-zero temperatures and the blizzards dumping feet and feet of lake-effect snow. I can handle the way the dirt and the grime of the city mixes with the piles of white snow bordering the roadways, giving everything a filthy, gray-black hue. But what I have a hard time managing is the sheer darkness—the sun setting at 4:20PM—and the way this darkness so greatly contrasts with the intensity of daylight reflecting off the snow-covered ground. The summer sun is incandescent

whereas the winter sun is L.E.D., that is, on those rare days when it's not overcast.

Winter in Wisconsin is all about these relative extremes.

"I forgot how much I love winter," Beau says.

It's something I take for granted. I long to live in a warmer climate. The idea of wearing shorts on Christmas seems so refreshing to me. I tell this to Beau and he insists I am wrong.

"Once you've seen the seasons change," he says, "routinized yourself to this cycle, it's hard to go without it. That's one of the reasons I had to leave L.A."

"You don't hear that often," I say.

"It's unnatural—seventy degrees and sunny every single day. You need some cold every once in a while in order to appreciate warmth."

"I don't know."

"One day," Beau says, "you'll see."

"I don't know about sunsets and sunrises, either," I say.

"What do you mean?"

"Whenever somebody gushes over the beauty of them I sometimes wonder if I'm seeing the same thing they're seeing."

Beau laughs. "I know what you mean."

We are both silent now, watching the colors of the sky perform, trying to figure out why it's so special to some. It's getting harder and harder to watch, but despite this neither one of us wants to avert our eyes. At some point when we can't stand to stare any longer we walk north on the path that runs along the lakefront. The crashing of the waves grows louder and louder as the land juts out farther and farther into the lake, gradually

nearing the breakwall that encloses the bay. Over the next hour we continue walking, through Veterans Park, past McKinley Marina, all the way to Bradford Beach. As we near Bradford Beach, we notice large crowds gathered near the water. There are tents set up here and there, vendors of some sort. News cameras wander through the groups of people.

Beau looks to me. “What the hell is going on?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

Then both of us notice a sign near the entrance to the sand that reads: *2019 Polar Bear Plunge*.

“I forgot they do this,” Beau says, grinning wildly. “Have you ever done it?”

I laugh. “Hell no.”

“Me either,” Beau says. And at once I know he’s made up his mind to do it. He starts running toward the water, and I follow behind him, not even trying to match his pace. By the time I make it to where he is on the beach, just yards from the water, he’s already stripped down to nothing but his briefs. His pants, boots, socks, jacket, sweatshirt, t-shirt, and winter hat lie in a pile on the sand. He’s jumping up and down, rubbing his arms vigorously, every now and then shouting, “Woo!”

I strip down to my boxers and watch as people sprint from the beach into the water, submerging themselves completely before sprinting back to land to get warm and dry. Some people inch carefully into the water, squealing the entire way while their friends shout what must be either words of encouragement or goading insults. I’m struck by the diversity of age. Some of these people are just kids, while some are quite old, their gray hairs standing up all over their bodies—the true polar bears. Some people are

wearing unexpected uniforms. There's a man dressed as a samurai, with plastic swords sheathed at both sides. Another man is dressed in the orange garments of a Buddhist monk, attire that I assume is only a costume—it must be. There is a man dressed in what looks like polar bear fur, the head of the bear acting as a sort of hood wrapping around his own head. He's playing a trombone that is garnished with a Wisconsin flag on the slide.

The people returning to the beach raise their arms high in the air, victorious. Giant clouds of steam rise off their soaked, bare bodies and then vanish in the wind. Beau slaps my stomach with the back of his hand. "Let's do this, Gabriel! The gods await us! For the glory!" And we both sprint toward the water, our legs splashing it up toward our midsections. Beau roars guttural, primal sounds. We reach the point where it is no longer possible to lift our legs and fall forward into the icy cold, heads submerging beneath the surface, bodies bobbing like buoys. Beau is hollering and splashing, sending water my way. I send splashes his way. And I'm laughing. I'm laughing so hard. I have begun the process of hypothermia and a euphoric rush of adrenaline lights a fire in my veins. I cannot believe I lived here my whole life and have never done this before. All this time there's been a lake of icy-cold water right here, and I've never once dove into it in January, have never even thought to.

There are people next to us that we've never met before, but they play along with us, sending splashes our way as if they are our long-lost childhood friends.

A burly guy who can't be too much older than me looks at Beau and says, "You look like if Beau Brooks grew a beard."

Beau, in a strange voice, says, "I *am* Beau Brooks. I *did* grow a beard."

The burly guy and his friends look at one another and then laugh.

A girl in a red bikini wades in the shallows, moving ever so slowly toward her friends, the people now splashing with us. “C’mon Karen!” one of the guys shouts. “Just do it!” She’s shivering and jumping, cowardly making her way closer only to retreat back onto the beach.

“You can do it, Karen,” Beau shouts. “Karen, Karen, Karen!”

Everybody nearby joins in, chanting, “Karen, Karen, Karen!”

She lets out a piercing scream and then runs and dives head first, submerging her entire body and as she breaks the surface of the water everybody nearby cheers and claps. She pops her head out and wearing a childish grin, she blushes and laughs. She holds her arms high in the air, her biceps, triceps, and forearms flexing. She shouts, “Woo!”

One of the people in a drysuit, who wades in the water as a sort-of lifeguard, yells at us, “You two’ve been in here too long. Get out or I’ll pull you out.”

He’s right. I notice the adrenaline thinning. I feel the sudden urge to escape. Beau nods at me and we both sprint from the water, no longer giddy but now deeply focused on getting warm again. We use our t-shirts to dry off and, feet and legs still covered in a layer of sand, remove our wet underwear. You’re supposed to use one of the many tents to change out of your wet clothes, but neither Beau nor I want to spend the time necessary to do so, so we undress right there on the beach in front of everybody. Once fully dressed again, we make our way toward one of the vendors and Beau buys us both a cup of coffee, which we sip while sitting pretzel-legged in front of one of the many campfires, desperately trying to warm ourselves. At once I notice how sober I am. Presumably arriving at this same realization, Beau removes the flask from his pocket and

pours some whiskey into his coffee. He hands me the flask and I do the same. The water in my hair begins to freeze. Same with Beau's. Icicles hang from his beard. Seemingly unaware of them, he blows into his cup and then sets it on the ground between his legs and blows into his hands, rubbing them together in an effort to friction himself warm again. Neither one of us says anything. Eventually I start to feel my extremities come back to life. The numbness gradually leaves my toes and fingers.

Beau looks over to me, grinning.

I smile back at him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I hadn't seen Michelle for a few days. She was busy catching up with work. I'd been growing more and more restless when I wasn't with her. Each of those three nights without Michelle I went to The Mountain Bar by myself and hung out with Roy. I knew it was out of my price range but I liked the routine of going. The Mountain Bar felt like home despite how expensive it was. Roy was a nice guy, but conversation ran dry with him fairly quickly, so I'd just end up watching sports highlights on the TV while sipping my old fashioned.

That Monday, before I went to The Mountain Bar, I sat at the desk in my bedroom sipping whiskey & coffee while looking at photography collections online. Michelle and I had watched a documentary the day before about this woman named Vivian Maier. She worked as a nanny, taking photographs in her spare time. Her work was unknown and unpublished in her own lifetime. Some guy discovered her negatives after she died and he went about trying to get them developed and printed and eventually her photos gained critical acclaim, all thanks to the Internet and this one guy. The Internet is so powerful.

I spent all of Monday morning and some of the afternoon looking through her photographs online. They're so amazing. Black and whites. Nearly all of them candid, the subject completely unaware of the camera, or if they are aware of the camera it's not until the moment right before the photo is taken, lending her work this undeniable sense of naturalism and authenticity. I've always loved street photography, though, so I guess I might be somewhat biased. But her photos really tell a story. Something about them makes me feel less alone.

One of my favorite photos of hers is of this old guy who's working at this

newspaper stand. He's sitting inside this little window of this shanty, surrounded on every side by huge shelves displaying the covers of the various magazines he's selling. Beneath him and his little window is a foldout, table-like surface lined with tall stacks of newspapers. But the man, the one in the little window of the shanty who's working the stand, he's wearing a black jacket and a black fedora and he's just sitting there with his head propped up and resting in the palm of his hand. He's fast asleep. And directly beneath him, above the stacks of newspapers on the foldout table, are two issues of the same *LIFE* magazine being displayed right next to each other. The titles of most of the magazines are visible, but the composition seems to draw the viewer's gaze directly to the man sitting there sleeping, and then to the side-by-side magazines displayed beneath him, as if that's the photo's caption: *LIFE, LIFE*.

It's obvious to me that she was an artistic genius, and yet most of the photos she took she never even saw. I think knowing that gives them an even greater sense of purity. She took them just for the sake of taking them, not because she even wanted them to be seen.

After looking through her photos I felt inspired to go out and venture around the city and shoot. It's really tough to do street photography nowadays without every shot feeling like it's staged. People are aware of cameras now more than ever. In terms of people's reactions, walking around with a camera aimed at somebody is like walking around with a shotgun pointed at them. But I get it. The Internet turned the camera into a weapon. As a result, I like to ride my skateboard around when I go shooting. I have these big rubber wheels on it so that the ride is quiet and smooth. I glide past people and let off a series of shots without even looking into the viewfinder. It's a good way to candidly

shoot without drawing attention to the fact that that's what I'm doing. Even if people do happen to realize that's what I'm doing, I'm gone before they can say or do anything about it.

But it's impossible to skate when there's snow and ice and salt on the ground. So that day I went all along Wisconsin Ave shooting not with my skateboard but just on foot. I took maybe a hundred photos, but there was only one that I thought was worth keeping. It's of this little boy and what I assume is his mother. They are walking across the Reiman Footbridge to the Art Museum and the little boy is pointing up at the wings of the Calatrava slowly closing. I was maybe a hundred yards behind them when I took the photo. The mom holds the little boy's hand, looking down at him while he stares off into the distance. They're right there in the center of the frame and the Art Museum is in the background and the immensity of the sky is even farther in the background lending the composition this grand sense of depth. Out of the all the photos I took that day, that one was the only keeper.

I woke up the next morning, that Tuesday, and looked out my window and noticed a blanket of lake-effect snow covered everything in sight, white as blank page, punctuations of houses and cars peeking out from underneath the cover like children looking for monsters from the comfort of bed. Shoveling and salting was one of my main household chores. Uncle Toby has a bad back and the snow, being so close to Lake Michigan, is far too heavy to lift for anybody with anatomical ailments. It's too heavy even for hearty, healthy young people.

It was now after noon. I should've gotten outside right then and started in on it

before Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby got home and packed it down even more than they had when pulling out that morning. But I was hungover so I didn't. My head was pounding. The sunlight reflecting off the snow would've made the headache even more piercing. So I fell back asleep.

I didn't wake up again until I heard Uncle Toby shout my name. He was getting closer, presumably walking up the stairs.

"Gabriel?" Uncle Toby shouted. He entered the darkness of my bedroom, the illuminant hallway behind him lending his frame the holy appearance of an apparition. "You're still in bed? Oh, I see why. It smells like a bottle of bourbon in here. I didn't realize you went out last night." Of course, I hadn't. I had sat at my desk, watching YouTube videos, drinking by myself.

He turned on the overhead light in my room and then headed toward the lamp on my desk. "You've to get out there and shovel it, buddy. If you start now you might be able to clear most of it before your aunt pulls in." He went over to the window and opened the curtains. It didn't provide the effect he was going for. The sun had already nearly set.

I let out a groan and then a sigh.

"Jesus Christ, son. Brush your teeth and put on some deodorant or something. Don't let your aunt smell that. She'll give you an earful."

I lay there waiting for him to leave. He was hovering in the doorway, apparently waiting for me to get up and get dressed.

"Let's go. Drop your cock and grab some socks. You want some coffee? If you get out of bed right now I'll brew some and put it in a tumbler for you... Lets go!"

“All right!” I shouted, sitting up in bed. “You’re so annoying.”

Uncle Toby laughed a little. “Should I make you coffee or not?”

“Yes,” I said. “Please. Thank you.”

With that he left and went downstairs. I was seething as I got dressed in my thermals. I grabbed the 1.75 of Jim Beam from underneath my bed and filled up my flask. I went to the bathroom and pissed a dark, brothy urine flavored with the scent of dehydration. I brushed my teeth and chugged large gulps of water from the faucet. Then I felt nauseated, so I sat down on the lid of the toilet. After a few minutes I stood up and tried again.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, Uncle Toby walked over and handed me a tumbler of hot coffee. Outside, I poured a third of it into the snow-covered driveway and replaced it with some of the Jim Beam from my flask. The best cure for a hangover, I’d learned, is getting drunk. I took a nice long sip of the whiskey & coffee, turned on the spotlight above the garage door, and started in on it, beginning inside the garage and proceeding down the driveway toward the road and the mailbox, pushing the shovel forward through the weight like an offensive line pushing a sled. Then I imagined it—an offensive line pushing a sled with a shovel on it, clearing the whole driveway in one wide pass and me standing atop the sled goading them on like a coach. I found that image funny. I could tell the caffeine and alcohol were at work on my body and mind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The week before Christmas, Beau and I make a trip to Grand Avenue Mall to walk through it one last time. It's a rare chance to explore an abandoned mall right before it officially becomes an abandoned mall. They're planning on making it into a market, whatever that means. I guess sort of like the Milwaukee Public Market in the Third Ward. At least, that's going to be the first floor. The second and third floors are going to be converted into office space for some big companies or something.

We walk into Plankinton Arcade where the statue of John Plankinton stands tall in the middle of the rotunda, the four staircases wrapping around and, for the longest time, leading to nothing but a bottom floor of locked doors. Supposedly there's some sort of comedy/theatre club down there now.

"There's so much history here," Beau says. "This used to be the heart of downtown."

"I'm sure they'll preserve a lot of it. It'll be restored to its former glory."

"I know," Beau says. "They'll do a nice job. But that doesn't mean I won't miss the way it is now."

"I'd rather see it changed and populated with people than remain the same and sit vacant."

"And it's a shame they're tearing down the Bradley Center," Beau says.

"Everything's changing down here. This city is nothing like it used to be."

"It's growing," I say. "That's for sure."

"Everything's changing."

We make our way up to the third floor and walk through the food court. There are

still a lot of restaurants, but some of the familiar ones are no longer there. The Culver's where I used to eat with Cora back in high school is gone. Cora and I would share cheese curds. I'd always order one scoop of vanilla custard in a dish and she'd get an Oreo concrete mixer. We'd eat our ice cream while waiting for the bus back to the East Side. I haven't talked to Cora in so long. It seems fitting that our hangout spot has disappeared.

After high school everybody I knew moved away, or went to college, or moved away *and* went to college. I maintained my friendships with some people for a while, those that went to UWM or Marquette anyway. I'd go to parties with them on the weekends. Especially the UWM parties. I mean, I do live right down the street from campus. But not being a student myself, I always felt like my life was lightyears away from theirs. At a certain point it got harder and harder to keep in touch with them—either they wouldn't reach out anymore or I wouldn't reach out anymore. Probably both. Being alone got easier than being around them. I was constantly being reminded of the fact that I wasn't in college, which made me feel pretty useless.

Cora moved to the south—Georgia. She got into UGA. She wanted to get as far away from Wisconsin as possible. I couldn't blame her. When she came back that first Thanksgiving we hung out. But it was obvious that we were operating on two different planes of existence, different wavelengths. That was the last time I spoke to or saw her. It's funny how people's lives just end up going in different directions, and even though you're right next to the person you're nowhere near one another. I felt sad about losing all my friends, especially Cora. But a part of me also felt as though a weight had been lifted off my shoulders, like I could really be free to be whoever I wanted to be. I was no longer weighed down by the way others perceived me. Not that I necessarily was before,

but sometimes you act out what others have come to expect from you as opposed to just being who you want to be, afraid that any change in your character might raise suspicion in the people who have gotten close to you. It took losing touch with all my friends to realize that. There is a certain air of excitement in being alone. Anything is possible. You can reinvent yourself and become anyone you want to be.

We walk past vacant storefronts, one with empty jewelry cases, then the boarded-up Boston Store. The only anchor still remaining is the T.J. Maxx.

We look down from the second floor onto the emptiness of the mall's center.

"Remember when they used to have those animatronic bears here during Christmas season?" Beau asks.

I shake my head. "So creepy."

"This was *it*," Beau says. "What happened?"

"The Internet... Online shopping."

Beau laughs. "I know that. I mean what happened to me? I've become that middle-aged person resistant to change. I'm a walking, talking cliché."

"Clichés exist for a reason," I say.

"Knowing that doesn't make their existence any less banal and pathetic. Maybe this is all a good thing, though. I mean who needs an urban shopping mall? When you really think about it, who needs a place like this anymore?"

I look around at more vacant storefronts. "Apparently nobody."

It's spring of 2014. Senior Prom.

Cora and I are going together. I'm not sure if she considers it a date or if we're

going as friends, and I'm too nervous to ask. Uncle Toby is accompanying me to her house. He's volunteered to take pictures for our group. All of the other parents are excited by the idea of a professional photographer doing the photos. Sadie is supposed to come with us, but she never shows up so we leave without her.

We get into the car and Uncle Toby starts it up and then looks over to me and says, "Sorry about your mom, buddy."

"It's whatever," I say.

When we get to Cora's house she presents me with a boutonniere and I present her with a corsage. She helps me pin mine to my jacket.

"Thanks," I say. "You look really pretty."

She smiles.

Uncle Toby stands by taking photos as if he's been hired to shoot a wedding. He moves around the back patio to get different angles of the whole group interacting. Then he begins to orchestrate the whole thing—the poses—getting ones of each couple, ones of just the guys, ones of the girls. He asks everyone to be serious, everyone to smile, and he finishes each round by prompting everyone to do something goofy. The other parents stand by and gawk, occasionally one yells at their child to straighten a tie, fix their bangs, wet down their eyebrows. The whole ordeal lasts just under an hour and by the end of it I'm exhausted and ready to go home and crawl into bed.

Later that evening, after the dance, we're all in a basement at an after-party. Everyone's been drinking, but we all try to hide it, as if the parents upstairs chaperoning the party aren't aware. But they must be. Without accusing anybody they remind us that there's no need to drive anywhere—people can spend the night or rides will be arranged

if need be.

At some point, after Cora and I have a lot to drink, she grabs my hand and leads me outside through a sliding-glass door in the basement. We wander around to the front of the house and into the street where one of her friend's cars sits parked on the side of the road. She pulls me into the backseat of the car and we begin to kiss.

"Let's have sex," Cora says, brandishing a condom she has hidden in her bra.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"Yes. I want to do it. I want you to be my first. And I want to be your first."

She slides up her dress. Then she starts to undo my belt buckle.

"I don't think this is what you want," I say. "We've had too much to drink, don't you think?"

"Just shut up, Gabriel." She pulls my body against her body and we start kissing again.

In my drunken state the whole ordeal lasts a lot longer than either one of us expected. When it's finally over Cora begins to put herself back together again. Out of breath, she looks at me and says, "Wow."

"Good *wow*?"

"Yes!" Cora shouts. "Thank you, Gabriel." She kisses my cheek.

The way she says *thank you* makes it obvious that this night is not a date and that we have, in fact, gone as friends.

We walk back into the party through the same door we exited from and a group of kids playing beer pong begin to cheer. Various couples are in different corners of the basement making out. Cora joins in the beer pong game. She's been waiting to play the

whole night. I fill up a red Solo cup with one of the beers from the cases hidden behind the couch next the ping-pong table and then I sit down on a nearby stool and watch as the balls soar back and forth.

The next day Cora and I go to the Culver's at Grand Avenue and get some cheese curds and frozen custard. Neither one of us mentions what happened in the backseat of that car the night before. There's no need to. Nothing's changed between us. Though I wish something has. I begin to contemplate the fact that she'll be in Georgia in a matter of months. It makes me feel sad. All we have left is the summer. It's not enough.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It was Wednesday, January 30th—just eleven days after Sadie visited. I was sitting on the Amtrak looking out the window at the Allen Bradley clock tower in the distance, studying it as we slowly passed it by. Michelle had taken a sick day from work in order to come with me. I was grateful for that. She was sitting next to me, slowly rubbing the inside of my forearm with her thumb. I pulled out the bottle of Coke that I'd bought at the station and after chugging about half filled it with whiskey from my flask. I didn't even bother trying to hide my drinking from Michelle, and she knew better than to say anything about it right then, at least she must've known better, because she didn't. I thought about how unfair it was that I was expected to go and Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy didn't have to. They had to work a quinceañera, but still, it felt unfair regardless of how legitimate their excuse might've been.

At Union Station we transferred to the L, which took us to the hospital. Sadie lay in the bed, IVs stuck in her arm, machines intermittently sounding off behind her. She was roused from her sleep not long after we entered into the room.

“Gabriel,” Sadie said, “my boy. Look at you—your beard.” I still hadn't shaved. It was now a little more than two weeks of growth and it was coming in patchy and uneven, but I didn't care. I guess it was sort of my tribute to Beau's messy-looking beard.

I smiled, unaware of what to do or say. I sat down in the chair next to the bed. Michelle walked over to the window and leaned against the sill. The room smelled like microwave meals and latex. Sadie looked pale and the bags under her eyes, which were always quite large, appeared even more swollen.

“How're you feeling?” Michelle asked.

“Physically, I’m doing all right,” Sadie said. “But I’m pretty upset with myself.” She turned and looked at me. “I really screwed the pooch this time.”

“Could be worse,” I said.

“I’m not so sure the alternative would’ve been much worse,” Sadie said.

A part of me agreed with her, and though I felt the urge to voice my agreement, another part of me felt obligated to sympathize. “Don’t say that,” I said. “Self-loathing will only make it worse... Want to tell us what happened?”

“I ran into some old friends and I just had a moment of weakness. I thought I could handle it but I just did too much. I got carried away.”

“So what’s next?” I asked.

“I’ve got to start from scratch now. I can’t afford a proper rehab so I’ll have to return to the meetings and figure it out on my own.”

I nodded at her.

“Enough about my sorry old ass. How’re you guys doing? Thanks for coming to see me, Gabriel. I know I’m not a good person, and a terrible mother. It means a lot that you came down here.” She reached for my hand and I acquiesced. “You too, Michelle.”

“Of course,” Michelle said, smiling.

“We’re just fine,” I said. “Same old, same old.”

Doctors or nurses, it was hard to know who was who, came in every once in a while to monitor her levels and replenish her IV. Network TV played in the background, filling the silence: “Jerry! Jerry! Jerry!” The chants of the studio audience punctuated by the bleeps of censored expletives distracted us from the situation at hand. I think we were all pleased to be reminded that there were people out there whose lives were seemingly

more pathetic and miserable than our own. I knew there was nothing more that needed to be said. It was more about just being there, being present with her. We ended up visiting with her for around an hour. The whole time we were there Uncle Toby's voice kept echoing in my head: *A person like her needs hope.*

I announced that we were leaving, that we had to catch the train back to Milwaukee. Michelle leaned in and gave her a hug. "We'll see you soon," Michelle said. Then she left room.

It was my turn. I gave Sadie a hug, kissed her on the cheek, and whispered, "I love you, Mom. Please, *please* take care of yourself."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It's Black Friday—November 23, 2018.

By late afternoon the sun has already begun its descent. I'm sitting on the bus with Beau. He has a backpack slung over his right shoulder. He's being mysterious. Although I'm not sure what we're doing or where we're going, I realize we're headed downtown. We get off at 4th and Wisconsin and start walking in the direction of the Courthouse.

Perhaps sensing my agitation, Beau finally fesses up and tells me that we're going to MacArthur Square to see an old friend of his: Tug. Tug lived next door to Beau growing up. And even though Beau moved to Los Angeles at the age of twelve, the two of them have managed to stay in touch all these years. Tug doesn't own a phone, but Beau stays in touch with Tug's mother, and of course, now that he's back in town, Beau makes routine visits to Tug.

Beau approaches a middle-aged gentleman sitting at a picnic table. "Richmond," Beau says, "How're you doing?"

"Leo!" Richmond says. "You're a sight for a sore stomach." Beau reaches into his backpack and pulls out a couple cans of Chef Boyardee ravioli and hands them to Richmond.

"Tug's in his tent," Richmond says, pointing to a big tree where an orange tent is pitched in the shadows of its branches.

We approach the orange tent and Beau shouts, "Thomas, Thomas, Tank Engine Number One!"

We hear somebody inside the tent rustling around—the soft crackling of a tarp,

the shifting of weight and the creek of metal that makes me imagine a person on a cot.

The person laughs. He shouts, “Choo Chooooooooo!”

Then Beau goes, “Chugga, Chugga, Chugga, Chugga, Chugga—”

“Choo Chooooooooo!” Tug yells. “Leo, I’ll be right out. Let me get my boots on.”

“I got some food for you,” Beau says. “Open up and let me throw them inside.”

Beau pokes his head inside the flap of the tent and empties out his backpack, his feet still on the snow-covered ground outside. “It smells like straight ass in here, Tug. Have you scrubbed your nuts recently?”

“Good,” Tug says. “It’ll keep the critters away.”

Beau chuckles. “I think it might have the opposite effect.”

“Thank you, Leo,” Tug says. “Now let me out.” Beau backs up and Tug emerges from his tent. He’s a little guy, probably around five-foot-five or five-foot-six. His beard is longer than Beau’s but it’s equally as messy. His hair is more golden, sort of a reddish-brown. He wears thick wire-rimmed glasses, a gray Carhartt winter hat, and a black hooded sweatshirt underneath a brown jacket.

“Tug,” Beau says, “this is my good friend, Gabriel.”

“Look at this tall son of a bitch,” Tug says, extending his hand. His grip is as firm as a congressman’s. “I’ll have whatever he’s eating.”

I laugh. “Nice to meet you.”

“Where’d you find this kid? The circus?” He looks at Beau and then back at me.

“You could play for the Bucks,” Tug says, laughing. “Let’s have a seat. Step into my office.” He leads us to a wooden picnic table about ten yards from his tent, below another big tree. Beau reaches into his backpack and pulls out three red Solo cups and a bottle of

whiskey in a brown paper bag. He pours a drink for each of us. Tug makes a snowball, compressing it tightly before plopping it into his drink. “Anybody care for some ice?” he asks, laughing. He has a deep, guttural laugh. It’s both charming and repulsive.

Richmond approaches from the other picnic table. “Can I join the party?” he asks.

Beau nods but tells him that he doesn’t have any more cups. Richmond places one finger in the air and then retreats to his blue tent beside another picnic table. He walks back with a plastic dishwasher-safe cup and pours himself a drink. He sits down across from Beau and me, right next to Tug. The sun has already almost disappeared behind the courthouse. We polish off a few drinks while listening to the Bucks game on Richmond’s battery-powered radio.

“Is Tug your real name?” I ask.

“Tommy Tugnuts,” Beau says. “When he was young he was always tugging on his nuts.”

“I had a bit of a fixation,” Tug says.

“He always had a hand in his pants,” Beau says.

“I wasn’t jacking off or nothing like that,” Tug says. “I just liked holding my junk. Made me feel safe.”

“The teachers used to yell at him all the time.” Beau laughs. “Years after the fact some of us guys started calling him Tommy Tugnuts. Then it became Tugnuts, and then eventually it just became Tug.”

“I like to think it has a second meaning,” Tug says.

“I’ll give you that,” Beau says. “Tommy here is such a sweetheart he’ll *tug* right on your heartstrings.”

Tug smiles.

“I’ll give you that, you sorry sack of shit.” Beau laughs. “Definitely the deepest person I’ve ever known.” Beau looks at me. “He’s like a well. You throw a rock down his throat and you won’t even hear it hit the bottom. That’s how deep ole Tugnuts is.”

“Whatever you say, Skids,” Tug says.

“*Skids?*” Richmond asks.

“Don’t start with that.” Beau laughs.

“Leo used to shit his pants a lot,” Tug says. “His tighy-whities always had a skid mark or two in them, didn’t they?”

“It was one time.” Beau laughs. He looks at me, shaking his head. “You shit your pants one time and you still hear about it thirty-some-odd years later. I’m just thankful that nickname never actually stuck.”

That night on the bus ride back to the East Side I ask Beau why Tug is homeless, as if there were a simple reason that could be summed up in a one-sentence response. Beau says he’s offered to set him up, get him off the street, but Tug refuses. It’s not a matter of money. Tug’s mom has tried to do all she knows to do but Tug just doesn’t want to leave his tent in MacArthur Square, so Beau bought him a one-thousand-dollar sleeping bag that’s supposed to be good for up to negative forty below zero, which Tug guards with his life, refusing to ever leave it unattended. The only person he trusts is Richmond, who looks after his tent while he goes to shower or grab some food. Tug’s told nobody else in the square about the cost or quality of it, afraid that if he does somebody might steal it.

“Is he mentally ill?” I ask Beau.

“That’s the thing,” Beau says, shrugging his shoulders. “The craziest thing about Tug is that he’s not crazy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

On Thursday, February 7th—eight days after we got back from visiting Sadie at the hospital in Chicago—I went to MacArthur Square to visit Tug. I hadn't seen him much since Beau's funeral. I'd meant to go visit him but I just hadn't gotten around to it. I brought him the usual: cans of Chef Boyardee and a few fifths of Jim Beam.

When I got there he was nowhere to be found. I headed over to his tent and sat down at the wooden picnic table. I pulled out one of the fifths of Jim Beam and took a long swig. As I sat there waiting for Tug to return, I imagined how Beau's suicide might've gone down. He's in his apartment, very drunk from hanging out with me. He sits at the desk in his kitchen, writing a letter. When he's done writing he goes to the front door and wedges a Nike sneaker underneath it, propping it wide open. He returns to his bed with a bottle of Ambien and a bottle of Jameson. He wishes he had something better, but he decides Jameson will do just fine. It's not worth waiting another day so that he can get a better bottle of booze. He goes back to the desk and picks up the letter. In the bathroom he sets the paper ablaze with his silver Zippo, placing the flaming sheets of paper on the porcelain of the bathtub—there's no explanation necessary, he decides. Nothing he could say will suffice. He watches the letter burn into ash and then washes it away with the spray of the showerhead. He returns to the bed and chugs the bottle of whisky, stopping only to swallow Ambien after Ambien. He lies down and settles in, staring at the clock on his nightstand. He feels himself getting sleepy and smiles.

Richmond appeared in the distance. He was walking toward me, boots crunching through snow-covered ground. When he got close enough for me to hear him without his

having to shout, he said, “He went to get a shower and a hot meal.”

“Hey Richmond.”

“You have beard now. Looks terrible.” He laughed. “Nah, I’m just messing with you. But really, you ought to shave that thing. You can sit with me if you want while you wait for him.”

I followed him to the wooden picnic table outside of his tent. We sat down across from one another. He turned on talk radio: “NASA scientists announced Wednesday that 2018 was the fourth hottest year in the one hundred and forty years of recording the average surface temperatures of Earth...”

“Shit, could’ve fooled me,” Richmond said. “This winter’s been colder than a well-digger’s ass.”

I laughed and nodded. It wasn’t worth trying to explain to him the difference between climate and weather.

“I suppose I should wait to bust this out until Tug gets here,” I said, brandishing the fifth of Jim Beam, “but I just don’t have the patience.”

Richmond smiled and held up one finger. He went into his tent and when he returned he had a dishwasher-safe plastic cup. I filled it and we sat there at the picnic table sipping the whiskey, me out of the bottle and him out of his cup.

“It’s a damn shame what happened to Leo,” Richmond said. “Tug’s been torn up about it.”

I nodded.

“That was his favorite person on the whole planet,” Richmond said. “Yep. He’s been torn up about it all right. He won’t say that of course. But living in a tent fifteen

yards from a man you come to know a thing or two about how they react to things. He's hurting."

"We all are, one way or another," I said.

Richmond nodded and took another sip.

"How long's Tug lived here?" I asked Richmond.

"Oh, I don't know that—years maybe. He's been here longer than I have,"

Richmond said. "You know he used to be a financial manager?" He laughed. "Can you believe that? A homeless guy used to be in charge of people's money."

"I suppose that sounds about right—did he lose it all or something?"

"I don't really know. He was damn good at it from what Leo's said. He used to handle some of Leo's money, too. And now he's living in a tent in MacArthur Square. *C'est la vie*, am I right?"

Just then Tug came strolling along the sidewalk from the opening between the Museum and the Courthouse.

"Habla del Diablo—Tug!" Richmond shouted. "Look who came, Tug!"

"Gabriel, you tall son of a bitch!" Tug shouted.

I laughed.

Tug picked up his pace to a light jog.

He looked good. He cleaned up real nice. His beard was still as long as it'd always been, but it looked well groomed and he had a minty aroma wafting off of him. He reached the picnic table outside of Richmond's tent and I stood up and he leaned in and gave me a hug, his head barely at my chest. He was no taller than Michelle I realized.

"Look at you, you hairy-faced giant! That beard suits you well."

“Richmond says otherwise.”

“Well it could use some grooming,” Richmond said. “That’s all I meant—get it lined up and shaped.”

“Forget him,” Tug said.

“Sorry I didn’t come sooner,” I said.

Tug sat down across from me at the table, right next to Richmond.

“No worries, Stilts,” Tug said. “You don’t owe *me* anything.”

“I guess you don’t want any of the Jim Beam then, do you?” Richmond asked.

“As a matter of fact, I don’t,” Tug said.

“You’re too good to have a drink with your friends?” Richmond asked.

“No, I’m not good *enough*,” Tug said. “I think I’ve had enough to drink for a while. I’m going to hold off on the drinking for the time being. I want to process my grief in a clear frame of mind. But please, you guys carry on without me. Don’t not drink on account of me.”

“We weren’t planning on it,” Richmond said, finishing off his cup. “I’m going in my tent to lie down. Thanks, Gabriel. Always good seeing you, my friend.” He got up and grabbed his radio then disappeared inside his tent.

“Let’s head over to my office,” Tug said. We both stood up and walked the fifteen yards through the beaten down snow where a path had formed between Tug’s table and Richmond’s table.

“Tug,” I said, sitting down at the wooden table, “why do you live here? You’re not like these people. Why didn’t you accept Beau’s help?”

“You’ve lost some of your restraint, Stilts,” Tug said. “No holding back today,

huh? Must be some good whiskey you got there.”

“Just J.B.,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

Tug grabbed the fifth of Jim Beam and took a long pull out of the bottle. “That’s all I’m going to have,” he said, replacing the lid and setting in back on the table in front of me. “I’ll tell you all you want to know, Gabriel.”

“...”

“First you ought to know that I’m not homeless because I drink. I drink because I’m homeless. There’s a big difference. My being homeless is a choice. And it actually helps temper my consumption, believe it or not. You should’ve seen me when I was working. I was completely out of control back then.”

“Richmond told me that you used to be a financial manager?”

“I sure was. I managed over forty million dollars for a number of different clients. I was all right at it, nothing special. And I had a good chunk of change set aside for myself, too. I still do. Though, I haven’t checked the growth or balance in over a year now.”

“And yet you decide to live in a tent in a park during the middle of the Wisconsin winter.”

“I know it doesn’t make sense. But I love it. I love living here.” He pointed at the other tents scattered around the park, maybe eight of them in total. “I know for them, this is their life. For me it’s a choice. They’re homeless—I’m just camping. Believe you me, I never forget that.”

I smiled. “Crazy.”

“What’s crazy,” Tug said, “is living the way I did before.”

“You mean like a normal person?”

“Look at you, Stilts,” Tug said. “No holding back today, huh? If that’s what you want to call it. But that *normalcy* just wasn’t for me. I’m not sure this lifestyle is for me either, but it is for now. For today. People here depend on me. I keep an eye out for the community. Make sure nobody tries robbing somebody’s stuff while they’re away taking a shower or getting a meal. Make sure everybody’s eaten and has some water to drink. And they do the same for me. I depend on them. It’s not much to most people but we’re a community here, which is more than I can say I had working the nine-to-five.”

“Do they know you got money stashed away in an account somewhere?”

“Are you crazy?” Tug asked. “I’d be the first one robbed and killed if they ever found that out. I’m better off if people don’t know about that. And frankly, they are too.”

“Don’t you feel bad about taking hot meals and showers from charities even though you don’t really need them?”

“Who says I don’t need them?” Tug asked.

“I mean, technically you could be living in an apartment paying your own way.”

“That’s true. But I would argue that I do need those hot meals and warm showers just as much as the next person. And those charities need people like me to help guide others toward them. It’s a fair exchange.”

“So why even keep money stashed away?” I asked. “If you’re so set on being here why not donate all that money?”

“There’s the sixty-four-thousand dollar question!” Tug said. “I guess a part of me is still too scared to walk away completely. A part of me has to know that I can go back if I want to. I’m no saint, Gabriel. I’m just like everyone else.”

“Believe me,” I said, “I get it. You need an escape route.”

“That’s all money’s good for in the end. It’s not happiness. It’s security. It’s a warm meal, a hot shower, and a sleeping bag. It’s knowing that you have the means to make it to tomorrow. But that’s all it is. You get yourself into trouble when you try to make it more than that. At least a person like me gets himself into trouble when he tries to make it more than that. I can’t really speak for anyone else.”

“You think maybe that’s what Beau’s problem was?” I asked. “Do you think if Beau lived like you maybe he’d still be here?”

“I can’t even begin to speculate on that,” Tug said. “Some people’s demons are too big to be solved by living in a homeless camp. It just so happens that mine aren’t, at least some of them aren’t. I like to think I got them under control but they might just be taking a break from me. Even my demons can’t stand to be around me anymore. They could show up again any day and I might be right back where I was, out of control again. I can’t speak about Leo and his problems. Nobody can truly know the suffering of another soul. Sure, we can empathize. We can imagine all we want. But we’ll never truly know what was going on inside of Leo.”

“I hear you,” I said.

“I’m really happy you came to see me,” Tug said. “Grieving’s made easier when you share it with others. I give you some of mine and you give me some of yours and somehow the mere act of exchange lessens the load for both of us.”

I nodded. “Do you remember Michelle?”

“Of course.”

“Well I’ve been seeing her a lot lately.”

“You guys are an item?”

“I’m not sure about that. I really do care for her. But I go back and forth.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean sometimes I feel as though I love her and at other times I feel as though we’re cut from a different cloth. Maybe we’re just infatuated because of our mutual grief. Like you said, we lessen the load for one another.”

“It might be all of that simultaneously, you know?” Tug said. “Quit trying to figure it out and just enjoy it.”

“Easier said than done.”

Tug laughed. “Always is, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Always is.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Beau and I are sitting at The Mountain Bar. It's December now. Mid-afternoon.

“Hey, I want to show you something,” Beau says.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, since you're so into urban exploring. I know of a place you might like.”

We leave The Mountain Bar and walk to the The Shorecrest. We take the elevator from the lobby of The Shorecrest to the eighth floor. When we get off the elevator we walk to the end of the hallway and enter a stairwell. It's nearly pitch black inside the stairwell, aside from a sliver of light coming in from the crack beneath the door to the ninth floor. Beau wrestles a screwdriver into either the doorknob or the threshold. I can't tell which in the dark. At some point there is a loud thud and then the stairway is flooded with sunlight. A giant space reveals itself.

“It used to be a ballroom or a restaurant,” Beau says.

We enter where the dining room must've been. There are huge arched windows on every wall, and large doors leading to a walkout patio overlooking the lake. The tile flooring is elaborate in its patterning. It consists of one-square-inch tiles, black and white, forming a mosaic patterning about a square foot in size, which repeats itself throughout the entire space. The wooden ceiling rafters have intricately carved detailing. There are still the remains of a men's room—a little urinal and a wooden stall housing a now-empty toilet. The walls that once enclosed the bathroom have been removed. Even without walls, the bathroom feels so tiny. It has one of those gravity flushes above the urinal and toilet, near the ceiling. Scattered about the room are empty beer cans, empty bottles of liquor. This has become a place of leisure for some.

Next to that bathroom must've been where the kitchen was. There must've been a wall separating the spaces—there's no flooring where the wall used to be, just baseboard. The floor inside the kitchen space is much different than the elaborate patterning of the tiles in the main space. Not to mention the kitchen has this large bay window as opposed to the opulent arches. We notice that there is some remaining ductwork, which seems to confirm our suspicions.

Off the kitchen space is a long hallway leading to a smaller room. Maybe it was for private events or maybe it served as an office. It has its own doors leading to a separate patio facing west toward downtown.

Back near the main space, beside the exposed bathroom, are the elevators, which today do not go to the ninth floor. That's why we had to enter through the stairwell. On the other side of the elevators is another small room with an eight-foot, coin-operated pool table with green felt. The table looks old, maybe from the 1980s or 1990s, obviously not original to the space. Somebody must've moved it here long after it stopped being used as a ballroom. This smaller room connects back to the kitchen and, like the other spaces, has its own walkout patio overlooking the lake.

Beau and I exit through this smaller room and walk around on the patio. Even though The Shorecrest only has nine floors, the building sits atop the bluff on Prospect Ave, so the rooftop patio is much higher than nine floors above the lake.

“This is incredible! How'd you hear about this?” I ask.

“Everybody in the building knows about it,” Beau says. “Management keeps it locked for insurance reasons—obviously—but people sneak in anyway.”

“Have you ever heard of Our Lady of the Lake?” I ask.

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s an abandoned Catholic boarding school just north of Milwaukee. I’ve never been there before but I’ve heard it’s pretty cool,” I say.

“It seems like you have, like, a degree in Urban Exploring,” Beau says.

“I know way too much,” I say. “I don’t know why, I’m just really fascinated by abandoned spaces. I wish I had my camera with me.”

“Maybe another time,” Beau says.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

On Saturday, February 16th—just eighteen days after we visited her in the hospital—Sadie came up for lunch. It was, of course, Uncle Toby’s idea. But I admit that I was not as upset about her visiting as I usually am. I’d started to realize just how fragile life was, and although I still had a lot of anger toward Sadie, as hard as I tried I could not imagine her living another ten years. That made me sad. What would she even look like at fifty? Addicts of her caliber don’t live that long. It was a miracle she’s made it this long. It dawned on me that I only have one mother and that I should do all I can to motivate her to get clean and stay alive. Anger, although justified, would only compound her problems, and, for that matter, mine too.

I’d also started to wonder whether there was more to Uncle Toby’s words—*a person like her needs hope*. Maybe Uncle Toby was really talking about me. A person like *me* needs hope. I decided I didn’t want to drink today. I’d been drinking practically every day since Beau’s funeral. I decided that I’d visit with Sadie and both of us would be sober.

When Sadie showed up around 2PM she had those puppy-dog eyes, which I recognized immediately. They always made me think of that cartoon character, Droopy. When she walked into the kitchen, Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy exchanged a look that made it clear they saw them too. But we all carried on as if we hadn’t seen them.

“Gabey,” Sadie said, “you’re still growing that beard, huh?”

I forced a smile.

A podcaster talked through the Bluetooth speaker on the kitchen table: “Gallon maintains that our country is facing a spiritual crisis. One way to solve that, according to

him, is through canine companionship. According to Gallon, ‘Humans are most nearly themselves when they experience the unconditional love of a dog.’ Part of Gallon’s platform includes government-provided veterinary services...”

Aunt Cindy had prepared quite the little lunch spread. We had deli meats and cheeses, hard rolls and sub rolls, pasta salads and potato salads. We all sat around the table, Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby in their usual spots across from each other, myself at the head, and Sadie at the other end across from me.

Finally Aunt Cindy spoke, seemingly on behalf of Uncle Toby and myself. “Sadie, you don’t look so good. Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine,” Sadie said. “I’m just a little dope-sick is all.”

I knew she was full of shit. It was a gutsy excuse. Why would being dope-sick be more acceptable than being faded? By now the physical withdrawals would’ve been over. We all knew she was full of shit. But we carried on as if unaware.

“I’m adjusting to the Suboxone,” she said.

Maybe she was. I don’t know.

I never understood how or why Suboxone was a thing. It was the same thing as being on heroin as far as I could tell. At least, it had the same effect on Sadie, if that *was* what she was really on.

The lunch was fairly silent. The parts that weren’t were routine conversation between Aunt Cindy, Uncle Toby, and myself. We were talking about my possibly helping them with a wedding that weekend when we looked over and noticed that Sadie had nodded off.

“Jesus Christ, look at her,” Aunt Cindy said.

“She’s doped up pretty good,” Uncle Toby said, spooning a bite of potato salad into his mouth.

I shook my head.

Sadie’s head hung limply, her chin against her chest and her mouth agape. She made snoring-like sounds with each breath. Spittle pooled in the corners of her lips and drool slowly winded its way out.

I got up and walked over to her side of the table and grabbed her purse off of the ground where it sat next to her feet. I riffled through the pockets of the bag until I found a leather case housing her needle kit and a small, small sack of dope.

I tossed it on the middle of the table, right next to the classic yellow potato salad. “I’m out of here.”

“Gabriel, have a seat,” Uncle Toby said.

Aunt Cindy started making those sniffing sounds that usually proceeded her crying.

“I’ll come back when she’s not around. You guys have to stop doing this to yourselves. You have to stop doing this to *me*.”

I ran upstairs and grabbed my flask from underneath my bed. I threw on a sweatshirt and then returned downstairs. As I was putting my boots on in the living room, Sadie snapped awake and took a bite of her sandwich as if she hadn’t just been out cold. She looked around and noticed that I was by the door.

“Gabriel, where are you going?” she asked.

Uncle Toby crossed his arms over his chest and looked at me. He shrugged his shoulders. It was a mixture of admonishment and understanding.

Aunt Cindy had her head in her palms.

I threw on my jacket. When I made it outside I headed toward the bus stop. I took a long swig of whiskey and pulled out my phone and called Michelle. She had wanted to come to lunch when I'd told her about it but I hadn't let her. I was happy I'd stuck to that decision.

"Gabriel," Michelle said.

"Lunch is over. I'm coming over early—right now to be exact. I'm about to hop on the bus."

"What happened?" Michelle asked.

"I'll be there in twenty minutes or so." I hung up and took another long swig of whiskey, huddling in the shelter of the bus stop. I thought about Grandpa Frank, Sadie and Cindy's father. He'd been an alcoholic. He'd died in his forties. I was certain that that was the fate that awaited Sadie. A part of me couldn't help but think maybe we'd all be better off without her, the same way Aunt Cindy and Sadie talked about being better off without Grandpa Frank. Sadie would be better off herself. Death seemed a whole lot better than the life she was currently leading.

I got to Michelle's and told her what happened. She sat there on her bed, smoking a cigarette, clearly unsure of what to say to console me.

"Have you been drinking?" Michelle asked. "You smell like whiskey."

"Give it a rest, would you?"

"Gabriel, I'm just asking."

"I took a few swigs on the way over."

“Don’t you think your scorn is a little unfair coming from somebody who drinks every day?”

“I don’t drink every day.”

She looked right at me. She didn’t have to say anything more.

“I don’t drink every day.”

“I’m worried about you, Gabriel.”

“Give it a rest, Michelle.”

“You don’t want to hear it, because you know it’s true. Be honest with yourself. You know you’re drinking too much.”

“Are you trying to say I’m like her?”

“I’m not saying that, Gabriel. I’m simply suggesting that you might be drinking too much, that you might benefit from taking a break for a while.”

“I’m not like Sadie. Yeah, I like to drink. But who doesn’t? Just because I enjoy having a few drinks doesn’t mean I have a problem. It’s been a rough few weeks for me. You of all people should know that.”

She just sat there looking at me with her big, piercing, blue eyes.

“What about you?” I said. “What are you up to now, two packs a day? Smoking is going to kill you faster than drinking’s going to kill me.”

She sat there looking at me. She took a big drag of her cigarette and then exhaled, never breaking her stare.

“Fuck this,” I said. “If I knew you were going to be a bitch, I wouldn’t have come here.” I slammed the door of Michelle’s little studio apartment. The elevator ride to the bottom floor was awkward and long, even though it was just myself in there.

I went to MacArthur Square and told Tug about everything that had happened that morning.

Richmond was sitting with us at the picnic table outside Tug's tent. The news played on his radio: "The sanctions are designed to prevent Pyongyang from funding its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs and thereby pressure the regime to abandon its arsenal, but North Korea has carved out new ways to flout the U.N. sanctions, including deceiving global banks, insurers, and commodity traders, said the U.N. panel's report..."

"Richmond," Tug said, "Do you mind giving us a minute?"

Richmond nodded and then walked over to his tent with his radio.

"Well," Tug said, "is she right?"

"What?"

"Are you drinking every day?"

"That's not the point," I said.

"It sounds like murderer's logic you're using, Gabriel."

"..."

"A murderer can convince himself he's not that bad as long as he's comparing himself to Jeffrey Dahmer... As long as you keep comparing yourself to your mother, you'll never have a problem. But there may come a day when the gravity of your problem surpasses the gravity of hers. Don't wait until then to acknowledge its existence."

"Jesus, Tug, now you're jumping on the pile?"

"I'm not jumping on the pile. Just calling it as I see it."

“I just don’t see it as a problem. Everybody drinks.”

“It’s not about everyone else. It’s about you, Gabriel. In your heart of hearts, are you comfortable with how much you’re drinking? Do you think that continuing on your current path will lead to you being healthy and happy? Be honest with yourself.”

“I don’t think I have a problem. Yes, if I continue at this rate maybe, *maybe* it has the potential to become a problem at some point down the line. But it’s just been a rough few weeks for me.”

“Well then *maybe* you’ll be just fine,” Tug said. “Just be honest with yourself. You know yourself best.”

I thought of all people, Tug would’ve provided shelter from all that bullshit. But he was making me feel just as guilty as Michelle had. I left MacArthur Square, not knowing where to go or what to do. I wanted to go home, but I didn’t want to be there if Sadie was still there. I wanted to go to Michelle’s, but I didn’t want to be there if she was going to lecture me. I ended up getting a hotel room not too far from MacArthur Square, at the Hilton. I’d never stayed there before but I decided, why not? I still had some money from my savings.

After I checked into my room, I went down to the bar in the lobby and ordered a Jameson and Ginger Ale. I acted like I was somebody else. For the rest of that night I wasn’t Gabriel Driscoll. I was just another person at the bar, perhaps a businessman visiting Milwaukee for work. I acted like I belonged here.

CHAPTER THIRTY

It's November. I'm seven years old. Mama's spending the day with me. We're going to a movie together, and then maybe we'll get some ice cream afterward. We're going to see *The Cat in the Hat*.

Before we go to the movie, Mama has to stop by her friend's place. I don't know exactly where in the city we are, but it's a part of the city I've never been before. Mama's friend is a guy with tattoos all over.

At her friend's apartment, Mama tells me to sit on the couch and watch TV for a minute while they go back in the bedroom. I sit there and watch and they leave the room. After a couple minutes I get impatient so I get up and wander back to the bedroom. When I walk in her friend is tying a string of rubber around Mama's arm.

"What's that?" I ask, standing in the doorway.

"It's just my medicine," Mama says. "It's just a shot. Like at the doctor's. Brandon here picked up my medicine from the pharmacy for me."

"Why do you need medicine?" I walk into the room.

"You ready?" the guy says.

"I'm just a little sick, honey. Go back and watch TV. I'll be right there."

"Are you going to die?" I ask.

"No," she says. "Mama's going to be just fine as long as she takes her medicine. Now go watch TV. I'll be right there."

I leave the bedroom and start making my way back toward the room with the TV. In the hallway I turn around and look back into the bedroom. The guy sticks the needle into Mama's arm. Mama sighs a big breath and closes her eyes. I continue back to the

couch where I sit down and watch TV. I change the channel with the remote. Eventually I find SpongeBob.

I watch a couple episodes before I realize that Mama hasn't come back out. I wander back to the bedroom. Mama and her friend are asleep on the bed. I go back to the couch and watch more SpongeBob. After a couple more episodes Mama comes out.

"I'm sorry, baby," Mama says. "I fell asleep. Mama's medicine makes her really tired."

"Are we going to go to the movie now?"

"We can go get ice cream. Then I have to take you back home to Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby. We'll go see the movie next time, okay?"

"I thought we were going today."

"We will next time, I promise. Come on now. Let's go get some ice cream."

We ride the bus back to the East Side. We go to an ice cream place on Oakland Ave. While I eat my hot fudge sundae, Mama looks at me and says, "Gabey Baby, I need you to make me a promise, okay?"

I look up at her.

"Don't tell Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby about what happened today, okay? Don't tell them that I'm sick, otherwise they might not want me to see you anymore. You understand?"

"Are you going to get me sick?" I ask.

"No, Gabey. It's not contagious. You won't get this sickness from me. They might not want you around me because they'll think if I'm sick I should be resting, not spending time with my boy. But they don't realize that spending time with my boy makes

me feel better. And feeling better is a part of getting better. You understand?"

"I think so."

"You tell them that we went and got ice cream and then we went to the park.

That's it. Okay?"

"But we didn't go to the park."

"We can stop by there for just a little bit on the way home if you promise me you won't tell them about Mama's sickness. Okay? How's that sound?"

"Okay."

"You have to pinky promise me!"

I stick out my pinky and she grabs it with hers and shakes both our hands. Then she kisses her fist and looks at me and I kiss my fist.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I met Michelle for breakfast the morning after I spent the night at the Hilton. I told her I stayed in a hotel and she was jealous. She said she wished she could've joined me.

"Look, Michelle," I said. "I'm sorry I stormed out yesterday. I didn't mean to call you a bitch. You don't deserve that. And of course you know I don't really feel that way. I was just upset. I didn't mean it."

"It's okay," Michelle said, half-heartedly.

"I should've stayed. But I felt like you were attacking me. Like you didn't have my back."

"Gabriel, I'm worried about you because I care about you. Because I *do* have your back."

"I know."

"I just don't want to see you turn into somebody you don't want to be."

"I know."

"I'm not saying you should never drink again." She placed the fingertips of one of her hands on her sternum. "I never said that. All I asked was that you try to be more mindful of your drinking. Just ask yourself, 'Do I want this drink or do I *need* this drink?' There's a big difference, and only you know whether you're drinking for fun or out of necessity."

"I know, Michelle. You're right. I've been drinking more than I should be. I'll be more mindful from now on."

"That's all I'm asking." Michelle smiled.

I smiled back at her. I felt really bad for being so mean. She deserved better than

that.

“Also, I’m going to quit smoking soon. Not right this minute. But I’m going to make a plan and I’m going to quit.”

“Michelle, you don’t have to do that. I didn’t mean to say that.”

“You’re right. If I’m going to push you to be your best self than I have to accept it when you push me to be my best self. My best self is a nonsmoker.”

“Well, don’t do it for me,” I said.

“That’s what healthy relationships look like. You make one another better.”

I nodded. I wanted to be better, but not for myself. I didn’t deserve Michelle, and I knew that. But I so badly wanted to be the person she deserved.

“So you’re saying this is a relationship? A *real* relationship?” I asked.

“Isn’t it?” Michelle asked.

“I want it to be.”

“I want it to be, too.” She smiled.

I smiled.

“So it’s settled then,” she said. “We’re officially together—officially a couple.”

I couldn’t believe it. She was my girlfriend. After what I’d just done to her the other day. What a piece of shit I am, I thought. And what an amazing person she is, to be able to forgive me and move on that quickly.

She hit my chest softly with the back of her little hand. “Now get your shit together so I don’t have to leave your ass.” She smiled.

I smiled and nodded. At that moment I vowed to myself that I would. With Michelle by my side, maybe I could be the person she deserved.

“I got you something,” Michelle said. “I was going to give it to you yesterday before you threw your little tantrum.” She handed me an envelope. Inside of it were two airline tickets to Orlando. “We’re going to Disney World!” she shouted.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

It's November. Beau and I are on the bus, on our way to the Eagles Ballroom for a concert. There's a DJ playing tonight. Beau knows him from way back, from the Hollywood nightclub scene. Apparently his career has really taken off recently. Beau's managed to get us backstage passes.

Before we walk into the venue, Beau leads me to an alley. He takes out a bag with a white crystalline substance in it. He scoops a little baby spoon into it and eats some of it. Then he offers some to me.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Molly," he says. "Pure MDMA."

"Like Ecstasy?" I ask.

"Yeah. Same substance. Just purer."

I open my mouth and he scoops some into it. My face goes sour as if sucking on a lemon. I swallow.

"Sorry," Beau says. "I should've told you it's really bitter."

That night while standing in the middle of the floor, with people jumping and dancing all around me, I'm suddenly overcome by a deep, deep feeling of love. I'm filled with so much compassion and goodwill. More than I ever imagined possible. I get to thinking about my family. I feel so much love for them. Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy. I feel an overabundance of love for them. I think of Sadie and it's as if I'm suddenly aware of the level of her humanness. I have no anger toward her. I know that whatever might happen to her, however she might disappoint me in the future, she is filled with love for me. And I am filled with love for her. I'm so thankful that she gave birth to me. So

grateful that she didn't get an abortion. She's just a human trying to make the best of her lot. In this moment I understand that. I forgive her. For everything. I become so overwhelmed, so overfilled with love that it has to escape me some way, and in this instant its only escape is salty, heavy tears, which wind their way down my cheeks.

Beau sees me and says, "You all right, man?"

I look at him. "Perfect." I smile. "I'm perfect."

He smiles and nods and then points to a door beside the stage. I follow him out of the pit of people. We flash our passes to the security guard and then enter through the door to the hollows next to the stage. We drink water from a bubbler. Lots of water. It's so refreshing.

"You had a moment out there, did you?" Beau asks.

"Everything makes sense," I say. "I mean all of it... This feeling is the flipside, isn't it? For as much despair as is possible in a human mind, this too—this feeling—is also possible."

"Spiritual isn't it?"

"It feels like I've struck gold in the well of my soul."

"Well said."

I see myself in a way I never have before. I become utterly aware of how ruthlessly introspective and judgmental I tend to be toward myself. But I'm not like that right now. I feel the exact opposite. I begin to feel love for myself, a deep understanding of my *own* humanness, and in feeling this love for myself I become painfully aware of how much I actually dislike myself in normal, day-to-day life. I begin to feel like I'm going to cry again—the river begins to flow. I don't have to view myself in such a

negative light. I can forgive myself. And in this moment, I do. It's life-affirming and spiritual and beautiful and all of that ooey gooey stuff and none of it makes me feel repulsed like it usually does. It pours into my heart and it radiates through my limbs to the rest of my body and it's such a relief. Such a deep, deep relief. Everything's going to be okay. No matter what happens, I know in the recesses of my soul that everything is going to be okay. *I'm* going to be okay.

Beau taps me on the head. "You all right in there?"

"I'm all right," I say. "I'm perfect."

The next day I wake up on the overstuffed chair in Beau's apartment feeling tired and depressed. That old familiar feeling creeps back in. I try to remember the epiphany, which felt so tangible and so real and so permanent the night before but now feels so vague and so distant. I try to hold onto it but it already seems like a distant memory, like waking from a dream only to watch it slowly unravel back into the darkness of the forest.

"Ugh, fuck my life," Beau says, holding his forehead in the palm of his hand.

"Yeah, I feel wrecked," I say. "Like emotionally wrecked, I mean."

"There's no biological free lunch, kid. The brain drain is the price you pay."

We go to The Mountain Bar and order a couple of Bloody Marys.

I can't decide what's worse: not ever feeling that feeling, or feeling that feeling and then not feeling that feeling.

Beau seems to notice my contemplating this reality. "You'll be back to your normal self in a day or two," he says.

"That's the problem," I say.

He laughs and then shrugs. “Nothing gold can stay.”

I laugh. “What if Frost was talking about coming down from MDMA?”

“He might as well have been.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

We went to Florida on Thursday, February 21st—about six weeks after Beau’s funeral. I was annoyed. I didn’t want to go to Disney World. But I did want to get the hell out of Wisconsin, if for nothing else just to be reminded that there are warmer places out there this time of year. Winter has a way of making you forget about warmth. And the summers in Milwaukee are so short that you aren’t reminded for very long before it turns to winter again.

We flew into Orlando. Michelle’s dad, Robert, and his wife, Lisa, picked us up from the airport. Robert and Lisa lived in a planned retirement community down there. Their skin was the reddish-tan of years of sun damage. They had a nice little house with a few bedrooms, a swimming pool, and a Jacuzzi. Their house was located in a cul-de-sac named Frontier Way in a section of the community called The Old West. The community was broken into multiple Town Squares, each with its own theme—The Old West, Tropical Hideaway, Mountain Valley, Prairie Farms, et cetera, et cetera. Within each Town Square there were country clubs, high-end restaurants, shopping centers—all the normal stores and places you’d find in any American suburb. Residents drove around on golf carts, the paths for which ran alongside the main roads.

I was unaware such places even existed until we entered through one of the security checkpoints at the main gate of the community. I looked over at Michelle, who was sitting next to me in the backseat. Robert was driving and Lisa was in the passenger seat. Michelle looked at me, her shoulders shrugged and her eyebrows raised, as if to say, *yes, this is how they live*. I was blown away. This is what people work for, I realized. You work hard for three decades and then you retire and live out the rest of your years in a

sunny retirement community in Florida with all the toys and entertainment you could ever want. It seemed miserable.

“So, Gabriel,” Robert said, peering into his rearview mirror, “Michelle says you’re a photographer? I hope you brought your camera with you. I’d like you to get some photos for us while you’re here.”

“I’m a photographer, yes,” I said, “not a very good one, but I’ll take as many photos as you’d like. It’s the least I can do.”

“How great is that!” Lisa said. She turned to look behind her at Michelle. “Your father and I are so glad you could make it down here to visit us.”

Michelle forced a smile.

“And of course we’re *so* glad you brought Gabriel,” Lisa added. “How long have you been together?”

I looked at Michelle while at the same time trying to do the math.

“It’s only been a little over a month,” Michelle said. “But it feels like much longer than that, doesn’t it?”

“Sure does,” I said.

“You two must be inseparable,” Lisa said. “I know your father and I were when we first started dating.” Lisa rubbed Robert’s shoulder as he drove the SUV around a corner of pristinely landscaped road. “Isn’t that right, honey?”

“That’s right, dear.” Robert’s voice had a very gentle tone when he spoke to Lisa, almost as if he were speaking to a young child.

We pulled into a driveway of a house that seemed identical to every house we’d seen thus far. The houses weren’t actually identical, but they all had the same building

materials so at first glance they appeared cookie-cutter. It was only upon further inspection that I realized they had different shapes, different floor plans and layouts.

Robert and Lisa gave us a quick tour of the house, showed us which room we'd be staying in, and then Michelle and I went for a ride in a golf cart that they'd rented for us for the weekend. They had a golf cart of their own that was customized. Robert explained to us that everybody in the community customizes their golf carts according to their personality. Robert and Lisa's golf cart had a red body kit on it that made it look like a Hummer.

"I always wanted a Hummer." Robert laughed. "Now I got one and I don't have to worry about the cost of gas or the environment."

"That's awesome." I laughed.

"Dad, it's so corny." Michelle laughed.

"Isn't it?" Lisa laughed. "I was against it, but your father let me choose all the finishings in the kitchen. I figured I'd let him have his Hummer."

"C'mon!" Robert shouted. "It's a *Hummer!* H2!"

Michelle and I drove around in the rental golf cart, which looked like a regular old golf cart. There was golf course after golf course. Swimming pools. Tennis courts. Softball fields. Spas. Bowling alleys. Beach volleyball courts. Restaurants. Live music in one of the squares. All of the Town Squares looked like the downtown of a rural town—Main Street USA. As Robert said himself, "the community is like summer camp for old folks." I could see what he meant as we drove around in the golf cart. The landscaping was the most impressive aspect. Just looking at the green, green grass and the bright flowers I couldn't help but imagine how much pesticides, fertilizers, and water they used

to maintain such a spectacle. God forbid there be a single dandelion.

When we got back to the house Michelle and I had some cocktails with Robert and Lisa and then the four of us went for a swim in their in-ground, saltwater pool. Robert explained to me that the saltwater is a lot better than chlorine because it makes you more buoyant so it's easier to float. Plus, it's way better for your skin. The Jacuzzi, when not in use, had a waterfall feature that flowed into the pool below it. There was a remote that controlled all of it—the lights in the pool, which changed colors, the waterfall feature, the temperatures of both the pool and the Jacuzzi, the music, which played through the many speakers throughout the whole house and on the lanai, which is a Hawaiian word I'd just learned which refers to a covered patio used as a living room. It was all so luxurious. When we'd first met, Michelle had told me that Robert had made his money in real estate, but she never mentioned how well he'd done. Then on the plane to Florida she told me that her father was pretty well off. I guess she was trying to warn me. I never could've imagined all of this. I learned later on when talking to Robert that he had been a developer. Business had been good.

The next morning the four of us went to Magic Kingdom. I didn't realize that Disney World had multiple parks. I mean I knew that there was the one in California called Disney Land and I knew the one in Florida was called Disney World, but I had no clue that within Disney World there were multiple, different parks. I thought it was just one. Apparently the one we were going to, Magic Kingdom, is like the original, the one most people think about when you say Disney World.

I was somewhat annoyed that morning because I was really hungover from

drinking all day the day before. I would've preferred to relax by the pool all day but that wasn't what we came down here to do. Michelle was dead set on taking me to Disney World. The community is about an hour's drive from Orlando, so we were on the road early that morning. We went through the drive-thru at McDonald's, which did little to cure my hangover. I slept most of the car ride.

Disney World was strange. It was really cool, but mostly just strange. We arrived via the monorail and I was already overwhelmed by how big the crowds were. I mentioned something about it and Lisa said we were lucky—this actually wasn't too big a crowd, at least not by Disney World standards. But it was big enough for me to feel like we were cattle getting corralled. Michelle was right, though. There were a lot of kids there, but there were also a lot of adults and older people seemingly not accompanied by kids. Disney World truly was for all ages.

The first thing we did when we entered was walk down Main Street. I couldn't help but think it was strange how obsessed people seem to be with the idea of a Main Street. They replicated them in the retirement community and now at Disney World. I couldn't help but wonder what was so cool about it. Just about every rural town has a Main Street that is dilapidated and dying and nobody seems to care about them. But they sure are busy trying to recreate them.

In the distance we could see the castle. I recognized it immediately as being the same one in the beginning of all the movies. Robert and Lisa were wearing Mickey Mouse hats that they'd brought with them from home. Robert insisted on buying Michelle and me matching ones, which he did upon entering one of the stores on Main Street. All four of us were wearing them now. It was sort of cheesy but Michelle seemed

to be having fun, so I did my best to do the same. We made our way toward the castle and I took some photos of Michelle and Robert, and then Michelle, Robert, and Lisa, and then we found somebody to snap a few photos of all four of us in front of it. Lisa and Robert gathered around me and I scrolled through them so they could get a look at the photos and make sure they were satisfied with them before we moved on.

The first thing we did after the castle was Space Mountain, and then we did Haunted Mansion. They were fun rides, both of them what Michelle called “dark rides,” which I figured out meant that the rides were housed inside of a building, in the dark. The lines were long though. I quickly realized that we’d only be able to ride a handful of rides because of the wait times. While we were in line for Haunted Mansion, some people cut up to the front and Michelle explained to me that for a higher price you can buy express passes, which involves waiting in a different, shorter, faster moving line. It became real clear how a family could very easily spend thousands and thousands of dollars on a trip to Disney World.

After Haunted Mansion I mentioned to Michelle that we should find somewhere to buy a beer. And she started laughing.

“They don’t sell alcohol here, Gabriel. This is a place for families.”

“Actually they do!” Robert said. “But you have to be at one of the sit-down restaurants, which involves waiting around for a table to open. It’s not worth waiting around just for a beer. Hard liquor, maybe, but not for beer and wine.”

“I don’t mind waiting,” I said. “Everything here involves a wait anyway.”

“We’re not spending our one day at Magic Kingdom waiting around for a drink,” Michelle said.

“C’mon,” I said. “You guys can go on a ride and I’ll wait for a table and by the time you’re done I’ll probably be seated already.” It was not lost on me how foolish we probably looked having this discussion while wearing Mickey Mouse ears.

“That’s a smart plan, and I’d even join you,” Robert said, “but I’m pretty sure you need the whole party present in order to be seated.”

“Forget about it, Gabriel.” Michelle’s face reddened.

“We should’ve snuck in a water bottle of booze.”

Michelle gave me another look, as if to say, *don’t even start with that*.

I wanted to continue trying to convince her to let me wait it out for a beer anyway, but I knew she wouldn’t let me and it wouldn’t be worth the conflict. But then I started to get bitter because I didn’t even want to come here in the first place. It felt like I was doing all this stuff in order to accommodate her and make her happy and she couldn’t even do one thing I wanted to do.

For lunch we ate nine-dollar hot dogs that tasted like one-dollar hot dogs. I was happy it wasn’t my money we were wasting here, because everything was a huge ripoff.

After the hot dogs we went on Splash Mountain. Our shoes squeaked and squished like a sponge for the next hour or so. After Splash Mountain we walked around aimlessly for a while. And then we stopped and stood on a dock looking across the water at Tom Sawyer Island.

“C’mon,” I said to Michelle, “Let’s go get some beers. It can’t be that long of a wait.”

“Would you stop!” Michelle snapped. Robert and Lisa looked over at us, and then turned back to look across the water.

Michelle pulled me closer to her and then whispered, “If you mention beer one more time, I swear to God, Gabriel.”

“You guys want to do Big Thunder?” Robert asked.

“Sure,” I said.

“Let’s do it,” Michelle smiled.

Michelle was quiet in the line for Big Thunder Mountain Railroad. She spoke when her father or Lisa prompted her to, but she made no efforts to converse with me. I started to feel bad. But I was also angry. I was beginning to feel as though I was just a pet to her, expected to do whatever she wanted to do without any opinions or ideas of my own. But I didn’t want to fight in front of her dad and Lisa.

On the ride Michelle was as normal as ever, screaming the whole way and gripping my arm as we went around the curves and drops. When we got off the ride I pulled her back so that we were a few yards behind Lisa and Robert.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay. Let’s just forget about it and enjoy ourselves.”

But I couldn’t enjoy myself.

I started to feel as though something was wrong with me. Here we were at the Happiest Place On Earth and I felt angry and frustrated and bitter. Everybody around me—Michelle, Robert, Lisa, and all the other random park-goers—all seemed to be having a good time. Perhaps it wasn’t the best time of their lives, but they were nonetheless clearly enjoying themselves. Why wasn’t I? Was it because I didn’t come here as a kid? Is that the secret magic of Disney World—it makes you feel like a child again? I was convinced that couldn’t be it. I mean, I’m sure nostalgia *is* a factor, but a lot

of people probably go to Disney World for the first time as an adult and enjoy themselves. There must be something else wrong with me. I wanted to go back to Milwaukee. Suddenly I was homesick for the cold. The heat and the sunshine and the happiness of Florida were so contradictory to what I felt inside that it made me more aware of it. At least in the dead of the Wisconsin winter the misery outside matches what's going on inside of me. I tried to push all this aside and at least pretend to have fun, for the sake of Michelle and Robert and Lisa, who were kind enough to include me in this experience. I owed it to them to be happy and enjoy myself. I faked a good mood for the rest of the time we were at the park.

At night there was a firework display at the castle. It was so ridiculously crowded but we sat around on a patch of grass waiting for it to start, all so we could have a good spot to view it from. When it started I squatted down and let Michelle go on my shoulders so that she could see over the crowd of people in front of us. She was so light that it wasn't hard at all. Somebody behind us shouted, "Down in front," but I refused to put her down, even though she agreed we were probably being rude. Fuck them, I thought. We're getting our money's worth.

When the fireworks really started going crazy and the music grew in volume, Michelle became mesmerized by the whole display and forgot all about wanting to come down off my shoulders. It was really a grand spectacle. At one point a woman dressed as Tinker Bell flew across a wire above the crowd. Everybody was cheering and shouting and clapping. When it was over we made our way back down Main Street.

"Thanks, Gabriel," Michelle said.

I smiled at her. She looked up at me and gave me that look she always gives me

when she wants me to bend down and kiss her. She leaned against me and held my hand the whole way out of the park. Robert and Lisa were holding hands the whole way out, too. None of us really spoke on the hour-long ride back to the retirement community. I'm not sure if it was because we were pooped from a long day in the sun or if it was because we were still in a state of hypnosis from the fireworks display. Whatever the reason was, it felt like a good reason to be silent.

That night Michelle and I drank some cocktails and went in the Jacuzzi. Robert and Lisa went to bed right when we got home. In the Jacuzzi Michelle kept asking me about which ride was my favorite, about what part of the parade on Main Street I enjoyed the most, which Disney character was my favorite, et cetera, et cetera. I didn't really have answers to these questions the way she did. I hadn't given any of it much thought. But after a stiff drink it was infinitely easier to play along and answer her questions as if I'd been thinking about them my whole life. We stayed out there in the water for a long time, jumping into the pool every now and then to cool ourselves down. Before we got out Michelle climbed on top of me and we made love right there in the Jacuzzi.

The next day we hung out around the pool. Lisa and Robert were at the bar next to the pool drinking Bloody Marys and watching TV. Michelle was on her phone, sitting in a lounge chair, presumably perusing social media. I was lying in the water in an inflatable lounge with a Miller Lite in my hand.

It was serene until Michelle said, "Oh my God. What the fuck?" She walked over to where her dad and Lisa were sitting at the bar. "Look at this."

Robert read the message on Michelle's phone: "Ballistic missile threat inbound to

Florida. Seek immediate shelter. This is not a drill.” It was one of those Emergency Alert messages.

“Is that real?” Lisa asked.

“No,” Robert said. “They’re just testing the system.”

“Dad. It specifically says *this is not a drill*.”

Just then the TV above the bar let out a series of emergency-alert-system sounds, which reminded me of dialup Internet.

The TV’s robotic voice announced: “We interrupt your programming. This is a national emergency. Important instructions will follow.” The TV started making the dialup sounds again. “This message is transmitted at the request of the United States Office of Civil Defense. The North American Aerospace Defense Command has detected a missile threat to Florida. A missile may impact on land or sea within minutes. This is not a drill. If you are indoors, stay indoors. If you are outdoors, seek immediate shelter in a building. Remain indoors well away from windows. If you are driving, pull safely to the side of the road and seek shelter in a building or lay on the floor. We will announce when the threat has ended. This is not a drill. Take immediate action measures. Repeat: The North American Aerospace Defense Command has detected a missile threat to Florida...

Robert muted the TV.

“Oh my God,” Lisa said. “What do we do?”

“You heard the TV,” Michelle said. “Get inside.”

Lisa ran into the house.

I was still floating around the pool with a Miller Lite in my hand.

“Gabriel, get out of there!” Michelle shouted.

“I don’t think we’re in any danger,” Robert said.

I knew we were in danger, but I also realized that a one-story house wasn’t going to protect us from that danger.

“Just relax,” Robert said. “Have a Bloody Mary.” Robert went behind the bar and started making a round of drinks.

“Are you insane?” Michelle shouted. “We have to get inside.”

“Michelle,” I said, “if there’s really a missile headed for us, going inside’s not going to save us. It’ll vaporize everything within hundreds of miles.”

“Yeah, but we’ll be safer indoors. The message said *stay indoors*.”

“Listen,” Robert said, “the second we hear or see something in the sky we’ll run inside. Until then, relax. Here, have a Bloody Mary.”

Michelle was pacing around. “Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God. I’m freaking out.”

I got off of my lounge and, chugging my beer, made my way toward the steps to exit the pool. I wrapped my arms around Michelle. “Just take some deep breaths. Panicking will only make it worse.”

“Why aren’t you guys freaking out?” Michelle shouted.

I didn’t know why I wasn’t freaking out. For some reason, I felt eerily calm, calmer than I normally feel.

“We’re going to be just fine,” Robert said. “I don’t think whoever wants to kill us would aim for the middle of Florida. Atlanta’s probably where it’s headed. Worst-case scenario we’ll have to bunker down here for a few days until everything sorts itself out.”

Lisa ran out of the house. “I’ve started gathering supplies. We can all huddle in

the laundry room. There's no windows in there. It's our best bet." She ran back inside.

Michelle headed for the bar and grabbed the Bloody Mary that Robert made for her and started drinking it.

"There you go," Robert said. "Just have a drink and relax. Hey, how about a round of shots?"

"That sounds great!" I said. I looked up at the sky and everything seemed normal. Just another sunny day in central Florida.

"Oh my God. This can't be real, can it?" Michelle lit up a cigarette.

"Let's make them double's." Robert poured us shots of tequila. The three of us took the shots and then Robert headed toward the house with Lisa's shot. "I'm going to go check on her."

"Gabriel, this is really happening!"

"If these are the last moments of your life, do you really want to spend them all panicked? Just let go." I was saying this as much for myself as I was for her. I started to feel an inkling of panic forming, lodged in the center of my diaphragm. Then I reminded myself that one way or another, this would all be over soon. And that maybe that was a good thing.

"Do you think it's North Korea?" Michelle asked.

"I think your dad is right. I think the entire United States is probably under attack. Florida alone makes no sense strategically."

Michelle poured us some more shots. For some reason that knowledge seemed to settle her. If we were going to die, at least the entire country was going to die, not just one region or state.

She stubbed out her cigarette and lit up another one.

I looked over at the TV. The emergency message was still repeating itself on mute, closed captions on.

Michelle began perusing the Internet on her phone.

“Don’t do that,” I said. “There’s nothing on there that is going to make it better. It’ll only make it worse.”

We drank the shots.

“There’s got to be answers,” Michelle said.

“They will alert us over the TV as soon as they have some. Going online right now to share in the mass panic will only make things worse.”

“I’m going to go check on them.” Michelle walked into the house.

I began to feel really relieved for some reason. In the midst of this chaos, it became so apparent how trivial our lives were. We’re just emotional animals. It felt nice to know that there was going to be a payoff to this experience of being a human. There was a clear end in sight. I began to wonder if maybe I should’ve been a more religious person. Is there a God? Am I going to meet Him? That might be cool.

Michelle returned less than a minute later. “They’re in there having sex!”

I laughed. “Can’t blame them, right? Maybe that’s what we should be doing.”

“How could you have sex at a time like this?” Michelle asked. “What are we going to do?”

“Maybe we should go for a ride in the golf cart or something? Sitting around here is going to make you go insane.”

“Let’s take another shot,” she said. “I’m just starting to feel a little buzz. I don’t

want to die sober.”

I poured us two more shots.

It'd only been fifteen minutes since the alert. Time felt like it was slowing down.

We drank the shots.

“Fuck it,” Michelle said. “Let’s go for a ride.”

We drove around the retirement community. There was a group of people out on one of the golf courses, either unaware of the impending threat, or unconcerned. I pointed them out to Michelle. “See, people are just doing what they love to do.”

She looked at me. “Sorry, we’re not having sex right now.”

I laughed. “It’s okay.”

“I guess I’m not a sex-during-end-times kind of gal.”

The fact that she said *gal* instead of *girl* somehow seemed significant, as if she was beginning to let go.

As beautiful as the community was, it was unnervingly beautiful now. I thought how strange it was that these rich old white folks worked their whole lives, saved up for retirement their whole lives to move into one of these houses in paradise, only for it all to end the same way for all of them. I wondered if they felt ripped off.

We didn’t speak much after that. We were both just looking around, taking it all in.

After only five minutes of driving, Michelle said, “Let’s go back. I don’t want to be out here.” She stuck the lit end of her cigarette to the end of a fresh one and began puffing on it to get it going.

I turned the cart around and headed back for the house.

When we arrived Robert and Lisa were in the kitchen with the bottle of tequila. Robert was in a bathrobe. Lisa was in her one-piece swimsuit. They were both sweaty and short of breath.

“Oh my God. We’re safe!” Michelle shouted. “I just got another message: *There is no missile threat or danger to the state of Florida. Repeat. False Alarm.*”

The whole ordeal lasted exactly thirty-eight minutes.

The four of us went outside to the bar on the lanai and watched the TV. It was all over the news. It would take a while to figure out what exactly caused the false alarm. But the news that it was in fact a false alarm was on every channel.

“I knew it!” Robert said.

“Oh thank heavens,” Lisa said. “I better go put everything back in its place.” She walked into the house.

“How the fuck do you make a mistake like that?” Michelle shouted. “How does this even happen?”

“Somebody must’ve hacked the system,” I said.

“Whoever is responsible for this needs to be locked up.” As terrified as Michelle had been, it was clear she was equally as angry now.

“I guess that means we’re not going to die anymore,” I said.

“Gabriel, don’t sound so disappointed,” Robert said. “You’ll get your chance to die eventually.”

“Fuck that!” Michelle shouted. “People are so fucking dumb.” She lit up another cigarette.

“I knew there was no way they’d target Florida,” Robert said. “Why not L.A. or

New York? Why Florida? I knew it wasn't real."

The truth was that I did feel kind of disappointed. I didn't want to die. But the feeling of relief I had during the whole ordeal was now gone. It was replaced by the old familiar confusion: Now what? Where do we go from here? What's to come of the rest of my life?

Michelle walked into the house, cigarette still lit. "I'm going in the golf cart to get more cigarettes. I'll be back."

After Michelle disappeared into the house, Robert looked at me and said, "I'll tell you what, that was pretty fun!"

We found out later that the false alarm was a result of somebody pushing the wrong button.

That evening Michelle and I took the golf cart out for a spin. We ended up parking at the edge of one of the golf courses to watch the sun set. I can never understand how people are so impressed with something they see every day. A sunset is a sunset is a sunset. But today was different. Although I didn't enjoy the sunset like Michelle did, I could see why she enjoyed it. Theoretically, I understood why somebody might.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

A week after our exploration of The Shorecrest's ninth floor, I manage to talk Beau into exploring Our Lady of the Lake. We look up its location on Google Maps and do a preliminary investigation. There is a public park about a mile south of the abandoned school, we learn. We'll park the car there and walk the rest of the way in. After I convince Beau, he takes us to Wal-Mart where we buy high-powered flashlights and some surgical masks, for him, to avoid inhaling dust and other particulates. I have my respirator, of course.

The next morning around 10AM we arrive at the site. We see it in the distance, across a vacant parking lot with shrubbery and weeds sporadically sprouting through the cracks of the blacktop. There's metal fencing surrounding the entire property, which prevents us from simply walking up to the main entrance. Signs saying *No Trespassing* are posted all over. Beau notices a dirt path just south of the site that follows the exterior of the fence. On a hunch, we follow it, not quite sure what exactly we're looking for or where exactly the best place to enter is. We know it's best to venture away from the road and the passing traffic. Sure, we could easily climb the fence, but Beau suggests that we follow the path and see where it leads first. It ends up being a good call. The path continues for a couple hundred yards, bordered by the fence on one side and the forest on the other. Deep into the woods we find a sizeable hole in the fencing. Somebody has cut through the metal, likely previous urban explorers. We crawl through the hole and head toward the back of the huge concrete structure.

We finally reach the site itself and the first thing we happen upon is an outdoor gymnasium—a sort-of courtyard enclosed by a roof and three walls. This design, I'm

guessing, must've been intended to allow students to recreate outside while still protecting them from the weather. It seems unfitting for Wisconsin though. I can't imagine having gym class outside in the middle of January. The lack of a fourth, eastern wall also gives the recreation area and the first and second floor an incredible view of Lake Michigan and the forests to the south and the north. I imagine some people might find that sunrises here are beautiful, that is, if you're into that sort of thing. The rest of the concrete structure surrounds and overlooks this spacious courtyard/open-air gymnasium.

We find an open entrance leading to the interior of the school. It's apparently a double door but now there's just one door remaining, propped wide open. A thick layer of debris and dust covers everything inside. It smells musky and dank. A lot of the windows are open or broken, so the structure is completely exposed to the weather. Mold grows in random patches on the ceilings, walls, and floors. Right away we notice that there are a lot of relics from the days of its operating as a school, but it's abundantly clear that we are not the first people to explore this site. Graffiti covers the walls, and desks and furniture are thrown about randomly in the halls and in the rooms. There's what appears to be broken wine bottles scattered about. A lot of the crosses above the doorways of the rooms hang upside down. But there is also a lot of stuff that appears to be in its original spot, right where the school left it. From my knowledge of watching Urbex videos, I know that a lot of urban explorers don't vandalize and destroy these sites. Most people try to maintain the originality as much as possible while exploring. Sometimes people will even make the effort to return things to a seemingly original state, primarily for the sake of taking photos. I have my camera with me but I'm not shooting. I'm too in awe of the place, too busy trying to take it all in. I don't want to be distracted

by taking photos, so my camera remains inside my backpack. I know I will probably come to regret this decision, but I figure I'll come back another time just to shoot.

On the first floor there is a long hallway off of which are a number of classrooms. Inside the classrooms are rows of desks with benches connecting to the bases of the writing surfaces. Each desk appears to be designed for two students. The chalkboards still remain but many of them have been spray-painted by vandals. On one of the chalkboards somebody has spray-painted in huge calligraphic letters: *GOD DOES NOT EXIST*.

Beau sees this and says, "How do they know?"

"Do you believe in God?" I ask Beau.

"That's such a loaded question."

"Well, are you religious?" I ask.

"That question's even more loaded," Beau says. "I go through moments of great faith and moments of great crisis of faith. I'll tell you one thing that might help answer those questions: I'm an addict. I was once recovering but now I'm using again. Not the same substance or to the same degree as when I was at my worst, but still, I'm using because that's what addicts do: we're either busy getting clean or we're busy getting high. Or at least that's what the literature would suggest. But I learned in recovery the origin of the word *addict*."

"What does that have to do with God or religion?"

"I'm getting there," Beau says. "*Addict* comes from two Latin words: *ad* meaning *to* or *toward*, and *dicere* meaning *to speak*. So an *addict*, then, is somebody who gives their voice—who *speaks*—*to* or *toward* some person, place, or thing, to something outside of themselves. In its original context, the word *addiction* was actually used to

describe a religious person, somebody who gave their voice to the gods. That also happens to be the third step—giving yourself up to a higher power, to God as you understand God.

“I think having a genetic predisposition to addiction is probably the same thing as having a genetic predisposition to religiosity. I think it’s the same exact sequence of genes that makes you an addict or religious. It’s the same personality trait... Does that answer your question?”

“I guess,” I said.

“The only difference between addiction and religion is what’s being worshipped.”

Amazingly, there are still some photos on the walls. They depict various men in Roman collars, faculty members I presume. It felt very wrong to think of those people as being anything like a drug addict. Some of the classrooms have papers thrown about all over the floor so that very little ground is actually showing. I pick up some of the papers and examine them. They’re extremely weathered learning materials: multiplication tables, penmanship exercises, maps of the USA with states and their corresponding capitals, et cetera.

At the end of the hallway, on the south end of the building, there’s a room for doing laundry. Huge industrial-size washing machines line one of the exterior walls. An interior room next to this one has clotheslines hanging from the ceiling in parallel rows. We head back down the hallway to the north end of the school. There are very small rooms here and there that serve as chapels. Inside of each is a painting of Jesus Christ and a few wooden kneelers. There’s a hallway that runs perpendicular with a grand, double staircase wrapped around it. At the north end of the hallway, we find a large open room

that we decide must have been a cafeteria, as it houses another room that appears to be a kitchen. There are no appliances remaining, but the ventilation ducts, the drains on the tiled floors, and the large three chamber sinks reveal the room's function.

At one end of the kitchen we find a few steps descending into an underground room. It's a wine cellar with arched ceilings constructed entirely of brick. It's filled with empty bottles of wine, which are stacked inside wooden crates. This is obviously where the broken bottles we saw earlier came from. There are hundreds of the glass wine bottles. We can't help but wonder why they kept them. What purpose did all of these empty bottles serve?

We wander back down the hallway to the adjoining one we passed by earlier. It leads us to the main chapel. We saw the chapel from the road outside. The steeple is the most prominent part of the structure. We forgot all about it until now. The inside of the main chapel is incredible. Nearly all of the stained glass is still in place, now barely illuminated by the mid-morning sun. There's a huge organ, the silver pipes of which line the second floor balcony. The pillars have ornate tiled stonework. There are a few steps leading to a large marble altar. Behind the altar is a very large depiction of Jesus with an open book in one hand. In the pages of the book in Christ's hand is the phrase: *Ego sum via et veritas et vita*. I don't even know that it is Latin, but Beau recognizes it immediately. He says, "*I am the way and the truth and the life.*" There's also a small octagonal tabernacle, a word I don't know until Beau uses it.

For as vandalized as the rest of the building is, it's amazing how pristine the main chapel remains. When I point this out to Beau, he says, "I guess there's some honor amongst vandals." There are two confessionals in the corners of the chapel near its main

entrance. The chapel is empty of any pews, but it has two rows of kneelers, a total of six of them, which I suspect are most likely not original to the room. Previous explorers must've brought them in here from elsewhere in the building in order to stage the space for photographs. I tell this to Beau and he nods in agreement. Of all the rooms we've seen thus far, the main chapel seems to be the most powerful in terms of its energy. Beau agrees, but suspects that it might have something to do with our own cultural connotations of religious buildings being inherently more sacred. I suspect he's probably right.

We wander back out to the hallway to the grand staircase leading to the second floor. At the top of the staircase is a spray-painted mural depicting a skull wearing a roman collar and a gas mask, kind of like the respirator I'm wearing. The second floor, which houses the dormitories, has a noticeably stronger odor than the rest of the building. We suspect that there are fewer opened windows on this floor—it's probably less ventilated. Beau says that it smells like somebody has been shitting in this place everyday since the place closed. I laugh and agree with him.

The second floor has three large open rooms with beds. The beds are nothing but metal frames with metal netting and padding only a few inches thick. A lot of them are missing pads. On a wall in one of the dormitories there's a mural of young boys running around and smiling, seemingly at play. To the right is written: *We hold great hope in our hearts. We are the sons of the resurrection.*

The beds line both the exterior walls and the interior half-walls—barriers in the middle of the room that are clearly meant to provide some separation. There are four rows of beds, something like sixty beds in total. The room we're in is the only dormitory

where the beds are actually organized in rows—maybe an explorer staged it for a photo. The other rooms have beds as well, but they’re scattered about and stacked haphazardly. Beau stands on one without a pad and begins bouncing, his feet never leaving the metal netting. “They’re so springy!” he says. Some of them still have sheets on them. One has a pillow and when Beau shines his flashlight on it we notice that it’s covered in splotches of black mold.

It’s clear that there was no privacy for these kids. If little Billy happened to be a snorer, the entire room would’ve had to put up with it. I can only imagine how that must’ve affected the social dynamics between students. I’m sure there was a lot bullying as a result of the overcrowded sleeping situation.

On the exterior walls of the second floor there are some smaller rooms, which might have been for the faculty. These rooms have a bed, maybe two, and some wooden wardrobes. A couple of bigger classrooms are on the second floor, as well as what must’ve been a recreation room—there’s a 1950s-era television on the ground of this room. Its screen is shattered and some of the buttons appear to have been pried off. There are also shelves with books and magazines. Most of the books and magazines are on the ground scattered about, as if somebody had been taking them off the shelves and chucking them across the room.

It’s hard to believe how many physical relics actually remain. Why would they just leave all of this stuff? Why didn’t they take these books with them? It seems as if they just left one day and never came back.

On the end of the second floor opposite the recreation room, there’s a small room with frosted glass windows. It appears to be an infirmary. Inside is an examination table.

There's also a metal locker in the corner with a bunch of medical tools: forceps, syringes, bandages, reflex hammers, et cetera. Another room next to that one appears to be some sort of quarantine. There are a number of beds in there as well as the same lockers with the same medical tools. The ceiling in this room is in really rough shape. There's some green fungus surrounding various openings in the façade of the ceiling. Giant pieces of debris cover the floor.

On this end of the second floor, there are also locker rooms and a small indoor gym with large glass windows overlooking the courtyard gymnasium outside. Inside this small gym are dumbbells and some miscellaneous gymnastics equipment: balance beams, pommel horses, parallel bars. The last place in the school we explore is the roof. Empty wooden flowerbeds line the edges, the remnants of what appears to be a garden. The view of the lake from up here is incredible. We soak it in for a while.

We depart by descending the stairs onto the balcony that surrounds the open-air gymnasium. We descend another set of stairs and arrive back on the ground floor of the courtyard, right back where we started. We head back toward the fencing and exit through the same hole and then follow the dirt path back through the woods to the road. Then we walk the mile all the way back to the park. We arrive at Beau's car having spent just over three hours at Our Lady of the Lake. It's a site I know I will return to one day.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

We'd been back in Milwaukee less than a week when Sadie died. She croaked on Thursday, February 28, 2019. They shipped her body from Chicago up to Milwaukee. Uncle Toby spoke at the funeral that following Tuesday. Aunt Cindy wanted to, but there was no way she could make it through that. She was a wreck. I had no desire to do it myself. So Uncle Toby got stuck doing it.

Sadie was three years younger than Cindy. They'd been pretty close all through their childhood. Cindy was more of a mother than a sister to Sadie. After Grandpa Frank died, Grandma Jo took the life-insurance money and moved to Arizona. Cindy let Sadie move into her and Uncle Toby's place so that she could stay in Milwaukee and finish her senior year of high school. Then Aunt Cindy took custody of me after I was born, all so Sadie could get her shit together and make something of her life without having to worry about taking care of a baby. As far as I was concerned, Sadie's death was yet another mess Aunt Cindy had to clean up.

In the visitation line there were a lot of people that knew Sadie. It was clear that most of them were fellow addicts—using buddies or getting-clean buddies. That pissed me off. They told me how great of a mother Sadie was. About how she always liked to talk about me—brag about my being a photographer and how much I'd grown and how much fun she'd had with me. That really pissed me off. But I nodded and smiled and acted like their words were consoling.

In the eulogy Uncle Toby hinted at her being addicted to heroin. He should've just come out and said it. All of us knew her and knew exactly what he was talking about. Instead of saying she was a heroin addict, he said, "She had a fragile soul." Instead of

saying that she continually tried and failed to get clean, he said, “She never lost hope. In the end her struggles got the best of her.” I felt he owed it to all of us to just cut the shit and be candid. But I also understood why he didn’t. What would it solve? What point would it prove?

Michelle and I went to The Mountain Bar after the burial. There was a gathering at the house, but I didn’t want to go. I couldn’t be around that. I couldn’t be around Aunt Cindy. Seeing her so distraught lit a rage inside me. I think Uncle Toby understood. At least he didn’t fuss about my not going to the house afterward.

Roy noticed my and Michelle’s attire right away. I was wearing the same suit I’d worn to Beau’s funeral.

“Look at how long your beard is,” Roy said.

“...”

“I’m guessing this is not a happy occasion?” Roy said.

“No,” I said. “No it’s not.”

“Gabriel’s mother passed away.”

“My *biological* mother.”

“So sorry for your loss,” Roy said. He lined up a couple shots of whiskey. “These are on the house.”

“Will you pour one for yourself?” I asked. “It’d mean a lot to me.”

Roy nodded, and then poured another one. He held it up.

Michelle and I held ours up.

“To your mother,” Roy said.

“To Sadie,” Michelle said.

“To Mom,” I said.

When I was around ten years old, I’d finally grown tall enough to ride all the rides at Six Flags. When I told that to Sadie on the phone, she promised me that she was going to take me. I was so excited when I realized that she was actually going to follow through with it. It was in the fall during Fright Fest and I got to skip school. We got there as soon as it opened. We waited in line with a map planning out which order we’d ride what. When they finally let us in I took off sprinting toward Raging Bull, all so we could get front row without having to wait in line forever for it. I never once looked back at Sadie, but I knew she was keeping up with me because I could hear her giggling.

While I was sitting there at The Mountain Bar drinking my old fashioned, I imagined what Sadie might’ve looked like that day chasing after me. Her dirty blonde hair in a ponytail. Her loose bangs blowing in the wind. Her Chuck Taylors lightly tapping the asphalt. The sound of her panting through her yellow, gap-toothed smile. *That* was my mom. Not the heroin addict. I wanted so badly to remember her as *that* person—the person who took me to Six Flags that day. Not the degenerate who’d nod off at the dinner table. But I knew that wasn’t the case. No matter how much I wanted it to be, that just wasn’t the case. I’d always be stuck with both versions of her.

Sadie took me to my first Packer game, my first Bucks game, my first Brewers game. It must’ve hurt Aunt Cindy to have to raise this child as her own and then stand by and watch somebody else, her fuckup of a little sister, come in and take him away like that. To have to cheer this kid up every time his *real* mother left and returned to her own life or just didn’t show up at all. What a bunk bag of goods Aunt Cindy had been sold.

It wasn't until I was in middle school that I started questioning the nature of my and Sadie's relationship. I started to get angry about the fact that she was my mom and she didn't want me to live with her. I couldn't understand how somebody could have a child and not want to be with them. How could they say they loved them when they weren't even there?

I went pretty much my whole freshman year of high school without seeing Sadie. She'd stop by the house and I'd go somewhere else until she left. Sometimes I'd just lock myself in my room. She'd sit on the ground outside my door for hours, catching me up with her life, trying to ask questions about mine. I'd put on headphones and listen to music until I was certain she was gone. That was around the time I stopped calling her Mom. That's around the time when her using started getting her into real trouble—legal trouble and health trouble, which of course only confirmed my decision not to see her. Made me feel like my treatment of her was justified.

Sitting there in The Mountain Bar, sipping my old fashioned, I couldn't help but wonder if my refusing to see her back then might've helped propel her opiate addiction, made her feel as though there was no hope anymore since her own son couldn't even stand to look her, didn't even want to hang out with her, or go to a Brewer's game or a Buck's game with her. Thinking about that made me feel like a big ole sack of dog shit. I knew it was irrational, but I couldn't help but think that maybe if I'd been a little less resentful, just a little more loving and forgiving, maybe things might've gone differently.

They wouldn't have though. And I knew that, too. Nothing would've gone differently. Her using wasn't *my* fault. But knowing that couldn't keep me from thinking about how angry I'd been and how poorly I'd treated her because of it. I realized at that

moment that caring about a person with addiction is like being trapped in a soundproof box. You're in there screaming at them and they're on the outside looking at you and nodding along, but they don't hear a single fucking word you're saying. You realize there's nothing you can do, but you continue to scream anyway, as much as for your own sake as for theirs.

Michelle tapped me on the top of my head. "Everything okay in there?"

"Yeah," I said.

She leaned her head on my shoulder.

"You know, Michelle, I know this is probably not the best timing or the situation you had in mind, but I love you. I have to tell you that. I really care about you—I love you."

She lifted her head off my shoulder. "I know, Gabriel. I love you too." She kissed me on the cheek. "I wish you'd shave this thing." She ran her fingers through my beard. "Or at least trim it."

When I knew the gathering at the house had ended, I went home to be with Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby. Michelle came with me. Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby were sitting on the couch, looking through old photos of Cindy and Sadie as children. I sat down on the couch next to Aunt Cindy. Michelle was in the kitchen pouring us some coffee.

"You know, I no longer have my biological mother, but we all know that you've always been my *real* mother." I held her hand. "You'll always be my real mom."

"Gabriel." Aunt Cindy blew her nose into a tissue. Uncle Toby, sitting on the other side of her, rubbed her lightly on her back. "Don't say that," Aunt Cindy said.

“Sadie was your real mother, regardless of whether or not she raised you.”

“Not to me. You’ll always be my real mother. I love you more than a child loves their mother. Same goes for you, Uncle Toby. You’re my real father. You guys are my *real* parents.”

“That’s enough, Gabriel,” Aunt Cindy said. “I can’t cry anymore today. My nose is going to get rubbed right off my face.”

“We appreciate that, buddy,” Uncle Toby said. “But we didn’t raise you so that you’d thank us. And we don’t love you so that you’ll thank us.”

“I know. I just have to say it. For myself as much as for you guys.”

Michelle walked into the living room with two cups of steaming coffee. “What’d I miss?”

“Gabriel’s turned our living room into the set of a soap opera,” Aunt Cindy said.

The four of us laughed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

On Beau's last night I show up right at eleven, and Beau is already there, sitting in that same booth at The Mountain Bar where we always sit. I walk over to him, and Roy nods at me.

We have a few drinks and then at some point we leave The Mountain Bar and head to the lakefront.

"Are you happy?" I already know he is not the kind of person who is happy but something makes me ask him tonight. There's an energy he's giving off.

He clears his throat. "What is that? What is happiness?"

"What does it mean to you?" I ask.

"Happiness is nothing but an absence of memory. An instant here or there when we momentarily forget the hell of our material existence."

"That's good," I say. "Did you come up with that yourself?"

"I'm clinically depressed," he says. "That's hard to believe, isn't it?"

I am not sure if he is being sarcastic or not.

"It's genetic," he says. "My family has a history. Have you ever been depressed?"

"Sure," I say. "Hasn't everybody?"

"Sure, everybody gets down from time to time. But most people come out of it eventually. They go back to enjoying life's little beauties." He lights up a cigarette and takes a long drag, blowing the smoke out through his nostrils. "Some people's brains are broken. Some people are simply not able to enjoy a sunset." He takes another long drag.

"You've never really used drugs before you met me, have you?"

"Not really," I say. "I used to smoke pot from time to time in high school. But

that's it. And of course I like to drink whiskey.”

“Who doesn't?” he asks. He removes his flask from his jacket pocket and takes a swig and then hands it to me.

I don't want to talk. I want him to carry the conversation. I try to keep my responses short and to the point. “This is such a cool flask,” I say. I've always admired it.

“You like it?” he asks. “It's yours. Keep it.”

“Seriously?”

“I used to abuse drugs,” he says. “I still do, but I used to, too.”

“That's a Mitch Hedberg joke, isn't it?”

“You know your comedy,” Beau says, smiling. It is a genuine smile, not at all like his smile in my photos of him.

“Laughter's the best medicine, right?” I ask.

“Medicine is the best medicine,” Beau says.

We walk for a while in silence, looking out at the dark water, the lights of the city reflecting off the lake and then vanishing as they creep toward the horizon.

“You know, people think addiction is a moral choice. We've come a long way, but people still think that only bad people abuse drugs. For most it's a substitution for suicide. It's the only way to put out the fire inside their head. It allows them to enjoy sunsets, or in our case, sunrises... People who kill themselves don't do it because they *think* it's the only way out. It *is* the only way out. People say that's selfish. But those people have never been clinically depressed, you see, because it's actually selfish to believe that somebody should continue to endure excruciating psychological pain for the sake of someone else.”

I don't know what to say. I formulate some responses in my head but I don't voice them because they all seem so trite, like clichéd attempts to diminish his point in some way.

“These are my demons,” he says. “This is the real me. I wish there was some way for people to see. So that maybe they realize they're not alone. Well they are alone—we are all alone. But maybe we're together in our loneliness.”

We don't speak for some time after that, and then at some point the conversation turns to the Packers.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Later that night, after a cup of coffee and dinner with Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby, Michelle and I lay in my twin-size bed. We were watching *Seinfeld* on my MacBook Pro, which was plugged in on my desk. *Seinfeld* is the perfect show to watch when you need mild stimulation. It draws you in just enough while also leaving your mind some space to wander away from time to time. *Two Shakes of a Lamb's Tail* had once been my go-to show for that perfect level of distraction, but I could no longer watch it without feeling blue about Beau. The contrast between the teenage Beau in that show and the Beau that I had known is too extreme. Might as well be two different people.

As I snuggled with Michelle, her head resting on my chest, I imagined how Beau's suicide might've gone down. I'd gotten it all wrong before. Now I saw it for what it was. He's in his apartment, still feeling the alcohol from his time with me earlier in the night. Through a Bluetooth speaker paired to his phone, music plays. Frank Sinatra. He smiles. Feels calm, happy even. He swallows an Ambien then strips down to his tighty-whities. He fixes himself a glass of whiskey. Jim Beam. The kind I drink because it's good and it's cheap. Tonight he's drinking it, too. He dances around the house, pirouetting from room to room. Then he gets in the shower and scrubs himself clean. Shaves his beard. After his shower, he turns off the music. Towels himself dry. With no accompaniment, he sings:

And now the end is near

And so I face the final curtain

My friend, I'll say it clear

I'll state my case, of which I'm certain

*I've lived a life that's full
I traveled each and every highway
And more, much more than this
I did it my way*

He brushes his teeth. Flosses. Gels his hair. Applies deodorant to his armpits. Spritzes cologne. Then he dances his way to the closet in his bedroom. He feels the grogginess creeping in, singing:

*Regrets, I've had a few
But then again, too few to mention
I did what I had to do
And saw it through without exemption
I planned each charted course
Each careful step along the byway
And more, much more than this
I did it my way*

In the closet, he finds his best suit. Pulls it off the hanger. Puts it on. Ties a black tie into a Full Windsor. Inserts a pair of sterling silver elephants into his cuffs. Places a red pocket square in the breast of his coat. Looks at himself in the full-length mirror on his bedroom wall. Winks. Lifts his glass of whiskey. Cheers.

He walks to the front door and wedges a Nike sneaker underneath it, propping it wide open. Strolls back into his bedroom:

*Yes, there were times I'm sure you knew
When I bit off more than I could chew*

But through it all when there was doubt

I ate it up and spit it out

I faced it all and I stood tall

And did it my way

Sitting on his bed, he pours himself another glass of Jim Beam. Holds the picture of himself with his German Shepherd. Looks at it. Smiles:

I've loved, I've laughed and cried

I've had my fill, my share of losing

And now, as tears subside

I find it all so amusing

To think I did all that

And may I say, not in a shy way

Oh no, oh no, not me—

I did it my way

He chugs the bottle of Jim Beam, stopping only to swallow Ambien after Ambien. He lies down and settles in. Gazes up at the ceiling:

For what is a man, what has he got

If not himself, then he has naught

To say the things he truly feels

And not the words of one who kneels

The record shows I took the blows

And did it my way

He embraces the grogginess. Lets out a sigh. Closes his eyes:

Yes, it was my way.

We lay in my bed, hypnotized by sitcom laugh tracks, by a manic George-Costanza diatribe, which contains just the right degree of levity to be humorous while nonetheless remaining convincing. Jerry, Kramer, and Elaine are standing around Jerry's kitchen helping George brainstorm a comeback to say to a coworker who made fun of him for doing something—I missed what exactly—in a business meeting. George is enraged by their input: “All right, all right! You see? This is why I hate writing with a large group! Everybody has their own little opinions, and it all get's homogenized, and you lose the whole edge of it! I'm going with *Jerk Store*. *Jerk Store* is the line. *Jerk Store*! YES!...”

Then I told Michelle what Beau said to me on his last night.

“Didn't you find that alarming that he was saying all that stuff?” Michelle asked.

“I don't know,” I said. “Not really. Beau always talked like that with me. I mean he had never shared those particulars, but we always discussed dark topics. He never shied away from that stuff. At least not with me.”

“Do you believe all that?” Michelle asked. “Addiction, suicide—about them not being a moral choice?”

“I believe Beau believed it. I believe Sadie probably believed it, too.”

“But do *you* believe it?” Michelle asked, looking right at me.

“I don't know.”

“I think it's all a load of horseshit,” Michelle said.

“I don't know. There's no way we can ever truly know what's going on inside

somebody else's mind."

"It's a very childish worldview," Michelle said.

"So, what? Are you like Uncle Toby then? Uncle Toby always says, 'Life's equally hard for everyone.' Do you believe that?"

"You open yourself up to trouble the minute you stop believing that," Michelle said.

"So you're telling me that a starving child in Africa and the Queen of England both suffer to the exact same extent?" I asked.

"I wouldn't say *that*," Michelle said. "I just think you're probably better off believing that they do."

"So you're saying you're better off believing something that's patently false, even though you know it's patently false?" I asked. "Seems like a delusion to me."

"You *don't* know it's patently false," Michelle said. "You said yourself we can never truly know what's going on inside somebody else's mind. For all anyone knows the Queen of England wakes up every day on the brink of suicide, in complete psychological agony, and the starving child in Africa has a family and friends and a village that loves him and he's very happy despite being hungry all the time." She was no longer snuggling me but sitting up and leaning against the headboard.

"Now *that* sounds like a childish worldview," I said.

"Just because it's not likely doesn't mean it's not possible," Michelle said. "It just depends what you're willing to consider. You're probably better off believing that life *is* equally hard for everyone."

"I disagree," I said. "How can you ever help somebody then? If you think a

starving child in Africa is suffering to the exact same extent as the Queen of England then why should we send humanitarian aid to Africa? Why not send it to Buckingham Palace instead?"

"Because they're both suffering," Michelle said. "The whole idea behind humanitarianism is to promote human welfare and alleviate human suffering."

"So the Queen of England needs humanitarian aid?" I asked.

"All I'm saying is that you're probably better off believing that she *might*."

"I understand that everybody suffers," I said. "Of course everybody suffers. Even people who appear to be happy and whose lives appear to be perfect from the outside suffer. They're still human, after all. But I think it's absurd to believe that there aren't levels to suffering. Some people's lives are objectively worse than others—"

"You're wrong, Gabriel. You said yourself we can never truly know what's going on inside somebody else's mind. For you to assume that the circumstances of somebody else's life are objectively better or worse than somebody else's is absurd. That's the flipside: life's also equally joyous for everyone. Just because somebody appears to have worse circumstances than the Queen of England does not mean that they aren't equally as capable of achieving the same level of happiness as the Queen of England. Suffering is suffering. Happiness is happiness is happiness. No matter *who* experiences it. It's the same thing for everyone. At the end of the day we're all just human beings living human lives having human experiences and feeling human emotions. No one person is more human than anyone else."

"But some humans have *better* lives, *less* suffering, and *more* happiness," I said.

"Nope. That's just what you want to believe. You'll never know for sure if that's

truly the case. And you're probably worse off for thinking that way."

I laughed. "Whatever. Agree to disagree."

"Think about it, Gabriel. It doesn't really matter what is true—we'll never truly know anyway. What matters is what you *think* is true."

"You sound like an evangelical trying to convince me that Jesus died for my sins, regardless of whether I believe he did or not."

"I don't know anything about Jesus, or God, or religion," Michelle said. "But I'm pretty sure that believing your suffering is different from everyone else's will most likely just add to your suffering. It certainly won't help alleviate it."

"Again, agree to disagree," I said.

"How you choose to think is *your* choice. You don't choose your thoughts, but you do choose how you react to them, which ones you give credence to, and which ones you dismiss. You're probably better off believing that life *is* equally hard for everyone."

"That gets in the way of gratitude, though. Doesn't it?" I asked. "If I'm unwilling to acknowledge how I'm privileged than how can I feel grateful for those privileges?"

"You're conflating the two. Privilege is separate and different than happiness and suffering. A privileged person still suffers and an underprivileged person can still achieve happiness. You can acknowledge and be grateful for your privileges while at the same time understanding that you're still capable of suffering despite those privileges—in some cases maybe even because of those privileges—to the exact same extent as a person who does not hold those privileges."

"I'm lost... Then why would we ever try to empower the underprivileged and marginalized? You're saying that somebody's status in society has no bearing on their

ability to achieve happiness and avoid suffering.”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all,” Michelle said. She slapped the back of one hand against the palm of the other. “I’m saying empowering the underprivileged and marginalized definitely enhances their ability to achieve happiness and reduce their suffering. But that’s all it does. In no way does it guarantee or grant them happiness. And in no way does it eliminate the possibility of them suffering further. It just enhances their ability to access those things. You can be privileged and acknowledge your privilege and still believe that life is equally hard for everyone.”

“We’re going in circles now,” I said.

“We’re not going in circles.”

“I think we should just drop it,” I said. “Agree to disagree.”

“Fine. But just realize that you have a say in how you think.”

“I guess I just choose to ground my thinking in reality,” I said.

“No you don’t,” Michelle said. “You choose to ground your thinking in your *perceptions* of reality, some of which may not actually be serving you all that well.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Agree to disagree.”

“Fine. Agree to disagree.” She lay back down without putting her head on my chest. The sitcom laugh tracks sounded in the background.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

On Friday, March 8th—a few days after we buried Sadie—I went to MacArthur Square to look for Tug. He wasn't around so I just sat and waited for him at the picnic table outside his tent.

At some point Richmond saw me and shouted from his table, “You haven't heard?”

I looked at Richmond, confused.

He walked over. “Tug was mugged. He's at Sinai.”

I went to the hospital and Tug was laid up. He had a couple hematomas on his face. He'd suffered a concussion as well. I figured he'd probably be doped up on pain meds but he was awake when I got there. His face was so swollen.

“Gabriel,” Tug said. “You lanky motherfucker. Every time I see you, you look taller and that beard looks longer. What are they feeding you?”

“What happened?”

“Somebody found out about my sleeping bag.”

“You got robbed for your sleeping bag?”

“I told him I would've gave it to him. I didn't even resist.”

“Do you know who it was?”

“No idea. But I'm sure somebody at the Square knows. It doesn't even matter, though. I'm not going back there. All I have left there is my tent. Somebody can take it over. I'm not going back.” He reached for a cup with a straw sticking out of it and took a sip.

“Jesus,” I said. “I can't believe this happened.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Tug said. “I’ll be fine. Whoever it was probably needed it more than I did. I had no business being there anyway. I guess somebody caught on. Have a seat, Stilts. *Mi casa es su casa.*”

I sat down in the chair next to the bed. A political pundit was speaking on the TV: “Ross A. Gallon is nothing but a guy who works for an animal shelter. He has no political background aside from lobbying in Washington on behalf of The Humane Society. The idea that dog ownership can solve the issues facing our country is not only wildly idealistic—it’s downright insane. The people of our country need *real* policy measures, not pets. When I first heard of him I assumed, like most of us did, that this was some sort of trolling started by some online community in the dark corners of the Internet. The fact that we’re even giving him any coverage at all just speaks to the lunacy of our current political climate...”

“You heard about this guy—Ross Gallon?” Tug asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “He seems to be getting a lot of media attention.”

“He believes if we all had a dog, the country would be a better place.”

“There’d be a lot more dog shit everywhere, that’s for sure.”

“There might be something to it,” Tug said. “Maybe I should get a dog.”

“I kind of agree with this guy.” I pointed to the pundit on the TV. “Seems pretty simplistic to me. Seems like an attack on cat people. Also, what if you’re allergic? What then? There’s no hope for people who have animal allergies?”

An older woman walked into the room. I recognized her from somewhere.

“Mom,” Tug said, “this is a friend of mine: Gabriel. He was good friends with Leo.”

“I met you at the funeral,” Tug’s mom said. “I’m Leanne.”

“You’ll have to forgive me for not remembering you right away. I met a lot of people that day.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Leanne said. “You want me to scram?”

“No. Please,” I said.

“Have a seat, Mom,” Tug said.

Leanne sat down in the chair on the opposite side of the bed.

“So, what’s next?” I asked.

“He’s coming home,” Leanne said. She turned and looked at Tug. “He’s had enough of his little camping experiment.”

“Yes,” Tug said. “I’m going to go live with her until I recover and plot my next move.”

“We should keep in touch,” I said.

“We will,” Tug said. He wrote something on a piece of paper and then handed it to me. “You have my phone number and my address. Stop by whenever.”

“A phone number and an address,” I said. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

“They’re hers.” He smiled at his mother.

I wondered what Beau would’ve made of all this—his childhood friend being robbed for the sleeping bag he’d bought for him.

“Oh my God,” I said. “I almost forgot. I originally came looking for you because I wanted to tell you that Sadie died.”

“Mom,” Tug said. “Can you give us a moment?”

Leanne stood up.

“It’s all right,” I said. “You don’t have to leave.”

Leanne looked at Tug. Tug nodded at her. She walked out of the room.

“Gabriel,” Tug said. “I don’t even know what to say.”

“It’s all right,” I said. “I just wanted to tell you. We buried her a couple days ago.”

“What happened?”

I just looked at him.

“I guess that’s a dumb question,” Tug said.

“No it’s not. In most cases that’s not a dumb question at all.”

“Jeez, kid,” Tug said, “two-thousand-nineteen is already proving to be a rough year for you. Things’ll get better. They have to.”

“Maybe *I* should get a dog.” We laughed.

After I left the hospital I went back to MacArthur Square. I found the bag for Tug’s tent right inside of it. I broke down the tent and packed it up. I wasn’t going to let somebody else have his tent, too.

That night I used a good portion of my savings to buy myself a nice sleeping bag online. It cost me nearly a thousand dollars. It was rated for down to negative-forty degrees. Perfect for winter camping.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

On Saturday—the night after I visited Tug in the hospital—I met Michelle for a drink at The Mountain Bar. We only got one drink apiece—an old fashioned for me and a Manhattan for her.

I'd been thinking a lot about that conversation I'd had with Michelle.

She'd wanted me to stay with her that whole week after we buried Sadie. But I didn't want to. I mean I did want to. But I just couldn't. But I didn't like being at home either. As much as I felt bad for Aunt Cindy, seeing her grieving only made it worse. I couldn't help but wonder why I wasn't grieving like she was. I mean I was grieving. But not like she was. Uncle Toby, seemingly aware of my unease, said, "Everybody grieves differently, son. No two people are the same. No two grieving processes are the same. There's not a right or a wrong way to do it." But still. I felt like there was something wrong with me. I didn't belong at home and I didn't belong at Michelle's apartment. But Michelle's seemed like the better of the two options.

As we were sitting there sipping our drinks, Michelle said, "Don't you think we should start going to a place that's within our price range?"

"It's not about the price of the drinks. It's about the setting."

"You shouldn't be wasting your money. Do something smart with it. Invest it or something."

"That's boring," I said.

"Exactly," Michelle said. "Plus, don't you think it's kind of dwelling to keep coming here?"

I didn't understand where this was coming from. I mean, it wasn't dwelling. I'd

gone there all the time and not even thought of the times I'd been there with Beau.

"I'm making new memories here," I said.

"Let's go somewhere else."

I didn't have the energy to contest her. So I followed her out and we walked down Farwell Ave to Brady St. I suppose a bar on Brady St might've made more sense to somebody on the outside looking in. But I wasn't really into the scene on Brady St. It's mainly young people, people in their twenties, or college kids. I mean of course there are bars that cater to an older demographic, but there are also a lot of just straight-up college bars. They're all right there on the same street. I preferred to drink at a nice, dark, quiet place. Anywhere that plays loud music, no matter what that music is, is not for me. But I didn't have the energy to explain all this to Michelle.

So we went to a little hole in the wall on Brady St. The inside of the bar had graffiti everywhere. It smelled like a men's locker room. And they only accepted cash. Drinks were cheap—two dollars and fifty cents for a PBR Tallboy. But nobody in that place knew how to make an old fashioned, which is why I had to order the PBR.

I started to wonder if Michelle was trying to change me. Maybe she just didn't get it. I thought back to that conversation we'd had. I'd been thinking a lot about it.

"So do I not have a right to be down?"

"What? What are you talking about, Gabriel?"

"I mean," I said, "if life's equally hard for everyone, is it equally hard for you and me in this moment right now, one week after my mom died?" I had to shout over the volume of the music. They were playing the Beatles. Abbey Road—Because.

"Gabriel," Michelle said, "you're still caught up with that crap?"

“Answer my question.”

“No,” Michelle said.

“As in?” I asked.

“No. As in: no, life is not equally hard for me and you in this moment right now.

The whole point of that maxim is that you shouldn’t compare your life to others. Of course you have a right to feel sad. You’re grieving the death of somebody you loved.”

“I’m grieving the *life* of somebody I loved.”

“Gabriel, please don’t shut me out now. Don’t feel like you ever have to temper your emotions for my or anybody else’s sake.”

“I just can’t agree with how that conversation went. I feel like it says a lot about you.”

“Oh my God. Would you drop that conversation? We should’ve never gotten that deep into it. I should’ve realized how it might be misconstrued. It was insensitive for me to push that point at that particular moment.”

“I just think you’re wrong, Michelle. I think some people have different personalities and temperaments and dispositions. No matter how much some people want to be happy, some people just struggle with it more than others.”

“Gabriel,” Michelle said, “this is so not worth getting into again.”

“Just let me ask you this: do you think if I were to play quarterback for the Packers, that I’d be even one-fourth as capable as Aaron Rodgers?”

“I don’t know how capable of a quarterback you’d be,” Michelle said.

“Well I wouldn’t. I’d be awful. Not because of my own lack of effort, but because some people have more natural, God-given talent than others. Even if I were groomed

from infancy to be the next great NFL quarterback, I'd never be as good as Aaron Rodgers. I just don't have the athleticism. The same applies for people and their potential for happiness. Life is not equally hard for everyone. Some people are born with the skills of Aaron Rodgers. Some people work their whole life to become Aaron Rodgers and they never even make it to the NFL."

"I'm not getting into this," Michelle said. "You're missing the point, but it's not worth arguing over. Can't we just agree to disagree and move on and enjoy ourselves?"

"I just think you're kind of insensitive."

"I already admitted it was insensitive for me to push that point when I did. I should've never gone there. I'm sorry that I did. And I'm sorry that you've been festering over it. That's not what my intentions were. I just want to help you be as happy as you possibly can be. It wasn't right of me to try to make you happy right after we buried your mother. But you have to realize that it has nothing to do with you grieving her death. Please, Gabriel. I'm really sorry. I never meant to upset you or make things worse for you in any way."

"I just figured if anybody would know," I said, "it'd be you. I mean you buried your mother as a teenager. I can't even begin to imagine what that was like for you. How you felt during that time."

"I know, Gabriel. You're right. I'm really sorry. From now on I just want to be here for you. Every emotion you're feeling is valid and natural. I'm sorry if I made things worse."

I still felt like she stuck to her point. And I firmly believed that she was wrong. But it wasn't worth pursuing. I didn't have the energy. Not right then.

Those next few days I ended up staying with Michelle. I hung out around her apartment while she went to work. Aunt Cindy called me and told me she was worried about me. I told her that I just needed to be with Michelle, that she was taking care of me just fine. Uncle Toby understood. He defended my decision to stay at Michelle's and convinced Aunt Cindy that it wasn't because of her or anything like that. Though, I suspect that Uncle Toby understood that it *was* because of her, at least partially, because he *did* make it a point to convince her otherwise.

While I was talking to Uncle Toby on the phone I made plans to go to Mass with him that following Sunday. He invited me and I felt as though I didn't have anything else to do, no true reason not to go. I even thought it might be peaceful being around a vaguely familiar ritual, especially one that he sought so much comfort in. Maybe some of that comfort, some of that peace of mind, would rub off onto me.

Every day that week I tried to wait to make a drink until after Michelle got home. Some days I cheated a little and poured a drink when I knew she was on her way home. She didn't seem too pleased that I'd have a glass of whiskey in my hand when she'd walk through the door, but she didn't say anything about it until that Thursday.

"Is this your life now?" Michelle asked, walking into her apartment.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"This drinking whiskey all night every night."

"What does it matter to you?" I asked.

"What do you want to do with your life, Gabriel? Don't you think you should get a job or something? You need something productive to do with your time."

“What do you want me to do? Go get a business degree and be an account executive at IBM like you?”

“I’m not saying that,” Michelle said.

“Because you just *love* your job, don’t you? You wake up every day so excited to spend the next eight hours schmoozing your clients.”

“At least I’m doing something productive.”

“That’s debatable.”

“I mean, go take photos or something. Exercise. Read a book. Volunteer at a nonprofit. I’m not saying you should go get a shitty job that you can’t stand. All I’m saying is that you should be doing something meaningful with your time.”

I got up and left her apartment.

I spent the rest of the night at The Mountain Bar. I knew Michelle was right—I should be doing something productive with my time—with my life. But I had no idea what I wanted to do. The only thing I really enjoyed was photography. But I couldn’t stand doing weddings with Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby. There was too much pressure in that, and although I was decent enough at it, I didn’t enjoy it. It’s like being told what I had to shoot ruined all the fun in taking the pictures. It was a business, not an art. I was a worker, not an artist. Uncle Toby would probably debate me on that. But to me it was not as creatively freeing as riding around on a skateboard or wandering around the city taking photos of interesting people or sites. But I didn’t know how to go about making money doing that. I mean, of course, there are people that get paid for taking photos on Instagram and stuff. But I wouldn’t even know where to begin with that sort of thing. Plus, how long would it even take to see any money from doing something like that. It’s

like I knew where I wanted to be and what I wanted to be doing, but I had no idea how to go about getting there.

I knocked on Michelle's door at around 2:30AM. I'd spent the whole night drinking at The Mountain Bar. I wanted to tell her that she was right. About how I wanted to figure out a way to make a living taking photos of stuff *I* wanted to shoot. But she opened the still-chained door and said, "If I let you in you have to promise me you'll go right to sleep. No talking. I have to wake up early and go to work."

I agreed.

I tried to fool around with her but she shut it down, so I went to sleep.

The next day I had a bad, bad hangover. But I stopped by home and grabbed my camera and my laptop, checked in with Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby, and then went back to Michelle's. I spent that whole night going through the photos of us from Disney World. Michelle was really happy to see them, and it made me feel good that something I had done gave her that feeling.

CHAPTER FORTY

I spent the rest of the weekend with Michelle. But that Sunday I returned home after going to Mass with Uncle Toby.

Mass was interesting.

I felt deeply jealous of the people there, especially Uncle Toby. To find solace in such rituals seemed so simple. Yet, I did not share the feeling that this ritual seemed to be providing them. To me it seemed as if I'd traveled back in time and was witnessing an ancient cult worshipping to appease a fickle, senseless God.

I understood why people believed. I understood why people lived this way. But *I* couldn't live that way. It was like I'd already seen the ridiculousness of it and was therefore unable to un-see it. Which is not to say that I didn't think that there was a God. I was as agnostic as one could get. But still, although I understood the purpose and the draw and the tendency for people to live like this, it still seemed too silly for me. I mean all of it. The sitting. The standing. The kneeling. The singing. The marching one by one to eat a wafer. The marching one by one to drink wine. The attire the priest had on. It all felt so ancient and silly. Almost neurotically OCD in its insistence on ritual. Everything had to be just so. A part of me understood that I was perhaps worse off because I was missing out on this sort of thing. But another part of me felt that maybe I was better off for being worse off. Could something like this ever be worth doing even if I felt that it was not worth doing? I left there feeling very confused.

I spent the next few days by myself. I felt embarrassed staying at Michelle's place. She'd become too aware of how I was spending my time. It made me nervous that

maybe she wouldn't approve of how I was spending it. And being at home still felt weird. Aunt Cindy was doing much better. But still, seeing her made me feel all kinds of grief.

On the morning of Monday, March 18th, I strapped my new sleeping bag and Tug's tent to the cargo rack on the back of my bike. I packed a bag and took the bus out to one of the Park and Rides in Mequon. From there I biked the remaining three or four miles to Our Lady of the Lake. It was my own urban camping trip. It felt fun to get away and go on an adventure. For the first time in a while I felt like I was truly enjoying myself. It was like I was on a photography mission or something. I'd brought my camera with me. I wanted to get a bunch of shots of the site at all different times of the day. It reminded me of old times when I'd just wander around the city taking photos, not thinking too much about life. I needed to get back to doing that more regularly.

I got there right around noon. I followed the path back through the woods to the hole in the fence. It'd been patched up since Beau and I had been there. I could see that the metal was a lot newer and in better condition than the surrounding parts. I decided to stash my bike in the woods, as far away from the site as possible. That way in case I needed to make a quick escape I could just leave my bike and come back for it later on. Then I returned to where the hole was, or where it used to be, carrying my sleeping bag and my tent. To me, the scariest part of the whole trip was the idea that I could be forced to separate from my one-thousand-dollar sleeping bag in order to make an escape. I knew I risked losing that money. Of course, I'd get arrested before I'd ever part with my camera.

I threw my tent and sleeping bag over the fence and then climbed over it myself, careful not to jostle or damage my camera and the equipment inside my backpack.

I spent the entire afternoon taking photos. I only stopped because I ran out of battery. I wanted to save one for dusk and then my third and last battery I saved for dawn the next morning. After I'd spent my first battery, I walked around the site, figuring out and planning when the light would shine in each room based on the direction the windows were facing. Then I set up my tent, right in the open-air gymnasium/courtyard space, protected by the roof and the three walls. Sheltered from the weather in case of rain or snow or wind.

I lounged around on my sleeping bag with the door of the tent wide open, waiting for dusk. I'd brought a couple fifths of whiskey and some Cliff bars and a couple PB&J sandwiches. I ate my dinner, had a few drinks, and then set out again when the sun started going down. I had my flashlight with me, and plenty of spare batteries for that too, but I had no intention of wandering around the building in the dark, so I made it a point to return to the tent before I actually needed to use the flashlight. I had half a mind to build a fire, but I didn't want to risk the smoke revealing my presence. It was creepy when it was finally dark out, but I had a few more drinks and hunkered down in the tent for the night.

I set my phone so that the alarm would go off about a half-hour before sunrise. I brought a portable charger for my phone, too, so I didn't have to worry about that dying. I got up and took some more shots that next morning. The main chapel was awesome in those hours of dawn—the stain glass illuminated by the rising sun. Naturally, the lighting from the sun shone from the exact opposite direction of what I'd shot during dusk. I took photos in the exact same spot in the main chapel so that I could patch the two photos together, so that both sides would appear fully illuminated. I had this idea of creating a photo of the abandoned chapel seemingly illuminated by Divine light, surrounded by it in

this unnatural—or perhaps supernatural—way.

I had plenty of battery remaining so I sat around and waited for dusk again. I wanted to be sure I'd gotten everything I wanted. I planned to retrace my steps and take duplicates of some of the photos from the day before that didn't turn out as good as I'd hoped. But during the evening on that second day at Our Lady of the Lake, it turned out that Michelle stopped by the house looking for me. She wanted to surprise me, probably as a way of avoiding giving me the chance to tell her not to come over.

That's when it all unraveled.

Aunt Cindy said that she thought I was staying at Michelle's. Michelle said she thought I was staying at home. Obviously, I was at neither of those places.

I got a text from Michelle: *Where are you? Just stopped by. Aunt Cindy told me that you're staying at my place?*

Within minutes Aunt Cindy texted me, too: *Michelle's here. What's going on? Where are you?*

I ended up packing up my things and biking to the Park and Ride as it was getting dark, never retaking the photos that didn't turn out as good as I'd hoped. I'd only stayed the one night. But I'd still gotten a lot of shots of the different rooms with various lighting scenarios.

Michelle picked me up from the Park and Ride and drove me home. I had to remove both of the wheels on my bike in order to get the frame to fit in the backseat of her little sedan. It was enough for now, I decided.

I had no idea how I was going to explain myself. I just wanted to get away for a few days. I thought it'd be nice to just have some time and space to myself, to do some

thinking and some shooting. I knew on the surface all of that sounded reasonable, but I also knew they'd wonder why I'd lied to them about it. Of course, it was partially because I'd grown tired of being around all of them. I just needed a break from everyone. But, of course, it was also because I didn't want them to know where I was staying—that I was trespassing onto the grounds of an abandoned Catholic boarding school. They'd probably think it was not a smart idea—I could get arrested. Who knows the kind of people that frequent a place like that? Blah, blah, blah—I could just here Aunt Cindy already. All of that was true, but I wasn't worried. It was still Mequon for Christ's sake. Worst-case scenario I would've ran into some drunk high schoolers. They probably would've been more afraid of me than I was of them. At least that's what I'd figured.

Michelle was relieved to find out that I wasn't cheating on her or something of that nature. I'd never do that. Michelle was the best thing that ever happened to me. I'd never do anything like that. She was still pretty weirded out though. Eventually we settled on the fact that she'd just have to go there with me some time to see it for herself. That's the only way she'd get a sense of the space and how fascinating it was. She also concluded that I'd been spending too much time with Tug—urban camping was not a movement you wanted to be a part of, according to her, especially in light of Tug's recent injuries. Luckily she refrained from mentioning any of that to Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby.

Aunt Cindy was pretty worked up over it, of course. She took it as a personal attack on her. The fact that I'd stayed there and not at home seemed more meaningful to her than it actually was. Uncle Toby thought it was pretty funny, though he didn't laugh about it around Aunt Cindy. The one time he did she yelled at him pretty good about his

thinking this was all a big joke, about his not taking my life and my safety very seriously.

The next day I showed Uncle Toby the pictures I'd taken of the site and he was really impressed by them. He tried to speculate about what'd been what in each of the rooms there, the same way that Beau and I had when we'd first gone. Apparently Uncle Toby knew of some people who'd actually attended Our Lady of the Lake. We bonded over that.

And when I explained to him that this is a whole thing: Urban Exploring and the photography and videography of abandoned places, he seemed genuinely interested in it. I ended up showing him some of the YouTube videos and photos of my favorite sites. He understood it for what it was: art. He even called it a *youth movement*. I don't know about all that, though. I don't even know what that means—a youth movement. To me it was just art, a way to document reality in a beautiful and unexpected way.

Aunt Cindy was still frustrated, but Uncle Toby did some convincing and she eventually settled down about it. She even admitted that she liked some of the photos, too, but she made a point of saying in no way did her enjoyment of the photos mean that she condoned trespassing to take them. Still, it felt really good to be acknowledged for something I had done. Even though they were the only people who'd seen the photos, it felt like those two days I'd spent taking them really counted for something. It felt like I was doing something that actually mattered. Why it would matter, I have no idea. But at least it felt like it did.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

On Friday, March 22nd I visited Tug. I had to take a couple transfers to get to his mother's house by bus. She lived west of Riverwest, not too far from Union Cemetery where Beau was buried.

I let myself in, upon Tug's instruction. He was lying on a couch in front of a TV, smoking a joint.

"What happened to your beard?" I asked.

"Once the swelling started to go down I decided to shave it. It got to be a burden putting those ointments on with all that hair."

"Looks good," I said. "You look young, healthy—vibrant. Next thing you know you'll be buying and selling stocks for millionaires."

Tug laughed. "God. I hope not—sorry, I hope you don't mind my smoking this. It helps with the inflammation and pain. I can't take those opiates anymore. They make me feel so stupid."

"No worries," I said.

Tug probably sensed that I wanted to take a hit because he held it out in front of me in offering.

"Thanks," I said. "So how're you feeling?" I took a long drag.

"I'm doing just fine," Tug said. "How're you doing? Keeping your spirits up, I hope."

I passed him the joint. "Yeah, yeah. I'm doing all right."

I stood up and left the room to take a piss. In the bathroom on the sink there was a pill bottle with Tug's name on it. It read: *Oxycodone Hydrochloride 15MG Tabs*. Without

even thinking too much about it I put five of them in my pocket.

I wandered back out to where Tug was lying on the couch and sat down in the La-Z-Boy next to him.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you about something,” I said.

“Shoot.”

First I filled him in on what Beau had said to me on his last night. Those things about addiction and suicide and morality that had been a point of contention between me and Michelle.

“What about all that?” he asked.

“I mean do you buy that?” I asked.

“Which part of it?” he asked.

“All of it,” I said.

“It sounds like the ramblings of a man on the brink of suicide. That’s for sure.”

“Michelle and I got into a disagreement—well, I guess it was more of a debate—about whether or not life is equally hard for everyone.”

“Why would it be *equally* hard for everyone?” Tug asked. “Isn’t that like childhood lesson number one? *Life’s not fair.*”

“My Uncle Toby always says it too, ‘life’s equally hard for everyone.’ I never understood it either. I always thought of it the way you do, but then Michelle was arguing that it’s more about how you can’t compare your suffering to other people’s suffering because, like, everybody suffers. Michelle said, ‘suffering is suffering is suffering.’”

“Oh yeah,” Tug said. “I agree with that. Everybody suffers. It’s the same thing for everyone.”

“So then you agree with them?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Tug said. “I think that some people have better lives than others, at least objectively speaking. I mean I’d rather be able to walk than be a paraplegic.”

“Of course,” I said.

“But that doesn’t mean that a paraplegic can’t be happy,” Tug said. “Sure, they may suffer a lot because of their disability, but it doesn’t have to define them.”

“Easy for you to say,” I said.

“I don’t know,” Tug said. “I’m not a paraplegic. I’ll never truly know what it’s like.”

“But don’t you think that if you gave a paraplegic the option to not be a paraplegic they would jump at it?” I asked.

“*Jump* at it?” Tug laughed.

“Poor choice of words.”

“I don’t know,” Tug said. “Not necessarily. Some deaf people, when given the option to get cochlear implants, choose not to.”

“...”

“What’s the point of all of this?” Tug asked.

“I just have to believe that at least some of what Beau was saying is true. Otherwise how can I forgive Sadie? How can I forgive Beau?”

“Ah,” Tug said. “Now I get it.”

“How culpable are they?” I asked.

“I don’t think that’s a question we can answer. Regardless of whether you view addiction as a disease or a moral choice, people still get addicted to drugs and some

people die because of it. Same goes for depression. Regardless of whether or not you believe it's a choice or a disease, people still commit suicide. There's no rational explanation to any of it." He lit up another joint. "There's also no rational explanation to life."

"Yet here we are. Living."

"Yeah," Tug said. "Just because you can't explain it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist or that its existence isn't still valid. Some things people just aren't meant to understand. You got to be comfortable with being uncomfortable." He handed the joint to me. "We're all headed the same direction anyway."

"So there's no point?" I took a hit and started coughing.

"I didn't say that," Tug said. "We'll never know for sure what we're doing here. But that doesn't mean that it's not still meaningful."

I passed the joint back to Tug.

"I mean," Tug said. "There's one thing that gives meaning to everything. And this is going to sound hippie-dippie, or sentimental, or lame, or sappy, maybe even banal. But the one thing that gives life meaning is love."

"Yeah, that sounds pretty pathetic."

"It does," Tug said. "But that doesn't mean it's not still true. There's a reason the idea of unconditional love has been codified in just about every culture across place and time. There's a reason. I mean it's right there. It's so obvious. But that doesn't mean it's not noteworthy. That doesn't mean it's not worth reminding yourself day in and day out."

"It still feels like there has to be more than that," I said.

"I think it's our culture," Tug said. "Everything in our culture is designed to make

you forget that. I mean, we knew about it in the sixties. That's what the counterculture was all about. It might just be overexposure. Any idea, product, movie, celebrity—you name it—that gets too much exposure, once it reaches a certain point, it becomes immediately discredited by the culture at large. Think about it.”

“That's true,” I said. “It becomes like a meme or something.”

“Exactly!” Tug shouted. “It's a shame. Because some of those ideas, products—whatever—might be worth remembering and holding on to. That might be the whole point of organized religion. To hold onto ideas that cultural shifts try to rid us from.”

“You sound like an evangelical or something,” I said.

“I know I do,” Tug said. “That's why this conversation is so frustrating. That's why people don't talk about this stuff as much as we probably should. It's like you know how it sounds even as you're saying it. Yet you feel compelled to say it anyway. Yet when you do say it there's always the immediate eye-roll reaction.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It's really annoying.”

“The situation or the conversation?” Tug asked.

“Both,” I said.

“There are just some ideas that when articulated lose all their power.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Really annoying.”

I wanted to know what it was that stole my mother from me. I had to know for myself. In order to forgive her, I had to understand. And the only way to understand was to do it myself. To feel for myself what it was like to be high on opiates.

I did it one day while Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby were away working. I

swallowed two of the pills and then sat at my MacBook in my bedroom and waited to feel something. Less than an hour later I started to feel a warming sensation throughout my whole body. I realized I no longer wanted to be sitting down at my desk, so I put on some peaceful music and lay in my bed.

A little over an hour after I took them I felt nauseated. It wasn't much longer after that that I was on my hands and knees throwing up in the toilet. It was one swift evacuation of the stomach. I went back to my bedroom in somewhat of a cold sweat and lay back down, music still playing in the background. I felt immediately better after throwing up and then I felt really heavy and warm. It was the warmth you feel when somebody you love tells you they love you, only better. I tried to keep my eyes open but couldn't. I wanted to stay awake to feel the euphoria. It was like that feeling of waking up in the morning and looking at an alarm clock only to realize that you still have a couple hours before you have to get up, so you roll over and fall back asleep. It was like that feeling right before you fall back asleep, balancing on the cusp of consciousness and unconsciousness, only much stronger than that. Much better.

Right away I got it. I understood. I felt I belonged here. It may have been fleeting. It may have been a neurochemical cocktail induced by a substance mirroring the sensation of belonging. But in that moment it was still *true* belonging.

This was home.

I was home.

I understood how Sadie had traded her whole life for this.

I slept through the day all the way up until when Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby got home that evening.

A few days later I got a call from Tug. I was sitting at my desk editing pictures on my MacBook.

“Hey, Gabriel,” Tug said. “I’ve been thinking a lot about our conversation.”

I laughed, imagining Tug tossing and turning, pulling his hair out over these existential questions. It felt good that somebody else shared in my all-encompassing fixation on these matters. That alone made me feel less alone.

“Any new developments?” I asked.

“I think what we were talking about the other day comes down to one truth, one existential *reality*, if you will.”

“What’s that?” I asked, turning circles in my desk chair.

“All right. Here it goes. Hear me out: we want to find answers to these questions, even though we know that there aren’t going to be any answers, right?”

“Right,” I said.

“Like we were saying, there’re some things people just aren’t meant to understand. Yet, we try to understand them anyway, right? That’s part of being human.”

“Correct,” I said.

“Where was I going with this?” Tug asked. I could hear him puffing on a joint.

“No idea,” I said.

“What was I just saying?” he asked.

“Trying to understand things we can’t—”

“Exactly! There it is. Part of being human is trying to understand things we’re not meant to understand. But it doesn’t have to be, right? I mean we can resist the urge to

intellectualize and explain our own material existence, can't we?"

"I suppose," I said.

"That's it," Tug said. "If I had to sum up that idea in one sexy little maxim, it would be this: life is meant to be lived not from the head but from the heart."

"*Life is meant to be lived not from the head but from the heart?*" I asked.

"Exactly. That captures all of it: the necessity to resist trying to explain things and the restorative power of love. It's all right there in that one little adage."

"Tug," I said, "have you been smoking nonstop?"

"Yes!" Tug shouted. "But that's beside the point."

"It still seems too hippie-dippie," I said.

"I know, I know. But there's no way to avoid the goo."

"I guess not," I said.

"To be human is to be annoyingly, inescapably corny. Maybe we ought to stop apologizing for it."

"You can't see, but I'm rolling my eyes right now," I said.

"Son of a bitch!" Tug yelled. "I think that's the problem. That's what we ought to be working to dismantle: the tendency to celebrate and applaud the casual roll of the eyes in relation to matters of the soul. I appreciate that urge. It means you're skeptical. Skepticism is a good thing. But when it comes to matters of the soul, you have to check that shit at the door. Well, at least *sometimes* you have to. There's no redemption in cynicism, Gabriel." He let out a big sigh. "Here I go again, sounding like an evangelical or a life-coach or something frustratingly simplistic and naive. But I'm still going to stand by it. Just because it sounds naïve doesn't mean you should dismiss it. I believe

there are some things, some ideas, that no matter how naïve they are, they're actually vital. This is one of those ideas.”

“Are you all right, Tug?”

“You have to forfeit your hipness, your coolness. It may be celebrated by our society, but it's really pernicious and insidious. I know it's uncool and just totally lame to be naïve, but a certain amount of goopy naivety is necessary to live a happy human life.”

“You're saying that it's actually counterculture to be naïve?” I asked.

“Yes!” Tug said. “But only in certain respects. The counterculture defines what's cool and what's lame. But the counterculture, at least nowadays, is to be understanding of the cynicism of the culture, acknowledging it and harnessing it *only* where it can benefit us, at least that's what it should be. Cynicism is good wherever it progresses the culture. But you need to abandon that shit wherever it begins to damage your own soul.”

“Okay, you got my attention,” I said. “Elaborate.”

“That's what it is to be aware, to be cool, to be hip. It's somewhere between nihilism and idealism. Our culture is teaching us that cynicism is cool. Isn't that what being *woke* is all about? Right? It's about understanding how our cultural systems ultimately rob us of our fundamental humanity. What I'm saying is that the next movement—the new counterculture, the counter-counterculture, if you will—must incorporate that skepticism while at the same time understanding its limits. There has to be a line drawn in the sand at some point where we agree that going any further in that direction is destructive to the human soul. The goo of love has to allow us to straddle that line. It has to bring us back into an understanding that being human requires unconditional love and loving unconditionally is really what it means to be *woke*

regardless of how gooey and lame our culture tells us that is.”

“Says the middle-aged white man,” I said.

“True,” Tug said.

“I think you wandered back into Evangelism Land.”

“Damn it, Gabriel!”

“I hear what you’re saying and I want to agree, at least partially. But I just don’t know how that actually works when it plays itself out.”

“I don’t know, either,” Tug said.

“To me the perfect embodiment of our culture is the image of a dog chasing its own tail.”

“I like that,” Tug said. “As long as the dog is making measurable progress in one direction or another.”

“I mean, he is. But he doesn’t know what direction he’s moving in or why,” I said. “By the way, that must be some good weed you’re smoking.”

“Oh it is,” Tug said. “Shit’s primo.”

After I hung up the phone I thought about how Tug could actually *not* like the feeling of being on opiates. I found that hard to believe. There was no way somebody could *not* enjoy that feeling. And then I thought about how maybe he actually did enjoy them but was too scared to take them because he didn’t want to enjoy them.

That I could understand.

I enjoyed them, but now I was deeply terrified by how much I’d enjoyed them. I flushed the last three pills down the toilet and vowed to never take them again. At least with alcohol there’s a hangover. A hangover has a way of reminding you that what you’re

putting in your body is, in fact, poisonous. It's more honest that way. Opiates have nothing like that the day after. At least not the first time. I knew that if I took them enough I'd *need* to take them otherwise I'd get dope-sick. To me that seemed a lot more sneaky and scary than alcohol. I decided I'd rather have a drink of whiskey than a pill. It's more honest. Plus, it's not illegal.

But I understood now. I could see how somebody, in the right circumstances, or rather, in the *wrong* circumstances, could get addicted to that. I could imagine how withdrawal could make it damn near impossible to quit and how after a person did quit they'd be likely to relapse and go looking for that feeling again. It made sense to me now in a way it just didn't before. It wasn't as simple as I'd once thought.

Realizing that really sucked.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Michelle broke up with me on the last day of March, a Sunday.

We met for lunch. I knew something was up when she didn't order anything. It came as a shock but I wasn't really all that surprised. For the most part, it'd been a long and quiet couple weeks.

"I still really care about you, Gabriel," Michelle said. "I always will."

I shrugged my shoulders and took a sip of my whiskey.

"I want to be with somebody more mature," she said. "I think we'd both agree that you still have a lot of growing up to do."

I couldn't disagree. I mean here was this intelligent, beautiful woman, almost thirty years old with her career on the rise and her life, for the most part, figured out. And then here I was, a little twenty-two-year old, barely even able to grow his first beard, with no plans for his life, no prospects, no goals, and most of all, no ambition. It was clear in my mind from the beginning that it'd only be a matter of time before she caught on to the reality of the situation. I didn't have very much to offer her. To be honest, I was surprised we'd made it as long as we did. And I knew that Sadie dying probably prolonged our demise, probably made Michelle feel bad for me, probably made her stick with me longer than she really wanted to.

"I think this could be really good for you," Michelle said. "I think it'll be good for both of us."

I nodded.

"Don't you have anything to say?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

Michelle reached her hand across the table and grabbed my wrist. “I’m sorry, Gabriel.”

I forced a smile.

She got up and walked out of the restaurant. I watched her through the window as she made her way down the sidewalk.

Then I ordered another whiskey.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Beau and I are sitting at The Mountain Bar. It's the day after Christmas. There's a comedy sketch playing on the TV. They're impersonating and parodying some guy named Ross Allen Gallon, talking about how our country needs to undergo another Great Awakening, talking about the healing power of canine love.

"He's right, you know," Beau says. "Last year around this time I lost my best friend."

"..."

"My German Shepard, Nietzsche."

"You had a dog named Nietzsche?" I ask.

"He was my best friend. He lived a good long life, though. Twelve years! I left L.A. right after he died. Decided to come back home. Although, it doesn't really feel like home anymore. Everything's so different now."

"I never would've taken you to be a dog person," I say.

"I loved that guy more than I've ever loved anything, Gabriel. He *knew* me. I was most myself around him. Some of the most peaceful, heartwarming moments of my life were spent with that four-legged fleabag. It's quite surprising—beautiful even—how much you can love an animal. *Man's best friend* is more than just a cliché. It's shorthand for a type of love that just isn't possible between people—at least it's not possible for me. It's not a lesser or greater love, just different. Purer maybe? I don't know. It defies explanation. I mean, don't get me wrong, I would've sacrificed his life to save a person I love ten times out of ten. A human life is worth more than a dog's. But still."

Beau takes out his phone and shows me some pictures of Nietzsche. I can see

Beau's eyes start to water, but he somehow manages to avoid letting a single tear escape from them. One of the photos is of Nietzsche as a puppy. Another one is of him much older—he and Beau are together. Nietzsche's tongue is hanging out and he's looking up at Beau, who's smiling at the camera.

“German Shepherds are such a gorgeous breed,” I say.

“They're so intelligent. I mean they're right there—undeniably conscious and tuned in to your every move, to your every utterance.”

“I don't doubt it,” I say. “Ever think of getting another one?”

“Yeah,” Beau says. “But it just wouldn't be fair. I'd always compare it to Nietzsche. It just wouldn't be the same. Plus, I don't think I can handle the death of another dog. To bond with something like that and then watch it die. It's too much. Once is more than enough for me.”

“Isn't that a small price to pay for all the joy it brings?” I ask.

“Maybe it is.” Beau takes a sip of his drink. “But I just don't think I have that type of courage in me. Not anymore.”

There's a moment of silence, a brief lull in conversation. Both of us just sit there sipping our drinks, idly staring at the TV until some of the emotional weight dissipates.

Then Beau says, “Have you ever had a dog?”

“Nah,” I say. “I wanted one when I was younger. Haven't thought about it too much since then. Seems like a lot of work.”

“The amount of work is a small price to pay,” Beau says. “Probably shouldn't get a German Shepard as a first-time dog owner, though. It's like having a Lamborghini as your first car. You should probably learn with something a bit easier to handle. People

tried to tell me that, but I didn't listen. Though, it's not impossible if you're dedicated. If you have the time to be. I have no regrets now." He laughs. "There were some days when Nietzsche was a puppy where I totally regretted it. I was in way over my head at the start. But you put the time in with a dog like that and they're perfect angels. You give them what they need and they return it tenfold."

I laugh.

"As a species we are not worthy of the love that dogs give us. To me, if there's any proof of God's existence, it may just be the fact that we have dogs."

"..."

"Seriously. That's what this Gallon guy is all about. I think he's probably on to something. Though I don't think he stands a chance. Nobody's going to take that message seriously."

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

A few weeks after Michelle broke up with me, I ran into her at the lakefront, near the art museum. She was jogging. I was walking around with my camera hanging around my neck. Even though it was late April, there was a fresh powdering of snow on the grass. Though, it'd already melted from the pavement.

I heard somebody calling my name. When I turned around I saw her.

“How're you doing?” I said.

She was panting. She came to a stop right in front of me. “I'm okay,” she said. “I quit smoking. Been trying to get into fitness.” She bent over, placing her hands on her knees. The sweat made her face shine.

“How long has it been?” I asked.

“Without smoking?” she asked. “Only a couple weeks. I've caved and cheated a few times here and there, but for the most part I'm really doing it. Nicotine patches help. How've you been?”

“I'm all right,” I said. “Just trying to do some growing up.”

She looked at me with her eyebrows raised. She shook her head and then looked away toward the lake.

“I'm not drinking anymore,” I said. “Well that's not true. I still am. But nowhere near as much as before. I've been taking a lot of photos. I've been working a lot for Uncle Toby and Aunt Cindy. Staying busy.”

“Busy's good,” she said. “Your beard is so long now. Looks good.”

“I thought you said I should trim it?”

“It's turned the corner. The extra length makes it seem more, I don't know, full.”

She smiled. “Really, it looks good. I like it—it’s very *Gabriel*.”

I nodded.

“I’ve missed you,” she said.

“So have I,” I said. “I mean—I’ve missed you, too.”

“You never tried to win me back.”

“I love you too much to do that.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s really good to see you.”

“You too,” I said.

“...”

“I’m thinking of getting a dog,” I said.

Michelle smiled, nodded, and then left, continuing her jog on the path along the lake.

I watched her get smaller and smaller in the distance, half-expecting, or maybe just half-hoping that she’d turn around and look back at me. But she never did. I pulled the viewfinder of my camera to my eye and shot some photos of her. The lighting from the sunset was not good. It was a lot darker than what the photo needed, but it seemed to work with the composition nonetheless. I knew it’d look great in black and white.

Everything looks great in black and white.

I walked west toward the river, to the other side of the Summerfest grounds, behind the Marcus Amphitheater to where the river drains into the lake. The sunset was dully colored, now barely even shining through the dark, dark clouds. It looked like a storm might be coming, hopefully rain instead of snow. I stopped and took some pictures of the Hoan Bridge with the dullness of the sunset in the background. It wasn’t a great

sunset. But it was a decent sunset. Perhaps not a sunset most people would enjoy. But it was a sunset I could enjoy. Maybe. Then again, maybe not. It *was* just a sunset, after all. And a sunset is a sunset is a sunset.

I spend the night at Our Lady of the Lake. It's pitch black by the time I get there. The light of my flashlight is the only light for some distance. I manage to just beat the rain. As I set up my tent—Tug's tent—in the open-air gymnasium the sky opens up and it starts pouring and there is thunder and there is lightning. I sprawl out in my sleeping bag, the door of the tent wide open. I sip whiskey from my flask and watch it all come down.

As much as I didn't enjoy watching Michelle leave, it feels right.

This is the way things are supposed to go.

I belong *here*.

Without Michelle. Without Sadie. Without Beau. Without Aunt Cindy and Uncle Toby. Without Tug.

All by myself out here in this abandoned structure. Only the ghosts of the past to keep me company. I am their witness.

This is the natural order of things.

Getting a dog won't change it.

Nothing will—nothing can.

END