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THE CHANUKAH GIFT

by

Colin J Cohen

the first night

I woke one morning to another me. A me both different and the same.

She crashed onto the wreckage of my youth. Mine and the boy she smashed through. A downside-up fairy tale they were. A punk rock *Cinderella*.

She’d come crashing forty years later, on a day that started as many others. With the sun sneaking above I-15 blocks away and my jacket zipped beyond my chin, I rattled refuse past Matt while he fixed a heater behind the motel where we worked. I rattled it toward a duo of dumpsters and the scruffy and aging man sitting next to them.

The can and I paused, by a dirty needle that was lying among the sand blowing across the crumbling asphalt.

It should’ve shocked me. Or disgusted me. Or caused some reaction. I wanted it to, but all I could muster was to grab it with my gloved hand.

“Hey,” spoke a voice.

The motel manager was whooping it up beside me. Amoun whooped it up a lot. He got a kick from an Egyptian bossing a Jew (or a “Hebrew,” as he called me). He was reenacting Exodus.

In a sense I was his slave. He had me do eight hours of work in a four-hour shift and for less than minimum wage. He discovered a loophole around it.

But I didn’t care about the money, most of all because I couldn’t spend it. I needed the work, the more of it and the more demanding it was. So I indulged his Ramessesian fantasies. I let him revel in them.

“I want you to shampoo the hallway carpets,” he told me, ours being the one Motel 6 with all interior corridors. “And power-wash the walkways. Oh, the people in 112 last night left blood everywhere. Clean that too.”

He swaggered off, as I dropped the needle into the can and the scruffy and aging man rose to his feet and straightened his clothes and his hair. He was a regular at the motel who paid his $70 bill in nickels.

With his hand shaking, he pointed at what I’d dumped. “That wasn’t mine. I would never leave them on the ground.”

I didn’t react to this either. “I appreciate that.”

#

The afternoon wasn’t much different than many others either. Matt and I took a pair of buses from Hesperia and were walking along 7th Street in Victorville, a would-be city of concrete and glass struggling to rise from the sands beneath it.

The two of us approached a sun eager to sink below the horizon, and I glanced at Matt. He was the closest I had to a friend and the reason I had a job, after he convinced Amoun that someone with a Computer Science degree could make a good houseman.

“Get off the road, you idiot,” he grumbled while I veered toward the traffic that was racing past us as if it had someplace to go. I was seeking the same impetus. “You’re gonna get hit.”

Shaking my head, I threw up my arms. “If one is destined to rot in the desert, one cannot get hit by a car.”

#

The two of us reached the gates of our home.

In the alley next to it was a man brooding over the open hood of a Civic, whose fender was gouging the ground.

“What’s wrong?” Matt asked.

Billy turned away. “It won’t start. If I can’t get to work tomorrow, they’ll fire me for sure.”

I could tell that Matt was tired, that he didn’t want to do more fixing. But he stepped to the car and eyed it.

“Matt?” Nicole called out from inside the gates. “The washing machine’s broken.”

“I’ll be over in a while.”

Bending over the engine, Matt tinkered with it.

“Thanks,” Billy murmured to him.

“We’re in this together.”

#

The evening began as many others. I was eating dinner with dozens of others. Men, women, and children, from toddlers to teens.

Across the table from me was a grizzled man my age, who’d come weeks earlier and was slipping silverware into his pockets.

“How’s it going?” I asked him.

Jerry hid his hands behind his back. “The usual.”

I finished my plate of sauerkraut and mashed potatoes and corn and stood.

He leaned toward me. He leaned with fear and dread and while deliberating over his words. “Were there suspicious characters outside?”

“That’s all there are, outside and in.”

Now he had to hide his smirk.

Without one of my own, I trudged to a table by the kitchen so that I could drop off my tray. On the wall was a calendar, along with what made this evening different from the rest. It was the first night of Chanukah. A night as all others I was spending in a homeless shelter.

That it was Chanukah shouldn’t’ve mattered. I had lost faith years before and religion before that. But the holiday invoked memories and good ones.

These kept playing while I cleaned the dining hall later and while I waited at the head of a winding line of people outside the office where we’d check in for the night. They only came to an end when the glass door opened and Matt passed me.

It was my turn. I stepped into the cramped room and to a man in his thirties, who was sitting behind a desk and crouched over it. With his graying beard, bulging belly, and red cheeks, Josh reminded me of Santa Claus, only without the jolly or good cheer.

I couldn’t tell if he noticed me. He was gazing into an oversized schedule as if it held the galaxy’s mysteries.

He wrote my name in a slot. “You’ve got laundry tomorrow morning.”

I tried to restrain my exasperation, coming from explaining to him five nights a week why I couldn’t do this. But I didn’t do a good job of it. “I work in the morning.”

With his own exasperation, he crossed out my name. “Kitchen, tomorrow night.”

I didn’t respond. I grabbed a towel off the stack on the chair by the desk and set out.

“Hey,” he uttered.

He was holding out a bulging white envelope. “This came for you.”

I didn’t glimpse at it. I snatched it and strode from the office with it. I strode a pair of steps to a set of cubbies and tossed the towel into mine, and I left the building, entering a courtyard that was passing as a diner, with a dozen weathered booths and lots of lost people passing time in them.

A man was rubbing out a stain from his coat, over Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge* screeching from his phone. This didn’t work, so he doused it with water and rubbed some more. But it wouldn’t let up. Neither would. Nor would the four people in the booth ahead who were swatting flies.

Two women were talking behind him. One with a shaved and tattooed head while the other had been a set designer on porn films. They were telling tales, of hunting for jobs they didn’t want and of plans for leaving the shelter they were desperate to believe.

*Mann tracht, un Gott lacht*, my grandma would say in Yiddish. *Man plans, and God laughs*.

He must laugh at women too.

I continued listening to the two. I listened to the normality they tried to project. I listened to the vainness they applied to it. Though this didn’t deter their aspiration for it.

By some vague happenstance, I recalled the envelope.

I opened it, most of all because I had nothing better to do. With less enthusiasm, I pulled out a set of pages written in ink on both sides of lined white paper with ruffled edges. The kind I’d last come across in school.

Shuffling through them, my disinterest decreased with each, till it hit me who’d written them. Which led me to gape at the envelope and gasp at its return address, of a Tommy Goodwin in Livingston, New Jersey.

This was shocking enough but more so was the postmark from forty years earlier.

#

The wind was kicking, and a chill saturated the air. It was so unlike the nights that had existed in the Southern California of my childhood from the opposite coast. It was sunny and room temperature on TV, all year round. Nobody wore jackets or sweaters.

At a booth far from the others in the courtyard’s corner, I was perching under a full moon. It silhouetted the palm trees and the canyons to my right as I stared at the pages spread out on the table and tried to fathom them.

I couldn’t. So I took out my plastic phone. A phone they gave out for free to people like me. “Obamaphones,” most of us called them despite years having passed since he was president. Nor was he the guy who came up with them. But we had to give them some name, to differentiate them from those that people wanted.

The phone was low on battery. It was low when charged. But I plugged it in and took an extended breath before dialing a number I was certain I’d forgotten.

It rang and rang, and I hoped it wouldn’t answer. I hovered my finger over the disconnect button and strove for the will to tap it.

“Hello?” came her voice.

I couldn’t recall when I heard it last, but I would’ve recognized it after a thousand years. It was the same as it had been, confident and unafraid and soaring. With it a serenity fell over me, and I reached out to touch it, to be a part of it. But I didn’t speak.

She repeated herself, and some words came out. “It’s me.”

Rudi had to wait for words herself. She waited more than I had. “Where are you?”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to take up your time, you must be busy tonight.”

“Service ended a while ago.”

“It’s crazy but, but I got a letter in the mail today . . . from Tommy.”

“Tommy?”

She gasped for air, much as I had, and I could tell she was falling forward. I leapt to catch her, to protect her.

“It’s right in front of me,” I said.

“What is?”

“Some journal he wrote.”

“He never wrote a journal.”

“You certain about that?”

She paused. She paused before answering, “I’m never certain. It comes with the job.”

“Do you want me to mail it to you? Or I could scan it with my phone and text it to you. There’s this new app that uses a machine-learning technique I’ve been reading about to do character recognition. It’s supposed to be flawless.”

“Can’t you read it to me?”

I shook my head. “I skimmed through it, and it’s real personal.”

“He must’ve wanted you to have it.”

“But how?”

“I can’t remember when I stopped questioning how. Please read it to me. It’ll be the best Chanukah gift I’ll get.”

I said nothing. I wasn’t positive that I wanted to relive what had happened, and I was pretty positive that I didn’t want her to. But after a silent sigh, I collected and ordered the pages by the numbers written on the bottom.

The first entry was from December 24, 1982. What stuck out about it was how the date was in a different color than the rest, as if written at a different time.

#

When reading someone’s journal, there’s an expectation that it’ll start at their story’s beginning. But Tommy’s started at its end.

He didn’t need to glance into the mirror to gaze at the peaked and skeletal eighteen-year-old frame in a white terrycloth robe, with flat chestnut hair so bare that it didn’t cover his scalp. The image was as clear as the yellow ribbon he was tying over a red gift-wrapped box as snow fell through the windows between them and the hospital across the street. The off-whiteness staggered from the skies, in time with the Glenn Miller song from a half-century earlier that was playing from a portable stereo by the bed.

A chain jangled, and Tommy shifted toward it. A golden-haired dog was guarding him by the door, with the urgency of its life.

Tommy returned to the gift, and he grappled with it, aware that he had to get it right. He tied and untied it, often resting between the two.

#

With sweat pouring down his face and the skies and the snow gone, Tommy tugged the ribbon’s ends, and two perfect loops spread across the box. He took pride in them as he lifted himself and the box off the bed.

His socked feet slipped, and he collapsed onto his knees on the wood paneling with a boom and a holler and a set of hacking coughs, sending him and the dog into a panic.

Would he ever get up? It was a question he asked on most days.

The panic didn’t last. It subsided with the pain.

He wiped his forehead and stood, and he made his way out the door with the box into the living room, followed by the dog. It matched him step for step as he approached a mantle and the simple metal menorah on top of it.

Under it he lowered himself to his knees. This took time, more than it had to raise himself. But he got the gift on the floor as the apartment’s front door shrieked open.

Standing in the threshold with her arms crossed was a woman his age, who otherwise couldn’t’ve been more different. She contrasted with him and with herself. Her powder-white face contrasted with her spiked black hair and with her heavy black mascara and with a glossy black lipstick that matched her nails. Contrasting with all this was the oversized blue-and-white football jacket she was wearing that had “Tommy” and a “C” stitched into it.

The woman’s expression was all that matched her appearance. It was grim.

Tommy didn’t share it. Joy washed over him. It wouldn’t wane and was so overpowering that he wrestled with what to say. “You’ve caught me.”

Her expression didn’t change. Not a bit. “I didn’t get you a gift.”

“You’ve already given me yours.”

“I did get you . . .”

She marched to him and kneeled beside him, and she took a white canvas seabag from her shoulder and reached inside it.

Her eyes stretched and her brows rose, as she pulled out an envelope wrapped in a fancy gold paper fashioned from untold stars.

He leaned toward her. “What’s wrong?”

Her shock got starker, and she shook her head. “He must’ve slipped it into my bag.”

“Who?”

“The old man at the store.”

“Can I open it?”

She didn’t answer. She kept shaking her head.

With a gentle touch, he took the envelope from her, and with the same touch he opened it, and he pulled out a white card. What you’d expect in a board game.

Now it was her turn to lean toward him. She was falling over. “What does it say?”

“One Replay.”

#

The second entry in Tommy’s journal was from December 11, 1981, more than a year before the first, with the remaining entries coming after that.

“Did you hear me?” spoke a familiar voice to Tommy’s right.

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t. His attention was on what was reflecting off a light-soaked window. An image that he didn’t need to gaze at, of a confused but handsome and well-built seventeen-year-old boy, who had a flock of wavy hair and an olive complexion and was wearing the blue-and-white football jacket with his name and the “C” stitched into it.

The voice repeated itself, and Tommy glanced at the gray school backpack across his shoulder and who his other arm was around.

Her name was Darlene, the most beautiful girl at Columbia High School. With her strawberry-blonde permed hair and never-ending legs and trillion-dollar smile, she could’ve become a model. The Jewish Brooke Shields people called her. But her ambitions went beyond that. “Tommy?”

This jarred him. He spun toward her and gasped, “What?”

“I said, ‘Happy Chanukah.’”

Tommy realized that he was standing by the cathedral-like school. One that was half old and half new. He was near its front doors, with his friends and dozens of other kids, who were talking and joking around with their breaths tinting the morning air.

Trying to make sense of what had happened, Tommy came to the lone conclusion that made sense: he’d been dreaming. But there was a problem with this. While a dream may appear real while it’s happening, when you wake from it, it becomes obvious what it was. But this hadn’t been. It had been as real as what he was experiencing now. Though, as when waking from a dream, he was forgetting it.

With an awkward burst, he released his arm from Darlene and swung his backpack off his shoulder, and he whipped out a spiral notebook and a pen from it and scrawled on the double-sided lined white paper.

Darlene gripped his arm. “What are you doing?”

Tommy shook his head. “I gotta write this down.”

He wrote all he remembered, from the time with the ribbon, and he read it. He read it and read it. “One replay? A replay of what?”

Darlene gripped his arm harder. She was squeezing it apart. “What are you talking about?”

Tommy didn’t answer. His mind locked on a more troubling riddle.

Shouldn’t he have been happy? Shouldn’t he have been happy that whatever he’d experienced wasn’t real? He was healthy and had his whole life ahead of him.

But he wasn’t happy. He felt loathing. The same he had for all in his sight, including himself, since the summer.

Before that you could say that he had a semblance of happy. A happy that came from that his heaviest contemplations were over “suede vs. leather.” Now the weight of his weightlessness could’ve brought Atlas to his knees. The one time that it hadn’t, the one time that he was happy, were those few minutes with the crazy-looking girl he couldn’t otherwise recall.

“Did you guys catch that Van Halen video?” spoke Joey, a boy who was wearing the same blue-and-white football jacket as Tommy and was much the same as him. All his friends were. They had similar pretty boy haircuts and preppy clothes and were all as good-looking. Judging by the pictures that Tommy would show me in his yearbook, they could’ve started a boy band if such had existed.

No one answered Joey’s question, and all the chatter outside the school ceased. The silence got so loud that Tommy spun toward it and what everyone was eyeing.

Approaching the school from the parking lot below it were two people. The first was a middle-aged man in an off-the-rack blue suit, who had a crew cut and pockmarked face. But what they were eyeing was the girl a few steps behind. A girl who’d never in her life make a quiet entrance.

It was the same girl from his dream, with the same wild hair and makeup, carrying the same white canvas seabag over her shoulder. The differences were the Walkman clutched in her hand and what she was wearing: a navy-blue overcoat, faded and torn jeans, and a pair of black Chuck Taylors. The latter two she was wearing at a time before either were in fashion or were close to coming into it. Tommy wrote that he couldn’t remember anyone wearing Converse since he’d been a kid, and what was more bizarre was that there were no laces on them.

She must’ve been some sight that morning, the way she clashed with the suburbia around her. While I bet today no one would gawk twice at her in the Bible Belt, it must’ve been as if she’d dropped from the stars.

Tommy, of course, was familiar with most of this sight. What he observed now was her apathy.

This she feigned. While you could say a lot about punks, an awful lot, what you couldn’t say was that they didn’t care. It was the whole point.

The apathy Rudi was projecting was also concealing. It was concealing what was beneath it and desperate for a way out.

It was Tommy who was apathetic. He told me that, before meeting Rudi, he struggled to wake in the mornings.

She got nearer to him, and his knees buckled. This was a sensation that he’d often experienced playing football. But at no time did he experience it like this or this much. “Who is she?”

No one answered, and the girl noted all the eyes on her. Her apathy turned into a scowl as she stared down the entire school, ready to fight them all. With this she cranked the volume of her Walkman and sang along with a song Tommy had never heard, about someone who belonged to a “Blank Generation.”

Tommy didn’t care for punk rock, and he didn’t get it. But this song was different. It was different from any other. The lyrics were about him or someone who could’ve been him. Someone who had it all and nothing. Someone surrounded by others and alone. Someone frantic to get away, who didn’t care if this meant never coming back anywhere.

The girl stopped singing, and her eyes latched onto Tommy’s. He was the only one there, the only person in the world, and she glared at him. She glared and snarled.

Tommy grimaced. But it was at himself and his attraction to a girl who was vile in many ways but fascinating in many more.

It wasn’t because of his dream that she fascinated him. She was unlike any girl around. She stood so uprightly and gave no heed to what others thought of her. His heart pounded in increasing excitement with each step she took toward him, and his body leaned forward. He was tipping over.

“Isn’t Halloween in October?” joked Joey within steps of her, to a gust of laughter that Tommy felt compelled to join in.

The girl continued to follow the man in blue, but she turned her snarl on Joey. “How’d you like to go next year as a rug?”

Joey didn’t respond. He couldn’t.

“Them’s fighting words, Joey,” a fellow boy in blue chimed in.

“I don’t fight girls,” Joey insisted. “Hell, I wouldn’t fight her.”

The girl was about to respond when the man ahead of her interrupted. “That’s enough.”

She sneered at him and returned her stare to Tommy, with her snarl.

Tommy was near enough to her that he could tell how bloodshot her eyes were and how she was sweating despite the cold. She also was oblivious to the girl heading toward the same set of doors.

Maria was mousy and had no makeup and under her plain black wool coat wore a white blouse and a plaid skirt that fell below her knees. She could’ve been heading to Catholic school as she hurried to the entrance without noticing who was hurrying with her. She and the new girl were about to crash into each other, avoiding it at the last moment.

Maria gazed at the girl. She gazed with a combination of awe and shock. She was witnessing a new form of life.

“Hey,” she mumbled.

The girl gazed back, without the awe or the shock, and she raised her fist as if insulted by the recognition of her. “Hey, how would you like some dentures?”

Maria didn’t answer. But she did respond. She took a step back, as far as she could, and another.

The girl took a step toward her as the man grabbed her by the arm. “What did I tell you, Rudi?”

There was no response.

Grunting, the man slammed his shoulder into the heavy wooden doors, and he tossed Rudi into the building and followed her inside.

“Who are you?” Tommy whispered, at a volume only he could hear and only a slither.

#

Tommy wasn’t the only one curious about Rudi, as this one was a stranger to me.

So I put down the page I was reading and asked her.

She didn’t want to answer and wasn’t bashful about it. “Wasn’t Tommy telling the story?”

“It’s interactive storytelling, all three of us.”

Rudi didn’t respond. But I was in control and wouldn’t read any more till she relented.

She did but with aggravation. “What I’ll say is that I had more on my mind than some preppy jock.”

“Such as?”

“Such as I was jonesing like hell. I would’ve raced up Everest for a handful of pills and wouldn’t’ve cared what. There was also a sword hanging over me. One that would’ve made Damocles piss in his pants or whatever he wore.”

“But Tommy got to you.”

“That doesn’t mean that it was love at first sight. I didn’t care for him at all, despite how gorgeous he was. Or because of it. He was the best-looking guy ever, better looking than anyone in movies, but that made me hate him more. I was sure that he was stuck-up and boring. Most guys like that are, in my experience. But . . .”

“But what?”

Rudi sighed, with more aggravation than before. “There was a way about him, in the way he was staring at me, in a way different from any other. He was staring through me, as if he knew me better than I did, as if there were nothing I could hide from him, and this threw me.

“But I brushed it off as biological. I can tell you that, when I stepped through those doors, or flew through them, I had completely forgotten about him.”

I doubted that, but I continued reading.

#

Tommy and Darlene entered the school.

Down the corridor, Rudi and her escort were by the principal and his office as he pointed at her.

“I want to reiterate my opposition to her attending this school,” spoke a man wound tighter than the most unopenable knot, who was wearing a tight brown suit and a tight brown tie. “We have enough of a criminal element here.”

Rudi raged at him. She crossed her arms and twisted her lips, and she sang, “*The real Nazis run your schools!”*

“What did you say?” howled the principal.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Gonzales,” the pockmarked man hooted as he grabbed Rudi by the neck. “She won’t be giving you trouble for long.”

The man dragged Rudi away. He dragged her past a guidance counselor as he traipsed by.

Mr. Cross was the one person that morning that Rudi didn’t put off. Not at all. This was all over his face, and it surprised her. It was all over hers.

#

Along with others striding toward class and yakking about nothing, Tommy wandered through the third-floor hallway, unaware of where he was wandering through or to. He had taken a spin in a dryer. He couldn’t walk straight as he came to the open door of his first-period computer class.

His mind wasn’t on it, but he peeked inside.

A handful of students were entering punch cards for use in the old computer on the room’s other side. That was how you programmed it. You’d type lines of code on the cards and wait for an operator to feed them into the machine. You could wait a week to compile the simplest of programs.

This didn’t make Tommy’s heart pound or make his knees buckle or make him tip over. So when the bell rang, instead of spending the hour punching the code that would’ve spewed a bunch of zeros across a page, he continued down the hall, glimpsing into each classroom he passed.

At the corridor’s end, he stepped into a stairwell. He climbed down it to the second floor and continued glimpsing. He glimpsed with a doubt hanging over him and about to collapse on top of him.

Had his dream been one?

If it hadn’t, it meant the incredible. That he’d gotten the chance to replay a part of his life and avoid the fate that came with it. A chance that wasn’t compatible with Rudi. She was the one not-so-random variable, there at the beginning of his story and at the end. Without her his story couldn’t finish the way it had before.

So why was he chasing after her? No matter how she was making him feel, she couldn’t be worth rotting over.

But this could’ve been what made her so exciting. The risk that came with her. She was a one-woman rollercoaster, and Tommy was in need of a thrill.

“What are you doing?” spoke a squeaky voice.

Tommy flung himself around, toward a man that didn’t reach his neck, who had his arms crossed and was wearing an argyle sweater over a button-down white Oxford and a blue paisley tie.

“What?” Tommy muttered.

“Why aren’t you in class?”

“I have a free period, and I was, I was going to Mrs. Elkind . . . she promised to help me with calculus.”

“Isn’t her classroom on the first floor?”

“Yeah. I guess, I guess I’m out of it today.”

Tommy scurried off, and he approached another stairwell, and he glanced back.

The teacher was gone.

“If you’re expecting to sleepwalk through this class, Ms. Weiss,” blared a voice from the last room on the floor, “you might as well drop it right now.”

With an anxiousness that heightened and widened with each step, Tommy came to the open door and a setup that was common at the school. Three tables stood along the room’s edges, forming a square with the teacher’s desk in the front.

Sitting at the back table by herself, or slouching there, was Rudi in a tattered white T-shirt held together by safety pins. A shirt that had “Black Flag” handwritten on it in marker above four black bars drawn in the shape of a flag.

As he had outside the school, Tommy grimaced. He grimaced while trying to imagine how he could end up with such a girl. She was a monster who didn’t care about anyone. So he convinced himself that his dream had to have been one. Yet he couldn’t budge, neither him nor his eyes, from Rudi and all there was about her.

His trance broke when he noticed Darlene sitting with a bunch of girls alongside the wall that was separating the class from the hallway, and his eyes darted back and forth between her and Rudi as he compared the two.

Darlene was better in all tangible ways, including looks. But it was in the other ways, the ones not so tangible, that she didn’t compare to Rudi at all.

Were these all that mattered? Did they matter more than the danger she posed?

“Modern Poetry is among the most challenging courses in the school,” continued Ms. Krasner, a woman in her forties with black-rimmed glasses and a black turtleneck sweater, who was both diminutive and towering. She towered as she leaned over a table while rummaging through a stack of textbooks in the room’s far front corner. “You’ll write about poetry and write some yourself and do it well. Shelley was publishing verse at your age, so I’ll make no excuse for your youth.”

“She had Frankenstein for inspiration,” quipped Darlene.

The teacher sighed. She sighed with exasperation churning from her. “Wrong Shelley. But it was a nice try, Ms. Cantor. Almost.”

With another sigh, though not as loud, the woman picked out a book, and she marched it toward Rudi. “This is an elective. That means no one is forcing you to take it.”

She marched the book all the way to Rudi. Recognizing her apathy, she frowned and dropped the book onto the table in front of her, where it bounced.

Rudi yawned. With deliberateness she yawned.

Scowling, the teacher put her hands on her hips. “Have you ever read poetry?”

“Can she read?” uttered Darlene, triggering laughter among the students. Ms. Krasner had to cover her mouth.

“Can you?” Rudi shot back. “I mean other than *Vogue*.”

The students laughed louder, and Krasner had to return her hand over her mouth and keep it there longer. “Touché, Ms. Cantor.”

Overcome with giddiness, the woman stepped to the center blackboard, where she’d written the poem “since feeling is first.” She’d written it in perfect script, and she soaked in it with marvel. “What can anyone tell me about E. E. Cummings?”

“He wrote his name in lowercase,” answered Darlene.

Rudi dropped her arms onto the table. “That’s a myth.”

Krasner spun toward Rudi. “That’s right, Ms. Weiss. Can you tell me more about him, as in ‘more interesting’?”

“He did use unorthodox typography and grammar. It was a product of his hatred of convention and constraints, of whatever got in his way, including language.”

Basking in herself, Rudi placed her feet on the table and her hands behind her head, and she leaned back in her chair. “Basically, he was a punk.”

Krasner laughed. She laughed without her hand over her mouth and more at Rudi than at her assertion. “Is that so? He certainly didn’t dress the part.”

“Punk has nothing to do with dress. Or hair. Or music. It’s about attitude. He-was-a-punk.”

“You need to dig deeper, Ms. Weiss. Your argument’s interesting but lazy, and we’ll have none of that here. There’s way more to Cummings than his attitude.”

Rudi twisted her face. “Too bad the same can’t be said of you.”

Krasner glared at Rudi. She glared before returning to the poem and reading it aloud.

Poetry wasn’t Tommy’s taste. It was less so than punk rock. So, as the words echoed through the classroom and into the hallway, he started down it, with Krasner’s voice fading.

*my blood approves,*

*and kisses are a better*

*fate than wisdom*

Tommy froze.

It wasn’t the words that froze him but his reaction to them, despite unable to say what this was. He was only certain that he did react and that it drew him toward the class.

*- the best gestures of my brain*

*is less than*

*your eyelids’ flutter which says*

*we are for each other*

Without realizing it, Tommy was back in the room’s threshold.

Rudi had removed her feet from the desk and was leaning toward the blackboard. She was pushing the table over.

The poem came to an end, and Krasner whipped herself toward the class. She did with as much excitement as Rudi, and this shot through the room.

“His words mix splendor and dissonance,” the teacher cried out, “and he riddles them with the passion he’s unleashed. Cummings was a Romantic above all. Or a neo-Romantic, as some call him.”

The woman paused. She paused for a moment. “‘Shelley in a blender’ is what I call him. That’s Percy Shelley, Ms. Cantor.”

Ms. Krasner took another pause before she sat on the edge of her desk. “I want to see this passion unleashed in your next assignment, due a week from Wednesday. You’ll write me a poem worthy of Cummings and his magic. A poem he might’ve written himself if he were you. And I’ll flunk anyone who does no more than play with their typography or grammar. I want to see passion. I want to see it all over the page!”

Twisting herself around, Rudi turned toward the door. She turned as if recognizing that someone was there, and her jaw unhinged. Her whole biosphere had flipped turvy-topsy in less than a flicker, and nothing in it made sense or would.

Tommy’s jaw unhinged too. It came from her eyelids and how they fluttered.

He rushed off, with his mind drowning in an unbearable uncertainty.

Had his eyelids been doing the same?

#

In the school cafeteria at lunch, Rudi paraded through the center aisle with a tray weighted with food. There was a mountain of it, covered by the fruit on top.

Table after table she passed, with waves of heads crashing onto her from all directions.

She ignored them or pretended she did. Despite appearances, I can tell you that she did give heed to what others thought about her, and it would anger her. Which must’ve been why she ignored the gazes more. She ignored them till she came upon one she couldn’t, from a table of football players and beautiful girls. It was searing through her.

Tommy turned. He turned from her while trying to convince himself that her eyelids hadn’t fluttered. That he imagined it.

For how could some poet’s overromanticized notion of life be true?

Eyelids don’t flutter, nor do people blush or swoon. We live in a rational world, where 2 + 2 can’t equal 5.

So why was he shivering all over?

Coming out of his stupor, Tommy realized Darlene was sitting next to him and that her arm was around his.

He wasn’t the only one who realized this. Rudi spun from him, and she stormed toward the back wall while no longer apathetic or uprightly and as if she’d slam through it.

At the empty table in front of it she sat, and she picked at her pile.

Approaching her with a more modest lunch was a boy in another place, as he often was.

Eliot was bones and skin, with a pimply face and greasy brown hair, who was wearing a stained blue button-down polyester shirt, tan Haggar slacks whose cuffs dragged across the floor, and dirty white Keds. He wasn’t cool. He was the kid bullies dream of. To the extent that some felt sympathy for him, including the ones who’d bully him regardless.

Eliot reached the table and who was sitting there, and he froze. He froze mid-step.

Rudi couldn’t endure much of this, and her snarl returned. “Can I help you?”

“I . . . I usually eat here,” he mumbled.

“So?” she barked.

Eliot didn’t answer. He backed up. In slow motion he backed up. He backed up as if retreating from a roaring lioness, and that wasn’t far from the truth.

Ignoring this, Rudi took a notepad and a pen from her seabag. With her eyes peeping at Tommy, she started doodling.

#

Glaring at what Tommy was staring at, Darlene brushed her hair back and said, “Can you believe she’s in my poetry class?”

Tommy, of course, could believe this. But he said nothing.

“She’s also in my chemistry class. She probably should be teaching it.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s a big-time druggie.”

“How’d you figure that out?”

“Beth has gym class with her. Her NA keychain fell to the floor when she was changing.”

“NA?”

“Narcotics Anonymous.”

Tommy wanted this to matter. He wanted it to dissuade him from his snowballing obsession of Rudi. He wanted and wanted and wanted.

But it didn’t matter.

What could?

#

“I was disappointed with the results of the quiz,” spoke Mrs. Elkind, as the graying woman in a graying dress handed papers to the students in her class.

This included Tommy, who was horror-struck by the “D” on his from his usual front-row seat.

“You should’ve mastered conic sections by now,” the woman growled. “Few of you, I fear, have a chance of passing the AP exam.”

The teacher was about to add further invective when a presence disturbed her.

Rudi sauntered into the classroom. She sauntered inside it while clutching a crumpled printout of her class schedule. It could’ve been a fast-food wrapper that she was about to toss.

The woman peered into Rudi. She peered into her down and up and many times over and with incredulity. “Yes?”

Rudi waved her schedule at the woman. She waved it with irreverence. “This is where I’m supposed to be.”

With more incredulity, Elkind marched to Rudi. She grabbed the printout and uncrumpled it and read it. She read and read it. “We’ll see about that, Miss Weiss.”

Pain shot across Rudi’s face. Lots of it. “*Ms. Weiss*.”

“Excuse me?”

“Do I look like a ‘miss’?”

The woman pointed behind Rudi. “Solve the problem on the board.”

Rudi turned toward an equation.

“Use partial fraction decomposition to integrate that function,” the teacher demanded.

Rudi spun toward the woman. “You’re joking, right?”

“I rarely joke about partial fraction decomposition.”

Rudi sighed, but she stepped to the board and picked up some chalk, and she weighed the problem. She weighed it for the teeniest of seconds before solving it. She solved it in another handful of seconds, filling the board with numbers and formulae.

The teacher shook her head. “That took me fifteen minutes to solve this morning.”

Rudi finished, and she wrote “Q.E.D.” next to the solution, in letters that extended across an entire board, before dropping the chalk onto the easel. She dropped it much as Ms. Krasner had dropped the textbook, and it bounced as the book had.

Mrs. Elkind lit up. “Quite easily done.”

With another sigh, Rudi frowned. “It means *quod erat demonstrandum. That which required proving*.”

“A girl after my own soul. You’ve earned your seat here, *Ms. Weiss*. Hopefully, you can help others keep theirs.”

Snatching the schedule from the woman, Rudi trudged toward a seat by the back wall, with Tommy’s eyes shifting back to the mark on his test.

“You can start by explaining how you solved the problem,” the teacher went on. “As we’re mostly adults here, you can skip the polynomial division and the factoring of the denominator and get right to the decomposition.”

Rudi sighed a third time and louder. “I can’t see over that wavy hair.”

Realizing she meant his, Tommy leaned back in his chair facing her. “Better?”

“Not really.”

Tommy laughed, and this stunned Rudi. It might’ve been because she could no longer pretend that he was stuck-up. Or boring.

#

Tommy exited a first-floor stairwell with many others as they strode out of school at the day’s end.

Reaching a restroom and the familiar voice shouting from inside it, he came to a halt.

“He doesn’t care about you!” Rudi howled.

Who could she be howling at?

“Nobody does! I don’t care about you!”

The door swung open, hitting Tommy in the face, and Rudi dashed from the bathroom.

It took some time, but the door returned to its frame, and Tommy stared at her and tried not to follow.

It was his choice. It was his choice what he did with his life and his so-called replay. It was no other’s, and it wasn’t hers. He didn’t have to end up that peaked skeletal frame waiting to realize itself. He could change his fate. It was so easy.

But he followed her anyway. He followed her down the hallway, and he followed her when she turned left toward the front doors, and he followed her through them. He followed her outside as she trotted toward a crowd on the edge of Parker Avenue and what they were gawking at.

Rudi came upon Darlene, who was alongside a short blonde with a ponytail and girl-next-door looks. The two were whispering among themselves as they snickered at her.

“Beth,” growled Joey from behind the two.

The two kept snickering as Joey tapped the blonde’s shoulder.

She spun toward him as he pointed with his thumb. “Let’s go.”

Without a thought, she followed him. She followed him as if tethered to him, leaving Darlene to snicker at Rudi alone.

She ignored it, and she reached the crowd, and she glimpsed over a shoulder.

With a swell of fury, she pushed her way through everyone. Tommy wrote in his journal that she was Moses parting the sea. She was an irresistible force and kept pushing till she reached the street and a golden-haired dog whimpering and bleeding in the road by the curb. The same dog from Tommy’s dream.

Rudi kneeled beside the animal, and she swept it into her arms, and she rose with it and cradled it, and she comforted it and calmed it. Tommy never saw such gentleness. It belied all she was about.

But what didn’t?

“There’s an animal hospital at the end of Valley,” a voice yelled.

Maria was jumping up and down and all around while pointing the way. “I volunteer there on weekends. The vet’s really awesome.”

Rudi checked the dog’s state, and she kissed its head. “We wouldn’t get there in time.”

“But we can,” Tommy yelped after vaulting into her view in spite of himself.

#

With the dog clutched in her arms, Rudi raced through the school parking lot with Tommy. They raced to a Harley Sturgis.

She gaped at it as she caught her breath. “You drive a motorcycle?”

“I live dangerously.”

“I bet.”

Tommy hopped onto the bike. But Rudi didn’t follow.

“Come on!” he cried out.

Crawling onboard, she sat behind him. But she didn’t do more, and he became impatient. “I suggest you put your arm around me, unless you want to fly there.”

With more hesitation, much more, she placed one arm around him while continuing to clutch the whining dog with the other, and they shot from the lot onto Parker.

Moving faster, they sped to the corner of Valley. After swinging left, they zipped through traffic while weaving around cars and trucks and running both lights and stop signs.

Driving with recklessness Tommy was good at. He did it all the time, much as some kids cut themselves, to make himself believe that he was alive and that this had meaning. But never did it have any. Coming close to death didn’t bring it.

Only now did it.

#

In the cramped and ultra-white animal hospital waiting area, Tommy and Rudi scrunched next to each other, with their eyes straight ahead and Tommy doing all he could to ignore how good she felt pressed against him, both here and on the bike.

“The dog’s gonna be all right,” he said.

“You can’t be sure of that,” she growled.

“Actually, I can.”

“What?”

“You’ve got some blood on your coat.”

Rudi checked this. “It’s not the first time. You’ve got some too, on the back of your jacket.”

“It’s all right.”

“Thanks. I mean, thanks for doing this.”

Approaching them in glasses and a white lab coat was a stoic veterinarian as she read from a chart.

The two stood and awaited the news.

The woman stopped beside them while continuing to read. “She’s in bad shape.”

Rudi lowered her eyes.

After lowering the chart, the vet’s demeanor improved. “She’s got a lengthy recovery, but she’s gonna be fine.”

Rudi’s eyes shot up. “Yeah?”

“It’s fortunate that you got her here so fast.”

Neither Rudi nor Tommy spoke, and the vet eyeballed them both. “I guess you two can’t pay for this.”

“I can,” Tommy told her before pulling out his wallet and a credit card from it and handing it to her.

The woman took it and took off, leaving the two to search for words that were past their combined reach.

With sudden anxiousness, Rudi backed up. She backed up while dragging her feet. “I guess I should be going.”

“You want a lift?” Tommy asked.

“I’m fine.”

With greater hurry she moved, and she bumped into a wall.

While trying to hide her embarrassment, she spun around and burst from the office, with Tommy staring at her. He stared after she was gone.

#

Tommy lay on his bed writing in his notebook, with crumpled pages all around him on the floor.

He had written all that had happened that day. He wrote it many times over. He also sketched some scenes on the papers’ edges.

After getting the words close to right, he dropped his pen. He dropped it as music began playing. It was the same Glenn Miller song from his dream or whatever it was. But now it was playing in his head.

He was inside it too. He was dancing with someone in his arms. Someone who was out of sight because her cheek was against him. Someone whose heartbeat matched not only his but the beat bound by the trombone.

Never had Tommy been so perfect, so himself, and he wanted to continue this way. He prayed for the music to never stop.

“Tommy, you up?” spoke a voice from outside his door.

The song came to an end, and Tommy opened his eyes.

He was clutching a pillow.

“Tommy?”

While trying to conceal his frustration, from above all himself, Tommy chucked the pillow onto the floor. “Yeah?”

“How about inviting Darlene over for dinner tomorrow? I’d love to see her.”

“Some other time.”

There was no response, apart from the steps of his mother shuffling off.

What he couldn’t hear was the music. No matter what he did or how much he did it, it wouldn’t come.

So his mind wandered, toward a certain someone and what she was doing, despite aware that it shouldn’t have wandered there, that his life depended on it not getting within a light year of there.

#

My mind also wandered toward that certain someone and what she was doing.

Rudi didn’t want to tell me. But she didn’t have a choice if she wanted me to keep reading to her.

“I was banging against the walls of the dump I was at,” she screeched.

“You were what?”

“I was listening to Bad Brains’ *Yellow Tape*, which a friend had given me after I got out of jail, and I was doing what I did whenever I listened to it. H.R., his voice would reach out and grab me and throw me into wall after wall. It does this now. I bang into walls all the time when I listen to them, and I can tell you that it raises eyebrows at work.

“I listen to Richard Hell when I’m afraid, but I listen to Bad Brains when I want to forget. That night, ‘Big Take Over’ was blasting into my head. It was a jackhammer into concrete. I listened to it six thousand times. There was nothing but the song as I kept hurling into walls, breaking plaster everywhere. I was in such a lather that my body stopped tormenting me over drugs, or I could pretend that it did. But . . .”

“But what?” I asked.

“A fist hit a wall from the other side. It came close to punching through it. And a voice hollered, ‘Stop that racket!’

“I didn’t holler back. I fell to the floor and gasped for breath, with sweat running down my face and my arms around my legs. I was willing myself to some other place. Any place but that one. But it didn’t work. It never did.

“‘There’s some fries out here if you want,’ the voice said next.

“But I didn’t want them. I especially didn’t want them from him.”

“Tommy wasn’t on your mind?” I asked next.

“Why do you think I was listening to Bad Brains?” she groaned.

“But now you couldn’t listen to them.”

“Now I couldn’t. So I yanked out the drawing I’d made at lunch. I did with surprise. I was certain that I was drawing Lee Ving, my crush at the time. Me and most punk girls on the planet and probably lots of punk boys too. But it was wrong. While the drawing had Ving’s eyes, eyes that were piercing into me when rendered in two dimensions, the hair was too wavy and the nose and chin too chiseled.

“Then it hit me. It hit me who was staring at me from the drawing. So I tore out the page and crumpled it, and I threw it across the floor. But . . .”

“But what?” I murmured.

“This did nothing. So I crawled over to it and uncrumpled it and tried to convince myself that my attraction was hopeless. ‘You’re so not good enough,’ my voice rasped while I shook my head and glanced everywhere but at the mirror across the room. ‘You’re so not him. And this, this is so not a fairy tale.’”

“I have one more question.”

“What’s that?”

“This person staring at you from the drawing, did his eyelids flutter?”

“Some of this I’ll keep to myself.”

“That was a yes,” I blurted out as I turned the page.

I was back at the first one. “That, that’s it.”

Fumbling about, I shuffled through the entries, anxious for some more, more anxious than I’d been in years. But there weren’t any.

“What do you mean?” she cried out.

“That was the last page he sent me.”

“But that’s not the end of the story.”

“But that’s all he sent.”

“Today.”

“What?”

“That’s all he sent you today.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are seven more nights of Chanukah,” she told me.

“He’s gonna send me more? I mean, he sent me more?”

“Call me tomorrow night.”

There wasn’t the slightest doubt in her voice that I’d have a reason to as she hung up.

#

It was after midnight when I shoveled Tommy’s pages back into the envelope.

The moon had buried itself behind some clouds, taking the palm trees and canyons with it. The one glimmer came from the courtyard. It burned into the night, as it would all night.

I had to work the next morning. But I couldn’t go to bed. I had to wait for a bus pass so that I could get to work.

This waiting was a ritual, regardless of who was working the night shift. But with Josh it was the worst. Some nights he’d make me wait hours, enjoying my dependence on him.

On this night, though, I didn’t have to wait more than twenty minutes for him to rise from his seat and tug open the glass door.

“Yes?” he said.

I told him.

With a forced sigh, he led me to a vault in a room beside the dining hall.

He unlocked it, and he drew from it a stack of day passes that the shelter got for free, and he offered me one. But he wouldn’t let go of it. “This is a pretty sweet deal you get, free transportation.”

“I’d buy my own pass if you let me spend the money I earn.”

“That’s right, we’d throw you out if we caught you spending money.”

He let the pass go, but not without adding, “We could throw you out for just about any reason. Any at all.”

Not responding in any way, I left. I put the pass in my wallet and returned to the dorm, and I shuffled down the hall, passing an open door to sleeping quarters on my left. Here not only the women slept but their children. Their teenage boys had to do this.

As uncomfortable as this must’ve been, leaving the shelter could’ve been worse. While no one wanted to be on the streets of Victorville in the winter, the cold was the least bad awaiting women there. Because of this, they were more dependent on the place than we were.

The men’s quarters were past them across the hall. I stepped through its door, to snoring so loud that it could’ve woken a cemetery, including the one in Arlington.

Careful with my steps, I made my way through the dark, in a tomb filled with dozens of bunk beds and the weary men sleeping on them. I stumbled to the back and my bed, where I climbed to the top and kicked off my shoes before taking off my coat and jeans and slipping them under my pillow with Tommy’s letter.

After stretching out on the slight and rotting mattress, I tried to fall asleep. This trying was another ritual, and on this night it was the same and not.

What made it different from all others was that I was excited about a following day.

the second night

I woke in the night, somewhere in the middle of it.

It wasn’t the snoring that woke me, despite it as loud as before. What did was what woke me each night. What would lurk all day but come out at this time, when I couldn’t fight it, when it was free to strike.

Waves of darkness fell over me. With them came the demons crawling into my head and pushing me down. They pushed me below myself. They pushed till I believed I’d never rise while reminding me of how I’d screwed up my life and how I couldn’t undo it or make it bearable. All I could do was give in to it.

Over and over they cried this out to me.

I turned and tossed and covered my head and prayed. I prayed for the sun to rise so that I could go to work and focus only on that.

#

*Fllliiiickkkk*.

Sudden glare filled the tomb. It crammed each nook with a yellow so intense that it forced each pair of eyes open. It also sent the demons scurrying for cover.

I didn’t need to check the time. It was six, when they woke us each day but Sunday, when they waited until seven.

While many tried to ignore the glare by hiding in their pillows, I rose with those who had reason to or wanted to pretend it. I tossed my pillow from my clothes, and I yanked out my wallet and opened it.

Satisfied that my five dollars was there, I returned the wallet to my jeans and put it and my coat and my shoes on, and I crept through the tomb to the door, where Matt was asleep in a bottom bunk.

I shook him, but he only grumbled.

Recalling an old TV commercial, I uttered, “Time to make the doughnuts, dude.”

He laughed but his eyes stayed shut, and I stepped into the corridor and to the cubbies stacked in three rows.

The day I arrived at the shelter over the summer, they gave me a compartment on top despite my lack of elevation. So I had to imitate a primate to reach mine and my towel, shower bag, and a clean set of clothes.

I carried them into the men’s bathroom to a trio of sinks, where I shaved and brushed my teeth alongside another early riser. Here I had to accept the decay reflecting off the wall. No morning went by without me getting older and gaunter, and this morning was no different.

Yet I was humming. I was humming the song my sister had sung on her first day at Columbia. I kept humming it as I strolled toward the shower stalls down the way with a verve I couldn’t deny wasn’t there.

By the bench that extended across from them, I undressed and took my wallet from my jeans. Which we all learned to do if we wanted to have money in it when we left the shower.

Having your money stolen while you showered was a rite of passage at the shelter. It happened so often that the staff laughed when people complained about it. It didn’t matter if they lost hundreds of dollars.

What’s funny is that this didn’t happen to me. While the thieves went through my wallet that first morning, returning it to the wrong pocket, they left my five dollars alone. Either it wasn’t worth pulling out or was too pitiful to steal. Or both. But I became paranoid after that and put my wallet in my shower bag anyway.

With it and my towel that morning, I stepped into the nearest stall and fired the hot water at me, enjoying the few minutes of normal I got each day.

I made them last.

#

I got a bagged lunch from some guy working in the kitchen, and I made a cup of green tea. The most I could stomach this time of day.

Taking it into a courtyard, I was awash in light and palms. Both were everywhere, as was the brisk breeze that got under my jacket and both stiffened me and made me shiver.

My gaze drifted toward a group of women in the booths, who were getting their kids ready for school. They were trying to give them a similar normal that I’d enjoyed. They were also trying to make them feel special in a place where they weren’t and make them feel that they mattered and that someone loved them.

One was brushing her child’s hair while others gazed at theirs while they played. Another was checking her son’s homework. She did so as if on the greatest mission there was.

On the surface, the kids were as any other. You couldn’t tell that they were different from those with homes. But it was what you couldn’t tell that made them different. The rumor was that it was kids stealing everyone’s money by the showers. Whether true or not, there was worse they could’ve been doing.

My gaze drifted some more.

Nicole and Allison were drinking coffee and smoking at the same corner table where I’d talked to Rudi the night before. They could do the smoking because the shelter made an exception to its spending ban when it came to cigarettes.

Was it their way of guaranteeing attrition?

I joined the women, both in their early thirties, sitting next to Nicole. She was someone who made a lie out of all stereotypes of a homeless person. She worked two jobs as a manufacturing supervisor and was as bright as the desert days. She also refused to give up on hope despite it never passing over her and would convey what you could only call elation from her waking each morning.

Another quality that set Nicole apart from the rest of us was how she didn’t suffer from any psychological or substance issues that I could tell. She was a victim of what she couldn’t control. After her husband went to prison, medical bills overwhelmed her, and she was trying to save enough to get herself over the water and her four kids from wherever the authorities had taken them.

“Saturday night we’re having it,” she told Allison.

“Having what?” I asked.

Nicole’s head darted around, and she leaned toward me and whispered, “I was talking to Lynnette the other night. She’s turning ten on Saturday, and she’s really upset about having a birthday here. So we’re throwing her a party.”

“Are you serious?”

“Keep quiet about it. I want it to be a surprise.”

“How will you pay for it?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

#

The Motel 6 was a ten-minute drive down the road from the shelter.

But there was no bus going down this road, despite it having the largest mall in the Victor Valley and any store you could imagine. So each day Matt and I took a pair of buses that crisscrossed the valley and all the concrete and glass strewn across it.

On both buses that morning, I stared from my window under the darkening skies at the desolation and tried to believe that we were a few hours from Los Angeles. Or from anywhere. It was the perfect setting for a dystopia. Though there was a shine in the distance doing its best to break through.

The trip to the motel took an hour and a half but only if a bus wasn’t late and that happened seldom. But on this day they got us to the motel five minutes early, in time for a rain shower.

“*Slota*,” I mumbled as we got off into the slosh.

“What’s that?” Matt asked.

“That’s what you call this weather in Czech.”

“Uh-huh.”

Matt was hungry, so we scurried to the convenience store down the block by the 76 gas station. Recalling what I’d told him earlier, he bought a box of doughnuts with his EBT food card, another exception that the shelter allowed when it came to spending money.

“If Hannibal’s army had doughnuts,” he said to me as he pried open the box when we left, “they would’ve won the Third Phoenician War for sure.”

“You’re thinking of the Second Phoenician War.”

“That one too.”

He stuffed a doughnut into his mouth, and the two of us jogged to the motel, and we punched in on the PC in Amoun’s office.

We stepped out of it as the guy with the nickels came to pay for his room. The counter became swamped in Jeffersons and Monticellos, and the poor clerk had to count each one, more than fourteen hundred after including tax.

She was finishing when the automatic doors swung open and Amoun skipped inside, whooping it up as usual. He was Fred Astaire in *Top Hat* and I was his Ginger Rogers. “Where is my Hebrew?”

I raised my hand. “Right here, Pharaoh.”

“Have you been cleaning out the weeds by the back lot?”

“Whenever I get a chance.”

“Be a *mensch* and get a chance right now.”

#

Cleaning the field behind the parking lot in the back was a never-ending task.

The field was a magnet for all the garbage guests would leave and for all the waste that would come from the desert surrounding it. Entangling all this were the weeds that never ceased to grow, regardless of how many I pulled and despite the apparent lack of water. So, no matter how much progress I’d make on a given day, a few days later it’d be worse.

While I toiled there that morning, my sister climbed into my head, and I broke the tedium by listening on my phone to the Bad Brains song she’d mentioned the night before.

I hadn’t heard the band in decades. So I was surprised that they connected with me. They connected with me as they had as a teenager, and I strutted about. So I didn’t pay much mind to the cleaning woman who pushed her cart outside for a cigarette break.

She had the fairest name of them all, Alaya. It’s Arabic for “sublime,” and it fit.

As with Nicole, Alaya refused stereotype, and there were a number you could’ve applied. She was an immigrant, as were most cleaning women at the motel and others like it in the desert. But she was young and from England. If you closed your eyes when speaking to her, you’d swear that you were talking to Paul McCartney.

Alaya shared the same elation Nicole had from her waking each day. Despite the bleakness of her job and her environment, she was about to erupt from whatever it was percolating inside her.

Gazing at me and my strutting while she toked her “fag,” as she called it, Alaya gave me the kind of accentuated wave that I’d come to anticipate each day.

I waved back, feeling my own elation if but for a moment. But I did while questioning who she was and why she was there.

I couldn’t say why I had.

#

Work ended early in the afternoon, but the first bus was late, making me late for the second, and the one that came after that was late as well. It took more than four hours to get to the shelter.

I got there as dinner was ending and people were lining up to check in for the night. Switching into my highest gear, I made a sandwich, and I ate it while cleaning the kitchen and peeking at the television in the rec room. I had flipped it onto *Upstairs, Downstairs* on PBS, and I was commiserating with the servants.

#

There weren’t more than a few people left in line when I reached it.

But getting to the front took forever as I waited for the envelope that I hoped would be waiting as well. I felt the same anxiousness I had each Chanukah day as a kid, waiting for the present that was waiting for me.

I wanted to believe that Rudi had been right, that another letter from Tommy would be in the office, despite a pessimism as pervasive as those weeds in the motel’s back lot. I wanted to believe it as much for myself as for her and for myself more.

But when it was my turn in the office, there was no letter from Tommy.

“You certain that there was nothing for me today?” I pleaded.

“What do you mean?” Josh grumbled.

“A letter, like what came for me yesterday.”

He shuffled through the mail a second time. “You want me to conjure one?”

I didn’t answer. I grabbed a towel and set out.

“Laundry tomorrow morning,” he said.

“I work tomorrow morning,” I shot back.

“Dining hall bathrooms tomorrow night.”

With my head hanging, I left the office. I took the towel to my cubby and tossed it up, and I strode into the courtyard to call Rudi. I went with my head hanging lower.

Jerry stepped in front of me, in his ubiquitous blue sweatshirt and tan Cali baseball cap, and with joy over his face and a set of manila folders under his arm. “Remember when I told you how the CIA director is stalking me?”

“Vaguely,” I said.

“I’ve tracked him to Green River, Utah.”

“The CIA director works out of Langley, Virginia.”

Jerry got more joyous, and he pointed at me. “That’s what they want you to think.”

“If you’ll excuse me . . .”

“I hear you’re a hacker.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I hear stuff.”

“I’m not a hacker.”

“But you know computers.”

“Sure but—”

“—I don’t, not at all. And I need information on this guy.”

“I’m sorry, but—”

“—I’ll pay you.”

“How about on Sunday? I’m off.”

“Terrific.

I meandered toward the corner booth.

“I almost forgot,” he called out.

Sighing, I turned around.

With bashful eyes, he was holding out Tommy’s letter. “I couldn’t help myself.”

I should’ve been angry. But I was so excited that I thanked him for stealing my mail before hurrying off with it. I hurried to the corner booth, where I ripped open the envelope and yanked out its contents, and I called Rudi.

She answered on the first ring. “Yeah?”

“You were right,” I told her.

“You sound surprised.”

“You ready?”

“Since last night.”

#

The morning rose through the clouds above a three-story white manor in Newstead, the most exclusive section of South Orange and among the most in New Jersey.

Light struck the house and the estates surrounding it, with a thawing glaze glistening over the grass and hedges, both of which the owners had trimmed despite not needing it at this time of year.

In a bedroom on the top floor, Tommy exited his bathroom wearing a white terrycloth robe. He loitered in the doorway and peered out the window toward the Manhattan skyline. The distance from the city miniaturized the skyscrapers, making them toy-like. He could’ve reached out and grabbed one.

It was a million-dollar view, his mother would tell him and everyone she could. But it was ordinary that morning. “Ordinary” was all around him apart from a certain someone.

In his seventeen and a half years, never had a girl made Tommy pause. They were accessories, much as he was to them. Darlene was the perfect example of both. His biggest concern over them had been whether they looked good on his arm. But in a single day one had sent him tumbling about as if hit by a wave from nowhere.

*She couldn’t be worth rotting over*.

The danger of Rudi came roaring back, and Tommy tried to balance his excitement of her with his fear.

Unable to do so, he stepped forward, reaching a pair of glass cases. The first displayed his sporting and academic triumphs over the years. This included a *Star Ledger* article from the previous winter that named him All-State in football as well as certificates naming him to the honor roll each quarter of his high school career. The second case exhibited the comic book collection he’d amassed as a kid, with gems such as the complete set of *All-Star Comics* and *Howard the Duck*.

The latter caught his eye that morning. Its telling of a creature stuck in a world that made no sense had fascinated him when he was a child. But the older he got, the more it enthralled him, the more he could empathize with that duck. He’d empathize with him much as he would with another fictional character, from another book he’d been revisiting.

Tommy continued on, passing the Yardbirds posters on his walls, and he approached a framed reproduction of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

Without understanding why, he wandered to the day he got it.

#

Tommy stood outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art with his parents and many other people while waiting for the black-tie event to begin.

His father kneeled before him on the sidewalk, and he fixed his crooked bow tie.

“I don’t get why we had to dress up,” Tommy moaned.

“We dress up for special moments,” his father answered, “to show them how special they are.”

“What’s so special about a painting?”

This brought joy to his father. It lit up his face. “You get one chance to experience Vermeer for the first time.”

The doors opened, and everyone streamed inside, toward the painting the museum had gotten on loan, with Tommy holding his parents’ hands.

Closer he got to the painting, and his eyes enlarged. The colors were beyond what he could imagine. They exploded at him, and he wanted to play in them.

But what grabbed him more was the expression on the girl’s face. He’d often stare at it from his bed and question its source.

#

Tommy came back to his bedroom, and he turned toward the full-length mirror in the room’s corner. A mirror similar to the one that he hadn’t stared into in his dream or whatever it was.

He didn’t stare into this one either. He stared at the gold chai necklace he was wearing. The one he got on his *bar mitzvah.*

The pendant had been his mother’s, and Tommy had admired it as far as he could remember. So, while most boys got Star of David necklaces or mezuzahs on their *bar mitzvahs*, his mother bought a new chain for the pendant and gave it to him.

Tommy put the pendant between his fingers, and he eyed the Hebrew word for “living.” While trying for a second time to balance his excitement and fear of Rudi, he mulled the word’s meaning.

Was it about dragging yourself from one place in time to the next? So that you could keep yourself breathing for as much as possible?

Or was it about reaching some end?

#

Wearing his football jacket over a white wool Polo sweater, along with a pair of starched pleated khakis and polished brown penny loafers, Tommy carried his backpack down a winding wooden staircase.

His soles and heels clanked and clinked off the gleaming wood, to the beat of Julie London’s velvety voice. Which bounced off wall after wall in the house as she sang “Two Sleepy People” from a record playing in the living room.

It was a flawless song, Tommy wrote in his journal. This arrangement in particular. But it depressed him because of who was listening to it and why.

At the stairs’ bottom, he turned right, and he inched to the wall separating the hallway from the dining room, and he peeked at a woman who had turned fifty.

Clad in a blue Dior dress that complemented the floral arrangement in the center of an oak table and with her dirty-blonde hair tied in a bun, she was tapping her fingers and toes to the music from the table’s far end while she gazed everywhere but toward the empty seat at its other end. A seat that would forever be empty.

Loneliness gushed from her. Was that how he’d be when he was her age? Would he spend his days doing no more than glancing back at times that couldn’t return?

With the tenderest of mercies, the song ended, and Tommy stepped into the room and plopped down next to his mother while dropping his backpack by his feet.

The two exchanged good mornings as a statuesque servant in a pristine white uniform marched into the room from the kitchen. She served them a breakfast of omelets and hash browns and orange juice and coffee. She left the *New York Times* and the *Star Ledger* on the table with them. She did without reason to believe that anyone would touch either.

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” spoke Mrs. Goodwin with an aristocratic flair that she was well aware was an affectation.

Elizabeth acknowledged the acknowledgment, and she hurried off with her silver tray into the kitchen.

With a forced sigh, Mrs. Goodwin forced herself to eat. But when her son wasn’t doing likewise, when he was picking at his food, she set down her utensils. “What’s wrong?”

Tommy continued with his picking. “Nothing.”

“You’re a bad liar. Always have been.”

He didn’t respond.

The woman sighed a second time, doing so louder and while tossing her arms onto the table. “It must be this crazy diet kick you’re on.”

Now the exasperation was Tommy’s. “It’s not.”

“So what is it?”

He gave up the pretense of eating and set down his own utensils. “I, I’ve met someone.”

The woman spun toward him. “You’ve met someone? What about Darlene?”

“What about her?”

“She’s perfect for you.”

“For me or for you?”

Humored, Mrs. Goodwin took a sip of coffee. “Why don’t you invite her for dinner?”

It was Tommy’s turn to spin toward her. “Who?”

“This girl you’ve fallen for.”

“I haven’t fallen for her,” he growled, with more exasperation than before.

“You’re a bad liar. Always have been.”

Part of Tommy wanted to laugh. But the other part grabbed his backpack off the floor, and he rose to his feet and marched off.

“Will she be coming tonight?” his mother called out.

Slowing, Tommy shook his head. “She’s not so easy to like.”

“We have that in common.”

“You have a lot in common. More than I realized till now.”

“I’d love to meet her.”

Tommy paused by the hallway. “How did you know Dad was the one?”

She didn’t need a moment to answer. “When I didn’t have to ask.”

Tommy walked out, and from the wall he glimpsed at his mother.

She was keeping her gaze from the empty chair, and she was listening to Julie London. It didn’t matter that the music was playing only in her head.

#

Tommy was parking his bike in the school parking lot when a sight startled him. It startled him so much that he had to convince himself that it was real.

Rudi and Maria were striding toward the front doors together. By the way they were talking, someone could’ve mistaken them as friends, despite the incongruity of their existence in the same universe.

“If no one claims her,” Maria told Rudi with excitement shooting from her, “she’ll go up for adoption. You should adopt her.”

Rudi made a funny face. “We could get matching collars.”

They both laughed, and this surprised Tommy more than the two striding toward school together. He met Maria in elementary school, but not in all the years that had passed had she come close to a smile.

The two entered the building, and Tommy headed there himself.

At the doors, another peculiar sight came into his view. A red Porsche 944 was stopping on Parker.

No kid at Columbia, no matter how rich they were, drove to school in a Porsche. Kids at Pingry might’ve driven to school in them, but not kids there. So he stared at the car and the silhouette of someone inside it.

Someone who was staring at him.

#

I interrupted the story. “This raises a question.”

Rudi said nothing, and I could tell that she wasn’t there.

“Rudi?”

“What?”

“Are you all right?”

“It’s . . . we’re coming to a not-so-wonderful part of the story.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I could skip stuff.”

“I want you to read me it all.”

I was hesitant. But instead of starting an argument, I changed the subject. “How did you and Maria become friends? It never made sense.”

“It doesn’t now. That’s the beauty of it. Or one. There are plenty.”

“How did it happen?”

“That morning on the bus I was in a netherworld, where all that existed were a pair of eyes. I was also humming this crazy song that I’d heard in a dream the night before. Then the bus jolted as it reached the stop, and through the window Maria was waiting, I guessed so that she could learn about the dog. She was so nervous and I was in such a good mood that I had to have fun with her.

“‘You must want those dentures,’ I growled with my fist clenched as I stepped off the bus, and she just about fainted. So I let up and told her that the dog was all right. And we talked. And all that made us different, and this kept on and on, wasn’t so important. What did was that we both needed a friend. Me especially.”

#

Rudi turned more heads at lunch when she paraded through the cafeteria’s center aisle, with her tray stacked with food and wearing a faded black Springsteen T-shirt that had “sucks” scrawled over it in white paint.

The interest that everyone was paying on Rudi that day was different from what they had the day before. The story of what she’d done for the dog must’ve spread. Because no one was in fear of her or expressing shock of her. What they were expressing was closer to warmth.

Rudi ignored it. She did till she came upon a stare that she couldn’t ignore.

Tommy’s eyes were on her, with Darlene’s arm around his, and she stormed off.

#

Darlene sneered at what Tommy was staring at, and she clutched his arm as if she were trying to split it apart. “I thought Ms. Krasner was gonna kill her in class this morning. For twenty minutes she argued with her over some arcane Ferlinghetti poem. Who does that?”

The answer was clear to Tommy, as clear as the makeup on Rudi’s face.

Someone who cares does that.

#

Rudi slowed. She slowed when she approached the table where Owen Connors was roosting by himself, along with his glare and the remains of his lunch.

Owen was the biggest and meanest kid in school. Though they held him back so many times that he wasn’t much of a kid. He had a receding hairline.

Everybody in school feared Owen, including the teachers and all the football players, who gave him a berth so expansive that it could’ve filled the sky. Tommy had been afraid of him from the first day of South Orange Junior High and kept all distance from him.

But Rudi glared back. She could’ve plowed right through him as she marched toward the back table, where Maria was sitting at one end with the same excitement as that morning and Eliot was at the other, quivering on glimpse of her while trying to make himself invisible.

Owen kept up his glare at Rudi after she passed, and Tommy had a sensation he never had before.

He was frightened for someone.

#

Tommy’s fright hadn’t waned at the end of lunch. So he followed Rudi as she left the cafeteria. He couldn’t make himself not do this.

She left at the same time as a skinny boy with a cropped afro who had transferred to the school a year earlier.

Jared didn’t fit in at school any more than Rudi, but for a different reason. He came from rural Georgia and spoke with what everyone believed was a funny accent. But what amused people more was how he dressed as if going to church, wearing long-sleeved dress shirts and dress pants and shiny black-leather shoes. He’d wear this in the brutal heat. He clutched a dogeared Bible too, including in gym class, where he did nothing but sit and read.

To anyone at school who gave him consideration, Jared was a caricature who’d come to life. One that they could dismiss with ease.

Rudi and Jared ambled down a corridor, and they happened to glance at each other. Tommy was expecting that Rudi would glare at him as she had with Owen. But she surprised him some more.

Despite having less in common with Jared than what she had with Maria, Rudi did what no one in school had bothered. She glanced under the caricature, and she recognized what was there.

They both recognized it. It was all over their faces as they spun away and rushed off in different directions.

#

Tommy exited the first-floor stairwell with many others at the day’s end, with his head spinning from that day’s math class.

On the hallway’s other side was a crowd. They were standing around a toothy Owen and the physics book he held over someone’s head.

Having a good idea of who this someone was, Tommy sprinted down the hall. He didn’t question what he was doing or why.

He reached the crowd, and he pushed his way through it to Rudi. She was facing Owen with a chemistry book under her arm and an expression that was several stages past apathy. She was fighting the urge to fall into a coma.

Despite this, Tommy felt rage, and he leapt toward Owen. But he didn’t leap more.

It wasn’t fear of Owen that prevented him. He felt an overwhelming compulsion to fight him in spite of his fear. But getting beat up was the least that could happen. Fighting Owen could’ve put him on a path that he couldn’t get off.

“I’ll give you three seconds,” Rudi groaned with her eyes far off. “One . . . two . . .”

Owen got toothier. “Three.”

After stretching her arms, Rudi dropped her seabag onto the floor. With the same casualness, she took her chemistry book and swung it across Owen’s jaw, knocking him headfirst onto the lockers and to the floor.

While clutching the physics book in his paw, Owen lay in a state of semiconsciousness, with silence thundering through the corridor. Tommy could hear his own heart beat.

Rudi peeked at Eliot, who was standing next to her with his mouth and eyes stretched beyond their limits.

“I suggest you pick up your book,” she told him. “Like, right now.”

“Thanks!” he cried out as he sped to Owen and ripped the book from his grasp.

Rudi pointed at him and his jubilation, with a mix of a sneer and a snarl. “This doesn’t mean we’re friends or nothing.”

But Eliot continued his delight, his delight of her. He continued it in defiance of her before scurrying down the corridor with the book under his arm.

Rudi sighed, and she dropped to one knee to get her book, with everyone gawking at her.

She glowered at them. “What’s the matter with you people? Have you never witnessed an ass-kicking? Go on, get outta here!”

Quicker than lightning they dispersed. All but Tommy. He stood steps from her dumbfounded, at how someone such as her could care enough about someone such as Eliot to stand up for him.

With this came a more consuming puzzlement.

What more could she care about? And who?

Rudi rose with her bag, and her glower returned. It shone on Tommy. “What do you want?”

He tried to form an answer. He tried and tried. “I . . . I was hoping, I was hoping you could help me with calculus. Conic sections are killing me. But those ellipses inside those rhombuses are nothing compared to partial fractions.”

Rudi beamed. The glee was pouring out of her. “So it’s true what they say . . . boys *are* bad at math.”

Tommy couldn’t respond, and he was certain he was blushing.

Rudi took off, and he realized that he had to take a chance. He had to take it at that moment. It didn’t matter if it meant making a fool of himself in front of someone who might not give a damn. “Please, I’ve never gotten lower than a B, and I haven’t a hint how I’ll pass that AP exam.”

She paused a few steps from him and turned back. “Why is it so important to you?”

“Don’t you fear failure?”

She didn’t answer, and the two sought words that were miles from their view.

“Weiss!” howled a voice from down the hall.

Rudi spun toward Mr. Gonzales and another of his tight brown suits and another of his tight brown ties.

He pointed at his door. “My office, now!”

“*Oy vey,”* she muttered, and she lumbered toward the man, who was trying to keep the snicker inside him from the justice that Rudi had meted out.

“Someone check if Mr. Connors is alive,” he called out.

“Well?” Tommy said to Rudi. “Will you help me?”

Flinging her bag over her shoulder, Rudi stopped and noticed how frayed the rope was that held it together. “I’m kinda busy.”

“He’s alive!” a student yelled.

“Later?” Tommy asked after Rudi marched toward the principal.

With another of her sighs, she came to another pause. “Where?”

“How about Reservoir? It’s a pizza place on—”

“—I’ll find it.”

Stomping her feet, she restarted her march toward the principal and his office. She did while swinging her arms like a gunslinger.

Tommy stared at her. His eyes wouldn’t budge.

Joey interrupted this when he grabbed him by the shoulder from behind. “Coach wants to talk, to everyone.”

Tommy shook his head. “Not today.”

“What do you mean?”

Joey wasn’t the only one surprised by Tommy’s answer. He surprised himself, as he was the type of person who obeyed. But he hustled through the school doors.

He came to a jolting halt, before the same red Porsche that’d been there that morning. A man in a leather jacket was leaning against the hood with his arms crossed.

He was in his twenties and was lean and wiry, with his head shaved and his neck covered in tattoos. But what stood out more was his cold blank gaze and eyes that didn’t blink.

Rudi was benign in comparison. He was someone with no more than a passing resemblance to a human.

#

In a pizzeria on South Orange Avenue, Tommy sulked.

With the sun setting in the window beside him, it was becoming apparent that Rudi had stood him up. Never had this happened to him, but this would’ve been the one time it would’ve mattered.

But should it have mattered? Should he have not been thankful and taken it as a sign to run as fast as he could and save himself?

He went back and forth over this before reaching for his jacket. He reached as Rudi strutted inside.

Spinning toward a waiter, Tommy got his attention, and the man hustled through the kitchen doors.

Rudi came to Tommy’s table. She came with reticence.

Uncertain what to say, he blurted out the first sentence that popped into his head. “Did you get into trouble?”

“I got detention. It won’t be the last time.”

The two ran out of words, and they stared at each other.

Spotting the chair across from Tommy, Rudi whipped it out and flipped it around, and she plopped herself down while dropping her bag onto the floor. But she didn’t take off her coat, and she snarled at him. “This is not a date.”

“Of course not,” he muttered while trying to convince himself.

He could tell she was disappointed. Was it on his face too?

“What would your girlfriend say about this?” she grumbled.

“Girlfriend?”

Rudi threw her arms at him. “The strawberry-blonde who drapes over you. *Ms. Cantor*.”

“She’s not my girlfriend. She might suppose so, and my mom definitely supposes so, but . . .”

“But what?”

“I’m not sure why I’m telling you this, but would you believe that I’ve never had a girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Don’t get me wrong, there have been girls. Lots. At times too many. It’s the ‘friend’ part that’s elusive.”

“We’re arguing over semantics, over what constitutes a girlfriend. And what does in your opinion?”

The answer was clear to Tommy, as clear as the makeup on Rudi’s face. He wanted someone who’d make him feel as Cummings had when he wrote “since feeling is first.” He wanted it so much. But he didn’t want to admit it, not to her or to himself. So he demurred.

Rudi eyed him. She eyed him with guardedness.

“Where you from?” he said.

“Lots of places.”

“Such as?”

“Such as Trenton or thereabouts.”

“What are you doing here?”

With an exaggerated yawn, Rudi dropped her elbows onto the table, and she dropped her chin onto her fists and closed her eyes. “I can’t imagine what I’m doing here. I can’t stay awake in this town.”

Tommy reached into his backpack. “I can imagine what you’re doing here right now, helping me with calculus.”

Rudi opened her eyes and jumped in her seat. “You were serious?”

“Why would I ask you here?”

She didn’t answer as he yanked out a heavy white textbook, sending a pair of other books onto the floor.

Rudi sneered at one and huffed. “You’re reading *The Catcher in the Rye?* I read that in tenth grade.”

“Me too,” he said after returning the two books to his backpack. “But I read it only enough to write an essay. Now I’m reading it for real.”

“Why?”

“I gather you’re not a fan.”

“Why should I care about some spoiled loser from the forties who’s whining about how he can’t get laid? What does that have to do with me and my life?”

Tommy was wary of exposing too much. But he decided to take another chance. “That’s not what it’s about. It’s about being alone, about being the only person in the world. The only one who feels like you. And being so scared of this that you’re unsure whether you want to live. Holden Caulfield, he isn’t some spoiled loser whining about how he can’t get laid. He’s you.”

Rudi crossed her arms, and she scowled. “Speak for yourself.”

“I am.”

Fear built on Rudi’s face, and Tommy couldn’t figure out why. I bet it was because she could no longer make herself believe that she was “so not him” and this meant that she’d have no more excuses for not caring about him.

The waiter came. He slapped Tommy’s shoulder with one hand and with his other he placed a thin-crusted pie on the table. “Here you go, bud. You need some drinks?”

“How about some Cokes?”

“You got it. Just give me a few.”

“Tommy!” came an accented voice from the restaurant’s other side.

Both Tommy and Rudi swayed toward it and an elderly man, who was wearing a suit that hadn’t fit him in years and was hovering over a table with many receipts and other papers on it.

Tommy waved at him. “Mr. Agnellino!”

Mr. Agnellino waved back before gawking at Rudi askance and returning to his papers.

“Everyone knows you here,” Rudi said.

“My family’s been coming to this place since the thirties,” Tommy told her, “back when it was in Newark by the old reservoir there. That’s where my dad grew up. Do you know that he only bought a house in South Orange because they moved here?”

Tommy motioned toward the pizza and the mushrooms and red peppers on top of it. “I hope you don’t mind, I’m a . . .”

Rudi gaped at him. “Vegetarian?”

“You too?”

“I’ve never heard of a football player vegetarian.”

“I’ve never heard of a punk rock girl vegetarian.”

Rudi wanted to retort. But instead she shook off her coat and pulled out a slice and blew on it.

“It’s the best pizza in the world,” he mentioned. “Nothing comes close to it.”

She shot him a dirty look. “Nothing is no different from any other nothing.”

“The ingredients, they aren’t much different from what you get at other places. It’s the love they put into it. The pizza has meaning to them, and that makes all the difference.”

She took a bite, and she tried to mask how good it tasted and how this taste was exploding in her mouth. It was all over her face as she took more and more bites.

Tommy had never observed anyone eat. Never had he reason to, and he didn’t have one now. But he was amazed at how she made the act of eating unordinary. All there was about her was unordinary, and a silliness must’ve come over him that he didn’t realize was there.

“What?” she demanded.

#

With the pizza and Cokes finished, Rudi pointed to the open calculus book.

“So you get it now?” she cried out. “There are four variations of problems. All you have to do is recognize which and follow the pattern for solving it. You don’t have to get how you’re getting it.”

“Wow,” he mumbled. It was as if someone had drawn a curtain that he couldn’t tell was there.

Rudi checked the clock on the wall. “I gotta run.”

“Yeah,” he muttered while continuing to gaze at the book.

Rudi rose and threw on her coat. Tommy did the same while stuffing his textbook into his backpack. After leaving some money on the table, he and Rudi staggered toward the door, with Rudi carrying her seabag by its rope.

He tried to come up with some words, and he let out the first that showed up. “It’s amazing how easy you make calculus.”

“It is easy when you stop fearing it, making it no different than any other fear.”

The two reached the entrance, and Tommy reached for Rudi’s hand. But instead he opened the door for her.

She didn’t appreciate the gesture. She shot him another dirty look, and she growled what would become a recurring theme throughout her life, “I can open my own doors.”

Tommy held the door open.

With an accentuated sigh, Rudi flung herself outside and swung her seabag over her shoulder. She swung it with such force that the tattered rope broke and the bag fell to the ground, and most of its contents spewed out. Making matters worse, there was a breeze, enough to blow her belongings around.

“*Oy vey!”* she cried out as she knelt on the sidewalk and stuffed her stuff into the bag.

A balled page rolled to Tommy’s foot.

He snatched it and uncrumpled it, exposing her drawing of him.

Never had his image rendered so. She’d captured what no photograph or mirror could: the boy trying to climb out from under the trappings, to discover what was there. More remarkable than the drawing itself was how she could see in him what he couldn’t, and he gaped at this.

“That’s mine!” she hollered before ripping the paper from him and rushing off with it and her bag.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

She spun toward him and raged. “Thank me for what?”

He pointed to the drawing.

Fumbling about, she slung the paper behind her back, with her face turning shades of scarlet and vermilion. “It’s not you! It’s Lee Ving!”

“I couldn’t guess who that is,” he said.

“You couldn’t. They don’t play his music on *American Bandstand* or *America’s Top 10* or whatever garbage you watch.”

Tommy laughed, and she became madder. “What’s-so-funny?”

“That punk girls blush.”

This floored Rudi. She took a step back and another as she sought a response that wasn’t coming.

“Or that they could make me blush,” he went on. “I had no idea that they read poetry and help bullied kids and stray dogs and . . . and jaded football players.”

Hiding from this and from him, Rudi rushed down the block.

“How about lunch with me tomorrow in the cafeteria?” he called out.

Rudi stopped. But she didn’t turn around. She didn’t dare. “You’d want to be with me in front of everyone?”

“I kinda do,” he answered. But what he wanted to say was, “I really do. I want this more than I want to breathe.” He wanted to scream it to her, but the only screaming he did was across a page of his journal.

“You shouldn’t,” she mumbled before disappearing into the night.

“Who are you?” he whispered. He whispered it at a volume that only he could hear and only a slither.

#

This time Rudi interrupted the story.

She told me that she was more concerned about where she was than who. She’d gotten lost.

“Why was that?” I asked. “Why didn’t you walk back the way you came?”

“Let’s just say that my mind was elsewhere.”

“And that was?”

She sighed. “It was trying to figure out his angle. Everyone had one and that he didn’t was driving me crazy.”

There was a pause. So I said, “And?”

“And,” she grunted, “for the second night in a row I was trying to convince myself that this was no fairy tale, despite all that was telling me it was.”

#

Rudi got so lost that it took her twice the time to get back to the school than from it.

At the bus stop on Valley not far from this, she was fixing the rope of her bag when a sound sent her spinning toward the school parking lot.

Eliot was stepping into a crumbling beige Cutlass. One kept together by prayer alone.

“What are you doing here?” she called out.

He did his best imitation of a Cheshire. “Chess Club.”

“Figures.”

“You do realize that there are no more buses tonight?”

“What?”

“They stopped running a while ago.”

“That’s wonderful. Tripleplusgood.”

Flailing her arms, Rudi stormed down Valley.

“Is that from *Dr. Strangelove?”* Eliot called out.

“Close.”

“I could give you a ride.”

She shook her head. “It’s all right, I live in a bad neighborhood. You wouldn’t want to go there.”

“Where’s that?”

“Near Irvington.”

“I live *in* Irvington.”

#

Eliot made a left, and the car lumbered in that direction and somehow in one piece.

“My dad used the address of a buddy of his at work so that I could register at Columbia,” he told Rudi. “I guess he’s under the belief that I could be someone.”

“What’s so crazy about that?”

“Take a gander at me.”

“I am taking one.”

Taking one at another sight, Rudi pointed down the road. “Park behind the blue sedan.”

He did, and she opened her door and said, “Thanks.”

“Sure, anytime.”

She stepped outside, where she paused for a reason she couldn’t fathom. She paused till she uttered, “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” he gasped as he leaned toward her.

“At lunch.”

Eliot’s delirium came rushing out. “Yeah?”

“Just don’t push it.”

#

Tommy stepped into school the next day.

Rudi was standing outside the girls’ bathroom with her arms crossed.

“You have to come out sometime,” she yelled.

“No, I don’t,” came Maria’s frightened voice from behind the door. “This isn’t a good idea.”

“The best ones usually aren’t.”

Maria didn’t answer.

“Come on,” Rudi cried out, “you look amazing.”

The door squeaked open, and Maria slithered out. Or someone who resembled her. This Maria, though, was wearing makeup. It was but a touch. On any other girl you might not have noticed. But on her you couldn’t help notice.

“What are you doing with that makeup?” howled the principal by his door.

Both girls spun toward him, and Maria lowered her eyes. She lowered them as far as she could. “Nothing, Daddy.”

“Daddy?” Rudi gasped.

Maria became more sheepish, and her eyes locked on the floor.

The principal roared toward Rudi. Tommy was certain he’d strangle her. His hands were inches from her throat. “Is there anything in this school you haven’t corrupted?”

“You.”

#

Rudi paraded through the cafeteria’s center with her pile of food. This afternoon no one cared.

Tommy, who was steps behind her and gravitating toward his usual table with his own lunch, noted her curiosity as she glanced left and right.

She only discovered the reason for the lack of interest in her when she reached the table where Owen was roosting, with his head on his arms and a barrage of paper balls hitting him from all directions.

Stopping beside his table, Rudi peeked at him.

Tommy peeked too, at her growing conflict. He couldn’t grasp its source.

She sighed. “That’s enough.”

The assault continued. So Rudi repeated her command, louder and firmer, and the paper balls ceased.

With another sigh, she sat across from Owen and whispered to him.

Tommy shot past curious, so he sat at a table across the aisle from them.

“You need better karma,” Rudi said to Owen. “I’ve been searching for it myself. The truth is that I need it more than you. It’s not close.”

Owen didn’t speak or react.

“Come on,” she went on, “lift that chin.”

“So you can punch it?” he mumbled.

“Better karma. I need better karma.”

With less enthusiasm than a dog gets into a tub of water, Owen lifted his head above the table.

The two stared at each other, with an innocuousness uncommon to them both.

This ceased when Eliot brought his lunch next to Rudi, with his hair much as hers, black and spiked.

While shaking her head, Rudi unspiked his hair with her fingers. “This is the definition of ‘pushing it.’ You’ve become a Quincy Punk.”

“What’s a Quincy Punk?” Eliot asked.

“A fake punk,” Owen told him, “like on that stupid TV show.”

Rudi spun to Owen. “You’re into punk?”

Owen rolled his eyes, and he removed the long-sleeve flannel shirt he was wearing, exposing the white T-shirt underneath it and the Black Flag logo tattooed on his arm.

Eliot leaned toward it. He leaned with all kinds of awe. He came close to falling off his seat. “I want one of those.”

Owen turned to Rudi. “We’re creating a delinquent.”

Approaching the three was Maria, who was more different than before. In addition to that makeup, she had confidence. Everyone could sense it, including a lanky redheaded girl who sauntered by and caught her eye.

Maria bathed this in. It stayed with her as she sat across from Eliot with her lunch. “I’d get a tattoo too. But I’m already grounded till next century.”

#

The four continued their bantering. They bantered nonstop.

Along with it, Tommy scanned the hall. They weren’t the coolest kids that afternoon or the best looking or the most athletic. But they were the midpoint of everyone’s world. No one could take their glance from them.

This included the principal when he stomped into the cafeteria, and he wasn’t pleased. He burst toward them with his fists clenched.

But he never got there, as magic happened. All four laughed. They laughed the way friends do when they’ve been friends forever and not because of some crazy-looking girl from Trenton.

The principal spiraled to a stop. He came close to tumbling over, with his whole face agape. He was witnessing a miracle, one that he’d helped create, and he forgot all about his anger. There was only his daughter and her laugh.

This died down, and Rudi glimpsed at Jared a few tables away, with only his Bible to keep him company. His loneliness reminded Tommy of his mother that morning.

Jared was staring at the four. He was staring right at them, no matter how he pretended otherwise.

It was obvious that Rudi was trying to ignore him. But she had no more success than she had with Owen. So she waved him toward their table with a sweep of her arm.

Jared pointed to himself, with a meekness that amplified itself. “Me?”

“Yes, you!” she called out, with no meekness at all.

With plenty of apprehension, he stood, and he made his way toward them with his lunch, with his apprehension growing with each step. It was taking him forever to get there.

Realizing Rudi wasn’t going to let anyone eat alone, Tommy rose with his tray and strode toward their table.

Rudi turned toward him. Everyone at the table did.

Feeling embarrassed, Tommy hurried off.

“What’s going on with you and Tommy Goodwin?” Maria demanded.

“Would you believe partial fraction decomposition?” Rudi answered.

“No.”

Happy came over Tommy. A gust of it swept him all the way to his table.

#

Tommy’s happy hadn’t subsided at the day’s end.

He had aced a partial fractions quiz and expected more outrageousness from Rudi and that it would awe him more.

But upon exiting the stairwell on the first floor with a bunch of others, there was no Rudi or any commotion or disturbance. An eerie normalcy hung over the hallway as Tommy pushed himself through the building’s front doors.

The normalcy ceased outside. Rudi and the wiry man with the shaved head and tattooed neck were arguing by his Porsche.

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” she howled while trying to suppress her fright and failing at it.

The man paused. He paused for a fraction of a moment before slapping her across the face with the back of his hand. He slapped her with a cold-bloodedness that made apparent that this was the least he could do.

The blow knocked Rudi backward and sent her wobbling.

Tommy took a step toward them. But as with Owen the day before, he froze. He froze from the handgun in the man’s waist.

It wasn’t the gun itself that froze him. It was the future playing out in his head, of that peaked skeletal frame waiting to realize itself.

The man grabbed Rudi by her ear, and he dragged her toward his car. “We need to chat, young lady.”

“Deke!” she cried out.

Deke threw open the passenger door, and he tossed Rudi inside and slammed the door. While stepping around the car, he scowled at Tommy before jumping into the driver’s seat and speeding off. He sped from the parking lot and down Parker.

Tommy couldn’t decide what to do. Most of him wanted to remain in control of his fate and the replay of his life. So, well after Deke’s car was gone, he was standing there.

*Nothing. Do nothing. This could be your last chance to do it.*

But the other part of him woke. It rushed him to his bike and down Parker. It rushed him to the end of it.

The Porsche was nowhere, but Tommy kept moving forward by veering right onto Clinton. He continued down it to the intersection of Sandford, where he stopped.

A handful of blocks away was Springfield Avenue, among the main thoroughfares in the area. Deke’s car wasn’t there, and Tommy couldn’t decide whether this disappointed or relieved him. But he drove onto Sanford anyway and down it.

At the corner of Springfield, he peered down the busy street in both directions.

In the distance to his right was the Porsche, and he raced toward it. He raced without checking the road. He raced in the path of an oncoming car.

Swinging his body to the right, he rotated the bike and missed the car, but he now headed for a parked one.

He swerved around this, leading him to jump the sidewalk.

After avoiding a pair of pedestrians, he jumped the bike back onto the street and followed the Porsche. He followed it through a set of roads that were much the same, and he came to a rundown section of Maplewood where he’d never been. This was a fifteen-minute drive from the neighborhood where he’d lived all his life, but it was so different that it might as well have been on the light side of the sun.

The Porsche parked, by a crumbling single-story home, with Tommy hiding behind an old burgundy pickup truck a block and a half back.

He stayed hidden, and he lost track of time.

With her face iced in fear, Rudi ran from the car. She shut the door and ran into the house while the Porsche dashed off, exposing the blue sedan parked in front.

Tommy couldn’t decide what to do. But he got off his bike. He got off and started toward her house. As if pushing himself through a hurricane he moved, and with each step this became more accentuated. He was moving slower than Jared had in the lunchroom.

He got to her building, and he staggered to her door. There was no doorbell, so he knocked. He knocked a couple of times.

This accomplished nothing. So he banged on the door and called out Rudi’s name.

Silence was all that came back.

Returning to the street, he swayed toward his bike, uncertain if this was where he was swaying.

He reached the side of her house. There was a backyard behind it, and he drifted toward it, unable to stop himself.

#

Confused by what I’d read, I asked Rudi how she could not hear Tommy banging on her door.

“I wasn’t there,” she told me. “I was so frightened when I ran into that house. The walls were falling onto me, and I was panicking for a way out. So I ransacked the place for one. I ripped it apart. But there weren’t so much as a bottle of aspirin or a warm can of beer. So I did what I did when I was a kid. I hid under the bed. I also cranked Richard Hell on my Walkman. I cranked it so loudly that I wouldn’t’ve noticed an apocalypse.”

#

“Rudi?” Tommy called out as he creeped alongside the house’s cracked wall. One that might’ve fallen apart if touched.

There was no answer. But there were sounds coming from inside the house. So he repeated himself and louder.

Another sound came, a clicking one, from behind him.

Whipping toward it, he faced the man who ushered Rudi to school on her first day. The man with the crew cut and pockmarked face, who was wearing another off-the-rack blue suit and was pointing a gun at his head.

Tommy raised his hands. He raised them as high as they’d go. So frightened was he that he didn’t see his life flash before him. He saw only death. It was a pull of a trigger away.

“You with them?” the man growled.

Tommy tried to keep himself from shaking as he tried to force out an answer. “With . . . with what?”

The man didn’t answer. He examined Tommy.

While keeping his eyes bolted on him, he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a badge and showed it to him. “FBI. Take off while you can.”

Tommy hurried off, and he hurried more when he got to the street. He kept hurrying after he jumped onto his Harley. He flew down the road. He wanted to fly all the way home. He told himself that this was where he was flying.

But he stopped by the Maplewood Public Library on Baker Street, and he swerved onto its lot and parked.

In his daze, he realized that whatever trouble Rudi was in, that whatever reason she had for coming into his life, it had to be major.

Why would the FBI be involved?

His other realization was that the lone means toward discovering it was in the building next to him.

He got off the bike, and he scurried up the ramp and into the library and to the Reference section. In the days before the web, there was a single way of learning about a recent event: the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*. It indexed stories from hundreds of magazines and journals.

He asked a librarian where these were, and the man directed him to an aisle of copious volumes going back decades. At the aisle’s end were lesser versions of more recent editions. He wrenched out the last few months and took them to a table, and he skimmed through them.

Page after page he searched and volume after volume. But what he was searching for wasn’t evident, so he was getting nowhere. With the sun setting through the windows around him, he was ready to give up.

*Such as Trenton or thereabouts*.

Remembering what Rudi had told him at dinner, Tommy flipped to the back of his current volume. He flipped to the T’s.

But there were no articles referencing the city, so he checked the other volumes.

In one from November, he came upon an entry for a *Newsweek* article, “Punk Rock Turns Deadly.”

With his arms thrashing about, Tommy sprinted to the magazine stacks near the library’s entrance, and he grabbed the issue.

He sifted through its pages. After passing an article about the mysterious sickness that had been afflicting the gay community, he reached the article. Under the headline was a mugshot of Deke.

According to the story, someone had beaten to death a nineteen-year-old Jewish student from Rutgers named Mark Shapiro, at a punk show outside Trenton. Deke Cox, a well-known drug dealer in the area and an ex-con with ties to the Aryan Brotherhood, was the leading suspect of what authorities had determined was a crime motivated by prejudice. But they hadn’t charged him, and he wasn’t the only suspect. They believed an unnamed teenage girl with a similar background was involved in the killing as well.

The “unnamed teenage girl” could be one person.

Tommy lowered both his head and the magazine. “She *is* a monster.”

#

Void seeped in from the desert. It seeped into the bleakness hanging over the courtyard that was suffocating me.

My breath pierced it.

“That, that’s all,” I mumbled after dropping the last entry onto the table.

Rudi didn’t respond. So I asked her if she was all right.

She didn’t respond to this either.

So I told her, “I said it before, I could skip—”

“—I want to hear it all,” she barked.

“But you shouldn’t. It was bad enough the first time.”

“All of it,” she hollered with a fury unchanged in forty years.

“No.”

“You can’t . . .”

“I can’t what?”

“You can’t do this to me,” she shrieked with her voice splintering in places. “He was my *bashert*, my *destiny*. And . . .”

“And what?”

“I miss him. I miss him when I wake. I miss him when I sleep. I miss him all the moments in between. I miss his hand on mine. I miss the way he’d anticipate my moods. I miss how he made me believe. You’ve gifted him back, and this isn’t a gift you can retract.”

“That’s exactly what I’m gonna do,” and I was going to do it as much for me as for her. Neither of us needed to go where this story was taking us.

“Just because you’re somewhere in the middle of nowhere doesn’t mean I can’t get to you,” she hollered, with her voice shattering the air. “It doesn’t matter how you tell me, but you’re gonna tell me it all. You won’t get away with skipping a comma.”

Now it was my turn not to speak.

“Call me when you get the letter,” she uttered before hanging up.

I didn’t move. All I did was stare at the pages on the table, trying to make them disappear, along with myself. I can’t say for how much time I did. I only stopped when the shelter gate and its clanging roused me.

A woman slithered inside. A slender woman in her twenties.

Much as some other women in the shelter, Katie worked at an Amazon fulfillment center down the hill in San Bernardino. They all worked crazy hours, late at night.

“Hey,” I said as she approached me and the dorm.

She answered in kind and with fright. She was a doe in the road waiting for some headlights.

“You okay?” I asked.

Without a response, she hustled into the dorm.

I tried to ignore this. I collected Tommy’s pages and shoved them into the envelope, and I followed her into the building so that I could go through my ritual with Josh.

It was no surprise that I had to wait. But I had to wait for a different reason than normal.

Josh was talking behind his closed door to Katie, who was more scared than before. She was shaking as she reached into her back pocket and pulled out some cash.

Shaking some more, she offered the money to Josh, who ripped it from her hand and counted each bill.

He counted them twice.

the third night

I was trying to decide whether I’d keep reading Tommy’s journal to Rudi, and how much of it I’d read if I did, when I brought my cup of green tea into the courtyard that morning.

The sun wasn’t as bright as it had been the day before. The ashen sky, caused by a wildfire in neighboring Riverside County, had turned it to haze, along with the palms and the plastic booths and all the flies swarming around.

That didn’t stop people from swatting them. Not a second went by without a *wwhhaaackkk*.

In the corner booth, Nicole and Allison were huffing down coffee and cigarettes. But they weren’t as upbeat as they’d been the day before.

“I can’t believe she’d leave like that,” Allison said with a slow shake of her head as I sat with them.

“Who left?” I asked.

“Katie,” Nicole answered. “She left in the middle of the night.”

“Why?” I asked next, with surprise.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Allison growled. “She was gone when we woke, along with all her stuff.”

“I heard someone crying,” Nicole mentioned. “It woke me.”

“Someone’s crying every night,” Allison countered.

“You have no idea why she’d leave like that?”

“All I can tell you is that she got that job at Amazon and that she was real excited about it and the possibility of getting out of here.”

“That could be what she did,” I interjected. “She got out of here.”

Allison shook her head for a second time, and for a second time she growled. “She would’ve told us or texted us or returned one of ours. She wouldn’t’ve left like that.”

“She’s the third woman who has since I’ve been here,” Nicole said. “A few weeks ago it was Jill.”

“Before that it was Michelle,” Allison added.

Over the years, I’d been witness to plenty of terrible and believed that I’d become numb to it. Nothing, no matter how bad it was, could unnerve me. But for some reason this did, and I couldn’t get why.

“Are we set for the party?” Allison whispered to Nicole, with all three of us wanting to change the subject.

“We need a cake,” Nicole answered.

“Josh said that he’d get one for us.”

“He did?”

“Last night he told us that he gets a veteran’s discount at a bakery near his house.”

#

The women who’d vanished from the shelter were rattling through my head on the buses to work. Katie, in particular, kept showing up. I couldn’t turn my eyes from her or her fright.

On the second bus, there was one passenger besides Matt and me. A woman way in the back, who was ranting about her gay son in Palm Springs to the driver way in the front.

While doing my best to ignore the loudness and the inanity of their exchange, I muttered, “*Cui bono?”*

“What’s that?” Matt asked.

“It’s Latin for *who benefits?* I’m trying to figure out who could benefit from these women disappearing from the shelter.”

Matt glanced away. He did in a way that made me say, “What’s going on?”

He glanced farther away and grumbled, “Just forget about it. There’s nothing you can do, and it’s not the worst he’s done.”

“Someone at the shelter did something to them?”

Matt said nothing.

“Who?”

He said more nothing.

“Josh?”

He turned toward me, and he shook his head. But I couldn’t tell whether he was shaking it at my question.

“We should tell someone,” I said.

“Someone in the shelter?” he snarked. “You might as well have chickens complain to the foxes.”

“We could tell someone outside it.”

“Tell who? You think people care about us? To most, we’re garbage, no better than cons. I’m one of those too, by the way.”

“But—”

“—Just forget about it, if you want to keep a roof over your head, not to mention your job.”

“What do you mean?”

“Before you came, there was this guy. He couldn’t have been older than twenty. But he already had a wife and a bunch of kids. During a cubby check, they fished out an empty Grolsch bottle from his. The kind with those fancy ceramic caps. He picked it up because it was cool looking. But they said that it was proof he’d been drinking. It was all the proof they needed to kick him out.

“So tell me, if they’d kick out that guy and his wife and all their kids and send them into the streets over nothing, what would they do to someone who made the slightest tremor in the water? And don’t fool yourself into believing that you’d hold down your job on the streets. You won’t.”

“But—”

“—Keep your mouth shut and follow the advice of that penguin in *Madagascar*. ‘Just smile and wave. Smile and wave.’”

#

I wiped the sweat off my forehead as I approached the third floor with my mop. Which I dropped into the yellow pail of hot water waiting for me on the landing.

It was close to the day’s end, but I had to mop two more staircases before my shift ended.

I was exhausted and in many ways. Here I was nearing sixty, running around and doing a job similar to the ones I had as a teenager, and I questioned if I’d ever not be doing it. I questioned if I’d be stuck in this awful place, with all the awfulness surrounding it, for the same forty years as the Hebrews of old. Most of all, I questioned why I was doing it.

Not getting an answer, I wanted to quit. I wanted to toss the mop and the pail and all the hot water down the stairs and run from the building. The town too.

Fear prevented this. Fear of what struck each morning before dawn and what struck all day before I got a job. I feared most the lone cure for it.

I had to keep the job, to keep myself going. I had to do what Matt told me, no matter how much I wanted to do the opposite.

But this didn’t stop me from screaming with Bad Brains and “How Low Can a Punk Get?” on my phone, nor did it stop me from tossing the mop and the pail and all the hot water down the stairs anyway.

#

Work ended, but I had time before the first bus came. *Mucho tiempo*. It’s the single element that homeless people have too much of.

So I took my bagged lunch, along with my self-pity, into the conference room and turned on the light.

I wasn’t alone. Alaya was sitting on the floor in a corner, gaping at her phone with tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I gasped.

Embarrassed, she jumped to her feet and ran through the room and out of it.

I called out her name, but she kept running, and this alone was enough for me to stop feeling sorry for myself.

#

All afternoon I tried to grasp what had happened in the conference room.

It weighed on me through both buses and on the slog to the shelter from the stop. I was in such a fog that I forgot it was Friday.

Only when I stepped into the kitchen was I reminded of it. Rich and his merry band of volunteers were serving dinner, and this made me forget all the rest.

The shelter employed a full-time cook, whose meals were as unpleasant as her. All week I’d wait for Fridays and Saturdays, her days off. On them, Rich and his group would come in and turn the same slop we ate each day into gourmet meals with multiple courses. More important than that was how he’d treat everyone who entered his kitchen as if they were guests at the finest Michelin-starred restaurant. He was so good at what he did that he could’ve worked at any restaurant in Southern California on the weekends and gotten paid well for it. Instead he and the others gifted this time to us.

Faith was what drove this. The one clue that gave it away was that they would play the local Christian rock station on a portable stereo while they worked. They played it at a volume so low that most of us wouldn’t’ve noticed.

I noticed because I was familiar with the station, from a recent stint at Pastor John’s mission in the forests of Lytle Creek, as it was the one station he’d let us listen to. Whenever I got some rest from watering the saplings outside his home from the buckets I’d haul from the creek, or when I got some peace from the Sam Kinison-like screaming of his sermons, the station would torture me by playing the same dozen songs, with the songs repeating the same phrases over and over and over.

But now I didn’t mind it so much.

Rich and I had become friendly, despite all the reasons we shouldn’t have been. Other than a fondness for *Jesus Christ Superstar* that embarrassed us both, we had nothing in common and could agree on less, and we’d often argue over the day’s issues and over plenty of theological ones.

But these arguments were congenial and accompanied by cheer. He was among the many Evangelicals I’d come to love in my years circling oblivion. I loved that pastor too, who took me in when no one would, from my confinement at San Bernardino Community Hospital.

They were the majority of Evangelicals. People who, like the rest of us, weren’t perfect but were good. They were good people trying to make the world the teeniest better, and that’s not bad.

#

After chatting with Rich, I took my meal of spiced tonnarelli and vegetables into the courtyard, to a booth where an old man was eating by himself.

“Mels Sergeiovich,” I said to him while biting my tongue. I had to do this each time I said his first name, as it’s an acronym for “Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin.”

“*Mogu li k vam prisoedinit’sya?”* I added.

Mels motioned toward the seat across from him. “*S udovol’stviyem*.”

I joined Mels, who was another volunteer at the shelter, after being a client of it.

Mels was as different from me as Rich, and not because of where he was from. Each day he wore a different Donald Trump T-shirt. He must’ve had dozens, at least. He had Trump socks too, and I cringed at what he might’ve been wearing under his pants. But I adored him anyway because of how he tolerated my pidgin Russian.

The Russian language is similar to the Czech that I learned from my grandparents. But it’s not similar enough. Most Russians can’t stomach the way I abuse it. But Mels would let me speak to him in it. I guess he had a hankering to converse in his mother tongue. Or could it have been that, with a name like his, he wasn’t that particular?

While he ate, Mels listened to a Vysotsky song on his phone. Vladimir Vysotsky was what you might call a Russian Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen, with a splattering of Lou Reed. The parallels between the four went beyond their style of music or its subject matters. As with those three, Vysotsky was Jewish, and as with them, he may not have had a perfect voice. But it didn’t matter. He sang with a soul that was all you heard.

Mels had told me that Vysotsky’s songs helped him through the gulags in the 1970s. He’d spend his evenings listening to his memories of them while reading the samizdat editions of Isaac Babel’s stories that prisoners would pass between them like fathers to sons.

I could tell what the music meant to Mels when the song that he was listening to that night came to an end. It etched onto his face.

I asked him if he could play “Koni priveredlivye,” and he obliged.

This was Vysotsky’s most famous song. They translate the title into English as either “Fastidious Horses” or “Capricious Horses,” but neither feels right, and I’m not positive that you can translate it right. I can’t. But the title matters not.

The song is about a man driven to his end by forces he’s both feeding and unable to control. “Slow down a little!” he screams at the horses he’s lashing forward. “Slow down!” But they don’t slow. They don’t listen to him at all as they carry him to the abyss.

I’ve loved the song from the first time I heard it. Mikhail Baryshnikov danced to it in the film *White Nights*. Each version I’ve heard since has been different, but none moved me as the one in the courtyard.

I realized the lyrics were about many of us at the shelter. This included both me and Mels. He was crying at the end of it, and I wanted to cry with him, and I might’ve if I’d been capable of any real emotion.

#

I was cleaning the dining hall bathrooms when I ran into Hank.

“Let me guess what you were up to today,” I said.

“Go ahead.”

“You walked to San Francisco and back.”

“Too easy.”

You’d never guess that this scrawny, over-the-hill chain-smoker would be an athletic marvel. He came to the shelter after hiking from Barstow in less than a day, trekking the forty miles through the scorching desert along train tracks with a forty-pound backpack.

When he first told this, I chalked it up as another tall tale, among the many I’d heard from homeless people. Till I went to the mall with him on Labor Day. I was a half mile behind him when he got there. He walked faster than most of us run.

Hank also spent some semesters at MIT, and he had mad carpentry and electrical skills. He was more of an anomaly at the shelter than I was. But I figure that he was another of us who couldn’t keep lashing their horses forward.

#

I turned from Hank, and someone fist-bumped me. His fist swallowed mine.

Brawny with a shaved head and a mustache and *mi vida loco* tats by his eye, Mario was someone who could’ve stared down the Devil. But he was the sweetest guy in the shelter. Not a person there had he not taken under his ample wings when they arrived. He made us all feel safe and welcome.

The two of us would often tease each other, over our shared experiences. Tonight it was his turn.

“Pastor Mike was here for you,” he said to me.

“Yeah?”

“He’s expecting you. All you gotta bring is some knee pads and a toothbrush. The knee pads are optional.”

#

I got in the check-in line before Jerry. I got in it well before him, and I kept checking for him over my shoulder.

Josh was off that night. A new guy named Bob was in his place, and I could feel the lack of stress as we waited. I got Tommy’s letter without hassle, and I took it to the corner booth.

After tearing open the envelope, I remembered that I hadn’t decided how much of Tommy’s journal I would read to Rudi, if any. I couldn’t decide now. While I feared the story and what it could do to both of us, I couldn’t deny that I was eager to discover what was inside it.

So I pulled out the entries and chose to wing it as I plugged in my phone and dialed her number.

“I’m sorry,” she said when she picked up.

“For what?” I asked with feigned ignorance.

“For getting mad.”

“It’s all right. But you shouldn’t be going through this.”

“But you’re gonna tell me it anyway.”

“But I’m gonna tell you it anyway.”

#

On the morning after reading the *Newsweek* article, Tommy felt the same sickness he had the night before. It rose with the tepid skies over his home and dangled above him. He couldn’t shake it off him.

It so overwhelmed him that his fate was no longer foremost on his mind. Or was there at all.

Hate was.

This hadn’t eased when he left his house, but he had no trace of what to do about it.

So he avoided Rudi. He went to school late and didn’t go to lunch, spending the hour hiding in the library.

But he couldn’t avoid her in Calculus class. Before it started, he sat in his usual front-row seat and stared into space as everyone streamed inside.

How would he react when he saw her? Would he scream and curse? Would he demand an explanation?

Neither. She killed a Jew or participated in it. There could be no rationalization of this, no excuse for it. He’d never speak to her. He told himself this twice and repeated it three more times.

The bell rang, and Rudi staggered into the classroom. She was nervous, shaken from what had happened with Deke.

Ignoring this, or pretending to, Tommy kept straight ahead. But this didn’t conceal his disgust.

It surprised her as she dragged herself toward the back wall. With the surprise came another reaction. One that surprised him.

Hurt.

How could you hurt a monster?

All he could say was that he had.

#

Tommy tried a different approach the next day. He acted as if Rudi hadn’t come into his life.

At lunch, he was listening to his friends’ dumb jokes and was telling some. He also tried to feel the slightest emotion toward Darlene as he gazed into her eyes.

A commotion interrupted this, and the two spun toward it.

Rudi had bumped into someone and her tray was on the floor. A tray that was close to empty.

She lifted it and glared at Tommy, with the same hurt as before.

Tommy wasn’t the only one who noticed it. Mirth fell over Darlene as she wrapped her arm around Tommy’s. She wrapped it like a snake.

Tommy turned from them both and himself.

“What is your problem?” Joey bellowed to Rudi from the table’s other end.

She marched off.

“That’s right, keep walking, loser,” Joey called out to her. “Not all of us are scared of you or that sucker punch you threw. I want you to try that with me.”

Rudi continued her marching, but she slowed when Beth staggered past her with her head down.

As she had with Jared days earlier, Rudi recognized some trait in the girl. Only she recognized it.

#

“Many have attacked Leibniz for arguing in *Theodicy* that we live in ‘the best of all possible worlds,’” Tommy’s Western Philosophy teacher told the class from behind his desk, “most famously and brutally Voltaire in *Candide*.”

Tommy heard this, but he wasn’t listening to it. He was going through the same motions he had in all his classes.

“But is this fair?” the teacher went on after rising from his seat. “After all, he wasn’t saying that we live in a perfect world. A man smart enough to discover calculus must’ve seen that it wasn’t. What he was saying is that it’s not possible to imagine a world that’s better than what we’ve got. If you don’t believe him, try conceiving it. I bet you can’t, and it’s because of free will. The one way to improve our world and remove all the suffering and ugliness in it is by eliminating free will. It’s the reason bad happens. But it’s also what brings us good and all the infinite possibilities that come with each next moment. What’s more, if we could eliminate the bad, we’d never appreciate the good or realize how precious each of our finite moments are.”

The teacher returned to his chair, and he stretched out on it. “Along with free will, we have life and all that makes it worth living: poetry and music and art. We have love. And best of all we have Pink Bubblegum Ice Cream at Baskin-Robbins this month.”

Many in class laughed. Tommy didn’t, but he was listening, for real this time. He was also imagining those infinite possibilities. He was imagining one, no matter how impossible it was.

#

Tommy got home late from school. He was so lost that he couldn’t remember driving home.

He came out of it when he stepped through his front door and stopped outside the living room.

His mother had company. An old movie on the TV.

A year earlier, she would’ve never been doing this. But it wasn’t unusual anymore. She’d given up living. Apart from making out her will, all she did these days was listen to Julie London or watch old movies or go shopping. They were the circle of havens where she could escape, to before the summer and from what came after it.

That afternoon her companion was *Miracle on 34th Street*. Having nothing better to do, Tommy leaned against the wall in the hallway and joined them. He joined them as Santa spoke Dutch with the refugee girl, and he continued beside them while the two sang a Christmas song. It was during the latter that his mother cried.

This was more out of character for her. During the whole awful summer that had passed, she didn’t cry. She didn’t when he was doing it all the time. Tommy believed that nothing could get to her, much as that other someone.

But she was as human as her.

#

I was curious about that other someone and what she was doing during this. So I asked her.

“I wasn’t doing,” Rudi insisted.

But I’d learn that this was an exaggeration.

#

Rudi convinced herself that Tommy’s sudden change toward her didn’t matter and that she’d expected it.

But she couldn’t deny the funk she was in and that all her treads had flattened. There was one way of raising them: going to the animal hospital and dropping in on the dog she’d helped rescue.

The dog would brighten her. Visiting her was stepping into a flashlight. Despite all the pain and misery that dog must’ve been feeling, she’d go crazy when Rudi showed up and wouldn’t stop licking her and wagging her tail.

I believe there was more to these visits than this. There was a lot of Rudi in that dog, left at an early age to fend for herself without the means of doing so, and this must’ve drawn her.

“You better be careful,” the vet said to Rudi when she passed her caressing the napping pup on her lap. “You’ll get attached.”

Rudi shook her head. “It’s too late for that. No one’s claimed her?”

“Not yet.”

“How much longer does she have to stay?”

“A few more weeks, a month. Fortunately, that young man, the one you brought her here with, paid for three months of care.”

“He did?”

“He’s pretty nice.”

Rudi didn’t react.

“He’s pretty handsome too.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” she groaned.

“See you tomorrow, Rudi.”

#

Rudi didn’t visit the dog only by herself. On the weekends she’d go with Maria when she volunteered at the hospital.

One afternoon she went with someone other.

While she waited for the bus by the school, Owen came. The two exchanged heys before turning toward the road.

“Where you heading?” he asked.

“The animal hospital.”

“You sick?”

Rudi laughed. She laughed despite herself. “I’m going to see a dog.”

“Yeah, I heard about that.”

“Where you heading?”

“Nowhere. Home, I guess.”

“You wanna come with me?”

#

The dog licked Owen’s hand. She licked it over and over while wagging her tail.

“She likes me,” he muttered while not believing it.

“Dogs can tell when someone’s nice,” Rudi said.

“No one’s ever called me that.”

“I know what that’s like.”

“I bet she wouldn’t be licking me if she knew about my record.”

“She doesn’t seem to care about mine.”

“I guess we have a lot in common, other than that you’re smart.”

“You’re not so dumb.”

“They held me back in fifth grade. Twice.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re dumb.”

“Everyone thinks I’m dumb. My dad thinks it. He wants me to drop out and get a job.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t want to quit, that’s what I want. But it ain’t so simple.”

“Why?”

“I, I don’t read so good.”

“I could help you.”

“You’d do that?”

“Someone helped me. We all need help at times.”

“I wouldn’t’ve believed you ever needed help.”

“You’d be wrong.”

The two glanced into each other’s eyes. They did awhile before Owen shifted his away.

#

Rudi and Owen staggered toward the bus stop. His gaze was in all directions but at her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He wouldn’t tell her. But she wouldn’t stop pressing.

“I saw how Tommy was ignoring you,” he muttered. “I’d never do that.”

This threw Rudi off. So she said nothing and gazed in all directions but at him.

“I’d be good to you,” he went on. “I swear I would.”

She said more nothing.

Owen became embarrassed. “I better go.”

He hurried off.

She called out his name, but he moved faster and with more fright. More than he ever could’ve invoked.

#

Tommy returned to the same loathing he’d felt before meeting Rudi, to all in his sight, most of all himself.

Would he ever feel more?

One day he could. This happened when he was wandering a hallway between classes. Rudi was doing the same, in the direction of Joey, who was arguing with Beth, much as they had of late. But it was louder and more animated than normal, and there was panic on Beth’s face.

That wasn’t all that was there. One of her eyes was swollen.

Tommy wasn’t the only person who spotted it. Rudi reached the pair, and she stared at the girl and at Joey, who growled, “Keep walking, loser.”

That’s what she did. She trudged off as if she didn’t care.

At the same moment, Beth tried to rush off.

But Joey grabbed her arm and raised his at her. “You’re still not listening to me! But you will!”

Rudi came to a halt. After an allusion to a pause, she marched to Joey. “I want you to try that with me.”

Grunting, Joey swung the back of his hand at her.

Rudi ducked, and he hit a locker and screamed in pain. He also let go of Beth, who fled down the hallway. So frantic was she to get away that she ran into Jared as he exited a stairway.

“I’m so sorry,” he called out with his whole body shaking.

She didn’t speak. But she calmed in his gentleness before scurrying off.

Tommy returned to Rudi and to Joey, who cocked his fist back with his face bright red. “Try to miss this one.”

“There won’t be a ‘this one,’” she told him before swinging her leg into his groin, sending him to the floor squealing in pain.

“WHY?” Tommy wrote when describing this in his journal, filling half a page. It made no sense, and it made less when he remembered how Beth had been snickering at Rudi on her first day of school.

But it makes sense to me. Rudi wasn’t doing it for Beth. She was doing it for all the Beths, all the ones who couldn’t fight back, and that included herself.

With a cold stare, Rudi stood over Joey with her hands on her hips as he squirmed on the floor. “It’s not fun when the girl hits back, is it?” she said.

He didn’t answer. He continued to squirm.

“Next time I won’t be so nice,” she went on. “I’ll break your arm.” She said this as if she were saying the weather, and she wandered off like she didn’t care.

But she wasn’t fooling Tommy, and he could no longer fool himself.

#

Tommy parked his bike in the lot the next morning as Rudi approached the school.

He was straddling the seat as she passed him. She passed him without acknowledgment. He wasn’t there.

I suppose this was like that scene from *The Third Man*, when Alida Valli walks past Joseph Cotten, never to lay eyes on him, at that moment or ever.

That was how the movie ended. But Tommy’s story couldn’t end with that kind of perfection, no matter how he wanted it to.

Rudi stepped into school, and Tommy continued straddling his bike. He waited, for what he couldn’t imagine.

Only after the bell for first period rang did he go inside. Not bothering with his locker, he went straight to his first-period computer class.

Outside its open door everyone was punching cards.

Sighing, he stumbled off. He stumbled down the hall and down the stairwell to the second floor, and he stumbled down that corridor, well aware of where he was stumbling to.

He approached Rudi’s classroom and Ms. Krasner’s voice. “I was impressed by some of your poems.”

Tommy hurried to the door.

Rudi was slouching in the back row with her arms crossed while the teacher handed papers to the class.

“Of course, there was some substandard work,” the woman said when she reached Rudi with a frown and one last page.

Rudi lowered her eyes.

“This wasn’t one of those,” the teacher added after setting the poem before her.

With her eyes expanding, Rudi lifted them toward the “A+” on the page’s top.

Krasner pointed at it. “I expected to dislike this. Boy, did I. But, damn you, girl, you gave me no choice. It’s too bad Cummings died before you were born. You’re allied souls. Fellow punks.”

Tommy’s curiosity leaned him forward, and he read the poem’s opening verses.

*so tall*

*but never reaches the floor*

*so sure*

*but cant say*

*what he wants*

Tommy soared beyond curious, and he leaned forward some more to read the rest. He was toppling over.

Twisting herself around, Rudi turned toward him. She turned much as she had the last time he was there. She turned to his shock, and it came over her before she slung the paper behind her back.

The teacher leaned over, to discover what Rudi was gawking at.

“Can I help you?” she growled at Tommy.

He ran off.

“Apparently,” echoed Krasner’s voice through the classroom and into the hall, “Ms. Weiss had some inspiration for her poem.”

#

Rudi broke the narrative. She did with a laugh.

I had to ask. “What’s so funny?”

“That’s not exactly what the teacher said. I kinda remember her saying, ‘Ms. Weiss had some inspiration for her poem. A very cute one.’”

#

Tommy didn’t sleep that night. He tossed himself around while trying to make the words of Rudi’s poem disappear or not matter.

The tossing continued as day broke. He tossed from side to side and down and up.

Why couldn’t a monster write that poem? Were they not capable of beauty?

He remembered the music class that he’d taken years before. The teacher one morning played the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*. They were the most beautiful sounds he ever heard.

But Wagner was a monster. He was a monster in the same way Rudi was.

By the time his alarm clock rang, Tommy had come up with all the excuses he needed to believe that nothing had changed, and he had free will. More than that he had fear.

But he rose to his waist, and he jumped off his bed and into the shower, and he had no doubt why.

#

The garage door opened, exposing a silver Jaguar and a gold Mercedes convertible as well as the Harley parked between them.

This sped onto the driveway with Tommy. It sped down Overhill Road. It sped all the way to Rudi’s house, where Tommy hid behind the old burgundy pickup truck and waited.

While he couldn’t decide what he’d say to her, he was confident words would come. Any had to be better than none.

He didn’t wait much. His bike was warm when she and the FBI agent left the house and meandered toward the blue sedan.

Rudi wasn’t wearing her coat, despite the cold. But what Tommy noticed most was how frightened she was and how she was trying not to show it.

The sedan drove off, and Tommy followed it. He followed it a good distance back. He followed it not to school but down Springfield Avenue, all the way to Downtown Newark.

The car reached the courthouse on Federal Square and turned into a multilevel garage across the street while Tommy continued up the road and parked in a lot on street level and waited a second time. He waited till Rudi and the FBI agent left the garage and crossed the street into the courthouse.

For the next few hours, Tommy waited more, by the courthouse doors.

With the day burning at full might, Rudi exited the building with the FBI agent and a man who had an expensive haircut and a more expensive gray three-piece suit, and they stopped by a set of steps.

“The grand jury should issue an indictment in the next few days,” the man in gray told Rudi. “We’ll bring you back when the trial starts.”

“If I’m alive,” she said without emotion as she marched down the stairs followed by the FBI agent, who smirked at her the whole way to the garage.

#

The blue sedan slowed by Columbia on Valley Road, and Rudi hopped out of it.

She didn’t close the door. Nor did she glance back. She scampered toward the school.

Without coming to a stop, the FBI agent shut the door, and he sped off as Tommy jumped the curb. He jumped it and rode over a patch of grass to the parking lot, where he slipped alongside Rudi.

She glowered at him while expressing the same hurt as before. “What do you want?”

“I’m sorry,” he told her before idling the bike.

She continued toward the school.

“It’s just that,” he called out, “it’s just that I’m Jewish.”

Rudi froze. “What?”

“You’re testifying against Deke, aren’t you?”

Spinning toward Tommy, she clenched her fists and raised them at him. “Have you been following me?”

“Ever since you got here, I was sure . . . I was sure that I was figuring out who you were. But it’s me I’ve been figuring out.”

“And who are you?” she snarled.

Tommy recited her poem. He recited it word for word.

*so tall*

*but never reaches the floor*

*so sure*

*but cant say*

*what he wants*

*every kiss*

*every blush*

*every broken heart*

*i wanna shout him outside in*

*i wanna scream him through the walls*

*i wanna make him see*

*what i see*

*the what i see*

*when i see me*

Tommy rode to her. He rode to both her and her shock. “I’m the guy in the picture you drew.”

She said nothing, and he leaned toward her, shocking her more than his recitation. It scared her too, enough to jump back.

“Or I want to be,” he mumbled.

With a tentative step, she approached him, unsure of herself and of him and as if she’d cry, and she gasped, “You made me feel so . . .”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He struggled to make out his voice.

She took another step toward him, and the two leaned forward as the school bell rang and stopped them both.

“I wanna be anywhere but in class,” she whispered with a shake of her head.

“I’ve got the best anywhere,” he whispered back.

#

Rudi stared into a waterfall, from the rocks she and Tommy were hanging over in the South Mountain Reservation.

“I met Deke in the hospital we were sent to clean up,” she mumbled over the rushing water. “It was forever ago but no more than six months back. He didn’t impress me, but he did give me my name.”

Tommy gaped at her. “What do you mean?”

“I was going by ‘Trudi.’ But he told me that nobody was ever afraid of a ‘Trudi.’”

“What’s your real name?”

“One that makes me chuck. Living was making me chuck. There was nothing going on but drugs, and they were making me chuck. So, after I got out of the hospital, I visited Deke.”

She paused. After lifting her eyes from the water, she glanced at the trees around them. “He was cranking ‘Blank Generation’ by Richard Hell on this gigantic stereo outside his house. He played it over and over. It was so loud that I heard it five blocks away.”

“That was the song you were singing on your first day of school, wasn’t it?” Tommy asked.

“It’s my favorite. Listening to it is the one time I’m not alone. The one time there’s someone out there like me. It’s actually in my bag, the song. It’s the last song on all the tapes I’ve made. That way there’s a good song coming.”

“I like it too.”

It was her turn to gape at him. “You do?”

“That was the one time I heard it, but yeah. It’s crazy, but I swore . . . I swore you were singing about me.”

Rudi returned to the water. “Deke played some Iggy next and X and the Adolescents, and the hook was in. Boy, was it, worse than drugs. It was the first substitute I had for them. In some ways, it was better. It lasted longer and the only after-effects were bruises.

“I’d spend days there listening to records. He had hundreds. He stole them all. He also stole a copy of *The Decline of Western Civilization* and a projector too. We played that movie on his living room wall a jillion times. Some nights we’d run it all night. I can imitate each inflection on Lee Ving’s face when he sings.”

While lowering her head, she added, “The music took over. It made me into someone new. Someone who wasn’t a victim. Someone no one was pushing around and who was never afraid. Someone who could break through the world and breathe a bonfire. More than that, the music got me from each day to the next and to and from each rottenness.”

“It didn’t matter,” Tommy mumbled, “it didn’t matter that Deke was racist?”

“It didn’t,” she growled as she spun toward him. “I could give you a bunch of excuses. My mom raised me on that crap. But I never questioned it, not with her or my stepdad and not with Deke and his friends. I buried my head in myself and pretended that it had nothing to do with me.”

The conversation fell quiet. They both went back to the water while avoiding what they both had to talk about. They kept this going till Tommy blurted out, “What about the kid that got killed?”

Rudi tried to answer. Though she had to close and open her eyes a number of times before she could get the words out. “Deke, he would put on shows in his house with local bands. I was dealing for him at them. A couple of college kids showed up one night, and I sold them some weed. I started talking to one, and we danced. It was nothing, but Deke got jealous. And when he learned they were from a Jewish fraternity . . .”

“He killed him,” Tommy muttered.

“There was violence at these shows. Some people, they hear in the music what’s not there. They hear what they want to hear, not just the violence but the racism. The truth is that it’s the one music that speaks out against it. It speaks out against all isms there are. It shouts it as loud as can be. It shouted it so loud that I heard it. And Richard Hell is Jewish. So is Keith Morris. Ron Reyes is Puerto Rican and Bad Brains are Black. Deke is the one who told me this. But to him and people like him, every song is a call for a race war and a second Holocaust. Every song is about splitting someone’s head open. A couple of times he put people in the hospital. But never did he do this.”

Rudi gasped. She was on the cusp of falling apart, with the pieces tumbling into the ravine. “He had the kid on the floor and wouldn’t stop beating him,” she stammered. “And I did nothing.”

“That’s all you could’ve done,” Tommy insisted.

“I could’ve tried!”

“You are.”

Rudi raged. Smoke was churning from her. “Don’t make me into a hero. I’m cutting a deal, like jillions of other losers.”

“You’re not a loser!”

“Even my mom thought so! She left without saying a word. I wasn’t there.”

“She’s the one who lost.”

Rudi gazed into his eyes. She gazed for many seconds as if she were desperate to believe him.

“That blood you said was on your coat,” he continued, “it was the kid’s, wasn’t it?”

She didn’t answer.

“Wasn’t it?” he repeated. He repeated it louder.

“Everyone ran when they heard the sirens,” she told him. “Deke ran. I wasn’t sure what to do. I tried to stop the bleeding, and that’s when the cops came.”

“You’re not wearing it, your coat.”

“I forgot it. I was so out of it this morning. I didn’t sleep last night. I haven’t slept through the night since it happened. I keep seeing that boy’s face. I relive the same ten minutes, and it ends the same way. No matter what I do, he dies. He dies because of me. Nothing will change this.”

Tommy wanted to respond. He wanted to take her pain. But nothing came. So he uttered the first words that did. “You must be cold.”

She crossed her arms, only now realizing she was cold, and she scowled. “I’m fine.”

He took off his jacket anyway. “I want you to wear mine.”

She kept her arms crossed.

But he wouldn’t relent, and she gave in and let him put the coat on. But she sneered at the corniness of it as she put her hands into the sleeves.

“It looks good on you,” he told her.

“How would you know?”

“Believe me, I know.”

They finished with the jacket, and he reached for her hand. But instead he peered into the forest while recalling how difficult it had been getting her through it.

#

Rudi followed Tommy through the trees while stumbling through branches and tripping over rocks in her laceless Chuck Taylors. She stumbled and tripped till she fell down a mound into some leaves and dirt.

He tried not to laugh. “You all right?”

“If you hadn’t noticed,” she moaned as she rose to her feet and wiped her knees, “I’m not exactly a Campfire Girl.”

#

“I come here often,” Tommy told Rudi after returning to the falls. “This is my favorite place. Some of my earliest memories are of this forest. There used to be a deer paddock on Crest Drive where we parked. When I was a kid, I’d feed them Cracker Jack from my palm.”

“That must’ve done wonders for their teeth,” she cackled before wading in the beauty around her and listening to the peacefulness of it. “You were right, this is the best anywhere.”

Tommy realized there was one better. Any “where” with her in it. But he only wrote this in his journal. What he said was, “The falls help me, they help me forget.”

“I wanna forget. I wanna forget it all.”

“When my dad, when he was dying over the summer, I came here each day.”

#

Tommy stepped into the hospital room, toward the larger-than-life man withering before him.

Slower he moved, over “Two Sleepy People” playing from a tape recorder by the bed.

The man lifted his head. He lifted it through the pain. “I wanted, I wanted to be here for your first time.”

“You’re a bit late for that, Dad,” Tommy uttered.

“I meant the first time you fall in love.”

“What makes you sure I haven’t?”

“I’m sure.”

Tommy couldn’t speak.

“You get one chance to fall in love for the first time,” the man went on. “Don’t let it get past you. It never returns the same.”

#

Back at the waterfall, Rudi was surprised. It came from what Tommy had said about his father.

There wasn’t only surprise on her face. It mixed with a sorrow deeper than what he could imagine, and this surprised him. She kept surprising him, and she continued doing so by wrapping her arm around him.

He did the same to her as she took a deep breath of mountain air and murmured, “This forest, it kinda reminds me . . .”

“What?”

She shook her head. “It’s stupid.”

“Tell me. Please tell me.”

“It reminds me of a fairy tale.”

He gasped, surprised by her some more. “You read fairy tales?”

“I did when I was a kid. The library was the one place I could hide, from my mom and especially my stepdad. I’d spend all afternoon there. I did this before I could read.”

A pinch of merriment came over Rudi as she took a trip back in time. “I kept pestering this old librarian to teach me. She’d sit outside in the garden and play classical records, and I’d pester her. ‘You’ll learn when you start school,’ she kept telling me. But I couldn’t wait, not a fraction of a millisecond, not with no one to read to me. So I pestered and pestered her till she caved.”

Rudi’s merriment rose higher. Higher than the trees. “For a month of afternoons, she taught me. I can remember it all, sitting in the sun on her lap, with all those books and Bach and Pachelbel and Monteverdi all around us. Then I read all the fairy tales they had. I wrote my own, too, and illustrated it.”

“Get out,” Tommy uttered.

“It was stick figures and finger paint and junk like that. But I was so proud of it. I so wanted to believe in it and make it come true.”

“What was it about?”

“Oh, I don’t remember, a girl and a prince and a happily ever after. The usual nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense to me.”

Rudi gauged him. She gauged what he’d said before leaning her head on his shoulder.

This didn’t surprise him. It shocked him. Not the act itself but his reaction to it. Girls had done this to him a jillion times, but never had it meaning, not to them or to him. Nor did it make him feel as good as it had at that moment.

But why had it? Was it because all Rudi did had meaning and that this in itself had meaning?

“I . . .” he mumbled as some raindrops fell onto him. He wanted to tell her, “I want you to be my girl.” He wrote it across a whole page of his journal. He wrote it on many and wanted to do more than say it. He wanted to scream it. He wanted all the living and dead in the forest to hear him, and he could hear the words echo back to him.

*I want you to be my girl*.

But he was afraid. He was afraid of her and of dying and most of all of not fearing either.

The words he said to her were, “You hungry?”

#

Tommy and Rudi sat opposite each other at a booth in a diner called Grunnings, with a pair of Cokes beside them.

The restaurant abutted the reservation, and the window in back provided a view that overlooked the forest. They were gazing through it as an old song played and led them to sway in its direction.

Tables over, an elderly couple were listening to the music from the jukebox at their table.

The song unnerved Tommy, because it was the same that had been playing in the bedroom at the beginning of his story and in his head on the night after meeting Rudi.

But should it have unnerved him? Shouldn’t he have expected it? Shouldn’t he have assumed that the playing of it was as inevitable as the crazy-looking girl across from him?

She swayed back to him. “I’ve heard this song, in a sort of dream I had the night I got here. Though I was kind of awake.”

Tommy became more unnerved. “A dream?”

“Yeah, I was . . .”

“Dancing with someone?”

“How did you . . .”

He didn’t answer.

“Anyway,” she continued while unnerved herself, “I couldn’t remember where I’d heard it before. But I do now. They were playing it at the end of that *Quincy* episode, the one where he went after punk rock. This was his example of the music I should be listening to.”

“I guess you don’t like it much,” he said.

“I didn’t say that. It’s different, old.”

“Like E. E. Cummings?”

Rudi sneered.

“It’s called ‘Moonlight Serenade’ by Glenn Miller,” he explained. “It was a hit back in the thirties. I remember my grandma listening to it on repeat all day in her room on one of those 78 players. When I was a kid, I’d sit outside her door and listen with her, and never did I get tired of it. I hadn’t heard it in years, till my . . .”

“Till your what?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

The song reached its break, and Tommy and Rudi glanced at the couple.

They were kissing.

Returning to Rudi, Tommy mentioned, “My dad told me that, when he first danced with my mom, Julie London was singing ‘Two Sleepy People’ at some nightclub they were at in New York City. It would be their song. The playing of it would remind him of how it struck him at that moment he was in lov . . .”

Tommy froze. He froze in reaction to how Rudi reacted to what he had said or had come close to saying. There was both dread and excitement on her face, and he felt them both and realized their cause was the same. He was in love with the crazy-looking girl across from him. Only now was he aware of it and so was she.

Smidgen by smidgen, he leaned toward her and she to him. They couldn’t stop or slow, and their lips were a breath away.

“Two garden salads,” barked a voice, sending the two jumping back in their seats.

The waitress laid the salads onto the table, along with a heaping dose of skepticism. “That’s all you guys want?”

“That’s all you’ve got without meat,” Tommy muttered.

“Kids today,” the woman groaned while shaking her head and marching off, leaving Tommy and Rudi to laugh.

“They do have fries,” he said.

“No, thanks,” she grumbled as she took a bite of salad.

“So, how’d you become a vegetarian?”

“You’ll laugh at me.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“It was because of *Bambi*.”

“*Bambi?”* he gasped.

“You’re laughing at me,” she growled.

“I’m not. Well, maybe I am.”

“When they shoot his mom and he cries out for her, I felt exactly what he was. It was real personal for me. What about you? How’d you become a vegetarian?”

“One morning I was. It could’ve been those deer I fed Cracker Jack to as a kid. Or it could’ve been *Howard the Duck.* But I never did see *Bambi*.”

#

Tommy paid the bill at the register, and he and Rudi sputtered toward the doors.

“What are you gonna do after you testify?” he asked.

“I’m not sure what I’m gonna do after today. Deke isn’t going away.”

“How’d he learn you were here?”

“That I’m not sure of either. But it isn’t because I’m testifying against him. I told him that I was staying with an uncle, and he believed me.”

“What does he want from you?”

“What he’s wanted since we met.”

The two reached the doors, and Rudi opened one for Tommy.

“Touché, Ms. Weiss,” he joked as the two stepped outside under an awning.

It was raining, and this was getting harder.

“I could call my mom,” he told her. “She could give us a lift.”

With no allusion to a pause, Rudi marched into the falling water and to the Harley, and she straddled the seat. “You said you lived dangerously.”

Beaming, Tommy hustled into the rain, and he jumped onto the bike. With her arms clenched around him, he gunned it from the parking lot and down South Orange Avenue before making a sharp left onto Harding Drive. It was so sharp that the two could’ve kissed the ground.

The bike regained balance, and Rudi screamed. She screamed and swung her legs over him.

“I’m so alive!” she added, and he wanted to shout it with her. Louder than she had.

Instead he peeked into his rearview mirror. She was tilting her head back to catch the falling water. But what he noticed more was her joy. Never had he noticed such joy, including on the girl in the Vermeer painting.

Was it on his face too?

Another truth hit Tommy. He had gotten the bike on the day he’d gotten his driver’s license, but this was the first time he had fun on it.

Did he ever have fun before her?

#

Tommy parked by his house, with the rain petering out along with the fun.

Rudi became quiet, and he discovered why. Discomfort had blanketed her as she gawked at his house.

“I thought Versailles was in France,” she quipped.

“Funny,” he said.

“Seriously, your mom must be the Queen of Navarre.”

“Not approaching close.”

Tommy got off the bike. He got off as an image in his rearview mirror sent his head whipping around.

A car was heading down Overhill Road. A car similar to the red Porsche Deke drove.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he answered, and he wandered toward his house.

She didn’t follow.

He spun toward her and threw up his arms. “Come on.”

She shook her head. “Just take me home. You obviously know where it is.”

“We’ll dry off, then I’ll take you home.”

She sighed. But she followed him into the house and to the cavernous foyer, where she fell into a daze.

This broke when Tommy took a pair of towels from a closet and offered her one.

Dropping her seabag onto the floor, she took the towel and used it to dry herself while Tommy did the same with his towel.

“Mom?” he called out. “Elizabeth?”

There was no response.

“Who’s Elizabeth?” Rudi asked as she handed him her towel.

“You’ll see.”

Rudi rolled her eyes, and she shook off his football jacket and offered it to him.

He didn’t want to take it. But he grabbed it and tossed it and the towels onto the staircase’s handrail.

She gave him one of her dirty looks. “You’re gonna leave them there? A punk wouldn’t do that.”

“Elizabeth will pick ’em up,” he said.

“Elizabeth, of course.”

Spotting a bowl of wrapped white chocolate truffles on an end table, Tommy offered it to Rudi.

She grimaced. “White chocolate?”

“It’s my favorite.”

“It’s disgusting, and it’s not chocolate.”

Tommy took a piece for himself, and he cooed as he ate it.

Rudi grimaced more, and she slung her hands onto her hips. “Can’t you see how ridiculous we are together? We’re barely the same species.”

Tommy grimaced back. “It only appears that way. The truth is that I’ve never met anyone more like me. But you’re already aware of this, aren’t you?”

Rudi searched for a response. Unsuccessful, she climbed the winding wooden staircase.

“Where you going?” he called out.

“I wanna see the rest of this palace.”

He followed her as she sang. She sang another song he’d never heard. But its lyrics about a house and the paper-thin veneer of happiness inside it were too familiar.

How did she do it? How’d she get what he was about better than he got himself?

Nearing the second-floor landing, Rudi halted. She ceased her singing and swung herself toward Tommy. “Some people say that I remind them of her.”

“Who?” he asked.

Rudi tossed up her hands. “Siouxsie. But I remind myself more of Exene. I sound like her too, don’t you think?”

Tommy’s mind churned. It churned awhile. “Susie who?”

Drowning in exasperation, Rudi crossed her arms and frowned. “What music do you listen to? I mean other than Glenn Miller.”

“I, I listen to the Yardbirds.”

“And?”

“Whatever’s on the radio.”

“That’s exactly what I don’t listen to.”

Rudi swung herself back around, and she continued up the staircase followed by Tommy.

On the landing, she came to another stop when she came to a framed autographed photo of Ronald Reagan on the wall, and she snarled at it.

“Now what?” he yelped from behind her.

“What a surprise,” she cried out, “you’re a Republican.”

“My dad knew him.”

“You don’t say?” she gasped with irreverence.

“They weren’t what you’d call friends. Their politics were different. But when my dad died, he called my mom. He spoke to her for twenty minutes, the president of the United States. He could’ve sent a card. No one would’ve blamed him. So, yeah, I’m a Republican.”

Rudi wanted to respond. She opened her mouth to do so. But instead she marched down the second-floor hallway.

“Now where you going?” Tommy yelled after following her.

She didn’t answer, and she reached the door at the hallway’s end and grabbed the doorknob.

Tommy grabbed her arm. “Don’t go in there, my mom wouldn’t like it.”

“*My mom wouldn’t like it*,” she squealed.

Shaking off his arm, Rudi thrust open the door, and she jaunted into a bedroom unlike any she could’ve imagined outside of a fairy tale, with a king-size canopy bed, a crystal chandelier, and many pieces of antique furniture.

She gaped at it all. “Your mom *is* the Queen of Navarre.”

“Can we go now?” he begged.

She wouldn’t. Deeper she stepped into the room, and he went with her.

Coming to an open closet that extended across a wall, she ran her fingers through dozens of dresses as she sauntered from one side of it to the other. “You’d never see me in a dress.”

“Who says I want to?” he snapped.

She paused at the last dress, a white wedding gown wrapped in plastic, and she snickered. “Marriage, what an outdated and sexist . . .”

Her voice faltered, as the dress’ train broke her concentration. There was no end to it. “It’s like the one . . .”

Tommy didn’t let her finish. He slammed the sliding door in her face.

“Now do you get how wrong we are?” she bellowed. “How I’d embarrass you all the time?”

“I’m not embarrassed!” he howled.

“You want to spit in my face.”

“It’s you who’s doing the spitting. What’s gotten into you?”

“This is me. The real me. The me who’s leaving.”

She hesitated but started off.

This was the out that Tommy had been waiting for since Rudi entered his life. His chance to live. All he had to do was to let her walk.

But he took her hand. He took it as she passed, and the incredible happened. She trembled. She trembled from nothing more than his touch. It was a tremble that meant so much that his mind couldn’t process it all. This and the shock on her face gave him the courage to pull her toward him.

She resisted. “Let go of me.”

He didn’t, nor did he stop pulling.

“Don’t you realize how easily I could lay you out on the floor?” she howled. “And you’d stay there!”

Tommy had no doubt of this, but it excited him more, and he pulled harder.

She didn’t stop resisting. Neither was getting anywhere, and they came to an abrupt stop.

With the same abruptness, she sighed.

“You better not hurt me,” she muttered. He struggled to make out her voice.

Throwing off his hand, she jumped into his arms and kissed him while hurling her arms and legs around him. This sent them spinning through the room, knocking into walls. They knocked into furniture too, sending much of it to the floor.

But Tommy was beyond caring. There was nothing but her kiss. It shuddered through him and made him scream. It got so loud that it became deafening, and this drove him into her further. They were thrashing about and were about to smash through a window.

A sound prevented it, of someone clearing their throat.

They broke their kiss and opened their eyes, and they darted them toward the doorway.

Standing there with her arms crossed and a glare on her face was Tommy’s mother.

#

The stars were sparkling that night. Never had they been so bright. They lit up the desert and the courtyard, making both prettier than they were.

Under them, I took my time dropping the final entry onto the table. I could tell Rudi was blushing, and I was enjoying it.

“Wipe that smirk off your face,” she growled.

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

#

I worked on Saturdays. So I needed a bus pass.

But they weren’t in the vault, and Bob couldn’t locate them elsewhere. Which meant that I’d have to try to get one in the morning, with all the hassle that would come with it.

Despite this, I was in a good mood when I traipsed into the men’s quarters, and I wasn’t the only one. Instead of snoring, everyone was laughing as they ragged on Hector. The sound was thunderous as it bounced from wall to wall in the tomb.

Hector was a Mexican-American who yearned to live in Mexico City. He loved the smells that would waft over its streets, the constant weaving of people through the tapestry, and he loved the food. “It tastes better there,” he swore to me.

But Hector wasn’t a Mexican citizen, so the authorities kept sending him back to America. He was only staying at the shelter so that he could save enough money to make another run for the border.

Hector worked at a warehouse down the hill, packing trucks all day. Before I got the job at the motel, he got me some shifts with him. It was soul-grinding work that left you in filth that would take days to remove. But never did this get Hector down. Which came from the dream that would never die.

“*Vato*,” came Mario’s voice from the tomb’s near side, “you must be the only Mexican who ever got deported *from* Mexico.”

Hank added, “You should ask Trump for help. I’m sure he’d pull some strings for you.”

I could tell from Hector’s silhouette that he was trying not to laugh. But he did so anyway. He laughed and laughed and wouldn’t stop.

I laughed too but not at the jokes. I laughed because, for the first time since I’d come to the shelter, I didn’t feel that I was in one. We were a bunch of guys joking around on a Friday night and that felt great.

the fourth night

Saturdays were a working day for me and not much different from the rest. They weren’t much different for anyone at the shelter. Each day could’ve been another or the same.

The one difference on this one, apart from Lynnette’s birthday party that night, was that I had no way of getting to work. I had to wait for the shelter’s assistant director to come in that morning and get me a pass.

While standing at the gates with my silhouette projecting over the alley, splitting it into two, I could tell time was running out to make my first bus when the man’s yellow station wagon roared past me. It whirled left and came within a slither of a wall. There were marks on it from the times it didn’t miss.

Dan staggered from the car and toward me.

He was a hefty man in his fifties and slow in many ways, and he took his time hunting for the passes. But he had no more success than Bob had, and he scowled at me. “Do you really need one right now?”

“I have to be at work in Hesperia,” I said. “I’ll buy a pass if that’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. We’d throw you out if you did that.”

So he gave me the money. But he only gave me $3.50.

“A day pass costs $4.00,” I told him.

He shook his head. “It was $3.50 the last time I bought one.”

“It’s not $3.50 now.”

He didn’t believe me. I had to get out my phone and show him the website for the Victor Valley Transit Authority before he would drop the last pair of quarters onto my palm.

#

Running for the bus didn’t help.

I missed it and got to the motel an hour late. Which meant I’d have to move faster than normal if I wanted to make it back for the party.

Amoun would have me clean the uncommon messes in the rooms so that the cleaning women could get through the common ones before the next guests checked in. Uncommon ones like that blood in 112 earlier in the week. There would be plenty of uncommon ones after a Friday night. In one room I had to mop the walls, where hung a combination of red wine and a substance more solid.

I was finishing when Alaya pushed her cart into the room.

“Hey,” I mumbled to her.

With embarrassment, she scurried into the bathroom. “I’m sorry about yesterday.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

“It’s . . . I read an upsetting article on the Internet yesterday.”

“Yeah?”

“They broke up a trafficking ring in Adelanto the other day.”

She peeked her head through the doorway. “It’s terrible what these women go through.”

It was obvious that she wasn’t speaking about hypothetical women. But it wasn’t obvious what to say about it. We stared at each other for many seconds till she returned to the bathroom.

“There are,” I called out while pretending to work, “there are people you can talk to.”

“About what?” she asked with forced innocence.

Instead of answering, I dropped my mop into the bucket and pushed it to the front door by the bathroom. She was cleaning the sink while trying to keep herself together.

“Don’t look at me like I’m a victim,” she groaned with her eyes locked on the running water. “I hate that.”

“I’m sorry,” I babbled after spinning away.

“Don’t say that either.”

“I . . .”

“You might be wondering how I ended up in this dump.”

“It had crossed my mind. But I’ve wondered it about many people, like me.”

“I wanted to be a doctor. I got good marks in school and was all set to go to the university. I got into King’s College. Exeter too. But my parents, they had other plans. They wanted me to marry this guy twice my age. To keep me out of trouble, they said. Actually, to say ‘they wanted,’ isn’t factual. I didn’t have a choice. Till I saw an ad for au pairs on Craigslist.”

“I can guess the rest.”

“No, you can’t.”

I was silent in response and must’ve had a dumb expression.

She shook her head. “I had this behind me. I’m starting classes at Cal State next month.”

“That’s terrific.”

“But . . . but I don’t have it behind me.”

“You should try—”

“—They don’t help. These people, they’re so far from getting me and what I went through.”

“I have a sister . . .”

“What is she, a counselor?”

“Not exactly. But she helps lots of people. It’s an obsession for her, fixing the world or her piece of it. You should see her house and all the people she’s taken in over the years. It’s because of all she’s been through. She’s not so far from you, and she’d get you.”

“I . . .”

“I could call her.”

Alaya turned toward me as I reached into my pants pocket, and she gasped, “You mean now?”

I didn’t answer. I took out my phone.

“I don’t have time,” she screeched. “I’ve got to finish my rooms before check-in.”

“Talk to her for a few minutes.”

“What’s up?” Rudi spoke into the phone on the first ring.

“You must be busy,” I told her, “but there’s someone I want you to talk to. She could use some help.”

“Put her on.”

I offered the phone to Alaya, but she wouldn’t take it.

“Please,” I whispered.

With excess unease she snatched it, and she spoke with Rudi while I hurried from the room with my mop and bucket and closed the door behind myself.

Which Alaya opened before peeking her head into the hallway. “What about your phone?”

“I’ll get it from you later.”

#

I left the motel after my shift and was crossing Cataba Road to the bus stop when Alaya yelled my name.

She ran toward me with my phone in her hand and the happiness back on her face.

I felt it too, more than I would’ve imagined.

We hugged. We hugged awhile.

“Your sister is amazing,” she uttered.

“Believe me, I know,” I uttered back as we broke our embrace and she handed me the phone.

“It was like talking to my older sister. Better. Rudi and I are doing a Zoom tomorrow morning with someone she knows. Someone . . . someone who’s like me. She runs a support group in LA, and Rudi says that I can participate remotely.”

“It’s gonna work out for you.”

“How can I thank you?”

“Get well. It could inspire me to do the same.”

“One day I could be the one giving help.”

“Life is a series of cycles constantly renewing themselves.”

I set off.

“She’s worried about you,” Alaya called out. “Your sister.”

“She’s not the only one,” I said.

“I told her that I’d keep an eye on you. Or two.”

“I appreciate that.”

#

I got curious about the trafficking ring Alaya had mentioned. So I took out my phone on the bus and searched for the story, and I discovered a few on local news sites.

The police had arrested two men in Old Adelanto, a miserable place one town over that made Victorville Paradise. They believed the men had an accomplice, but other than that there wasn’t much information. Though one site did say that both men had served in the army together a handful of years earlier.

#

With the day slipping past the horizon, I entered the shelter gates and came upon the birthday decorations Nicole had managed to get her hands on.

I came upon Nicole too. She rambled toward me with a combination of frantic and frustrated.

“Have you seen Josh?” she cried out.

I started to answer, but Matt called my name and drew me away.

“There’s a letter for you in the office,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Have you seen Josh?” Nicole shrieked.

“No,” I told her.

“There’s no Josh. So there’s no cake. And there’s no birthday party without a cake. Lynnette and her mom will be here in an hour.”

“We have time to buy one.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” groaned Matt with his arms crossed and his head shaking.

Nicole pointed down the street. “Stater Brothers has this cake for twenty bucks and that includes decorating it.”

“We can all chip in,” I said.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Matt groaned a second time, with his head shaking as before.

“They can’t throw us all out.”

“They can’t?”

Ignoring this, Nicole and I went around the courtyard and collected money in stealth mode.

I was surprised that most gave. Some gave all the change they had in their pockets—all many had—for a girl most weren’t aware of.

Sharon, who worked there on weekends, also gave when she figured out what we were up to. She gave despite how it could’ve gotten her fired.

Matt gave as well, in spite of himself, and I threw in my five dollars, hoping it would make me less paranoid about losing it.

We raised more money than we needed, enough to buy some extras and a gift for Lynnette.

Hector sped me to the supermarket in his car. We got the cake and had it decorated, and we returned with it, a box of candles, snacks and soda, and a teddy bear.

Nicole grabbed the cake from me, and she tossed ten candles onto it.

“They’re coming!” someone howled from the gates.

Nicole lit the candles. Another someone turned off the lights. Which they flipped on when Lynnette and her mother entered the gates to a chorus of “Happy Birthday to You.”

None of us could forget the shock and joy on that girl’s face, including her mother, who was combating her tears. So was Nicole, whose mind must’ve been on her own kids.

With a fervor leaping from her, Lynnette blew out the candles. She blew them out as a normal ten year old. A normal girl celebrating a birthday and made to feel that she was special and mattered and loved.

We, too, were normal people attending a birthday party. The party was as much for us as for Lynnette, and that could’ve been why everyone gave. We needed it as much as she did, if not more.

#

Josh showed up, with no cake.

But he was surprised to see one. He was more surprised than Lynnette and her mother had been.

Nicole marched to him with her fists clenched. “Where were you?”

“I got stuck on the 395. Some police action.”

This piqued my attention, as the road went through Old Adelanto. But what piqued it more was when I recalled that Josh had been in the army, much as the two men the cops had arrested.

Of course, it could’ve been a coincidence. But could it have been more?

#

For the second night in a row, I got ahead of Jerry in the check-in line and well ahead of him.

After I stepped into the office, Josh handed me the letter that had been waiting for me on the desk. But he didn’t let go of it. “How did you guys get the cake?”

I stuttered as I tried to answer. “I . . . I had some money on an old EBT card. We’re allowed to use that, right?”

He didn’t answer. But he released the envelope, and I took off.

“I’m gonna be watching you,” he called out.

“*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?”* I shot back, in my Jersey-accented Latin.

“What’s that?”

“It’s from a poem by Juvenal.”

What I didn’t tell him was what it meant.

*Who watches the watchers?*

There was only one person who could.

#

I hustled into the courtyard with Tommy’s letter as the party was ending. Lynnette and a few other kids were finishing the banana split sundaes Rich had made for them, from ice cream he’d conjured.

While dipping my toes into the beauty of this, I took Tommy’s letter to the corner booth and called Rudi.

Unlike the previous nights, it rang many times, as this set of entries would be among the story’s more difficult parts.

On the fifth ring, she picked up.

Without any small talk, I opened the envelope and read her the pages.

#

It took Tommy time to grasp what was happening. That he was against a window in his mother’s bedroom, with Rudi wrapped around him and his mother glaring at them both.

Outside the rain had eased to an end, and the falling sun was projecting onto his mother, baking her in shadow and light and making her glare sharper.

Releasing his arms from Rudi, Tommy spun toward the woman, sending Rudi crashing to the floor with a thump.

“Sorry about this, Mom,” he said as Rudi jumped to her feet.

The woman continued her glare. “It’s fortunate for all of us that I didn’t arrive about ten minutes later.”

“It’s not like that, Mom,” he insisted as he and Rudi trudged toward her as if through a swamp. “Really.”

Closer the two got to his mother and her disgust. Disgust of Rudi. She didn’t bother to hide it as the pair reached her.

Leering at the two, the woman examined them down and up and all around, and she got more upset. “Did you two come from the shower?”

“It’s not like that, Mom,” Tommy screeched. “The rain caught us. Sorta.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” the woman grumbled through her clenched teeth.

“This is Rudi, my . . .”

“I’m his friend,” Rudi blurted out. “Sorta.”

“Will your friend be staying for dinner?” Mrs. Goodwin asked Tommy.

“Yes,” he answered at the same time Rudi answered, “No,” and now the glare was on her face.

“By all means stay for dinner, Rudi,” the woman uttered with her jaw back to its clenched position and the disgust back on her face. “I’m dying to learn more about you.”

#

Tommy and Rudi were sprawling out over the living-room couch, with Rudi overanxious. “She hates me. And if I were her, I’d hate me too.”

“It’s that you remind her of someone,” Tommy said. “Someone close.”

“Wait till she learns about my record and all the drugs I’ve done. Which is just about every one, by the way.”

“I don’t care about the past. I . . . I don’t care about the future either. All I care about is now.”

“Some of us can’t separate our past from our now. Or our future.”

“Listen—”

“—And she’ll be overjoyed when she learns about the kid that got killed.”

“I don’t care.”

“Take me home.”

“Right after dinner.”

“Maria said that she lives near you.”

“Down the block.”

Rudi jumped to her feet. “Point me in her direction.”

“Stay. Please stay.”

Rudi sighed, and she fell back onto the couch.

Tommy lifted a remote off the coffee table. “How about some TV?”

Crossing her arms, she spun from him. “I hate TV.”

Tommy turned it on anyway and flipped through the channels. He came upon some football highlights, and he gave Rudi an inquisitive glance.

She twisted her face. “I hate football and all pursuits that involve large groups of people who act alike. Which I define as any group larger than one.”

Tommy returned to the screen, and he kept flipping. He reached MTV and a Van Halen video, and he gave her another inquisitive glance.

This time she scowled. She didn’t utter a word.

He continued flipping, and he found a UHF station, where a peculiar man in a checkered suit and fedora was telling a more peculiar puppet that Squeeze would be performing later in the show.

With her eyes agog, Rudi uncrossed her arms and shifted herself toward the TV. “I hate all TV but this.”

“What’s that?” Tommy asked with his attention on the screen.

“You’re telling me that you watch *Uncle Floyd?”*

He didn’t answer, and she returned her gaze to the irreverent comedy show that few were aware existed. I’m not sure Floyd was.

Out of nowhere, Rudi and Tommy laughed. They laughed at the same stupid joke, sending them facing each other.

“It means nothing,” she insisted.

“Dinner’s ready!” Mrs. Goodwin called out from the dining room.

#

Tommy and Rudi took their seats across from Mrs. Goodwin, by a table setting that Rudi gazed at with confusion and wary. “Why are there four plates?”

“We usually don’t eat so formally,” Tommy grumbled while glaring at his mother.

“It’s a nice change,” the woman said.

Tommy continued his glare, realizing his mother was trying to make Rudi feel out of place and that it was working.

“It’s real simple,” he told Rudi, “the first plate is the charger—”

“—The what?”

“It’s for show.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then comes the dinner plate, the salad plate, and the soup bowl. The plate off to the side is for bread.”

“Why can’t I use the same plate?” Rudi bellowed. “Is it some kind of crime?”

Mrs. Goodwin laughed and did so with condescension. “You eat however way you want, my dear.”

Rudi fumed. She kept this up until the kitchen doors swung open and Elizabeth marched into the room and served them from a tray of parsley soup.

This serving made Rudi uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as she had been outside the house, and she tried to hide it under another quip. “Now I know where they got the idea for *Upstairs, Downstairs*.”

Elizabeth and Tommy smirked. But it wasn’t so funny to Mrs. Goodwin, who glowered at no one in particular. “Thank you, Elizabeth.”

The humor left Elizabeth’s face, and she shuffled off with her silver tray.

Rudi stared at her soup. She stared with nervous eyes.

“I should warn you, Rudi,” Mrs. Goodwin remarked, “my son’s been on a fad of late. Which I’ve regrettably humored.”

“What do you mean?” Rudi asked after she lifted her eyes from the bowl.

“He doesn’t eat meat.”

“Rudi’s a vegetarian too,” Tommy said.

“How convenient,” the woman yelped.

Clenching her fists, Rudi plopped them onto the table. “I’ve been a vegetarian since I was fourteen.”

“I’m sure you have, dear.”

Rudi got angrier than before. But noticing Tommy sip his soup, she calmed herself and took her own sip, and surprise overcame her. “This is good. It sure beats stale fries.”

Tommy didn’t respond. All he did was peek at Rudi.

She took another sip, this one larger, and she slurped it, drawing the notice of Mrs. Goodwin.

The woman turned toward her son as she tried to maintain her composure. “Tell me, Tommy, wherever did you two meet?”

“Rudi’s in my math class.”

The woman gaped at him. “Aren’t you taking AP Calculus?”

“She’s the smartest one there. She might be the smartest person in school.”

“That’s not true,” Rudi insisted.

“What did you get on your SAT?”

“I forget.”

“I bet. I bet it was perfect.”

“You’d lose that bet. They cheated me out of a few points.”

Mrs. Goodwin tried not to let this win her over. But her face betrayed her, and Tommy couldn’t hold back his excitement. “You should’ve been there when she solved this partial fraction decomposition integration. She solved it like addition. Even Mrs. Elkind was impressed. And Rudi wrote ‘Q.E.D.’ beside it.”

“Quite easily done,” exclaimed Mrs. Goodwin.

“Actually,” Rudi countered, “it means—”

“—*Quod erat demonstrandum*,” the woman interrupted.

“My mom was Phi Beta Kappa at Radcliffe,” Tommy mentioned. “The other night she was telling me how she saw E. E. Cummings in person at school.”

“Really?” Rudi mumbled.

Mrs. Goodwin shook her head. “That was many years ago, Tommy.”

“He was giving what he called a ‘nonlecture’ at Harvard,” Tommy continued. “As he stepped toward the lectern, she and some other girls hopped up and recited . . . what was the poem of his you recited?”

The woman sighed. “‘Buffalo Bill ’s.’”

“And what did he do?”

The woman sighed a second time. “He stopped and turned to us and let us finish, and then he took out his handkerchief and waved it. I was certain he’d cry. The world for decades had forgotten him, and here were these silly coeds treating him like a rock star. Which he was.”

“Wow,” was all Rudi could say.

“Rudi wrote a poem in his style for one of her classes,” Tommy blurted out.

Spinning toward him, Rudi raised her fist. “Don’t you dare recite it.”

“Well, Rudi,” commented Mrs. Goodwin, “you certainly are a Renaissance woman, calculus and modernist poetry. If only the school offered a beauty class.”

Unlike with the woman’s other barbs, Rudi had no retort. Her sole reaction was to recoil.

“*Mom*,” Tommy snarled under his breath.

“Do you actually pay someone to do that to your hair?” the woman went on.

“Didn’t you tell me that you were a beatnik?”

“That was completely different.”

“How? Are you saying that people didn’t prejudge you? That they didn’t look down on you because of how you dressed and acted?”

“We had ideas!” Mrs. Goodwin howled as she rose in her chair and shook her wrists. “We weren’t painting our faces and running around like idiots!”

Rudi slammed her fists onto the table. “That’s not what we’re doing! We’re expressing who we are and how we feel. And either you can’t get this or can’t handle it. And probably both.”

The woman had no response. So she changed the subject. “I didn’t catch your last name, Rudi.”

“Weiss,” Rudi barked.

Mrs. Goodwin gaped at her. She gaped more than she had at her son. “You’re Jewish?”

“Wwwhat?” Rudi stammered, more shocked than the woman. “‘Weiss’ is German, isn’t it? It means ‘white.’”

“It’s also a common Jewish name.”

“I have heard you say, ‘*oy vey*,’ Tommy interjected. “More than once.”

Rudi spun toward him. “That’s Jewish?”

“It’s Yiddish,” Mrs. Goodwin explained.

“You think I could be Jewish?” Rudi mumbled to Tommy, with horror over her face.

“Are you ashamed of it?” grumbled Mrs. Goodwin.

Rudi turned from them both, with her horror increasing. “Not in the way you imagine.”

Silence followed. A good amount of it. It kept on till Mrs. Goodwin told Tommy, “You’ll never guess who I ran into this afternoon at the Short Hills Mall . . . Darlene. So beautiful, so . . .”

Gazing at Rudi, the woman added, “So unlike any other.”

Rudi lowered her eyes and her spoon. She also crossed both her arms and legs.

Tommy would’ve never guessed that Rudi would’ve been the type to be self-conscious of her looks or insecure about them. But his mother’s current line of attack was hurting her more than the others. Doubt was rising over her.

“That’s enough,” he growled at the woman.

“I’m telling it as it is,” Mrs. Goodwin shot back. “I bet Rudi can tell too.”

“As I said before, I’m sorry about what happened this afternoon. But it doesn’t give you the right to treat Rudi this way. I won’t have it.”

“Darlene was telling me how she got into Penn. Swarthmore too. Of course, she’s waiting for you to decide.”

“She shouldn’t.”

“And why is that?”

“Darlene’s gorgeous, there’s no question about that. She’s smart too. She can be funny at times. But I can barely stand the sound of her voice. I cringe when she touches me.”

“Well, you weren’t cringing this afternoon.”

Tommy was about to respond when Rudi lifted her eyes. She lifted them while trying to keep her emotions from flying out. “Listen, Mrs. Goodwin, despite what you saw earlier and despite what Tommy thinks he feels, there’s nothing serious going on between us.”

“Nothing but Glenn Miller,” groaned Tommy.

“Glenn Miller?” his mother gasped.

“But that’s nothing serious. It’s not as if we feel the same or dream the same or that we laugh at the same dumb jokes or that any incredible happens when I take her hand.”

To disprove this, to disprove it to Rudi and himself, he put his hand on hers, and she trembled. She trembled as she had in his mother’s bedroom.

Frightened, Rudi yanked her hand away as she reached her breaking point. “Next week, Tommy, next week you’ll move on to someone new.”

“That’s not true.”

“I’m some exotic flavor you’ve never tasted.”

It was Tommy’s turn to slam his fists onto the table. “That’s not true!”

“Look at me, Tommy,” she babbled with her eyes away from both him and herself. “Really look. Not at my hair or at my clothes but at who I am. I’m not gonna end up with some preppy football player Republican. And I’m not gonna end up at Penn or Swarthmore either. We all know that I’m not gonna end up anywhere!”

Rudi jumped to her feet, and she rushed from the room as Tommy jumped to his own feet.

“Let her go,” his mother said.

“Shut up!” he yelled as he ran after Rudi.

“She’s not for you!”

“Her eyelids’ flutter tells me you’re wrong!”

Tommy approached the foyer as Rudi flung her seabag over her shoulder. On the verge of tears, she swung open the door and ran out.

He followed. He ran outside as she reached the street, and he called out her name.

“Leave me alone!” she shrieked. “I was doing just fine until I met you, and now . . .”

“Rudi . . .”

She spun toward him and threw her arms at him. “What can you possibly . . .”

“It’s the other way around.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I’m good looking . . . and rich. I made All-State last year, and I could go to any college I want. Yet all I see is how boring I am. And slighter than paper. But if you see more, there could be more.”

Rudi lingered for a moment before rushing off. She rushed into the night with him staring at her, unable to move or express the words he wanted to say. The same ones he had wanted to say to her by the waterfall and didn’t because of the same fear he was having now.

#

I didn’t have to ask Rudi what happened after she left Tommy’s house.

Hearing the pause on the line after I finished the entry, she must’ve expected the question, because she started telling me.

#

Rudi wandered through Newstead, getting nowhere but more upset, at herself.

If sex had been clouding her mind, she could’ve written off what she was feeling. But it wasn’t. Nor was it Tommy but his hand and how she wanted to hold it. There could be no reasoning for this. There was no way to rationalize it.

As she often did when troubled, she reached for her music. However, the one negative facet of punk rock is that there are no love songs. None at all. Few songs broach the subject. But she had one with her: “Love Und Romance” by the Slits. The most cynical song ever written about the feelings swirling around her.

This was what she wanted to hear or was what she told herself. So she threw the tape into her Walkman and reached the song, and she cranked the volume all the way while screaming with Ari Up. She screamed with her for what could’ve been hours while rewinding the song each time it finished, and she rewound it so many times that she was able to press the rewind button to the song’s beginning in one go.

But no matter how she screamed or how often she listened to the song, she couldn’t regain her old self. This was when it hit her that she’d gotten herself cooked, that she was “head over heels in love,” no matter how stupid it sounded, and there was nothing more she could do about it but cry. Which hadn’t happened in so many years that she couldn’t remember when it had last. What was crazier was that she couldn’t figure out why she was crying or whether she was crying because she was happy or sad.

She stopped in the road. She stopped to wipe her eyes, as an old woman walked an old dog across the intersection ahead, and she ran to her.

The woman took a full step back, for the obvious reason. But the tears in Rudi’s eyes must’ve ushered another instinct, a much less malevolent one.

“Are you all right, sweetheart?” she asked.

“I’m lost,” Rudi answered while realizing the words had infinite meanings.

“Where are you trying to go?”

“A friend of mine lives nearby. Her name is Maria Gonzales.”

“Oh, I know the Gonzaleses. What a nice family. They live on Overhill Road up the way. You can’t miss it. It’s a yellow house with a lovely Nativity scene in the yard.”

“Thank you!” Rudi cried out, and she lunged forward to hug the woman.

But she stopped herself and rushed off, I bet with the woman trying to make sense from the enigma that had been in front of her.

#

Rudi rang the doorbell a third time.

There was no response, and she doubted whether Maria or anyone was home despite all the lights in the house.

The door slithered open, and there was Maria, with her jaw open but nothing coming out.

“Can I come in?” Rudi pleaded.

Maria swung herself around, toward a voice coming from inside the kitchen.

Right away, she swung back to Rudi, and she grabbed her arm. “You’re lucky my dad’s on the phone. Quick.”

This was how they snuck up the stairs and into Maria’s bedroom, where Maria locked the door.

After grabbing a flashlight from a bureau drawer, she flipped it on before she flicked off the room’s light and collapsed onto the floor with Rudi, who told her all that had happened since her happening with Tommy outside the school.

Maria couldn’t contain her glee and didn’t try. “He’s in love with you. You should be happy, just about every girl in school is crazy about him.”

Shaking her head, Rudi turned away. “Not me.”

“‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks.’”

Rudi peeked at Maria. “Nobody gets that quote right. You must love Shakespeare.”

“I actually wrote a modern teenage version of *All’s Well That Ends Well* for the Drama Club last spring.”

“*All’s Well That Ends Well?* Isn’t that the one where the woman tricks her husband into sleeping with her by pretending to be someone else?”

“I kinda glossed over that part when I described it to my dad.”

“And you wrote a modern version of it? That’s awesome.”

“The teacher said that I should become a playwright. But it’s crazy.”

“Why?”

“How many women playwrights have you read?”

“Lillian Hellman, Lorraine Hansberry, Sophie Treadwell. There are tons.”

“I’ve never heard of those people.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“Don’t change the subject,” Maria insisted.

“There is no subject,” Rudi insisted back.

“There is from where I’m sitting.”

“You need glasses.”

“It’s you who needs them.”

“How could I be in love with him?” Rudi screeched. “He’s a Republican!”

For a second time, Maria couldn’t contain her glee and didn’t try. “I’m no expert, but I don’t suppose you get to choose.”

“You say that you’re no expert, but you sure sound as if you’re speaking from experience.”

Maria became embarrassed.

“I get that your dad is strict,” Rudi went on, “but you must be hot for someone.”

Maria blushed. But she wouldn’t add to it.

“Come on, spill it,” demanded Rudi.

Maria kept up her reluctance. But Rudi kept prodding, and she relented. “There is this someone.”

“Yeah?”

“We notice each other and stuff.”

“What’s his name?”

Maria became more reluctant. But Rudi wouldn’t let up, and Maria gave in. “Terry.”

“Terry? Is that the guy . . .”

“Terry . . . Louise.”

Moments of silence followed, many uncomfortable ones, and Maria shut off the flashlight.

“Why’d you turn off the light?” Rudi asked.

“You must hate me,” Maria answered.

“Why would I hate you?”

“Because I’m a . . .”

Rudi grabbed the flashlight, and she flipped it on and shined it onto her face. “I think it’s cool.”

“You do?” gasped Maria.

“It takes courage to be different.”

“That’s my problem.”

“What is?”

“I don’t have courage.”

“Have you talked to this, this Terry Louise?”

“God, no.”

“Why not?”

“My dad would kill me. He’d kill me if I talked to boys.”

“Are you gonna live your whole life for your dad? Are you gonna marry some guy and have babies just to make him happy?”

Maria said nothing.

“‘To thine own self be true!’” Rudi hollered.

“Sshhh!” Maria yelped. “My dad would freak out if he caught you here.”

“Tomorrow you’re gonna march right up to Terry, whether it’s in the hallway or wherever it is you two do your noticing, and you’re gonna say hello.”

“No way.”

“Either you talk to her or I won’t talk to you. I won’t be friends with a coward.”

#

With a glint of a glimmer peeping through his window, as what passed for the morning crept through the looming squall, Tommy sat on his bed much as he had all night, with his head on his knees and his arms around his legs.

*Leave me alone!*

For the jillionth time, Rudi’s words screamed at him. The ones that had given him another out. A better one than before. All he had to do to avoid his fate and fulfill the replay of his life was to do what she wanted and stay away from her.

But he had no more success at convincing himself of this than he had the last time he tried or at any other time.

So he got off his bed. Without showering, he threw on a white tee and some 501s, and he slipped into a pair of Docksides and his football jacket before speeding from his house on his bike in the sputtering rain. He sped all the way to Rudi’s house and didn’t bother hiding behind the old burgundy pickup truck. He parked in front and waited. He waited and waited.

No one left the house, nor was there an indication that anyone was inside, and the blue sedan wasn’t anywhere.

He checked his watch. With school about to begin and the rain falling harder, he sped to Columbia.

At the red light at the corner of Valley and Parker, he glanced around.

Rudi and Maria were walking through the parking lot toward the school. Rudi wasn’t wearing her coat, and she had on the same clothes as the day before.

Deke’s Porsche raced into the school’s lot from Parker. It ground to a halt by the two girls, and they halted with it as its window rolled down.

Fear shrouded Rudi’s face, and it replicated on Maria’s.

The light turned green. But instead of driving down Parker, Tommy made a U-turn in front of a bus, sending it to a jolting stop, and he jumped the curb and rode over the grass to the lot. Though he kept his distance from the Porsche, idling well behind it. No matter how much he wanted to be brave, he couldn’t be.

Rudi’s head fell. It fell like a boulder into a chasm, and it stayed there as she made her way around the car to the passenger door. Which she stepped through despite the pleas of Maria, who was yelling at her and thrashing her arms.

The Porsche bolted forward. It bolted from the lot and down Parker, but Tommy didn’t follow. He was more afraid than ever.

Maria turned to him, with her frantic jacked up. “Aren’t you going after her?”

He didn’t respond.

“You stupid idiot!” she howled with her face reddened. “She went with him because of you!”

Tommy sought to make these words matter. He sought to get him to move. He clenched his eyes and strove himself forward. But he couldn’t go anywhere.

*You get one chance to fall in love for the first time. Don’t let it get past you*.

The words of his father echoed, but they couldn’t make him move either.

A pair of footsteps opened his eyes, and he turned toward them.

Owen rushed to him from the bus stop. He was gasping for breath and scowling at him. He scowled with an expression that said, *if she were my girl, I would’ve already saved her*.

Tommy gunned the bike. He gunned it and followed the Porsche. He followed it to Route 22, a highway that bisected the state’s width.

On the edge of Newark, Deke swung onto the lot of a seedy motel and parked by a room in the pouring rain while Tommy pulled up nearby.

Deke leapt from the Porsche, and he strutted to the other side, where Rudi was getting out with less urgency and a face that was fighting to project apathy and failing at it.

Snickering, Deke grabbed her arm, and he pulled her outside and slammed the door, and he dragged her forward.

Tommy kept quiet. It was his last chance to do so. He was certain of it.

The two were steps from the door, and Tommy couldn’t hold himself back. He called out her name, and she and Deke froze before spinning toward him with fury.

“What are you doing here?” she hollered.

“What are you?” he hollered back.

Deke lunged toward Tommy. But Rudi stopped him with her arm, and she spoke to him under her breath. “You promised.”

“What’s going on?” Tommy shouted.

“How dumb can you be?” she barked. “I’m walking into a motel room with another guy. Can’t you see I’m trash?”

Tommy wanted to believe this. But he shook his head and yelled, “That’s not ‘the what i see’!”

“Go home!”

Tommy didn’t.

Deke opened his jacket, exposing the gun in his waistband. “Listen to her, man. Unless you wanna end up like that other kike.”

“Let’s just do this,” Rudi screeched at Deke, and she grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and dragged him back.

“Sure thing, babe.”

The two reached the door. Deke unlocked and opened it, and the two entered.

“I want you to be my girl!” Tommy screamed.

Deke reacted by pausing a few paces into the room, but Rudi continued inside as if she didn’t hear or care.

“I want you to be my girl!” Tommy screamed another time. He screamed it as loud as he could.

With his face burning, Deke turned to Tommy, and he gestured toward the highway. “Take off while you can.”

Deke slammed the door in front of himself and locked it, with Tommy gazing into it while wallowing in his fear.

*Take off while you can*.

The words sounded familiar to Tommy. He supposed Deke must’ve said them. But he recalled that it had been someone other, and he turned around.

Behind him to his right was the blue sedan and the FBI agent inside it, who was sitting in the driver’s seat with the window open and sneering at him.

A lamp crashing to the floor sent Tommy’s head hurling toward the room.

“You’re not getting off that easy!” Deke yelled. “You can’t believe I’d let you testify!”

“I’m not!” Rudi yelled back.

“That’s right you’re not!”

The two fought, followed by one slamming onto the floor.

“I guess you forgot who taught you!” Deke shrieked. “I taught you it all! I made you a man, better than a man! And all you wanna do is screw Jews!”

Tommy got off his bike, and he lurched ahead. But he stopped himself.

“There’s nothing you can do!” he squealed. “He’d kill you!”

The fighting continued, and Rudi cried out. No longer did she sound so tough. She sounded more like a frightened child, the one who’d been hiding under her toughness, desperate for a way out.

Tommy spun to the sedan and the man inside it. “Aren’t you gonna help her?”

The man added to his sneer. His contempt had runneth over. “All in good time, young man. All in good time.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“Backup. You can’t expect me to confront a dangerous armed suspect without backup, can you?”

It all became clear to Tommy, as clear as the makeup on Rudi’s face. It was the FBI who told Deke where Rudi was and what she was about to do. They had no intention of having her testify. She was an addict with a record. She was unreliable. But the man in the car, he’d be the perfect witness to murder. The perfect means toward a conviction, and that was all that mattered.

Rudi screamed for help, and Tommy drifted toward her. He did while recognizing that he didn’t have a choice in what he did and didn’t and never had. Free will was nothing but a joke. If given a jillion replays of his life, he’d make the same choice each time.

He’d choose her.

He rushed at the door and was about to slam into it.

#

There was silence after I finished reading the entry.

There was silence on the line and silence in the courtyard and silence in the alley and on Armargosa Road past it. All life had switched off, and this went on and on.

With a moth floating below the sputtering light above me, I was at a loss as to what to say to Rudi. I could tell she was crying. It didn’t matter that I couldn’t hear it.

“Call me tomorrow,” she mumbled with her voice less than a whisper.

“Tomorrow’s Sunday, there’s no mail.”

“Call me anyway.”

She was about to hang up, but I couldn’t let her go. “I never told you how I came into this story.”

“You never did.”

#

I woke one morning to another me. A me both different and the same.

It happened before dawn, with the sole source of light coming from the street lamp over my room.

Grandpa had screamed.

This wasn’t unusual. He’d often scream at this time, from the nightmares that followed him from the pits of Verdun and from worse ones in the war that came after it.

But this scream hadn’t come from my grandparents’ bedroom. The two were arguing in the kitchen below my room.

I listened to them, unaware of how this would change my life, before rising to my waist and grasping that they were yelling in German.

This was unusual. They spoke English at most times while often breaking into Czech, a language associated with wonderful memories for them both. German, though, was associated only with terror despite it their native tongue. It was a terror that hung over our family, waiting to swoop down and devour it at any chance it got. The lone exception the two had for speaking the language was when they didn’t want me to follow what they were saying.

Yet I picked up a few words that Grandma said as she pleaded with Grandpa. “She, she’s a Nazi. Like her . . .”

Grandpa said nothing. There was quiet. This kept up till the kitchen door swung open and the screen door beyond it shrieked forward.

With his faltering steps, Grandpa shuffled outside to the house’s side wall, where he lifted and closed the garbage can’s metal lid. The echo of its clanking emptied into the skies as he shuffled back into the house.

I was drowning in my own curiosity. So I tossed on some clothes and stumbled from my room, and I snuck down the stairs and out the front door.

With daylight tiptoeing across our neighborhood, spreading a shimmer across the lawns and the road, I made my way to the garbage can and opened it.

A crumpled page from a newspaper was on top.

I yanked it out and uncrumpled it. It was from the *Star Ledger* and the headline read: “Drug Dealer Shot Dead in Newark Motel Room.”

Underneath it were the mugshots of two people. The first was the dead man while the second was a punked-out teenage girl who otherwise was the same as me.

I was staring into a funhouse mirror. I wasn’t a normal teenager in the early 1980s, with my wild curly brown hair and scruffy face, but I was the cover of *Tiger Beat* in comparison to her.

Feeling sudden coldness, I tried reading the story. But I couldn’t make out the text. So I snuck back into the house with the paper and rushed up the stairs and onto my bed, where I gazed into the article.

What grabbed me right off was that the circumstances of what had happened were unclear. All that was clear was that an unnamed minor had broken into the motel room where Deke Cox and Gertrud Weiss had been fighting and that Deke attacked the boy, who lost so much blood that the doctors couldn’t say if he’d live.

But what grabbed me more than this was that Deke and Gertrud were skinheads, with criminal records and ties to neo-Nazis, and that both were involved in the killing of a Jewish Rutgers student that fall.

All this couldn’t sink in. That I could have a twin living within driving distance of me was incredible enough but that she was a skinhead and a murderer of Jews was too much. I had spent years trying to forget a near-identical evil. My instinct was to rip the paper apart and try some more.

But my curiosity had me drowning some more. So I reread the article. I read it many times, and I realized what it hadn’t said could’ve been as important as what it had. There was no mention of who killed Deke or what had happened to the girl who had to be my sister. The one clue they gave was that she and the boy went to a high school in the area. But I’d learn that this wasn’t much of a clue, after I ran downstairs into my grandparents’ library.

Some suburban families build pools while others build gardens or game rooms. Mine built a library. It was mammoth, with interconnected rooms and more books than at my high school library. It had some rare books as well, such as a French edition of Gogol’s *Dead Souls* that a young Marc Chagall had illustrated, whose imagery would haunt many of my childhood nights. My adult ones too.

The library included a bookcase of all telephone directories in New Jersey. I snatched the one for Essex County and those for the adjoining ones.

While browsing through them, I discovered there were dozens of high schools within an hour’s drive from the motel, spread out everywhere. Locating her appeared an impossible task, till I recalled that I was the grandson of a man who had made such quests ordinary.

I left the library, and I pushed myself through the kitchen doors.

My grandparents were beside the white porcelain table that’d been there as far as my memories went. The two weren’t trying to eat their breakfast as they gazed into nowhere.

“Hey,” I uttered as I stood before them while quaking.

Neither spoke. They didn’t notice I was there.

“Grandpa,” I went on, “remember how I was telling you that I’m taking a film class at school?”

“*Cože?”* he muttered. He muttered it while stuck in his daze before gulping down an entire cup of piping hot coffee.

For years now, Grandpa had been suffering from a form of dementia. It was one that fluctuated. Often he’d be lucid and at other periods he’d be in another place and time. It was like his past and present were fighting it out in his head. There were also periods as this, where it was difficult to tell which was winning.

“For my class project,” I told him while hoping for the best, “I’ve decided to make a documentary on New Jersey. I’m gonna need your car in the afternoons for a while.”

It took some time, but he spun toward me. “*Jistě*. *Surely*. Just remember to bring it home on Fridays before service.”

“Yes, Grandpa.”

“It would not hurt if you joined me.”

“Yes, Grandpa.”

“The rabbi is forever asking about you. The cantor too. It is time.”

I walked off, feeling guilty about lying to him. But I justified it by telling myself that he would’ve done the same.

#

Each weekday afternoon, I cut last class and drove to a different high school and two if they were close. I showed my sister’s picture from the newspaper to students and teachers and anyone who’d walk by.

But no one recognized her, despite it having been a story for days on the local TV news.

I can’t say how many times I convinced myself to give up, but it was a lot. It wasn’t only the search’s futility but my doubts as to what I’d say to her if I found her. More than that I feared how it would dredge up what had derailed me and could derail me more.

Was I doing my best not to find her? So that I’d have a convenient excuse for not facing her and the past?

I can’t answer this, but I kept getting into Grandpa’s well-rusted Matador each day, and I kept searching.

#

I reached a dead end.

I’d been to all high schools in the area and to some outside it and was no closer to my sister than when I’d begun. I had no choice but to give up.

“How is that documentary of yours coming?” Grandpa asked one night during dinner.

“Everywhere is the same.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everywhere in New Jersey is the same.”

“You are not looking well enough. There are gems everywhere in the state. There are gems in Newark. Especially there.”

“Hillside too,” Grandma interjected. “Some of my favorite homes are in Hillside. Of course, they cannot compare to my old villa in Vinohrady. But nothing can.”

Grandpa agreed. “Hillside is a perfect example. Who would expect to see such lovely homes on the border of Newark and Elizabeth?”

“Hillside?” I muttered. “Isn’t that where Pingry is?”

“Exactly my point,” he said while pointing at me. “You would never believe that the most prestigious private school in the state would be in Hillside. But there it is.”

It struck me that I hadn’t checked private schools. I must’ve assumed that a girl like my sister must’ve gone to a public one.

#

The next afternoon I drove to Hillside and the leafy campus of Pingry, where rich kids from all over northern New Jersey went.

Years earlier, half my sixth-grade class went there instead of to the local junior high. Which I guess had more to do with the school’s racial makeup than its academics. When I parked, a guy that I had been friends with jumped into an Alfa and drove off. Both would’ve gotten themselves lost in the snow.

As I had at the other places I’d been, I asked everyone I passed about the girl in the picture, despite feeling less hopeful than normal. So I was not surprised when they all shook their heads.

I decided to leave and to forget about my sister for good. But as I approached Grandpa’s car, I came upon three boys, and I showed them the photo anyway.

“Isn’t she the one who shot that drug dealer?” one asked, a skinny kid with short and frizzy sandy hair and light blue eyes and a wardrobe out of *GQ*.

“How do you know she shot him?” I asked back, having never discovered who fired the gun.

“There are rumors.”

“I guess she doesn’t go here.”

“She goes to Columbia. A friend of mine was telling me about her. He goes there.”

I shook my head. “I checked Columbia a few weeks ago. Nobody knew her.”

“It doesn’t surprise me.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are rumors,” he said as he and the others rambled off.

“What rumors?” I growled.

“I’m not saying,” he uttered, and I could tell that he was sneering.

#

I came home from school, and I grabbed Grandpa’s car keys off the bureau by the dining room table, and I headed out.

This time I had a reason to believe that I was heading somewhere or could hope I was. But was it to a good place?

I sauntered toward our house’s front door, passing Grandpa, who was asleep on the living-room couch by the TV, much as he’d been doing in the afternoon for years.

He’d been retired since before I came to live with him and Grandma when I was a child, and he didn’t have much to do during the day, as Grandma worked. She was a decade younger than him and the director of our local YM-YWHA. So he was often alone. Along with this he’d run out of steam or any place to use what he had, and I’d question if this was the cause of his stupors.

Glancing at him that day as I crept by, I wished he could’ve been with me. I wished I could’ve given him some purpose, and I could’ve used his help.

With climbing unease, I left the house, and I drove twenty minutes to Maplewood.

As I’d done before, I parked on Valley Road by a diner called Ralph’s, and I crossed the street as kids streamed from the school and meandered through the parking lot, and I showed the photograph to everyone I passed.

They all shook their heads while not glimpsing at the newspaper clipping or me. They were avoiding both. They’d been doing this the last time I’d been there, but only now did I pick it up.

Not far from the school doors, I approached two girls. One was mousy and conservative while the other was lanky and redheaded.

The mousy one slowed and her eyes broadened before stopping steps from me.

“Are you her brother?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I muttered.

She took the final steps and wrapped her arms around me, more than shocking me, and she whispered, “I’m Maria, Rudi’s best friend.”

“Rudi?” I uttered before realizing that no teenage girl in America would call herself “Gertrud.”

Maria released her arms, and the two of us gazed at each other.

“You’re her best friend?” I stammered while trying to corroborate the girl in the photo with the one in front of me.

“She didn’t tell me that she had a brother.”

“Probably no one told her either. Where is she?”

“She calls me every few days from a pay phone, but she won’t tell me where she is. I’m really worried.”

“What about the boy?”

“The boy?”

“The one who got beaten up in that motel room.”

“Tommy Goodwin. He’s at St. Barnabas. That’s a hospital in Livingston, off South Orange Avenue.”

“He hasn’t left the hospital?”

“I’ve no idea what’s wrong with him.”

#

“I’ve heard the rest,” Rudi interrupted as the moth escaped the light above me and dashed toward another in the distance. Along with it, a car horn blared down the road, breaking the silence around me.

“You haven’t heard all of it,” I insisted. “Me neither.”

“It’ll have to wait till tomorrow. I have to get up early.”

“I don’t work tomorrow, so I can call you earlier.”

“Call me anytime after noon, my time.”

#

Because I wasn’t working the next day, I didn’t need a bus pass from Josh.

But I had no choice but to notice him when I went to bed. He was standing by the door to the women’s quarters. He was gazing at them as they slept. He gazed the way a wolf does at its prey, with his eyes sparkling with delight.

*Who watches the watchers?*

I didn’t sleep much that night. But it wasn’t because of snoring that was louder than normal. Nor was it because of waves of darkness and demons that never came.

While staring at the ceiling, I tried to figure out what I should do about Josh. I tried and tried.

the fifth night

I surprised Josh when I volunteered to do the house laundry on Sunday morning. But I did it each Sunday.

While it was the worst chore at the shelter, washing all the towels and bedding from the previous day and hanging them on the clotheslines behind the dining hall before collecting and folding them when they were dry, it had one perk. I got to wash my own laundry before the others who’d signed up for it that day.

I showered that morning and brought the laundry cart through the dorm. Its wheels jangled and jingled over the floor and fell with a high-pitched *booommmm* when I pushed the cart over a step and onto the courtyard.

Standing before me was an old balding man, who was grousing to Sharon with his eyes squinting from the shine above.

Patrick was the most loved person at the shelter, a veteran who saw action in Vietnam. But he didn’t care to talk about that. Instead he would regale us with stories from the set of *Road House* and the role he played in it as a drunk at the bar. A role he was too qualified to play.

His flash of fame came during a brawl scene when he laughs at someone’s whopping before another someone whops him. It lasted a handful of seconds, but these would repeat themselves in him forever.

“I’m not one to complain,” he said to Sharon.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I woke this morning covered in urine.”

“You what?”

“Theo, the guy in the bunk above me, he doesn’t want to go to the bathroom during the night. So he uses plastic bottles, those two-liter Coke bottles. This morning one broke all over me.”

“I’ll handle it,” she told him as she hurried off with a grimace.

I tried not to smirk at Patrick. But I failed.

He smirked back and raised his hands. “When it rains, it pours!”

#

With the shine bearing down on me in the courtyard, I waited for two loads of wash to finish.

A few booths down sat Billy and Jennifer, who were drinking coffee after finishing their breakfast.

It wasn’t easy for couples at the shelter. Married ones like them had it the worst. They couldn’t hold hands much less have marital relations. For that they had to seek secluded places outside the shelter. An unwritten list of these they passed between them, along with a creative set of euphemisms, with new places added and others removed when circumstances warranted it.

Billy and Jennifer were a few years younger than me, but they could’ve been teenagers by the way they were ogling each other that morning. They managed to stay in love despite their troubles. It might’ve been what kept them facing forward.

“How’s your car?” I asked Billy when he noticed me.

“I’m praying for another week,” he said while crossing all his fingers and his thumbs, “till payday, so I can get a new starter.”

“They’ll let you buy one?”

“We’ll be gone. That’s where the rest of the paycheck will go, for the deposit of our new apartment.”

#

I brought a basket of laundry outside, as Josh strutted from the shelter at the end of his shift. He strutted as if he owned it and us.

*Who watches the watchers?*

The words crawled back into my head, and they wouldn’t crawl out. I couldn’t shoo them away.

They remained well after I hung up the towels and bedding, and they got me to take out my plastic phone. I stared at it while trying to decide whether to cross the digital Rubicon and give in to a side of me that I couldn’t hide from, including in a homeless shelter.

With an extended sigh, I launched Tor and did some browsing. I learned that the FBI provided access to their criminal database through an API that lets programmers use this data in their applications. The agency, of course, protected access to the sensitive information the API exposed. They did through keys, strings of numbers and letters that authenticate requests and are unbreakable.

But this system of protection isn’t infallible. Despite means of securing API keys, programmers are often lazy and include them in their code. So I searched the web for one in public code repositories.

There wasn’t any. Which meant that, if I wanted to learn more about Josh, I’d have to search private repositories and that wouldn’t be legal.

This gave me pause but not enough.

Could prison be worse than this?

The leading sites for private repositories were GitHub and GitLab. As the latter geared itself more toward software development and because government agencies and contractors often used it, I tried it first.

On their website, they disclosed vulnerabilities that they’d discovered over the years. One allowed attackers to inject commands when importing files from GitHub. While they’d fixed this, I found another instance in the same codebase where I could perform a similar injection.

After installing a terminal app on my phone, turning it into a low-end computer, I used the injection to spawn a reverse shell. With it I searched the repositories, and I located a key in one.

The rest should’ve been easy. All I had to do was write a pair of simple Python scripts that employed the key to access the FBI’s database. The first would’ve located Josh in it and the second would’ve taken the information from the first to list out his record.

But I hadn’t programmed in years. I had many bugs in my simple scripts, and I had many troubles getting them out.

#

While staring into my phone, a throat cleared.

Jerry was sitting at the corner booth in his sweatshirt and cap, with a puppy-dog expression and his manila folders spread across the table.

His belief that the CIA director was stalking him wasn’t the craziest conspiracy theory I’d heard from homeless people. Not a person I’ve met on the streets has been without a theory, and often they have lots. I guess it’s easier to believe that someone has loaded the dice than to blame the one rolling them.

Needing a break from my scripts, I indulged him. I sat with him at the booth and sought his stalker.

“Are you having a happy Chanukah?” he asked.

“Who told you I was Jewish?” I asked back.

“I hear stuff.”

With some unease, I returned to his stalker. All this required was some simple web searches. I got the man’s address and phone number and where he worked as well as his picture.

I showed it all to Jerry. “Your typical middle-aged ambulance chaser.”

This brought him cheer. He was splashing in it. “The perfect cover.”

I was about to respond when Mitchell, the gangly guy who slept in the bunk below mine, marched to us in a Palm Springs Pride T-shirt. With a sneer, he held his hand out to Jerry. “My phone.”

With his bashful eyes, Jerry reached into his sweatshirt pocket and pulled out a plastic device similar to my own. “I couldn’t help myself.”

Mitchell grabbed it and growled, “I bet you’re the one stealing everyone’s money in the shower.”

“I’m not a thief. I’m a kleptomaniac. There’s a difference.”

“And that is?”

“I may take your wallet, but I’d never steal your money.”

Mitchell stormed off.

“Besides,” Jerry added, “they stole my money too.”

Mitchell didn’t respond. He took his phone to a booth down the way, and he listened to “Enter Sandman.”

Jerry found this amusing. “I never knew Black guys listen to Metallica.”

Mitchell glowered at him. “Black guys invented rock ’n’ roll, not to mention blues, hip-hop, R&B, soul, reggae, jazz . . .”

“What about disco?”

“Don’t lay that one on us. It was you who were listening to it.”

“You also invented hardcore punk,” I interjected.

“We did?”

I waved him over, and I played a video of a pair of Bad Brains’ concerts at CBGB from the early eighties, as a surge of punks of all hues and tones slammed into each other in front of H.R. (and at times on top of him), creating a thunderous mosaic while unaware that Jerry would one day regard this as unusual.

#

Returning to my scripts, I figured out how to traverse the JSON objects that the FBI’s API returned, and Josh’s record spewed out on my phone’s terminal.

Or the lack of it.

There was nothing. Not a lapsed parking ticket. I was so convinced that this had to have been a mistake that I triple-checked my code and the results from it. But there were no mistakes.

Undeterred, I searched for a connection between Josh and the two men that the cops had arrested.

There wasn’t any, and the few articles about Josh were positive. He volunteered to help teens in crisis and people with disabilities. He had a wife and two kids and was vice-chairman of his local PTA. He had a dog too. One of those fluffy ones. He was as perfect as you could get. Way more perfect than me.

So I begged myself to forget about him and those women, to do no more than “smile and wave,” as Matt put it.

But I couldn’t make myself forget. The trying of it did the opposite, and the most frustrating part of it was that a week earlier this wouldn’t have been true.

#

Mitchell, Jerry, and I weren’t the only ones in the shelter engaged in an eighties flashback that day.

After finishing my own laundry, I returned to the courtyard. Nicole, Allison, and a few others were playing Trivial Pursuit, a special edition of it that focused on the decade I’d come of age.

It took a few minutes to feel old, when none had an answer to the vegetable-themed doll craze that swept the nation or what had inspired the songs “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” and “We Are the World.” The 1980s were as disconnected from them as the 1880s were from me. But it got me recalling my own experiences during that time, and I stretched out over a quiet booth and called Rudi.

“You wanna hear how I met Tommy?” I asked.

“I told you, I’ve already heard this,” she grumbled.

“Not all of it.”

#

In the reception area of St. Barnabas, one that was blinding white, I asked for Tommy’s room.

“He’s in the Isolation Ward,” a man told me after checking the patient directory. He, too, was in white.

“Isolation?” I mumbled.

“It’s for isolating infectious or possibly infectious patients.”

#

I approached Tommy’s room, passing signs on the doors leading to his that warned about the dangers of being there.

I wasn’t scared. I guess I felt the same immortality many young people feel.

Or was I more scared of a different fate?

I got within sight of his room, with my sneakers squeaking on the shiny white floor.

“What’s the contamination level?” one doctor whispered to another as I went by them.

“That is the question,” the other whispered back. “It’s impossible to say how much of the blood supply this has affected. We can’t test for it.”

“So we should expect more of these cases.”

“‘Expect’ is too mild.”

Hearing labored breathing and coughing, I stopped at an open door.

On the bed was a boy my age. He showed the effects from the beating he’d taken as he scribbled in a notebook with a glumness that pervaded each stroke. He could’ve been making out his will.

I disliked Tommy despite this. He was the type of guy I disliked and often hated. He was perfect in each way, despite his appearance. Or because of it. If this was how he was, beaten and unshowered and unshaven, I could only imagine what he was before.

To me, Tommy was the type of guy who never had a bad day. A type so different from me. But at that moment he wasn’t as different from me as I wanted to believe.

I tapped on his door. Though it sounded more like a knock. It sounded as if I’d pounded my fist on it.

This startled Tommy. But I startled him more. He expressed the same shock that Maria had. “You, you’re her . . .”

“Yeah,” I said. “Can you tell me where she is?”

His response was a series of coughs. Loud, hacking coughs. He followed them with returning to his scribbling.

I couldn’t decide what to do.

On a bureau across the room was a pen and one of those yellow sticky pads, and I stepped toward it. “I’ll leave my name and number.”

“Keep your distance from me,” he bellowed while continuing to write.

I jotted down my information. “Tell her, please tell her that I want to talk to her.”

He didn’t say a word.

I started out, as a nurse entered the room. She had on a mask and rubber gloves and was pushing a medical cart toward Tommy. But what stood out more was her fright. She could’ve been approaching her death.

#

I strode from the elevator on the hospital’s ground floor, and I proceeded through the whiteness.

This was when I first came upon her, my sister. She had flopped herself upon an easy chair in the distance. She appeared as if she hadn’t slept in months, with her arms crossed and the same face as in the mugshot, apart from the black streaks that had run down her cheeks.

Recognizing that she hadn’t spotted me, I had the urge to run. I eyed the exits and hurried toward them.

But I didn’t get there. I stopped and searched for the courage to face her and discover the truth about her and to face my own another time through.

It took time for this courage to show, and there wasn’t much of it. But there was enough to stagger toward her.

To be honest, “stagger” isn’t the right word. “Inched” wouldn’t describe it either. It must’ve taken five minutes before I was close enough for her to notice me.

While she recognized my resemblance, it didn’t surprise her. It angered her.

“Hi,” I mumbled in front of her, after unable to come up with better words, despite having practiced them from when I’d learned about her. “I think I’m . . .”

“My brother,” she growled as she wiped her face, making it worse.

“I . . .”

“What do you want?” she growled next.

“What do I want?” I uttered while feeling my own anger rising. “Out of nowhere, I learn I have a twin and that she might be a Nazi or a neo-Nazi and . . .”

“And a murderer?”

“I . . .”

“You can see that it’s all true. So you can go back to your little life and forget about me, in the same way I’m gonna forget about you. I’ll forget about you the second you slink away.”

I couldn’t breathe. I gasped for air and stumbled toward the exits without saying more. I kept stumbling through the automatic doors, and I keeled over outside them.

#

I needed a break from my story.

While stretching my legs in the courtyard, I asked Rudi what she’d been doing between the night at the motel and the day I met her in the hospital.

She couldn’t tell me much, because she couldn’t remember much. One of her few vivid memories was of a dream.

#

Rudi woke in a hospital bed. Her pain was so bad that she screamed and cursed.

No one came. So she stumbled off the bed and into the hallway, where she became awash in her loneliness. There was no one anywhere.

She wandered down the corridor and reached a supply closet. Feeling worse pain, she flung open its door.

Inside was a glass cabinet filled with pill bottles. It wouldn’t open, so she smashed the glass with her fist, and she grabbed a bottle at random and tore off its top.

It was empty. So she chucked it onto the floor and grabbed another. But it, too, was empty, as was the next and the one after that. They were all empty, and she screamed and cursed more than before, and she shook her bloody fist, with her pain and loneliness worse.

Returning to the hallway, she hurried through it and all the empty rooms. She passed hundreds before she came to Tommy’s. He was lying in a bed beaten but happy as Darlene held his hand from a chair by the bed and the two gazed into each other’s eyes.

Happy and gazing, too, was Mrs. Goodwin, who was doing so at the two from a chair by the door.

Rudi called out Tommy’s name, but he wouldn’t answer. He wouldn’t acknowledge her.

Frantic, she hollered and yelled. She hit him as well. But he wouldn’t react. It was as if she weren’t there.

#

Rudi woke, for real.

As in her dream, she was in pain from the beating she’d taken, and she screamed and cursed as she had in it.

“Rudi?” whispered a voice from her right.

Maria was in the chair beside her bed, with an expression much as she had when she met her but for a different reason.

Rudi turned from her, and she rolled herself into a ball. “What are you doing here?”

“The next time you’re in trouble . . . you might want to tell your best friend.”

Overcome with emotion, Rudi spun toward the girl and hugged her. She hugged her with all she had.

Remembering Tommy, she released her arms and asked about him.

“He’s in another ward,” Maria said. “I went to see him, but he wasn’t awake.”

“I gotta go to him,” Rudi yelped before falling from the bed onto the floor.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Maria told her as she helped her up. “Not for a while.”

“How is he? How’s Tommy?”

Maria shook her head.

#

Rudi lingered in bed for days, strung out on the drugs the hospital had given her and her mind on a septuple of words.

*I want you to be my girl*.

Weeks earlier, these would’ve been the most ridiculous ones she ever heard. Now they were the only ones.

It was more than the words that clutched her. Or how Tommy had screamed them to her from outside the motel room. It was how she had wanted to run into his arms when she heard them. She wanted, in that fraction of an instant, to give it all up to him, to never more belong to herself.

She didn’t because she wasn’t in that room for herself. She told me that ignoring him was her first selfless act ever.

*I want you to be my girl*.

The words dragged her out of bed, and they sent her searching for Tommy. She stumbled through the hospital corridors with them echoing in her head.

*I want you to be my girl*.

But when she got to his room, other words replaced them.

“Leave me alone!” he screamed in between coughs, and he wouldn’t let her get anywhere near him. Nor would he glance at her when she came to his door.

Soon after that he was gone. For a reason no one would explain, the hospital transferred him to a different one.

Realizing her nightmare had come true, she left the hospital. She left despite far from all right.

This was when it all went blurry, as most pill bottles she’d encounter weren’t so empty.

In the pieces and bits she could recall, she staggered through streets and hallways or crawled across floors, with both sets of Tommy’s words fighting it out in her head. Along with this she fought the worthlessness she’d battled since her mother had left and her compulsion toward self-destruction. Both were propelling her nowhere.

One day she came to a library. Recalling the safety that another had provided when she was a child, she went inside, where she stole a paperback copy of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. She couldn’t say why she had, as she had read it years earlier.

Night after night, she clutched the book, with the words on its tattered cover pushing her toward the words she wanted to believe. The words she had no choice but to believe. They pushed her all the way to Tommy’s new hospital.

He wouldn’t talk to her or glance at her any more there, and she flopped herself onto an easy chair in the waiting room. What she was waiting for she couldn’t imagine. But it was the one “where” left to go.

I wasn’t the first who found her there. Tommy’s doctor had, and he told her what Tommy had.

It had caused the streaks on her face.

#

I was leaning against a wall by the entrance of St. Barnabas as it got dark.

I couldn’t make myself leave. But I also couldn’t face Rudi.

The automatic doors opened, and there she was, with her hands on her hips.

I tried to speak. “How, how’d you . . .”

“This is where I’d be.”

She leaned against the wall next to me. With both of us facing forward, we stood in silence for God knows how long.

It was Rudi who broke it. “When I was a kid, I stumbled upon a picture of us when we were babies. You couldn’t tell us apart.”

“You can now.”

We both laughed. We laughed for God knows how long.

“I don’t remember you at all,” I muttered with my head shaking.

“Me neither. They must’ve split us up soon after that picture.”

“But why?”

“I suppose my stepdad had no use for a boy.”

I shuddered. From the time I could remember, I believed that I had it bad. But I’d been wrong.

“What about . . .” I whispered while trying to figure out what to ask next. “What about our dad? All Grandpa could tell me about him was that his last name was Cohen.”

Rudi shook her head. “That’s more than Mom told me. It’s more than I would’ve imagined she could’ve.”

“And where is she?”

“That I couldn’t tell you either. And that’s the one ‘that’ I’m grateful for.”

“I guess she was pretty messed up.”

“You can say that.”

“She’d been through a lot.”

“She wasn’t the only one.”

“She was born in Prague,” I said. I said it with unease, and not because I was about to defend a woman that no one could. It came from stepping back into my nightmare.

For many seconds, I struggled to get more words out. I had to shove them across my tongue. “After the war, they deported her and her Czech mother to Germany because her dead father had been, he’d been a Nazi. An SS officer.”

When Grandpa told me this, when he told me that he wasn’t my grandpa, it hurled me into a tailspin of guilt and shame that I’d never escape. Rudi was as shocked as I’d been. But she tried not to show it when she spun toward me and gaped. “The apple doesn’t rot far from the tree.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m just like him.”

“You’re not. Neither of us.”

“I thought I was Jewish. I wanted to believe I was.”

“You are Jewish. We both are. It’s complicated. My grandparents . . . I mean our grandparents, they adopted our mother.”

“What happened to her mom?”

“They were staying at a resettlement camp in Nordhausen. While the Czechs had hated them because they considered them German, the Germans hated them because they didn’t. Some people in the camp, they killed her mother. They killed her in front of her and came close to killing her. Grandma says that she couldn’t make it through a night without pills.

“Try to remember that, try to remember it the next time you hate her. That’s what I do.”

Rudi shook her head. “I don’t get it. If her father had been a Nazi, why would Jews adopt her?”

“It’s hard to explain. Grandpa had met her mom before he left Prague, and she reminded him of his late first wife. But there was more to it than that. Grandma couldn’t have children, and Grandpa didn’t have any either. Then this chance came for them both. I suppose they also wanted to see our mother as some kind of Ruth.”

“Ruth?”

“From the Bible. She wasn’t Jewish but was married to one. When he died, instead of returning to her people, she joined her mother-in-law and became a Jew. She’d later become the great-grandmother of King David.”

“But our mom was the child of a Nazi. How could they adopt her?”

“I guess they were trying to fix the world or their piece of it. It sounds corny, but it’s part of who we are as a people.”

“It’s not corny to me. But they failed. They failed badly.”

“Could be. But I wouldn’t be here if they hadn’t tried. Nor would you. So I guess we’ll have to wait on that one.”

Rudi said nothing.

“I saw Tommy earlier,” I told her.

“He won’t see me.”

“Why?”

“This is all my fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“None of this would’ve happened if I hadn’t shown up here . . . if he hadn’t lov . . .”

“So you two . . .”

She didn’t answer.

“Is he gonna be okay?” I said.

“He’s got some form of pneumonia that’s been going around, and they’re having a difficult time treating it.”

“Was that why he was in isolation and why his nurse was wearing a mask and gloves and was so terrified?”

“She’s an idiot, that woman. His doctor doesn’t wear that crap around him. He’s not terrified.”

“I learned about what had happened, from the newspaper and TV. But they didn’t say much.”

“This guy Deke was beating me. Actually, he was killing me. He didn’t because Tommy broke into the motel room.”

With her head shaking, she added, “I don’t get why he did. He had no chance against Deke. He had to know that. So why would he do it?”

“The alternative, it could’ve been worse.”

“Tommy surprised Deke. He picked him up and threw him into a wall. He threw him through the plaster.

“I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe that anyone would do that for me.

“I tried to get up. But I couldn’t get off the floor, and Tommy leaned over me. He was crying. He was crying more than I was. That’s when Deke jumped him. He was beating him worse than me. I wanted to help, but I couldn’t.

“Deke’s gun was on the floor. And I reached for it. It was just out of my . . . and Tommy, he wasn’t gonna last.

“I leapt for it, and I grabbed it, and, and I shot him.”

“Are you in trouble for that?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? If I’d been anyone but me, they would’ve given me a medal.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m not the one in a hospital bed.”

“What about, what about the other boy?”

“What other boy?”

“The one who got killed a few months back.”

“Are you asking me if I killed him?”

“I’m not sure what I’m asking.”

She got angry, as angry as before. “And if I told you that I killed him?”

I peered into her eyes. I sunk myself into them. “I wouldn’t believe it.”

She spun from me.

“Where you staying?” I said.

“Around.”

“Grandpa and Grandma would—”

“—I want nothing from them.”

“They had no idea you existed. They would’ve never left you like that.”

Rudi didn’t react, not at all.

I had so many questions left, but I couldn’t form any. So I pushed myself off the wall. “Can I come back?”

“I’m here all the time.”

#

I visited Rudi at the hospital a lot.

It was slow at first. Some days no more than a few words passed between us. But we loosened up after a while.

I told her about my “little life” and our grandparents. I told her about Grandpa and me. I told her how he’d crank Smetana’s “Vltava” on our stereo when I was sad as a kid and how he’d perform scenes from it to pick me up. I told her how he’d come up with some nifty Meister Eckhart saying for all the important moments in my life. I told her, too, how he’d come up with a way to forgive me for all that I’d put him through. I told her how no one could’ve been more my grandpa.

Rudi told me about her life as well, and I learned how alike we were despite how unalike we’d grown up. I expected us to have the same birthday and similar aptitudes, and I loved punk rock much as she did, but we had surprising similarities. Such as the books we’d read. This included unusual ones like Miguel de Unamuno’s *Mist* and Kōbō Abe’s *The Woman in the Dunes*. Though I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised, as both books were about people who only believed they controlled their fate, and I can imagine how this would’ve appealed to both of us.

Rudi and I were also different in many ways, and more than in how we dressed or wore our hair. She had a strength I didn’t. It wasn’t her physical prowess. That’s not strength. Any coward can hit someone. Her strength came from her ability to charge ahead no matter what was in her path, as she was doing with Tommy. At the same time, there was a warmth under her strength. A warmth beyond what I could give. Her smile would forever be unexpected, but it would come and light up all that was around her.

So, regardless of her flaws, I’d view her as a perfected me. The me I wanted to be but never could or would.

#

One afternoon, I was shivering as I scampered to the hospital from the parking lot.

Rudi wasn’t in her chair. She was outside the doors and panicked.

I hurried to her and asked what was wrong.

“Tommy’s gone,” she screeched.

“Gone?” I muttered, jumping to the worst.

“He left the hospital.”

“And went where?”

“Nobody knows. Or cares. A nurse was smirking about it. I almost broke her teeth.”

“You said he was sick.”

“He’s badly sick. I’ve gotta get to him.”

“All right, I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Where you going?” she howled as I sprinted off.

“To get help.”

#

Grandpa turned off the TV with the remote, and he frowned at me from the living-room couch before shaking his head. “I cannot do it.”

“She’s not a Nazi or a murderer,” I insisted. “She’s my sister, your granddaughter.”

He kept shaking his head. “Your grandmother, she would never forgive me. You have no idea what she went through with your mother. She cannot go through that another time.”

I joined him on the couch and begged. “Please, Grandpa, only you can find him.”

“You did a pretty good job of finding her.”

“Because you gave me the most important clue, without trying to. I also had a sense of where she was. Tommy could be anywhere.”

“I cannot help anyone anymore. I am a useless old man who spends the few good days he has with these idiot boxes.”

“You can do it. We can do it together.”

Grandpa lowered his head, from the choice before him. He kept it there awhile before shaking it.

“Talk to her for a few minutes,” I pleaded. “How can that hurt?”

#

Rudi was more panicked than before when my grandpa and I approached her by the entrance of St. Barnabas. She was about to shatter.

Grandpa had been hesitant the whole way there. But on sight of his granddaughter for the first time outside her mugshot, his hesitancy grew. I expected to have to drag him to her.

The sight of him didn’t please Rudi either. Her fists became clenched and her nostrils flared when we reached her.

“Sorry we’re late,” I mumbled.

She pointed at Grandpa and snarled. “Who’s that?”

“Your grandfather.”

Rudi spun from us both and crossed her arms. “I told you, I want nothing from him.”

“Remember when I told you that he’d been a police detective? What I didn’t say was that he’d been a really good police detective.”

“In what century?”

“This one,” Grandpa deadpanned.

“He can find Tommy,” I went on while trying to hide my smirk. “He might be the only one who can.”

“Did I ever tell you how I searched for Franz Kafka after he went missing?” Grandpa asked me.

“Yes, Grandpa,” I huffed. “Many times.”

“Ah, yes, but your sister, she has not heard this. You see, Kafka was not yet a famous writer. So when he went missing, no one cared. But it alarmed his family. His sister . . .”

Grandpa couldn’t finish, because Rudi sighed at a volume that drowned him out.

After uncrossing her arms, she turned back to us. “All right.”

“First of all,” Grandpa said, “are you certain this Tommy of yours is missing? Kids run away and return. Your mother often did.”

“You don’t get it. He needs to get back to this hospital right now. His life depends on it.”

It was Grandpa’s turn to sigh. “Have you checked his home?”

“I called. But he hasn’t been there. He and his mother have been fighting. They’ve been fighting over me. I doubt she’s been to the hospital.”

“Where could he be?”

“There’s this waterfall that he goes to in the forest, but you’d never find it. I can’t.”

Grandpa pointed behind himself, toward the trees in the distance. “The one in the reservation, behind Grunnings?”

“Yeah,” Rudi muttered with her mouth so gaping that wasps could’ve nested in it.

“What about friends or relatives?”

Rudi shook her head.

“Do you have a picture of him?” he asked.

Rudi yanked a page from a phone book out of her bag. “I don’t have a picture, but his mother must. I can give you her address.”

“All right, I will search for your Tommy. But realize that it does not work as it does in these TV shows you Americans watch, where they solve the entire mystery in exactly one hour. It takes time.”

“He doesn’t have any.”

“Meanwhile, I have a friend who works at your school. You can stay with him.”

Rudi’s mouth opened and was more gaping than before. “What?”

“And you will return to school.”

“The hell I will!”

“I was too lenient with your mother. Because of all that she had been through, I let her get away with it all. This time I will practice that . . .”

Grandpa couldn’t latch onto the words he wanted, and he lost himself.

“*Jak se řekne?”* he mumbled.

This jogged his memory, and he snapped his fingers. “‘Tough love.’ I will practice ‘tough love.’”

“Listen—” Rudi began.

“—If I had done this with your mother, she could have been the one to tell you what to do. It is possible that she would not have to. But I am smart enough to learn from my mistakes. So these terms are, how do you say, nonnegotiable.”

Rudi lowered her head. She lowered it in the same manner Grandpa had in the living room. She lowered it as if she had grown up seeing him do this. “I want updates every day.”

“Give me until Monday. Then we can meet by your school daily when it lets out. Do we have a deal?”

#

“You will enjoy Stephen,” Grandpa said to Rudi as he stepped from the Matador. “You have qualities in common.”

He closed the door, and he shuffled toward a house not far from the reservation. The ceaseless trees were silhouetting the kids playing under them in the front yard.

Grandpa rang the doorbell, and a man came outside, who leaned down and hugged him. He hugged him like he was hugging his father.

Rudi drifted forward in her seat.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Mr. Cross,” she muttered. “He’s a guidance counselor at school. What ‘qualities’ could we have in common?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t tell whether the question was rhetorical.

#

While plugging in my phone at the corner booth, I asked Rudi about life with the Crosses.

“Pink,” she told me. “It was pink.”

#

Pam Cross led Rudi up a flight of stairs.

A woman in her late thirties, she had stepped out of an Ivory commercial. The wholesomeness was loud in her.

Two preteen boys ran down the stairs toward them. They came close to running them over.

“We’ve been foster parents for years,” Mrs. Cross said as the two women continued up the staircase. “But we haven’t had a girl in ages. It’s going to be so nice.”

Rudi said nothing. She was doing her best not to express disdain of all that was around her.

“If you ever need advice,” the woman went on as they reached the second floor and meandered down the hallway, “just ask.”

“Advice?”

“Girl stuff.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

They reached a door, and the woman opened it, exposing a frilly and pink girl’s bedroom. Along with the dolls and dollhouses and doll accessories, were four pink walls, a pink carpet, a pink bed that Goldilocks could’ve slept in, and a pink dresser. There was also a mirror on the dresser, framed in pink.

Pam raised her arms. “This was my bedroom when I was growing up. Isn’t it special?”

“It’s not ordinary.”

#

Rudi sat on the front stoop, with her eyes on the trees above and with sounds and smells coming from the barbecue in the backyard.

The front door opened, and Pam peeked out. “The steaks are about ready.”

“Terrific,” Rudi uttered. “Tripleplusgood.”

“But we have baked potatoes and corn. You can eat that, can’t you?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You haven’t been hungry since you got here. And I can relate to that.”

Rudi eyed the woman. She eyed her askance as she sat next to her and put her arm around her.

This made Rudi uncomfortable. But not as uncomfortable as she would’ve expected.

“I met Stephen on the first day of South Mountain Elementary,” the woman said. “We were *the* couple, and I had this fantasy of the perfect life we’d have together.”

The woman’s eyes drifted. “But it didn’t turn out that way, and I’d spend my days worrying about him, and I got really, really thin.”

“And?” Rudi mumbled.

“I didn’t give up on my fantasy. I didn’t when everyone was telling me to. *I* was telling me to.”

“So did you . . .”

“I never did get the fantasy. I guess it doesn’t work that way. But without holding on to it, without refusing to let it fall, I wouldn’t’ve gotten my reality, and it’s pretty darn good.”

“You know,” Rudi said as she rested her head on the woman’s shoulder, “you’re okay.”

“So are you. You have to remind yourself of that.”

#

Grandpa and I parked outside Columbia on Parker Avenue Monday afternoon.

While we waited for Rudi, we listened to a haunting rendition of Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* playing from a cassette in the car’s stereo. The two women singing it were emptying themselves onto us.

When I was a kid, Grandpa never listened to this music. But in recent years he often did, most often the last movement, “Quando corpus morietur.” Pergolesi wrote the piece during the last days of his life when he wasn’t much older than Tommy, and this movement in particular touches upon this.

*While my form here fades,*

*May my soul Thy goodness praise.*

Grandpa had been listening to the music so much of late that I’d asked him why. I asked him, too, why he would be listening to a Catholic hymn.

He insisted that he had no special reason, but he added that music had no religion. He told me that a Jewish choir had many times performed Verdi’s *Requiem* at Theresienstadt. Performances that were indelible upon their listeners, including the Nazis who’d show up for them. He said that they sang it as if the words were their own and had flowed from their lips since birth. “Oh, if you could have heard the soprano sing ‘Libera me’ at the end of it,” he murmured with a slight shake of his head. ‘*Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna in die illa tremenda*.’ It was more than her voice begging for deliverance. It was all of ours. You could hear them in the echoes everywhere, and I tell you that God Himself must have been in tears.”

#

Looking back, I believe Grandpa did have a reason for listening to *Stabat Mater*. Similar to what *Mist* and *The Woman in the Dunes* had meant for Rudi and me, the musicwas a means of accepting fates that he could no longer control.

#

The school let out. A thousand people pushed their way through the doors at the same time.

Rudi wandered out and through all those hanging outside.

Everyone was avoiding her. They were frightened of her.

I figured this was normal. Till Maria avoided her, her supposed best friend, dragged away by the lanky redhead that she had been with on the day I met her.

There wasn’t only fear of Rudi on display. One girl, with venom in her eyes, hollered a gay slur at her as she scurried off.

Rudi ignored it all. But all of it was bothering her as she glanced around. She was the loneliest person in the multiverse.

She spotted someone sitting on the stoop outside the school. He was a hulking boy with a receding hairline and eyes sadder than her own. I got the impression that he could relate to whatever she was going through.

There was conflict on his face too, enough to sink ten Hamlets. He wanted to act. He wanted to be unlike the others, but he couldn’t.

His shame from this made him turn from her.

I opened my door and stuck my head out. “Rudi!”

She ran toward our car and inside it.

Grandpa lowered the music.

“Well?” she gasped.

“Mrs. Goodwin was kind enough to give me a photograph of Tommy,” Grandpa told her. “She also gave me the names and numbers of his relatives and friends in the area.”

“What makes you believe he’s in the area?”

“White chocolate.”

“What?”

“There was a bowl of white chocolate truffles at Tommy’s house. A wrapper from one was at those falls of yours. It was no more than a day old.”

After reaching inside his jacket, Grandpa pulled out a Polaroid of a tire track, and he showed it to Rudi. “There were also fresh tracks from that Harley Sturgis of his. I must say, while these Harleys cannot compare to the Jawas I rode in my Prague days, they are very nice bicycles.”

Rudi shook her head. “How is any of this going to help us discover where Tommy is right now?”

“I told you that it would take time.”

Rudi sighed, and she sat back and crossed her arms.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She turned from us. “They know.”

“What?”

“That Tommy’s sick. They’re talking about him as if he’s got the plague.”

“Is that why everyone was avoiding you?”

“You did not tell me that he has a contagious disease,” Grandpa said to me with concern.

“It’s not contagious,” Rudi insisted.

“If it’s not contagious,” I countered, “why was he in the isolation ward? And why is everyone so afraid of him if all he has is pneumonia? What are you not telling us?”

Rudi wouldn’t answer, and this worried me more.

“Are you positive that you are not sick?” Grandpa asked Rudi.

She scowled as she kicked open her door. “They checked me out, I’m fine.”

“There was one more tidbit.”

Rudi stopped.

“Mrs. Goodwin was further kind enough to check Tommy’s credit cards,” he added. “He has not used them, but he has taken some cash with his ATM card.”

“So?”

“The amount he took and that he is not staying with friends or family lead me to believe that he is staying in a hotel. A cheap one. You would not have an idea of which?”

“I only have an idea of one. But he’d never go there.”

#

We drove to the motel in Newark anyway, before getting stuck in a river of traffic on Route 22.

Through his rearview mirror, Grandpa locked onto the anxiety in Rudi’s eyes.

“While we are waiting,” he said to her, “I can tell you my Kafka story.”

I shook my head. “This isn’t a good time, Grandpa.”

“The story will have meaning for your sister.”

I kept trying to dissuade him, but I would’ve had an easier time making the traffic disappear.

#

It was the day after New Year’s in 1923.

The twenty-five-year-old man who’d become my grandpa was shuffling down Eliška Krásnohorská Street in Josefov, the Jewish quarter of Prague. He was carrying a bouquet of white roses, as he did each Friday night. They covered his chest in their brilliance as he quickened with each step closer to his goal.

Voices interrupted his zeal. They were coming from the Spanish Synagogue a block away and were chanting “Shalom Aleichem.” They chanted it much as others had in the shul of his youth 800 kilometers to the east.

*Bless me with peace,*

*Angels of peace,*

*Angels of the Most High.*

It was what was beneath these voices that was calling out to him. *Come celebrate with us*. *Come celebrate life*. This was also beneath the voices coming from outside a pub on Pařížská Street a block in the other direction. They called out to him in the same way.

He ignored them both, and through the kaleidoscope of light cascading over the cobblestones, he strode into his apartment building.

In the lobby was a woman around thirty, who was sitting on the stairway steps in her overcoat.

With distress, she rose to her feet. “Hermann Weiss?”

“That’s me,” he answered as he approached her with caution.

“My name is Ottilie Davidová. My sister Elli lives in this building. She says that you’re a policeman.”

“That’s right. What can I do for you?”

“Our brother Franz has been missing for days. Franz Kafka is his name.”

“Franz Kafka?” Hermann muttered, with the name sounding familiar. It took a few seconds to realize why it had, and he said, “The writer?”

“You, you’ve heard of him?”

“I read one of his stories at the university. But I haven’t heard of him since. Does he continue to write?”

“Not successfully, I’m afraid. He worked as an insurance clerk until tuberculosis forced him into early retirement.”

“Did you file a missing persons report with the police?”

“Yes, but they won’t help us. They told us this.”

“Well, I can’t imagine what you expect from me. I’m but a beat cop and not a good one. Twice they’ve threatened to fire me, and the third time may be the charm.”

“Elli told me that she had coffee with you and your wife. She said that you were smart and ambitious.”

“Let’s suppose that’s true, what could I do? He could be anywhere in Europe by now.”

“Please, Franz may be a nobody to the world, but to us he is special. We must get him back.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Tuesday evening. He’d been staying with me at my house on Golden Lane. The next morning he was gone, with his suitcase and belongings.”

“He could’ve gone to a sanitarium.”

“He wouldn’t’ve gone without telling us. He didn’t tell his girlfriend either. She’s as worried as we are.”

Hermann sought to refuse the woman’s request. The words formed in his mouth. It was an impossible task and he was tired and wanted to relax over the weekend. More than that he wanted to spend time with his wife, who hadn’t gotten over a tragedy from many months before.

But there was a desperation in Ottilie’s eyes that he couldn’t ignore. He couldn’t ignore it any more than he could Rudi’s. So he sighed. “Do you have a picture of him?”

“Yes,” she answered, and she reached into her purse and pulled out a photo and handed it to him. “It’s old. He’ll be forty this year.”

“I guess I could check the train stations.”

“Oh, thank you, Herr Weiss!”

“Let me drop off these flowers, and I’ll have a look. But I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

#

Hermann went to Wilson Station, the main terminal in Prague. He showed the picture of Kafka to everyone who worked there.

But none recognized him.

Next he tried Masaryk Station, the smaller one in town, where he had the same lack of success. So he was ready to give up. He convinced himself that he had done all he could.

But he recalled that there was a commuter station in Dejvice, not far from where Kafka had been living. The station President Masaryk used when he visited his summer home in Lány.

#

It was after midnight when Hermann got to the aging building.

From a distance it was dark and empty. But when he reached its doors, a dimness projected from inside. It illuminated the handful of people waiting on benches as well as a ticket booth and the man inside it.

Hermann sauntered into the building and to the clerk, who was wearing a suit that was a hundred years old.

“Have you seen this man?” Hermann asked while showing him Kafka’s photo.

The man didn’t stir from his paperwork, but he said, “He was here, a few nights ago.”

“Where did he go?”

“Ústí nad Zapomněním.”

This confused Hermann. “I’ve lived in this country for years, but I’ve never heard of Ústí nad Zapomněním. I’ve been to Ústí nad Labem and have read about Ústí nad Orlicí but no . . .”

“Do you want a ticket or not?”

“How much?”

“One crown, ninety-nine hellers.”

“That’s a rather odd amount,” Hermann mumbled. But he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out two crown coins and placed them under the ticket window.

The clerk grabbed them, and he wrote out a train ticket. Which he slipped below the window along with a one-heller coin that he pointed at. “Don’t lose this. You’ll need it to pay the ferryman.”

“The ferryman?” Hermann gasped.

He waited for an answer, but none was coming. So he took the ticket and the coin and sat on a bench across from a man who was reading the latest edition of a Czech daily called *Lidové Noviny*.

“Excuse me, sir,” Hermann said to him, “my Czech is a work in progress. Could you tell me what *zapomnění* means?”

“Oblivion,” the man told him.

“So ‘Ústí nad Zapomněním’ would mean ‘The Mouth . . .’”

“The Mouth at the River of Oblivion.”

Hermann was pretty confident that there was no such river anywhere in what was in this period the First Czechoslovak Republic. So he wanted to give up.

*Go home*. He told himself this over and over. But Ottilie’s eyes kept popping into his head. They refused to go anywhere. So he waited.

With nothing better to do, he glanced at the man’s newspaper and its headline: “Jaroslav Hašek Hospitalized in Grave Condition.”

As best he could, Hermann read the opening paragraph. He learned that they didn’t expect the famed author of *The* *Good Soldier Švejk* to live much longer.

Hermann shook his head, as he loved what was at the time a three-volume collection of books and what many consider the first anti-war novel. He loved the books despite needing his wife to translate much of it. Like many World War I veterans, he recognized his own life in its pages, and it made him feel less alone.

Hermann’s head hadn’t stopped shaking when a train with a single car sputtered into the station.

#

The car Hermann stepped aboard was similar to the clerk’s suit. It was a hundred years old.

With his unease growing, he took a seat on a wooden bench with the others and waited.

He waited for so much time that he was ready to give up, as a stout middle-aged conductor entered the car.

“I do hope everyone has their heller with them,” he called out in a bellowing bass voice. “The ferryman will not provide passage without proper fare.”

The man swayed through the car. He swayed while punching the tickets of those he passed, and he came to Hermann.

Hermann gave him his ticket, and he showed him Kafka’s picture. “I’m searching for this man.”

“He was on the train the other night,” the conductor told him with his eyes never leaving the ticket.

“The one to Ústí nad Zapomněním?”

“What other?”

“So there is such a place?”

“There is.”

“When will we get there?”

“You have a journey ahead of you, young man. Sit back and get some rest. I’ll be certain to tell you when we get there.”

Hermann took the ticket, and he leaned back and closed his eyes, and the train sputtered from the station. Someone could’ve overtaken it on foot.

“It’ll take us days to get out of Prague,” he growled.

*The Mouth at the River of Oblivion*.

The words returned to Hermann’s head. Why they had wasn’t clear, but they kept themselves there till he realized that he had heard of such a river.

But where?

*The ferryman will not provide passage without proper fare*.

“Charon,” Hermann cried out as he opened his eyes and recalled how, in Greek mythology, Charon ferried the dead across the River of Oblivion to the afterworld, after they paid him a coin.

“It’s ridiculous,” he screeched with his head shaking. “This must be a joke.”

He searched for the conductor. He searched while noting that they were moving slower than before.

“Ústí nad Zapomněním,” the conductor roared as he marched into the car. “Last stop, Ústí nad Zapomněním.”

“But we just left Prague!” Hermann yelled.

“We’ve been traveling all night, sir. Check your window if you don’t believe me.”

Hermann did. It was morning outside and covered in fog.

#

Hermann stumbled from the train.

With dogged unwillingness, he followed the others as they made their way up a hill. Toward what he couldn’t tell. All he could make out was the tepid river to his left whose flow was a trickle and the cliff that he was ambling alongside that overlooked it.

He continued up the hill, and he reached a stairway leading down the cliff to a dock where stood a dozen people.

Screeching wheels sent his head spinning, toward an elderly woman in a dirty blue uniform who was pushing an empty garbage bin up the hill and grimacing.

He showed her the picture of Kafka and asked her about him.

“If he’s here,” she told him as she pointed ahead, “he’s there.”

Hermann glimpsed at what she was pointing at. Through the fog was a castle-like structure on the hill’s peak. “What is it?”

“A place of death it is. And plenty of it.”

Hermann froze. He froze while wanting to return to the station and to Prague, as he’d been around too much death in his young life.

He started back. But he came to another stop.

A boatman in a hooded cloak was rowing a skiff down the river toward the dock.

“Charon,” he muttered with his fear rising.

Staggering forward, he took a step closer to the cliff’s edge and another. He kept stepping until he slipped. He slipped and tumbled down the hill, all the way to the bottom.

#

Hermann woke on a stretcher, in a dark and dank hospital corridor, wearing nothing but a nightshirt.

Rising to his waist, he felt faint. He felt as if he’d collapse as he reached for his head.

A bandage was on it, and he was sore all over. Yet he pushed himself off the stretcher onto the floor.

Steadying himself, he moved. He shuffled down a winding hallway and reached an open door.

Men on beds had packed most of a hall-like room. There were more than a hundred in an area that stretched beyond his sight.

“Franz Kafka?” he yelped.

There was no response. No one acknowledged the question.

He continued down the corridor, passing more rooms packed with men. Into each he called out Kafka’s name. But in none did he get a response. He couldn’t tell if anyone was breathing.

The first exception to this was in a room by a stairway. A group of five men had surrounded the bed of an obese man. He was around forty, with a coif of curly brown hair, and he was wearing a filthy nightshirt.

The man was the center of attention due to the notebook he was reading aloud. “Lieutenant Dub, who thought the terrible liquor was going to his head, tapped his finger on the table and lucidly explained to Captain Ságner: ‘The district commissioner and I have always said, “Patriotism, loyalty to duty, self-achievement, these are the true weapons in war.” I’m reminded of this especially today when our troops are on the cusp of crossing the border.’”

The obese man fell silent, and he lowered both his notebook and his head.

The men around him, who you would’ve sworn had been listening to the voice of God, glanced at each other with discomfort.

“Well?” one uttered.

“Well what?” the obese man groaned.

“Aren’t you going to finish?”

“There is no more, gentlemen. It’s probable that there will be no more.”

“But you can’t end it without finishing the story,” said another man.

“I can if I must.”

“Would you,” mumbled a third man while holding a leather-bound book in his shaking hand, “would you sign my copy?”

“What for?” howled the obese man. “What good will it do you now?”

The man lowered his eyes, causing the obese man to sigh and moan. Along with this he snapped his fingers and reached out his other hand. “Give it here.”

The man brightened up, and he handed his book as well as a pen from his shirt pocket to the obese man, who signed and returned it.

“Thank you, Mr. Hašek,” the man cried out while clutching the book like a newborn. “Thank you so much!”

“Jarda,” Hašek told him. “My friends call me Jarda. All of you, call me Jarda.”

The men walked off, exposing an old wheelchair by Hašek’s bed.

Gawking at who was only steps away, Hermann took a handful into the room. He stepped all the way to Hašek and his hate.

Escaping this, Hermann turned toward the men to his left and the darkness beyond it.

“Franz Kafka?” he shouted while cupping his mouth. “Is there a Franz Kafka here?”

“I am Franz Kafka,” came a meekness from the nothingness.

#

Grandpa broke from his story when we reached the motel on the edge of Newark. A motel with no name.

The car came to a shrieking stop by the office. Above it on the roof was a single-word sign, the single clue to the place’s purpose. The red glass covering the “M” on it had broken apart in many sections, leaving the yellow light behind it bare and harsh.

With one of his famous extended moans, Grandpa stepped from the car and shuffled into the building.

“So that’s a Matador,” the clerk droned as the door closed, repeating a joke from a TV commercial many years earlier that wasn’t funny when it came out.

Grandpa spoke to him. He spoke to him for many minutes, with agitation rising on his face.

He came out with his head hanging, and he opened his door and pointed behind himself. “That *vůl* in there . . .”

“That what?” Rudi uttered, unable to rein in her exasperation.

“That *ass*,” I translated.

“Thank you,” Grandpa said to me. “That *ass* in there would not ‘spill the beans,’ as you say, nor could I bribe him.”

“I told you that Tommy wouldn’t come here,” Rudi snapped.

“But that does not mean that he will not. I will add this place to my daily checklist on that . . .”

Grandpa tried to latch onto the right word, much as he had outside the hospital. But this time “*Jak se řekne?”* couldn’t help him. He had to turn to me. “What do you call that contraption in the living room?”

“A PC, Grandpa,” I told him with my own exasperation.

#

Grandpa and I waited outside Columbia as it let out. Most kids weren’t wearing jackets despite the season, and so many hung outside that the front doors were nowhere in sight.

In a wink, everyone scattered. They scattered when Rudi marched through them.

This afternoon she wasn’t alone. She was holding the hands of two boys. One was the hulking kid from the other day and the other was gripping a Bible. The three were defiant as they made their way toward us, as was the geeky boy behind them who was trying to keep up. They were flipping off the entire school, not with their fingers but with their faces.

Following them from the school was a man. He was wearing a brown suit and a brown tie and came across as the typical no-nonsense principal in how he was crossing his arms.

But his smile gave him away. He was smiling at the four, in the way a parent does when their children please them beyond their expectations.

#

“You wanna tell me the story behind this?” I said to Rudi as the day began to set in the courtyard.

“No,” she answered.

But she did so anyway.

#

Rudi slouched at the cafeteria’s back table by herself, as she’d been doing since soon after returning to school. The tables around hers were empty as well.

She picked at her food till the silence in the hall lifted her eyes.

Owen was standing in front of her with his food.

He turned toward the quiet and the shock on everyone’s face.

“I got curious about that disease,” he told them, “the one you’re so sure she’s got. So I went to the library last night. I went for the first time ever. And you know what? You people, you’re so sure I’m dumb, but you’re way dumber than me.”

The silence and shock continued as Owen sat across from Rudi, who was as silent and shocked as the others if not more so.

“While I was at the library,” he mentioned, “I asked about that word . . . *karma*. This is the good kind, right?”

Rudi didn’t answer. She was doing all she could not to cry.

Owen reached out his paw, and she grabbed his fingers while lowering her head and shaking it.

“Come on,” he said, “lift that chin.”

She did but with a guilty smirk. “I don’t deserve you . . . not after I . . .”

“No one thought I deserved anything till I met you.”

Trying to hide their own guilt, Jared and Eliot sat next to them with their lunches.

Rudi made it easy for them, by pretending that nothing had happened. At the same time, she noticed Maria, who was off in the distance next to Terry and doing all she could to avoid her.

But she couldn’t avoid both her surprise and shame.

#

Grandpa didn’t have much to report that day.

It was obvious to both of us the increasing doubt Rudi’s was having and that fatalism was setting in. I guess that’s why Grandpa stayed out so late that evening.

He hadn’t come home when I fell asleep.

#

I returned from school the following afternoon.

Grandpa was turning in his sleep on the living-room couch, with the TV playing at full-volume, and I could tell that this wasn’t one of his good days.

I called out his name, but he wouldn’t wake. So I shut off the television and shook him till he rose.

“Ana?” he mumbled.

“No, Grandpa,” I whispered, “Ana’s not here.”

“I have to buy her roses before she comes home,” he went on, unaware that decades had passed since he gave them to her last. “White roses.”

“Let’s get some.”

I stood and was about to help Grandpa up when the computer in the room’s corner drew my eyes.

At first I was upset, as I often told Grandpa that the CRT monitor could burn in if left on for extended periods. But after I got closer to it, what was on it put me in a stupor.

Shaking this off, I typed some commands on the keyboard, and the dot matrix printer next to the monitor churned.

#

Rudi stepped through the Matador’s back door with her head down.

As she raised it, she saw me in the driver’s seat, with Grandpa asleep next to me and mumbling in Czech.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“He overdid it last night,” I answered.

“You sure he’s up to this?”

I wasn’t. But I didn’t say it, because Grandpa needed this as much as Rudi did. He needed a reason to move forward, and I needed him to have it. Because I needed him.

Grandpa woke, and he started shaking, and he banged into the door with both his elbows. “*Drž se dál od vlaku!”* he screeched with tears in his eyes, repeating his last words to Ana, when he begged her to stay away from the train that was taking him to Theresienstadt. “*Prosím tě se drž*.”

“What’s he saying?” Rudi whispered.

“Remember when I said that our mother had been through a lot?” I said. “So has he.”

“That music he’s been listening to . . . the Pergolesi.”

“You’ve heard of Pergolesi?”

She snarled at me as if I had asked the stupidest question ever, and she pointed at the car’s stereo. “Put it on.”

I did, and what she did stunned me more than her knowledge of Late Baroque music. She leaned toward the front and took Grandpa’s hand with both of hers, and she caressed it.

“Sshhh,” she murmured.

This was when I first witnessed the nurturing side of her. A side that contradicted all she was about but one that would be fundamental to all she’d become.

It took some time, but Grandpa calmed, and he drifted off.

Rudi sat back in her seat, and I reached into my jacket for the printout I’d made, and I showed it to her.

“What is it?” she asked.

“He mapped out all lodgings in Tommy’s price range that are within thirty kilometers of here, and he’d been visiting them. He visited them all yesterday. He must’ve been up the whole night.”

Wide-eyed, Rudi examined the printout. “Did you program that for him?”

“Don’t let that Luddite spiel of his fool you. He was programming the computer the day we got it. I noticed this afternoon that he wrote a serial communications library in C so that he could download data from CompuServe.”

#

The afternoon had fallen behind the shelter when Rudi told me that she had to go.

The darkening skies had taken away the shine and its warmth, leaving the courtyard in a chill and gust that shuddered through the courtyard and me.

But the story wouldn’t go with the light. So I returned to it later as I lay on my bunk. It came alive under the cacophony rumbling through the tomb, as snores from one side of it got answers from those on the other.

#

Over the next week, after checking on Grandpa when I returned from school, I drove to Columbia myself.

Rudi would often be outside it on the stoop with her friends. They’d be helping Owen with his homework while basking in a bond that was blooming with each day.

On an afternoon singed with frost, a girl joined them. She had blonde hair and a ponytail and was as different from them as they were from each other.

Sitting next to Jared, Beth took his hand. But what I recall most was her face. She was in another place and a good one.

I honked my horn, shattering their peacefulness, and Rudi and I went to many places on Grandpa’s checklist. This included the South Mountain Reservation, where I stumbled through the drifting snow while Rudi hung over on a rock facing the waterfall.

She had her arms wrapped around herself and her eyes closed as she tried to hum an old song that I recognized but couldn’t name. She tried many times to get it right.

When she did, she wouldn’t stop humming it. She hummed it with the same bliss that had been on Beth’s face.

Only now can I imagine how she was crossing her arms not against the weather but in remembrance of a time that she wanted to return.

As with the previous afternoons we’d spent in the reservation, we found nothing. We found nothing everywhere. Despite being the grandson of a larger-than-life detective and hearing his stories to the point that I could recall the pauses he’d make between the words, I lacked the most important skill he had: the ability to see what was hiding in sight.

Lacking all momentum, Rudi and I staggered back to the car on Crest Drive, a street that cut through the forest’s width.

I reached my door and froze. Some unknown had caught my eye, and I wandered toward it with Rudi.

In a clearing were motorcycle tracks. The same as those in Grandpa’s Polaroid. They headed for a tree before swerving from it at the last moment.

“He was trying to . . .” I mumbled.

Rudi took off.

I followed her as she called out, “I need to go somewhere.”

#

The snow was falling harder. It was a sheet of white when Rudi and I parked by the South Orange Recreation Center.

“Why’d you want to come here?” I asked.

“There, there’s a meeting. Attending is actually a condition of my probation. But this is my first time here.”

“Is it open?”

“You wanna come?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t have one.

The time neared six, and some people streamed into the building. They were all a blur.

Rudi continued to wait. She waited until well after the hour before slithering from the car.

I hesitated, but I went with her, no stranger to these types of meetings or the need to go to them. We entered the building and climbed to the second floor, and we approached a room and the echoes coming from inside it that were far from in unison. They rattled through the hallway and down the stairs.

The echoes were of a prayer. A prayer that I also was no stranger to.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*The courage to change the things I can,*

*And the wisdom to know the difference.*

*Just for this day.*

The echoes faded, and we crept through the door.

Near the threshold sat Jared on a folding metal chair, a kind ubiquitous throughout the room. He sat with his Bible on his lap, away from the others, who had scattered and were wistful. I could tell that no one wanted to be there and at the same time they all did.

Rudi whispered Jared’s name, and he feigned surprise, and his presence didn’t shock her either.

We sat next to him as the man in front rose from behind a table covered in keychains of different colors. A man with a weathered face. It reflected all of us. Each line on it told a tale.

“We have some new people tonight,” he said. “My name is Frank. Feel free to introduce yourself.”

No one spoke.

“Does anyone want to share?” Frank went on.

He got the same response.

“Anyone?”

Frank wouldn’t give up. He motioned toward the room’s far back corner. “Stephen?”

A man stepped from the shadows. It was Mr. Cross.

With his head down and with steady steps, he made his way to the front. It was as if he were marching to a beat that only he could hear.

“My name is Stephen,” he told everyone after reaching the table, “and I’m an addict.”

“Hello, Stephen,” we all said, in the robotic manner that was common at meetings like these.

“I’ve been clean for thirteen years. Thirteen. To some of you, that may be lifetimes. But not to me.

“I was gone before I came back from the war. I was some piece of work. You wouldn’t have wanted to be anywhere in my sight.

“Thirteen years ago, I was robbing a man. A little old man with a funny accent. I had a gun right to his head.

“But he just smiled. He smiled as if this had happened to him all the time. He smiled not *at* me but *on* me.

“I was born that day. That day and each one since. Each day I’m sober. Each day I’m loved. Each day I’m back holding a gun on that little old man with the funny accent. The one who smiled on me.”

Mr. Cross returned to his corner. He returned with his head down. Though he wasn’t marching with such steady steps. It was as if the beat had gone.

“Anyone?” Frank asked.

Jared raised his hand. He raised it as if made of iron.

This surprised Frank, who waved him forward.

Dragging his feet in a haphazard way, Jared approached the table while clutching his Bible. He was clutching it with all he had.

By Frank he mumbled, “My name is Jared, and I’m an addict.”

“Hello, Jared,” most of us called out, with more energy than before. Rudi was the loudest.

“I’ve been clean, I’ve been clean for sixteen months. That was when I came to, in a house I didn’t know, with people I had never met, in a town where I hadn’t been. Right now, right at this moment, I’m no more than a day from returning. The certainty of it never leaves me. It’s with me when I’m at school and when I’m at home with my mom and whenever I sit and pray.”

Lowering his head, Jared lifted his Bible. “Don’t let this fool you. I’m worse than all of you. You, too, Mr. Cross. I can’t wear short-sleeved shirts in the summer, so messed up are my arms. My legs too. I’ve lied and stolen and done unspeakable to myself. I’ve hurt people, really hurt people. I hurt my own mother. Nothing will make up for that. No Bible verses, no good deeds, nothing.”

With his hand shaking, Jared lowered his Bible. But he didn’t raise his head. “The one difference between now and sixteen months ago is that I’m not alone. Not only has my mom been great, despite having every reason not to be, but I have friends. Real friends. Friends who care about me. And it’s for this I pray. I pray for it all the time. I pray not only that I’m not alone but that I know I’m not alone.”

Jared made his way to the back. He did in the same way he had to the front.

He reached us, and Rudi rose and clutched him. She clutched him in the same way he was clutching that Bible, and he cried. He cried and wouldn’t stop. He was crying after the two sat and another man began to share.

A few others shared after him, and Frank uttered, “Anyone?”

No one spoke. But Jared tried to encourage Rudi by placing his hand on hers.

She didn’t react, and Frank moved on.

Rudi stood, and she stormed to the table. She stormed to it as if racing someone, and she told us, “My name is Rudi. I’ve been clean for a few weeks.”

“Hello, Rudi,” was the response. I shouted it.

“I forgot to say that I’m an addict,” she added, after turning to Frank.

“It’s all right,” he murmured to her.

“I probably didn’t because, because I like to pretend that I’m not. I like to pretend that I’m tough and that I’m in control and that I’ve licked my problems. But I’m an addict, and I will always be an addict, and I’m not tough and I’m not in control and I’m about to fall apart.”

Frank took her hand, and she squeezed his. But it took a while before she could steady herself. She closed and opened her eyes multiple times before she continued. “I must’ve been to hundreds of these. I’ve never shared. I’ve mocked the whole idea. But I’m not the same person. For the first time, I’ve let someone near me.

“I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t alone. I was alone no matter how messed up I got. I would never let anyone close. But I’ve met someone. Someone who makes me so mad because he makes me want to believe that I matter and have meaning, that all around us is meaning and that it all matters and that there’s actually a reason to be alive. He might not be alive right now, and I can’t make it if he’s not.”

#

I got home late that night. Grandma was tucking a blanket over Grandpa as he lay on the living-room couch in a daze.

“Where have you been?” she asked me.

“I,” I muttered not far from them, “I was at one of my meetings.”

“I was under the impression that you no longer went to them.”

“But I should.”

Grandma grabbed a spoon from the coffee table, and she placed it in the bowl beside it, and she tried to feed Grandpa some of her famous chicken soup.

But he’d have none of it.

“*Srnčí na pepři si dám*,” he growled while shaking his head and keeping his mouth from the spoon. “*S kroketama*.”

“You know well, old man,” she growled back, “that there is no venison in this house, peppered or otherwise. Nor are there potato croquettes. You will have to suffice with my soup.”

Neither would relent.

But she won out, and he let her feed him, with her wiping his chin after each spoonful with her handkerchief.

“I love this man,” she murmured. She murmured it as much to him as to me. “He is not my *bashert*, nor am I his. But I love him. He . . . he is *moje všechno*.”

*Her* *all*.

#

Grandpa got close enough to his old self to continue searching for Tommy.

But he wasn’t hopeful as we sat in his car and waited outside Columbia in our usual spot on Parker Avenue.

The school let out, but there was no Rudi. Or her friends.

A pair of stragglers left. They were snickering about her and Tommy, and it worried me.

I opened my door. I opened it as she exited the school holding the hand of another of her friends.

It was Maria. The two looked as if they’d been through the inferno together. Both their faces showed tears.

Rudi noticed us, and she and Maria embraced and said goodbye before Rudi sprinted toward us, with Maria not budging as she broke into pieces. “I’ll call you tonight!”

#

Recalling this from my bunk, it struck me that I never learned what had happened between Rudi and Maria and how they had made up, and I had to learn. I had to learn it at that moment.

I fumbled to the floor, coming close to crashing onto it. After grabbing my phone from the bed, I made it through the tomb, and I scampered into the courtyard without my coat or my shoes (or my pants), and I called Rudi.

There was so much wind whirling about that I had to shout to get through it.

“What’s wrong?” she muttered as she tried to wake.

“I need to ask you a question,” I told her, and I told her what.

“Can’t it wait?”

“I’ll never get to sleep.”

We compromised, and she gave me the quick version. “It was me who let out what Tommy had or confirmed it.”

“Maria. You told her.”

“When I came back to school, she told me about the rumors some were spreading. She didn’t believe them, she said. Lots of people didn’t. Tommy didn’t fit the profile of those with the disease at the time.

“So I told her. I told her it all. I thought she’d understand, but she was frightened.”

“Of getting sick?”

“And how she’d explain it to her dad. She went crazy. The whole world was going crazy. Remember how people believed that you could get it from a toilet seat? Maria believed this. She got hysterical because I had used her bathroom. That’s why I lied to you about Tommy’s sickness. I was sure you’d go crazy too.”

“I might’ve.”

“Maria told Terry what I told her, and it blew up from there.”

“You weren’t mad at Maria?”

“Are you kidding? I wanted to kill her. But . . .”

“But what?”

“That day we were hugging, much had happened earlier. A crazy scene at lunch that shook everyone. I was trying to process it all as I was leaving school.

“Maria was waiting for me in the corridor by the front doors. She was frightened but for a different reason.

“I didn’t want to recognize that she was there. But Terry made up for it. She was by the exits and madder than me. She slammed open a door.

“Maria spun toward her, but she wouldn’t go with her, and Terry ran out and screamed, ‘It’s over!’

“Maria wouldn’t follow. She turned back to me and mumbled, ‘I’m sorry.’

“Ignoring her, I started to go. But I couldn’t keep myself going. I guess it was because I realized that she’d given up a lot to make us right. Whatever my reason was, I just stood there.

“‘You were the best friend I ever had,’ she whispered, and my body turned toward her, and my arms opened. ‘I still am,’ I told her.”

#

I said goodnight to Rudi and hung up, and I went back to bed.

But the story wouldn’t go to sleep. It kept unraveling before me like waves onto a shore, crashing onto me with each snore.

#

Rudi reached the Matador and was surprised that Grandpa was in the driver’s seat.

She jumped inside the back door and slammed it. “He was here!”

Grandpa and I spun toward her, and I uttered, “What?”

“Tommy came to the cafeteria at lunch. He was drunk and his head shaved.”

“And?”

“He was standing in the front. No one noticed him at first. But when they did, everyone fled, including his so-called friends.”

“Because he has pneumonia?” Grandpa asked.

“He’s dying,” I said. “Isn’t he?”

Rudi didn’t answer.

“Is this the disease I have been reading about?” Grandpa mumbled. “The one that has been afflicting homosexuals?”

“Obviously, it’s afflicting more than them,” Rudi growled with defensiveness, no doubt believing that someone Grandpa’s age would be homophobic.

“You must stay away from this boy,” he shrieked while shaking his head and finger.

“I’m not staying away from nothing.”

“This is a deadly and contagious disease. They are unaware of what is causing it or how it spreads. They are only aware that it kills.”

“It’s not contagious, not in the way everyone believes.”

“How can you be certain?”

“Because the whole world would have it!”

“They could. I read that it can take years before it manifests.”

“If we all have it, what difference does it make!”

“You are not to go near him.”

“Listen—”

“—I will find him, I promise you that. It does not matter if I get sick.”

“You won’t get sick!”

“Stay away from him!”

“I won’t!”

“Stay away or I will!”

“Do what you want!”

Rudi kicked open her door, and she lurched through it.

This startled Grandpa. He must’ve feared that he’d lose his granddaughter much as he had his daughter. “Please, please do not go.”

Rudi paused. She paused before returning to her seat, and she slammed her door.

“What happened after everyone fled?” Grandpa said to her.

“He went nuts. He tossed over tables and chased people. I ran after him, and he ran from me. I followed him outside, but he went off on his bike before I could reach him.”

“Did he give you a notion of where he might be going?”

“No, but there was more. He had on a Walkman and was screaming this Black Flag song.”

“Is there some significance to that?”

“He doesn’t listen to that type of music. I wouldn’t’ve believed that he had heard of them.”

“He could have heard them on the radio.”

“They don’t play that type of music on the radio, Grandpa,” I interjected.

“So it is possible that he bought one of their recordings recently. But many stores here must sell recordings.”

“Not these.”

“Where could he have bought these?” Grandpa asked Rudi.

“I couldn’t tell you,” she snapped. “I haven’t been buying records.”

“We could go to a library and get a phonebook,” I said, “and call each store.”

“That would take all day,” she groaned.

“Do you have a better idea?”

She sighed. “There’s a library and a pay phone in the school.”

After swinging open her door, she stepped from the car. But she froze.

Owen was passing through the parking lot toward the bus stop on Valley Road.

She cupped her hands around her mouth, and she shouted his name. She shouted it a number of times, each one louder.

But he was too far away as he joined a bunch of people waiting for the bus that was crossing Parker.

Rudi leapt into the car.

“Stop that bus!” she hollered while pointing at it.

Grandpa sped off. He didn’t wait for Rudi to close her door. She only could when we made a squealing right into the intersection. This was when Grandpa, as he’d often do when he wasn’t paying attention, followed his instincts and swerved onto the left lane, putting us in the path of a truck and its frantic horn.

“*Do práva, Dědo!”* I screamed at him while flailing my arms to the right. “*Do práva!”*

“I know,” he spoke with calm. “I know.” With the same calm, he yanked us from the truck’s path and cut off the bus as it left, with the bus now honking its horn, doing so as the truck had.

“Where did you learn to drive?” Rudi gasped.

“Uzhhorod,” Grandpa answered with matter-of-factness. “If the Habsburgs had won the first world war, everyone would be driving on the proper side of the road.”

The bus kept honking its horn. So Grandpa spun toward Rudi and pointed out the car. “The bus.”

Rudi didn’t move. She didn’t because of Grandpa’s forearm and the number tattooed on it. She stared at it in horror.

“Rudi?” I murmured.

This got her out of her fog. It got her out of it enough to get from the car, and she hustled toward the bus.

#

Rudi kept hustling as I fell asleep in the tomb and it all faded.

She and the story and the snoring and the darkness blanketing them.

the sixth night

I’d have more work on Mondays, as no one took my place on my days off, and Amoun expected me to get it done in the same four hours. I’d run around more than normal.

With less than a half hour to go on this Monday, I’d caught up and had to clean the field by the back lot.

While I labored in the bright but shivering midday, my mind kept wandering to Josh and what I should do with what I hadn’t learned about him. Why it did when there was nothing I could do, I can’t say. It wouldn’t stop. Bad Brains couldn’t get it to stop.

All that could was *Larks on a String,* an old Czech movie that I’ve seen so many times that I can recite its lines backward and forward.

Set during the early years of Communism, it’s about a group of intellectuals and misfits who’d gotten on the authorities’ worst side. They force them to work in a scrapyard that served as a metaphor: it’d smelt them into the kind of new men the regime wanted or not, with “not” meaning a prison sentence and the uranium mines and the unnatural death that’d come from it. Because of this, the men were birds perching on the barest of strings. Any breeze could’ve blown them over for good.

One by one they fall, at least in body. This included a former librarian who was there because he refused to destroy the works of Schopenhauer. Despite this (or because of it), he’d quote Kant during the movie. One popped into my head and kept popping. “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily I reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral code inside me.”

“Why am I thinking of this?” I cried while gripping a diaper I’d pulled from some weeds.

The answer came fast. It was this “moral code,” the kind that thrived with such boldness in my sister, that was keeping my mind on Josh in contravention of all reason.

The slamming of a door brought me out of it.

Alaya had pushed her cleaning cart outside for a cigarette break. The woman with the beautiful name and the voice that you would’ve sworn was Paul McCartney’s.

She gave me one of her accentuated waves. She gave me encouragement too, with her eyes. It was as if she could sense my struggle.

Turning from this, I returned to the story of searching for Tommy.

#

Owen told Rudi the two places where he bought Black Flag records.

One was a flea market in Union that was open only on weekends. The other was a store not far from Columbia called Vintage Vinyl.

We went to the latter, driving to Springfield Avenue in Irvington and a shop that you’d never notice unless you wanted to notice it, if that. We passed it twice before we spotted it amid blight on all sides. The sun couldn’t brighten it, no matter how it tried.

After parking across the street, Grandpa, Rudi, and I scampered through the busy road into the store. It was empty apart from the compact and muscular man behind the counter, who was wearing a shredded Bay City Rollers T-shirt three sizes his junior and screaming with Keith Morris as he sang “Back Against the Wall” from a turntable a few steps away.

I couldn’t tell which of their voices was louder or shriller as the two smacked off the walls and struck the window in front. They threatened to split it apart.

Confused by the man, Grandpa stood by the door and stared at him as Rudi and I glimpsed around.

What stood out to me about the place was how, despite lacking the area of some Cadillacs, each record was great. It was a faultless selection of music from the fifties to the present, with apparent disregard to whether any of it would sell. It was more of a record collection than a store.

Among the treasures were all thirteen Captain Beefheart albums. They also had an alternative version of John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* and a section dedicated to the bands that had performed in *The Decline of Western Civilization.* Which included the record playing.

Just as important as what was there was what wasn’t: all records in the *Billboard Top 200*.

What also stood out were the copies of *Trouser Press* on the counter. This was a cult magazine about the independent music scene that I’d heard about but had been certain was a legend, as it had never been in my sight.

The man behind the counter got tired of Grandpa’s stare. He ceased his screaming and scratched the needle across the record before whipping himself toward him. “Listen, pops, we have old records, but not that old.”

Hiding his smirk, Grandpa pulled out the picture of Tommy and showed it to the man, and he asked about him.

“And you are?” the man growled.

“Tommy and I are . . .” Rudi mumbled.

The man gawked at her. “You and Tommy?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I bet,” he uttered with a roll of his eyes.

“Please . . .”

“The name’s Butch.”

“Please, Butch . . . Tommy’s sick. He’s sick and alone and . . . and I love him.”

Butch’s expression softened. “He comes in here and buys old Yardbirds records.”

“Has he been here recently?” Grandpa asked.

“A few days ago.”

“And he bought a Yardbirds record?” was my question.

“Actually, no. It was all kind of off. First, he was off and trashed. But what was more off was how he pulled out a copy of *Damaged*.”

“By Black Flag?” Grandpa asked next.

With his eyebrows raised, Butch rotated them toward Grandpa, and he deadpanned, “Your knowledge of punk rock is impeccable.”

Grandpa tried to hide his smirk a second time, but he couldn’t.

After returning to me, Butch added, “Tommy asked if it was any good. So I told him. I told him it was the best. But I also told him it was no Yardbirds. I told him he’d certainly hate it. But that’s what he wanted and that’s what he bought. He had me make him a tape of it too.”

Grandpa turned to me. “Apart from it being ‘the best,’ is there some special quality to this *Damaged?”*

“Do you have another copy?” I said to Butch.

He motioned toward a stack of albums.

I pulled out the record, and I showed Grandpa the image on the cover, of Henry Rollins with his head shaved and his bloodied fist through a mirror.

Grandpa recoiled. “We better get to this boy quickly.”

“It’s not as bad as you think,” I insisted. “I’ve listened to this record a lot. There were times I’d listen to it all afternoon when I came home from school, and there wasn’t a time that I didn’t feel better because of it. While it’s full of anger and rage and self-hatred, many songs have this . . . I can’t describe it . . . a mad desperation.”

“For what?”

“Hope,” spoke Rudi.

She startled me. I had believed what I experienced when listening to the record had been unique to me. But she and many others must’ve felt the same when they listened to it. If Tommy did, we had reason to hope as well.

“I guess Tommy did not mention where he is staying,” Grandpa said to Butch.

“Why would he?” he snapped.

Grandpa had no more questions, so he placed the record on the stack, and the three of us started out.

Huffing, Butch pointed down the street. “He was swerving that way.”

“Toward Newark?” Grandpa asked.

#

We parked at the same decrepit motel in Newark that we’d been at before.

No one had fixed the sign, and the light coming from it was as harsh as before. Like before, Tommy’s bike wasn’t there.

“I told you that he wouldn’t be here,” Rudi snarled with frustration overwhelming her.

“But that does not mean that he was not here,” Grandpa countered before opening his door and stepping onto the lot.

“What’s he doing?” Rudi cried out.

I had no answer.

Grandpa shuffled through the grounds. He did for many minutes before stopping for many more, and it wasn’t obvious why he had. Which made me question whether he was having another of his stupors, and I questioned what we’d do if he was.

Grandpa came out of it. He stepped to a parking space and kneeled on the ground, and he pulled out the Polaroid of Tommy’s tire tracks from his jacket.

Rudi and I jumped from the car, and we sprinted to him.

He showed us a track frozen in the dirty snow. “He was here and recently. Because this was not here the last time I was.”

“He could come back,” I said.

“Or he could be anywhere,” groaned Rudi.

Grandpa rose to his feet, and he continued his shuffling.

I tried a different tactic. I tried to imagine what I’d be doing if I were Tommy, the boy who’d been so different from me when I met him but who now was no different at all.

Toward this end, I closed my eyes and played the album he’d been listening to. I went through each song, searching for the one that could’ve been keeping him above ground. The one that could’ve stopped him from hitting that tree.

One came to mind and opened my eyes.

“What was Tommy singing in the cafeteria?” I asked Rudi.

“What does it matter?” she grumbled.

“I’m not sure.”

“It’s the song where the guy screams, ‘Keep me alive.’”

“‘Room 13.’”

“What was that?” Grandpa called out.

“Just a second,” I said as I checked the rooms. There were twenty, across two floors. The numbers of those at street level began at 101 while the ones above did at 201.

I pointed at them. “The song he was singing is ‘Room 13.’ But there’s no room 13 here.”

“But at another hotel . . .”

Rudi and I ran to the car, with Grandpa behind us.

#

From her seat in the back, Rudi leaned toward Grandpa as the car sped from the motel.

“When you mapped these places, did you use a Mercator projection?” she asked.

“They teach you about Mercator projections?” Grandpa gasped.

“Did you use one?” she groaned.

“I wanted to use one, but I could never do partial fractions. So I used an orthographic projection.”

Rudi spun to me. “Do you have that printout?”

I opened the glove compartment.

“I’ll need a pen too,” she added.

I grabbed both and handed them to her, and equations spewed over the page.

“Are you familiar with Dijkstra’s shortest path algorithm?” I asked.

#

Rudi and I got us to the lodgings faster, but it wasn’t getting us to Tommy. There wasn’t a single place with a room 13.

“Thirteen is an unlucky number in America,” Rudi grumbled to Grandpa. “No one would want to stay in a room 13. That’s probably why the song’s called that. This is hopeless.”

But we had no other clues. So we kept pursuing this one.

At a red light, Grandpa couldn’t avoid Rudi’s eyes in his rearview mirror and how they amplified her distress. So he decided that this was a good time to continue his Kafka story.

#

Hermann approached a bed where lay a frail man in a flawless nightshirt whose feet hung over the mattress.

“You’re Franz Kafka?” Hermann said as he reached him, with the area around them awash in the dull light that was reflecting off the river behind the man through a row of windows.

Kafka answered with a string of coughs, each harsher, and with increasing degrees of bewilderment.

Hermann eased himself onto the empty bed next to Kafka’s, and he told him, “It’s an honor to meet you, sir. I enjoyed that book of yours. *The Metamorphosis*, wasn’t it?”

Kafka became more bewildered. “Who told you I was here?”

“Your family sent me.”

“There you are!” cried a booming voice. With it came an enormous woman with cropped black hair and colossal black eyes. “I’ve been searching all over for you, Herr Weiss. I’ll get your stretcher so that I can bring you to your bed.”

“What’s wrong with this one?” Hermann said while pointing at it.

“I guess it’d be all right.”

“Am I all right?”

“You’re lucky Mrs. Veselá was around when you fell down that cliff. You can bet that ferryman wouldn’t’ve helped you. He wouldn’t’ve helped you if you had your heller with you.”

“I must’ve lost mine in the fall.”

“You needn’t fret, you shall not be needing it, not for many years to come. The doctor says that you need nothing more than some bed rest. And when you do go home, you can bring Herr Kafka with you. He belongs here as much as you.”

“I’m confused, nurse. You’re not implying that ferryman is Charon?”

“I could care less what his name is. He’s a *vůl*, I tell you. A *velikánský vůl!* What right did he have to take my mother before her time? I was a girl. I needed her.”

Overwrought with emotion, the nurse scampered off.

“I’m in a madhouse,” Hermann mumbled, “and the inmates are running it.”

“That’s what I believed,” Kafka told him. “But now . . .”

“Don’t tell me that you believe that boatman is Charon.”

“Is it crazier than airplanes or radios? When I was a boy, I would’ve believed such to have been as fantastical as Charon. But . . .”

The screeching of wheels interrupted him.

A scowling Hašek was straining toward them in his wheelchair.

He reached their beds and wheezed. “Just what we need here: more Jews. Can a Czech go anywhere these days to escape you? Perhaps not in death!”

“What did I tell you, Mr. Hašek?” hollered the nurse as she returned with Hermann’s chart and placed it on the railing of his bed. “Keep your prejudices to yourself. You’ll soon discover how meaningless they are. Very soon!”

The nurse marched off, with Hašek sneering at her.

As she left the room, he returned to the men and glared.

“This is the famous Jaroslav Hašek,” Kafka said to Hermann. “Or should I say, infamous?”

“I gathered as much,” Hermann told Kafka before frowning at Hašek. “I can assure you, sir, that many Czechs and Jews have shared death. I’ve witnessed it.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you served in the army, little man?”

“And I have an Order of the Iron Crown to show for it. Which I’d gladly chuck into that river to get any of my friends back. I wouldn’t care if they were Czech, German, or Jew. The bullets didn’t.”

Ignoring this, Hašek turned his growl onto Kafka. “Did he call you ‘Franz Kafka’?”

“I did,” Hermann said.

“Franz Kafka, the writer?”

“You’ve heard of me too?” Kafka gasped.

“I’ve read some of your stories, if you can call them that. ‘Absurd nonsense’ is a better name . . . men turning into bugs and ridiculous penal colonies.”

“You are one to judge, Mr. Hašek. The author of dreck. The ramblings of a drunkard. A common street urchin can write more coherently than you. Hell, my Czech is terrible, but *I* can write it better than you.”

“You filthy . . .”

Hašek stumbled from his wheelchair, and he stumbled toward Kafka and swung his fist at him.

It missed Kafka, and it missed him by a lot. Though it knocked his end table onto the floor, along with the lamp and bell on top of it.

This didn’t deter Hašek. He rolled up the sleeves of his nightshirt as he panted. “It’s time for a pogrom.”

“I should warn you,” Kafka told him without fear, “my father was a competent boxer in his day, and he taught me well. Despite my pathetic state, I can put you down. Especially in your pathetic state.”

“Boxer? Your father . . . your father isn’t Hermannek, is he?”

“He is.”

“He’s got a shop on Staromák?”

“That’s right.”

Hašek couldn’t corral his humor. It stampeded from him as he stumbled to his wheelchair and plopped onto it. “That man, he’s more Czech than me.”

Kafka said nothing, and Hašek added, “He’s the one person in Prague who can drink me under the gutter. He’s done it to me twice, and that’s the times I can remember.”

Kafka said nothing a second time but couldn’t corral his humor any more than Hašek had.

“How come you’re never out with him?” Hašek asked.

“I’m afraid we are different men,” Kafka muttered.

“Yeah, I bet you’re a disappointment to him.”

Kafka cringed but kept quiet.

“You, a member of the literati,” Hašek went on, “snooting too high above to lower yourself to us ordinary folk.”

“Listen to you talk as if you were some proletariat. You must be the richest novelist in the country, especially with no publisher to pay. I bet Čapek doesn’t earn what you do. Why, what you make off *Švejk* in a single day must exceed my writing earnings for a lifetime.”

“What’s wrong?” the nurse called out from the doorway. “I heard a bell.”

“I’m sorry, nurse,” Kafka told her. “I knocked the table over by accident.”

With skepticism, the woman came over to them. While glaring at Hašek, she lifted the table and set the lamp and bell onto it. “Don’t let this ruffian bully you, Herr Kafka.”

“Have no fear of that, Nurse Černá,” Hašek bellowed. “He’s the son of one Hermann Kafka of Old Town Square, Prague. A man who stared down a whole street of rioters. And I should know, I was one of them!”

The nurse snarled at Hašek before scurrying off.

She left the room, and Hašek glared one more time at Hermann and Kafka and scurried off himself.

#

Hermann tried to convince Kafka to go home with him.

“I’m a dead man,” Kafka insisted between a fit of coughs. “Whether I die tomorrow or six months from now makes no difference.”

“It makes a difference to your sisters,” Hermann insisted back. “And to your girlfriend.”

“I’m a burden to them all.”

“It didn’t appear so.”

“They’ll be better off when I’m gone, especially Ottla. She’s in a bad marriage with a horrible man. She’s only staying with him so I’ll have a place to stay. She’d leave him otherwise.”

“Can you be certain of that? Your death could make her life worse. None of us can be certain of what comes next. That could be the whole point of living: to discover what happens next. Don’t you want to discover what happens next?”

“Not anymore.”

“There must be some ‘next’ worth living for.”

“I can’t imagine one.”

“But if I can, will you come home with me?”

Kafka began to answer, but the nurse interrupted him. “You have a visitor, Herr Kafka,” she called out from the door.

A well-dressed man Kafka’s age came to his bed.

“Thank you, Max,” Kafka said. “Thank you for coming.”

“Max?” Hermann uttered while jumping from his bed. “Are you Max Brod, the author of *Nornepygge Castle?”*

“You’ve heard of me?” Brod uttered back.

“He’s heard of me,” Kafka interjected with a snicker.

Wanting to give the men some privacy, Hermann rose from his bed. “I could use a walk.”

Hermann didn’t go far. Unsteady from his fall, he took a seat on a plush chair by the doorway.

While the two men conversed, he felt himself getting drowsy, and he drifted off.

#

Hermann woke and was unaware of why.

Hašek and Brod were yelling. They were yelling at each other by Kafka and his bed.

“You goddamn Jew!” Hašek screamed while flapping his arms. “For years now, you’ve been a goddamn Jew!”

Turning to Kafka, he added, “And you write as badly as he does!”

Spinning his wheels, Hašek hurried from the two men and toward the door. He hurried it as fast as he could, and this wasn’t much.

He slowed when he approached Hermann. He glared as he reached him.

A gravelly voice came from Hašek’s right. “Don’t you worry about them.”

An unshaven man was lying in a bed nearby. “They’ll get theirs sooner than soon,” he added while motioning toward Kafka and Brod.

“What do you mean?” grumbled Hašek.

The man glanced around. He glanced all around himself, and he lifted the lapel of his nightshirt, exposing a swastika pin.

Hašek turned white. “You, you stay away from me.”

“What are you getting so upset about, Jarda?”

“The name is Jaroslav. But don’t call me that. Don’t call me ‘Mister Hašek.’”

“You and I are the same.”

“We’re not the same. We’re not the same at all!”

Hašek left, pushing himself through the door, leaving the man to Hermann.

The man burst out in laughter. He laughed and laughed and wouldn’t stop.

#

Kafka and Brod continued conversing by Kafka’s bed.

The two became agitated and argued, and they got louder after Hašek returned to the room and stopped by Hermann.

Brod rushed off. He rushed toward the door.

“You must do what I say!” Kafka shouted. “You must burn them all!”

Brod didn’t respond as he reached the two men.

“Burn what?” demanded Hašek.

Brod wouldn’t answer. He stormed out.

Conflict came across Hašek’s face. All sorts of it. It was as if he couldn’t decide what to do.

This kept on till he followed Brod. He followed him into the hallway.

#

Grandpa broke from his story.

With the afternoon’s remains dipping below an industrial landscape that was inseparable from the New Jersey Turnpike ahead of us, he suggested that we check the waterfall before it got dark.

We turned around, and we drove down a country road as different from the turnpike as the day had been from the night switching places with it. The road passed through the reservation’s length and all the trees as well as the quiet whispering through them.

While gazing out the window, Rudi hummed. She hummed the same old song she’d been humming by the waterfall. She hummed it till her voice faltered when we got to a body of water that dropped into our view from nowhere.

“Reservoir,” she mumbled.

“What about it?” Grandpa said while glancing at it.

“Tommy told me that his father grew up in Newark, by the old reservoir there.”

“There is no reservoir in Newark.”

“But there must’ve been.”

#

We were so close to the waterfall that we checked it anyway.

Tommy wasn’t there. But Grandpa stared into the ravine with concern.

“What?” I mumbled, steps from Rudi’s earshot.

He pointed at a smashed vodka bottle below and whispered, “That was not here the last time I was.”

I had noticed the broken glass the last time I was there, but it didn’t register that it could be important. “So?”

He didn’t answer.

#

We returned to Newark and searched for a reservoir that didn’t exist.

The confirmation of this came at the Newark Public Library’s main branch as it closed, by a woman locking its doors. She told us that she hadn’t heard of an old one either.

Everyone we asked in the streets said the same or close to it.

During his decades as a police detective, my grandpa had been on many quixotic quests, but the great knight-errant himself would’ve given up on this one. It was obvious that Grandpa wanted to give up. He only didn’t because there were no alternatives and we needed to get to Tommy now.

He kept pulling over the car, and he kept asking people, including a middle-aged woman who was pushing a shopping cart of groceries down an empty block.

“I’ve never heard of any reservoir,” she told us, causing Grandpa to groan. “But I remember Reservoir Pizza. My brother cried when they left town.”

With a gasp of exhilaration, Rudi leaned toward the woman. “Do you remember where it was?”

“I sure do. On the corner of 14th Avenue and 9th Street.”

#

The Matador sped right onto 14th Avenue.

There was no sign that a reservoir had been there. Nor were there any motels or hotels. But Grandpa kept driving. He drove through each street in the area, and we approached a complex that offered furnished rooms by the week.

“I did not think of apartments,” Grandpa muttered as he raced onto the parking lot and to a set of ramshackle units that opposed each other. By number 13 were the remnants of Tommy’s bike.

Grandpa parked beside it. Before the car could come to a rest, Rudi ran out.

She tried the door before banging on it with both fists while screaming Tommy’s name.

There was no response.

“Now what?” I asked Grandpa while we hurried toward her.

He didn’t answer. He examined the area before pulling out a set of lock picks from his jacket pocket and telling us to cover him.

“What?” Rudi muttered.

“*Honem!”* he howled.

*Fast* was how Rudi and I crouched around and over him. We shielded him from view, and he picked the lock and opened the door, and we rushed inside.

Tommy was thrashing on top of a creaky Murphy bed in the cramped studio. As Rudi had described, he’d shaved his head and was drunk. He was dangling from consciousness as he swayed to the music playing on his Walkman. Which was cranking so that I could tell he was listening to “Room 13.”

Rudi fell onto him. But he didn’t react. He didn’t when she shook him and hollered. He kept swaying.

I stepped toward him and his sweating. He’d soaked his bedsheets and the pillows and his clothes. He was swimming in them.

Shifting my eyes from this, I turned them toward Grandpa as he raised an empty vodka bottle off the floor. The same kind that had been by the waterfall.

He tossed it into a garbage pail and checked Tommy’s pulse, with his concern worse than at the falls.

Leaping forward, he grabbed the phone off an end table and called 911. “I need an ambulance.”

Avoiding Tommy, I scanned the room. He had broken the four walls. He’d been smashing into them. He smashed the full-length mirror by the bathroom as well, with more than one fist. There was blood on it too.

“Tommy!” Rudi pleaded while desperate to get him to respond.

He wouldn’t. It was as if she wasn’t there.

The song ended, and Tommy hit the stop button on his Walkman. He followed this by reversing the tape and pressing play before yelling “Keep me alive!” with Henry Rollins. He yelled it over and over.

#

Grandpa, Rudi, and I sat in a corridor of St. Barnabas, with one of us sitting with more impatience.

Rudi’s anxiousness got worse, and Grandpa took her hand with both of his. He took it much as she had taken his in the car a week or so earlier. As it had done with him, she calmed, and she gazed at him with a reverence that was as jarring to me as her nurturing had been the week before.

“I’ll never forget what you did,” she mumbled, “for a nobody like me.”

A jaundiced man in a white coat approached us, with the same frightened nurse who’d been in Tommy’s room when I met him. She was wearing another mask and another pair of gloves and was as frightened as before.

“That’s Dr. Kleinsten,” Rudi uttered, and we rose.

The doctor stopped by us while the nurse ran off.

“How is he?” Rudi asked. She was begging him.

“He’s determined to kill himself,” Kleinsten said, “and succeeding.”

“What can I do?”

“Ever heard of ‘tough love’?”

Rudi peeked at Grandpa.

“You’re the only one who can give it to him,” the doctor told her.

Rudi wandered down the hall. Her feet never left the floor.

“What are his chances?” whispered Grandpa to the doctor.

“Chances?” the man whispered back as if the question had been in a language he didn’t speak.

“His chances for survival.”

“No one has survived this or has experienced any remission.”

“How much time does he have?” I asked.

“I’m aware of no case where the patient has lived for more than a month, and his is as bad as there is. His immune system has shut down. If the Pneumocystis doesn’t kill him, some other complication will. And soon.”

The doctor took off, and I called out to him.

“What?” he answered after coming to a reluctant stop.

“If it’s true that you’re unaware of what causes the disease and how it spreads, how is it that you are not wearing a mask and gloves like that nurse you were with?”

The doctor got angry, and he thundered off. “I didn’t become a doctor to hide from sick people.”

With nothing better to do, Grandpa and I returned to our seats.

In the silence that followed, I wanted to thank him for what he’d done, but it was he who thanked me.

“For what?” I muttered.

“For dragging me to my granddaughter. It would have been a tragedy if you had not.”

“What about Grandma?”

“She will not be thanking you. Or me. Me especially. I may not leave the living-room couch, and she might move this outside.”

#

I returned to the shelter late in the afternoon. The night was falling upon the alley as Billy slammed the hood of his Civic and cursed.

“What’s wrong?” I uttered as I reached him and headlights that were projecting down the road.

He kicked the car.

“I bet Matt can fix it,” I said.

“It’s gone,” he howled before kicking the car with all he had. “The engine, the job, the apartment—all gone!”

He kicked and kicked. He kicked without making a mark. Or a scratch. He kicked till a truck arrived. It sputtered beside us and ground to a halt.

It was donating food from a local restaurant. Which was not an uncommon sight at the shelter. But it kept surprising me how generous people were in a city that wasn’t thriving. People from nearby churches would often drop off food, and multiple times dozens of pizzas arrived uncredited, as they had in a Jason Stratham film called *Redemption*. After the second time, I questioned whether life was imitating art or whether it was the other way around. I questioned whether this happened all over.

The donation that afternoon surprised me more than usual. It included dozens of cartons of choice steaks and ribs as well as many boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables.

The gift overwhelmed all of us. That’s why Josh didn’t have to ask us to unload the truck. On our own we formed a chain from the alley through the dining hall and into the kitchen. We passed the boxes between us while talking of what a wonderful Christmas meal it would make. Not only on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day but through New Year’s. It’d be Christmas all week.

It took a half-hour to get all the food off the truck. But no one complained. For one night fortune hung over us. It didn’t favor the bold and refused to go anywhere. It hung over Billy and Jennifer, despite losing their chance for escape. It made everyone feel that the gift was in part from them.

#

I got into the check-in line after cleaning the rec room. A commotion was coming from behind the office’s closed door.

Josh was arguing with Hector. They were screaming at each other, with both their voices and arms.

The door flew open, and Hector burst out. He passed me and went to his cubby, and he wrenched his belongings onto the floor.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I got thrown out,” he howled as he crammed his stuff into a dusty silver suitcase.

“Why?”

“I wouldn’t do his wet work.”

“His what?”

Hector blew past me, and he threw open the office door. “I need my passport,” he yelled.

“Your what?” Josh yelled back.

“I gave you my passport for safekeeping when I came here.”

Pointing toward the dining hall, he added, “You put it in the vault.”

Groaning, Josh rose to his feet. “Wait here.”

#

Josh returned to the dorm and the office, and he raised his eyebrows. “It’s gone missing.”

Hector glared at him. He glared for many seconds before storming off.

#

Another letter from Tommy arrived that day. I grabbed it from Josh and brought it into the courtyard, and I called Rudi.

There was anticipation in her voice. It couldn’t stay beneath it.

#

It was difficult getting through the first pages Tommy sent me. He’d garbled most entries.

In a quasi-coherent one, he described his transfer to St. Barnabas after his original hospital refused to treat him when they learned what he had. In another he mentioned an encounter with his mother in the hospital.

“I blame myself,” the woman said by the door and all the whiteness around her. “I should’ve sent you to Pingry.”

Tommy said nothing. All he did was cough.

“You just have to promise me that you’ll stay away from her,” she continued.

“I won’t.”

“After what she’s done to you? After she’s ruined your life?”

“Go away,” he told her with his eyes far away. They had locked onto the woods through his windows as well as the waterfall well behind them.

“If I go, I’m not coming back.”

Tommy said more nothing.

She ran from the room, with her steps becoming deafening as they faded, and Tommy wasn’t sorry about it.

#

What Tommy didn’t describe was his encounters with Rudi. He didn’t write about her apart from a brief passage lamenting how he’d never make love to her.

He wrote less about the disease ravaging him. All he said was that his countdown had begun. Only the exact units of measurement were unknown.

Tommy followed this with a fractured sentence about leaving St. Barnabas. What followed after that were nothing more than streams of semiconsciousness. I inferred from these that he moved from motel to motel, drinking himself to sleep and waking this way.

Despite this, he got on his bike one morning and drove. One moment he was swerving through traffic on Route 22 and the next he’d made it to the waterfall.

He spent the day on the rocks, decrying himself and his fate and what he blamed for it. He screamed this into the skies, only letting up when he ran out of vodka.

After smashing the bottle onto the ravine, he returned to the roads. He drove till he reached Vintage Vinyl.

He bought the Black Flag record because he remembered the T-shirt Rudi had been wearing on her first day of school and the tattoo that had been on Owen’s arm and because staring at the record’s cover was like doing so into a mirror. But he had no doubt that Butch had been right, that he’d hate the music.

Despite this, when he got to his room, he put the tape in his Walkman and put his headphones on and hit play. Which was when Henry Rollins crawled into his head and took over the screaming.

*My name is Henry, and you’re here with me now*.

The screaming sent Tommy teetering. It knocked him from his knees and from what was under them. He’d swear that Rollins was screaming at him, at him alone, screaming all he was feeling but unable to express. But what toppled Tommy over was how Rollins was screaming about more than how life sucks. He screamed more about how he wanted to change it and how he wouldn’t give into it or stop screaming about it.

This inspired him. “Room 13” inspired him but also “Life of Pain” and “Damaged II” and “What I See.” Each song focused on a different aspect of his hurt till there wasn’t a sliver Rollins hadn’t dissected and cast out. Bleaker songs such as “Depression” and “Thirsty and Miserable” offered traces of promise as well.

When the tape ended, Tommy played it a second time. He played it while smashing into the walls and punching the mirror.

Each time through the songs, his anger lessened. By the fourth, all darkness had gone. There was nothing but the music and the mad desperation to hope.

He sobered the next morning and listened to the tape another time. He listened to it all the time. It was his one substitute for self-pity. The one means from it. The one substance that wouldn’t let him have it.

It moved him forward too. It got him up in the morning and to sleep each night and through all his attempts at killing himself. It also led him to a punk club in the Alphabet City section of Manhattan called A7 and a band that I guess was Ism, because he talked about them playing a cover of “I think I love you” as bodies flew across the stage and the room and he dropped into a corner of it invisible to it all, including himself.

#

Tommy’s first lucid observation was after returning to St. Barnabas and waking to the angel hovering over him. The one in contrasting black and white, with no shades of gray.

Forgetting all that had happened to him, he murmured her name.

But he remembered. He remembered it all, and he growled, “I told you to leave me alone.”

Instead Rudi grabbed his hand. She grabbed it as if she were about to break it apart while angrier than ever. The fury was shattering through her.

“Are you crazy?” he hollered. “I’m infected!”

He tried to squirm his hand away, but she held on. He couldn’t yank it away. All he could do was turn from her and mutter, “Go. Please go.”

“Not till we have it out.”

He wouldn’t. He clenched his eyes closed and willed her to leave.

But she wasn’t going anywhere anymore. So he returned to her.

“There’s gonna be some changes around here,” she snarled with her voice lashing him. “From now on you’re gonna take care of yourself, and you’re gonna do what that doctor tells you. And . . .”

She couldn’t finish. Her voice fractured and her lips trembled and the raging punk towering over him changed back into the frightened child. The one who’d been crying from inside the motel room. She fell apart, seam by seam.

When there was nothing holding her together, her knees buckled, and she tumbled onto him, and she grasped him in her arms. “And you’re gonna love me,” her voice rasped. “You are. Because I love you. God, how I love you!”

“How could you love me?” he mumbled.

“I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to love anyone, especially me. But you’re the most magnificent person I’ve ever met or will ever meet. You make my whole rotten life worth it.”

Tommy didn’t speak. But tears rolled down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpered. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry? You think I’m mad at you? Don’t you get it? I don’t want you to watch me die.”

“But I’m gonna watch you live, I am, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Tommy tried to resist her. He tried with all that he had.

But he couldn’t. He no longer belonged to himself or would.

So he grasped her. He grasped her harder than she was grasping him.

“Tommy!” she screeched as she cried with him. Her tears mixed with his and became one.

“I can’t live without you,” he said. “It’s not a figure of speech or a hyperbole or whatever the right term is. It just is.”

#

None of us were sure Tommy would make it through the night. The doctor was the least sure.

Rudi refused to leave him. She refused after a nurse threatened to call security. I doubt the cops could’ve dragged her away.

All night she clutched Tommy. She clutched him while humming “Moonlight Serenade” during each of his bouts with the shivers.

“I’m so scared,” he stammered.

“Me too,” she told him. “But not as much as when I was alone.”

He grabbed her arms. He grabbed them and held on.

#

The nurse shoved her medical cart out of Tommy’s room. As usual she was wearing a mask and gloves and wanting to be anywhere but there.

On most days, this bothered Tommy, no matter how much he pretended it didn’t. But now it didn’t matter.

The reason for this was the man next to him on the bed, who was wearing a suit and a kippah but had no mask or gloves, and who was leaning over him and holding his hand.

Tommy wrote how floored he was that this man that he revered his whole life was touching him and unafraid.

“Is there anything I can get you?” the man whispered, with a gentle voice that belied his size.

“Could you,” Tommy muttered with embarrassment, “you could get me a Bible?”

Where did this come from? It was a question with no answer. Never had Tommy had an interest in it before, and he couldn’t say that he had one now. But the spark had come and he’d let it out.

“I’ll bring one tomorrow, Tommy,” the man said with his head askance.

He released Tommy’s hand and rose, and he did a double take.

Tommy sought the reason for it.

Rudi was in the doorway, wearing his football jacket and carrying a cold compress, and she was nervous.

“Hey,” Tommy said to her.

“Hi,” she muttered with her voice a single notch above audible.

“This is Rabbi Orenstein, from my temple.”

Rudi forced a smile.

Tommy pointed at her. “This is my . . . my . . .”

“I’m his girlfriend,” she called out. I bet she called it out not only to the rabbi and to Tommy but to herself.

While feigning confidence, she marched to the rabbi and offered him her hand and told him her name.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he said as he shook her hand with his own forced smile. Tommy could sense his bewilderment and that it was growing.

Hiding from this, the rabbi went back to Tommy. “I guess you’ll be going home soon.”

Tommy shook his head. He shook it with his eyes far from the man.

“We’re getting a place,” Rudi interjected.

“We could get one,” Tommy countered.

“We *are* getting one.”

“You’re eighteen, Rudi. I won’t saddle you with this.”

“It’s my choice, not yours!”

“What if, what if I don’t get out of here?”

“You’re getting out of here.”

“Well,” the rabbi muttered while trying to hide his discomfort, “there are nice apartments across the street. I’ve been inside a few. Some you can rent furnished.”

“They’d be out of our range,” Tommy insisted with another shake of his head. “We don’t . . .”

“The synagogue has a fund for these kinds of situations.”

“You do realize that we’re not married,” Rudi said.

“Ordinarily, that would be a problem. But under the circumstances . . .”

Tommy groaned.

But the rabbi waved him and his doubts off, and he started toward the door. “Let me handle it.”

He left, with Rudi staring into the doorway. She stared into it after he was gone. “Are all rabbis like him?”

“They aspire to be,” Tommy answered before she climbed onto the bed and applied the compress to his face and forehead.

“I have a surprise for you,” she told him.

“Should I be worried?”

“Yup.”

“Well?”

“You’ll have to get out of here to get it.”

#

I glanced at Rudi while the two of us stood in front of Dr. Kleinsten.

She wasn’t breathing as the doctor read through a chart. He read through it many times before lowering it with an amazement that shone through his suppression of it.

“The Pneumocystis has passed,” he mumbled.

“Yeah?” Rudi gasped. “So he can go home?”

“I guess. But you need to get realistic about this, Ms. Weiss. I keep trying to tell you that. I keep trying to tell you that, not only is there no cure for what he’s got, there’s none on the horizon. None at all. We have no name for his disease, nor an understanding of the virus triggering it. We can’t say for certain that it is a virus. I’ve got an obligation to be forthright with you. In cases as his . . .”

Rudi wouldn’t listen to the rest. She marched down the hall, refusing to allow reality to get in her way.

I followed her, and we stepped into an elevator. The rabbi was there.

“Hi,” he said with awkwardness.

She said the same, with the same awkwardness, and the two remained straight ahead as the elevator descended.

“I want to thank you for the apartment,” she told him. “It’s terrific.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I, I have questions.”

“Questions?” he mumbled as we reached the ground floor and exited.

“This isn’t the place or time,” she said.

“Our synagogue, Beth El, is on Irvington Avenue, not far from the intersection of South Orange Avenue. I have office hours each morning.”

#

The door creaked open, and Rudi helped Tommy inside.

Switching on the light, she exposed a well-furnished one-bedroom apartment and a golden-haired dog. She ran to Tommy with her tail wagging, and she jumped into his arms and licked his face.

“She remembers me,” Tommy yelped.

“How could a girl forget a hero?” Rudi said.

“So this is your surprise. What’s she doing here?”

“No one claimed her. I talked to Dr. Kleinsten, and he said that a dog could be good for you. She’ll keep you company and give you to-dos when I’m not around. And, to be honest, I could use an unconditional friend. So we’ve adopted her.”

“*We?”*

Rudi scratched behind the dog’s ear. “We’re calling her Flutter.”

Tommy laughed. “What about the matching collars?”

“They’re in the kitchen,” she answered with her own laugh.

“All right,” he relented, and Flutter licked his face more. She wouldn’t stop.

#

The excitement of having a home, and all the love inside it, was too much for Flutter. She fell asleep before dinner was over and was snoring on the makeshift bed that Rudi had set up for her on the kitchen floor.

At a table steps away were Rudi and Tommy, along with the remains of a Reservoir pizza and a pair of Cokes. Like what they had on their first date or whatever it was.

Rudi rose. She lifted Tommy to his feet and led him to their open bedroom door while blushing as she had outside the restaurant, with Tommy more nervous than how she appeared.

In the room’s threshold was Tommy’s copy of *Damaged* against the wallon the floor.

He picked it up, and he gazed at it with rising joy, mixed with tears that he forced back. It was at that instant he realized how it had saved him.

“That you were listening to that was a real shock to me,” she said.

“It’s the best, and I’m not the only one who believes it.”

Rudi released Tommy’s hand, so that she could walk to the portable stereo on an end table by the bed’s far side.

She hit play, and “Moonlight Serenade” filled the room.

Tommy pointed at it agog. “Where did you get that?”

“I got the record at the library and made an infinite tape of it. You can listen to it all day if you want.”

“And never get tired of it.”

Tommy glimpsed around the room, and he motioned toward a gift-wrapped package on the bed. “What’s that?”

“A housewarming gift.”

“*Rudi*. I should be the one giving gifts. You’ve given me too much.”

“It’s nothing. Go on, open it.”

Tommy put down the record, and the two sat on the bed, and he opened the gift. He opened it so as not to tear the wrapping, and he uncovered her crumpled drawing of him set inside a simple black frame.

He raised it with a smirk. “I’ve always wanted a picture of Lee Ving.”

She smirked back, and she pushed him onto the bed before leaning down to kiss him.

He stopped her. He stopped her with a shake of his head. “I can’t.”

“There are only a few *can’ts*,” she grumbled, “and jillions of *cans*.”

Tommy had to force back more tears, more than before. But he got them under control as he caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. “The infinite possibilities.”

#

Tommy described his first night with Rudi in colors.

They trickled over him with each kiss and touch—blues and yellows and violets, as vivid as those in the Vermeer painting his parents had taken him to.

The colors weren’t only in his eyes. He felt them in Rudi’s lips and fingers and toes, and he heard them in Glenn Miller’s trombone.

There was ivory too. Michelangelo had carved her out of it. She was perfection. His perfection.

By the time he passed out, she’d become his lover. Not in all senses but in all the ones that mattered.

#

Tommy woke in the night.

He woke with fright because it was dark and he couldn’t tell if Rudi was there.

But there she was, asleep in his arms and clinging to him. She was clinging as if he’d slip away if she let go.

This recalled the afternoon by the waterfall, when she’d put her head on his shoulder. He had believed this was the best he could feel. But it was nothing compared to now, to holding her and protecting her and feeling her breathe against him.

This would be his reason to live. So he could keep feeling her body next to his.

“I’m never gonna die,” he mumbled, and he kept repeating it till he believed it.

#

I rang their apartment doorbell the next afternoon while carrying a full-size ceramic bowl wrapped in tinfoil.

Rudi answered the door. A Bible was in her hand, with her finger marking the spot she’d been reading.

It wouldn’t be the last time that I’d catch her with a Bible or a similar book, and she’d often be embarrassed by it, as she was at this moment. Fumbling about, she hid it behind her back as if it were a *Playgirl*.

What led her to it? Was it the same spark as Tommy’s? Or was it a desire to make sense of what wasn’t making any?

Rudi noted my bowl. “Whatcha got there?”

“Grandpa wanted to give you guys a housewarming present,” I told her, “a jar of his *utopence*.”

“His what?”

“Pickled sausages.”

Before a grimace could form on Rudi’s face, I raised the bowl. “But we made you a salad instead.”

She hugged me. She hugged me in the doorway for God knows how long.

#

“How’s next Saturday?” I called out from the dining room table across from Tommy.

“I’m not sure,” Rudi answered from the kitchen.

“You can’t avoid her forever.”

“It’s not me who’s been doing the avoiding.”

“Saturday will be fine,” Tommy said.

Rudi marched into the room carrying the salad bowl in one arm and a plate of omelets in the other hand, and she glared at Tommy.

Flutter jumped onto Rudi to get at the food, and she told everyone, “Rule number one here: no feeding Flutter from the table. Breaking it will be a capital offense.”

Tommy and I acknowledged this as Rudi used a pair of tongs to serve the salad and the omelets.

She joined us, and Tommy and I picked up our utensils, and we peeked at each other with skepticism before trying the omelets.

“This is good,” Tommy gasped.

“Yeah,” I gasped back.

“What were you guys expecting?” Rudi cried out.

“Glass and nails?” I muttered. “And rusty ones.”

Tommy and I laughed. Rudi laughed too before slapping my arm, sending me to the floor.

She was feeding Flutter a tomato under the table. So I continued laughing as I returned to my seat.

#

It took a lot of cajoling from Grandpa and me to get Grandma to meet Rudi, and that was only after she stopped throwing stuff at us.

After she agreed, she made it clear that it’d be a one-time happening.

The three of us waited outside the Matador by Rudi and Tommy’s apartment building. We waited awhile, with Grandma getting more uncomfortable. It was as if a bomb were about to go off.

The building’s front door swung open, and Rudi and Tommy climbed out, and they approached us with wariness.

Grandma sneered at Rudi, and she shook her head. “She . . . I cannot imagine what she is.”

I’m certain Grandma’s problem wasn’t Rudi’s appearance. It was how she reminded her of my mother. There was more fear on her face than disgust.

Tommy and Rudi reached us, and Rudi muttered, “Hi.”

Grandma didn’t respond, and I doubted whether we’d make it through lunch. Or get there. But this would prove minor compared to what happened next.

“Jeeeewww!” a voice howled beside us. With it a car of laughing boys came to the red light down the way.

We all turned to Grandpa.

He played it down, as he did whenever his Jewish looks got him noticed. I’d been witness to this a number of times but never as bad as this. I could tell that he wanted to make himself disappear.

All of us wanted to pretend that it didn’t happen. All but Rudi.

At the time, I believed her reaction came from the number tattooed on Grandpa’s arm. But now I believe she was recalling a time when she didn’t react, when she didn’t stand up to hate.

Whatever her reason, she marched toward the car with her fists clenched.

“Where you going?” Tommy called out.

Rudi didn’t answer. She kept marching.

“You can’t change the world!” Tommy hollered.

“Just watch me!” she hollered back.

Rudi reached the car and grabbed a rock, and she smashed the front passenger window, shattering it to pieces.

After leaning toward the boys and their frightened faces, she brandished the rock. “That’s my grandpa you’re laughing at.”

The driver didn’t wait for the light to change. He sped through it. He sped through the one after it.

“Not much of a Nazi, I would say,” Grandpa whispered to Grandma.

She wasn’t convinced. But we did make it through lunch. We also made plans for a Sabbath dinner the following week.

#

I grabbed that night’s pages off the table, along with the envelope, and I said goodnight to Rudi and strode toward the dorm and the glimmer trickling from it.

But I didn’t get there. I wouldn’t for hours.

Josh exited the dining hall, with a carton of ribs. One of those we had brought inside. He carried it through the courtyard to the back of his bright red pickup truck parked outside the gates, where he’d packed a dozen other cartons.

With a heave, he tossed the carton beside the others.

A *thhhuuddd* rang out. People could’ve heard it in Hesperia.

After returning to the dining hall, Josh entered the kitchen, where he opened the freezer and grabbed another carton.

Coming outside with it, he noticed me. He noticed me without worry. I was a fly who couldn’t harm him if I tried.

He headed out the gates, and I realized that the gift we’d received and all the effort made by many to make it happen was for nothing.

Which was when that pesky “moral code” began gnawing me.

#

I needed a bus pass for the next day.

I had to wait for Josh to finish carrying out the cartons, and I had to wait for him to return from wherever he took them. All this made that gnawing deeper.

It was past three when Josh led me to the vault.

A passport was inside it, and I didn’t need to guess whose it was.

“Is there a problem?” he growled as he grabbed the passes and offered me one.

I didn’t answer. I grabbed the pass and hurried off so that I couldn’t answer.

the seventh night

I woke before dawn.

It wasn’t the waves of darkness that woke me or the demons pushing me below myself. I hadn’t felt them in days and couldn’t make sense of why.

Was it because, unlike before, my mind wasn’t on myself?

#

I got my cup of green tea from the kitchen and strolled into the courtyard below the bluish clouds hovering over it, and I headed toward the corner table and the hazy yellow peeking above the canyons behind them.

Allison was in the booth by herself, and I could tell she was upset. So I sat across from her and asked what was wrong.

She didn’t answer.

A woman named Zara stopped by her. “I heard you got a job at Amazon. Congratulations.”

Allison said nothing to her as well.

“Josh said that he could get me one too,” the woman went on. “A late shift.”

Allison grimaced, and she grabbed her coffee and cigarettes and sulked off.

“It’s all vanished,” Mitchell screamed at a handful of guys in a booth steps away. His voice shook the air. “All the ribs and all the steaks we hauled into the freezer last night. Each of those cartons. Someone stole them all.”

The entire booth turned toward Jerry.

He lifted his sweatshirt. “Where could I put them?”

Matt glanced away. He did as if he’d expected the food would disappear. “So much for that Christmas dinner.”

“All they left was the fruit and vegetables,” Mitchell added.

Patrick did a drumroll on the table. “They must’ve been thinking of our health.”

Everyone laughed, including me. I guess we were like those creatures in Whoville. The ones who woke to empty houses on that famous Christmas morning. It didn’t matter that the Grinch had stolen our gift. It was what was behind it that mattered, and Josh couldn’t steal this.

#

I was power-washing the walkways outside the motel when Matt and a cleaning woman lumbered by.

They were chatting about the company Christmas party that was happening the following week. They’d been chatting about it since I got the job in the summer. On most days they did. There was longing in their voices, as if this were the best they could aspire to. It made me suppose that, from the day after the party, they’d be chatting about next year’s.

“Hey,” spoke a voice from beside me.

Amoun was whooping it up as usual. “I have some good news for you. I’ve decided to make you full-time at the beginning of the year. I am going to raise your salary too, all the way to minimum wage.”

I fell over, in belly laughter.

“Happy Chanukah,” he added before patting me on the shoulder and swaggering off.

The news should’ve made me happy. With a full-time job, I could’ve left the shelter. Matt and I were talking about getting an apartment together. It was possible that I could’ve kept the darkness and the demons away for good.

*Mann tracht, un Gott lacht.*

Grandma’s saying echoed while I tried to grasp why I wasn’t happy.

Two drifters broke my concentration. They were inside a room across the way and were breaking the seal that kept the window shut.

They got it open, and one by one they tossed their belongings outside, I guessed to avoid the reception area and what was waiting for them.

It was pathetic, but my witnessing of it was more so.

#

I approached the shelter in the fading light. An ambulance was racing from it.

I ran inside the gates and to Hank, and I asked him what had happened.

“Jennifer had a stroke,” he said. “One moment she’s talking with some people in a booth and the next she’s on the ground.”

I turned toward the courtyard and to Billy, who was on a bench surrounded by others. They were trying to comfort him, but his life had sped off, and he was desperate for a way to the hospital without a running car or money.

That’s how it often is for homeless people. The badness climbs on top of each other.

“It hasn’t been the best of days all around,” Hank went on. “Mario got kicked out.”

“For what?”

“Josh found a knife in his cubby.”

#

It was a somber line of people waiting to check in that night. All our minds were on Billy and Jennifer. Some could’ve also been on their own fragility.

Mine was.

So I was relieved when I got Tommy’s letter from Josh. With it gripped in my fist, I hurried into the courtyard to call Rudi.

But I couldn’t do this right away, as I learned that I had “volunteered” for street showers.

Two nights a week, we let people living on the streets inside for a shower. Most had been clients that the shelter had kicked out for various reasons. Instead of moving on, they camped out in the alley by the gates or down the block behind Starbucks.

What kept them there? Could they have had nowhere better to go? Or did it not matter where they went?

One of these people helped out at the shelter. He would help with lunch whenever I was around. His name was Fred, and he’d been a lawyer. You could see it under the decay.

My job that night was to sit in the men’s room for the next few hours. I had to sit there while they undressed before they showered, and I had to sit there while they got back into their dirty clothes.

Why we had to do this to them, why we had to dehumanize them more than how they already were, was no one’s guess. None could explain it to me.

The men that night were much like the drifters escaping the motel earlier. They were pathetic but not as much as me.

Doing my best to avoid this, I positioned my chair in their general direction and took out Tommy’s letter, and I called Rudi.

Realizing that we’d come to some more difficult moments in the story, I asked her if she was ready. But I was readying myself.

#

I rang the doorbell while my grandparents and I waited outside Tommy and Rudi’s apartment.

The last times I’d been there I hadn’t noticed the hospital through the window at the passageway’s end. But at night with all its lights shining, it jumped out at me, and I cringed.

*Only the exact units of measurement were unknown*.

Tommy’s countdown was ongoing. But I didn’t want to believe it, so I turned away, toward my grandparents.

Grandma wasn’t any more excited than she had been the last time we met Rudi. But she wasn’t sneering, and I took this as a hopeful sign.

The door swung open with a sweeping swish, along with the aroma of challah and potato knishes baking in the oven, and an anxious Rudi let us inside.

While Tommy and Flutter greeted my grandparents, I followed Rudi as she stormed toward the kitchen and the pan of kasha cooking on the stove.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She spun toward me. “I can’t get the matzo balls right.”

Grandma sighed. “We call them ‘knaidels.’”

“I can’t get the knaidels right.”

“How did you prepare the chicken fat?”

“They’re vegetarian.”

“Vegetarian knaidels? In chicken soup?”

“Parsley soup.”

The shock of this sent Grandma wobbling. She had to grip the sofa with both hands as she gasped, “Vegetarian knaidels in parsley soup?”

Eying Grandpa, she added, “Have you ever heard of such?”

“Just now,” he deadpanned.

Grandma hissed at him, and she waved him off with both hands before taking Rudi by the arm and leading her into the kitchen. “Let us see what we can do.”

“At least, Gertie,” Grandpa called out to her, “at least you will not have to worry about eating unkosher.”

“Gertie?” Rudi muttered. “Your name is . . .”

“Gertrud.”

“So I’m . . .”

“You have apparently been named after me.”

I was hoping this would make a crack in the frost, but the two wouldn’t stop arguing. They argued over the stove while trying combinations of all the ingredients in that kitchen. A couple of times they came close to blows.

But damn if those wouldn’t be the best knaidels I’d ever eat.

#

Before dinner could start, Rudi had to light the Sabbath candles and recite the blessing over them.

We were all nervous for her, including Grandma.

I held my breath as she placed a scarf over her head and lit the candles. She was the most nervous.

Lighting the candles was easy. So was waving the light’s spirit into her home. Much harder was singing the Hebrew prayer. None of us were sure what to expect. I’m sure she wasn’t.

Out came her voice and the quiet that rumbled through the room in response to it.

Rudi turned to us. “That bad?”

No one answered, but “bad” couldn’t’ve formed in any of our minds. Though Grandma had become pained. It was all over her face, and we all focused on it.

Rudi put down her scarf, and she stepped to the woman and asked what was wrong.

“Your voice,” Grandma mumbled with her head shaking, “it, it is your mother’s.”

The two stared at each other. They stared and stared till Grandma broke down and grasped Rudi.

Rudi didn’t react. She didn’t breathe.

“I miss her so much,” Grandma added as she cried.

It took some time, but Rudi put her arms around the woman as she tried to control her own emotions. “I miss her too. I don’t want to, but I do. I can never remember the bad. I remember her buying me cotton candy at the circus and holding me all night after a nightmare.”

“I remember it too, whenever I close my eyes.”

“She . . .”

“She never could let herself be a part of us.”

Rudi lit up. From what she’d say next, it was because she got where Grandma was coming from. “‘Your people are my people,’” she whispered, quoting from the book of Ruth. “‘Your God is my God.’’”

Grandma cried some more, and she gripped Rudi harder and whispered back with a quote from the same verse. “‘And not even death shall separate us.’”

The two continued their embrace. These two women who couldn’t’ve been more different. The granddaughter of a Nazi and a woman whose life the Nazis had wrecked. A punk rocker and a gentlewoman, separated by generations and continents and mores.

But they were the same.

#

So stuffed were we after dinner that none of us could move. None more so than Flutter, who’d sprawled herself out on the floor.

Rudi stretched her arms. “Grandpa, I want to hear the rest of your Kafka story.”

“*Oy vey!”* Grandma shrieked. “Do not get him started. You will never get him out of your house.”

Everyone laughed. None more so than Grandpa. But he wasn’t going to let this opportunity get by him. So, after he filled Tommy in on the story’s beginning, he brought it to an end.

#

“Brod!” Hašek yelled as he followed the man down the hospital corridor. It was so thunderous that it was painful to hear.

This wasn’t Hermann’s business, but he peeked into the hallway. His curiosity over why Hašek would care what Kafka wanted Brod to burn overwhelmed him.

Why would he care about Kafka at all?

Hašek raced after Brod in his wheelchair in a corridor bereft of light. The two men were but figures.

“If you don’t stop,” Hašek cried out while panting for air, “I will follow you to Prague. I will haunt you to your last days. I swear I will!”

Brod slowed to a halt as Hašek rolled up to him.

With awkwardness, Hašek lifted himself from the chair, and he grabbed hold of Brod for balance and uttered, “What does he want you to burn?”

Brod didn’t answer. So Hašek shook him. He shook him and howled, “Answer me!”

“His novels,” Brod said.

“Novels? He has written novels?”

Brod didn’t respond.

“Are . . . are they like his stories?”

“Better.”

“And you, you’re gonna burn them?”

“What can I do?”

Hašek threw Brod and himself into a wall and forced the man to face him. “What gives you the right?”

“Me?” gasped Brod. “They’re not mine, they’re his.”

“What gives him the right, the selfish little kike!”

“Let go of me!”

“Listen to me, you worthless wretch, you’re gonna publish those novels, every single one.”

“No.”

“The greatest writer Prague will ever bear, and you’d turn his poetry into ash? You’d be damned. For such a crime there can be no absolution!”

“Let go of me!”

Brod pushed Hašek away, sending him to the floor, and he sprinted off.

“You won’t burn them, Brod!” Hašek hollered. “You won’t!”

#

Hermann returned to his bed.

“What was that screaming about?” Kafka asked.

Hermann turned away. “I can’t say.”

Hašek came back to the room, and he glared at Kafka. He glared as he rolled his wheelchair toward him.

“What was that all about?” Kafka demanded.

“I can’t imagine how it’s your concern,” Hašek growled, and he rambled toward his bed.

But he didn’t go far. He stopped with his back to both men and without saying a word.

“What’s wrong?” Kafka asked.

Hašek didn’t answer. All he did was lower his head.

“Did you hear me?” Kafka asked next, a bit louder.

“You’re looking at a jealous man, Herr Kafka,” Hašek mumbled.

“Jealous?”

“When I told you the other day that I had read some of your stories, I lied.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve read them all. Every single one. I have them stacked in my home. I’m jealous of you, of your talent and accomplishments.”

“Me?”

“I wish I could write like you, that my words could flow as yours do, from the page onto someone’s soul. But I’m only a scribbler. It doesn’t matter how many books I sell. Nothing will change that I’m a failure.”

With a teary face, Hašek turned toward Kafka. “I never cared about the money. I wanted to be a real writer and not some peddler of dreck as you called me.

“That’s why I got so mad at you the other day. You weren’t the first to call *Švejk* that. That’s what the publishers called it. That was why I had to put it out myself. No one would touch it. Not because they believed it wouldn’t sell, they were certain it would. But they didn’t want to be associated with dreck or with me.”

Hašek took off. He yanked his wheels forward.

“*Švejk* isn’t dreck,” Kafka called out, causing Hašek to come to another stop. “I was lashing out at you. The truth is . . . I loved every page. Every single one. You’re a modern-day Rabelais, Mr. Hašek. If publishers can’t figure this out, never you mind. History will.

“Let me tell you a story. I was crossing Palačák when I approached a group of boys. They were playing out a scene from *Švejk*. The last one from the first book, if I remember right. The one where Lieutenant Lukáš curses out Švejk for giving him the colonel’s stolen dog. These boys, they performed it so perfectly and with such delight.

“Through them, Mr. Hašek, Švejk will live on past you. He will live forever. These children, they will pass him onto their children and their children’s children. And were you aware that Max is preparing a German translation of it?”

“He is?” gasped Hašek.

“Soon the whole world will love Švejk. They will love him as we do. He is all of us, our follies and our fears but most of all our joys.

“I should be the one who’s envious, envious of you. You called yourself a failure, but they’ll forget me before I’m lowered into the ground.”

“Don’t be so sure about that, Herr Kafka,” Hašek told him as he rubbed the tears off his chubby face. “Don’t be so sure.”

#

All afternoon and into the evening Hermann tried to convince Kafka to go home with him.

“If you won’t live for others,” he said while gazing at the ceiling from his bed, “what about for yourself? What would you miss?”

Kafka said nothing.

“Oh, what I’d miss,” Hermann went on as he crossed his arms. “I’d miss the sun setting over the Vltava. I can’t imagine life without it. But more than that I’d miss the marvel in the eyes of a child when you tell them a story. I would’ve given any price to see it in the eyes of my own child. The one who was stillborn. And what about the kiss of a woman? You can’t tell me that you wouldn’t miss that.”

Kafka said nothing. So Hermann gave up and went to sleep, consigned to leaving the following day without him.

#

Late at night Hermann woke.

Kafka was reading from a compact hardcover book, an edition of *The Metamorphosis*. He was viewing it as if it were his own son or daughter.

Hermann stretched his arms and yawned. “I have the best reason yet for you to live.”

Kafka ignored him and continued to the next page.

“It’s rather selfish, I’ll admit,” Hermann went on, “but I’d love to read another of your stories. I bet I’m not the only one.”

#

Hermann woke a second time.

It was morning and Kafka was hovering over him in a suit, with his open suitcase on his bed.

“You better hurry,” he said. “There’s only one train out of here, and it leaves in an hour.”

Hermann jumped out of bed. But he froze when he noted his nightshirt. “My clothes.”

“I sent Nurse Černá to get them.”

Kafka’s copy of *The Metamorphosis* was lying on Hermann’s end table, and he pointed at it. “What’s this doing here?”

“A belated Chanukah gift.”

Hermann lifted the book and opened its cover. Kafka had inscribed it to him.

“Thank you, Herr Kafka,” he said. “Thank you.”

Kafka was about to respond when the screeching of wheels interrupted him.

Hašek was approaching them in his wheelchair. The man was in a dour mood as he reached them. “Would you gentlemen do me the honor of accompanying me to the dock?”

Raising his fist, he showed them the one-heller coin between his fingers.

#

Kafka wheeled Hašek to the staircase, the one on the cliff overlooking the river, with Hermann a few steps back and holding both his suitcase and Kafka’s.

Hašek peered downward, at the steps and the handful of people boarding the boat from the dock, and he shook his head. “I didn’t realize there were so many stairs. I won’t make it.”

“But we will,” Kafka told him as he offered him his hand.

Hašek took it, and Kafka lifted him to his feet.

“I see it now,” Hašek muttered while gazing up into Kafka’s eyes.

“What?” Kafka asked.

“Your father.”

The two made their way down. They did with their arms around one another. Together each complemented the other to the extent that they appeared as one healthy body.

“You think they’ll have some good pubs?” Hašek said.

“I’m certain of it,” Kafka answered.

“I’ll save you a seat.”

“I’d like that.”

The men paused, to catch their breaths.

“Can I call you Franta?” asked Hašek.

“You may.”

“And you, you call me Jarda. That’s what my friends call me.”

The men continued on, and they got to the dock. Hašek paid Charon his fare, and Kafka helped him into the boat before it pulled away.

“You know what?” Hašek called out with his face beaming with happiness as it reflected the blinding sun. “I’m no longer so afraid.”

“Neither am I,” Kafka called back as he waved his friend goodbye. “Neither am I.”

#

Grandma threw up her arms, toward the row of floodlights on the ceiling and the heavens beyond them. “Kafka must be sick of that story. Hašek too.”

Everyone laughed. None more so than Grandpa.

Flutter jumped to her feet and joined in. She howled in jubilance.

“Well, I loved it,” Rudi declared as she grabbed Tommy’s hand with a tint of dampness in her eyes.

I could tell that Grandpa had been right. The story did have meaning for her. The same meaning that Black Flag record had for Tommy.

#

Spring came and Tommy’s eighteenth birthday.

This would’ve been an accomplishment for anyone, but for him it was more.

To celebrate it, Grandma cooked him dinner at our house. As a way of welcoming him into our family, she made him all the Czech dishes she could make without meat. These weren’t many but were delicious and included stuffed peppers and fried mushrooms and lots of dumplings, both potato and fruit.

#

The next day Rudi held a party for Tommy by the waterfall, after telling everyone that the only gift they were to bring was themselves.

I guess she recognized how difficult it would’ve been getting gifts for him.

What do you give someone who’s about to die?

I drove Tommy and Rudi and Flutter to the falls that afternoon, along with a cake Rudi had baked, a few boxes of Reservoir pizza, and some soda.

Owen and Eliot were already there, and Jared and Beth came later. So did Maria.

A motley bunch we were that day, sitting on the rocks in the sun while listening to a tape of Tommy’s favorite Yardbirds songs that Rudi had made. Over “Happenings Ten Years Time Ago” and Tommy and Owen’s arguing over whether Beck or Page was the better guitarist, I glanced at everyone. I glanced the most at myself.

There wasn’t a shred of commonality. There was no rationale for us spending this time together, but here we were. Here we belonged.

#

The party ended early.

After I helped Rudi carry all the stuff back to the car, she asked me to bring Tommy back from the falls while she said goodbye to Maria on Crest Drive.

I returned to the rocks. Tommy was hanging over the edge next to Jared and Beth. They were staring into the ravine.

“Some people back home have the same,” Jared said, with Beth holding on to him from behind. She held on to him with all she had. “It’s only dumb luck I don’t.”

“There could be a reason,” Tommy told him.

“What reason could there be for me to live and not you?”

“That’s not what I mean. What you survived could give you a reason to do what you wouldn’t’ve done.”

#

Rudi, Tommy, Flutter, and I left the reservation, and we passed South Mountain Elementary on the way to Pathmark, so Rudi could get some groceries.

Reading Is Fundamental was having a readathon behind the school and volunteers were welcome.

“Let’s do it,” Tommy cried out.

“You sure you’re up for it?” Rudi asked.

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

It was obvious that Tommy was tired. It was why Rudi ended the party early. But we couldn’t refuse him on his birthday. So I drove down a steep hill to the blacktop behind the school. Dozens of children were waiting and a handful of adults were organizing them into groups.

It was no surprise that the adults got frightened on whiff of Rudi. But what was surprising was how the kids didn’t. Her appearance drew them as if she were a superhero, and that wasn’t far from the truth. They all surrounded her and wanted to be part of her group, and they loved Flutter and the matching spiked collars the two had on.

“Be gentle,” Rudi told the children as they encircled the dog and petted her. “She’s been through some rough times.”

The kids took heed. Some may’ve been recalling their own rough times.

#

All three of us headed reading groups on the field below the blacktop, as did many others.

But Rudi’s was the largest and got the most attention. The kids in hers took turns sitting on her lap while others sat next to Flutter, and she helped them voice out the syllables that made up each tale they read.

As she had with Owen, I bet she was repaying a debt that afternoon, for when that librarian took the time to teach her how to read. But what I remember is how she made reading magical for those kids. She bestowed upon them a secret wand that opened worlds, as many as they could imagine. The marvel on their faces will never leave me.

All afternoon we read with the kids. But Rudi did nonstop. It was impossible to tell who was enjoying it more.

#

The sun started to fall, and the readathon’s organizers had to shut it down, sending the kids in Rudi’s group screeching. But Rudi was more disappointed.

“You should become a teacher,” the woman running the event told Rudi as we left. Earlier, she’d been the most frightened person there, but now she was the least.

#

Tommy appeared healthy in the months that followed, and he kept away from the hospital. There were days that I couldn’t tell he was sick or could pretend it. I could pretend that these wonderful times, the best that would come my way, would last forever.

But I’d learn the truth of this period from his journal.

They hadn’t yet given his disease a name, at least one that everyone could agree on, and there were no treatments for it. All Dr. Kleinsten could do was treat his symptoms, and these had no end.

Among them were the Kaposi lesions that would develop on Tommy’s face and body. As she had with Maria, Rudi taught him how to use makeup. This included the many hours she spent experimenting with foundations and concealers till she got the right blend.

Rudi’s care didn’t end there. She’d often have to change their bedsheets during the night due to the sweating Tommy would do. At times she’d do this twice a night. What’s more, she had to nurse him through each cold and sickness, as any could’ve been fatal.

The reason I was unaware of all this was that Rudi never let on how much they were struggling. I remember her as happy at this time. I’d never see her as happy as she was with him.

#

Despite their troubles, Tommy and Rudi developed the kind of everyday routines any couple would.

This included hikes into the woods with Flutter. “The beautiful afternoons of normal,” Tommy would call them, where they would argue all the time. They’d argue about the news and about politics and about music. They’d argue about the weather. But it didn’t matter to him because there never was a time with her that hinted of dull, not when she was holding his hand.

They also went to Dr. Kleinsten’s office each week, where they’d go over his condition and get the latest test results and prognoses. No matter how depressing this got, Rudi would glean a positive.

But one afternoon she couldn’t.

“I’ve got some good news for you,” the doctor said to them across from his desk. “A hospice that’s willing to take Tommy.”

“Hospices are for people who’ve given up,” Rudi growled.

“It would make both your lives easier.”

Tommy agreed. He was tired of fighting the disease and wanted to ease Rudi’s burden. He wanted her to have a life outside of taking care of him.

But Rudi would have none of it. “We’re not giving up. We’re not.”

#

Another of Rudi and Tommy’s routines was spending their Saturdays at Vintage Vinyl. They’d bring lunch and listen to records all day with Butch.

They didn’t listen only to their types of records. Some days they’d pick a bunch at random and listen to them the whole way through. They listened to records they wouldn’t’ve otherwise, such as *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* and *Patti LaBelle*. They loved the latter so much that they bought it and had Butch make a tape of it for them.

On other days, they would binge on the British imports that Butch would get because he liked the bands’ names, such as the Cure and the Psychedelic Furs and Echo and the Bunnymen, who were all years away from becoming known in America. Among these records was a single from a group that was as obscure in England as they were here and got Rudi so worked up that she called me and howled, “You gotta hear this. The guy sings, he sings like he means every word.”

She put the phone to the record, and I heard “Hand in Glove” and the voice of Morrissey for the first time.

The two also listened to that Coltrane album that I came upon during my first visit.

Tommy loved the music, but he loved more the poem Coltrane wrote in the liner notes. The one he played his saxophone to in the record’s final movement. Two lines of it, in particular, grabbed him and wouldn’t let go.

*God breathes through us so completely . . .*

*So gently we hardly feel it . . .*

This entry puzzled me.

How could Tommy’s faith grow the closer he got to the end? How could he have had more hope the more hopeless he got?

I’ve spent many nights trying to answer these questions, and I doubt I’ll ever do so in full. But could it have been that this eighteen-year-old boy stumbled upon the purpose of faith? Was it to raise us when we have nowhere left to fall?

#

Rudi and Tommy didn’t spend all that time at Vintage Vinyl for the music or the poetry. They also went for Butch, who’d make them laugh all day through. This was possible because Butch didn’t care about Tommy’s disease and refused to treat him in a different way because of it.

He was as rude to him as he was to everyone.

#

The laughter and the music and the hope couldn’t fill all of Tommy’s days.

One morning, he sat beside his bedroom window as the leaves of fall dropped from the trees. He sat beside it into the afternoon and was sitting there in the dark when Rudi stepped through the door.

That summer, she graduated high school and got a job. One that was personal to her. She worked at the first counseling center in the state to help the increasing number of those diagnosed with what they had just named AIDS, and she often had to work late.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He wouldn’t tell her. He kept staring into the window. He kept it up after she helped him from the chair and into bed.

She joined him, and she wrapped her arms and legs around him, and she whispered, “Tell me. Please tell me.”

He shook his head, but she kept pressing, and he relented. “Today I realized, I realized I’d never see the leaves grow.”

#

Tommy woke with the sun. He woke with surprise, coming from Rudi’s absence and all the pots in the room. They were everywhere, filled with young and green and growing life.

Bringing another into the room was Rudi. She was filthy, having spent the night hauling plants from a nursery down the road. Tommy could tell, too, that she was exhausted. But she refused to show it.

“It’s spring,” she told him with her face as bright as the morning pouring through the window. “It will always be spring.”

#

Rudi often had to work on Saturdays. On one, I drove Tommy to Vintage Vinyl in her place.

We stepped from the car with a pizza, and I noticed how slight Tommy had gotten in the face. Which must’ve been why he’d wear a baseball cap whenever he went out, so you couldn’t notice it as much.

The cap didn’t hide Tommy’s hair and how it was no longer as wavy as it was when I met him. But he also wasn’t the same doomed young man. He stood in defiance of it, and this was on display to the whole world as we entered the empty store.

“You got the new DKs album,” I blurted out.

“Go ahead,” Butch told me as he pulled out a slice, “put it on.”

I grabbed *Plastic Surgery Disasters,* and I rushed behind the counter with it to the turntable as Tommy stepped to Butch.

“Rudi’s having a birthday,” he mentioned.

“Me too,” I mentioned back before placing the recordon the player and the needle on top of it.

“Him too,” Tommy said as the Dead Kennedys filled the store. You could tell it was them from the opening chord. “But I’m at a loss as to what to get her, and he’s no help at all.”

“Well, don’t look at me,” Butch groaned after he put down his pie and swallowed. “There’s a reason I’m single.”

“But you guys love the same stuff.”

“Except you.”

“Come on, if you were having a birthday and could have whatever you wanted, what would it be?”

Butch didn’t need a second to answer. “To see Bad Brains live.”

“They’re good?”

“They’re good,” I confirmed.

“Do they play at that A7 place?”

“They usually play at CBGB,” Butch told him. “But they left town.”

“What about . . . what about Black Flag?”

“They’re in LA. They do come out here to play but not now.”

“Lee Ving?”

“You mean Fear? They’re also in LA.”

Tommy pointed at the record I was playing. “Them?”

“San Francisco.”

“Is there anyone good playing around here?”

“I’ve got some flyers somewhere.”

Butch checked under the counter and through the clutter, and he pulled out a bunch of papers and set them on the counter.

One made Tommy shine.

#

Rudi dragged herself into her apartment after more than a full day of work. She did as Tommy dragged her out.

“Where are we going?” she whined when he led her into the corridor.

He didn’t answer as she shut their door before Flutter could run out. Though this didn’t keep the dog from making herself heard.

Tommy kept dragging, and the two approached the building’s front door.

Rudi resisted. “I’m beat.”

“You won’t be,” he insisted, and he flung himself and her outside.

A driver in a black uniform was standing alongside a white limousine. The kind she might’ve ridden in if she had gone to her high school prom.

“What’s going on?” she demanded.

“There’s one way to learn.”

#

The limousine crawled its way through traffic in Lower Manhattan before idling beside a parked car not far from CBGB.

Rudi gazed out the window. “Why are we stopping here?”

Tommy pointed to a flyer on the wall. It revealed that Richard Hell was performing that night.

“Happy Birthday,” he whispered.

This shocked her. But through it she kissed him. She kissed and kissed him. Nothing could get her to stop.

*kisses are a better fate than wisdom*

Tommy recalled the poet’s words. The ones that came from that classroom on the day he met Rudi. He recalled, too, the man’s overromanticized notions of life and recognized how they were true.

He was bathing in them.

#

Hand-in-hand, Rudi and Tommy passed through the crowded bar to the back where the bands played.

“Rudi?” someone called out.

Rudi released Tommy’s hand and turned toward a young woman with blue hair and facial piercings, who was next to a group of punks that made Rudi conservative.

“Leila?” Rudi wailed before grabbing the woman.

“Where have you been?” Leila screeched as she grabbed Rudi back. “You haven’t been anywhere.”

“I’ve been busy.”

The two let go of one another, and Rudi said hello to the others.

Taking Tommy’s hand, she introduced him, leading to some uncomfortable stares, as Tommy didn’t fit in with them any more than Rudi had with his friends. But he didn’t take offense.

“I’ll meet you by the stage,” he said to her.

“I’ll go with you,” she told him.

“Stay with your friends.”

“But . . .”

He gestured toward a door. “I gotta go to the bathroom anyway.”

#

Tommy was burning up when he staggered into the graffiti-covered men’s room. He was so sick that he had to lean against a wall, and he slid all the way down it to the floor and was unsure he’d get up.

“You missed Bad Brains,” came Leila’s exasperated voice from outside the door. “You missed every show.”

“I had no idea they were in town,” Rudi said.

“You said that you loved them.”

“I do love them. I listen to that tape you gave me all the time. I couldn’t get through a day without it. Remember how we’d skip over those slow reggae songs? I don’t anymore. I especially don’t skip them.”

“We’re gonna follow them down the coast, all the way to hell. We’re leaving after last call. Why don’t you come with us?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got some better to-do.”

“What could be better than Bad Brains?”

“There’s only one ‘what.’”

“It’s got to do with that guy, doesn’t it?”

“It’s got to do with that guy.”

“Who is he anyway?”

“I told you, his name’s Tommy.”

“Yeah, but *who* is he?”

“The boy I love.”

“The boy you what?”

“He’s what gets me through the night.”

No longer did Tommy feel sick. He felt himself rising from the floor.

#

Tommy took a seat at an empty table not far from the stage as a cliff dropped onto him.

He had believed that he needed Rudi more than she needed him and that their relationship was one-sided. But after hearing what she told Leila, he doubted this, and it didn’t make him happy. It scared him that he wouldn’t be around for her. It scared him so much that it put him in a daze.

He came out of it when Rudi jumped onto his lap.

“*Rudi*,” he grumbled.

“What?” she grumbled back.

“It’s your birthday, hang with your friends.”

“They’re not my friends. We just love all the same music and hate all the same wrongs. That doesn’t make you a friend.”

She added to this by singing to him. “*You are my friend.*” She sang it as Patti LaBelle had on the record the two came to love.

After putting her head on his chest, she murmured, “You’re my friend despite not loving all the same music or hating all the same wrongs. You’re my friend in spite of it.”

Reaching up to touch Tommy’s face, she felt how hot it was, and she jumped. “You’re sick, Tommy. We’ve been through this. You’ve gotta tell me when you’re sick.”

“I’m okay,” he whined.

“We’ve gotta go home.”

“We’ve gotta stay.”

“Do you want to go back to the hospital?”

“I’m going back no matter what. But not tonight. Tonight we’re watching Richard Hell.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s your birthday!”

“Each day is my birthday! Each day I come home to you it’s my birthday. Each day I wake to you it’s my birthday. I don’t need this.”

But Tommy wouldn’t relent, nor would he let her make a fuss over him. All she could do was hold onto him and hope for the best as they waited for Hell to play.

They waited for hours.

#

Hell and his band came on stage, and they played “Blank Generation.” The song that helped two lonely people see that they weren’t alone.

Tommy wrote that, as Hell sang about the feelings that marked the decade of our youth for the jillionth time, if he had glimpsed at the two, he might’ve noted how they were gazing up at him with their arms and bodies entwined as if he were singing the most beautiful love song ever written.

#

As Tommy expected, he returned to the hospital.

Would he ever leave?

It was a question that he asked on most days.

But we were determined to make them happy. For Tommy that meant reading all the classics, old and new, and I raided my grandparents’ library to make this happen.

On one raid, in a darkened nook I came upon a compact hardcover book that startled me. A first edition of *The Metamorphosis*.

“It can’t be,” I muttered before I pulled out the book and opened its cover.

Despite my bad German, I could read the inscription.

*To my good friend Hermann,*

*Franz Kafka*

From the first I’d heard Grandpa’s Kafka story, I was doubtless that there was a lot of truth in it. But I also was doubtless that this was well beneath it.

Now I wasn’t so doubtless.

#

I came to Tommy’s room with a stack of books.

Rudi was next to him on the bed, below the picture on the wall, of a boy who longed for what he couldn’t imagine, and was reading aloud Cummings’ “i carry your heart with me(i carry it in.”

“I wish I could write those kinds of words to you,” Tommy murmured after she finished. “Words that speak without spoken.”

“Yours speak plenty.”

I knocked on the door, and they greeted me as a copy of *The Master and Margarita* slipped from my grasp.

Climbing off the bed with her book, Rudi sat in a chair beside it, in front of a bureau and the box of Reservoir pizza that was on top of it along with a pair of Cokes. While I put my books next to another stack on the bureau by the other side of Tommy’s bed, Rudi pulled out a slice and tried to feed it to Tommy.

Despite all the weight he was losing, he wouldn’t eat. He grimaced and shook his head.

I motioned toward the old stack. “You done with those?”

“Yeah.”

A copy of *Ficciones* was under the pizza box, and I pointed at it. “What about the Borges?”

“Nah.”

“You’re telling me that you can get through Boccaccio and Potocki in a couple of days but can’t finish that in more than a week?”

“I can’t stop reading it.”

“What’s so special about it?” Rudi asked.

“I’ll show you,” he said as he reached for the book.

Rudi put down her pizza, and she grabbed the paperback and gave it to him.

While halting in multiple places, he flipped through the pages. He flipped until he reached the story he wanted. “This is my favorite, ‘The Secret Miracle.’”

“That’s Grandpa’s favorite too,” I said. “He reads it each year on the anniversary of his first wife’s death.”

“It’s set in Prague,” Tommy told Rudi.

“What’s it about?” she asked as she took the book and eyed the story’s first page.

“This playwright during World War II. The Nazis arrest him and sentence him to death, and he’s upset about it.”

“I should hope so.”

“But he’s not upset about dying. Well, he could be upset about that too. But what upsets him more is that he’ll never write his opus, his reason for being. So he begs God for a one-year reprieve, so that he can write his play. And, guess what, God grants him his wish.”

“So he doesn’t get shot?”

“Oh, he gets shot, right on time.”

“I don’t get it.”

“On the morning of his execution, the soldiers stand him against a wall and fire their guns. But the bullets freeze. The whole world freezes, including the playwright, who remains conscious.”

Tommy paused. He paused as he stepped into the story. “What’s a fraction of a second becomes a year to him, and he gets to write his play in his head. He doesn’t care that it won’t be famous or celebrated or known. Achieving greatness is enough, and he gets to die happy. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Rudi lowered her eyes. “I guess.”

Tommy turned to me. “She’s not much of a believer, no matter how much her nose is in that Bible.”

Rudi got angry, and she jumped up. “How could I believe in a God that would let this happen?”

Not waiting for an answer, she scampered from the room. She might not have realized that she was clutching the book.

Tommy stared into the doorway. “I have my opus, my reason for being.”

#

I stayed with Tommy late into the night.

For hours we discussed the books he’d read. He had so much enthusiasm for them that I felt guilty for taking them for granted. I felt guilty for taking so much for granted.

He fell asleep, and I grabbed the old books from the bureau, sending the piece of paper that was under them to the floor.

It was in Tommy’s handwriting.

*even punk girls blush*

*and love*

*harder than they punch*

*and they kiss you to tears*

*while you die in their arms*

I slid the page, along with the words that spoke without spoken, beneath the new stack of books and left. Rudi was sitting on the floor outside his door, staring into the Borges book.

“You all right?” I mumbled.

She didn’t respond.

I sat next to her. Her eyes were on the last page of “The Secret Miracle.”

“Did you read it?” I whispered.

She shook her head but not at my question.

“It’s not a story,” she said. “It’s not fiction. It’s not.”

“That’s his style. All his writing reads that way, as if he were making an authentic and objective observation.”

“No, it’s true. It’s all true.”

I didn’t respond. Years later, the truth in Borges’ works would overwhelm me, most of all in this story. But at that moment it was only a story.

Unsure of what to do, I took Rudi’s hand.

She cried. She cried and leaned against me, and I wanted to cry with her. I wanted this so much.

#

I woke in the night and rose to my waist, with voices and music coming from downstairs.

“It is heroic what you are doing for those people,” spoke Grandma in the kitchen, with an old German cabaret record playing in the den next to it.

“They’re the heroes,” Rudi told her. “Not a day passes that they don’t humble me.”

I wasn’t shocked hearing the two, despite how early it was. They talked over the phone often and at times late into the night, and they got together as much as they could. I guess they were making up for lost time.

“How are you holding up?” Grandma asked.

“I’m okay,” Rudi insisted.

“You forget that I raised your mother. You lie as badly as she did.”

Rudi was silent, but I could sense she was gasping for air. “What am I gonna do? What will I do when he’s gone?”

Grandma took many seconds before answering. “You will live, that is what you will do. You will live big. You will live so big that when the two of you meet next, when you meet for good, he will be proud of you. You will be proud of you.”

The two must’ve hugged, because they didn’t say another word till Grandma mentioned, “You are yet grating the potatoes too fine.”

“*Sakra!”* Rudi cried out.

“You speak Czech! Did your mother teach you?”

“My brother.”

“Oh, do not learn it from him. He tortures it as much as your grandfather. I will teach you. I will teach you all its poetries. It is so pretty that people do not speak it. They sing it.”

“What’s that music you’re listening to?”

“Dora Gerson. My first husband and I, we would drive to Berlin to hear her sing.”

“It’s wonderful.”

“You like it?”

“I’m gonna make a tape of it. I bet Tommy would love it too.”

“You keep surprising me, Rudi. It is such a joy at my age to be surprised.”

“What is she singing about?”

“Times that cannot return.”

The two danced. Their footsteps echoed off the linoleum, in beat with Grandma’s voice as she sang with the music.

*Vorbei, vorbei, vorbei—*

*Ein letztes Wort,*

*Ein letzter Gruß—vorbei.*

Grandma’s voice broke, and I wasn’t the only one who noticed.

“What’s wrong, Grandma?” Rudi asked.

“They burned her,” she called out with her voice breaking more. “They burned her at Auschwitz. But they could not burn that voice. Listen to it. It outlives them all.”

#

I left my bedroom in the morning. Rudi and Grandma were putting on their coats in the foyer.

As I stepped onto the landing, Grandma reached into her purse.

She pulled out a check, and she offered it to Rudi and said, “Your grandfather and I want to give this to you.”

Rudi shook her head. “We’re doing okay.”

“Why will you not let me spoil you?”

“You already spoil me, Grandma, with the one thing I need.”

#

Grandpa and I came to Tommy’s room to pick Rudi up for lunch. He was staring at the cover of *The Master and Margarita*.

He put down the book and motioned down the hall. “She’s visiting Gary.”

“How was it?” Grandpa asked while pointing at the book.

“It says Bulgakov spent his last twelve years writing it.”

“He could not get it published while Stalin was alive. So he kept writing and writing it. That is why it is so perfect.”

“He couldn’t’ve known that it would ever come out. What motivated him to keep going?”

“I bet it was the woman he based Margarita on.”

#

Gary was one of Rudi’s clients.

Grandpa and I came to the open door of a tallish man with a thinnish beard. He had the same tubes coming in and out of his body that Tommy had.

“I’ll be ready in a minute,” Rudi said.

She introduced us, and Grandpa held out his hand to the man.

Gary didn’t take it. Instead he glanced at Rudi with wariness and muttered, “Have you told him about me?”

“There is nothing she could say that would make a difference,” Grandpa answered with his hand remaining out.

Gary shook it. Neither wanted to stop.

“Is that a domino set?” Grandpa asked as he motioned toward a box behind Gary.

“Yeah, unfortunately it’s a lost art. No one can play.”

“I love dominoes.”

“Would you like to play?”

#

Grandpa was back at the hospital the next day and for many after it.

He spent this time with Gary and many AIDS patients. He became a surrogate grandfather to them, the most to those whose families had shunned them. Grandpa would be there whenever they needed a kind word, and he’d play board games with them and bring them gifts, as any grandpa would. But more than that he listened to them and never judged.

In return, Grandpa got a receptive audience for his detective stories. More than that he got purpose. No longer did he spend his afternoons with a TV, and never did I hear him listen to Pergolesi anymore.

#

One patient was immune to Grandpa’s charms.

His name was Tony and wouldn’t respond to anyone. He was already dead and was waiting for his body to acknowledge it.

But Grandpa refused to give up. He’d sit next to him and tell him his stories, all afternoon at times.

This didn’t work, so he told him the story that he seldom told, of Ana’s death, and he cried himself to sleep.

#

Grandpa woke to a crash. It came from a tray that a nurse had dropped when she entered the room.

Grandpa hadn’t been the only one crying. Tears were streaming down Tony’s face.

“How?” the nurse muttered while shaking her head.

“I suppose,” Grandpa told her, “I suppose this terrible disease cannot rob you of what makes us all human.”

#

With the afternoon disappearing in Tommy’s window, Rudi slithered into the room carrying another box of Reservoir pizza.

She brought him one on most days. She brought it that day despite him connected to a feeding tube, in addition to those that helped him breathe and get fluids. She brought him the pizza because it connected him to his old life and to being alive.

Tommy was staring at a bureau and the simple metal menorah on top of it that the rabbi had left earlier.

“It’s gonna be Chanukah soon,” he said after she didn’t say a word. She didn’t say hello.

“Yeah,” she muttered. “Grandma’s been showing me how to make potato latkes. For the first time ever, we didn’t have to substitute ingredients.”

Tommy kept his stare on the menorah. “I must admit, when I was a kid, I had some serious Christmas envy. My friends, they had Santa Claus and reindeers and Christmas trees, and all we had were a bunch of candles. I mean, so the oil in the Temple burned for eight days. Who cares?”

With a rush of fervor, Tommy turned toward Rudi. “But I get it now. The miracle wasn’t the oil lasting eight days. It was that it lasted longer than what anyone could expect. That’s what we have to be thankful for. That’s what we always have to be thankful for, the exceeding of expectations.”

Rudi said nothing. She didn’t have to. Her glazed-over eyes as his words fell over her said it all.

#

Despite how sick Tommy was, he insisted on spending Chanukah at home.

From the way his story had begun, I bet he was curious as to what would happen during the replay of it.

I, too, was curious. But Tommy made but one entry during the holiday.

*Chanukah was different this time, and I got a better* *gift. But Rudi’s holding back*.

“What does this mean?” I asked Rudi while gaping into the page.

“Why are you asking me?” she snapped.

“What was it that you were holding back?”

“I can’t imagine what he’s talking about.”

“What was the gift you gave him?”

“I don’t remember, not only the gift but the entire holiday.”

“What about the old man in the store at the beginning of the story, the one who slipped the envelope into your bag, with the wrapping of gold stars?”

“That’s not how I remember it.”

I didn’t believe her. Not a word. But I kept reading.

#

Tommy returned to the hospital after Chanukah.

On his first day, I staggered to his room and through his door with a collection of tomes from an unabridged edition of Burton’s translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*. I struggled to keep them in my grasp.

Tommy was sealing a bulging and blank envelope.

“You want me to mail that for you?” I asked while motioning toward it.

“I’ve got it.”

I lifted the books I’d brought as best I could. “This should hold you a while.”

The telephone rang.

After dropping the books onto the bed, I stepped to the phone and the oversized book beside it. A bilingual volume of the Talmud.

This is a collection of teachings on the Torah, the Bible’s first five books. It tries to apply what’s in them to solve unsolvable problems, such as “why does God allow suffering?”

The book confused me, as it hadn’t come from my grandparents’ library, nor had Tommy asked for it. It wasn’t the type of enjoyable reading he enjoyed.

“Hello?” I spoke into the phone.

“It’s me,” Rudi said. “I had to work late, and I missed the last bus. I hate to ask . . .”

“I’ll be right there.”

#

I stepped from the elevator into the hospital lobby.

Rabbi Orenstein was in the distance, sitting on a sofa next to a middle-aged woman who had her dirty-blonde hair tied in a bun.

I headed toward them, wanting to say hello to the man.

“I told you that I’d keep it a secret,” he murmured. “But I shouldn’t.”

“How’s he doing?” the woman asked while feigning disinterest.

“Better than I would’ve imagined. Rudi has—”

“—I don’t want to talk about her or hear about her.”

“But you should.”

The woman shook her head.

“I’ll admit she’s difficult on the eyes,” the rabbi went on. “But underneath that . . . I’ve been a rabbi for many decades, I visit families caring for their loved ones all the time. But none as devoted as that young lady.”

“She feels guilty,” the woman growled.

“Guilty?”

“She’s the one who did this to my son, by bringing him into the gutter with her.”

I wanted to scream at the woman. I wanted to tell her what an idiot she was.

But this wasn’t what Rudi would’ve done or what she would’ve wanted me to do. So I rushed through the building and out of it.

This was when I screamed.

#

Rudi was waiting for me on a street corner when I got to her office building in Florham Park.

I never understood how she got her job. She couldn’t’ve been qualified for it out of high school. But I guess her personal experiences counted more, as she had those in excess. Also, there couldn’t have been many who wanted the job.

This required her to reach out to those with the disease, both at the office and in the hospital. She’d try to lift these men, men who had lost hope, despite in short supply herself. I suppose that was the point, to raise all boats in the rising tide.

What they would talk about she didn’t tell me. All she would say was that she’d often do nothing more than hold their hands or hug them. She’d make them feel that they mattered and that someone loved them.

That evening, despite the darkness, it was obvious that the months of doing her job, along with all the effort taking care of Tommy, were weighing on her. She was about to fall over.

Part of this came from what she was carrying. A few of those oversized Talmud volumes. Which she put on her lap as I drove off.

I tapped the top one. “There was a time when women weren’t allowed to read these and recently.”

“Those times aren’t coming back,” she said.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Have you gotten any answers in them?”

“No, but no matter how I try, I can’t stop searching.”

#

“*Pizzu do nemocnice přinesu*,” I said to Rudi as we drove down South Orange Avenue.

She tried to repeat it but got stuck on the “ř” and a sound that can take English speakers months to get right, if ever.

“You sure you want to learn this?” I asked her.

She sighed. “Beneath the ridiculous consonants and the grammatical absurdity lies a chunk of me.”

I believe it was more than that. Rudi, her whole life, had been a leaf blowing in the wind, and out of nowhere she noticed the roots. But she was trying to figure out how to plant them.

“You’ll need nine lives before you can speak Czech,” I uttered.

“It’s no harder than Hebrew,” she insisted.

I motioned toward the books in her lap. “Are you reading these in Hebrew?”

“It’s difficult enough getting at the truth, but when you’re not reading the right words . . .”

We got to Reservoir. I parked outside it so that Rudi could get dinner for herself and Tommy.

“Just wait here,” she told me as I opened my door.

“Why?”

“Please.”

Confused, I closed my door, and she slunk into the busy restaurant.

It became clear right away why she didn’t want me with her. The people working there were glaring at her. This included an old man in an ill-fitting suit by the register and the woman behind the counter, who dropped a pizza box onto it in front of Rudi. It bounced many times, causing many in the restaurant to discover why.

Rudi ignored this. While fighting to project apathy, she paid for the pie as fast as she could and left quicker.

#

I dropped Rudi off at the hospital.

She stayed up late with Tommy, so that they could share their day of hopes and fears. Though it was more than them sharing.

“I can’t wait to meet her,” Rudi said into the phone from next to Tommy while reading a volume of the Talmud.

She listened to the response as she turned the page, and she got upset. “I am going to college. I want to be sure for what.”

Glancing at Tommy, she added, “I gotta go. I’ll call you next week.”

She hung up. “Maria says hi. So does Owen, Jared, and Eliot. I had breakfast with them this morning. With Beth away, they’ve literally become the Three Musketeers*.* They go everywhere together.”

“Who could be responsible for that?” Tommy murmured.

Sneering, Rudi dropped the book onto the other volumes, and she took out a slice of pizza and tried to feed it to Tommy.

He moaned and turned from her before slamming his water tray onto the floor and growling, “I hate it. And what I hate more is that I hate it. I hate this place. I hate this bed. I hate me.”

Rudi wouldn’t relent. She’d become used to these outbursts. “You don’t want them to put back the feeding tube, do you?”

*Feeding tube*.

The mention of it was enough for Tommy to turn back and gobble down pie, as the tube made him feel more machine than human. He gobbled as much as he could.

But the words weren’t enough to keep the pizza down. He had to clench his eyes and force his body to obey. Sweat poured down his face, and his body shook.

The misery subsided. But it took its time.

With a deep breath, Tommy opened his eyes. Rudi was holding his hand and was more pained than he was. She was trying to take his pain. She would’ve taken it all if she could.

He grappled for words. He was flailing for them. “Why, why do you go through this?”

“Through what?” she asked.

“You could’ve sent me a card. No one would’ve blamed you.”

The words angered her. This built and built, and she glared at him. She was as angry as she’d been when the two had it out.

Releasing his hand, she dropped the pizza onto the box and rose from her chair. “We need to talk.”

He realized that she wanted to lie next to him, so he wiggled his frame and slid to his left, careful not to let his IV come out.

She joined him. She draped her arm around him, and he lowered his head onto her chest and gripped her hand with both of his.

For many seconds, she said nothing. She was waiting for courage.

“Let’s be clear,” she snarled. “I didn’t do any of this for you. I did it all for me. I’m the most selfish person alive.”

Tommy caressed her. He caressed her hand with his, and he caressed her arm with his cheek.

She waited for more courage. She was gasping for it. “I, I’ve become tired of my look. So what do you say I get some new clothes and a new haircut? I could be, I’m gonna be, I’m gonna be someone who won’t embarrass you.”

Tommy didn’t answer.

“Did you hear me?” she whispered.

“I fell in love with a punk rock girl,” he told her. “A girl who was nobody but her. Nothing less will do.”

Rudi gasped some more, and she buried her head in his shoulder, I suppose to keep herself from crying. While squeezing him with all her might, she screeched, “You, you’re my fairy tale. The one I’ve been chasing forever.”

#

Grandpa and I stopped by Gary’s room, so that the two could finish the dominoes tournament they’d begun days before.

But Gary wasn’t there. Instead Rudi was sitting on his stripped bed with her arms around her legs and her apathy face full on.

“Where’s Gary?” Grandpa asked.

“Gone,” she told him.

“Gone?”

“He passed away last night.”

Grandpa shuffled toward her and the bed. It took him ages to get there.

He sat next to Rudi, and he placed his arm around her.

“I have seen many friends and loved ones pass,” he said. “I wish I had some magic to give you. But what I can say is, if these people, if they remain with you, they never pass.”

Rudi dropped her head onto Grandpa’s shoulder. “He’s the third this month. I can’t keep doing this.”

“If you do not, who will?”

#

Tommy no longer had the energy to read. So we took turns doing it for him.

Grandpa’s Kafka story had made him curious about *The* *Good Soldier Švejk*. So he asked me to tell it to him.

“‘Do you know, Švejk, what is a march battalion?’” I read from Grandpa’s cherished copy one afternoon.

“‘I respectfully report, Lieutenant, sir, that a march battalion is what we call a *maršbaťák*, just as a *marška* is a march company. We are always shortening.’

“‘Well, Švejk,’ came the grave voice of the lieutenant, ‘since you enjoy such shortenings, I will inform you that you’ll be joining me in a *maršbaťák*. But don’t think that on the front you’ll get to partake in the kind of stupidities you have here. Does that bring you joy?’

“‘I respectfully report, Lieutenant, sir, that it brings me tremendous joy,’ answered the good soldier Švejk. ‘It’ll be something truly wonderful when the two of us fall on the battlefield together for the emperor and his family.’”

Tommy and I laughed. We laughed and laughed.

Rudi peeked her head in the room. She did as Nurse Templeton checked Tommy’s vital signs. Which she did without a mask or gloves. Or fear.

Petite and a few years older than us, the nurse had curly blonde hair that fell below her shoulders and pale blue eyes. She was among the few in the hospital who wanted to take care of Tommy. She requested the assignment, and she became a personal nurse to him and many AIDS patients.

“Thank you, Kim,” Rudi whispered to the woman as she left the room.

“I brought you a book,” I told Rudi, and I handed her an ancient and brittle copy of *Pohádky Boženy Němcové*.

“What is it?” she asked.

“A collection of fairy tales. Grandpa would read them to me when I was a kid. They’re so famous over there that the woman who wrote them is synonymous with the genre.”

Rudi opened the cover.

“It’s not exactly your taste,” I went on, “but it’ll help you with learning—”

“—It’s exactly her taste,” Tommy interrupted, causing Rudi embarrassment.

She shook it off. “Up for some company?”

“Sure,” Tommy said.

My grandparents stepped into the room, with Grandma carrying a casserole dish and saying, “You must be tired of hospital food and all that pizza. So we brought you some noodle kugel. Vegetarian, of course.”

She took it over to him.

To make room for her on the bed, Tommy slid over, and his IV came out, and some blood dripped down his arm.

“Stay away from me!” he cried out.

Grandpa ignored this. He grabbed a towel, and he cleaned Tommy’s arm with it. “Blood can no longer frighten me.”

Grandma wasn’t frightened either. She sat next to Tommy and fed him as the phone rang.

Rudi answered it.

The voice on the other end stunned her. It kept doing this as she walked the receiver to the room’s corner.

“Mrs. Goodwin?” she murmured in a voice so low that if I hadn’t seen her lips move, I wouldn’t’ve known what she said.

The lone response was Rudi’s disappointment as she lowered the phone.

#

Rudi was working late so often that picking her up became a daily ritual.

Part of this included getting a pizza at Reservoir and all the unpleasantness that came with it and never let up.

On one gloomy night, an unexpected sheen overcame it. After Rudi collected the pizza at the counter, she set out. But she paused. She paused because Rabbi Orenstein was staring at her from a table steps away. He stared at her with ardor. He stared at her as if she were his own child.

This wiped away the apathy she was feigning, and she struggled to make it out the door.

#

Rudi and I got off the elevator at Tommy’s floor with the pizza, and we traipsed down the corridor.

“Rudi?” came the voice of Dr. Kleinsten.

This was ominous. It was so ominous that it took Rudi many seconds to turn toward the man, who was combating his emotions.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“The Pneumocystis has gotten worse. Much worse. If, if you have any special plans . . .”

“Does he . . .”

“Yes.”

“When? When will he . . .”

“I wouldn’t leave him tonight.”

Rudi meandered toward Tommy’s room, with me following.

“I have to say this,” the doctor called out as Rudi and I continued down the hall. “You gave that boy a year of life. You alone. That doesn’t happen every day.”

Rudi said nothing, and we approached Tommy’s room and the coughing and labored breathing inside it.

I wanted to tell her some words too. I wanted to tell her how I loved her. I wanted to tell her how wonderful she was and how all the ugliness I’d been through didn’t matter because without it there’d be no her. I wanted to tell her this so much, but the words wouldn’t come.

We reached the doorway, and she said some words to me. “I’ll call you tonight.”

She lurched inside the room. But she stopped herself and hugged me.

“I wish I could . . .” I mumbled while trying to keep myself together, for her sake.

“You’re saying it.”

#

Tommy wrote of how he took the news the doctor had given him.

He took it better than Rudi had. He had expected it. He expected it from when he woke in the hospital after the beating he took. In a way, he was relieved, as his suffering would come to an end.

The only pain after he died would be hers. All afternoon and into the evening he tried to come up with the means to ease it.

But he couldn’t.

#

Rudi made it into Tommy’s room as he tried to turn a page in the Borges book.

Fumbling about, he hid the book under the covers. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to hide it,” she told him. “Or be sorry for it.”

“I don’t want to upset you.”

“You can’t.”

“I bet I can.”

“How?”

“I talked to Him today.”

“Him?”

“I believed I had all that I wanted. I really did. But today I realized I didn’t. So I asked Him.”

“Asked Him what?”

“I asked Him . . . I asked Him if I could have you.”

“You have me.”

“I mean later.”

Rudi froze. She couldn’t speak or breathe. She gaped at him until she could do both. “What did He say?”

“He hasn’t gotten back to me yet.”

“He must be pretty busy.”

“Yeah, and there was that, there was that I cursed Him pretty badly a while back.”

“He must be forgiving about that.”

“I sure hope so.”

Rudi searched for a response. She searched and searched.

“I need to go somewhere,” she said after peeking at the door. “But you gotta promise me that you won’t go anywhere.”

“Go?”

“Promise me.”

He weighed her words. For many seconds he did. “I . . . I love you.”

“I love you too!” she shouted as she rushed from the room.

“Where you going?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow!”

Tommy hoped she was right. He hoped all night.

#

I didn’t realize tears were falling down my face till I finished the last of Tommy’s pages that night. I couldn’t hold them back anymore.

With both hands, I wiped them away, and I checked around. All the street people had finished showering and must’ve had awhile. Though the floor was wet with their footprints. It sparkled from them.

“There’s one night left,” I told Rudi as I tried to keep myself together, for her sake.

“Yeah,” she told me back. “Call me tomorrow but a few hours later than normal. There’s a dinner after service.”

We hung up, and I left the bathroom, and I was surprised that the women’s shower was running in the room steps away.

“You owe me,” came Josh’s voice from inside it.

“Not like this,” Allison screeched, with fear scratching her voice.

“I could throw you out,” Josh said, with his tone yielding but in control, “I could throw you out for just about any reason. Any at all.”

Silence followed. Too much of it.

Feeling rage, I wanted to barge through the door and confront him. I raised my hand to push the door open.

But the weaker part of me was stronger, despite the so-called “moral code” inside me.

So I took the path of ease, of cowardice. I slunk down the hall while convincing myself that there was nothing I could do for her.

With this came hate, and it was more directed at myself than at Josh.

the eighth night

I had Wednesday off and expected an extended day of nothing but introspection and self-immolation.

While I got the extended day, it was not what I expected, and it was of a lot more than introspection and self-immolation.

It began when I stumbled into the courtyard’s fog that morning. Nicole was raging at a handful of people. Her fists were quaking. “He was in the bathroom with her!”

“Were you there?” Matt shot back.

“Zara was. Allison was taking a shower after getting back from work. When Zara left the bathroom, he walked past her through the door like it was nothing. She said that Allison was crying when she returned.”

“Is Zara willing to file a police report?”

Nicole didn’t answer.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Allison left in the middle of the night,” Nicole said, “with all her stuff. Because of Josh.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” Matt barked.

“I can, and I’m calling the cops.”

She took out her phone.

“What will you do when they throw you out?” Matt yelled. “Have you asked yourself that and what’ll happen to your kids?”

Nicole hesitated. She hesitated for many seconds.

“Tell it to Dan,” Mitchell pleaded with her. “Then it’s his responsibility. Then you can’t get into trouble.”

Instead she dialed a number. She was fearless, and it reminded me of someone other.

“I was outside the women’s bathroom last night,” came my voice. Or a voice that sounded like mine. But it was more like that other someone. My perfected me. “Josh was harassing her. He was more than harassing her. He was probably doing the same to the other women who left. I was also around when he stole the steaks and ribs.”

“Are you willing to file a police report?” Matt howled.

I hesitated. I hesitated in the same way that Nicole had. But I wasn’t so fearless. I wasn’t sure what words would come out, if any.

“I’ll file it,” I said.

“You sure?” Nicole whispered.

“I’m sure.”

She called the police as Matt shook his head at me.

#

Nicole and I waited outside the shelter gates. We waited and waited.

The fog had lifted, but there was no sun. It was hiding somewhere behind 7th Street.

I supposed my reticence would return and grow when the consequences of what would happen to me became clearer and nearer along with the lack of those for Josh. But I felt better as time went on. I felt better about me.

Moving as if in a funeral procession, a police car pulled up beside us. A burly bald cop climbed from the vehicle and took my report.

“I need to speak to the person in charge,” he told us.

Nicole pointed through the gates toward the office. “Dan, he’s the assistant director.”

The policeman rambled inside, and Nicole and I went back to waiting. But we didn’t wait much.

“Well?” Nicole yelped when the man returned.

“This Josh has the right to be in the bathroom with the girl,” the policeman said with aggravation.

“She’s not a girl! She’s over thirty!”

“He has the right to be there.”

“In the women’s room while she showered?”

“If that’s where he has to carry out his duties. You two should be ashamed. This Josh is a good guy. He’s got a family. He’s a vet. Dan was telling me how he volunteers in the community. He’s helping you two, and this is how you thank him.”

“He was harassing Allison. He was more than harassing her. And he was probably doing the same with the other women who left. We have a witness!”

The policeman snarled at me. “What he heard is not enough. She’ll have to file a complaint herself.”

“She’s gone!”

“So am I.”

“What about that food he stole from us?”

“Dan says that there’s no record of any steaks or ribs delivered in the past week.”

“Because Josh was in charge that night!”

“I bet you’re lying about that too.”

The policeman got into his car and took off. He took off much faster than he came.

*To most, we’re garbage, no better than cons*.

Matt’s words echoed as Nicole and I gazed at each other with a glumness that was flattening us. It flattened me despite having expected what would happen.

We slithered inside the gates, where Matt was scowling at me with his arms crossed. “Dan wants to see you both in the office. You first.”

“Don’t you have to be at work?” I asked.

“If only you had asked yourself that.”

#

I entered the office. I entered it no longer glum, and I couldn’t figure out why.

Dan had stuffed himself behind the desk next to an underling. He told me to take a seat while the underling took notes.

“You have to leave,” he said the moment I’d sat. “You have to leave now. You broke so many rules that I haven’t a clue where to begin. And I warn you, repeat any of this outside the shelter, and we’ll sue.”

“Good luck serving the papers,” I told him while trying to suppress a chuckle, and I didn’t do a good job of it.

“You should’ve let us handle it.”

I jumped in my chair. “You’ve turned blind eyes, all of you, to the thievery, to the abuse of women without family or friends or protection. Worse than that, you’ve created an environment that let it happen. You’ve let a predator reign to prey.”

“That’s a lie!” he hollered, and he reached for the phone on his desk. “I should file charges against you!”

“For what?”

“Perjury!”

I opened my mouth, to explain to him what perjury meant. But while rubbing his nose in his own ignorance might’ve been enjoyable, it would’ve accomplished less than what I already hadn’t. So I ceased eluding Matt’s advice as I rose to my feet.

I smiled and waved.

#

It didn’t take much time to pack what I’d brought with me months earlier into the same grimy blue backpack that I’d also brought.

I had accumulated other stuff since coming to the shelter but decided not to take it when I recalled the nifty Meister Eckhart saying my grandpa told me when I left for college.

*The more we have, the less we own.*

#

With the backpack across my shoulders, I stepped into the bathroom and to the wall behind the sinks.

The image projecting off it was as old as ever, but it wasn’t rotting.

I hadn’t fixed the world or my piece of it, but the pursuit of it had meaning. The same meaning that Tommy and Rudi had gotten from their pursuit of it. It might’ve been what kept many of us Jews pursuing it, despite how we’d at times make a mess of it.

More than all this, it might’ve been why I wasn’t glum.

#

I left the dorm. Nicole was waiting for me at the shelter gates, overcome with guilt.

“They didn’t kick her out,” Patrick whispered to me. “Dan believes you duped her into it.”

I staggered toward her.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled within steps of me.

“You’re a hero,” I said. I said it with a joy that wouldn’t have been possible eight days earlier. “You risked more than I ever could.”

We hugged.

“They won’t bury this,” she told me. “I promise you that. Josh will never be alone with another woman or girl here. He’ll never have the chance. Everyone’s gonna be watching him.”

*Who watches the watchers?*

Juvenal had to wait a pair of millennia to get an answer to his question, but he got one. The one that could stop all the Joshes.

“Congratulations,” came Matt’s voice.

Nicole and I broke our hug.

Matt was trying to hide his “I told you so” face, but he wasn’t trying much. “You got thrown out and for nothing.”

“It wasn’t for nothing,” I insisted. “I satisfied my moral code.”

“Your what?”

“I remember what Ben Gazzara told us on the set,” came Patrick’s voice from behind us.

“What was that?” I asked.

“He said, ‘Evil can only prevail when good men do nothing.’”

“It was Edmund Burke who said that.”

“You sure? He could’ve picked it up from Benny.”

“He could’ve.”

“It’s more what your Uncle Lenny sang,” Matt insisted to me. “‘*Everybody knows the war is over. Everybody knows the good guys lost*.’”

“Everybody but me.”

“I guess these ‘good men’ must’ve been in short supply during the Holocaust. And in Nanking. And after that Prague Spring of yours. And Tiananmen Square. And they must’ve gone extinct when the Khmer Rouge murdered millions of their own people in a country the size of Missouri and no one cared.”

“The Dead Kennedys cared.”

Matt wanted to respond. But all that would come out was, “Now what will you do?”

“I’m gonna give Palm Springs a try. It’s warmer.”

“And gayer.”

“I could use some gaiety. It is the season, after all.”

“What’s Amoun gonna do?”

“He’ll have to get himself another Hebrew.”

“In Victorville?”

We both laughed. We embraced too, and I thanked him for getting me the job and for being my friend.

Without looking back and with owning more than I ever had, I swaggered through the gates and down the alley. In recent years, “being woke” had become a slur. But it wasn’t to me. I reveled in it. I was Christopher Plummer crossing the Alps.

“Enjoy the streets,” Josh called out.

As with Dan, I wasn’t going to respond. It wouldn’t’ve made any difference. But I said, “Enjoy prison.”

“I’m not going to prison.”

I stopped. “Not today and likely not tomorrow. But one day.”

“How can you be so certain?” he shouted as I took off.

“I have faith.”

#

The shelter kicking me out wasn’t all bad. I was free to spend money.

I went to my bank and took a hundred dollars from the ATM.

This felt good. I’d become an adult for the second time.

With the cash, I bought a debit card at Walgreens and used it to buy a train ticket to Palm Springs over the phone. However, the one train didn’t leave until 4:30 the next morning. So I had *mucho tiempo*. With nothing better to do and no place better to do it, I lumbered toward D Street and the Amtrak station at the end of town.

This place was notorious. More than one person told me how those who’d hang out there would roll people, often after drugging them. But this was at night. During the day it was in a border region of nice. There was a field beside the pretty station, and there were trees and canyons behind them, and I sat on the grass and took them in.

#

With the sun falling, I leapt to my feet. I did when I remembered that I hadn’t gotten Tommy’s last letter.

Thrashing about, I hurried toward the shelter. But I stopped with as much hurry. Fearing the letter might “go missing” if I went back and asked Josh for it, I made a call instead.

“I heard you got kicked out,” Jerry said.

“Yup.”

“The tentacles of the CIA reach far and wide.”

“You can say that again.”

“The tent—”

“—How’s that kleptomania of yours?”

#

Jerry handed me Tommy’s letter by Starbucks.

I thanked him and walked off.

“Give my best to Rudi,” he called out.

I froze.

“But don’t tell her that it came from me,” he went on. “I told her that I was visiting relatives.”

“You know her?” I mumbled after spinning toward him.

“She’s so sad on Chanukah, despite all the people in our house. She misses you. She misses many.”

A whole lot became clear, and I uttered, “The letters from Tommy, they were from you?”

“I was fixing some leaky pipes in the basement when I came upon some boxes. They were wet, so I took out the contents. Tommy’s journal was at the bottom of one. I wanted to make Rudi happy this holiday, as happy as she’s made me. I could only do this through you.”

“How did you find me?”

“You gave this address to the IRS on the W-4 you filled out for your job. The security on these government servers, it’s beyond woeful. But I needn’t tell you that. Nor will I need to tell it to Josh. It’s nothing like the security on the bank sites I used to pwn before my confinement.”

Jerry lowered his eyes. “I can’t imagine why Rudi took me in after I got out, what she saw in me. Maybe she saw a pinch of herself. Maybe one day I will too.”

#

I returned to the train station while trying to process what Jerry had told me.

In such a haze was I that I didn’t realize that the sun had gone until I’d gotten back. Which would bring a darkness that would come in many forms.

The temperature fell with the sun, and the winds rose. With the station closed, I had to sit on a bench by the tracks. Never had I been so cold. It was colder than some nights I’d spent in Eastern Europe when the temperature was dozens of degrees below zero, no matter what measuring system you used.

With my shivering came the zombies. They came from nowhere. These were homeless people, the same as me and all others I’ve met. But they weren’t the same. With their lifeless eyes they roamed the grounds in a fog, uttering incoherencies only they could grasp while wielding crowbars that they swung through the air against horrors only they could fear.

I should’ve been frightened by them. But my disease had robbed me of fright from physical harm. This had gotten me through some rough spots over the years, as all predators, regardless of how many legs they have, feed off fright and need it to attack. But it didn’t rob me of sorrow. I felt it plenty, for all of us.

#

Time dragged its feet that night, and checking it on my phone dragged it some more.

Trying to break the monotony, I stepped into the 7-Eleven across the street to buy hot chocolate and snacks. I also counted the freight cars that would pass at intervals close to clocklike. I listened, too, to *A Love Supreme* on my phone.

But all of this stretched time.

#

The monotony came to an end in the form of a man who was standing by the tracks down the way from me.

He was different from the others that night. He was no zombie. He had no crowbar and was in no fog.

He turned toward me, with emptiness in his eyes. It was the same that had often been in mine. But his was worse, and this did scare me. I was scared of becoming him, because I could tell right away what he wanted to do.

Another freight train approached in the distance.

It got closer, and the man returned forward and counted down aloud. He shouted it. “10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . .”

He got to zero, and he ran across the tracks as the train came. He ran over the train’s frantic horn. It called out to him. It pleaded with him and begged.

He made it to the other side and continued running. He ran into the night and into the nothingness. He didn’t glance back.

#

Earlier that day, it took the Victorville Police more than an hour to send one squad car to the shelter. But it didn’t take more than a few minutes for five to speed into the station’s lot.

As I was the one person about, it didn’t take much deduction for them to believe that I’d been the one running across the track, and they weren’t pleased.

With wary steps, a man approached, and his wariness multiplied with each step.

But his demeanor changed after checking my explanation and my train ticket (and my record).

“Whoever it was put a real fright into the train’s driver,” he told me as he pointed his thumb at the tracks.

“I bet,” I said.

“You have no idea why he was playing chicken with the train?”

“It wasn’t chicken. It was Russian roulette.”

Not responding to this, the policeman went back to the others. So that their trip wouldn’t be a waste, they decided to chase the zombies through the grounds.

This went on and on. I had a seat to my own Keystone Kops picture, a bad one, as the police tried to herd and capture those who were past either.

#

The chase wound down.

I remembered that I hadn’t called Rudi. So I took out Tommy’s letter and my phone and dialed her.

“I’m sorry to call you so late,” I said.

“Are you all right?”

“Why do you ask?”

“What’s all that commotion?”

“Oh, it’s just some kids.”

I opened the envelope, and I pulled out the pages, and I read them to her.

#

The morning glowed into Tommy’s room through the shades. They couldn’t hold it back.

But this couldn’t keep Tommy from drowsing off, no matter how he tried to keep himself awake.

He’d been drifting into and out of consciousness since Rudi had left the night before, and each time he drifted out of it he doubted more whether he’d drift back into it.

“Hey,” whispered Rudi.

This was loud enough to shake him awake and push him toward her. He came close to falling from the bed.

Her tired but happy face was peeking through the doorway.

“Shut your eyes,” she commanded.

“They were,” he grumbled.

“Shut them another time.”

“What’s going on?”

“Just do it.”

He sighed, but he closed his eyes, and she said, “You can open them.”

He complied, as she waltzed into the room carrying a paper shopping bag.

Disbelief fell over Tommy. It came from what Rudi was carrying in her other hand: the train from the white wedding gown she was wearing.

Smirking, Rudi dropped the bag and showed off the gown while releasing the train. It didn’t fit in the room.

“You’re wearing a dress,” he gasped.

She threw her hands onto her hips and glared at him. “It’s a one-time event. So enjoy it while it lasts.”

The gown was familiar to Tommy. “It’s the one my . . .”

With a single set of steps, Mrs. Goodwin lifted her feet over the train and came into the room.

At the end of that day, the woman would tell me and others in the hospital lobby how shocked she was at the state of her son. But she said what was more shocking was how happy he was. He was happier than she could remember.

Realizing there could be but one reason for such an all-too-obvious contradiction, she took this person’s hand.

“Hello, Tommy,” she mumbled.

Tommy shook his head. He shook it many times, unable to believe what his eyes were telling him.

“Mom?” he screeched as he threw open his arms.

She rushed up and hugged him. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m the one who’s sorry.”

“I missed you.”

“I . . . I . . . how did this . . .”

Mrs. Goodwin let go of Tommy, so that she could turn to Rudi. “You were right about her, we do have a lot in common. Hopefully, she’ll outgrow it.”

“How did this happen?” he uttered, with the question giving him a burst of energy.

“Shall we tell him?” his mother asked Rudi.

#

A taxi drove off, exposing Rudi and the shopping bag outside the white manor in Newstead. The one that had so frightened her the first time she was there.

It frightened her as much. But she had no hesitation in approaching it. She marched to the door, where she took a deep breath and rang the bell as she prayed. She prayed for one wish.

*The courage to change the things I can.*

*Just for this day.*

The door slid open, and Elizabeth glanced at Rudi before glancing away.

“Hi,” Rudi mumbled.

“Hello,” the woman said.

“Is Mrs. Goodwin home?”

Elizabeth shook her head, and Rudi felt the air rush from her. But the woman added, “I’m afraid she won’t talk to you.”

“Please, Tommy’s dying. He’s dying right now.”

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“Please.”

The woman struggled over what to do, and this rose.

“All right,” she muttered, “I’ll give it a try.”

“Thank you so much!”

“I’m not promising,” she groaned before hurrying off while leaving the door open.

Sounds followed. The muffled sounds of two women talking. They got louder and more animated until there was no muffling at all.

“How dare you talk to me like that!” screamed Mrs. Goodwin.

“Somebody has to!” Elizabeth hollered.

“Tell her to go away!”

“You tell her!”

The conversation ended, and another sound came. Footsteps. They marched toward Rudi, followed by Mrs. Goodwin. She appeared in the doorway with a snarl. “What do you want?”

“Hi,” Rudi mumbled.

“What-do-you-want?”

“Tommy’s sick.”

“As if I weren’t aware of this. Who do you imagine has been paying his medical bills, not to mention for that nest of yours?”

The latter revelation stunned Rudi, but she pretended it hadn’t. “Why won’t you visit him?”

“He’s made his bed, *literally*.”

Rudi shook her fists at the woman. “I’d tell you how he got it if it mattered. But it doesn’t. The disease doesn’t care who, why, or how. People like you care!”

“What do you want from me, money?”

“That’s all you rich people live for, money—making it and spending it and lording it over others. Well, if you ever left this palace, you’d discover there’s a whole world out there!”

Rudi was no longer furious alone. Mrs. Goodwin’s face turned a shade darker than red, and she became someone other. Someone Rudi found menacing.

This someone took a step toward her with her own fists clenched, followed by a second, causing Rudi to step back in fear for the first time since Deke died.

“You rich people?” the woman roared with a gruff accent. One that was years removed from her normal one. “You can’t be stupid enough to believe that I was born in this, this palace. They didn’t allow Jews in this neighborhood when I was your age.”

The woman’s nostrils flared. They flared like a bull’s. “You want the whole world to cry for you because of how rough you’ve had it. You want them to cry you a sea. Well, I’m from Flatbush, the worst part of Flatbush. Growing up, we had no heat, no hot water. Half the time we ate pickles! So don’t you lecture me, you . . .”

Mrs. Goodwin didn’t finish. She spun around and hurried into her house and was about to slam the door when Rudi called out, “This is your last chance!”

The woman stopped. She stopped with her hand gripping the wood.

“This is your last chance to say goodbye,” Rudi added, “your last chance to make it right. There won’t be another. Please, Mrs. Goodwin, hate me all you want, but don’t hate Tommy. He doesn’t deserve it.”

Mrs. Goodwin didn’t react. Rudi questioned whether she’d ever move.

But she turned her head, and she stared at Rudi, and she mumbled, “Let me get my coat.”

“There’s a favor I need to ask.”

#

Mrs. Goodwin zoomed into her house, with Rudi stopping in the doorway.

“You’re not wearing my dress,” the woman howled while shaking her head in a constant motion. The idea of Rudi marrying her son was horrid enough but that she wanted to do so in her wedding gown was too much.

“Mrs. Goodwin . . .”

The woman whipped herself toward Rudi and the desperation in her eyes, and she paused. She paused for a full stop.

“Can’t you see how outrageous this is?” she shrieked.

Rudi shifted her head. “I do. You have every reason to say no. I would.”

The woman turned herself back around, but she didn’t go anywhere. “All right, you can wear the dress. But I won’t be part of this . . . this so-called wedding. I will say goodbye to my son and leave.”

Rudi assented. She assented despite the woman’s back to her.

Mrs. Goodwin marched up the stairs. “You know the way.”

Rudi followed. She followed her up the winding and gleaming wooden staircase.

Reaching the top, she noticed Elizabeth eyeing them from below. She was eyeing them in bewilderment.

#

Mrs. Goodwin sat on the edge of her king-size canopy bed with her arms and legs crossed, and she feigned disinterest as Rudi put on the wedding dress.

But her feigning waned, as the way the gown fit Rudi recalled to the woman the day she wore it, and without control she rose from the bed and scampered toward a dresser.

After grabbing a box of needles from a drawer, she knelt beside Rudi and shortened the sleeves. She shortened them while becoming lost, in a different time and place.

“You okay?” Rudi asked.

“On my first date with Tommy’s father,” she murmured as she continued with the dress, “he took me to *The Sound of Music* on Broadway. He wasn’t paying much attention to it. Or to me. It wasn’t exactly love at first sight.”

“I know how that is.”

“So you can imagine my surprise after we got engaged when he said that he wanted me to have the same dress Mary Martin wore on our first date.”

“I never miss the movie when it comes on TV,” Rudi mentioned. “I’ve never told anyone that, including Tommy.”

Mrs. Goodwin rose, and she led Rudi to a full-length mirror in the room’s corner, where Rudi blushed at her image.

This must’ve melted whatever coolness the woman had left, because she uttered, “You’re so beautiful.”

Rudi shook her head, and she blushed some more. “Nah.”

“Don’t argue with your mother-in-law.”

The last word astonished Rudi. This shot out of her as she gazed at the woman in the mirror.

“Not till after the honeymoon,” the woman went on. “That’s how it was with my mother-in-law. She was all peaches and cream until after the honeymoon.”

Rudi’s eyes dropped. “I guess I won’t have to worry about that.”

“What do you mean?”

Rudi turned from the mirror, and she grabbed Mrs. Goodwin as she cried. “There’s not gonna be a honeymoon.”

At a loss as to what to do, the woman grabbed her back. “Please don’t cry, you’ll ruin your makeup.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Oh, well, I guess you can’t ruin it any more than it already is.”

Both women laughed.

Breaking their embrace, they took each other’s hands, and Mrs. Goodwin motioned toward the door. “We better hurry, we’ve got a wedding to go to.”

#

Rudi tossed her hands onto her hips as she took a step toward Tommy with another snarl. “So, are you gonna marry me or what?”

“You call that a proposal?” he gushed.

“It’s the best you’re gonna get.”

“Someone said marriage was an outdated and sexist—”

“—You’re making me mad now.”

“And we’d need a . . .”

Rabbi Orenstein entered the room. He entered it as if he’d swallowed a whole flock of canaries before taking a juice glass from behind his back. “I believe that’s my cue.”

“We need to get you a tux,” Mrs. Goodwin told her son.

“A tux?” he muttered.

“And somehow I’ll have to get my hands on a photographer.”

“And guests will be coming at any moment,” Rudi interjected.

“Guests?” Tommy muttered next.

“What about music?” Mrs. Goodwin asked Rudi.

With unbound giddiness, Rudi took her portable stereo from the shopping bag, and she slapped it onto the bureau next to Tommy and hit play, and “Moonlight Serenade” filled the room.

“Glenn Miller?” Mrs. Goodwin gasped.

With more giddiness, Rudi sat on the bed next to Tommy and took his arm, and she told the woman she’d forever call her mother, “It’s our song.”

Mrs. Goodwin shook her head. “Kids today.”

#

Wearing an itchy suit that the moths in my closet knew better than I did, I strode into Tommy’s room with a cardboard box as the rabbi left so he could complete his rounds before the ceremony.

Rudi’s appearance sent me teetering, along with the box.

She vaulted toward me and did a pirouette.

“Who are you?” I cried out. “And what have you done with my sister?”

Slapping my arm, she sent me toward the floor a second time, along with the box.

But she grabbed me and swung her arm around me. “You’re gonna have to give me away, big brother.”

“I’m not sure Jews do that,” I told her after laughing at what she’d called me. She calls me that to this day, despite us never learning who was born first.

“We’ll make our own rules,” she insisted.

I opened the box, revealing a three-tiered wedding cake. On top of it stood painted wooden figurines of a bride and groom, with the bride’s hair spiked.

“Grandma was up all night making this,” I said.

“Where are they?” Rudi asked.

“They dropped me off in front. But I should tell you . . .”

“Did someone mention a wedding?” howled a voice.

Butch strutted toward us in a Black Flag T-shirt, with a blue tie around his neck.

Rudi hugged him. But she got annoyed at the record in his hand. “What’s that?”

“A gift.”

“I told you, no gifts.”

“It’s not for you.”

Butch marched to Tommy, and he handed him *Live Yardbirds: Featuring Jimmy Page*.

Tommy shook his head. “I’ve never heard of this.”

“It wasn’t out for more than a week. It includes some early Zeppelin songs.”

“Wow.”

“Now you have some music to listen to when you get home.”

Tommy tried to keep himself together. But he had to take Butch’s hand with both of his to do so. “Now I have some music to listen to.”

#

With slow and careful steps, Grandma led Grandpa into the room by the arm, with Grandpa somewhere but not there.

Rudi and her dress sent Grandma to an abrupt halt, and she hurled her arms toward the heavens. “My sweet little girl!”

“No one’s ever called me that,” Rudi quipped.

“You better get used to it, because I will be saying it all the time, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

Rudi ran into her grasp, and the two kissed each other’s cheeks, and Grandma choked on her words. “You have none of my DNA, but you have all of my soul.”

Neither wanted to release their arms, but they did, and Rudi turned toward Grandpa and his daze.

“*Už jsme na Lucerně?”* he asked, giving away his location: the dance hall in Prague that he frequented as a young man.

“I am afraid this is not one of his good days,” Grandma said.

Rudi didn’t mind. She clutched him and whispered, “Thank you, Grandpa, for giving me this day.”

While squeezing him tighter, she added, “*Mám tě strašně moc ráda*,” telling him in the language he loved how much she loved him.

#

Tony wheeled himself into the room.

This Tony was far from the one months before. Since his moment with Grandpa, never was he without a smile. But never was it as bold as it was when he stopped by Tommy that day and said, “I guess this means you’re off the market.”

“It appears so.”

“The best usually are.”

#

Mrs. Goodwin managed to hire a photographer with no notice. He sprinted into the room with the tailor, who fit Tommy into a tuxedo under the direction of Mrs. Goodwin.

Nurse Templeton came next. She came despite it her day off, and she brought some more men that Rudi had helped raise, who were there to return the favor.

The Crosses came too.

Following them was the rabbi. “We have another guest.”

Into the room slunk Mr. Agnellino with a stack of pizzas.

Rudi stumbled toward them with alarm. “We didn’t order pizzas.”

“These are on me,” Mr. Agnellino told her.

“I don’t get it.”

The man put the boxes on a dresser, and he sighed. “For months you have come into my restaurant. You come each day and buy a pizza from me, even though me and everyone there is mean to you. And none of us can get why. Why is it that she cannot get the message, this awful person everyone speaks so terribly about?”

Rudi glanced away.

“Then,” he continued, “then the other day Rabbi Orenstein, God bless his soul, he tells me who the pizzas are for. He also tells me all the wonderful things you have been doing for this poor . . . and, and I have never been so ashamed.”

Returning her glance to the man, Rudi shook her head. “Forget about it.”

“I will not. You are a saint.”

Rudi shook her head a second time. “I’m not.”

“Listen to me, this is a subject that I have some knowledge of. You are a saint. They come in all shapes and sizes . . . and hairstyles.”

Rudi tried not to smile, but it came in spite of herself.

“From this day on,” Mr. Agnellino added, “for as long as I own that restaurant, for as long as my children and grandchildren own it, we will treat you as a member of the family when you step inside it. This is a promise.”

She hugged him, and he hugged her back as she mumbled, “You’re staying for the wedding, aren’t you?”

He agreed.

“So, are we ready?” the rabbi asked.

Rudi couldn’t answer, because Maria stormed into the room in a blue dress. She was alongside a woman in a red one, who had auburn hair and glasses and the manner of someone about to meet her in-laws for the first time.

Maria screamed her head off, and she flailed her arms and shook all over, and Rudi did much the same before the two flew into each other.

“I was sure you wouldn’t make it,” Rudi cried out.

“She drove so fast that I don’t remember Delaware,” interjected her friend.

“It’s easy to miss,” Maria insisted.

#

In a place and time far from that day, I would reminisce about this moment and many others with Maria.

She never did become a playwright. After college, she moved to Hollywood to become a screenwriter.

Many years of struggle later, which included more than a few all-night calls with Rudi, she achieved success and became known for her striking female characters.

I ran into her on Sunset Boulevard. Amid the heat and smog, she told me, “I write about larger-than-life people all the time. But Rudi is the only one I’ve met. There’s probably some of her in all the ones I’ve created. More than some.”

#

Rudi and Maria broke their hug, and Maria pointed to the woman beside her. “This is Sandra.”

Rudi shook her hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you. Thank you for coming to my wedding and on such short notice.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” Sandra said. “This is so romantic, and you look so totally awesome.”

“I hate to be a spoiler,” the rabbi interrupted, “but I need to be leaving soon.”

“All right,” Rudi said. “Let’s get this on.”

“Wait for us!” came the voice of a boy down the corridor, along with his footsteps and others.

Eliot ran into the room. He was a senior and not so geeky. His suit, shirt, and tie came close to matching. He was on the way toward the confident man he’d become. The one who’d go to Stanford before becoming an engineer and a high-tech entrepreneur in Silicon Valley.

“My favorite Quincy Punk!” Rudi yelled as she embraced him.

Owen came next, in a suit more uncomfortable than my own.

With the help of his friends, he had graduated high school and was working at a local auto repair shop. Later on, with an investment from Eliot, he’d run a whole chain called Good Karma, whose motto was, “We treat our customers as friends. Because they are.”

Rudi jumped into his arms. She jumped into the arms of a man that she’d come to love, and she kissed him on the cheek, making him blush.

Jared was the last to enter. He was premed at Seton Hall University down the road and would become a doctor. Working for a missionary group with the woman that he ran into on his ascent from the bottom, he’d spend his career traveling the world, giving care and comfort to anyone in need while making the most from the second chance he got.

Rudi hugged him the longest. It must’ve been because he, more than the rest of us, could relate to all the conflicting feelings she must’ve been experiencing, of both happiness and doubt as to whether she deserved any of it.

Wiping her eyes, Rudi released her arms from Jared, and she spun toward the rabbi. “We’re ready.”

“Where do I begin?” the rabbi said after blinking at the photographer’s flash. “I’ve never done a wedding like this. We have no *ketubah* or *chuppah*. We don’t have wine. But what we do have are two young people who love each other. I can more than attest to it. So hopefully God will give us a pass on the rest.

“Rudi, you’re supposed to circle the groom seven times. But under the circumstances, why don’t you sit next to him?”

Mrs. Goodwin, who was beside Tommy on the bed, rose, and Rudi took her place.

We all crowded around them as the rabbi gave Tommy a kippah and he struggled to put it on.

The rabbi turned to Rudi. “You are Jewish? I’ve assumed by your last name and your interest in the Talmud and Hebrew and . . .”

She didn’t answer. She couldn’t. Despite all the reading she’d done and all the cooking and Sabbaths she’d experienced, she couldn’t say what she was, no matter what Jewish law told her. She was that leaf blowing in the wind, searching for a place to root.

The rabbi scanned the room. “I realize this is all rather un—”

“—She’s Jewish,” Mrs. Goodwin interrupted before placing her hand on Rudi’s shoulder. Which was before Rudi placed her hand on hers.

The rabbi remained hesitant.

“She is our granddaughter,” Grandma called out, leading the rabbi to whip himself toward her and Grandpa. “She is as Jewish as we are.”

“Thank you, Grandma,” Rudi whispered. She whispered it with a voice rooted in love. “That was better than the cake.”

“Who has the rings?” the rabbi asked.

The question floored Rudi, and its answer came in silence.

“Someone does have the rings?”

Rudi lowered her eyes. “We don’t have any.”

“Oh, yes, you do,” Mrs. Goodwin said. “You have one.”

The woman took off her wedding ring, and she offered it to Tommy.

He shook his head. “I can’t let you do that, Mom.”

“Your father would’ve wanted you to have it. He would’ve been so proud of you. I’m proud of you. This, this is our wedding gift to you.”

Tommy was reluctant, but he took the ring.

The rabbi pointed at it. “Place it on Rudi’s right index finger and repeat after me, ‘Behold, you are consecrated to me with this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel.’”

Tommy struggled with the words. He struggled more than he had with the kippah. But after many false starts and more pauses after he got it started, he got through it.

Next it was Rudi’s turn, and no one needed to tell her what to do. Nor did it matter that she had no ring for Tommy. She wrapped her finger around his, and she gazed into his eyes as she took her vow. “*Ani l’dodi, ve dodi li*. *I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine*.”

“All we have to do is break the glass,” the rabbi blurted out.

He got the juice glass and wrapped it in his handkerchief, and he set it between Tommy’s foot and the bedpost.

Tommy tried to break it. He pushed with all he had. But it wouldn’t crack.

The rabbi peeked out the door. “I could get a light bulb. It’d be easier.”

“I can do it,” Tommy growled.

He tried to break it a second time. But he came no closer.

“Is it that important?” asked Rudi.

“Yes, it’s that important!” Tommy hollered with his face red and sweating. “It signifies, it signifies that joy must be tempered, and no one gets this more than us.”

Rudi was coming undone. But she managed to keep herself in one piece as she took Tommy’s free hand with hers. “You can do it, baby. You can do it.”

Tommy clenched his eyes closed, and he tried to break the glass. He tried and tried.

Everyone in the room was crying. Grandpa was crying. So was the photographer, who had to stop taking pictures. A set of teardrops also fell down Tommy’s cheeks before the glass splintered.

“*Mazel tov!”* the rabbi yelled.

The room erupted in cheers, but this didn’t dampen anyone’s tears. They bathed Mrs. Goodwin’s face as she ran from the room while calling out for her son.

“What comes next is the *yichud*,” the rabbi mumbled before he wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand, “where we give the bride and groom twenty minutes of seclusion.”

Mr. Agnellino grabbed the pizzas. “We can eat downstairs.”

He went off with the boxes, and we all followed after congratulating the couple and shaking their hands.

Tommy did this with as much warmth as he could. He wasn’t saying goodbye but farewell.

The last to leave was Maria. She’d been crying since before the ceremony and was crying as she clutched her best friend. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” Rudi screeched with one arm around her and the finger of her other hand around Tommy’s.

They hugged for endless moments before Maria released her arms and left the room.

“Shut your eyes,” Tommy commanded.

“What’s going on?” Rudi grumbled.

“Just do it.”

She closed her eyes, and she kept them that way till he told her to open them.

He was putting his chai necklace on her.

She helped him, and she clasped the chain.

“This is my wedding gift for you,” he told her, “to remind you.”

She took the pendant between her fingers and eyed it.

“But it isn’t to remind you of me,” he insisted. “It’s to remind you of that word . . . *living*, the most precious there is. Don’t you dare forget it.”

Rudi cried. To hide from this, she leaned over the stereo and hit play.

“Look at us, Tommy,” she told him as the music poured into the room. “Who’d have imagined?”

“Me. I knew it from the beginning.”

Not knowing what to do next, the two stared at each other.

“So, are you gonna kiss the groom or what?” Tommy growled.

“You call that a proposition?” Rudi growled back.

“It’s the best you’re gonna get.”

With a gentle touch, she rested her hands on him, and with the same touch she kissed him. By no more than the breadth of a single particle had their lips met.

Yet he swooned. He swooned as they danced the day away.

#

That was how Tommy’s journal ended.

But it wasn’t the end of Tommy’s story. This was clear from the beginning of it and from that cryptic entry he wrote.

*Chanukah was different this time, and I got a better* *gift. But Rudi’s holding back*.

So I asked Rudi for the story’s end. I asked as another freight train sputtered toward me in the distance.

“I told you,” she grumbled, “I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

“Grandma was right,” I shot back, “you lie badly. You lie as badly as Tommy. And that’s the best compliment anyone could get.”

“I swear I don’t know.”

“You do.”

I kept pressing, but she kept denying, and I could no longer bribe her with more pages from the journal.

“Please,” I begged, “it’ll be the best Chanukah gift I’ll get.”

She laughed but didn’t do more. But she couldn’t turn down a request on the last night of Chanukah. Not because she was my sister but because she was a rabbi.

The kind others would aspire to be.

#

The end of Tommy’s story began on that first night of Chanukah. The one Rudi insisted that nothing special had happened.

That year it coincided with Christmas Eve, so many people were shopping. As the day tumbled from the skies and snow fell all around her, Rudi stood outside a mobbed Livingston Mall.

This was a place she loathed, like all places like it. But she wasn’t there for herself.

So, while listening on her Walkman to Lee Ving’s most unusual holiday take, the closest punk rock would get to Yuletide cheer, Rudi slammed open the doors and marched into the building, and she trudged through a corridor that led to the stores, in the direction of a woman who was leaving with two children and lots of bags.

Horrified by Rudi’s appearance, one that must’ve been more menacing because of all the snow on her, she pulled her kids from Rudi’s path as if she were a charging lioness, and that wasn’t far from the truth.

#

Rudi shuffled through a row of men’s shirts in a department store called Bamberger’s.

She’d been in the mall for an hour. It was all ordinary when she needed what wasn’t.

*What do you give someone who’s about to die?*

Noticing a heavyset security guard and his anxious eyes on her while he babbled into a handheld radio, Rudi took this as a sign to try somewhere else.

She pushed herself toward the mall area, followed by the guard. He followed her till she left the store.

Sighing, she sauntered toward a railing and gazed below. On the ground floor was an ill-stuffed Santa Claus, who was going through the motions.

“Fake,” she growled. “This whole place is fake.”

With her fists clenched, she plodded toward an escalator. But she stopped when she spotted a chocolate shop.

#

With his hands shaking, the clerk dropped some white chocolate into a paper bag, and he offered it to Rudi with his hands shaking some more.

While glaring at his fright, she slapped some money onto the counter, and she grabbed the bag and rushed off. She rushed down the escalator and toward the exits. But as she reached a corridor leading to the parking lot and the bus stop beyond it, a toy store window caught her eye.

In it was a miniature waterfall, much like the one Tommy loved but couldn’t visit anymore. Best of all, she had enough money to buy it.

“There it is, Mommy!” came a voice from the store’s other side. “There it is!”

Rudi wanted to hurry into the store and buy the waterfall. But she peeked her head around the building’s corner.

A girl of around five was jumping up and down as she pointed at a lone Cabbage Patch doll in the window.

Without as much excitement, her mother strode to the doll. She examined both it and its price before turning to her daughter. While trying to suppress her sorrow, she searched for words. “I’m sure next year we . . .”

The girl tried to hide her disappointment. But she had to avoid her mother’s eyes. “It’s all right, Mommy. Really.”

“How about some hot chocolate?”

The two walked off hand in hand, with their heads hanging.

Rudi tried to ignore this. She tried, too, to forget all the disappointing Christmases she’d experienced as a child. They all flew at her. The mornings without a tree let alone presents. The mornings that were no different from any other. The mornings where she wasn’t special and didn’t matter and had no love.

The ignoring and the forgetting of all this took time. But she did both and hustled into the store and through it and reached a counter.

Behind it kneeled a man with black-rimmed glasses and a bow tie who was older than time.

He lifted himself up. It took him ages, but he got to his feet.

Unlike all others she’d encountered at the mall that day, the man wasn’t frightened of her. He expressed warmth and said, “Happy Chanukah.”

Believing he must’ve been talking to another person, Rudi checked around.

But there was no one. So she spun toward him, not getting his kindness but not getting more how he could tell she was Jewish when she herself couldn’t.

“What can I do for you?” he murmured.

She stared at the waterfall in the window. She stared and stared at it. But she pointed at the doll.

The old man took it from the window. “You’re lucky. This is our last one. We literally couldn’t keep them in stock. That’s why we had to mark the price up so much.”

He brought the doll to the counter. “Do you want me to wrap it?”

Rudi glimpsed out the store window, at the mother and daughter sipping hot chocolate at a bench. “If you can do it fast.”

“It won’t take but a minute,” he told her, and he wrapped the gift. He wrapped it with a fancy gold paper fashioned from untold stars.

“Could you do me a favor?” she asked.

“What’s that?”

She pointed out the window, at the mother and daughter. “Could you give the doll to that woman?”

The man froze. He froze in mid-wrap before glancing at the two and shaking his head at Rudi. “I don’t understand.”

“Tell her, tell her that she’s won a contest or that it’s some kind of store promotion. Tell her whatever you want as long as it’s not in front of her girl.”

The man returned his glance to the two. He glanced at them longer than before. He must’ve noted their sadness, because he turned toward Rudi and expressed more warmth. I bet he expressed it more than before.

“What about you?” he murmured. “What can I get for you to give?”

“I’m fine,” she groaned while fishing through her seabag for her purse.

The man finished with the wrapping as Rudi slapped the money onto the counter and hurried off.

“Don’t you want a receipt?” he called out to her.

“No.”

“Or your change?”

Rudi didn’t answer. She ran from the store while cursing her stupidity.

By the corridor she stopped. She stopped in the same place she had before, and for a reason unknown waited.

The old man left the store. He left with a plain-paper shopping bag in his hand, and he inched toward the woman and her girl. The one who’d still believe in fairy tales.

She wouldn’t be the only one.

#

Rudi opened the door of her apartment. She opened it to “Moonlight Serenade.”

Tommy was walking a red gift-wrapped box toward the simple metal menorah on their mantle, followed each step by Flutter. She followed him as if her life depended on it.

No longer was Tommy the gorgeous football player Rudi first met. But nothing was ever as beautiful as him, and she wanted to lock this inside her.

Tommy lowered himself to his knees, and he placed the gift under the menorah before turning toward Rudi.

“You’ve caught me,” he said. He said it with a smile. A smile she loved because he was only smiling for her.

She didn’t smile back. “I didn’t get you a gift.”

“You’ve already given me yours.”

“I did get you . . .”

She marched to him, and she kneeled beside him as she took off her seabag and reached inside it for the chocolate.

Which he enjoyed that night in the arms of his gift.

the end