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THE CHANUKAH GIFT

by

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Blurb

On a Chanukah in a bleak California desert, a homeless man reconnects with his twin sister when he receives a series of letters postmarked from a Chanukah forty years earlier. These letters contain the journal of the dying teenage boy his sister unexpectedly came to love, who’s gifted the chance of replaying the last year of his life and avoiding the one thing that will end it: her.

From the author of *Last Jew in Prague, The Chanukah Gift* is a magical coming-of-age tale about the unstoppable pursuit of a happy ending, no matter how impossible it may be.

*Even punk girls blush*

*and love*

*Harder than they punch.*

*And they kiss you to tears*

*While you die in their arms.*

the first night

I didn’t even know I had a twin sister when I was growing up, until she came crashing down upon me.

This would happen to me again forty years later, on a day that started like most others. With the sun doing all it could to avoid creeping above Interstate 15 a few blocks away, I pushed a garbage can through the back lot of the Motel 6 where I worked. I pushed it toward the dumpsters, where sat a scruffy and aging man.

A few steps from this, I came to a stop, in front of a pair of dirty needles lying among the sand that was blowing across the rotting asphalt. This was a sight so common that my only reaction was to reach down to pick them up with one of my heavily-gloved hands.

“Hey,” came the accented voice of someone behind me.

I turned toward it, and standing there with a big smile on his chubby face was the motel manager. Amoun was always smiling at me. He got a kick out of our relationship: an Egyptian getting to boss around a Jew, or a “Hebrew” as he called me. He was singlehandedly reenacting Exodus.

I really was kind of his slave. He had me do eight hours of work in a four-hour shift, and he didn’t even pay me minimum wage. He found a loophole in the law that let him pay me less. But I really didn’t care about the money, especially as I wasn’t allowed to spend it. I needed the work, the more of it and the harder it was the better. So I indulged him in his Ramessesian fantasies.

“I want you to shampoo the hallway carpets today,” he told me, ours being the only Motel 6 that had all interior corridors. “And power-wash the walkways. Oh, and the people in 110 last night left blood everywhere. Clean that up too.”

I nodded and turned around, and I dropped the needles into the can as the scruffy and aging man rose to his feet. He was a regular at the motel, who every morning paid his $70 bill in nickels.

“Those weren’t mine,” he insisted while pointing at what I had dropped. “I would never just leave them on the ground like that.”

“I appreciate that,” I told him.

Much like the morning, the afternoon was not much different than most others. After taking a pair of buses from Hesperia, Matt and I walked home along 7th Street in Victorville, a decaying city of concrete and glass that had never fully risen from the sands underneath it.

The two of us approached the setting sun, which seemed eager to disappear behind the horizon, and I glanced at Matt. He was the closest thing I had to a friend and was the only reason I had a job, after he convinced Amoun that someone with Computer Science degrees really would make a good houseman.

“Get off the road, you idiot,” Matt growled at me with a smirk once he noticed that I was walking in the street and veering toward the heavy rush-hour traffic to the left of us. “You’re gonna get hit.”

“If a man is destined to rot in the desert,” I cried out while throwing my arms into the air, “he cannot get hit by a car.”

Matt chuckled and grabbed me by the collar of my jacket, and he tossed me onto the sidewalk just as a red Dodge Charger roared by.

I’d expected the night would be like most others too. But I would discover that there was something different about this one. As I reached a calendar on the wall after I dropped off my tray in the collection area of the dining hall, I noticed that it was the first night of Chanukah. A night like all others I was spending in a homeless shelter.

That it was Chanukah shouldn’t’ve mattered to me. I had lost faith long ago and religion even before that. But the holiday invoked memories and mostly good ones.

These were still playing in my head as I waited at the head of a long line of people standing outside the office where we’d all check in for the night. They only came to a halt when the door opened and Matt stepped past me carrying a towel in his hand.

It was my turn now. I walked into the tiny room, and I saw a large man in his thirties sitting behind a desk. With his graying beard, bulging belly, and red cheeks, Josh looked almost like Santa Claus, except without the jolly or good cheer.

He didn’t seem to notice me. He was staring intently at the large schedule in front of him. It was as if he were gazing into the secrets of the universe. “You got laundry tomorrow morning,” he finally said before beginning to write my name in a slot on the schedule.

“I work in the morning,” I told him while trying to hide the exasperation of explaining this to him night after night. “Like I do almost every morning.”

With his own exasperation, he crossed out my name and barked, “Kitchen. Tomorrow night.”

I didn’t respond. I just picked up a towel off the stack lying on the chair beside the desk and headed out the door.

“Hey,” he uttered.

I turned back to him, and I saw him holding out a thick white envelope.

“This came for you,” he said.

Barely glancing at it, I grabbed it and walked out. After tossing the towel up into my cubby a few steps away, I left the building and found myself in the shelter’s courtyard. This was set up like an outdoor diner, with a dozen cheap plastic booths and dozens of lost people passing the time in them.

I stood there and listened to everyone. I listened to their stories of hunting for jobs they didn’t want and to their plans for leaving the shelter they didn’t believe. Through it all, I listened to the normality they tried to project. I listened to how vainly they tried this.

Vaguely, I recalled the envelope. This I opened, but only because I had nothing better to do. With even less enthusiasm, I pulled out a set of pages, which were handwritten in ink on both sides of lined white paper with ruffled edges. The kind I hadn’t seen since I was in school.

Glimpsing through the pages, my disinterest decreased with each one. Once it hit me who had written these, I grabbed the envelope and gaped at it. With my mouth and eyes stretched to their limits, I saw that the return address was from a Tommy Goodwin in Livingston, New Jersey. This was shocking enough, but far more so was that it was postmarked forty years earlier.

Well into the chilly and windy evening, I sat at a booth far from the others in the corner of the courtyard, with the full moon silhouetting the palm trees and canyons behind me. There I stared at the pages spread out on the table in front of me and tried to make sense of them. Finally, I gave up, and I took out the cheap plastic phone they gave out for free to people like me. “Obamaphones,” most of us still called them even though he hadn’t been president in years. He wasn’t even the guy who came up with them. But I guess we had to call them something.

Slowly, I dialed a number. It was a number I hadn’t called in so long that I thought I’d forgotten it. For many seconds it rang, and suddenly I hoped it wouldn’t answer. I even put my finger over the disconnect button and tried to find the courage to push it.

“Hello,” came her voice.

I couldn’t recall when I heard this voice last, but it was one I would’ve recognized after a thousand years. It was the same as it always was, strong and confident and unafraid. With it a serenity fell over me, and I found myself reaching out to touch it. But I didn’t reply to it. I just sat there dazed until she repeated herself.

“It’s me,” I mumbled.

Rudi paused longer than I had. I could count the silence, which went on until she murmured, “Where are you?”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to take up a lot of your time. I’m sure you must be busy tonight.”

“Services ended a while ago.”

“It’s just that, it’s just that I got something in the mail today . . . something from Tommy.”

“Tommy,” she gasped, and I could almost see her falling forward. I even reached out to catch her.

“I know it’s ridiculous,” I muttered while shaking my head and staring at the pages with more disbelief than before. “But it’s right in front of me.”

“What is?”

“I don’t know. It looks like a journal he wrote.”

“He never wrote a journal.”

“You sure about that?”

She took many seconds before telling me: “I’m never sure of anything. It kinda comes with the job.”

“Do you want me to mail it to you?” I asked. “Maybe I could even scan it with my phone. I saw 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?”

Again, I shook my head, and again I glanced at the pages, and I told her: “I just skimmed through them, but they seem real personal.”

“He must’ve wanted you to have it,” she insisted.

“But how?”

“I’ve long stopped questioning how, when it comes to anything. Please read it to me. It’ll be the best Chanukah gift I’ll get.”

I didn’t reply. I wasn’t sure I wanted to live through what had happened again, and I was pretty sure I didn’t want her to relive it. Still, with a drawn-out sigh, I collected and ordered the pages by the numbers written on the bottom of them, and I read the first entry, which was dated December 24, 1983. Right away, I noticed how the date was written in a different-colored ink than the rest of it, as if it had been written at a different time.

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

He was glancing into a full-length mirror, where he saw a tall but gaunt and sickly young man sitting on a bed, whose hair was so thin that he could see through to his scalp. This man was wearing a yellow terrycloth robe and was struggling to tie a white ribbon over a red gift-wrapped box, with snow falling through the window beside him and an old Glenn Miller song playing from a portable stereo on an end table by the bed.

Tommy noticed something else in the mirror: a small golden-haired dog lying by the door, who was watching him as if its life depended on it.

For a long time, Tommy struggled with the ribbon. He struggled for what seemed like hours, knowing that he had to get it just right. Over and over, he tied and untied it, often having to pause many seconds between the two.

With the sun beginning to fall, and with sweat pouring down his face, he grinned at the big perfect loops spread across the width of the box. This grin stayed on his face as he slowly lifted himself and the box off the bed. Just as slowly, he wiped his brow and made his way out the door and 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.

Underneath this, Tommy lowered himself to his knees. This took time, much more than it had taken to raise himself, but he got the gift on the floor just before the front door of the apartment creaked open.

Turning toward it, he saw a young woman his age, who otherwise couldn’t’ve been more different. She stood not only in contrast to him but with herself, with short and spiked jet-black hair and a powder-white face, which contrasted as well with her thick black mascara and a glossy black lipstick that perfectly matched her nails. Also in contrast to her was the oversized blue-and-white football jacket she was wearing. One with the word “Tommy” and a big “C” stitched into the front of it.

“You’ve caught me,” he said to her, with a smile that reflected the joy washing over him. It just kept coming. It wouldn’t stop and was so strong that he couldn’t think of anything else.

She didn’t smile back. She just shook her head and mumbled, “I didn’t get you anything.”

“You’ve already given me your gift.”

“I did get you a little something,” she insisted, and she marched over to him and kneeled beside him before taking off the small white seabag that hung over her shoulder, which she reached inside.

With surprise, she pulled out a small envelope wrapped in a gold paper fashioned from countless little stars.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered while shaking her head as she gazed at the envelope. “He, he must’ve slipped it into my bag somehow.”

“Who?”

“The old man at the store.”

“Can I open it?”

She didn’t answer. She just kept gazing.

Gently, he took the envelope from her, and gently he opened it, and he pulled out a white card. A card like what you might find in a board game, which he read.

“What does it say?” she asked.

“One Replay,” he told her.

The second entry in Tommy’s journal was dated December 11, 1982, more than a year before the first one, and I noticed that all the remaining entries were dated after that.

“Did you hear me?” came a familiar female voice next to Tommy.

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t. His attention was on the image reflecting off a nearby window, of a confused but handsome and muscular seventeen-year-old boy, who had thick and wavy brown hair and who was wearing the blue-and-white football jacket with his name and the big “C” stitched into the front of it. This boy also had a dark-gray school backpack across his shoulder and had one of his arms around Darlene, the most beautiful girl at Columbia High School. She was a girl with strawberry-blonde permed hair and long perfect legs and a million-dollar smile. A girl who could’ve easily become a model. The Jewish Brooke Shields everyone called her. But she had much bigger ambitions than that.

“Tommy?” she muttered.

“What?” he muttered back before looking around and noticing that he was leaning against the school. He was not far from its front doors, along with his friends and dozens of other kids, who were all talking and joking around while waiting to go inside on a cold but sunny morning.

Trying to make sense of what he had just experienced, or what he thought he had, Tommy came to the only conclusion that made sense, that he’d been dreaming. Only it didn’t seem like a dream. While a dream may seem real while it’s happening, when you wake from it, it becomes obvious what it was. But this wasn’t. It seemed as real as what he was experiencing right then. Though, just like when waking from a dream, he was quickly forgetting it.

Hurriedly, he released his arm from Darlene. After swinging his backpack off his shoulder, he whipped out a spiral notebook and a pen from it, and he started writing frantically on the double-sided lined white paper.

“What are you doing?” demanded Darlene.

“I gotta write this down,” he groaned in aggravation while shaking his head.

He wrote down everything he could remember. Everything that happened from the time he’d glanced into the mirror by the bed.

Once he had finished, he read what he had written and read it again, and he mumbled, “One replay? A replay of what?”

“What are you talking about?” Darlene screeched, suddenly sounding frightened.

Not even Tommy knew the answer to this. But he did know that he should’ve been happy. He should’ve been happy that whatever he’d experienced wasn’t real. Looking again at his reflection in the window, he saw how healthy and strong he was and how he had his whole life ahead of him. At the same time, though, he couldn’t help feel loathing. The same loathing he had felt for everything around him, including himself, since the summer. He had felt this all the time apart from the few minutes he spent with that crazy-looking girl he didn’t even know.

“Did you guys see that new Prince video on MTV?” spoke one of his friends, who were all wearing blue-and-white football jackets like his. They looked much like him too. They all had similar haircuts and clothes, and they were all just as good looking. Judging by the pictures I would later see of them in Tommy’s yearbook, they could’ve started a boy band if such a thing had existed then.

No one answered the boy’s question, and all the chatter outside the school ceased. The quiet was so deafening that Tommy turned from the window, and he saw that everyone was staring at the same thing. Approaching the school entrance from the parking lot below it were two people. The first was a large middle-aged man in an off-the-rack blue suit who had a crewcut and a pockmarked face. But he wasn’t what everyone was staring it. It was the girl a few steps behind him. 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 and who was carrying the same white seabag over her shoulder. The only differences were the Walkman clutched in her hand and what she was wearing: an old and oversized navy-blue overcoat as well as torn and faded blue jeans, along with a pair of black Chuck Taylors. The latter two she was wearing at a time years before either were in fashion or were even close to coming into it. Tommy wrote that he couldn’t remember anyone wearing Converse since he was a little kid.

She must’ve been some sight that morning. While today I bet no one would look twice at her even in the Bible Belt, back then it must’ve been as if she had dropped from the moon.

Tommy, of course, had already seen most of this sight. What he noticed most about her now was the scowl on her face. It, I’m sure, reflected her rage at the moment, but I imagine it was hiding something too. The something under her rage that was always looking for a way out.

“Who is she?” Tommy uttered while feeling his knees buckle, a sensation he long knew from playing football. But never did he feel it like this or this hard.

Again, no one answered him, and by now the girl was close enough to notice all the eyes upon her. Her scowl only increased as she stared down the whole school, looking as if she were ready to fight them all. She also cranked the volume of her Walkman all the way up and sang off-key with a song Tommy had never heard, about someone who belonged to a “Blank Generation.”

Tommy never liked punk rock, and he especially never understood it. But this was somehow different. Unlike any song he knew, the lyrics were about him or someone just like him. Someone who had everything and nothing. Someone who was surrounded by others but alone. Someone who was desperate to get away, even if it meant never coming back anywhere.

Suddenly, the girl stopped singing and her eyes locked on Tommy’s. It was as if he were the only one there, the only person in the world, and she glared at him. She glared and snarled.

Tommy couldn’t help grimace. But it was mostly at himself and his attraction to a girl he found vile in so many ways but fascinating in many more. It wasn’t even because of his dream he found her fascinating. She was unlike any girl he knew. A girl who walked so uprightly and didn’t seem to care what anyone thought of her. His heart pounded in increasing excitement with every step she took toward him, and he felt himself leaning toward her. He almost fell over.

“I thought Halloween was in October,” one of Tommy’s friends joked within steps of her, to a cackle of laughter that Tommy nervously joined in.

The girl spun toward the boy. While continuing to follow the man in front of her, she growled, “How’d you like to go next year as a rug?”

“That’s enough,” the man called out, and Tommy noticed how bloodshot the girl’s eyes were and how she was sweating despite the cold.

The girl kept glaring and snarling, which again was focused at Tommy. She was so concentrated on him that she was oblivious to everything else. So, as she approached the front doors of the school, she didn’t notice Maria.

Maria was a small and mousy girl with no makeup, who underneath her plain black wool jacket was dressed in a white blouse and a long plaid skirt. She looked like she was going to Catholic school as she hurried to the front doors without paying attention to who else was hurrying there. She and the new girl almost slammed into each other, only coming to a stop at the last moment.

For many seconds, Maria gazed at the sight in front of her. She gazed with a combination of shock and awe. It was as if she were witnessing a new form of life.

The new girl gazed back, only without the shock or the awe. “How would you like my footprints on your face?” she barked with her fist raised, causing Maria to take a step back in fright and then another.

“What did I tell you, Rudi?” the man beside her barked back as he grabbed her by the arm. With a bit of a grunt, he slammed one of his shoulders into the heavy wooden doors, and he tossed her inside the building like a rag.

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

I, too, was curious about who this Rudi was, as she was a stranger to me. So I put down the page I was reading and asked her.

“I thought Tommy was telling the story,” she grumbled.

“It’s interactive storytelling,” I replied. “All three of us.”

She giggled a bit but didn’t say a thing. However, I was in control of the situation and wouldn’t read any more until she relented.

“I can tell you that I had a lot more on my mind than some preppy jock,” she finally blurted out.

“Such as?” I wondered.

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

“But Tommy obviously got to you.”

“That doesn’t mean it was love at first sight. I really didn’t think much of him, despite how gorgeous he was. Maybe it was even because of it. He was the best-looking guy I had ever seen, better looking than anyone in movies or TV. But that just made me dislike him more. I was sure he was as boring as can be. Most guys like that are, in my experience. But . . .”

“But what?”

“There was something about him,” she conceded with an aggravated sigh. “Something in the way he was looking at me. No one had ever looked at me like that. He was looking right into and through me. It was like he could see everything. But I brushed it off as nothing more than biological. I can assure you that, by the time I’d stepped through those school doors, or were thrown through them, I had completely forgotten about him.”

I doubted that, but I continued reading.

Along with many others heading to class and chatting about all kinds of nothing, Tommy wandered through the third-floor hallway in the school, not knowing where he was wandering through or to. It was as if he’d 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 was on anything but it, but he glanced inside the room anyway, and he saw a handful of students entering punch cards for use in the old computer on the other side of the room. This was how you programmed it. You would put the cards in a queue, and then you had to wait for an operator to manually feed them into the machine. Sometimes you had to wait a week just to compile the smallest of programs.

Watching all this didn’t exactly make Tommy’s heart pound or make him lean toward it. So when the bell rang, instead of spending the next hour punching the code that would have spewed a bunch of zeros across a printed page, Tommy continued down the hall. He did while glancing into every classroom he passed.

At the end of the corridor, he stepped into the stairwell and climbed down to the second floor, where he continued glancing. He also thought about his dream while beginning to question whether it really had been one. If it hadn’t, he realized it meant something incredible, that he’d been given the chance to replay a part of his life and avoid the fate that came with it. A chance that likely wasn’t compatible with Rudi, as why else would it begin when he met her? He also knew that, without her, it couldn’t possibly end the way it had.

So why was he looking for her? he screamed at himself. No matter how she was making him feel, he replied, she couldn’t be worth dying over. But still he looked.

“What are you doing?” came the squeaky voice of someone a few steps behind him.

Startled, Tommy spun around and saw the small man behind the voice, who was wearing an argyle sweater over a button-down white Oxford and a blue paisley tie. “What?” he mumbled.

“Why aren’t you in class?” the teacher demanded in a voice even squeakier than before.

“I have a free period,” Tommy told him, “and I was, I was looking for Mrs. Roth . . . she promised to help me with calculus.”

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

“Oh, yeah,” Tommy said with a grin. “I guess I’m a little out of it today.”

Quickly, he hurried off, and he approached the end of the hall and another stairwell. There he glanced back, and he saw that the teacher was gone.

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

Slowly, Tommy stepped up to the open door, and he peeked inside and saw a setup quite common at the school. Three long tables stood along the edges of the room, forming something of a rectangle with the teacher’s desk up front. At the back table, Rudi sat by herself or rather slouched there, wearing a tattered white T-shirt that had “Black Flag” handwritten on it above four black bars hand drawn in the shape of a flag.

Again, Tommy grimaced, this time as he tried to imagine how he could end up with someone like her. She was a monster, he told himself, who didn’t care about anything or anyone. So he was now convinced that his dream could’ve only been one. Yet he couldn’t move, nor could he stop looking at Rudi and wondering about her.

“Modern Poetry is one of the most challenging courses in the school,” continued Ms. Krasner, who wasn’t exactly tall but was imposing nonetheless. A woman in her forties with thick-rimmed glasses and a black turtleneck sweater, she towered over everything. She was towering even as she leaned over a table as she rummaged through a stack of textbooks in the corner of the front of the room. “You’ll be expected not only to write about poetry,” she let Rudi know, “but also 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, who was sitting with a bunch of girls alongside the wall that separated the class from the hallway.

“Wrong Shelley,” retorted the teacher with unmasked frustration. “But it was a nice try, Ms. Cantor. Almost.”

The woman finally picked out a book, and she marched it toward Rudi while saying, “This is an elective, Ms. Weiss. That means no one is forcing you to take it.” After stopping in front of her and noticing her apathy, she frowned and dropped the book onto the table in front of her, where it bounced a few times before coming to a rest.

Rudi yawned, slowly and deliberately.

“Have you ever even read poetry?” Krasner cried out.

“Can she read?” uttered Darlene, causing chuckles among the students. Even Krasner grinned.

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

The students again chuckled, this time louder.

“Touché, Ms. Cantor,” Krasner said to Darlene before she marched up to the center blackboard, where the poem “since feeling is first” was written in picture-perfect script. “Can anyone tell me something about E. E. Cummings?” she asked the class while gazing at the words in joyful wonder.

“He wrote his name in lowercase,” Darlene answered with a knowing grin.

“That’s just a myth,” groaned Rudi with a sneer.

Krasner turned to Rudi in surprise and said, “That’s right, Ms. Weiss. Can you tell us anything else about him? Perhaps something more interesting.”

“He did use unorthodox typography and grammar,” Rudi explained. “But that was only a product of his hatred of convention and constraints, of anything that got in his way, including language.” Rudi then put her feet on the table, and she crossed her arms and smirked a bit before adding, “Basically, he was a punk.”

Krasner laughed. It seemed to Tommy that she was laughing more at Rudi than at her assertion. “Is that so?” she commented. “He certainly didn’t look the part.”

“Punk has nothing to do with looks or even music,” Rudi growled. “It’s about attitude. He-was-a-punk.”

“You need to dig a little 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.”

Again, Rudi sneered, this time at the teacher.

Ignoring it, Krasner once more turned to the poem and began reading it aloud.

Poetry was never Tommy’s thing. He liked it even less than punk rock. So, as the words echoed through the classroom and into the hall, he started down it, with Krasner’s voice fading as he did.

*my blood approves,*

*and kisses are a better*

*fate than wisdom*

This surprised Tommy and caused him to come to a stop. It wasn’t the words that surprised him but his reaction to them, even if he couldn’t say exactly what this was. He only knew that he did react. It was so strong that it turned him around and 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 again in the threshold of the room, where he saw that Rudi had removed her feet from the desk and that she was leaning toward the blackboard with something far past excitement. She had almost pushed the table over in front of her.

The poem came to an end, and Krasner spun toward the class. She did with as much excitement as Rudi. This shot through the room as she exclaimed, “His words mix not only splendor and dissonance, but they’re saturated with an overwhelmingly irrational passion. Cummings was a Romantic above all else. Or a neo-Romantic, as some would call him.”

The teacher paused. She paused for just a moment before grinning slyly and adding, “‘Shelley in a blender’ is what I’d call him. That’s Percy Shelley, Ms. Cantor.”

Again, the woman paused, and she sat on the edge of her desk and told the class: “I want to see this overwhelmingly irrational passion in your next assignment, due a week from Wednesday. You will write me a poem worthy of Cummings and all his magic. A poem he might’ve written himself if he were you. And I will flunk anyone who does nothing more than play with their typography or grammar. I want to see passion. I want to see it all over the page!”

Suddenly, as if she just now realized that someone was watching her, Rudi slowly turned toward the door. With surprise, she noticed Tommy and his gaze.

Tommy noticed something too. He noticed her eyelids flutter, and this sent him rushing off while wondering if his had been doing the same.

In the school cafeteria at lunch, Rudi walked through the center of the cavernous hall carrying a tray weighted down with food. There was a mountain of it, but all Tommy could see was the fruit on the top.

As she passed table after table, waves of heads turned toward her from all directions.

She ignored this, or she at least pretended she did. Despite appearances, I know she really did care what people thought of her, and this always angered her. This likely made her ignore the gazes even more. She ignored them until she saw one she couldn’t. It was coming from a table full of football players and beautiful girls and was cutting right through her.

Tommy looked away. He did while trying to convince himself that he didn’t really see Rudi’s eyelids flutter, that he had just imagined it. For how could some poet’s overly-romanticized notion of life be true?

Eyelids don’t flutter, he hollered inside his head, nor do people blush or swoon. We live in a purely rational world, where 2 + 2 can never equal 5. But at the same time, he again glanced at Rudi, and he saw that she was staring at him and making him shiver all over.

Suddenly, Tommy realized that Darlene was sitting next to him and that her arm was around his. Rudi must’ve noticed this too. She spun from him, and she rushed toward the back of the cafeteria, looking as if she were going to smash right through the wall. Instead, she came to a stop at an empty table in front of it, where she sat and picked at the pile of food.

Approaching her with a more modest lunch was a boy who was somewhere else, much like he always was. Eliot was small with a pimply face and greasy brown hair and was wearing a blue button-down polyester shirt, brown Haggar slacks, and white sneakers. He wasn’t exactly the poster boy for cool. He was the kind of boy every bully dreams of. Even some of them felt sympathy for him, including the ones who’d bully him regardless.

Eliot reached Rudi’s table, and just then he saw who was sitting there, and he froze. He froze mid-step.

“Can I help you?” Rudi groaned after enduring a handful of seconds of this.

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

“So?” she growled.

Eliot didn’t answer. He just backed up. Slowly, he backed up. He backed up as if retreating from a raging lioness. Which wasn’t that far from the truth.

Rudi turned from this. She calmed herself too, and she took a notepad and a pen from her seabag. With these, she glanced at Tommy and started doodling.

“Can you believe she’s in my poetry class?” Darlene remarked to Tommy when she noticed what he was staring at.

Tommy, of course, could believe this, but he shrugged.

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

“What do you mean?” Tommy uttered.

“Rumor is,” Darlene replied, “she’s a bigtime druggie.”

Tommy tried to make this information matter to him. He tried for it to dissuade him from his increasing obsession of Rudi. He tried and tried and then tried again. But it didn’t mean a thing, and he wasn’t sure anything could.

“I was very disappointed with the results of this quiz,” spoke Mrs. Roth, as the aging woman in an aging dark-grey dress handed papers to the students in her class late that day. This included Tommy, who glumly looked at the “D” written on the top of his from his usual seat in the front row. “You should’ve mastered conic sections by now,” she went on. “Most of you will have to do a whole lot better to have any chance of passing the AP exam, much less this class.”

The teacher was about to add some further invectives when her attention was interrupted by Rudi, who sauntered into the classroom clutching a crumpled printout of her class schedule. She was clutching it as if it were a fast food wrapper she was about to discard.

“Yes?” the teacher asked incredulously after looking Rudi up and down many times over.

Rudi waved her schedule at the woman. As irreverently as possible, she told her: “This is where I’m supposed to be.”

Mrs. Roth marched up to Rudi and grabbed the printout. After crumpling it, she read it again and again before telling Rudi: “We’ll see about that, Miss Weiss.”

“*Ms. Weiss*,” Rudi groaned.

“Excuse me?”

“Do I look like a ‘miss’?”

“Solve the problem on the board,” the woman barked as she pointed at it, and Rudi turned and saw the following equation on the blackboard:

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

With some surprise, Rudi spun back to Mrs. Roth, and she said, “You’re joking, right?”

“I rarely joke about partial fraction decomposition.”

Rudi sighed, but she marched up to the board. There she picked up a piece of chalk and solved the problem. She solved it in a handful of seconds, filling the entire board with numbers and formulae.

“That took me twenty minutes to solve this morning,” gasped the teacher in shock.

Rudi responded by writing “Q.E.D.” in big letters on the board next to the solution before dropping the chalk onto the easel. She dropped it much like Ms. Krasner had dropped the textbook in front of her, causing it to bounce a few times on the easel.

“Quite Easily Done,” Mrs. Roth remarked.

“Actually,” Rudi explained, “it means *quod erat demonstrandum: that which was to be proven*.”

“A girl after my own heart,” the teacher murmured with a grin. “You’ve earned your seat here, *Ms. Weiss*. Perhaps you can even help some others here keep theirs.”

Rudi said nothing in reply. She just snatched the schedule from Mrs. Roth and glanced at Tommy as she headed toward a seat in the back of the room, and Tommy again shifted his eyes to the mark on the paper in front of him.

Tommy exited a first-floor stairwell along with many others as they headed out of the building at the end of the day. As he reached a restroom, he heard a familiar female voice that made him stop by the door.

“He doesn’t care about you!” Rudi howled, causing Tommy to wonder who she could be howling at. “Nobody does!” she added. “I don’t even care about you!”

Suddenly, the door swung open, hitting Tommy in the face, and Rudi rushed out of the bathroom by herself.

The door quickly returned to its frame, and Tommy stood there and watched her rush off.

“It’s my choice,” he argued with himself while trying not to follow her. It was his choice what he did with his life and his so-called “replay.” It was no one else’s. It especially wasn’t hers. But still he followed her. He followed her down the hallway. He followed her as well when she turned left toward the front doors, and he followed her through them too. He followed her all the way outside and saw her marching toward a crowd of people that had encircled something on the edge of Parker Avenue.

Passing Darlene and her best friend Beth, a short blonde with a ponytail and girl-next-door looks, Rudi noticed them whispering among themselves as they snickered at her. They kept doing this until Beth’s mountain of a boyfriend named Joey tapped her on the shoulder and ordered her to come with him.

“That’s the girl I was telling you about,” she said to him as she followed.

“She doesn’t look like much to me,” he said.

Darlene again snickered at Rudi, who ignored this and reached the crowd, where she looked over someone’s shoulder. Seeing what everyone was staring at, she began pushing her way through them. Tommy wrote in his journal that she looked like Moses parting the Red Sea. She was an irresistible force and kept pushing until she reached the street and came upon a small golden-haired dog, who was whimpering and bleeding by the side of the road and who looked a lot like the one from Tommy’s dream.

Rudi kneeled in front of the animal, and she swept it into her arms. While she cradled it, she tried to comfort and calm it. Tommy had never seen anyone act so gently. It belied everything about her. But so did everything else.

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

Rudi turned toward it, and she saw Maria pointing the way with great excitement. “I volunteer there on weekends,” the girl added. “The vet’s really great.”

Rudi glanced at the dog’s state, and she kissed its head before muttering, “I don’t think we’d get there in time.”

“But we can,” Tommy uttered as he jumped in front of her.

With the dog clutched in her arms, Rudi raced through the school parking lot with Tommy before the two came to a stop by a Harley Sturgis.

“You drive a motorcycle?” she gasped as she tried to catch her breath.

“I like to live dangerously,” he told her with a bit of a smirk.

“I bet.”

Tommy continued to smirk, and he jumped onto the bike. But Rudi didn’t follow.

“Come on!” he cried out.

Hesitantly, she climbed onto the seat behind him. But she didn’t do anything more, and he became impatient. “I’d suggest you put your arm around me,” he bellowed, “unless you want to fly there.”

Even more hesitantly, she put one arm around him. While she continued to clutch the dog with the other, they sped out of the lot onto Parker before turning left onto Valley, where they sped through traffic, weaving around cars and trucks while running both red lights and stop signs.

Driving recklessly was something Tommy was good at. He did it all the time, much like some kids cut themselves, just so he could know he was alive and that this meant something. But never did it do a thing for him, even when he came close to death. Only now did it mean anything.

In the cramped white waiting area of the animal hospital, Tommy and Rudi quietly sat next to each other, with both looking straight ahead.

Glancing at her, Tommy noticed something, and he said, “You’ve got some blood on your coat.”

Rudi glanced at herself and remarked, “It’s not the first time.” After glancing at Tommy, she added, “You’ve got some too, on the back of your jacket.”

“It’s all right.”

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

“Sure.”

Again, the two looked straight ahead and did so as quickly as possible, and they saw a stoic-looking vet in glasses and a white lab coat approach them while reading from a medical chart.

Glumly, the two stood and awaited the news.

“She’s got a long recovery in front of her,” the woman said as she stopped in front of the two. With something of a smile, she lowered her chart and added, “But she’s going to be just fine.”

“Really?” Rudi uttered in surprise.

“Really,” the vet replied. “It’s fortunate you got her here so quickly.”

Neither replied back, and the woman took a good look at the pair. With a bit of a sigh, she remarked, “I guess you two can’t pay for this.”

“I can,” Tommy told her, and he pulled out his wallet and a credit card from it and handed it to her.

The woman took it and marched off, and Tommy turned to Rudi, and the two looked at each other while searching for words they couldn’t find.

“I guess I should be going,” she finally mumbled as she started backing up.

“You want a lift?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she insisted before bumping into a wall.

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

Tommy lay on his bed late into the evening while writing in his notebook, with crumpled pages all around him on the floor. He wrote down everything that had happened that day. He wrote it many times over until he had the words just right. He even sketched out some of the scenes on the edges of the paper.

Suddenly, he began hearing music and realized it was only in his head. He was hearing the same old Glenn Miller song he had heard in his dream. It played over and over, and he could feel himself dancing to it with his arms around someone. Someone whose heartbeat matched not only his but the beat of the trombone.

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

With this, the music came to an end, and Tommy realized that he was clutching a pillow.

“Tommy?” spoke the voice.

“Yeah?” he replied as he tossed the pillow onto the floor.

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

“Perhaps, perhaps some other time.”

There was no reply, but Tommy could hear his mother walk off.

What he couldn’t hear was the song. No matter how hard he tried to recreate it in his head, it just wouldn’t come. Left to his thoughts, he could think of only one thing: a certain someone and what she was doing right then.

I was also wondering what this certain someone was doing right then. But, just like when I had interrupted the narrative earlier, she didn’t want to tell me. But, just like then, she didn’t have a choice if she wanted me to read her the rest of the journal.

“I was banging against the walls of the dump I was staying at,” she told me with lots of exasperation.

“You were what?” I uttered.

“I was listening to Bad Brains’ *Yellow Tape*, which a friend of mine had given me after I got out of jail,” she explained, “and I was doing what I always did when I listened to them. H.R., his voice would reach out and grab me by the neck, and it would throw me into wall after wall. It still does this. I still bang into walls whenever I listen to them, which I can tell you raises quite a few 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 Takeover’ was blasting into my head like a jackhammer into concrete. I listened to it like six thousand times. There was nothing but that song as I kept smashing and smashing into walls, breaking plaster everywhere. And then . . .”

“Then what?”

“Then a big fist hit one of the walls from the other side. It almost punched right through it, and a voice called out, ‘Stop that racket!’

“I didn’t reply. I just fell to the floor and sat there gasping for breath, with sweat pouring down my face and my arms around my legs. I was trying to will myself to be anywhere else. But it didn’t work. It never did.

“‘There’s some fries out here if you want,’ the voice called out next. But I didn’t want anything, especially from him. I especially didn’t want those fries.”

“You weren’t thinking about Tommy,” I questioned.

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

I chuckled and said, “But now you couldn’t listen to them.”

“Now I couldn’t listen to them. All I could do was pull out the drawing I had made at lunch, and I looked at it in surprise. I really had thought I’d been drawing Lee Ving, who was my crush at the time. Me and just about every punk girl on the planet. But there was something wrong with it. I mean, the drawing had Ving’s piercing eyes, which were piercing into me even when rendered in two dimensions. But the hair was too wavy, and the nose and chin were too chiseled. Then, when I realized who was actually staring at me from the drawing, I tore out the page and crumpled it. But . . .”

“But what?”

“This did nothing.”

“I have just one more question,” I said to her.

“What’s that?” she grumbled.

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

“There are some things I will keep to myself,” she insisted.

“That was a yes,” I blurted out as I turned the page, causing Rudi to chuckle, which is when I saw that I was back at the first page. “That, that’s it,” I muttered as I shuffled through the pages, looking for some more and not finding 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.”

“I know it’s not the end. But that’s all he sent me.”

“Today.”

“What?”

“That’s all he sent you today.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are seven more nights of Chanukah,” she told me, and I could just about see the smile on her face.

“You think he’s gonna send me more?” I gasped. “I mean, you think he *sent* me more?”

“Call me tomorrow night,” she commanded, and there wasn’t the slightest doubt in her voice that I’d have a reason to as she hung up.

It was well after midnight by the time I got off the phone with Rudi. But even though I had to get up early the next day for work, I couldn’t go to bed. I still had to wait for a bus pass from Josh so that I could get to work.

This was a daily ritual, regardless of who was working the night shift. But with Josh it was the worst. Some nights he would make me wait for hours, enjoying my dependence on him. On this night, though, the wait wasn’t that long. After standing outside the glass office door for about a half hour, he slowly rose from his seat and opened the door, and I stepped through it with Tommy’s letter clutched in my hand.

“Yes?” he said, despite knowing exactly why I was there.

I told him. With a forced sigh, he returned to his desk. From this, he took out a stack of day passes that the shelter got for free, and he offered me one. But he wouldn’t let go of it. Instead, he said, “This is a pretty good deal you get here. Free transportation every day.”

“I’d buy my own if you guys would let me spend the money I earn,” I said back.

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

Finally, he let go of the pass but not without adding, “We could throw you out for just about anything. Actually, anything at all.”

I didn’t say anything back. I just left the office. I also put the pass in my wallet and walked down the hall, soon reaching the women’s dorm on my left.

The women in the shelter had it harder than the men, especially those with children, who had to sleep in the dorm with them. Even their teenage boys had to do this. But as uncomfortable as this must’ve been, leaving the shelter could’ve been far worse. While no one wanted to be on the streets of Victorville, especially in the winter, the cold was the least worst thing facing women there. Because of this, they were far more dependent on the place than we were.

The men’s dorm was a little past them across the hall. I entered it to snoring so loud that it could’ve waken a cemetery, even the one in Arlington. Slowly, I walked through an enormous room filled with dozens of bunk beds and all the weary men sleeping on them. I walked to the back of the room and came to my bed. There I climbed to the top, took off my coat and jeans and put them under my pillow just like I did every night. I put Tommy’s letter there as well, and I tried to fall asleep. This trying was another nightly ritual, and on this night it was both the same and not. What made it different and unlike all the others was that I actually had something to look forward to the next day.

the second night

I woke in the middle of the night.

It wasn’t the snoring that woke me, even though this was even louder than before. What did was the same thing that did almost every night, something that was always there but never as strong as it was at this time.

Wave after wave of darkness passed over me. With each came the demons, who crawled into my head and pushed me further below the floor. They pushed me until I thought I’d never get up while reminding me of just how badly I had screwed up my life and how I could never undo this or even make it bearable.

All I could do in response was lay there and pray, pray for the sun to rise, so I could go to work and think of anything else.

Sudden light filled the room.

I didn’t need to look at the time on my phone to know it was six in the morning. This was when they woke us every day but Sunday, when they waited until seven. While most of us that morning tried to ignore the light by any means they could, I got up with the few others who had something to do or wanted to pretend they did. Like I did every morning, I pulled my coat and jeans from under the pillow. After checking my wallet and its contents, I put the jeans and the coat on and crawled out of bed and down to the floor, and I crept my way out of the enormous room. By the door, I saw Matt asleep in the bottom bunk, and I shook him a bit.

His only reply was to grumble.

“Time to make the doughnuts,” I told him.

He chuckled a bit, but he didn’t open his eyes, and I went into the corridor and stepped up to the cubbies, which were stacked onto each other in three rows. When I first got to the shelter that summer, they gave me a cubby on the top row even though I’m not exactly tall. So, like every morning, I had to climb up like a monkey to get my towel, toiletries, and a clean set of clothes.

With these I walked a few steps into the men’s room and up to one of the three communal sinks, where I shaved and brushed my teeth along with another of the early risers. Here I was forced to look at my rotting image in the big mirror in front of the sinks. Every morning I seemed to look older and thinner, and this morning wasn’t much different. Still, I found myself humming. I hummed the song my sister had been singing on her first day of Columbia and kept humming it as I headed toward the shower stalls down the way.

By the long bench in front of them, I undressed and put my wallet in my shower bag, which was something every guy in the shelter learned to do if they wanted to have money in it when they left the shower. Having your money stolen while you showered was kind of a rite of passage at the shelter. It happened so often that the staff just laughed when people complained about it, even when they lost hundreds of dollars.

With my bag and towel, I stepped into one of the three stalls, and I turned on the hot water and enjoyed the few minutes of normal I was given each day.

I got a bagged lunch from the guy working in the kitchen, and I made a cup of green tea, which was the only thing I could stomach in the morning. I took this into the courtyard, where I saw all the mothers getting their kids ready for school. It seemed like they were trying to give them the same semblance of normal I had just experienced. They were also trying to make them feel special in a place where they were anything but and that they mattered. A few were combing their children’s hair while others smiled as they watched them play. One was even checking her son’s homework.

On the surface, the kids looked like any other. You couldn’t tell they were different from those with homes. But it was what you couldn’t see that likely made them different. There was a prevalent rumor that it was kids who were stealing everyone’s money by the showers. Whether it was true or not, there were probably worst things they could be doing.

Glancing around the courtyard, at the same corner booth where I had talked to Rudi the night before, I noticed Nicole and Allison drinking coffee and smoking. They could only do the latter because cigarettes were something that the shelter, for a reason I could never learn, allowed us to buy. Maybe it was their way of guaranteeing attrition.

I joined the two women, who were both in their early thirties, sitting next to Nicole. She was someone who made a lie of every stereotype there was of a homeless person. She worked two jobs as a manufacturing supervisor and was as bright as the long desert days. She also would never lose hope and always conveyed this wonderful joy from being alive. What’s more, unlike most homeless people I knew, including myself, she didn’t seem to suffer from any psychological or substance issues. She was a victim of things she couldn’t control. After her husband went to prison, medical bills overwhelmed her, and she was desperately saving as much as she could so she could get herself out of the shelter and her three kids out of Child Protective Services.

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

“Having what?” I asked.

Nicole glanced around the courtyard before softly telling me: “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. A big one.”

“Are you serious?”

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

“How are you gonna pay for it?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

The Motel 6 where Matt and I worked was only a ten-minute drive down the road from the shelter. But there was no bus going down this road, even though the largest shopping center in the Victor Valley was on it as well as just about every kind of store imaginable. So every day we’d have to take a pair of buses that crisscrossed the valley and all the concrete and glass randomly strewn across it. This would usually take an hour and a half, but that was only if one of the buses weren’t late, which happened rarely.

On this morning, though, the buses got us to work five minutes early. After Matt bought a box of doughnuts in the convenience store across the street from the motel with his EBT food card (which was another exception the shelter allowed when it came to spending money), he and I punched in on the PC in Amoun’s office.

As we stepped out of it, the guy with the nickels came to the desk to pay for his room that day. The whole counter became covered in Jeffersons and Monticellos, and the poor clerk had to count each one. More than fourteen hundred after including tax.

“Where is my Hebrew?” Amoun called out after he came through the automatic front doors with one of his smiles.

“Right here, Pharoah,” I called back with a smile of my own.

He turned to me and asked, “Have you been cleaning out the weeds in the back lot?”

“Whenever I get a chance,” I answered.

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

Cleaning the weeds in the large field behind the back parking lot was an endless task, as the place was a magnet, not just for all the garbage guests would leave but also for all the waste coming from the desert surrounding it. The weeds would also endlessly grow, no matter how many I pulled from the ground and despite the apparent lack of water. So regardless of how much progress I would make on a given day, a few days later it would be worse than before.

I had lost track of how long I had been out there that morning when one of the cleaning ladies walked outside of the motel with her cart for a cigarette break. This woman had the most beautiful name I had ever heard: Alaya. It’s Arabic for “sublime,” and it certainly fit. Like Nicole, Alaya refused to fit a stereotype, and there were any number you could’ve applied to her. Like most of the cleaning women at the motel, she was an immigrant. But, unlike most, she was young and from England. She even sounded just like Paul McCartney. Also, much like Nicole, she was full of life. Despite the bleakness of her job and surroundings, she always had a smile on her face, and she seemed like she would burst from the excitement bubbling inside her at any moment.

Noticing me as she took a drag of her cigarette, she gave me one of the accentuated waves I had come to look forward to every day.

I waved back, feeling a brief moment of happiness. But I did while suddenly wondering who she really was and why she was here. I didn’t even know why I was wondering this.

After work ended early that afternoon, both buses home were late. It took me more than four hours to get to the shelter. I got there just as dinner was ending and people were beginning to line up to check in for the night.

Quickly, I made myself a sandwich. I ate it while cleaning the kitchen as fast as I could. By the time I had finished, there only a few people left in line. Still, this seemed to take forever as I anxiously waited for the envelope that I hoped would be waiting for me. I actually felt the same anxiousness that I had felt every Chanukah day when I was a kid, waiting for the present that was waiting for me.

I wanted to believe that Rudi was right and that another letter from Tommy would be there, despite my pessimism of not only this but of all things. I wanted to believe it as much for myself as for her and maybe more. But when it was my turn to enter the office, there was nothing on the desk.

“Anything come for me today?” I asked Josh.

“Like what?” he asked back.

“Like a letter. Like the one that came for me yesterday.”

He looked around his desk and uttered, “I don’t see anything. Do you?”

I didn’t utter anything back. I just grabbed a towel as he added, “You got the dining hall bathrooms tomorrow night.”

Again, I didn’t say anything. I just left the office. I did with my head down and the towel in my hand. I took this to my cubby, and I was about to toss it up there like I usually did. But for some reason this time I climbed up to it, and there it was waiting for me: another thick envelope from Tommy.

Not even caring how it got there, with great excitement I grabbed it and jumped down. I was so excited that I forgot that I still had the towel in my hand. I tossed this into my cubby, and I rushed outside into the courtyard and to the corner booth, where I ripped open the envelope and pulled out its contents before calling my sister.

She answered on the first ring and gasped, “Yeah?”

“You were right,” I told her.

“You sound surprised.”

“You ready?” I asked after a brief chuckle.

“Since last night,” she answered.

The sun sneaked through the clouds above a large three-story white manor in Newstead, the most exclusive section of South Orange and one of the wealthiest areas in the state.

In a bedroom on the top floor of the house, Tommy exited his bathroom wearing a yellow terrycloth robe. There he peered out the big window in the front of his room, toward the Manhattan skyline in the distance. It was a million-dollar view, his mother would always tell him and everyone else she could. But it looked ordinary this morning. Everything seemed ordinary in comparison to a certain something else. In his seventeen and a half years, never had a girl so much as made him shrug. But in a single day this one had sent him tumbling about as if he’d been hit by a wave out of nowhere.

Slowly, Tommy stepped past a pair of trophy cases. These showcased his sporting and academic triumphs over the years, which included his naming to the honor roll every quarter of his high-school career as well as his naming of all-state in football the year before. He also passed the posters of the Yardbirds that covered his walls, from their early Eric Clapton years to their last days with Jimmy Page. Finally, he stopped in front of a full-length mirror in the corner of the room while noticing that it was not unlike the one he had stared at in his dream or whatever it had been.

He stared at this one too. He stared not only at himself but at the gold chai necklace he was wearing, the one he’d gotten years earlier on his *bar mitzvah.* The pendant had actually been his mother’s, who’d been given it by her mother, and Tommy had admired it for as long as he could remember. So, even though boys usually got Star of David necklaces or mezuzahs on their *bar mitzvah*, his mother got a new chain for the pendant and gave it to him.

It had been the only gift that ever mattered to him. Though, as he put the pendant between his fingers, which represented the Hebrew word for “living,” for the first time he thought about what the word really meant.

Wearing his football jacket over a white wool Polo sweater, along with a pair of pleated khakis and freshly-polished brown penny loafers, Tommy carried his backpack down a long and winding wooden staircase. He did over the sounds of Julie London’s velvety voice. It bounced off wall after wall in the house as she sang “Two Sleepy People” from a record playing on the stereo in the living room.

It was a beautiful song, Tommy had always thought, especially this arrangement. It was perfect in every way. But it depressed him, knowing who was listening to it and why.

At the bottom of the stairs, Tommy inched up to the wall that separated the hallway he was walking through from the dining room, and he peeked at a woman who had just turned fifty. She was sitting by herself at one end of the table and was wearing a blue Dior dress, which perfectly complemented the floral arrangement in the center of the table. She also had her dirty-blonde hair tied tightly in a bun and was gazing at the empty seat at the other end of the table. A seat that she knew would forever be empty.

She looked so lonely, he thought, and he wondered if that’s how he’d look when he was her age. He wondered if he’d spend his days just like she was, doing nothing more than glancing back at times that could never return.

Mercifully, the song came to an end, and Tommy stepped into the room and sat next to his mother while dropping his backpack beside his feet.

The two exchanged good mornings, and a large servant in a pristine white uniform entered from the kitchen, who served them a breakfast of omelets and hash browns as well as orange juice and coffee. She also left the latest editions of the *New York Times* and the *Star Ledger* on the table, even though she knew neither would be touched.

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” spoke Mrs. Goodwin with an aristocratic flare that even she knew was affected, and she politely smiled.

Elizabeth smiled back in a similar manner and nodded, and she left the room with her silver tray.

Mrs. Goodwin forced herself to start eating, but when she noticed that her son wasn’t even doing this, that he was just picking at his food, she put down her utensils and uttered, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Tommy insisted as he continued picking.

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

Tommy didn’t reply, and the woman told him: “It must be this crazy diet kick you’re on.”

“It’s not,” Tommy insisted with some exasperation.

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled after he finally gave up the pretense of eating and put his utensils down. “I met someone.”

“You met someone?” his mother gasped. “What about Darlene?”

“What about her?”

“She’s perfect for you.”

“Perfect for me or for you?”

Mrs. Goodwin grinned. After she took a small sip of coffee, she said, “Why don’t you invite her for dinner.”

“Who?” Tommy asked.

“This girl you’ve fallen for.”

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

“You’re a bad liar,” she let him know again. “Always have been.”

Now Tommy was more than just exasperated, and he grabbed his backpack off the floor and rose to his feet and marched off.

“So, will she be coming to dinner tonight?” his mother called out.

“She’s not so easy to like,” he remarked while shaking his head.

“Then we have something in common.”

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

“I’d love to meet her.”

Suddenly, Tommy stopped, and he turned back to his mother and asked, “How did you know Dad was the one?”

“When I didn’t have to ask,” she replied, without giving it a moment’s thought.

Tommy continued out of the room. Though, as he reached the wall, he glanced back at his mother, and he noticed that she was again gazing at the empty chair. He knew, too, that she was again listening to Julie London, even if the music was playing only in her head.

In the school parking lot, Tommy parked his bike and saw something strange. It was so strange that he had to look at it a couple of times just to make sure it was real.

Rudi and Maria were walking toward the front doors of Columbia together. By the way they were talking to each other, they could’ve easily been mistaken as friends, despite the incongruity of them existing in the same universe.

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

Rudi smirked, and she said, “We could get matching dog collars.”

They both laughed, and this surprised Tommy even more than seeing the two walk to school together. He had known Maria since elementary school, but never in all that time had he even seen her smile.

Tommy kept watching the two as they entered the building, and he headed there himself. At the doors, he saw another strange sight. Coming to a stop in the front of the building was a red Porsche 944. Even in the affluent neighborhood he lived, kids didn’t drive to school in Porsches. Maybe kids at Pingry drove to school in them, but they never did at Columbia. So he gazed at the car, and he could see the silhouette of someone inside it. Someone who was staring right at him.

Like the day before, I interrupted the story. “This is something I’ve always wanted to know,” I said to Rudi over the phone.

“What?” she mumbled, clearly unnerved by something.

“Are you all right?”

“It’s just . . . we’re coming up to something not so wonderful.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I could skip over stuff.”

“I want you to read me everything.”

I was hesitant about this. So I changed the subject. “How did you and Maria become friends?” I asked. “It never made sense.”

“It still doesn’t,” Rudi told me. “That’s the beauty of it. Or one of them. There are lots.”

“So how did it happen?”

“That morning on the bus I was kind of in a netherworld, where the only thing that existed were a certain pair of eyes. I was also humming this crazy song I heard in a dream the night before. Then the bus jolted, and I saw Maria waiting by the stop, I guessed so she could find out about the dog. She looked so nervous standing there, and I was in such a good mood that I couldn’t help having a little fun with her. ‘You must really want my footprints on your face,’ I growled as I stepped off the bus, and she almost passed out. But then I smiled and told her how the dog was doing all right. And, I don’t know, we talked awhile. And it was like, it was like all the things that made us different, and these were endless, didn’t seem so important. What did was that we both needed a friend. Me especially.”

Rudi again turned heads as she walked through the cafeteria that afternoon with her tray stacked high with food, even if it were for a different reason than the day before. The story of what she did for the dog must’ve spread around school. Because this time they were looking at her not in shock or fear but with something approaching wonder and even warmth. Still, she again ignored it. She did until she again saw Tommy staring at her, with Darlene’s arm again around his.

Again, she turned and hurried off, but she slowed when she noticed something else. Owen Connors was glaring at her from a table a short distance away, where he sat by himself, like he always did. Owen was the biggest and meanest kid in the school, though he’d been held back so many times that he was no longer much of a kid. He even had a receding hairline.

Everyone in school feared Owen, including the teachers and all the football players, who gave him a berth so wide that it could’ve filled the sky. Tommy had been afraid of him from the first day of South Orange Junior High and had always kept his distance from him. But Rudi just glared right back at him, looking as if she could have plowed through him as she headed to the back table. There excitedly sat Maria at one end and Eliot on the other, who quivered on sight of her while trying to make himself as invisible as possible.

Watching as Owen continued to glare at Rudi, Tommy felt a sensation he had never felt before. He was frightened for someone.

Still feeling frightened for Rudi at the end of lunch, Tommy followed her out of the cafeteria while keeping a good distance behind her. She left at the same time as a skinny boy with a closely-cropped afro, who’d transferred to the school a year earlier.

Like Rudi, Jared didn’t fit in, though for a different reason. He moved to the area from rural Georgia and spoke with what everyone thought was a funny accent. But what people really found strange about him was how he always dressed like he was in church, wearing long-sleeved dress shirts and dress pants and shiny black leather shoes. He wore all this even when it was brutally hot outside. He was always clutching a dogeared Bible too, including in gym class, where he would do nothing more than sit by himself and read. To anyone at school who paid attention to him, he was a caricature who had come to life. One that they could all-too-easily dismiss, including the teachers.

As Rudi and Jared walked down the corridor, they happened to glance at each other. Seeing how he was dressed and what he was carrying, Rudi looked as if she were about to glare at him much as she had with Owen. But then she did something that again surprised Tommy. Despite seemingly having even less in common with Jared than what she had with Maria, Rudi did something that no one else in school had bothered to do. She looked underneath the caricature, and she noticed something she recognized. They both recognized this at the same time. It was all over their faces as they quickly turned away and rushed off in different directions.

Like he had at the end of the day before, Tommy exited the first-floor stairwell with lots of others, this time with his head spinning from that day’s math class.

In the hallway, he saw a crowd of people down the hall standing around Owen, who was holding a thick textbook high over someone’s head with a big grin on his face.

Having a pretty good idea of who this someone was, Tommy marched down the hall. He didn’t even think about what he was doing.

When he reached the crowd, again without thinking he pushed his way through it and found Rudi. She was facing Owen with a chemistry book under her arm and a look that was many stages past apathy. She seemed as if she were fighting the urge to fall asleep.

Still, Tommy felt a burst of rage, and he took a step toward Owen. Though he didn’t take another.

It wasn’t just the fear of Owen that stopped him. He even felt an overwhelming compulsion to fight him despite his fear. But he suddenly realized that getting beat up was the least that could happen to him. Fighting Owen, he knew, could’ve put him on a path from which he couldn’t get off.

“I’ll give you three seconds,” Rudi groaned while not even looking at Owen. “One . . . two . . .”

“Three,” Owen cooed.

Casually, Rudi dropped her seabag onto the floor. Just as casually, she took the chemistry book from under her arm and swung it across Owen’s jaw, knocking him headfirst into the lockers and onto the floor. There he lay in a state of semiconsciousness with the thick textbook still in his hand and the sound of dead silence roaring through the corridor. Tommy could hear his own heart beat.

Rudi turned to Eliot, who was standing nearby with his mouth and eyes as wide as they could be. “I suggest you pick up your book,” she mentioned as she nodded at it. “Like, right now.”

“Thanks!” Eliot cried out as he rushed over to Owen and ripped the physics book out of his hand.

“Now don’t think this means we’re friends or nothing,” Rudi growled at Eliot while pointing at him with a mix of a sneer and a snarl.

But Eliot just turned to Rudi and smiled. He smiled in defiance of her as he hurried down the corridor with the book under his arm.

Rudi sighed. Noticing her bag on the floor, she dropped to one knee to pick it up, and she saw everyone staring at her in shock. “What’s the matter with you people?” she uttered. “Have you never seen anyone get their butt kicked? Go on, get outta here!”

Quickly, they dispersed. They moved as fast as they could. Everyone but Tommy, who stood in front of Rudi dumbfounded, not understanding how someone like her could care enough about someone like Eliot to stand up for him. Which made him wonder what else she could care about and especially who.

“What do you want?” she barked after she rose with her bag and saw him staring at her.

“I . . . I was wondering,” he mumbled, “I was wondering if you could help me with calculus. Conic sections are just killing me. But even those ellipses inside those rhombuses are nothing compared to partial fractions.”

Rudi smirked. She smirked and put her hands on her hips, and she remarked, “So it’s true what they say. Boys really *are* bad at math.”

Tommy smirked too, and he was certain he was blushing as well.

Rudi started off, and he murmured, “Please. I’ve never gotten anything lower than a B in my life, and I don’t even know how I’m going to pass this class let alone the AP exam.”

She stopped, and she turned toward him and uttered, “Why is it so important to you?”

“Don’t you fear failure?” he asked.

She didn’t answer, and the two just stared at each other while once more searching for words.

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

Rudi spun her head toward it, and she saw the red-faced principal, who was wearing a tight dark-brown suit and an equally tight dark-brown tie and who pointed inside his door and barked, “My office, now!”

“*Oy vey,”* Rudi muttered as she started toward the man, who was trying hard to keep from smiling at the justice Rudi had just meted out to Owen. “Someone check if Mr. Connors is still alive,” he called out.

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

“I’m kinda busy right now,” she replied after she swung her bag over her shoulder and noticed how the rope holding it together was badly frayed.

“He’s alive!” a student yelled.

“Later?” Tommy wondered as Rudi continued toward the principal.

“Where?” she questioned with another sigh while coming to another stop.

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

“—I’ll find it,” she interrupted, and she once more headed toward the principal and his office with Tommy gazing at her the entire way.

“Coach wants to see everyone,” a boy named Victor told Tommy after he grabbed him by the shoulder from behind.

“Not today,” Tommy told him back.

“What do you mean?”

Tommy didn’t reply. He just hurried out of the school, where he again saw the red Porsche out front. This time a man in a leather jacket was leaning against the hood of it with his arms crossed. A man who was in his late twenties and who was lean and wiry and had his head shaved, with his neck covered in tattoos. He also had a cold, blank expression on his face and eyes that didn’t seem to blink at all.

Tommy had never seen anyone like him. Even Rudi looked benign in comparison. He was someone who only vaguely seemed human.

In a pizzeria on South Orange Avenue, Tommy sat at a table by himself and glumly glanced at his watch, and he noticed how the sun was setting in the window beside him. Never in his life had he been stood up by a girl, but this would’ve been the only time it would’ve mattered.

He waited another ten minutes before he reached behind himself for his jacket. This was when he saw Rudi strut inside the door. With a smile, he spun toward a waiter not far away and nodded his head.

The man smiled and nodded back, and he rushed inside the kitchen doors as Rudi came up to Tommy’s table.

“Did you get into trouble?” he asked.

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

After pausing for a pair of seconds, Rudi whipped out the chair across from Tommy and flipped it around, and she plopped herself down while dropping her bag onto the floor. “This is not a date,” she growled with another of her snarls and without taking off her coat.

“Of course not,” he said while trying to convince himself of this, and he couldn’t help notice that she seemed disappointed and wondered if this was on his face as well.

“I wonder what your girlfriend would think about this,” she uttered.

“Girlfriend?” he uttered back.

“The strawberry-blonde who’s always draped over you,” she howled in exasperation. “*Ms. Cantor*.”

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

“But what?”

“I really don’t know why I’m telling you this, but would you believe I’ve never had a girlfriend?”

“No.”

Tommy chuckled a bit, and he explained, “Don’t get me wrong. There have been girls. Lots of them. Sometimes too many. It’s the ‘friend’ part that’s elusive.”

“We’re quibbling over semantics,” Rudi argued. “Over what constitutes a girlfriend. And just what does in your opinion?”

Tommy knew. He knew exactly. He wanted someone who’d make him feel just like how Cummings felt when he wrote “since feeling is first.” He wanted this badly. But he didn’t want to admit it even to himself. So he mumbled, “I don’t know.”

She had no reply. She just looked at him unsurely.

“Where you from?” he asked.

“Lots of places,” she answered.

“Like?”

“Like Trenton or thereabouts.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I don’t know *what* I’m doing here,” she said as she laid her elbows onto the table and dropped her chin onto her fists.

Tommy grinned, and he told her: “Helping me with calculus.” He further reached into his backpack, and he pulled out a thick white textbook.

“You were serious?” she gasped after raising herself up.

“Why else would I ask you here?” he replied.

She didn’t answer. She again gazed at him unsurely as the waiter came by with a pizza. While he slapped Tommy’s shoulder, with his other hand he placed the pie in the center of the table and said, “Here you go, bud. You need anything else?”

“How about a couple of Cokes?” Tommy told him.

“You got it,” the man said as he walked off. “Just give me a few.”

“Tommy!” came the heavily-accented voice of a man from the other side of the restaurant.

Both Tommy and Rudi turned their heads. They saw a heavyset old man, in a suit that was way too small on him, sitting beside a table with a bunch of receipts and other papers on top of it.

“Mr. Agnellino!” Tommy called out with a wave of his hand.

Mr. Agnellino nodded. He also glanced at Rudi and did so askance before shaking his head and returning to his papers.

“Everyone knows you here,” Rudi said to Tommy after the two turned back to each other.

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

Noticing the pizza in front of him, Tommy nodded toward it, which had mushrooms and red peppers on it, and he remarked, “I hope you don’t mind. I’m a . . .”

“A vegetarian?” she muttered in surprise.

“You too?” he muttered back with the same surprise.

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

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

She didn’t reply. She just took off her coat and pulled out a slice and blew on it.

“It’s the best pizza in the world,” he mentioned to her. “There’s nothing quite like it.”

“There’s nothing that isn’t just like everything else,” she insisted before taking a small bite. Right away, he saw how she was trying to hide her surprise at how good it was. She kept doing this even as she took more and more bites.

Tommy had never watched anyone eat before. He never had any reason to, and he wasn’t sure why he was doing so now. But he was amazed at how she made even the act of eating seem out of the ordinary. Everything she did was out of the ordinary, and a smile came over his face that he didn’t even realize was there.

“What?” she demanded once she noticed this.

“Nothing,” he lied.

With the pizza and the Cokes almost finished, Rudi pointed into the open calculus book in front of Tommy.

“So, you see,” she explained to him, “there are only four variations of problems. You just have to recognize which and follow the pattern for solving it. You don’t even have to understand how you’re solving it.”

“Wow,” he mumbled as if a curtain had been drawn that he didn’t even know was in front of him.

Rudi looked up at a clock on the wall, and she said, “I gotta run.”

“Yeah,” he uttered while continuing to gaze at the problem in the book in astonishment.

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

“It’s amazing how easy you make calculus,” he remarked while shaking his head.

“It *is* easy once you stop fearing it,” she told him. “Which means it’s just like anything else.”

The two reached the door, and Tommy reached for Rudi’s hand. But he stopped himself at the last moment and instead opened the door for her.

She gave him a dirty look in response, not quite appreciating the gesture, and she growled what would become a recurring theme throughout her life: “I can open my own doors.”

Still, Tommy held the door open.

With an accentuated sigh, Rudi stepped outside and swung her seabag over her shoulder, causing the rope to break and the bag to fall to the ground, with most of its contents spewing out all over the place. Making matters worse, there was a bit of a breeze, enough to blow her things around.

“*Oy vey!”* she cried out, and she fell to one knee on the sidewalk and hurriedly collected her belongings back into the bag.

Tommy noticed a balled-up piece of paper by his foot. He picked this up and opened it, and he saw something extraordinary. He saw himself, in her drawing of him. Never had he seen anything like it. She captured something no photograph or mirror had: the small boy trying to climb out from under the trappings, just to see what was out there. Even more remarkable than the drawing itself was how she could see things in him that he couldn’t see himself, and he just stood there in stunned silence as he stared at his likeness.

“That’s mine!” she hollered as she ripped the paper from him and rushed off with it and the bag in her other arm.

“Thank you,” he said to her.

She came to a halting stop and spun toward him, and she howled, “Thank me for what?”

He pointed to the drawing, and she hid it behind her back, with her face turning many shades of scarlet and vermillion. “It’s not you!” she screeched. “It’s Lee Ving!”

“I don’t even know who that is,” he replied with a shake of his head.

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

Tommy chuckled, which only made her madder and caused her to bark, “What’s-so-funny?”

“I didn’t know punk girls blush,” he told her.

This stunned her, and she took a step back while looking for a reply that just wouldn’t come.

“Or that they could make me blush,” he went on. “I didn’t know they read poetry and help bullied kids and stray dogs and . . . and jaded football players.”

Quickly, Rudi turned around, and she rushed down the block.

“How about lunch tomorrow in the cafeteria?” he asked.

Again, Rudi stopped. But this time she didn’t turn around. I don’t think she dared. She just muttered, “You’d want to be seen with me?”

“I kinda do,” he answered. Though what he really wanted to say was: “I really do. I want this more than anything.” He wanted to scream this, but the only screaming he did was on the page of his journal.

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

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

This time Rudi interrupted the story. She did by telling me that, at that moment, she was a lot more concerned about where she was than who. She was lost.

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

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

“And where was that?”

Rudi sighed, and she uttered, “It was trying to figure out what he was seeing when I couldn’t see it myself.”

Rudi was so lost that it took her twice as long to get back to the school than from it. At the bus stop on Valley not far from this, she stood there and waited. Then she heard a sound.

Turning toward the school parking lot, she saw Eliot getting into a beat-up Cutlass. “What are you still doing here?” she groaned.

“Chess Club,” he answered.

“Figures,” she uttered as she turned back to the road.

“You do know that there are no more buses tonight.”

“What?”

“They stopped running a while ago.”

“That’s just great,” she grumbled before starting down Valley.

“I could give you a ride,” Eliot called out.

“That’s all right,” she called back with her head shaking. “I live in a really bad neighborhood. You wouldn’t want to go there.”

“Where’s that?”

“Near Irvington.”

“I live *in* Irvington.”

Eliot made a hard left turn, and the big car lumbered in that direction.

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

“What’s so crazy about that?” she asked.

“Come on, look at me.”

“I am looking at you.”

Eliot didn’t reply.

“Just park behind that blue sedan,” she told him while pointing down the road.

He did, and she started out of the car and said, “Thanks.”

“Sure,” he said back. “Anytime.”

She stepped outside, where she paused. She paused for many moments before muttering, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” he wondered.

“At lunch.”

“Really?” he gasped with a lot of excitement.

“Just don’t push it,” she growled.

The moment Tommy walked inside the school the next day, he saw Rudi standing outside the girls’ bathroom.

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

“No, I don’t,” came Maria’s voice from inside the bathroom.

“You look great.”

Like in Poetry class on her first day, Rudi must’ve felt someone’s eyes on her. Because she turned to Tommy and saw him smiling at her, and she couldn’t help smile back just a little.

When Rudi walked through the center of the cafeteria at lunch with her big pile of food the next day, no one paid her much attention. Tommy, who was a short distance away and walking toward his usual table with his own lunch, could see the curiosity on her face as she glanced around.

Finally, she discovered the reason for the lack of interest in her that day when she approached the table where Owen sat by himself, with his head on his arms and a barrage of paper balls hitting him from all directions.

Rudi stopped beside his table and watched. Tommy stopped and watched too. He couldn’t imagine what she was doing.

Suddenly, she sighed and uttered, “That’s enough.”

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

With another sigh, she sat across from Owen and started softly talking to him.

Now Tommy was curious. He was so curious as to what she could be saying to Owen that he sat at a table across the aisle from them.

“You just need better karma,” Rudi told Owen. “I’ve been looking for it myself. The truth is I need it more than you. It’s not even close.”

Owen didn’t reply.

“Come on,” she insisted, “lift up that chin.”

“So you can punch it?” he groaned with his head still down.

“Better karma. I need *better* karma.”

Slowly, Owen raised his head, and she grinned at him a little. Reluctantly, he grinned back. But this turned into a chuckle when Eliot sat next to Rudi with his lunch and his hair much like hers, jet-black and spiked.

Rudi chuckled too, and she unspiked his hair with her fingers and moaned, “What part of ‘don’t push it’ did you not understand? You look like a Quincy Punk.”

“What’s a Quincy Punk?” Eliot asked.

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

“You’re into punk?” Rudi uttered to Owen in surprise.

With another grin, Owen removed the long-sleeve plaid shirt he was wearing, exposing the white T-shirt underneath it and the Black Flag logo on his arm.

“Cool,” Eliot murmured. “Maybe I’ll get one of those.”

Both Owen and Rudi giggled, and he said to her: “We’re creating a monster.”

Watching this was not only Tommy. Maria was, too, as she walked to their table with her tray. Or someone who looked like Maria. This Maria, though, had a little makeup and a lot of confidence. Everyone could see both, including a tall redheaded girl, who walked passed her and smiled.

Maria smiled back, which was still on her face as she sat across from Eliot and told everyone: “I’d get a tattoo too. But my dad’s gonna kill me enough when he sees this makeup.”

“If you’d like,” Rudi said, “I could put some on him too.”

All four of them laughed. They laughed like they had been friends forever and not just because of some crazy-looking girl from Trenton. At the same time, Rudi noticed Jared eating a few tables away, with only his Bible to keep him company. He looked so lonely and was looking right at them, no matter how hard he tried to pretend otherwise.

Tommy could see that Rudi was trying to ignore him. She tried this hard. But when she couldn’t do it anymore, she waved him toward their table with a big sweep of her arm.

“Me?” he meekly called out while pointing to himself in shock with both his hands.

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

Hesitantly, he stood up and made his way to them, with his shock increasing with every step.

Realizing that Rudi wasn’t going to let anyone eat lunch alone as long as she was around, Tommy rose with his tray, and he stepped toward their table. Rudi turned to him as he did, and they stared at each other for a few uncomfortable moments before Tommy decided to walk off.

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

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

“No.”

Tommy smiled. He smiled all the way to his table.

Tommy was again smiling at the end of the day. He had just aced a partial fractions quiz, and he expected Rudi would once more be doing something outrageous, something that would again awe him.

But as he exited the stairwell on the first floor with lots of others, he noticed there was no Rudi or any kind of commotion or disturbance. Everything seemed eerily normal. This continued as he walked through the front doors of the building.

The normalness ceased once he was outside. There he saw Rudi and the wiry man with the shaved head and tattooed neck from the day before. He saw them arguing by his Porsche.

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” she howled with a face full of fright.

The man paused for a few seconds before he slapped her across the face with the back of his hand. He slapped her with a cold-bloodedness that made Tommy think that this was the very least he could do to her. The blow knocked her backward and almost off her feet.

Tommy took a step toward them. But like with Owen the day before, he froze, this time when he saw a handgun in the man’s waist. He saw not just this but his future. He saw the frail boy sitting on his bed waiting to die.

The man grabbed Rudi by her ear, and he dragged her toward his car. “I know exactly what you want,” he cried out. “We both know it!”

“Deke!” she cried back in pain.

He didn’t respond. He just threw open the passenger door and tossed Rudi inside, and he slammed the door shut. As he stepped around the car, he noticed Tommy, and he scowled at him before he jumped into the car and sped off.

Tommy wasn’t sure what to do. A big part of him wanted to do nothing. It wanted him to remain in control of his fate and the replay of his life. So, long after Deke’s car had left his sight, he was still standing there.

“Do nothing,” he told himself over and over. “Do nothing.”

But the other part of him, the stronger part, finally awoke, and he rushed to his bike and raced it down Parker. He raced it to the end of it.

The Porsche was still nowhere in sight, but he kept going forward by veering a bit right onto Clinton. He continued down this until he reached the intersection of Sandford, where he stopped and noticed that, a handful of blocks away, was Springfield Avenue, one of the main thoroughfares in the area. He still couldn’t see Deke’s car anywhere, but he turned down it anyway.

Once he got to the corner of Springfield, he looked down the busy street in both directions. In the distance to his right, he saw the Porsche, and he sped toward it. He did without looking, in the path of an oncoming car.

Quickly, Tommy turned his bike, just missing the car, but now he was heading for a parked one. He swerved around this, causing him to jump the sidewalk. There he avoided a trio of pedestrians before he jumped the bike back onto the street and followed the Porsche. He followed it through a maze of roads that looked much the same and came to a rundown section of Maplewood he had never seen. This was only a few-minute drive from the neighborhood he had lived his entire life, but it was so different that it might as well have been on the moon.

The Porsche came to a sharp stop in front of a small and crumbling single-story home, with Tommy parking behind an old brown pickup truck about a block and a half back.

He waited. He waited so long that he lost track of the time. Eventually, Rudi rushed out of the car. After she slammed the car’s door closed, she ran into the house as the Porsche sped off, exposing the blue sedan that had been parked in front of it.

Again, Tommy wasn’t sure what to do. Still, he got off his bike and headed down the street toward her house. Slowly, he headed, with each step moving slower, until he was in front of the building. After hesitating for a few seconds, he stepped to the house’s door. There was no doorbell, so he knocked. He knocked a couple of times. He also banged on the door with his fist while calling out Rudi’s name.

The only responses were silence, so he returned to the street and headed back to his bike. But as he reached the side of the house, he noticed a backyard behind it, and he found himself moving toward it.

I was confused by what I read. So I asked Rudi how she didn’t hear Tommy.

“I wasn’t there,” she told me. “I was so frightened when I ran into that house. It seemed the walls were caving in on me, and I was looking for an escape. So I ransacked the place looking for this. I ripped it apart. But I couldn’t even find a bottle of aspirin. So I did what I had done since I was a little girl. I hid under the bed. I also cranked Richard Hell. I cranked it so loudly that I wouldn’t’ve heard a hurricane.”

“Rudi?” Tommy called out as he walked along one of the cracked walls of the house, which looked as if it would fall apart if touched.

Like before, there was no response. But he heard something coming from inside the house. So he repeated himself, this time louder.

Again, he heard something: a clicking sound. Spinning toward this, he saw the man who’d been walking Rudi to school on her first day. The one with the crewcut and pockmarked face, who was pointing a gun at his head.

Tommy raised his hands in surrender, and the man growled, “You one of them?”

“One of what?” Tommy mumbled while unable to keep himself from shaking.

The man didn’t answer. Instead, he carefully looked Tommy over. He did for a long time before he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a badge, which he showed him. “FBI,” he let him know. He also nodded toward the street and added, “Take off while you can.”

Tommy hurried away, and he hurried even more once he got to the street. He kept hurrying even after he reached his Harley. Quickly, he jumped on it and sped down the road. He wanted to speed all the way home. He even told himself that this was where he was going. But he somehow ended up in front of the Maplewood Public Library on Baker Street, and he turned onto the lot and parked.

While sitting on his bike and staring into space, Tommy realized that whatever trouble Rudi was in, whatever reason she had for coming into his life, it had to be big. Why else would the FBI be involved? He knew, too, that the only means of discovering this was in the building beside him.

So he got off the bike, and he marched up the ramp and into the building. He marched all the way to the Reference section. In the days before the web, there was only one way to find out about a recent event: the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*, which indexed stories from hundreds of magazines and journals. After asking a librarian where these were, he came upon an aisle that had stacks of thick volumes of them going back decades. At the end of the aisle, he found smaller versions of the more recent editions. He pulled the last few months off the shelves and took them to a nearby table, and he started skimming through them.

For hours, he went through page after page and volume after volume. But not knowing what he was looking for, he was getting nowhere. So, with the sun setting through the windows all around him, he was ready to give up.

*Like Trenton or thereabouts*.

Remembering what Rudi had told him at dinner the night before, Tommy flipped to the back of the volume he was looking through and searched for “Trenton.” He found nothing, so he checked the rest of the volumes. In one from October, he came across a *Newsweek* article entitled “Punk Rock Turns Deadly.”

Quickly, he rushed to the magazine stacks on the other side of the library, and he found and grabbed the issue. He turned its pages until he reached the article, where to his shock he saw under the headline a mugshot of Deke.

According to the story, a nineteen-year-old Jewish student from Rutgers named Mark Shapiro had been beaten to death at a punk show outside Trenton. Deke Cox, who was a well-known drug dealer in the area and a ex-con with ties to the Aryan Brotherhood, was the leading suspect of what authorities strongly believed was a racially-motivated crime. Though he hadn’t yet been charged and wasn’t the only suspect. An unnamed teenaged girl with a similar background was believed to be involved in the killing as well.

Tommy knew the “unnamed teenage girl” could only be one person, and he lowered the magazine and mumbled, “She *is* a monster.”

“That, that’s all there is for today,” I mumbled to Rudi as I put the last page of the journal on the table.

There was no reply, so I asked her if she was all right.

Again, there was no reply, and I told her: “Like I said before, I could skip—”

“—I want to hear every word,” she interrupted.

“Well, I don’t think you should. It was tough enough going through this the first time.”

“Every word,” she hollered with a fury unchanged in forty years.

“No,” I hollered back.

“You can’t do this,” she screeched with her voice breaking. “He was my *bashert*. My *destiny*. You can’t hold him back from me.”

“And if I do?”

“Don’t think because you’re off somewhere in the middle of nowhere that I can’t find you. I will. You know I will. One way or another you’re gonna tell me everything he wrote. I’ll know if you skip a comma.”

Now it was my turn not to reply.

“Call me tomorrow as soon as you get it,” she uttered matter-of-factly before hanging up.

I sat there in the booth for many minutes, staring at the pages in front of me and unsure of what to do. I did this until Katie came through the gates of the shelter.

A slender woman in her mid-twenties, like some other women in the shelter, she was working at an Amazon fulfillment center down the hill in San Bernardino. All of them seemed to work crazy hours, including in the middle of the night.

“Hey,” I said to her as she approached me and the building.

She replied in kind, and I noticed how scared she looked.

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

She nodded unconvincingly and hurried into the building.

Like the night before, I collected Tommy’s pages and put them back into the envelope, and I went into the building myself, so I could go through my nightly ritual with Josh. Like always, I had to wait. This time because he was talking behind his closed door to Katie, who was looking even more scared than before. Her hand was shaking as she reached into her back pocket and pulled out some cash, which she offered to Josh, who ripped it from her hand and counted every bill. He counted them twice.

the third night

Like the morning before, I brought my cup of green tea to the corner booth in the courtyard, where Nicole and Allison were again huffing down coffee and cigarettes. Though this morning their conversation wasn’t so upbeat.

“I can’t believe she would leave like that,” Allison uttered with a shake of her head as I sat down.

“Who left?” I asked.

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

“Why?” was my next question. One with lots of surprise.

“She was gone when we woke up,” Allison said, “along with all her things.”

“You have no idea why she would leave?” Nicole asked Allison.

“The only thing I know is that she got that job at Amazon,” Allison replied. “She seemed real excited about it and about getting out of here.”

“Maybe that’s what she did,” I interjected. “She got out of here.”

“She would’ve told someone or left a note,” Allison insisted. “She wouldn’t’ve just left like that.”

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

“Before that it was Michelle,” added Allison.

Over the years, I had seen and heard my share of terrible things, and I thought I had become numb to them. Nothing, no matter how bad it was, ever seemed to shock or unnerve me or upset me in the least. But for some reason I wasn’t numb to this, and I couldn’t make sense of why. It was as if something had awoken in me.

“Do we have everything for the party?” Allison whispered to Nicole as she tried to change the subject.

“Everything but the cake,” answered Nicole.

“Josh said last night that he’d get it for us.”

“He did?”

“That’s what he said.”

I was still thinking about Katie on the buses to work.

On the second one, apart from Matt and I, there was only one other passenger: a middle aged woman sitting way in the back, who was ranting about her gay son in Palm Springs to the driver way up front. While trying to ignore both the loudness and the inanity of their conversation, I turned to Matt and said, “Have you heard about these women disappearing from the shelter?”

He shrugged. He did in a way that made me say, “You know what’s going on, don’t you?”

“Just forget about it,” he said with a shake of his head. “There’s nothing you can do about it, and it’s not even the worst thing that’s happened there.”

“We should tell someone.”

“Tell who? Do you think anyone gives a damn about us? To most people, we’re garbage, no better than cons. I’m one of those too, by the way.”

“But—”

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

“What do you mean?” I uttered.

“Before you came to the shelter, there was this young guy. He couldn’t have been much older than twenty. But he already had a wife and a whole bunch of little kids. During one of the random cubby checks, they found an empty Grolsch bottle in his. You know, the kind with those fancy ceramic caps. He just found it in the street somewhere and picked it up because he thought it was cool looking. But they said 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 those little kids and send them into the streets over absolutely nothing, what do you think they’d do to someone who made the slightest tremor in the water? And don’t think you’d be able to hold down this job while you’re on the streets. You won’t.”

“But—”

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

I wiped the sweat off my forehead as I reached the third floor of the motel staircase with my mop, which I dropped into the yellow pail of water waiting for me on the landing. I also caught my breath. It had been a long day, and I still had to mop two more staircases before my shift ended in a half hour.

I was exhausted. I was exhausted in many ways. Here I was over fifty, running around and doing the kind of job I had as a teenager, and I wondered if I’d be doing it forever, stuck in an awful job and in all the awfulness that surrounded it. I wondered, too, why I was doing this.

Not finding an answer, I wanted to quit right then. I wanted to toss the mop and pail down the stairs and run out of the building and the town.

Only fear prevented this. The fear of what I felt every morning before dawn and what I had felt all day long before I got a job. I especially feared the only cure there was for it. So I knew I had to keep the job, if only to keep myself going. I had to do what Matt had told me, no matter how much I wanted to do the opposite.

My shift ended, but I still had almost an hour before the first of my buses came. So I took my bagged lunch into the conference room and turned on the light, where I saw I wasn’t alone. Alaya was sitting on the floor in the corner of the room and gazing into her phone with tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I gasped.

Embarrassed, she jumped to her feet and ran out of the room while wiping her eyes.

I called out her name, but she didn’t reply. She just kept running.

All afternoon I tried to make sense of what I had seen in the conference room. I did this not just on the buses but on the long walk to the shelter. I was in such a haze that I forgot it was Friday and was only reminded of it when I saw Rich and his merry band of volunteers preparing dinner in the kitchen. Which was something that made me forget everything else.

Rich was a retired naval intelligence officer. I don’t know if the Navy was where he learned how to cook, but wherever it was, I and many others owe it a debt we can never repay. While the shelter employed a full-time cook, her meals were edible at best. All week I looked forward to Fridays and Saturdays, her days off. On them, Rich would come in and turn the same food we ate every night into gourmet meals with multiple courses. Also unlike the full-time cook, he would treat everyone who walked into that kitchen as if they were guests at the finest Michelin-starred restaurant. He was so good at what he did that I’m sure he could’ve worked at any restaurant in Southern California on the weekends and been well paid for it. But instead he and the others chose to gift this time to us.

This was driven by faith, one that they kept to themselves. I was only aware of it because Rich would softly play the local Christian rock station on a portable stereo while they worked. This was a station I knew well from a recent stint at a Christian men’s home in the nearby forests of Lytle Creek, as it was the only station we were allowed to listen to. It would torture me all day by playing the same dozen songs, with the songs repeating the same phrases *ad nauseum*. But now I didn’t mind it so much.

I had become friendly with Rich during the months I spent at the shelter, despite our many differences. Other than the love we shared for *Jesus Christ Superstar*, we couldn’t agree on much and would often argue over the issues of the day and over plenty of theological ones too. But these arguments were always congenial and always accompanied by smiles on our faces. He was one of the many Evangelicals I’d come to know and love in my years circling oblivion. He was one of the majority of them. People, who like the rest of us, weren’t perfect but were good. They were good people trying to make the world a little better, and that’s not so bad.

After talking with Rich for a few minutes, I took my meal of spiced tonnarelli and vegetables outside into the courtyard, and I stopped at a booth where an elderly man named Sergei was eating by himself.

“*Sergei Alexanderovich*,” I said to him, “*mogu li prisoedinit’sya k vam?”*

Sergei grinned and motioned to the seat in front of him while saying back, “*S udovol’stviyem*.”

I joined Sergei, who was another volunteer at the shelter, this after being one of its clients a few years back. Originally from Russia, Sergei, like Rich, was quite different from me, and not just because of where he was from. Every day he wore a different Donald Trump T-shirt. He must’ve had dozens of them, at the least. He even had Trump socks, and I cringed to think what he wore under his jeans. But I liked him anyway, especially because he tolerated my pidgin Russian.

The Russian language is a lot like the Czech I learned from my grandparents. But it’s different enough that I have trouble speaking it well. Still, unlike many Russians I’ve known, Sergei would let me speak to him in it. Maybe he just had a longing to converse in his mother tongue, no matter how terrible it was spoken to him.

That night, Sergei was listing to a Vysotsky song on his phone while he ate. Vladimir Vysotsky was kind of a Russian Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen, with maybe a splattering of Lou Reed thrown in. The similarities between the four went beyond their style of music or its subject matters. Like those three, Vysotsky was Jewish. Also like them, he may not have had a perfect voice. But it didn’t matter. He sang with a soul that was all you ever heard.

Sergei once told me that the songs helped him get through the gulags in the 1970s, even at times when he could only listen to his memories of them. As the one he was listening to that night came to an end, I asked him if he could play “Koni priveredlivye,” and he smilingly obliged.

This was Vysotsky’s most famous song. I’ve seen the title translated into English as either “Fastidious Horses” or “Capricious Horses,” but neither feels right, and I’m not sure if it can be translated correctly. I certainly can’t. But its title matters little.

The song is about someone who’s being driven to his death 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 and carry him off 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*. Every version of it I’ve heard since is somehow different, but none moved me like the one I heard in the courtyard. Maybe it was because I realized that the lyrics were about a lot of us at the shelter. This included not only me but maybe Sergei as well. He was crying at the end of it, and I felt like it too.

Josh was off that night. Some new guy named Bob was working in the office, and I could feel the lack of stress in the line as we waited to check in. When it was my turn, I got Tommy’s latest letter from him without hassle, and I called Rudi from the corner booth.

“I’m sorry,” she said as soon as she picked up.

“For what?” I asked as I pulled out the letter’s contents.

“For getting angry at you last night.”

“It’s all right. But I still don’t think you should be going through this again.”

“But you’re going to tell me anyway.”

“But I’m going to tell you anyway.”

The morning after reading the *Newsweek* article at the library, Tommy felt the same sickness in his stomach that he had then. It hadn’t let up one bit, but he had no more idea what to do about it than he had the night before. So he just avoided Rudi. He went to school late and didn’t even go to lunch. Instead, he spent the hour hiding in the school’s library.

But he knew he couldn’t avoid her in Calculus class. Just before it started, as he sat in his usual front-row seat and stared into space as everyone streamed inside, he wondered how he’d react when he saw her. Would he scream and curse at her? Would he demand an explanation?

Neither, he decided. She killed a Jew or was involved in it. There could be no rationalization of it, no excuse for it. He’d never speak to her again or even look at her. He told himself this twice and then repeated it once more.

The bell rang, and Rudi stammered into the classroom, and she nervously smiled at him a little. He could tell that she was still shaken from what had happened the day before with Deke.

Ignoring this, or pretending to, Tommy kept staring straight ahead. But he couldn’t hide his disgust. He knew it was all over his face.

Through the corner of his eyes, he could see her surprise as she headed toward the back of the room. He saw something else too. He saw hurt. It was all over her face, and this surprised him.

How could you hurt a monster? he asked himself.

All he knew was that he had.

The next day at lunch, Tommy tried to act as if Rudi had never come into his life. He was again listening to his friends’ dumb jokes and was telling some too. He even smiled at Darlene as she held onto his arm while trying to feel the slightest anything toward her.

Darlene smiled back when she saw this, and this turned into a smirk when she saw who was staring at them a few steps away. She also wrapped her arm all the way around his. She wrapped it like a snake.

Tommy turned his head, and he saw Rudi glaring at him. Though this couldn’t hide the same hurt he saw the day before. He also noticed that her tray of food had almost nothing on it.

“What is your problem?” bellowed Joey from the other end of the table.

Rudi ignored him and 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.”

“Leibniz has often been attacked for arguing in *Theodicy* that we live in ‘the best of all possible worlds,’” Tommy’s Western Philosophy teacher told the class that afternoon, “most famously and brutally by Voltaire in *Candide*.”

Tommy wasn’t really listening. He was just going through the motions, like he’d been doing in all his classes.

“But is this fair?” the teacher went on. “After all, he wasn’t saying we live in a perfect world. A man smart enough to discover calculus surely must’ve seen that it wasn’t. What he was saying was that it’s not possible to imagine a world that’s better than the one we’ve got. If you don’t believe me, try conjuring one yourself. I bet you can’t do it, and it’s all because of free will. The only way you can improve the world we’ve got and remove all the suffering and ugliness is by eliminating free will. It’s the reason bad things happen. But it’s also what brings us joy and the infinite possibilities. The possibilities that every next moment brings. What’s more, without bad things happening, we’d never appreciate the good or realize how precious each of these finite moments are. We have life too, and everything that makes it worth living: poetry and music and art. We have love. And let’s not forget we also have Pink Bubblegum Ice Cream at Baskin Robbins this month.”

Many in the class chuckled. Tommy didn’t, but he was at least listening, for real this time, and that was something. Maybe he was thinking about those infinite possibilities. Maybe he was thinking about one in particular, no matter how impossible it may have seemed.

Tommy came home late that day from school. He was so lost in his thoughts that he couldn’t remember driving home. He only came out of this when he stepped through his front door and saw his mother watching an old movie on the TV in the living room.

At one time, she would’ve never been doing this in the middle of the day. But it wasn’t unusual anymore. It seemed as if she had given up living. She even made out her will. Apart from that, the only things he’d see her do was listen to Julie London or watch old movies or go shopping. These were her only places she could escape, back to the times before the summer and from everything that came after it.

Tommy noticed she was watching *Miracle on 34th Street*. Having nothing better to do, he leaned against the wall in the hallway and watched it too. He watched the part where Santa speaks Dutch with the little refugee girl, and he watched the two sing a Christmas song together. It was during the latter that he saw his mother was crying.

This, too, was out of character for her. Even during that awful summer, he didn’t see her cry. She didn’t cry even when he was doing it all the time.

He thought of his mother as so hard, that nothing could get to her, much like that someone else he knew. But even she was human, just like that someone else.

I was curious about that someone else and what she was doing during all this. So I asked her over the phone.

“I wasn’t doing anything,” she insisted.

Rudi had convinced herself that Tommy’s sudden change toward her didn’t matter, that she had even expected it. Though she couldn’t deny the funk she was in and that all the air had come out of her balloon. There was only one thing that could help her escape this: going to the animal hospital and visiting the dog she had helped rescue.

The dog would always brighten her day. It was like stepping inside a flashlight. Despite all the pain and misery that dog must’ve been feeling, she would go crazy with joy the moment she saw Rudi, and she wouldn’t stop licking her face and hands.

“You better be careful,” the vet said to Rudi one afternoon as she passed her holding and caressing the dog in her lap. “You’ll get attached.”

“It’s too late for that,” Rudi replied. “No one’s claimed her yet?”

“Not yet.”

“How much longer does she have to stay here?”

“A few more weeks, at least. Fortunately, that young man you brought her here with paid for three months of care.”

“He did?”

“He’s pretty nice.”

Rudi shrugged.

“And pretty handsome too,” the vet added.

“I hadn’t noticed,” Rudi insisted, perhaps a little too strongly.

The woman grinned, and she said, “I’ll see you tomorrow, Rudi.”

While Rudi mostly visited the dog by herself, a few times she went with Maria and once even with Owen. The two actually spent the whole day together, where she learned that he, too, had come from a broken home and that he, too, had a record. He also desperately wanted to graduate, so he could finally succeed at something.

She told him things too. Things she didn’t even tell Maria, such as about the sword hanging over her head, which was just about to fall. Owen was the only one who could understand. But she admitted to me that she wished he wasn’t and that every time she saw Tommy she found herself wishing this.

The days went by. With them, Tommy returned to the same loathing he’d felt before meeting Rudi, of everything around him, especially himself, and he wondered if he’d ever feel anything else. Then one day he suddenly could.

While wandering the hallways after class, he saw Rudi doing likewise, in the direction of Joey, who was arguing with Beth, much like they’d been doing lately. This time, though, it was louder and more animated, and Tommy could see the panic on Beth’s face. He noticed something else too. One of her eyes seemed swollen.

Rudi must’ve seen this too. As she reached them, she glanced at the girl and then at Joey, who growled, “Keep walking, loser.”

Rudi did. She walked off as if she just didn’t care anymore.

At the same time, Beth tried to run. But Joey grabbed her arm, and he raised his at her. “You’re not listening to me!” he howled at her as he cocked his arm back. “But you will!”

At once, Rudi came to a stop, and she turned around and marched toward Joey. The moment she reached him, she slammed the side of her shoe down across his ankle. Screaming in pain, he released Beth, who fled down the hallway as fast as she could. So frantic was she to get away that she didn’t see Jared exit a stairway, and she ran right into him.

“I’m so sorry,” he called out in fright.

She didn’t reply. She just looked into his eyes, and she calmed a bit before she scurried off.

Tommy turned back to Rudi and Joey, and he saw that she had one of his arms behind his back and that she was twisting it. “I’m listening,” she screeched.

“WHY?” Tommy wrote in big letters when describing this in his journal. It made no sense to him, especially 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 everyone like her, everyone who couldn’t fight back, and that included herself.

“Let go of me!” Joey yelled in horror. Tommy could see tears forming in his eyes. But this was nothing compared to the horror and tears on Rudi’s face. It was as if it were her own arm she was snapping.

Still, she wouldn’t let go of Joey. She only twisted his arm more, to the point of breaking, and she uttered, “It’s not so fun when the girl hits back. Is it?”

“Let go! Please let go!”

This time she did, but not before she kicked up one of his feet and pushed him onto the floor, where he grabbed his arm and cried. He cried like a baby. “Next time I won’t be so nice,” she told him as she wandered off again while again looking like she didn’t care.

But she wasn’t fooling Tommy, and he could no longer fool himself.

Tommy parked his bike in the school lot the next morning, and he noticed Rudi in the distance. He just sat there and watched her approach the front doors of the school and enter them. She didn’t look at him. It didn’t seem that she was looking at anything.

He waited outside. He waited a long time. Only after the bell for first period had rung did he step inside the school. Not even bothering going to his locker, he went straight to his first-period computer class, where outside its open door he saw everyone punching cards, just like they always did.

Sighing at this, he walked off. He walked down the hall and down the stairwell to the second floor. He walked down that corridor too, knowing exactly where he was walking toward. As he got close to it, he heard a boy’s voice echo through a classroom and into the hallway.

*inward, inward falls my heart*

*onto me*

*colder than ice*

*colder than cold*

Tommy grimaced. He grimaced all the way to the open door, where he saw Rudi slouching in her chair with her arms crossed in the back of the room.

“That was very . . . something,” Ms. Krasner moaned with a pained expression once the boy had finished and sat down. After glancing around the classroom, she asked, “Who wants to go next?”

No one raised their hand. They all looked away, including Rudi.

“How about you, Rudi?” the teacher said with a nod. “You don’t know how much I’ve been looking forward to yours.”

“I’d rather not,” Rudi muttered while still looking away.

“I’d rather you did,” Krasner replied.

Rudi groaned, but she also reached into her seabag and pulled out her poetry textbook. From this, she took out a folded piece of paper, which she opened. Though she didn’t read it. She just slapped it onto the table and growled, “The assignment was to write a poem, not to recite it. If you’re so curious about it, you can read it yourself.”

With lots of exasperation, the teacher marched up to Rudi, and she grabbed the page and read it aloud.

*So tall*

*But never reaches the floor.*

*So sure*

*But can’t say*

*what he wants:*

*Every kiss,*

*Every blush,*

*Every broken heart.*

*I wanna shout him inside out.*

*I wanna slam him through a wall!*

*I wanna make him see*

*what I see.*

*The what I see*

*when I see me.*

Slowly, the teacher lowered the poem, and she looked at Rudi. She looked at her as if she couldn’t believe she was the same girl as before. “So there is a soul under all that makeup and hair,” she murmured. She also smiled at Rudi. She smiled just a little.

Trying to escape this, Rudi turned toward the door. She turned to it much like she had the last time Tommy had been standing there. This time she saw not only him but his shock, and this came over her face as well.

Leaning forward to discover what Rudi was gaping at, Ms. Krasner noticed Tommy, and she said to him: “Can I help you?”

Like the last time Tommy had been there, he ran off.

“It seems Ms. Weiss had inspiration for her poem,” he heard the teacher’s voice echo through the classroom and into the hall.

Rudi broke the narrative. She did with a giggle.

“What so funny?” I uttered as I lower the pages in my hand.

“That’s not exactly what the teacher said,” Rudi told me. “She said something like, ‘It seems Ms. Weiss had inspiration for her poem. A very cute one.’”

Tommy didn’t sleep that night at all. He tossed himself around in his bed while trying to make the words of Rudi’s poem disappear or at least make them not matter so. But they kept bouncing inside his head and all through it.

Why couldn’t a monster write something like that? he asked himself. Were they not capable of beauty?

He recalled the music class he took the year before. The teacher one afternoon played Richard Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, and he thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard. But Wagner was a monster. He was a monster in the same exact way Rudi was. So was Ezra Pound and lots of so-called artists like them.

By dawn, Tommy had come up with all the excuses he needed to believe that nothing had changed. He had free will too. But still he rose to his waist and jumped off his bed and into the shower, and he knew just why he was doing this.

The garage door slowly opened, exposing both a silver Jaguar and a tan Mercedes convertible as well as the Harley parked between them. This sped onto the driveway along with Tommy. It sped down Overhill Road too. It sped all the way to Rudi’s house, where Tommy parked behind the old brown pickup truck and waited for Rudi. While he wasn’t sure what he was going to say to her when she came out, he knew he had to say something.

He didn’t have to wait long. His bike was still warm when she and the FBI agent left the house and walked to the blue sedan parked in front of it, with Tommy noticing two things about her. The first was that she wasn’t wearing her coat despite it not exactly being warm out. But what he noticed more was how frightened she looked and how hard she was trying not to show this.

The sedan drove off, and Tommy followed it. Like when following Deke, he followed it a good distance back. He followed it down Springfield Avenue all the way to Downtown Newark. When the car reached the courthouse on Federal Square, it turned into a multilevel garage across the street while Tommy continued up the road and parked in a small lot on street level, where he again waited. He waited until he saw Rudi and the FBI agent leave the garage and cross the street toward the courthouse.

For the next few hours, Tommy waited some more, this time by the side of the courthouse doors. Finally, Rudi exited the building with the FBI agent, along with a man wearing an expensive gray three-piece suit, and the three came to a stop before a short set of steps.

“After the grand jury finishes its work,” the man in gray told Rudi, “we won’t need you until the trial.”

“If I live that long,” she uttered as she marched down the stairs followed by the FBI agent, who was smirking at her the whole way to the garage.

The blue sedan came to a stop on Valley Road in front of Columbia. While it was still kind of in motion, Rudi swung open her door, and she jumped out. With a big swing of her arm, she slammed the door shut and made her way to the school while doing so as slowly as she could.

The sedan left, and Tommy jumped the curb and rode over a small patch of grass between the sidewalk and the parking lot, and he came onto the lot and drove alongside Rudi.

She glanced at him, and he again saw the same hurt he’d seen before, and she growled, “What do you want?”

“I’m sorry,” he told her as he idled the bike.

She didn’t reply. She just continued toward the school.

“It’s just that,” he called out, “it’s just that I’m Jewish.”

Rudi responded by coming to a halt, and she muttered, “What?”

“You’re testifying against Deke, aren’t you?” Tommy asked.

Spinning toward Tommy with her fists clenched, she hollered, “Have you been following me?”

“You know,” he answered, “ever since you got here, I thought . . . I thought I was trying to figure 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, and he rode up to her and the surprise on her face and added, “I’m the guy in the picture you drew.”

She didn’t reply, and he leaned toward her. This surprised her even more than the poem. It scared her too, enough to step back.

“Or I want to be,” he murmured.

Tentatively, she took a small step toward him, looking unsure of both herself and him. “You made me feel so . . .” she muttered with her voice breaking.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, this time softer.

Once more, she took a step toward him, and the two leaned toward each other, just as the bell inside the school rang. “I wanna be anywhere but in class,” she whispered with a shake of her head.

“I know the best anywhere,” he told her.

“I met Deke in rehab,” Rudi mumbled while staring into a waterfall from the rocks she and Tommy were sitting on in the South Mountain Reservation. “It seems like it was forever ago. I didn’t really think much of him, but he was the one who gave me my name.”

“What do you mean?” Tommy asked.

“I was going by ‘Trudi’ back then. But he told me that nobody was ever afraid of a ‘Trudi.’”

“What’s your real name?”

“One that makes me chuck. Anyway, like I said, I didn’t think much of Deke, but I was bored. There was nothing going on but drugs, and even they were boring me. So, after we both got out of rehab, I visited him at his house.”

Rudi paused. She also looked up from the water and glanced at the endless trees surrounding them and recalled, “He was cranking ‘Blank Generation’ by Richard Hell on this big stereo on his front lawn. He played it over and over. It was so loud that I could hear it five blocks away.”

“That was the song you were singing on your first day of school, wasn’t it?” Tommy wondered.

“It’s my favorite,” she replied. “Listening to it is the only time I don’t feel alone. The only time I know there’s someone out there like me.”

“I like it too.”

“You do?” she asked after turning to him in surprise.

“Even if that was the only time I’ve heard it,” he admitted. “It’s crazy, but I thought . . . I thought you were singing about me.”

Rudi turned back to the water, and she continued: “Deke then played the Buzzcocks and the Damned and Jim Carroll, and I was hooked, even worse than drugs. Sometimes I’d spend days there listening to records. He had hundreds of them. I barely ate or slept or did anything else. There was only the music and how it made me feel. I felt like I could stomp apart the world. I could smash through walls. I was feeling so good that I just blocked out the crap Deke and his friends were always spewing. I pretended it away. I told myself that it was just talk, the same talk I’d heard all my life. I did this so I could keep listening to the music. I buried my head in it.”

Again, Rudi paused. She paused with a look Tommy had seen before, on his mother whenever she was lost in the past. “Deke even stole a copy of *The Decline of Western Civilization*,” she mentioned, “and a projector too. We watched that movie on his living room wall just about every night. Sometimes we’d let it run all night. I know it so well that I can imitate every inflection on Lee Ving’s face when he sings.”

Tommy didn’t say anything back. Both were quiet. They went back to staring into the water while avoiding what they both knew they had to talk about. Finally, Tommy muttered, “What, what about the kid that got killed?”

Rudi didn’t answer him right away. Even when she started to, she had to close and open her eyes a couple of times before she could get the words out. “Deke would sometimes put on shows in his house with local bands,” she began. “I was also dealing for Deke, mostly at these shows. A couple of college kids showed up one night, and I sold them some weed. Then I started talking to one of them and we danced a little.” Turning to Tommy as she tried to control her emotions, she screeched, “It was nothing, but Deke got jealous. And when he found out they were from a Jewish fraternity . . .”

“He killed him,” Tommy uttered.

“There was violence at these shows,” Rudi mumbled after looking away. “Some people, they hear things in the music that’s not there. They hear what they want to hear, not just the violence but the racism too. The truth is that it’s the only music I know that speaks out against this. It speaks out against every ism there is. It shouts it as loud as can be. And Richard Hell is Jewish. So is Keith Morris and a lot of the Circle Jerks. Ron Reyes is Puerto Rican and Bad Brains are black. But to Deke 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 and his friends put people in the hospital, but nothing like this. This time it wasn’t just talk.”

Rudi paused once more, this time while looking as if she were going to fall apart with the pieces tumbling into the ravine below, and she yelped, “He had the kid on the floor and wouldn’t stop beating him. And I didn’t do a thing.”

“You couldn’t’ve done anything,” Tommy insisted.

“I could’ve tried!”

“You are,” he told her after he glanced at her.

“Don’t make me into some kind of hero!” she hollered after spinning toward him in anger. “I’m just cutting a deal, like millions of other losers.”

“You’re not a loser!” Tommy hollered back.

“Even my mom thought so! She left me like a piece of trash on the side of the road.”

“She’s the one who lost.”

Rudi looked at him. She looked as if she were trying to believe him.

“That blood you said was on your coat,” Tommy went on, “it was the kid’s, wasn’t it?”

Rudi didn’t answer. She just turned from him once more.

“Wasn’t it?” Tommy repeated, this time louder.

“Everyone ran when they heard the sirens,” she answered. “Even Deke. I didn’t know what to do. I tried to stop the bleeding, and that’s when the cops came.”

“You’re not wearing it today,” Tommy noted, “your coat.”

“I forgot it,” she replied. “I was so out of it this morning. I couldn’t sleep last night at all. I haven’t slept through the night since it happened. I keep seeing that boy’s face. I relive the same ten minutes every night, and it always ends the same. No matter what I do, he dies. He always dies. Nothing I’ll ever do will change this.”

Tommy didn’t know how to reply to this, so he just said, “You must be cold.”

“I’m fine,” she groaned while crossing her arms, as if only now did she realize she was cold.

Tommy took off his jacket, and he told her: “I want you to wear mine.”

He started putting the jacket on her, and she smirked a bit at the corniness of it as she put her hands into the sleeves. “It looks good on you,” he mentioned as these hands made their way toward the other ends.

“How would you know?” she grumbled.

“Believe me, I know,” he asserted with a grin.

They finished with the jacket, and he reached for her hand. But, like in the restaurant, he stopped himself at the last moment. While trying to think of something other than this, he glanced into the forest and recalled how difficult it had been getting Rudi to walk through it.

“If you hadn’t noticed,” she had moaned to him as they made their way through all the rocks and branches, “I’m not exactly a Campfire Girl.”

He had smiled at this, and he was again smiling by the waterfall as he let her know: “I come here a lot. It’s my favorite place in the world. Do you know that 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 the palm of my hand.”

“That must’ve done wonders for their teeth,” she told him with a giggle. She also glanced at the beauty around her, and she listened to the peacefulness of it, and she murmured, “You were right. This is the best anywhere.”

Tommy realized there was one place better: any place with her. But he only wrote this in his journal. What he said to her was: “The falls help me, I don’t know, they help me to forget things.”

“I wanna forget,” she remarked while gazing again into the water. “I wanna forget everything.”

“When my dad, when he was dying over the summer, I came here every day.”

Rudi spun toward him, with a look that mixed surprise with a sorrow deeper than any he’d seen, and this surprised him. She always surprised him, and she did so again when she put her arm around him.

He did the same to her as she remarked, “This place kinda reminds me . . .”

“What?” he asked.

“It’s stupid,” she answered after shaking her head.

“Tell me.”

“It reminds me of something from a fairy tale.”

“You read fairy tales?” he gasped, surprised by her once more.

“I did when I was little,” she admitted with some embarrassment. “The library was the one place I could escape, from my mom and especially my stepdad. Sometimes I would spend all afternoon there, even though I didn’t even know how to read at first. I kept pestering this librarian to teach me. ‘You’ll learn when you start school,’ she kept telling me. But I couldn’t wait. I couldn’t wait another minute. So I pestered and pestered her until she caved in. Then I read every fairy tale they had. I read them again and again. I even wrote my own and illustrated it.”

“Really?”

“It was just stick figures and finger paint and stuff 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 know. A girl and a prince and a happily ever after. The usual nonsense.”

“I don’t think it’s nonsense.”

Rudi responded by once more looking at him. She looked at him as if she were gauging him before she leaned her head on his shoulder.

This didn’t surprise Tommy. It shocked him. Not the act itself but his reaction to it. Girls had done this to him countless times, but it never meant anything, not to them or to him. Nor did it ever make him feel as good as what he felt at that moment, even if he didn’t know why it did. I think it was because everything Rudi did meant something, and this meant everything.

“I . . .” he mumbled as he felt a couple of raindrops fall on his head. He wanted to tell her: “I want you to be my girl.” He wrote this across a whole page of his journal. He wrote it on many of them, and he didn’t just want to say it. He wanted to scream it. He wanted everything in the forest to hear him and could even hear the words echo back to him.

*I want you to be my girl*.

But the only words that came out of his mouth were: “You want something to eat?”

Tommy and Rudi sat at a booth in a diner called Grunnings with a pair of Cokes in front of them.

The restaurant abutted the reservation and had a large window in the back that provided a birds-eye view of the forest, which they were both staring into when they started hearing the sounds of an old song coming from nearby. Turning toward it, they saw a smiling elderly couple a few booths over who were listening to the music through the small jukebox at their table.

The song unnerved Tommy, as it was the same one from his dream. But he wondered whether he really should’ve been unnerved. He wondered if he should’ve expected it, if he should’ve known that the playing of it was inevitable as the girl sitting across from him.

“I know this song,” this girl said as she spun back to him. “I heard it in a dream when I first got here and couldn’t remember where I had heard it before. But now I do. 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 people like me should be listening to.”

This revelation unnerved Tommy even more than hearing the song. “I guess you don’t like it too much,” he muttered.

“I didn’t say that. It’s just, I don’t know, different. Old.”

“You mean like E. E. Cummings?”

Rudi smirked, and he told her: “It’s called ‘Moonlight Serenade’ by Glenn Miller. It was a big hit back in the thirties or forties. I can remember my grandma listening to it on repeat all day in her room on one of those 78 players. When I was little, sometimes I’d sit outside her door and listen too, and never once did I get tired of it. You know, I hadn’t heard it in years until . . .”

“Until what?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter.”

The song reached its break, and Tommy and Rudi again glanced at the couple, and they saw that they were kissing.

“My dad once told me,” Tommy noted after he and Rudi returned their glances to each other, “he told me that when he first kissed my mom, when he first knew he was in love with her, Julie London was singing ‘Two Sleepy People’ at some nightclub they were at in New York. It would forever be their song. They heard it all the time, even in their . . .”

Tommy stopped mid-sentence. He stopped while watching Rudi’s face react to what he had just said. He could see both the fear and excitement and felt them too, and he realized they’d come from the same thing, the implications of what he had just said. He was in love with the crazy-looking girl across from him. Only then did he know it, and now so did she.

Slowly, he leaned toward her, and she leaned toward him. They couldn’t stop themselves and their lips were just a fraction apart.

“Two garden salads,” came a woman’s voice, causing the two to jump back in their seats.

The waitress put the salads in front of them, and she cried out, “Are you sure that’s all you guys want?”

“It’s the only thing on the menu without meat,” Tommy replied with a shrug.

“Kids today,” the woman barked while shaking her head as she marched off, leaving both Tommy and Rudi to laugh.

“You know, they do have fries,” he mentioned to Rudi.

“No, thanks,” she groaned before she took a bite of the salad.

“So, how’d you become a vegetarian?” he asked, wanting to keep the subject away from the song, which had just come to a gentle stop.

“You’ll laugh at me again,” she grumbled.

“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 a little.”

“When his mom gets shot and he cries out for her,” she explained, “it was real personal for me. I knew exactly what he was feeling. What about you? How did you become a vegetarian?”

“I really don’t know,” he told her. “I woke one morning and I was. Maybe it was all those deer I fed Cracker Jack as a kid. But I never did see *Bambi*.”

Tommy paid the bill at the register by the front of the diner, and he and Rudi slowly started toward the front door.

“What are you gonna do after you testify?” he asked her.

“I don’t even know what I’m gonna do after today,” she answered.

“How’d Deke find you here?”

“That I don’t know either. But he doesn’t know I’m testifying against him. He thinks they’ve resettled me here.”

“So what does he want from you?”

“What he’s always wanted.”

The two reached the door, and Rudi opened it for Tommy and did so with a grin.

“Touché, Ms. Weiss,” he said with a grin of his own as he walked outside and saw that it was raining and that this was getting harder. “I could call my mom,” he mentioned from under the awning. “Maybe she could give us a lift.”

Ignoring this, Rudi marched right into the falling water. She marched up to the Harley and sat on the seat, and she told him: “I thought you liked to live dangerously.”

With a chuckle, Tommy hustled into the rain, and he jumped onto the bike. Then, with both her arms around him, he gunned it out of the parking lot. He gunned it down South Orange Avenue too, before he made a sharp left onto Harding Drive. This was so sharp that the two were almost touching the ground.

The bike regained balance, and Rudi screamed. She screamed while wrapping her legs around him.

He glanced back at her, and he saw her tilt her head to catch the falling rain in her mouth. But what he really saw was the joy on her face. Never had he seen anyone so happy, and he wondered if this was on his face as well.

Something struck Tommy at the same time. He had gotten the bike on the day he had gotten his driver’s license, but this was the first time he ever had fun on it. He wondered if he ever had fun at all before her.

Tommy parked in front of his house, with the rain coming to an end, along with the fun. Rudi became quiet, and he turned toward her and saw the discomfort and unease on her face as she gazed at his big house.

“I thought Versailles was in France,” she quipped. Though under this quip was fear. A lot of it.

“Funny,” he said.

“Seriously,” she went on, “your mom must be the Queen of Navarre.”

“Not even close.”

Tommy got off the bike. At the same time, he noticed something in his rearview mirror, and he whipped his head around and saw a car turn down Overhill Road that looked a lot like the red Porsche Deke drove.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he replied, and he started toward his house. But when she didn’t follow, he turned to her and said, “Come on.”

“Just take me home,” she insisted after shaking her head. “You obviously know where it is.”

“We’ll dry off,” he insisted back, “and then I’ll take you home.”

She sighed and did so loudly. But she followed him into the house and to the large foyer, where she gazed at her surroundings as if she were in another world. After Tommy offered her a towel from a closet, she dropped her seabag onto the floor by the door and took the towel, which she used to dry herself while Tommy did the same with his own towel.

“Mom?” he called out as Rudi handed him her towel. “Elizabeth?”

There was no reply.

“Who’s Elizabeth?” Rudi asked.

“You’ll find out,” he answered.

Rudi rolled her eyes, and she took off his football jacket and offered it to him.

Reluctantly, he took it and put it and both towels on the staircase’s handrail.

“You’re just gonna leave them there?” she uttered. “Not even a punk would do that.”

“Elizabeth will pick ’em up,” he explained.

“Again with Elizabeth.”

Tommy didn’t reply. He just grabbed a bowl of wrapped white chocolate truffles from an end table, and he took a piece and offered Rudi some.

“White chocolate?” she groaned with an accentuated grimace.

“It’s my favorite,” he told her.

“It’s disgusting, and it’s not even chocolate.”

Tommy said nothing. He just unwrapped and ate his piece and cooed.

“Can’t you see how ridiculous we are together?” she growled with her hands on her hips. “We’re barely the same species.”

“It just looks that way,” he growled back. “The truth is I’ve never met anyone more like me. But you already know this, don’t you?”

Rudi searched for a reply. When she couldn’t find any, she started up the long winding wooden staircase.

“Where you going?” he called out.

“I wanna see the rest of this palace,” she let him know as she continued up the stairs.

He followed as she began singing another song he had never heard. Though its lyrics about a house and the paper-thin veneer of happiness inside it was all too familiar, and he wondered how she always seemed to know things about him that he didn’t know himself.

Near the top of the first flight of stairs, Rudi came to a halting stop. She also stopped singing and spun toward Tommy, who came to a halt a few steps below her. “Some people say I look like her,” she remarked.

“Who?” he asked.

“Siouxsie,” she cried out in exasperation.

“Susie who?”

Rudi sneered, and she crossed her arms and screeched, “What music do you listen to? I mean, other than Glenn Miller.”

“I don’t know,” he mumbled in embarrassment. “I listen to the Yardbirds sometimes.”

“And?”

“And whatever’s on the radio.”

“That’s exactly what I don’t listen to.”

Rudi spun back around, and she continued up the staircase followed by Tommy. By the landing, she again stopped when she came upon a framed autographed photo of Ronald Reagan on the wall, which she snarled it.

“Now what?” he yelped as he stopped behind her.

“What a surprise,” she cried out. “You’re a Republican.”

“My dad actually knew him a little,” he mentioned while nodding at the picture.

“You don’t say?” she replied as irreverently as she could.

“They weren’t big friends or anything. 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 just sent a card. No one would’ve blamed him. So, yeah, I’m a Republican.”

Rudi didn’t reply. She just headed down the second-floor hallway.

“Now where you going?” Tommy yelled as he followed her.

Again, she didn’t reply. She continued to the door at the end of the hallway, and she grabbed the doorknob as Tommy grabbed her arm.

“Don’t go in there,” he growled. “My mom wouldn’t like it.”

“*My mom wouldn’t like it*,” she squealed before she shook off his arm and thrust open the door, and she stepped inside a large and well-furnished bedroom, which I’m sure was unlike anything she’d seen, at least in person. She stopped in shock as she gaped at it. “Your mom really is the Queen of Navarre,” she muttered with her head shaking.

“Can we go now?” he begged.

But Rudi stepped deeper into the room, and Tommy reluctantly went with her. At the far end of it, she came to a large open closet, and she ran her fingers through dozens of expensive dresses as she walked from one end of the closet to the other. “You’d never see me in a dress,” she let him know.

“Who says I want to?” he snapped.

She came to the last dress and stopped, at a white wedding gown wrapped in plastic, and she blurted out, “Marriage: what an outdated and sexist . . .” Suddenly, she paused as she gazed at the dress’ long train in wonder. She paused for a long time before mumbling, “This is just like the one . . .”

Tommy slammed one of the closet doors in front of her, and she turned toward him and his anger.

“Now do you see how wrong we are together?” she bellowed. “How I’d embarrass you all the time?”

“I’m not embarrassed!” he howled.

“You look like you want to spit in my face.”

“It’s you who’s doing all the spitting. What’s gotten into you?”

“This is me. The real me. The me who’s leaving.”

She hesitated for a moment before starting off.

He grabbed her hand as she passed, and something incredible happened. He felt her tremble and from nothing but his touch. It was a tremble that meant so many things that his mind couldn’t process them all. He saw, too, the surprise on her face, and this gave him the courage to slowly pull her toward himself.

She resisted and demanded, “Let go of me.”

He didn’t reply nor did he stop pulling, and she told him: “Don’t you realize how easily I could lay you out on the floor? And you’d stay there!”

Tommy knew this was true, but it just excited him more. He didn’t stop pulling her, nor did she stop resisting. Neither was getting anywhere, and they both finally stopped and stared at each other. They did for many seconds.

Their staring was only broken when she loudly sighed and threw off his hand. After jumping into his arms, she kissed him while wrapping herself around him. This sent them spinning around the room, knocking into walls and furniture while sending much of the latter onto the floor. But Tommy was beyond caring about anything other than her kiss. It shuddered through him and made him scream, even if only he could hear it. It got so loud that it became deafening, and this drove him into her further. They were thrashing around, and they almost smashed right through a window.

Just one thing prevented this. The sound of someone clearing their throat.

They broke their kiss, and they opened their eyes, and they turned their heads toward the threshold of the room. Standing there with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face was Tommy’s mother.

I paused after reading this, and I could just about see Rudi blushing on the other end of the line.

“Wipe that smirk off your face,” she growled.

I chuckled and told her: “That’s it for today. Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

I worked on Saturdays, so I needed a bus pass for the following day. But Bob couldn’t find them when I stopped by the office. This meant that I would have to go through the hassle of getting one from the assistant director of the shelter when he came in the following morning. Still, I was in a good mood when I walked into the men’s dorm, and I wasn’t the only one. Instead of snoring, everyone was laughing. They were laughing as they ragged on Hector.

Hector was a Mexican-American who badly wanted to live in Mexico. But because he didn’t have citizenship there, the authorities kept sending him back to America. He was only staying at the shelter so he could save enough money to make another run for the border.

It was actually the Hispanic guys in the room who found the most humor in Hector’s predicament. “Dude,” one of them called out, “you must be the only Mexican who ever got deported *from* Mexico.” Another added, “You should ask Trump for help. I’m sure he’d pull some strings for you.”

Even Hector had to laugh at this.

I smiled but not because of the jokes. I smiled because for the first time since I got here I didn’t feel like I was in a homeless shelter. We were just a bunch of guys joking around on a Friday night and that felt great.

the fourth night

As Saturday was a working day, it wasn’t that different than any other. Even the days I had off weren’t that different.

The one big difference on this day was that I had to wait for the assistant director of the shelter to come in that morning so I could get a bus pass, and he was late. When he finally staggered through the gates, I knew I only had a few minutes to run for the bus.

Dan was a hefty man in his late fifties, who was slow in many ways, and he took his time looking for the passes. But he couldn’t find them either. “Do you really need one right now?” he grumbled.

“I have to be at work in Hesperia this morning,” I grumbled back. “I have to go right now. I’ll buy a pass myself if that’s okay.”

“No, 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.

“It was $3.50 the last time I bought one,” he insisted.

“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 give me the last pair of quarters.

Running to the bus stop didn’t help. I still missed it. So I got to the motel an hour late and would have to move even faster than usual if I wanted to make it back in time for Lynnette’s birthday party.

Amoun would often have me clean the big messes left in the rooms so that the cleaning ladies could get through their normal duties before the next guests checked in. There were always plenty of these after a Friday night. In one room, I had to mop the walls, where hung a combination of red wine and something a little more solid.

As I was finishing, Alaya walked inside the room with her cart. “Hey,” I mumbled to her, not sure what else to say.

She didn’t say anything back. With a lot of embarrassment, she scurried into the bathroom. Only then did she utter, “I’m really sorry about yesterday.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” I told her as I continued working.

“It’s just that . . . I read something really upsetting on the Internet yesterday.”

“Yeah?”

“They broke up a trafficking ring in Adelanto the other day.”

I didn’t reply, and she peaked her head in the bathroom doorway and added, “It’s terrible what these women go through.”

I could tell by the look on her face that she wasn’t speaking about some hypothetical women. But again I wasn’t sure what to say, this time even more so. She, too, was lost for words. We just stared at each other blankly for a few seconds before she returned to the bathroom.

“You know,” I called out while I pretended to work, “there are, there are people you can talk to.”

“About what?” she innocently asked.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I put my mop in my bucket and pushed it to the front door of the room, where I could see her cleaning the sink while trying to keep herself together.

“Don’t look at me like I’m a victim,” she groaned with her eyes on the sink. “I hate that.”

“I’m sorry,” I said after quickly lowering my eyes.

“Don’t say that either.”

“I . . .”

“You’re probably wondering how I ended up in this dump.”

“It had crossed my mind. But I’ve wondered it about a lot of people, including myself.”

“I wanted to be a doctor when I was growing up. I got really good marks in school and was all set to go to the university. But my parents, they wanted me to marry this guy, this guy twice my age. Actually, to say ‘they wanted,’ is not putting it strongly enough. I didn’t have a choice. Then I saw an ad for an au pair on Craigslist and . . .”

“I can guess the rest.”

“No, you can’t.”

I just stood there in response to this, probably with a really dumb look on my face.

“You know,” she went on after a bit of a sigh, “I really thought I had it behind me. I’m starting Cal State down the hill next month.”

“That’s terrific.”

“But I guess, I guess I don’t really have it behind me.”

“You should try—”

“—They don’t help. I’ve tried. It’s too impersonal. These people, they’re like a million miles from having any understanding of me and what I went through.”

“I have a sister . . .”

“What is she, like a counselor or something?”

“Not exactly. But she’s helped a lot of people get through stuff. It’s kind of an obsession for her, maybe because she’s been through a lot herself. She’s certainly not a million miles from you.”

“I don’t know.”

“I could call her.”

Alaya turned toward me as I reached into my pants pocket, and she gasped, “You mean, right now?”

I didn’t answer her. I just took out my phone and dialed my sister.

“I don’t have time,” she insisted. “I’ve got to finish these rooms before check-in.”

“Just talk to her for a few minutes,” I insisted back.

“What’s up?” my sister said into the phone after the first ring.

“I know you must be busy right now,” I told her, “but there’s someone here I’d like you to talk to. She could really use some help.”

“Put her on,” Rudi said without hesitation.

I offered the phone to Alaya, but she wouldn’t take it.

“Please,” I murmured, and she reluctantly grabbed the device.

As she started speaking with Rudi, I left the room with my mop and bucket, and I closed the door behind myself. Which she opened right away while calling out, “What about your phone?”

“I’ll get it from you later,” I told her.

I left the motel and was walking across Cataba Road to the bus stop when Alaya yelled my name.

Turning around, I saw her running toward me with my phone in her hand and her big smile back on her face.

She hugged me and whispered, “Your sister is so amazing.”

“Believe me, I know,” I whispered back with a grin before we broke our embrace and she handed me the phone.

“It was like talking to my big sister or something,” she said. “Better, actually. My real sister won’t even talk to me. Rudi and I are going to do a Zoom call tomorrow morning with someone she knows. Someone . . . someone who’s a lot like me. She runs a support group in LA, and Rudi says I can participate remotely.”

“Everything’s gonna work out for you. I just know it.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Get better. Maybe it’ll inspire me to do the same.”

“Who knows, maybe one day I’ll be the one giving help.”

“Life’s one big cycle, constantly renewing itself.”

On the bus ride home, I became curious about the trafficking ring Alaya had mentioned. I got so curious that I searched for the story on my phone, and I found a few of them from local news sites.

I learned that the police a few days earlier had arrested two men in Old Adelanto, a miserable place one town over that made Victorville look like Paradise. The police were still looking for a third man, but other than that there wasn’t much information. Though one site did mention that both men had served in the army together a handful of years earlier.

With the sun setting, I entered the gates of the shelter, and I noticed all the birthday decorations in the courtyard, which Nicole had somehow gotten her hands on. I noticed Nicole as well, who frantically rushed up to me and shrieked, “Have you seen Josh?”

Before I could answer, Matt called out my name. “There’s a letter for you in the office,” he added from a chair a handful of steps away.

“Thanks,” I told him.

“Have you seen Josh?” Nicole again shrieked.

“No,” I answered.

“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 still have time to buy one.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” groaned Matt with his arms crossed and his head shaking.

“Stater Brothers has this big cake for twenty bucks,” Nicole uttered while pointing down the street, “and that includes decorating it.”

“We can all chip in,” I suggested.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Matt groaned again, again with his head shaking.

“They can’t throw us all out,” I argued.

“They can’t?”

Ignoring this, Nicole and I went around the courtyard and collected money as quietly as we could. I was surprised that almost everyone gave something, even if it was only the change in their pockets, and even if this was all they had, for a little girl most of them barely knew, if that. Even Sharon, one of the people who worked at the shelter, gave us five dollars when she found out what we were up to, despite knowing she could’ve been fired for it. Matt, too, gave, however grudgingly. We ended up with more money than we needed, enough to buy some extras and a small gift for Lynnette.

Hector, who had a car, sped me to the supermarket. We got the cake and had it decorated, and we returned with it, a box of candles, a few bottles of soda, and a small teddy bear.

We came back just a few minutes before Lynnette was to come back with her mother. Quickly, Nicole grabbed the cake from me and even more quickly put ten candles on it.

“They’re coming!” someone howled from the gates as Nicole lit the candles. Another someone turned off the lights, which they flipped back on after Lynnette and her mother entered the gates, which was just before we all serenaded the girl with a chorus of “Happy Birthday to You.”

The surprise and joy on that little girl’s face that night was something none of us were likely to forget, especially her mother, who was barely holding back the tears. For those few moments, Lynnette was just a normal ten-year-old girl celebrating a birthday, just a normal girl made to feel that she was special and that she mattered.

We, too, were just normal people attending a birthday party. I saw that the party was as much for us as it was for Lynnette, and maybe that’s why everyone gave. We needed it as much as she did and maybe even more.

Josh showed up a short time later, with no cake, of course. But he was certainly surprised to see one. He might’ve been even more surprised than Lynnette and her mother.

Angrily, Nicole marched up to him and cried out, “Where were you?”

“I got stuck on the 395,” he insisted. “Some police action.”

This piqued my interest, as I knew the road went right through Old Adelanto. I also recalled how Josh had been in the army, just like the two men who’d been arrested. Of course, I knew all this could be nothing more than coincidence. But I couldn’t help wonder if it could be more.

When I checked in that night, Josh handed me the letter that had been waiting for me on the desk. But he didn’t let go of it, and he grumbled, “How’d you guys get the cake?”

“Oh,” I stammered, “I had some money left on an old EBT card. We’re allowed to use that, right?”

He didn’t say anything. But he did release the envelope, and I started out of the office.

“I think I’ll be watching you,” he told me.

“*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?”* I replied as I stepped out of the office.

“What’s that?”

“It’s from a poem by Juvenal.”

What I didn’t tell him was what it meant.

*Who watches the watchers?*

I knew there was only one person who could.

I walked back into the courtyard just as the party was coming to an end. Lynnette and many of the other kids in the shelter were finishing the huge banana split sundaes that Rich had made for them, from ice cream he had somehow conjured up.

I couldn’t stop grinning at this as I took Tommy’s letter to the corner booth and called Rudi. Unlike the previous nights, it took many rings before she answered. I think we both knew that this would be the most difficult call so far.

When she finally picked up, without any small talk, I just opened the envelope and started reading its pages.

It took Tommy a few seconds to grasp what was happening, that he was pressed against a window in his mother’s bedroom and that Rudi was wrapped around him and that his mother was glaring at both of them.

Quickly, he released his arms from Rudi and spun toward his mother, sending Rudi crashing to the floor.

“Sorry about this, Mom,” he uttered as Rudi hurriedly rose to her feet.

“It’s just fortunate for all of us that I didn’t arrive about ten minutes later,” she told him.

“It’s not like that, Mom,” he insisted before he and Rudi slowly made their way toward her. “Really.”

Closer the two got to the woman, and Tommy could see the disgust growing on her face. Disgust of Rudi. She didn’t even bother to hide it.

An immeasurable amount of time later, the pair were in front of the woman, who looked them over and noticed something about both. “Did you two just get out of the shower?” she screeched.

“It’s not like that, Mom,” Tommy screeched back. “We got caught in the rain. Sorta.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” the woman grumbled through her clenched teeth.

“This is Rudi,” he explained, “my . . .”

Tommy honestly didn’t know what to call her. So he stammered. He did until Rudi blurted out, “I’m his friend. Sorta.”

“Will your friend be staying for dinner?” Mrs. Goodwin asked Tommy.

“Yes,” he replied at the same time Rudi said, “No,” and she turned to him and glared.

“By all means stay for dinner, Rudi,” the woman told her with her jaw again clenched and disgust again over her face. “I’m just dying to know more about you.”

Tommy and Rudi sat on the living-room couch together, with Rudi looking many stages past anxious.

“She hates me,” she groaned. “And if I were her, I’d hate me too.”

“It’s just that you remind her of someone,” Tommy explained. “Someone real close.”

“I can’t believe there’s anyone like me.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Just wait till she finds out 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,” Tommy insisted. “I don’t even care about the future. All I care about is now.”

“Some of us can’t separate our past from our now,” she insisted back. “Or our future.”

“Look—”

“—And I’m sure she’ll be overjoyed when she learns about that kid who got killed.”

“I don’t care.”

“Just take me home.”

“Right after dinner.”

“Maria said that she lives near you.”

“Right down the block.”

“Just point me in her direction,” Rudi cried out as she climbed to her feet.

“Please stay,” Tommy murmured. “Please.”

Rudi sighed, and she fell back onto the couch as Tommy picked up a remote off the coffee table and asked, “You wanna watch TV?”

“I hate TV,” she howled before crossing her arms and turning away.

Tommy turned on the TV anyway and flipped through the channels. After briefly stopping at MTV and the video of Prince’s “1999,” he continued flipping. He only stopped when he found *The Uncle Floyd Show* on a little UHF channel, and he started watching the strange and irreverent comedy show that most people didn’t know existed. I’m not even sure Floyd knew.

Surprised at what he was watching, Rudi uncrossed her arms and turned toward the TV, and she muttered, “I hate everything but this.”

“What’s that?” he replied with his concentration on the screen.

She glanced at him incredulously and uttered, “You really watch *Uncle Floyd?”*

He didn’t answer, and she watched the show with him. It didn’t take long before the two burst out into laughter at the same exact moment, and they spun toward each other in shock.

Tommy smiled, and she smiled a little too. Though she told him: “It doesn’t mean a thing.”

“Dinner’s ready!” Mrs. Goodwin called out from the dining room.

Tommy, Rudi, and Mrs. Goodwin took their seats in front of a formal table setting, which Rudi gazed at in confusion. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many utensils,” she mumbled.

“We don’t usually eat so formally,” Tommy uttered while glaring at his mother.

“I thought it’d be a nice change,” the woman explained.

Tommy continued his glare, realizing that his mother was trying to make Rudi feel as out of place as possible. “It’s real simple,” he told Rudi as he turned toward her. “As the courses come, just use the utensils farthest from you.”

“Why don’t we just use the same utensils?” Rudi bellowed. “What’s the big deal?”

Mrs. Goodwin chuckled, and with lots of condescension, and she told Rudi: “You eat however which way you want, my dear.”

Quietly, Rudi fumed. She did until the kitchen doors swung open and Elizabeth entered the room carrying a tray of pipping-hot parsley soup, which she served to them. Tommy could see that having a servant serve her was making Rudi uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as she had been outside his house. Like then, she tried to hide this under a quip. “Now I know where they got the idea for *Upstairs, Downstairs*.”

This sent grins across the faces of both Elizabeth and Tommy. But Mrs. Goodwin didn’t find it so funny, and she groaned, “Thank you, Elizabeth.”

The grin left Elizabeth’s face at once, and she nodded at the woman and shuffled off as quickly as she could.

Seeing Rudi stare at her soup in wonder, Mrs. Goodwin mentioned, “I should warn you, Rudi, my son’s been on a fad of late, which I’ve regretably humored.”

“What do you mean?” Rudi questioned as she lifted her eyes off the soup.

“He doesn’t eat meat.”

“Rudi’s a vegetarian too,” Tommy remarked.

“How convenient,” Mrs. Goodwin remarked back with a knowing grin.

“I’ve been a vegetarian since I was fourteen,” Rudi growled after clenching her fists and plopping them onto the table.

“I’m sure you have, dear,” the woman cooed.

This made Rudi even angrier. But noticing Tommy taking a small sip of soup, she calmed herself and took a small sip as well. “Wow,” she muttered afterward. “This is really good. It sure beats stale fries.”

Tommy wasn’t sure how to reply to this. So he just glanced at Rudi, and he watched her take another sip. This one was larger than the first, and she slurped it a bit too loud, drawing the attention of Mrs. Goodwin, who turned toward her son and said, “Tell me, Tommy, just wherever did you two meet?”

“Rudi’s in my math class,” he replied.

This surprised his mother, who uttered, “I thought you were taking AP Calculus.”

“I am. Rudi’s the smartest one there.”

“That’s not true,” Rudi interjected.

“You should’ve seen her solve this partial fraction decomposition integration,” Tommy excitedly went on. “She solved it like it was addition. Even Mrs. Roth was impressed, and she’s never impressed. Then Rudi wrote ‘Q.E.D.’ beside it.”

“Quite Easily Done,” Mrs. Goodwin exclaimed.

“Actually,” Rudi replied, “it means—”

“—*Quod erat demonstrandum*.”

“My mom was Phi Beta Kappa at Radcliffe,” Tommy let Rudi know. “The other night she was even telling me that she saw E. E. Cummings in person at school.”

“Really?” Rudi muttered in surprise.

“That was a long time ago, Tommy,” Mrs. Goodwin noted with a shake of her head.

“He was giving a lecture at Harvard,” Tommy continued. “As he walked to the lectern, she and some other Radcliffe girls stood up and started reciting . . . what was the poem of his you recited?”

“‘Buffalo Bill’s,’” she answered with a bit of a sigh.

“And what did he do?”

Again the woman sighed, and she told them: “He stopped and turned to us, and once we had finished, he took out his handkerchief and waved it at us. I thought he was going to cry.”

“Wow,” Rudi mumbled.

“Rudi just wrote a poem in his style for one of her classes,” Tommy mentioned.

“Don’t you dare recite it,” Rudi threatened under her breath.

“Well, Rudi,” Mrs. Goodwin said, “you certainly are a Renaissance woman. Calculus and modernist poetry. If only the school offered a beauty class.”

“*Mom*,” Tommy quietly snarled.

“Do you actually pay someone to do that to your hair?” the woman went on.

“Didn’t you tell me once that you were a beatnik?” Tommy cried out.

“That was completely different,” his mother insisted with a sweeping motion of her arm.

“How? Are you saying people didn’t prejudge you? That they didn’t look down on you because of how you dressed and acted?”

“We had big ideas!” Mrs. Goodwin howled as she jumped up in her chair. “We weren’t painting our faces and running around screaming!”

“That’s not what it’s about!” Rudi yelled after she slammed both her fists onto the table. “It’s about expressing who we are and how we feel. And either you can’t understand this or can’t handle it.”

The woman had no reply to this. Instead, she said, “I didn’t catch your last name, Rudi.”

“Weiss,” Rudi barked while still furious.

This shocked Mrs. Goodwin, and she shrieked, “You’re Jewish?”

“What?” Rudi muttered while looking even more shocked than Tommy’s mother. “I, I thought ‘Weiss’ was German.”

“It’s also a very common Jewish name.”

“I have heard you say ‘*oy vey*,’ Tommy interjected with a bit of a grin. “More than once.”

Rudi spun toward him, and she asked, “That’s Jewish?”

“It’s Yiddish,” Mrs. Goodwin replied.

“You think I could be Jewish?” Rudi said to Tommy with horror all over her face.

“Are you ashamed of it?” grumbled Mrs. Goodwin.

“Not in the way you think,” Rudi responded after turning from both of them and probably herself as well.

Silence followed. A good amount of it. It was only broken when Mrs. Goodwin told Tommy: “You’ll never guess who I saw this afternoon at the Short Hills Mall . . . Darlene. So beautiful. So . . .” The woman then glanced at Rudi and added, “So unlike anything else.”

Rudi lowered her eyes, and Tommy growled, “That’s enough. Look, I’m sorry about what happened this afternoon, but it doesn’t give you the right to treat Rudi like this. I won’t have it.”

“Darlene was telling me how she just got accepted into Penn,” his mother went on. “Swarthmore too. Of course, she’s waiting to see what you’ll do.”

“She shouldn’t.”

“And why is that?”

“Darlene’s beautiful, there’s no question about that. She’s smart too. She can even be funny at times. But I can barely stand the sound of her voice. I cringe whenever she touches me.”

“Well, you certainly weren’t cringing this afternoon.”

Tommy was about to respond when Rudi looked up at the woman and uttered, “Listen, Mrs. Goodwin, despite what you saw earlier and despite what Tommy thinks he feels, there’s nothing serious going on between him and me.”

“Nothing but Glenn Miller,” groaned Tommy.

“Glenn Miller?” the woman gasped.

“But that’s nothing serious. It’s not like we feel the same things or dream the same things or that we laugh at the same jokes or that anything happens when I take her hand.” To prove this, he put his hand on hers, and again he felt her tremble before she yanked her hand away.

“Next week, Tommy,” she stammered while trying to hide her emotions and not doing a very good job of it, “next week you’ll find someone else.”

“That’s not true,” he insisted.

“I’m just some exotic flavor you’ve never tasted.”

“That’s not true!” he screamed after he slammed his fist onto the table.

“We had a few laughs today and a little escape from reality,” she babbled as she started falling apart. “But we both know I’m not gonna end up with some preppy football player Republican. And I’m not gonna end up at Penn or Swarthmore either. I’m not gonna end up anywhere!”

With those last words, Rudi jumped to her feet and rushed out of the room. Tommy jumped up as well.

“Let her go,” his mother told him.

“Shut up!” he yelled, and he ran after Rudi.

“She’s not for you!” Mrs. Goodwin hollered.

“Her eyelids’ flutter tells me you’re wrong!”

Tommy reached the foyer just as Rudi swung her seabag over her shoulder by the front door. On the verge of tears, she swung open the door and ran out, leaving the door wide open.

He followed. He ran outside as she reached the street, and he called out her name.

“Just leave me alone!” she yelled with her voice past the breaking point. “I was doing fine until I met you, and now look at me!”

That’s what Tommy did. He looked at her, and he kept looking as she disappeared into the night. He was still looking even then, unable to move or to express the words he so wanted to say to her. The same words he had wanted to say by the waterfall.

I didn’t even have to ask Rudi to tell me what happened to her after she left Tommy’s house. Hearing the pause on the line after I finished reading the journal entry, she must’ve expected the question would come, because she just started telling me.

Rudi wandered through the streets of Newstead, without getting anywhere but more upset, especially at herself.

If her mind had been clouded with thoughts of sex, she could’ve easily wrote off what she was feeling. But it wasn’t. She wasn’t even thinking about Tommy but his hand and how badly she wanted to hold it. There could be no reasoning for this. There was no way to rationalize it.

As she often did when she was troubled, she reached for her music. However, the one thing about punk rock is that there are no love songs. None at all. There are only a few songs that even broach the subject. But she had one of these with her: “Love Und Romance” by the Slits, which was perhaps the most cynical song ever written about the feelings swirling around her.

This was just what she wanted to hear, or so she told herself. She threw the tape into her Walkman, found the song, and she cranked the volume all the way up before screaming along with Ari Up. She screamed for what seemed like hours while constantly rewinding the song after it finished. She rewound it so much that she knew exactly how long to press the rewind button till it returned her to the beginning of the song.

But no matter how hard she screamed or how often she listened to the song, she couldn’t regain her old self. This was when she knew she was cooked, when she knew 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. The strangest thing was that she didn’t even know why she was crying or whether she was crying because she was happy or sad.

Suddenly, she saw a little old lady walking a little old dog down the block, and she rushed up to them.

The woman took a big step back, for the obvious reason. But seeing Rudi’s tears, another instinct must’ve kicked in. A much stronger one. “Are you all right, dear?” she murmured once Rudi had stopped in front of her.

“I’m lost,” Rudi replied while realizing the words had infinite meanings.

“Where are you trying to go?”

“A friend of mine lives near here. Her name is Maria Gonzales.”

“Oh, I know the Gonzaleses. What a nice family. They live on Overhill Road just up the way a bit. You can’t miss it. It’s a big yellow house with a lovely Nativity scene in the front yard.”

“Thank you!” Rudi cried out, and she almost hugged the woman. But she stopped herself and rushed off, I’m sure with the woman trying to make sense of the enigma that had just been in front of her.

Rudi rang the doorbell for the second time. But again there was no response, and she began to wonder if Maria or anyone else was home even though there were plenty of lights on in the house.

Then the door creaked opened, and there was Maria, looking more than shocked. She was so shocked that she couldn’t say a thing.

“Can I come in?” Rudi softly pleaded.

Maria turned around, and she listened to the faint voice of a man coming from inside the kitchen before spinning back to Rudi and grabbing her arm. “You’re lucky my dad’s on the phone,” she whispered. “Quick.”

“Quick” was just how they snuck up the stairs and into Maria’s bedroom. There Maria locked the door. After finding a flashlight, she flipped it on before turning off the room’s light and sitting on the floor with Rudi, who told her everything that had happened that night.

“He’s in love with you,” Maria said with a smile. “You should be happy. Just about every girl in school is crazy about him.”

“Not me,” Rudi growled before turning away.

“‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks.’”

Rudi giggled a bit, and she glanced at Maria and said, “Almost nobody gets that quote right. You must really like 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 so awesome.”

“The teacher even said I should become a playwright. But it’s silly.”

“Why?”

“How many women playwrights do you know?”

“Lillian Hellman, Lorraine Hansberry, Sophie Treadwell. There are tons of them.”

“I’ve never even heard of those people.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“Don’t change the subject,” Maria insisted.

“There is no subject,” Rudi insisted back.

“That’s not what I see.”

“You need glasses.”

“Maybe it’s you who needs them.”

“How could I be in love with him?” Rudi screeched. “He’s a Republican!”

“I’m no expert,” Maria replied, “but I don’t think you get to choose.”

“You say you’re no expert, but you sure sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

Maria shrugged in embarrassment.

“I know your dad is pretty strict and all,” Rudi went on, “but you must at least be hot for someone.”

Maria blushed. But she wouldn’t say a thing.

“Come on, spill it,” Rudi exclaimed.

Maria was still reluctant. But, after continued prodding from Rudi, she mumbled, “Well, there is this someone.”

“Yeah?”

“We’re always smiling at each other and stuff.”

“What’s his name?”

Maria didn’t want to tell her. But Rudi kept pestering her. She did until Maria finally mumbled, “Sam.”

“Sam?” Rudi uttered. “Is that the guy . . .”

“Sam . . . antha.”

Moments of uncomfortable silence followed, many of them, and Maria turned off the flashlight.

“Why’d you turn off the light?” Rudi asked.

“You must hate me,” Maria uttered.

“Why would I hate you?”

“Because I’m a . . .”

Rudi grabbed the flashlight from Maria, and she turned it on and said, “I think it’s cool.”

“You do?” Maria gasped.

“It takes courage to be different.”

“That’s my problem.”

“What is?”

“I don’t have courage.”

“Have you talked to this, this Samantha?”

“God, no.”

“Why not?”

“My dad would kill me. I’m not even allowed to talk to boys.”

“Are you gonna live your whole life for your dad? Are you gonna get married and have babies just to make him happy?”

“I don’t know.”

“‘To thine own self be true!’” Rudi hollered.

“Sshhh!” Maria yelped. “My dad would freak out if he found you here.”

“Tomorrow you’re gonna walk right up to this Samantha,” Rudi told her, “whether it’s in the hallway or wherever you two do your smiling, and you’re gonna at least say hello to her.”

“No way,” Maria cried out.

“Either you walk up to her or I’ll walk you up. You pick.”

With the sun peeking through his window as it made its way toward the darkening clouds above it, Tommy sat on his bed, much as he had been doing all night. Like then, his head was on his knees and his arms were wrapped around his legs.

*Just leave me alone!*

He listened to the words Rudi had spoken to him the night before. The words that had given him the out he’d been looking for since he met her. All he had to do to avoid his fate and fulfill his second chance 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. So he got off his bed. Without even showering, he got dressed, and he sped out of his house on his bike in the lightly-falling rain. Like the day before, he sped all the way to Rudi’s house. This time, though, he didn’t even bother hiding behind the old brown pickup truck. He stopped in front of her house and waited.

For hours, no one came out of the house, nor was there any indication that anyone was inside it. He realized, too, that he couldn’t see the blue sedan anywhere. Glancing at his watch, he noticed that school was about to begin. So, with the rain starting to fall a little harder, he drove to Columbia. He drove as fast as he could. While stopping at the red light at the corner of Valley and Parker, he saw Rudi and Maria walking through the parking lot toward the school, and he noticed how Rudi again wasn’t wearing her coat and that she had on the same clothes she had the day before.

Tommy continued to wait for the light to change, and he saw Deke’s Porsche race into the school’s lot from Parker before coming to a halting stop by the two girls, who stopped and turned toward it as its window rolled down.

The light finally turned green. But instead of driving down Parker, like the day before, Tommy jumped the curb and rode over the grass. While keeping his distance from the Porsche, he idled his bike well behind it in the lot. No matter how much he wanted to be brave right then, he just couldn’t.

Slowly, Rudi lowered her head. For many seconds, she kept it that way until she made her way around the car to the passenger door. Which she stepped through despite the pleas of Maria, who was screaming at her in fright.

The Porsche sped off, but Tommy didn’t follow. He just watched it race down Parker, feeling more afraid than ever.

Maria noticed him, and she frantically yelled, “Aren’t you going to do something?”

He didn’t respond.

“You stupid idiot!” she went on with her arms flailing. “She only went with him because of you!”

Without even realizing it, Tommy gunned the bike, and he followed the Porsche. He followed it to Route 22, a highway that bisected the width of the state. From there, Deke turned onto the lot of a seedy little motel on the edge of Newark before parking in front of a room in the pouring rain.

While pulling up behind the Porsche, Tommy watched Deke jump out of it and strut around to the other side, where Rudi was getting out a lot slower. With a sneer, Deke grabbed her arm, and he pulled her outside before he slammed the door and dragged her toward the room.

Tommy called out Rudi’s name from his bike, and she and Deke both came to a halt, and they both spun toward him in anger.

“What are you doing here?” she hollered.

“What are you?” he hollered back.

Deke took a step toward Tommy. But Rudi stopped him with her arm, and she said something to him under her breath, something that sounded like, “You promised.”

“What’s going on?” Tommy cried out.

“Just go home,” Rudi replied. “Can’t you see it already? I’m trash!”

“That’s not ‘the what I see’!”

“Just go!”

Tommy didn’t, and Deke opened his jacket and put his hand on the gun in his waistband, and he told him: “Listen to her, man. Unless you wanna end up like that other kike.”

“Let’s just do this,” Rudi growled to Deke before she grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and dragged him toward the room.

“Sure thing, babe,” he replied.

The two reached the room, which Deke unlocked and opened, and the two entered.

“I want you to be my girl!” Tommy screamed.

Deke reacted by stopping a few steps into the room, but Rudi didn’t even do this. She just continued inside as if she didn’t hear or didn’t care.

“I want you to be my girl!” Tommy screamed again.

Slowly, Deke turned around, and he glared at Tommy once more. While nodding toward the highway, he told him: “Take off while you can,” and he slammed the door behind himself.

Hearing this lock, Tommy gazed out into nowhere, frozen with fear.

*Take off while you can*.

These words seemed familiar to Tommy. At first, he thought he must’ve heard Deke say them, but then he recalled that it had been someone else. This led him to glance around. Slowly, he glanced. A little behind him to his right he saw the blue sedan and the FBI agent inside it. The one with the crewcut and pockmarked face, who was sitting in the driver’s seat with the window open and smirking at him.

The sound of a lamp crashing to the floor sent Tommy’s head spinning toward the motel room. “You’re not getting off that easy!” Deke howled from inside. “You think I don’t know you’re testifying against me?”

“I’m not!” Rudi insisted.

“That’s right you’re not!”

The two began fighting, and this was followed by one of them landing hard on the floor. “I guess you forget I taught you!” Deke screamed. “I taught you everything! I made you a man! Better than a man! And all you wanna do is screw Jews!”

Tommy got off his bike, and he took a step toward the room. But he couldn’t take another. “There’s nothing you can do!” he screamed at himself. “He’d kill you!”

The fighting continued inside the room, and Rudi cried out in pain while no longer sounding so tough. I bet she sounded like the frightened little girl she had always been, who’d been hiding underneath the toughness, looking for any way out.

Spinning back to the sedan and the man inside it, Tommy called out, “Aren’t you going to do something?”

“All in good time, young man,” he said while unable to hide the glee oozing out of him. “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?”

Suddenly, everything became clear to Tommy. He realized that it had been the FBI who told Deke where Rudi was and what she was about to do. He realized that they had no intention of having her testify. She was an addict with a long record. She was unreliable. But the man in the car, he’d be the perfect witness to murder. He’d be the perfect means toward a conviction, which was all that mattered.

Rudi screamed for help. While feeling himself starting toward her, Tommy realized that he really didn’t have a choice in what he did and didn’t and never had. He realized that free will was nothing but a joke. He knew if given a million second chances, he’d make the same choice every time.

He’d choose her.

He rushed at the door and was moments from slamming into it.

There was silence on the line after I finished reading the last page Tommy had sent me that night. There was lots of it, and it went on and on. I didn’t know what to say to Rudi, and I could tell she was crying even if I couldn’t hear it.

“Call me tomorrow,” she finally uttered with her voice barely a whisper.

“Tomorrow is Sunday,” I let her know. “There’s no mail.”

“Call me anyway,” she growled.

She was about to hang up, but I couldn’t let her go like this. “I don’t think I ever told you how I came into this story,” I said to her.

“No,” she answered. “You never did.”

On a morning just before dawn, I woke when I heard my grandparents arguing in the kitchen below my room. This would not only be how I would come into this story, but how I would come to know my sister.

Groggily, I rose to my waist, and I suddenly grasped that my grandparents were yelling in German. This was unusual. Most of the time, they spoke English while often breaking into Czech, a language associated with beautiful memories for both of them. German, though, was only associated with nightmares, even if it was their native language. The only time I ever heard them speak it was when they didn’t want me to understand something. Still I could pick up one thing my grandmother said as she pleaded with my grandfather: “She . . . she’s a Nazi.”

Grandpa didn’t reply to this. For a long while, all I heard was quiet. Then the kitchen door swung opened, followed by the unmistakable footsteps of my grandfather shuffling outside. These continued to the side of the house, where he opened and closed the metal garbage can there before he shuffled back into the house.

I couldn’t control my curiosity of this. Hurriedly, I dressed and left my room, and I snuck down the stairs and out the front door. With the sun beginning to peek above the horizon of our neighborhood, I made my way to the garbage can and quietly opened it. In the faint light, I saw a crumpled page from a newspaper, and I pulled it out and uncrumpled it. It was from the *Star Ledger* and the headline read: “Drug Dealer Shot Dead in Motel Room.”

Underneath this were the mugshots of two people: a man with a shaved head and a tattooed neck, along with a punked-out teenage girl who otherwise looked a lot like me. It was like staring at myself in a funhouse mirror. I wasn’t exactly a normal-looking teenager, with my wild curly brown hair and scruffy face, but I looked like the cover of *Tiger Beat* in comparison to her.

I don’t know how long I gazed at her image. Eventually, I got cold and tried reading the story. But the text was too small to read in the morning light. So I snuck back inside the house with the paper and rushed up the stairs into my room, where I read the article on my bed.

What caught my attention right off was that the exact circumstances of what had happened were still unclear. All they knew for certain 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 weren’t sure if he’d make it. The article also mentioned that both Deke and Gertrud were skinheads with long criminal records and ties to neo-Nazis and that they were both thought to be involved in the killing of a Jewish Rutgers student earlier that fall.

All this couldn’t fully sink into my head. That I could have a twin sister living within driving distance of me was incredible enough but that she was also a skinhead and possibly a murderer of Jews was too much. My instinct was to rip the paper apart and at least try to forget about it.

But again I couldn’t control my curiosity. So I read the article again. I read it many times, and I realized what it didn’t say was as important as what it had. There was no mention of who had killed Deke or what had happened to the girl I knew had to be my sister. The only clue they gave was that she and the boy went to a high school somewhere in the area. But this wouldn’t be much of a clue I would soon learn, after I rushed downstairs into my grandparents’ library.

Some suburban families build pools while others build gardens or game rooms. Mine built a library. It was huge, with many interconnected rooms and more books than that at my high school library. They even had some rare books, such as a French edition of Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls* that was illustrated by a young Marc Chagall and whose imagery would haunt many of my childhood nights.

The library also had a bookcase of every telephone directory in New Jersey. I found the one for Essex County along with those from the adjoining counties. While browsing through them, I discovered there were dozens of high schools within an hour’s drive of the motel where they found my sister, and they were spread out everywhere. Finding her seemed an impossible task, until I remembered that I was the grandson of a man who had made such quests seem ordinary.

I left the library and stepped through the kitchen doors, and I saw my grandparents sitting in front of the white porcelain table that had been there for as long as I could remember. The two were not even trying to eat the breakfast in front of them as they gazed into space.

“Hey,” I uttered as I nervously stopped in front of them.

Neither replied. They didn’t even seem to know I was there.

“Grandpa,” I said, “remember how I was telling you that I’m taking a film class at school?

“*Cože?”* he muttered without looking at me.

My grandfather had been suffering from a form of dementia. It was one that fluctuated. Often he’d be quite lucid and at other times he’d be in another world and time. Then there were times like this, where it was difficult to tell which.

“For my class project,” I went on, hoping for the best, “I’ve decided to make a documentary on New Jersey. I’m really gonna need your car in the afternoons for a while.”

Suddenly, he realized I was talking to him, and he spun toward me in confusion and uttered, “*Jistě*. Sure.”

I nodded while feeling a little guilty about lying to him. But I justified it by telling myself that he would’ve done the same.

Over the next few weeks, I got home early and drove to a different high school every weekday afternoon and sometimes two if they were near each other. I would show the picture of the strange girl in the newspaper clipping to students and teachers and anyone else who walked by. But no one knew her. None of them even seemed to recognize her from the news, which had been a big story for a few days on the local TV news.

I don’t know how many times I almost gave up looking for her. But it was a lot. It wasn’t just the futility of the search that gnawed at me, but I wasn’t sure what I’d say to her if I found her. I even wondered if I was secretly doing my best not to find her so that I would have a convenient excuse for not facing her. Still, every afternoon I got into Grandpa’s beat-up gray Olds and continued to look for her.

Finally, I reached a dead end. I had been to every high school in the area and even to some outside it and was no closer to finding her than I had been when I started. I told myself that I had no choice but to give up.

“How is that documentary of yours coming?” Grandpa asked me one night during dinner.

I shrugged and told him: “Everywhere is the same.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everywhere in New Jersey looks the same.”

“Then you are not looking hard enough. There are gems everywhere in this state, even in Newark. Especially there.”

“Hillside too,” Grandma interjected. “Some of my favorite homes are there. Of course, they cannot compare to my old villa in Vinohrady. But nothing can.”

“Hillside is a perfect example,” Grandpa remarked while nodding his head a couple of times. “Who would expect to see such beautiful homes on the border of Newark and Elizabeth?”

“Hillside?” I muttered. “Isn’t that, isn’t that where Pingry is?”

“Exactly my point,” he replied while pointing at me. “You would never think that the most prestigious private school in the state would be in Hillside. But there it is.”

Only at this moment did I realize that I hadn’t checked any private schools. I must’ve just assumed that a girl who looked like my sister could’ve only gone to a public one. So the next afternoon I drove to Hillside and the leafy campus of Pingry, where rich kids from all over Northern New Jersey went. It seemed like half my six-grade class went there instead of the local junior high, which I guess had more to do with the racial makeup of the school than its academics. As I parked in the school lot, I even recognized a guy I had once been friends with as he jumped into an Alfa and drove off.

Like I had at all the other places, I asked anyone I passed if they knew the girl in the picture, even though I felt even less hopeful than normal. So I was not surprised that everyone shook their heads.

Finally, I decided not only to leave but to forget about finding my sister for good. But as I was approaching 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 of them asked, who was a skinny kid with short curly brown hair and light blue eyes and a wardrobe straight out of *GQ*.

“How do you know she shot him?” I asked back, having never discovered who fired the gun.

“There are rumors,” he answered with a shrug.

“I guess she doesn’t go here. Do you happen to know what school she does go to?”

“Columbia. A neighbor of mine was telling me about her. He goes there.”

“I checked Columbia a few weeks ago,” I insisted while shaking my head. “Nobody knew her.”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” he replied.

“What do you mean?”

“There are rumors,” he said again with another shrug, as he and the others walked off.

“What rumors?” I called out.

“I’m not saying,” he bellowed, and I could almost see the smirk on his face.

When I came home from school the next day, I once again did what I’d long been doing. I grabbed my grandfather’s car keys off the bureau by the dining room table and headed out. Though this time I knew I was actually heading somewhere or could hope I was. But I still wasn’t sure that it was to a good place.

I made my way toward our house’s front door, and I saw my grandfather asleep in front of the living-room TV on the couch, much as he’d been doing in the afternoon for years. He’d been retired since I came to live with him and Grandma when I was a small child, and he didn’t have much to do during the day, especially as Grandma still worked. She was a decade younger than him and was the director of the local YM-YWHA. So he was left alone a lot. Along with this, it seemed as if he had run out of steam or any place to use the little he had left, and I wondered if this was the cause of the stupors he’d find himself in.

Gazing at him that day as I walked by, I really wished he could’ve been with me. I wished I could’ve given him some purpose. I could’ve also really used his help.

I left my house, and I drove twenty minutes to Maplewood. Like I had when I was there weeks earlier, I parked the Olds on Valley Road in front of a little diner called Ralph’s, and I crossed the street as kids streamed out of Columbia High School and walked through the parking lot. Like always, I showed the photograph to everyone I passed. Like always, they all shook their heads. Then, not far from the school doors, I approached two girls. One was small and conservatively dressed while the other was tall and redheaded. The small girl slowed in increasing shock when she saw me before coming to a stop a few steps from me. “Are you her brother?” she mumbled.

“I think so,” I answered.

She rushed up and hugged me, which more than surprised me, and she whispered, “I’m Maria, Rudi’s best friend.”

“Rudi?” I muttered before realizing that no teenage girl in America would want to be called Gertrud and certainly no punk.

Maria broke her embrace, and the two of us gazed at each other.

“You’re her best friend?” I stammered while trying to corroborate the image of the girl in the photo with the one in front of me.

“She never told me she had a brother,” Maria remarked.

“She probably doesn’t know. Do you know where I can find her?”

“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, just off South Orange Avenue.”

“He’s still in the hospital?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure what’s wrong with him.”

“I’m pretty sure I know the rest,” Rudi interrupted over the phone.

“Not everything,” I replied. “And I don’t know everything either.”

“It’ll have to wait till tomorrow. I have to get up early in the morning.”

“I don’t work tomorrow, so I can call you earlier.”

“Call me anytime after noon.”

As I wasn’t working the next day, I didn’t have to get a bus pass that night. Still, I noticed Josh as I went by the office. I gazed at him awhile and was still thinking about him as I made my way to the dorm and my bed.

I didn’t sleep much that night, but it wasn’t because of the snoring, which was even louder than normal. Nor was it because of the waves of darkness, which never came. As I stared at the ceiling, I was trying to figure out what I should do about Josh, and I still wasn’t sure if it would be anything.

the fifth night

I had asked Josh if I could do the house laundry on Sunday morning. I did it every Sunday morning. It was the worst and hardest job at the shelter: washing all the towels and bedding from the previous day and putting them on the clotheslines behind the dining hall before collecting and folding them all once they were dry. But it had one big perk: I got to use the washing machines first for my own laundry once I had finished.

After showering that morning, I brought the house laundry cart into the courtyard, where I saw Phil talking to Sharon. Phil was the most-liked person at the shelter, a veteran who saw action in Vietnam. But he didn’t like talking about that. Instead, he would regale us with stories from the set of *Road House*, in which he had a small role as one of the drunks at the bar. A role that he was all too qualified to play.

“You know I don’t like complaining,” he said to Sharon while looking and sounding quite upset.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I woke up this morning covered in urine.”

“You what?”

“Theo, the guy above me, doesn’t like going to the bathroom in the middle of the night. So he uses plastic bottles. But this morning one of them broke open, and it spilled all over me.”

“I’ll handle it,” she told him before walking away in disgust.

I couldn’t help grin at Phil, and he grinned back before telling me: “When it rains, it pours!”

With the sun bearing down on me that morning, and while waiting for two big loads of towels to finish washing, in the courtyard I noticed a married couple named Billy and Jennifer a few booths from me.

It wasn’t easy being a couple at the shelter. They weren’t even allowed to hold hands much less have marital relations. For that they had to find secluded places outside the shelter. An unwritten list of these places was passed between couples, along with a set of creative euphemisms, with new places constantly added while others removed when circumstances warranted it.

Billy and Jennifer were only a few years younger than me, but they looked like teenagers that day the way they were ogling each other. They managed to stay in love despite all their hardships. Maybe it was what kept them looking forward.

The two weren’t the only people I noticed that morning in the courtyard. I also noticed Josh. He was strutting all over the place like a cock. He strutted like he owned it and us.

*Who watches the watchers?*

Those words began bouncing up and down and all around my head, and this led me to take out my cheap plastic phone. I stared at it for a long time while trying to decide whether I should cross the Rubicon and learn more about Josh.

Finally, I loaded a web browser and did some searching, and I discovered that the FBI provided access to their entire criminal database through an API, which lets programmers use this data in their applications. The agency, of course, protected access to the sensitive information the API exposed. This was done through the use of keys, which are kind of like long, unbreakable passwords. Though I knew from experience that this system of protection was far from infallible.

While there are secure ways of handling API keys, programmers are often lazy and include them directly in their code. So I searched the web, looking for one of these particular keys in public code repositories.

But I couldn’t find any, which meant I’d have to search private repositories for them, which wouldn’t exactly have been legal. This gave me some pause but not enough. I knew that, even if someone found out what I was doing and cared, I couldn’t so easily be found, especially with the VPN on my phone.

Two of the biggest sites for private repositories were GitHub and GitLab. As the latter was geared more toward software development, I tried that first. On their website, they publicly disclosed many vulnerabilities that they’d discovered over the years. One of these gave attackers control through a bug that related to importing files. While this bug had been fixed, it wasn’t too hard to modify it and unfix it. This allowed me to search through the repositories, and I found a key in one of them.

After I installed a terminal on my phone, which turned it into a low-end computer, I wrote a Python script that used the key I had found to access the FBI’s database and list out Josh’s record. The problem was that I hadn’t programmed in a long time. So it took me forever to get all the bugs out of my script. While I was doing this, I noticed Mitchell, who slept in the bunk below me and who was listening to Metallica’s “Enter Sandman” on his phone a few booths behind mine.

He must’ve noticed me too. Without turning toward me, he mentioned, “Did you know black people invented rock ’n’ roll? Not to mention blues, hip-hop, R&B, soul, reggae, jazz . . .”

“You also invented hardcore punk,” I interrupted.

“We did?” he muttered in surprise.

“I’ll show you.”

Quickly, he sat beside me, and I took a break from my sleuthing to show him a video of a pair of Bad Brains’ concerts at CBGB from the early eighties. For the next hour or so, the two of us watched the great band in its prime as punks of all colors slammed into each other in front of them and sometimes on top of them, creating a giant mosaic while blissfully unaware that someone might’ve found this unusual.

I returned to my Python script later that morning, and I was finally able to traverse the JSON objects that the endpoints of the FBI’s API returned, and Josh’s record spewed out on my phone’s terminal.

From this I learned that Josh had been arrested three times: for false imprisonment, attempted kidnapping, and assault. But only for the assault was he actually charged, and that was dismissed before it reached trial. Which was likely how he passed the background check the shelter must’ve made before hiring him.

I knew none of this proved anything. It certainly didn’t prove he was the third man the police were looking for. He might’ve even been innocent of all three charges made against him, however unlikely it was. So again I begged myself to just forget it. To “smile and wave,” as Matt had put it. But this didn’t make me forget anything. It only did the opposite.

Mitchell and I weren’t the only ones that day engaging in an eighties flashback at the shelter. After I finished washing my own laundry, I walked back into the courtyard and saw Nicole, Allison, and a few others playing Trivial Pursuit. They were playing a special edition of it that focused on that decade I had come of age.

It only took a few minutes of watching them to make me feel old, after none of them knew what had happened to the Space Shuttle Challenger or what famine 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 thinking of my own experiences during that time, and I found a quiet corner of the courtyard and called Rudi.

“So you wanna hear the story of how I met Tommy?” I asked.

“I told you, I’ve already heard this,” she grumbled.

“Not everything.”

I stepped up to the receptionist in the waiting area of St. Barnabas, and I asked him for Tommy’s room.

The man looked it up, and he said, “He’s in the Isolation Ward.”

“Isolation?” I mumbled.

“It’s for isolating infectious or possibly infectious patients.”

Slowly, I approached Tommy’s door, passing various warning signs posted on the doors leading up to his. These were warning of the dangers of being there.

I wasn’t too scared. Maybe it was because I felt the same kind of immortality many young people feel, or maybe I was more scared of something else.

While hearing labored breathing and some coughing, I came to Tommy’s open door. I peeked my head inside, and I saw a badly-beaten boy my age lying in a bed as he glumly wrote in a notebook. It looked as if he were writing his will.

Despite all this, I couldn’t help feel a visceral dislike toward him. He was the kind of guy I’d always disliked and sometimes hated. He was perfect in every way, even with all his bruises, or maybe it was because of them. If this was how he looked beaten and unshowered and unshaven, I could only wonder what he looked like before. To me, Tommy was the kind of guy who never seemed to have a bad day. The kind who was so different from me. Only at that moment I couldn’t escape the truth that he didn’t seem different from me at all.

Softly, I tapped on his door, and he turned toward me with the same kind of shock Maria had.

“You,” he eventually muttered, “you’re her . . .”

“Maybe,” I replied. “Do you know where she is?”

He responded with a long series of hacking coughs before he returned to his writing without answering me.

I wasn’t sure what to do. For many seconds, I just stood there. Then I noticed a pen and one of those little yellow sticky pads on the table to the left of him, and I headed toward it while saying, “I’ll just leave my name and number.”

“Keep your distance from me,” he bellowed while he continued writing.

“If you see her,” I said as I put down my information, “please tell her, tell her I’d really like to talk to her.”

I finished and turned around, and I saw a nurse enter the room. She had a mask across her face and rubber gloves on her hands, and she was pushing a medical cart toward Tommy. I noticed how she looked as if she were approaching her own death.

I stepped out of the elevator on the ground floor of the hospital, and I started making my way through the waiting area. This was when I first saw her, when I first saw my sister. She was slouching in an easy chair way in the distance, looking as if she hadn’t slept in months, with her arms crossed and her face much like the one in the mugshot in the paper, apart from the black streaks of tears that had run down her face.

Now that I had finally found her, I wanted to run, especially as I could tell she hadn’t yet seen me. I eyed the exits and started toward them. But I didn’t do this for long. I came to a quick stop and looked for the courage to both face her and discover the truth about her.

It took a long time for this courage to come, and there wasn’t much of it. But there was just enough to turn around and slowly head her way. Actually, “slowly” isn’t the right word. Even “inched” wouldn’t describe it right. It must’ve taken me five minutes before I was close enough for her to notice me.

Strangely, while she clearly recognized my resemblance to her, this didn’t seem to surprise her. It only made her angry.

“Hi,” I mumbled once I was in front of her, unable to come up with anything better to say, even though I had practiced this moment in my head from the time I had first found out about her. “I think I’m . . .”

“My brother,” she growled as she wiped her face a bit, which only made things worse.

“I . . .”

“What do you want?” she growled next.

“What do I want?” I uttered, feeling a sudden anger of my own rising inside me. “Out of nowhere, I find I have a twin sister and that she might be a Nazi or a neo-Nazi and . . .”

“And a murderer?”

“I . . .”

“Well, now you can see that it’s all true. So you can go back to your little life and forget all about me, just like I’m gonna forget all about you. I’ll forget about you the moment you walk out that door.”

Suddenly, I couldn’t breathe. I gasped for air and stumbled toward the exits without saying anything more. I kept stumbling until I got through the automatic doors, where I came to a stop and keeled over.

Here I interrupted my own story. I guess I needed a little breather. So I asked Rudi over the phone what she had been doing between the night at the motel and the day I met her in the hospital. But she couldn’t tell me much, because she couldn’t remember much.

Oddly, one of the few vivid memories she had was of a dream. In this she awoke in a hospital bed in pain. This was so bad that she screamed. She screamed and cursed. Still, no one came. So she stumbled off the bed and into the hallway, where she felt a burst of loneliness in her empty surroundings. There was no one anywhere.

She started down the corridor, and she came upon a supply closet. Feeling even worse pain than before, she flung open its door and found a glass cabinet filled with all sorts of pill bottles. The cabinet was locked, so she smashed the glass with her fist, and she grabbed a bottle at random and tore off its top. But it was empty. So she chuckled it onto the floor and grabbed another bottle. But it, too, was empty, and so was the next and the one after that. They were all empty, and she again screamed and cursed, and she shook her bloody fist, with her pain and loneliness worse than before.

This led her back into the hallway and down it, and she passed empty room after empty room. She passed hundreds of them before she came to Tommy’s. He was lying in a bed badly beaten, but still he was smiling. He was smiling at Darlene, who held his hand from a chair by the bed. Mrs. Goodwin was there as well, and she, too, was smiling as she watched the two from her own chair by the door.

Rudi called out Tommy’s name, but he wouldn’t answer. He wouldn’t even acknowledge she was there. She became frantic, even more so than before. She hollered and yelled and started hitting him, but this did nothing. It was like she wasn’t there.

Then she awoke, for real this time. She discovered that, like in her dream, she was in pain from the beating she had taken. Like then, she screamed and cursed.

“You okay?” came a soft voice to her right.

She turned toward it, and she saw Maria sitting in the chair beside her bed.

Rudi spun from her in embarrassment and uttered, “What are you doing here?”

“Maybe,” Maria replied, “maybe the next time you’re in trouble, you tell your best friend.”

Feeling overwhelmed with emotion, Rudi turned to the girl and hugged her. She hugged her as hard as she could. Then she remembered Tommy. So she broke her embrace and asked Maria about him.

“He’s in another ward,” she said. “I went to see him, but he wasn’t conscious.”

“I gotta see him,” Rudi screeched, and she crawled out of bed. But she fell right to the floor.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Maria told her as she helped her back in the bed. “Not for a while.”

“How is he? How’s Tommy?”

“I don’t know.”

Rudi lingered in bed for days, strung out on the drugs the hospital had been giving her for the pain and with her mind on one thing alone.

*I want you to be my girl*.

A few weeks earlier, these would’ve been the most ridiculous words she ever heard. But now it was all she could think about. She thought not only about them and how Tommy had screamed them to her outside the motel room, but how she had wanted to run into his arms when she heard them and only didn’t because she wasn’t there for herself. She told me that ignoring him was the first selfless thing she ever did in her life.

*I want you to be my girl*.

Finally, the words dragged her out of bed, and she went looking for Tommy. For what seemed like forever she stumbled through the corridors of the hospital, with his words echoing in her head. But when she finally found him, the words were replaced by another set.

“Leave me alone!” he screamed at her in between his coughs, and he wouldn’t let her get anywhere near him. He wouldn’t even look at her, not only at that moment but whenever she came to his door.

Then he was gone. For a reason she couldn’t discover, he was transferred to a different hospital. Realizing that her dream had come true, she left the hospital, even though she was far from all right. This was where things became blurry, as most of the bottles she would encounter were not so empty. In the bits and pieces she could recall, she was stumbling through streets and hallways or crawling across floors, with both sets of Tommy’s words fighting it out in her head.

One day she came upon a library. Remembering the safety one of them had provided her when she was little, she went inside, where she stole a paperback copy of Carson McCullers’ *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. She didn’t even know why she did, especially as she had already read it years earlier.

She clutched the book night after night, with the words on its tattered cover keeping her moving toward the set of words she wanted to believe in. They pushed her all the way to Tommy’s new hospital. Still, he wouldn’t see her or talk to her, and she found herself slumped over a chair in its waiting room. For days she had been there. What she was waiting for she didn’t know. She only knew that it was the only place to go.

I’m not sure how long I leaned against the wall outside the entrance of St. Barnabas.

It was getting dark, but I couldn’t leave. I also couldn’t face Rudi again. Then the automatic doors opened, and there she was, staring at me with her hands on her hips.

“How’d you know I’d be out here?” I muttered.

“Because that’s what I’d do,” she replied.

I didn’t say anything back, and she leaned against the wall next to me, and we just stood there silently for God knows how long.

“I once saw a picture of us when we were little,” she finally mentioned. “Real little. You couldn’t tell us apart.”

“You can now,” I said.

We both laughed. We laughed for God knows how long.

“I don’t remember you at all,” I went on.

“Me neither,” she said. “They must’ve split us up pretty soon after that picture was taken.”

“But why?”

“I suppose, I suppose my stepdad had no use for a boy.”

These words caused me to shiver. I had always thought that I had it bad growing up. But I knew now that I’d been wrong.

“What about . . .” I whispered while trying to figure out what to ask her next. “What about our dad?”

“I don’t know who he is,” she answered matter-of-factly with a shake of her head. “I’m not even sure Mom knows.”

“And where is she?”

“That I don’t know either. And that’s the one thing I’m grateful for.”

“I guess she was pretty messed up.”

“You can say that.”

“She went through a lot.”

“She wasn’t the only one.”

“She was born in Prague,” I remarked while feeling unease that I was about to defend a woman that I knew couldn’t be defended. “But after the war, they deported her and her mother to Germany because her mom had been married to a German officer.”

This surprised Rudi. She spun toward me and uttered, “So I’m not Jewish.”

“You are,” I let her know. “We both are. It’s complicated. My grandparents . . . I mean, our grandparents, they adopted Mom.”

“What happened to her mom?”

“They were living in a displaced-persons camp. 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 right in front of her and almost killed her too. 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.”

“I don’t understand,” Rudi muttered while shaking her head. “If her father was a Nazi, why would Jews adopt her?”

“It’s hard to explain,” I answered. “Grandma couldn’t have children of her own, and Grandpa didn’t have any with his first wife either. Then along came this chance for both of them. I think they also wanted to see Mom 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.”

“But they could’ve adopted any child. Why the child of a Nazi?”

“Maybe they were trying to fix the world or their little piece of it. I know it sounds corny, but it’s kinda part of who we are as a people.”

“I don’t think it’s corny. But they failed. They failed badly.”

“Maybe. But I wouldn’t be here if they hadn’t tried. Nor would you. So maybe, maybe we don’t know yet if they succeeded.”

Rudi didn’t say anything. Neither of us did for a long time, not until I mentioned, “I saw Tommy earlier.”

“He won’t see me,” she mentioned back.

“Why?”

“None of this would’ve happened if I hadn’t showed up here, if he hadn’t lo . . .”

“So you two . . .”

She shrugged.

“Is he gonna be okay?” I asked.

“He’s got some rare form of pneumonia that’s been going around,” she explained, “and they’re having a tough time treating it.”

“Was that why he was in isolation and why his nurse was wearing a mask and gloves and looking so terrified?”

“She’s an idiot, that woman. His doctor doesn’t wear that crap around him. He’s not terrified of him.”

“I read a little about what had happened to Tommy in the newspaper. But they didn’t seem to know much.”

“This guy Deke, he was beating me up in a motel room,” she explained. “Actually, he was killing me. He only didn’t because Tommy broke into the room. And I can’t understand why he did. He had no chance against Deke. He had to know this. So why would he do it?”

“Maybe the alternative would’ve been worse,” I mumbled.

“Tommy surprised Deke,” Rudi went on, “and he threw him into a wall. But when he kneeled on the floor to check on me, Deke jumped him. He was beating him worse than me. Then I saw Deke’s gun on the floor, and I shot him.”

“Are you in trouble for that?” I asked.

“Are you kidding?” she groaned. “If I had been anyone else, they would’ve given me a medal.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I’m not the one lying in a hospital bed.”

“What about, what about the other boy?”

“What other boy?”

“The one they say got killed a few months ago.”

“Are you asking me if I killed him?”

“I don’t know what I’m asking.”

“And if I told you I killed him?” she barked after she spun toward me with the same anger she had expressed before.

“I wouldn’t believe it,” I told her while looking her in the eyes.

She turned from me, and I asked, “Where you staying?”

“Around,” she answered.

“I’m sure Grandpa and Grandma—”

“—I don’t want anything from them.”

“They didn’t know about you. I’m sure of it. They would’ve never let you rot like that.”

Rudi didn’t reply to this or even react to it. While I still had a million things to ask her, I couldn’t think of any. So I just pushed myself off the wall and said, “Can I see you again?”

“I’m here all the time,” she said back.

Over the weeks that followed, I visited Rudi at the hospital every day.

It went slowly at first. Some days barely a few words passed between us. But we both started to loosen up after a while. I told her about my “little life” and our grandparents, and she told me about herself, and I learned just how similar we were in spite of how differently we had grown up. I had expected us to have the same birthday and similar aptitudes, but we also listened to a lot of the same music. We had read a lot of the same books too, even unusual ones like Miguel de Unamuno’s *Mist* and Kōbō Abe’s *The Woman in the Dunes*. We pretty much had the same sense of humor as well.

Still, we were also different in many ways, and not just how we dressed or wore our hair. She had this 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 always charge ahead no matter what was in her way and to never give in to anything, much like she was doing right now with Tommy. At the same time, there was also this surprising warmth underneath her strength. A warmth that was always beyond what I could give. Her smile would forever be unexpected, but it always came. When it did, it lit up everything around her. So, despite her flaws, and there were many, I would come to see her as a perfected me. The me I always wanted to be but never could or would.

One brutally cold afternoon, I was shivering as I walked to the hospital from the parking lot, where I found Rudi wasn’t in her usual chair in the waiting room. Instead, she was standing outside the doors and looking frantic. The same kind of frantic she had described in her dream. She was shaking all over.

Quickly, I rushed up to her and asked her what was wrong.

“Tommy’s gone,” she screeched.

“Gone?” I uttered in shock, immediately thinking the worse.

“He left the hospital.”

“And went where?”

“Nobody knows. Or cares. One of the nurses was even smirking about it. I’m almost broke her teeth.”

“I thought you said he was still sick.”

“He’s very sick. I gotta find him right now.”

“All right. I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Where you going?” she howled as I hurried off.

“To get help,” I yelled.

Grandpa turned off the TV in the living room with the remote, and he frowned as he looked up at me from the couch and shook his head. “I cannot do it,” he insisted.

“She’s not a Nazi,” I insisted back. “She’s my sister. She’s your granddaughter.”

Again, he shook his head, and he muttered, “Your grandmother, she would never forgive me. You have no idea what she went through with your mother. She cannot go through that again.”

I sat next to him and said, “Please, Grandpa. You’re the only one who can help her.”

“It seems you did a pretty good job of finding her.”

“Only because you gave me the most important clue, without even trying to give me one. I also knew where to look. But Tommy could be anywhere.”

“You know very well that I cannot help anyone anymore. Look at me. I am a useless old man who spends the few good days he has in front of these idiot boxes.”

“I know you can do this. We can do it together.”

Grandpa thought about this. He thought about it awhile, but he still shook his head once more.

“Just talk to her for a few minutes,” I pleaded. “How can that hurt?”

Rudi was still anxiously waiting by the entrance of St. Barnabas when my grandfather and I approached her. She looked even worse than before. She looked like she was falling apart.

Grandpa had been hesitant the whole way there. I practically had to push him into the car. But when he saw his granddaughter for the first time outside of her mugshot, his hesitancy grew. I thought I’d have to drag him to her.

Rudi didn’t look so pleased to see him either. Her fists became clenched and her nostrils flared as we came to a slow stop in front of her.

“Sorry it took so long,” I mumbled.

“Who’s that?” she snarled while pointing at Grandpa.

“Your grandfather.”

She spun from both of us. With her arms crossed, she grumbled, “I told you, I don’t want anything from him.”

“I mentioned that he was a police detective,” I uttered. “But what I didn’t tell you was that he was a really good police detective.”

“In what century?”

“This one,” Grandpa deadpanned.

“He can find Tommy,” I went on while trying to hide my grin. “He might be the only one who can.”

“Did I ever tell you how I once found Franz Kafka?” Grandpa said to me.

“Yes, Grandpa,” I answered with some exasperation. “Lots of times.”

“Ah, yes, but your sister, she has not heard this story. You see, Kafka was not yet a famous writer. He was just some retired insurance clerk ill from consumption. So when he went missing, no one cared. But his family was quite alarmed. His sister begged me . . .”

Grandpa couldn’t finish. This was because Rudi sighed loudly enough to drown him out. She also uncrossed her arms and turned back to us, and she reluctantly grumbled, “All right.”

“First of all,” Grandpa uttered, “how do you know this Tommy fellow of yours is really lost? Kids run away and return. Your mother did thousands of times.”

“You don’t understand. He needs to get back to the hospital right now. His life depends on it.”

It was now Grandpa’s turn to sigh. Along with this he asked, “Have you checked his home?”

“I called,” she answered. “But he hasn’t been there. He and his mother have been fighting. They’ve been fighting over me. I don’t think she’s even been to the hospital to see him.”

“Where else could he be?”

“There’s this waterfall he goes to, but you’d never find it. I know I can’t. I’ve tried more than once.”

Grandpa pointed behind himself, toward the endless trees in the distance, and he wondered, “The one in the reservation over there? Behind Grunnings?”

“Yeah,” Rudi muttered in surprise.

“What about friends or relatives?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you have a picture of him?”

“No, but his mother must,” Rudi said before she pulled a page from a phone book out of her bag and added, “I can give you her address.”

“All right,” Grandpa murmured. “I will look for this Tommy. But you must understand that it does not work like in these TV shows you Americans watch, where they solve everything in exactly one hour. It takes time.”

“He doesn’t have any,” she insisted.

“Meanwhile, I know some people who live not far from your school. You can stay with them.”

“What?” Rudi bellowed while once again surprised.

“And you will return to school,” Grandpa continued.

“The hell I will!”

“I was far too lenient with your mother. Because of everything she had been through, I let her get away with everything. This time, I will practice that, that . . .” Grandpa couldn’t think of the words he wanted, and he got lost in his thoughts. He was so lost that he just stood there in a daze for many seconds before mumbling to himself, “*Jak se řekne?”* A few seconds after that, though, he snapped his fingers and blurted out, “‘Tough love.’ I will practice that ‘tough love.’”

“Look—” Rudi began.

“—If I had done this with your mother,” Grandpa interrupted, “maybe she would be the one to tell you what to do right now. Maybe she would not even have to. But I am smart enough to learn from my mistakes. So these terms are, how do you say, nonnegotiable.”

Rudi thought it over. She did for a long time. Finally, she barked, “I want updates every day.”

“We can meet in front of your school when it lets out,” replied Grandpa. “Do we have a deal?”

Again, Rudi thought it over. She again thought it over for a long time.

Grandpa and I waited in his Olds, which we parked outside Columbia on Parker Avenue while listening to a haunting rendition of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* playing from a cassette in the car’s stereo. The two women singing it seemed to be emptying themselves onto us.

I never heard Grandpa listen to this music when I was growing up, but in recent years I had often found him doing so, especially the last movement, “Quando corpus morietur.” Pergolesi wrote the composition 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.*

I once asked Grandpa why he was listening to it so much, considering how it was a Catholic hymn. He answered that music had no religion and that a Jewish choir had many times performed a rendition of Verdi’s *Requiem* at Theresienstadt that could never be forgotten. He said they sang it as if the words were their own and had flowed from their tongues from birth. “Oh, if only you could have heard the soprano sing ‘Libera me’ at the end of it,” he told me with a gentle smile and a slight shake of his head. “It was not only her voice begging for deliverance. It was all of ours. You could hear it in the echoes everywhere, and I tell you even God Himself must have been in tears.”

Looking back at this now, I think that Grandpa’s reasons for listening to *Stabat Mater* went beyond this. I think itwas a means of accepting fates he could no longer control.

The school began to let out. It seemed as if a thousand people pushed their way through the doors at once. After many minutes of this, Rudi wandered out among all the people hanging outside.

I noticed right away how everyone was avoiding her. It was as if they were frightened of her. At first, I figured this was something normal. But then I saw that Maria was avoiding her too. The girl who was supposedly her best friend and who was being dragged away by the tall redheaded girl I had seen her with on the day I had met her.

Rudi ignored all this, or she tried to. I could see, though, that it was bothering her as she stopped and searched, presumably for us.

“Rudi!” I yelled, after I opened my door.

She turned and saw me, and she rushed toward our car and inside it.

Grandpa lowered the music a bit, and he and I looked at Rudi, who anxiously gasped, “Well?”

“Mrs. Goodwin was kind enough to give me a photograph of Tommy,” Grandpa replied. “She also gave me the names and numbers of his relatives and friends in the area.”

“How do you know he’s still in the area?”

“White chocolate.”

“What?” Rudi uttered in shock.

“There was a bowl of white chocolate truffles at Tommy’s house,” Grandpa explained, “and I found a wrapper from one at those falls of yours. It was no more than a day old.” He afterward reached inside his jacket for a Polaroid of a tire track, which he showed Rudi while telling her: “I also found fresh tracks there from that Harley Sturgis of his. While these machines cannot compare to the Jawas I rode in my Prague days, it is a very nice bicycle.”

“How is any of this going to help us find where Tommy is right now?” Rudi screeched.

“I told you it would take time.”

Loudly, Rudi sighed in frustration, and she sat back and crossed her arms.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She turned her head from us and mumbled, “They know.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Everyone knows Tommy’s sick. They’re talking about him like he’s got the plague or something.”

“Is that why everyone was avoiding you? They think you have it too?”

“You did not tell me that he has a contagious disease,” Grandpa said to me.

“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 if all he has is pneumonia? Is there something you’re not telling us?”

Rudi wouldn’t answer, and that just made me more worried.

“Are you sure you are not sick?” Grandpa asked Rudi.

“They checked me out,” she growled before kicking the door open and starting to leave. “I’m fine.”

“There was one more thing,” Grandpa said.

Rudi stopped and turned to him, and he let her know: “Mrs. Goodwin was also kind enough to check Tommy’s credit cards. He has not used them, but he has taken some cash with his ATM card.”

“So?” she replied.

“The amount he took and that he is not staying with any friends or family in the area lead me to believe that he is staying in a motel. A cheap one. You would not know which?”

“I only know one. But he’d never stay there.”

We went to the motel in Newark anyway, but we got stuck in a sea of traffic on Route 22. Seeing the anxiety in Rudi’s face through his rearview mirror, Grandpa said to her: “While we are sitting here waiting, I might as well tell you my Franz Kafka story.”

“I really don’t think this is a good time, Grandpa,” I told him with a shake of my head.

“I think the story will have some meaning for your sister. Actually, I am sure of it.”

I kept trying to dissuade him, but I would’ve had an easier time making the traffic disappear.

#

It was just after New Year’s in 1923 when the 25-year-old man who’d become my grandfather stepped inside his apartment building on Eliška Krásnohorská Street in Josefov, the Jewish section of Prague. Like every Friday night, he was carrying a big bouquet of white roses in his arms.

In the building’s foyer, he saw a woman around thirty sitting on the stairway steps in her coat. He saw, too, the distress on her face as she anxiously rose to her feet and uttered, “Hermann Weiss?”

“That’s me,” he answered before he warily stepped toward her.

“My name is Ottilie Davidová,” she told him. “My sister Elli lives in this building. She says 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, as the name sounded familiar. It took a few seconds to realize why it had sounded familiar, and he asked, “The writer?”

“You, you’ve heard of him?” the woman asked back in surprise.

“I read one of his stories when I was in college a few years ago. What happened to him? I haven’t heard of him at all since. Does he still write?”

“Not very successfully, I’m afraid. He worked as an insurance clerk until tuberculous forced him into early retirement.”

“Did you file a missing persons report with the police?”

“Yes, but they’re not doing a thing to find him. They even told us this.”

“Well, I’m not sure what you expect from me. I’m just a beat cop and not even a good one at that. Twice already they’ve threatened to fire me, and the third time just may be the charm.”

“Elli told me that she once had coffee with you and your wife. She said you were smart and ambitious.”

“Even if that were true, what could I do? He could be anywhere in Europe by now.”

“Please. Franz might be a nobody to the world, but to us he is special. We must find him.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Tuesday evening. He’d been staying with me at my house on Golden Lane. Then the next morning he was gone, along with his suitcase and all his things.”

“Perhaps he went to a sanitarium.”

“He wouldn’t just go without telling us. He didn’t tell his girlfriend either. She’s just as worried as we are.”

Hermann wanted to refuse the woman’s request. The words even formed in his mouth. He knew it was an impossible task, and he was tired and just wanted to relax over the weekend. He especially wanted to spend time with his wife. But there was something in Ottilie’s eyes. A desperation he couldn’t ignore. So he sighed and mumbled, “Do you have a picture of him?”

“Yes,” she replied, and she reached into her purse and pulled out a small photo, which she handed him while mentioning, “It’s a little old. He’ll be forty this year.”

“I guess, I guess I could check the train stations.”

“Oh, thank you, Herr Weiss!”

“Just let me drop off these flowers, and I’ll have a look. But I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

The first thing Hermann did was go to Wilson Station, the main train station in Prague. There he showed the picture of Kafka to everyone he could find who worked there. But none of them recognized the man.

Next, he tried Masaryk Station, which was the smaller station in town, and he had the same lack of success. So he was ready to give up. He even convinced himself that he had done all he could do.

Then he remembered something, that there was an even smaller station in Dejvice, not far from where Kafka had been living. The same station President Masaryk used whenever he visited his summer home in Lány.

It was well after midnight by the time Hermann got to the aging building. From a distance, it looked dark and empty. But, after he reached its doors, he saw a dim light coming from inside as well as a handful of people waiting on the benches. There was a ticket clerk working there too.

Hermann strode inside the building and up to the clerk, who was wearing a suit that looked a hundred years old. “Have you seen this man?” Hermann asked while showing the clerk Kafka’s photo.

It didn’t look as if the man even glanced at the picture, but he said, “I’ve seen him. A few nights ago.”

“Where did he go?”

“Ústí nad Zapomněním.”

This confused Hermann, who uttered, “I’ve lived in this country now for close to three years, but I’ve never heard of any Ústí nad Zapomněním. I know Ústí nad Labem and Ústí nad Orlicí, but no . . .”

“Do you want a ticket there 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 underneath the ticket window.

The clerk took them, and he wrote out a train ticket. This he placed underneath the window along with a one-heller coin, which he pointed at while telling Hermann: “Don’t lose this. You’ll need it to pay the ferryman.”

“The ferryman?” Hermann gasped.

No further information was forthcoming. So Hermann took the ticket and the coin and sat across from a man who was reading the latest edition of a popular Czech newspaper called *Lidové Noviny*.

“Excuse me, sir,” Hermann said to the man, “I’m still learning Czech. Can you perhaps tell me what *zapomnění* means?”

“Oblivion,” the man replied.

“So ‘Ústí nad Zapomněním’ would mean ‘The Mouth at the . . .’”

“The Mouth at the River of Oblivion.”

Hermann was pretty certain there was no such river anywhere in what was then Czechoslovakia. So again he wanted to give up. “Just go home,” he told himself over and over. But every time he did, he saw Ottilie’s eyes, and the image of this only got stronger. 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 with the Czech he knew, Hermann read the first few paragraphs of the article, and he learned how the famed author of *Good Soldier Švejk* wasn’t expected to live much longer.

Hermann shook his head at this, as he loved the book, which many consider the first anti-war novel. He loved it even though his wife had to help him read it. Like many veterans of the first world war, Hermann saw his own life in its pages, and this somehow made him feel less alone. So he was still shaking his head when a train with a single passenger car sputtered into the station.

Like the train clerk’s suit, the train car Hermann stepped aboard looked a hundred years old. With his apprehension increasing, he took a seat on a wooden bench along with the other passengers and waited. He waited a long time.

“I do hope everyone has their heller with them,” spoke a stout middle-aged conductor as he entered the front of the car. “The ferryman will not provide passage without proper fare.”

Slowly, the man started through the car while punching the tickets of those he passed, and he came up to Hermann.

“Have you seen this man?” Hermann asked while showing him Kafka’s picture.

“He was on the train the other night,” the man answered before taking Hermann’s ticket and punching it.

“The train to Ústí nad Zapomněním?

“Where else?”

“So there really is such a place?”

“There really is.”

“When will we get there?”

“You have a long journey ahead of you, young man. So just sit back and get some rest. I’ll be sure to let you know when we get there.”

Hermann tried to do this. He leaned back and closed his eyes, and he felt the train sputter out of the station. It moved so slow that someone could’ve overtaken it on foot. “It’ll take us days just to get out of Prague,” he said to himself.

*The Mouth at the River of Oblivion*.

These words suddenly popped back into Hermann’s head. Why they did he didn’t know, but they kept popping into it until he realized that he actually *had* heard of such a river. But where?

*The ferryman will not provide passage without proper fare*.

“Charon,” Hermann softly cried out as he opened his eyes and recalled how in Greek mythology Charon ferried the dead across the River of Oblivion to the underworld, but only after they paid him a coin. “It’s ridiculous,” he shrieked with his head shaking. “This must be some kind of a joke.”

Hermann started looking for the conductor, and he noticed they were somehow moving even slower than before.

“Ústí nad Zapomněním,” the conductor bellowed as he marched inside the car. “Last stop. Ústí nad Zapomněním.”

“But we just left Prague!” Hermann yelled.

“You are mistaken, sir,” the man informed him. “We’ve been traveling all night. Look out your window if you don’t believe me.”

Hermann did, and he saw that it was morning outside and that it was covered in fog.

Hermann stumbled off the train, and he hesitantly followed the others as they made their way up a hill. Toward what, he couldn’t see. All he could was the tepid river to the left of him, whose flow was barely a trickle, and the small cliff he was walking alongside that overlooked it.

As he continued up the hill, he saw something else. A stairway leading down the cliff to a dock where stood a dozen people.

Hearing the sound of screeching wheels, Hermann turned toward it and an elderly woman in a dirty blue uniform, who was pushing an empty garbage bin up the hill with a big grimace on her face.

After showing her the picture of Kafka, he asked her if she had seen him.

“If he’s here,” she answered as she pointed up the hill, “he’s up there.”

Hermann looked at what she was pointing at. Through the fog, he could just make out a large gothic structure on top of the hill. “What is it?” he asked.

“A place of death it is,” she moaned. “And plenty of it.”

Hermann came to a sharp stop. He did with fear and while thinking about returning to the station and to Prague, as he had already seen too much death in his young life. This led him to turn around and start back, which was when he came to another stop, this time because he saw a boatman in a hooded cloak rowing a skiff down the river toward the dock.

“Charon,” he muttered with his fear increasing. Unsteadily, he took a step closer toward the edge of the cliff to get a better look at the man, and then he took another. Then he slipped. He slipped and tumbled down the hill, all the way to the bottom.

Hermann awoke on a stretcher, in a dark and dank hospital corridor, and he saw that he was wearing a gown.

Rising to his waist, he felt faint. He felt as if he would collapse, and he reached for his head and found it bandaged. He was also sore all over. Still, he pushed himself off the stretcher and onto the floor.

It took him many seconds, but eventually he started to move. He did with a lot of pain as he stammered down a long and winding hallway.

Reaching an open door, he looked inside, and he saw that it was packed with men lying on beds. There were at least a hundred of them in an immense room that stretched farther than what he could see.

“Franz Kafka?” he yelped.

There was no reply. No one even acknowledged the question.

He continued down the corridor, passing rooms packed with either men or women. Into each of the former, he called out Kafka’s name. But in none did he get a response. All the patients were motionless. They didn’t even seem to breathe.

The first exception Hermann found to this was in a room by a stairway. Here he saw a group of five men surrounding the bed of an obese man around forty, who was wearing a filthy nightshirt and who had wild curly brown hair and was reading aloud from a notebook.

“Lieutenant Dub,” the man spoke, “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.’”

Right then, the obese man fell silent.

The men around him, who were looking on as if listening to the word of God, glanced at each other uncomfortably for a few moments.

“Well?” one of them finally uttered.

“Well what?” the obese man growled.

“Aren’t you going to finish?”

“There is no more, gentlemen. Perhaps there will be no more.”

“But you can’t just end it without finishing the story,” said another man.

“I don’t know what I can tell you.”

“Do you think,” mumbled a third man, who was holding a leather-bound book, “do you think you could sign my copy?”

“What for?” howled the obese man. “What good will it do you now?”

The man responded by lowering his head and everything else. This caused the obese man to sigh. A sigh that was more like a groan. “Give it here,” he barked after snapping his fingers and reaching out his hand.

The man brightened up. Hurriedly, he handed his book and a pen to the obese man, who just as hurriedly signed and returned it.

“Thank you, Mr. Hašek,” the man cried out in joy while clutching the book as if it were his child. “Thank you so much!”

“Jarda,” Hašek told him. “My friends call me Jarda. All of you call me Jarda.”

The men all smiled, and they started back to their beds, which exposed an old wheelchair by Hašek’s bed.

Surprised by who was sitting only a handful of steps in front of him, Hermann took a step into the room and then another. He stepped all the way up to Hašek, who glared at him full of hate.

Turning from this, Hermann saw the endless men to his left and the darkness beyond it. “Franz Kafka?” he shouted. “Is there a Franz Kafka here?”

“I am Franz Kafka,” came a meek voice from the nothingness.

#

Grandpa broke from his story when we reached the decrepit motel on the edge of Newark and parked in front of its office. While Rudi and I sat silently by ourselves in the Olds, Grandpa went inside the building and spoke to the clerk.

When he finally came out, he did with his head hanging. After opening the driver’s door, he glanced at us while pointing behind himself. “That *vůl* in there . . .” he began.

“That what?” Rudi uttered, barely able to control her exasperation.

“That *jerk*,” I translated.

“Thank you,” Grandpa said to me. “That *jerk* in there would not tell me anything. I could not even bribe him.”

“I told you Tommy wouldn’t come here,” Rudi snapped.

“But that does not mean that he will not,” Grandpa countered. “I will add this place to my daily checklist on that, that . . .” For many seconds, he tried to come up with the right words, just like he had outside the hospital. However, this time not even “*jak se řekne?”* would help him do so. So he turned to me and asked, “What do you call that contraption in the living room?”

“A PC, Grandpa,” I told him with my own exasperation.

The next afternoon in front of Columbia, it seemed that kids were more afraid of Rudi than they’d been the day before. One boy even ran from her as she approached our car while screaming in fright.

Rudi stopped, and she looked around at the faces glowering at her. It was more than just fear. They hated her, and I knew that it had to have been because of something much worse than pneumonia.

Suddenly, the school doors swung open behind her. It was as if a hurricane had blown through them. Outside came a large boy with a receding hairline, who marched toward Rudi while raising his big right paw over his head.

Frightened for her, I opened the car door and was about to shout her name when the boy gently placed his paw on her shoulder.

Rudi turned to him, and they both smiled a little. Though I could tell she wanted to cry. “I don’t deserve your friendship,” she told him with a shake of her head. “After I . . .”

“Funny,” he said while looking as if he would cry too, “nobody thought I deserved anything until I met you.”

A bunch of kids stared strangely at him. It was as if he had his hand in a roaring fire.

“You people think I’m dumb,” the boy called out to them. “But you’re way dumber than me.”

The door opened again, and another boy exited the school with what looked like a Bible, and he put his hand on Rudi’s other shoulder.

She smiled at him too. She also took both their fingers. She grabbed them as if her life depended on them.

Grandpa didn’t have much to report that day, and he and I could both see the increasing doubt Rudi was feeling and the fatalism that was setting in. Perhaps that’s why Grandpa stayed out so late that evening. He still wasn’t home when I fell asleep. Then, when I came home from school the following day, I found him asleep on the living-room couch in front of the loudly-playing TV, and I knew right away that this wasn’t one of his good days.

I called out his name, but he wouldn’t wake. So I turned off the television with the remote and sat beside him, and I shook him a little, until he started rising.

“Ana?” he groggily mumbled.

“No, Grandpa,” I told him as softly as I could. “Ana’s not here.”

“I have to buy her roses before she comes home,” he went on, unaware that decades had passed since he had seen her last. “White roses.”

“Let’s go get some.”

I stood from the couch. I was about to help him up when I noticed something on the screen of the CRT monitor a few steps away. At first, I was a little upset, having often told Grandpa that the monitor could burn in if it were left on for long periods of time. But after I got in front of it, I was surprised to see what was there. This led me to type in a few commands from the keyboard, and I watched as the dot matrix printer next to the computer began to churn.

Rudi stepped into the back of the Olds with her head down. When she finally raised it, she saw me in the driver’s seat, with Grandpa asleep next to me while mumbling in Czech.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“I think he overdid it a little last night,” I answered.

“Are you sure he’s up to this?”

I wasn’t sure. But I didn’t say this. I didn’t say anything, knowing Grandpa needed this as much as Rudi did. He needed to have a reason for moving forward, and I needed him to have it too. Because I needed him.

Grandpa started shaking in fright, and he banged into the door with both his arms. “*Drž se dál od vlaku!”* he screeched with tears in his eyes. These were among the last words he would say 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 wanted to know.

“Remember when I said Mom had been through a lot?” I replied. “So has he.”

“That music he’s been listening to,” Rudi mentioned. “The Pergolesi.”

“You know Pergolesi?” I muttered in surprise.

She looked at me as if I had asked her the stupidest question ever, and she pointed at the car’s stereo and told me: “Put it on.”

I did, and Rudi did something that surprised me even more than her knowledge of Baroque music. She leaned up front and took Grandpa’s hand with both of hers, and she caressed it. This was when I first saw the nurturing side of her. A side that might’ve seemed to contradict everything she was about but one that would be fundamental to everything she’d become.

It took a while, but Grandpa finally calmed, and he peacefully drifted off.

Rudi sat back in her seat, and I reached into my jacket for the printout I had made. I showed her this and whispered, “I found this when I came home today.”

“What is it?” she whispered back.

“He mapped out every lodging that’s within thirty kilometers of here and within Tommy’s price range, and he was visiting them all too. He must’ve been up half the night yesterday.”

Carefully, Rudi looked at the printout, and she said, “Did you program all that for him?”

I grinned. While nodding at Grandpa, I told her: “Don’t let that Luddite spiel of his fool you. He was programming the computer the first day we got it. I noticed today that he even wrote a serial communications library so that he could download data from CompuServe.”

The sun began setting behind the shelter. With it, Rudi told me that she had to go. But the story wouldn’t let go of me. So I returned to it later that night as I lay on my bed in the dark.

For a week of afternoons, after checking on Grandpa when I came back from school, I drove to Columbia by myself. There I would often find Rudi waiting for me outside on the front stoop of the school with the two boys I saw before, along with another. Often it seemed like they were all helping the big kid with his homework.

On one blustery afternoon, a girl joined them. She had blonde hair and a ponytail and looked as far removed from them as they did from each other. She sat next to the boy with the Bible, and she took his hand. They both smiled, but what I remember was the look on her face. She was in another place and a good one.

I watched them awhile, and then I honked my horn, and Rudi and I went to many places on Grandpa’s checklist by ourselves. This included the South Mountain Reservation, where I looked around in the lightly-falling snow while Rudi sat on some rocks facing the waterfall. She had her arms wrapped around her body and her eyes closed as she try to hum some old song I recognized but couldn’t name. It took her many tries before she got the tune right, and then she wouldn’t stop humming it. She hummed it with a big smile.

Only now can I imagine what she was thinking of and how her arms were crossed not against the weather but in recollection of a time she wanted to relive.

Like all the previous afternoons we’d spent in the reservation, we found nothing. We found nothing anywhere we went. Despite being the grandson of a great detective and hearing his stories millions of times, I simply lacked the most important skill he had: the ability to see what was hidden right in front of me.

Rudi and I headed back to the car, which was parked on Crest Drive, a long street that cut through the width of the forest. As I reached my door, I noticed something in a clearing in the opposite direction from where we had been. I’m not even sure what I noticed, but I wandered toward it along with Rudi, and we found a set of motorcycle tracks that ran through the clearing. They looked much like the ones from Grandpa’s Polaroid and headed straight for a tree before swerving away from it at the last moment.

“It’s like he was trying to . . .” I mumbled.

Rudi turned away, and she hurried back to the car. I followed her as she called out, “I need to go somewhere right now.”

The snow was falling harder. It was coming down so hard that it was almost a sheet of white when we stopped in the parking lot of the South Orange Recreational Center as the sun began to set.

“Why did you want to come here?” I asked.

“NA meets here,” Rudi told me. “Attending is actually a condition of my parole. But this is the first time I’ve been to this one.”

We waited. As it neared six, some people began streaming into the building, and one of them seemed to catch Rudi’s attention through the snow.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I thought I saw something,” she told me.

Rudi continued to wait. She waited until well after six before going into the building. I went in with her, no stranger to meetings like these. On the second floor of the building, we approached an open door, where we could hear the echoes of many voices chanting a prayer 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 wisdom to know the difference.*

The voices came to an end just before the two of us stepped inside the room. In the threshold, we saw someone we both recognized: the boy from school with the Bible, who was sitting in one of the ubiquitous folding metal chairs. He was sitting way in the back, far from everyone else.

“Jared,” she whispered to him, and he turned to her and feigned surprise, and she didn’t exactly seemed shocked to see him there either.

We sat next to him, and Rudi quietly introduced me.

“For those who are new here tonight, my name is Frank,” said an aging man upfront, who was standing behind a table covered in keychains of different colors. “Does anyone have anything they want to share?”

No one raised their hands.

“Anyone?” Frank asked.

Hesitantly, Jared raised his hand, which surprised the man. But he smiled at Jared and waved him toward the front of the room.

Slowly and nervously, Jared approached, still clutching his Bible. In the front of the room, with his thick accent he told everyone: “Hello, my name is Jared, and I’m an addict.”

“Hello, Jared,” most of us replied. Rudi was the loudest.

“I’ve been clean now for a while,” he went on. “According to the calendar, more than sixteen months. Now that may seem like a long time to some of you, but to me it was yesterday. It was yesterday I woke in a house I didn’t know, with people I had never met, in a town I had never been. Even today, even at this moment, I know I’m no more than a day from returning there. I know this when I’m at school. I know it when I’m at home with my mom. I know it every time I sit and pray.”

Jared lifted his Bible, and he growled, “Don’t let this fool you. I’m worse than all of you. I can’t even wear short-sleeved shirts in the summer because my arms are so messed-up. My legs too. I’ve lied and stolen and done unspeakable things to myself. I’ve hurt people too. I mean, really hurt people. I even hit my own mother. Nothing I’ll ever do will make up for that. No Bible verses, no good deeds, nothing.”

Lowering the Bible and his head, Jared added, “The only difference between now and sixteen months ago is that I’m not alone. Not only has my mom been great, even though she has every reason not to be, but I have friends too. Real friends. Friends who care about me. And it’s for this that I pray. I pray for it all the time. I pray not just that I’m not alone but that I know that I’m not alone.”

Just as slowly as Jared had walked to the front of the room, he made his way to the back of it. There Rudi rose from her seat and hugged him. She clutched him as hard as he was clutching that Bible, and he couldn’t stop crying, even after they sat down and another man began to share.

A few others shared after him, and Frank afterward called out, “Anyone else?”

No one responded, though Jared quietly tried to encourage Rudi by putting his hand on top of hers.

She didn’t react, and Frank started to move on to other business. But just before he could, Rudi stood up and walked to the front of the room, where she mumbled, “My name is Rudi, and I don’t even know how long I’ve been clean. A couple of weeks, I think.”

“Hello, Rudi,” everyone called out, trying to make her feel comfortable. I was the loudest.

“I forgot to say that I’m an addict,” she went on, specifically 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 strong and that I’m in control and that I’ve licked all my problems. But I’m an addict, and I’ll always be an addict, and I’m not strong and I’m not in control and I’m just about to fall apart.”

Frank took her hand, but it still 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 things over the years. I’ve never shared anything. I’ve even mocked the whole idea of it. But I’m not the same person I was. For the first time, I’ve let someone close to me.

“I’ve always been alone, even when I was all messed up. Even then I wouldn’t let anyone near me. But now there’s someone. Someone who makes me so mad because he makes me want to believe, that I mean something and matter, that everything means something and matters, and that there’s actually some reason to be alive. I don’t even know if he’s alive right now, and I don’t know if I can make it if he’s not.”

When I got home that night, Grandma was putting a blanket over Grandpa as he lay on the living-room couch in a daze.

“Where have you been?” she asked me.

“I,” I mumbled as I came to a stop not far from them, “I was at one of my meetings.”

“I did not think you went to them anymore.”

“But I should.”

Grandma didn’t reply. She just started feeding Grandpa some of her famous chicken soup and matzo balls from a tray on the coffee table. Or at least she tried to do this.

“*Srnčí na pepři si dám*,” Grandpa insisted while shaking his head and keeping his mouth away from the spoon. “*S kroketama*.”

“You know very well, old man,” she insisted back, “that there is no venison in this house, and there are no potato croquettes either. You will have to suffice with my soup.”

It looked like neither Grandpa or Grandma would relent. But finally he let her feed him, with her wiping his chin after each spoonful with her handkerchief.

“I love this man,” she murmured with a smile, I’m sure as much to him as to me. “He is not my *bashert*, nor am I his. But I do love him. He . . . he is *moje všechno*.”

*Her* *all*.

Early the following week, Grandpa was close enough to his old self to continue looking for Tommy. But I could tell that he wasn’t too 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. Though I could hear kids snickering about her and Tommy, and I started getting worried. After waiting for more than a half hour, I opened my door, just as she walked out the door. She walked out with Maria, with the two of them holding hands and looking as if they had just been through hell together. Both their faces showed streaks of tears.

Rudi noticed us, and she and Maria hugged and said their goodbyes before Rudi rushed toward us, with Maria watching her the entire way while looking as if she were going to cry again. “I’ll call you tonight!” she yelled.

While thinking back to this from my bunk in the men’s dorm, it struck me that I never learned what had happened between Rudi and Maria and how they had made up, and I just had to know. I had to know right then. So I climbed down my bed and rushed into the courtyard without my coat, and I called Rudi.

“What’s wrong?” she groggily mumbled as she tried to wake up.

“I need to ask you something,” I told her, and I told her what.

“Can’t it wait till tomorrow?”

“I’ll never get to sleep if I don’t find out.”

We compromised, and she gave me the quick version.

“It actually had been me who had let out just how sick Tommy was,” Rudi admitted, “and with what.”

“Maria,” I said. “You told her.”

“There had been rumors at school that both Tommy and me had some kind of disease, and she wanted to know if they were true. So I told her. I told her everything. I thought she’d understand, but she was frightened.”

“Of getting sick?”

“And how she’d explain it to her dad. She just went crazy. The whole world was going crazy. That’s why I lied to you about Tommy’s sickness. I thought you’d go crazy too.”

“I probably would have.”

“Maria told Samantha what Tommy had, and it blew up from there.”

“You weren’t mad at Maria?”

“Are you kidding? I wanted to kill her. But . . .”

“But what?”

“The day you saw us hugging outside the school, a lot had happened earlier. There had been a big scene with Tommy in the cafeteria at lunch. After school, Maria was waiting for me in the corridor by the front doors as I was rushing out to meet you. Again, she was frightened. For a different reason this time.

“I wanted to ignore her. I didn’t even want to recognize she was there. But then I noticed Samantha by the exits. She looked even madder than me. She glared at Maria and slammed open one of the doors. Maria spun toward her, but she wouldn’t come with her, and Samantha rushed out.

“‘I’m sorry,’ Maria muttered after she turned back to me.

“Still, I wanted to walk off. But I didn’t. Maybe it was because I realized she’d given up a lot to make things right. I just stood there, not sure what to do. ‘You were the best friend I ever had,’ she whispered with her eyes lowered, and I couldn’t help open my arms. ‘I still am,’ I told her.”

I said goodnight to Rudi and hung up, and I went back to bed, but even then the story wouldn’t let go of me. It kept unraveling before me.

Rudi reached the Olds, and she glanced into it, and she was surprised to see Grandpa. She gazed at him for a few seconds before she jumped inside the back door and excitedly told us: “He was here.”

Grandpa and I both spun toward her, and I uttered, “What?”

“Tommy came to the cafeteria at lunch,” she went on. “He was really messed up.”

“Messed up?” Grandpa replied.

“He looked drunk,” Rudi explained. “And his head was shaved too.”

“Then what happened?” I asked.

“He was just standing there in the front of the room. No one even noticed him at first. When they did, the whole place got quiet. Then everyone started fleeing from him, even his friends.”

“Just because he has pneumonia?” questioned Grandpa.

“He’s dying,” I said. “Isn’t he?”

Rudi said nothing back.

“Is this, is this the disease everyone has been talking about?” Grandpa mumbled. “The one that has been afflicting homosexuals?”

“Obviously, it’s afflicting more than just them,” Rudi growled, I guess thinking that someone like Grandpa had to have been homophobic when he was anything but. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t upset.

“You must stay away from this boy,” he shrieked while shaking both his head and finger.

“The hell I will,” she hollered.

“This is a deadly disease, Rudi. I have been reading about it. They do not know what is causing it or how it spreads. They know nothing but that it kills.”

“It’s not contagious.”

“How can you know?”

“Because the whole world would have it by now!”

“Maybe they do. You are not to go near him.”

“But—”

“—I will still find him. I promise you that. It does not matter if I get sick.”

“You’re not gonna get sick!”

“Stay away from him!”

“I won’t!”

“Stay away or I will!”

“Do what you want!”

Rudi kicked open the door, and she started to leave.

“All right,” Grandpa called out with fright, I’m sure not wanting to lose his granddaughter the way he lost his daughter. “Please, do not go.”

Rudi stopped, and she returned to her seat and closed her door.

“What happened after everyone was fleeing from Tommy?” Grandpa asked.

“He went nuts,” she answered. “He started tossing tables over everywhere. Then he saw me heading toward him and ran. I ran after him and followed him outside. But he went off on his bike before I could get to him.”

“Did he give you any notion of where he might be going?”

“No, but there was something else. He had a Walkman on and was screaming this Black Flag song.”

“Is there some significance to that?”

“He doesn’t listen to that type of music. I would’ve never even thought he knew who they were.”

“Maybe he 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 phonograph recordings recently,” Grandpa surmised. “But lots of stores around here must sell phonograph recordings.”

“Not these,” I countered.

Grandpa turned to Rudi, and he questioned, “Where around here could he have bought these?”

“I don’t know,” she cried out. “It’s not like I’ve been buying records.”

“We could go to a library and find a phonebook,” I suggested, “and call every store.”

“That would take all day,” growled Rudi.

“Do you have a better idea?”

Rudi sighed, and she told us: “There’s a library in the school.” She then swung open her door. Though at the same time she saw her big friend walking through the parking lot, heading toward the bus stop on Valley Road.

“Owen,” she mumbled, right before she called out his name. She called it a number of times and each one louder. But he was too far away to hear her as he joined a half-dozen people at the stop, who were waiting for the bus that was just crossing Parker.

“Stop that bus!” Rudi screamed while pointing at it, and Grandpa sped off, not even waiting for Rudi to close her door. She only could after we made a screeching right onto the intersection. Then Grandpa, as he would do sometimes when he wasn’t thinking, followed his instincts and turned onto the left lane, putting us in the path of a large pickup, which frantically honked its horn.

“*Do práva, Dědo!”* I screamed at him while flailing my arms to the right. “*Do práva!”*

“I know,” he calmly uttered. “I know.” Just as calmly, he swerved out of the way of the pickup and in front of the bus as it was starting to leave, and now the bus was honking its horn at us, doing so much like the pickup had.

“Where did you learn how to drive?” Rudi gasped in shock.

“Uzhhorod,” Grandpa matter-of-factly answered. “If only 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, only more frantically. So Grandpa spun toward Rudi and pointed out the car while telling her: “The bus.”

But Rudi didn’t move. This was because she was staring at Grandpa’s forearm and the number tattooed on it. She was staring at it in horror.

“Rudi?” I murmured.

Finally, she came out of her daze enough that she could get out of the car, and we watched her hurry toward the bus.

I continued watching her as I started falling asleep in the men’s dorm. I fell asleep in spite of the cacophony of snores. I knew the rest would have to wait until the next day.

the sixth night

Mondays I always had more work at the motel than normal, as no one took my place on my days off, and Amoun expected me to get this work done in the same four hours. I was running around even more than usual.

With about a half hour to go, I had finally caught up. This meant I again had to clean the large field in back of the motel. As I labored there in the cold but bright midday sun, my mind kept wandering back to Josh and what I should do with what I had learned about him the day before. Why I was thinking about this when I knew there was nothing I could do I couldn’t say.

Finally, I forced my mind to think of something else, and it somehow wandered to an old Czech film called *Larks on a String.* This is a film I’ve seen so many times that I know every line by heart. It’s about a group of misfits who’d run afoul of the authorities for one reason or another during the early years of Communism. So they’re forced to work in a scrap steel plant that also served as a metaphor: it would smelt them into the kind of new men the regime wanted or else, with the “else” meaning working in the uranium mines and the unnatural death that would almost certainly come from it. Because of this, these men were much like birds perching on a string. Any little wind could blow them over.

One of these men had been the head of the Prague Library, who got sent there because he refused to destroy the works of Schopenhauer. Despite this (or maybe because of it), he was always quoting Kant during the movie, and one of these quotes popped into my head and wouldn’t leave: “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 asked myself aloud while gripping a discarded diaper that I had just pulled from some weeds.

It took a few moments to realize that it was this “moral code” that was keeping my mind on Josh in spite of all reason. This only got stronger when I saw Alaya step outside with her cleaning cart for a cigarette break. The woman with the beautiful name and a voice just like Paul McCartney. She not only gave me one of her accentuated waves but smiled at me as well. She smiled as if she knew exactly what I was thinking and was trying to encourage me to see it through.

Ignoring this, or trying to, I turned around and returned to the story of searching for Tommy. I returned from where I had fallen asleep the night before.

Owen knew only two places where you could buy Black Flag records. One was a flea market in a city called Union that was only open 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, where we parked across the street from a tiny shop that you’d never notice unless you were looking for it. Even when we were looking for it, we passed it twice before we finally spotted it.

Grandpa, Rudi, and I stepped out of the car, and we crossed the busy road and walked inside the store. We found it empty apart from a short, muscular man in his twenties, who was standing behind the counter wearing a ripped T-shirt that was about three sizes too small. He was also screaming along with the Circle Jerks’ “Back Against the Wall,” which was blaring from a record player a few steps from him.

Not quite knowing what to think of this or the man, Grandpa stood by the door and stared at him with equal measures of confusion and wonder as Rudi and I looked around the store. The first thing I noticed about it was that, even though it was smaller than some Cadillacs, every record there was great. It was the perfect selection of music from the fifties onward, with apparent disregard as to whether any of it would sell. It was more of a record collection than a store. Among the treasures I saw was an original copy of *The Velvet Underground & Nico* with the banana sticker intact. They also had a bootleg of 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*. This included the record that was now playing.

The other thing I noticed about the place was that they had copies of *Trouser Press* on the counter. This was a cult magazine about the independent music scene that I had heard about but had always thought was just a legend, as I had never seen it anywhere.

The man behind the counter finally got tired of Grandpa staring at him. He stopped his screaming and scratched the needle across the record before spinning toward Grandpa and uttering, “Listen, pops, we have old records. But not that old.”

Grandpa grinned. He also pulled out the picture of Tommy and showed it to the man while mentioning that we were looking for him.

“And you are?” the man growled.

“Tommy and I are . . .” Rudi mumbled.

The man glanced at Rudi incredulously and said, “You and Tommy?”

“It’s complicated,” she replied with a bit of a sigh.

“I bet,” the man replied back 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. It softened just a bit, and he told her: “Look, he comes in here now and then and buys old Yardbirds records.”

“Has he been here recently?” Grandpa asked.

“A few days ago,” Butch replied.

“And he bought a Yardbirds record?” was my question.

“Actually, no,” Butch remarked. “It was kind of weird. First, he was looking weird and maybe even a little drunk, and then he pulled out a copy of *Damaged* from the stacks.”

“By Black Flag?” Grandpa wanted to know.

Butch responded by slowly turning toward him in surprise. With his eyebrows raised, he noted, “Your knowledge of punk rock is impeccable.” He then turned back to me and continued: “He wanted to know if it was any good. So I told him. I told him it was the best. But I also told him that it was no Yardbirds. I told him that he’d almost certainly not like it. But that’s what he wanted, and that’s what he bought. He even had me make him a tape of it.”

“Is there something special about this *Damaged?”* Grandpa asked me.

I asked Butch if he had another copy, and he nodded toward a stack of records to the right of us. I found it, and I showed Grandpa the cover of the record, which had a photo of Henry Rollins with his head shaved and his bloody fist through a mirror.

This shocked Grandpa, and he mumbled, “We better find 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 I always felt better afterward. Yeah, it’s full of anger and rage and self-hatred, but a lot of the songs have this . . . I don’t even know what you’d call it . . . a mad desperation.”

“For what?”

“Hope,” Rudi uttered.

I turned to her in surprise. I had always thought what I had experienced when listening to the record had been unique to me. But I now saw that she and probably many others felt the same thing when they listened to it. If Tommy did too, then we had a reason to hope as well.

“I guess you do not know where Tommy is staying?” Grandpa asked Butch.

“Why would I?” he snapped.

Grandpa had no more questions, so he put the record on top of the stack, and the three of us slowly started out.

“He was heading that way,” Butch remarked with some exasperation while he pointed down the street.

“Toward Newark?” Grandpa wondered.

We parked in the lot of the same decrepit motel in Newark that we had been before, and it didn’t take us long to see that Tommy’s bike wasn’t there.

“I told you he wouldn’t be here,” Rudi snarled, with her frustration beginning to overwhelm her.

“But that does not mean that he was not here,” Grandpa replied as he opened his door and walked into the lot.

“Now what is he doing?” Rudi asked me.

I didn’t know. So I didn’t answer. I just stared at Grandpa as he strolled through the lot. He strolled for many minutes, and it wasn’t obvious that he was looking for something. This made me wonder if he was having another of his stupors, and I wondered what we’d do if he was.

Suddenly, something grabbed his attention, and he kneeled on the ground in a parking space and pulled out the Polaroid of Tommy’s tire tracks from his jacket.

Quickly, Rudi and I jumped out of the car, and we rushed up to him, and he showed us a tire track frozen in the dirty snow and said, “He was here and not so long ago. Because I didn’t see this the last time I came here.”

“But he could be anywhere now,” Rudi insisted.

Grandpa had no reply. He just rose to his feet and continued looking around. I did too, and I tried to imagine what I’d be doing if I were Tommy, the boy who seemed so different from me when I first met him but who I now knew was no different at all. This led me to close my eyes and think. I especially thought about the album he’d been listening to. I went through every track in my head, trying to think of the one that could’ve stopped him from hitting that tree. One, in particular, came to mind, and I opened my eyes and asked Rudi: “What song was Tommy singing in the cafeteria?”

“What does it matter?” she grumbled.

“I’m not sure,” I grumbled back.

“I don’t know the name of it. It’s the one where the guy screams, ‘Keep me alive.’”

“‘Room 13,’” I uttered.

“What was that?” Grandpa uttered back.

I didn’t answer him right away, as I was scanning the door numbers of the rooms around us. “The name of the song he was singing is called ‘Room 13,’” I told him afterward. “The room numbers here, they only go to ten.”

“But a larger hotel . . .” Grandpa remarked before the three of us rushed back to the car.

For hours, we drove. We drove to every hotel and motel in the area, without getting anywhere. As we came to a red light, Grandpa looked into his rearview mirror and glanced at Rudi. Seeing how distraught she looked, he decided that this was a good time to continue his Kafka story.

#

Slowly, Hermann approached a bed where lay a tall and frail man. He was so tall that his feet hung over the mattress.

“You’re Franz Kafka?” Hermann asked as he reached him.

Kafka nodded along with a string of coughs, and Hermann sat on the empty bed next to his and said, “It’s an honor to meet you, sir. I really enjoyed that book of yours. *The Metamorphosis*, wasn’t it?”

Kafka looked surprised, and he muttered, “How did you know I was here?”

“Your family sent me to find you.”

“There you are!” cried out a booming female voice. With it came a large nurse with short black hair and big black eyes. “I’ve been looking all over for you, Herr Weiss. I’ll go get your stretcher, so I can bring you to your bed.”

“What’s wrong with this one?” Hermann wondered while he pointed at it.

“I guess it would be all right.”

“Am I all right?”

“You’re very lucky that Mrs. Veselá saw you fall down that cliff. You can be certain that that good-for-nothing ferryman wouldn’t’ve helped you, even if you had your heller with you.”

“I must’ve lost mine in the fall.”

“Don’t you worry. You shall not be needing it, not for a long time. The doctor says that you just need some bedrest for a few days and then you can go home. Perhaps you can bring Herr Kafka with you. He belongs here as much as you do.”

“I’m a little confused, nurse. You’re not implying that that ferryman outside is really 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 just a little girl. I needed her.”

Suddenly overwrought with emotion, the nurse scampered off.

“I’m in a madhouse,” Hermann mumbled to himself, “and the inmates are running it.”

“That’s what I thought,” Kafka remarked. “But now . . .”

“Don’t tell me that you, too, believe that boatman is Charon,” interrupted Hermann.

“Is it any crazier than airplanes or radios? When I was a boy, I would’ve thought those things were as fantastical as Charon. But now . . .”

Like before, the two were interrupted. This time by the loud screeching of wheels. Both men turned toward it, and they saw an angry-looking Hašek approaching them in his wheelchair. He came to a stop in front of their beds and growled, “Just what we need here: more Jews. Can a Czech go anywhere these days to escape you? Perhaps not even in death!”

“What did I tell you, Mr. Hašek?” hollered the nurse as she returned with Hermann’s chart, which she placed on the railing of his bed. “Keep your petty prejudices to yourself. You’ll soon discover just how meaningless they are. Very soon!”

The nurse marched off, with Hašek sneering at her until she left the room. Then he turned back to the men and glared.

“This is the famous Jaroslav Hašek,” Kafka told Hermann.

“I gathered as much,” Hermann told Kafka back before noting to Hašek: “I can assure you, sir, that many Czechs and Jews have already shared death together. I’ve seen it.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you served in the army, little man?” Hašek retorted.

“And I have an Order of the Iron Crown to show for it. Which I’d gladly chuck into that river over there to get any one of my friends back. I wouldn’t care if they were Czech, German, or Jew. The bullets didn’t care.”

Hašek didn’t respond to this. He just turned to Kafka and growled, “Did he call you ‘Franz Kafka’?”

“I did,” Hermann let him know.

“Franz Kafka, the writer?”

“You’ve heard of me too?” Kafka gasped.

“I’ve read some of your stories. If you can call them such. ‘Absurd nonsense’ are better words for them. Men turning into bugs and ridiculous penal colonies.”

“And 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 even I can write it better than you.”

“You filthy . . .”

Hašek stumbled from his chair, and he stumbled even more toward Kafka, and he wildly swung his fist at him. This missed Kafka, and it missed him by a lot, but it knocked his end table onto the floor, along with the bell that was sitting on top of it. Though this didn’t deter Hašek. He rolled up the sleeves of his night shirt, and while gasping for breath, he groaned, “It’s time for a little pogrom.”

“I should warn you,” Kafka told him without fear, “my father was a very good boxer in his day, and he taught me well. Even in my pathetic state, I can still knock you to the floor. Especially in your pathetic state.”

“Boxer? Your father . . . your father isn’t Hermannek, is he?”

“He is.”

“He’s got a little shop on Staromák?”

“That’s right.”

Hašek started to smile. He smiled just a little, in spite of himself. He also stumbled back his wheelchair, where he muttered, “Why, that man is more Czech than me.”

Kafka said nothing in reply, and Hašek added, “Do you know he’s the only person in Prague who can drink me under the table? He’s done it to me twice, and that’s just the times I remember.”

Again, Kafka didn’t reply. But he couldn’t help grin.

“How come I’ve never seen you out with him?” Hašek asked.

“I’m afraid we are quite different men.”

“Yes, I bet you’re a big disappointment to him.”

Kafka cringed a little, but he didn’t say anything.

“You, a snooty member of the literati,” Hašek went on, “too high and mighty to hobnob with us common folk.”

“Listen to you talk,” Kafka shot back, “like you’re some kind of proletariat. You must be the richest writer in the country, especially as you have no publishers or agents to pay. Not even Čapek can earn what you do. Why, what you make off *Švejk* in a single day surely exceeds my writing earnings for a lifetime.”

“What’s wrong?” the nurse called out from the doorway. “I heard a bell.”

“I’m sorry, nurse,” spoke Kafka. “I knocked the table over by accident.”

Skeptically, the woman came over to him. While glaring at Hašek, she picked up the table and put the bell back on top of it. “Don’t let this ruffian bully you, Herr Kafka,” she told him.

“Have no fear of that, Nurse Černá,” Hašek exclaimed with a big grin. “He’s the son of one Hermann Kafka of Old Town Square, Prague. A man who once stared down a whole street of rioters. And I should know. I was one of them!”

The nurse didn’t reply. She just snarled at Hašek and hurried off. As she left, Hašek glared one last time at both Hermann and Kafka, and he hurried off as well.

Over the course of the following day, Hermann tried in vain to convince Kafka to go home with him.

“I’m a dead man,” Kafka insisted between a fit of coughs early in the morning. “Whether I die tomorrow or six months from now makes no difference.”

“I bet it makes a difference to your sisters,” Hermann pleaded. “And to your girlfriend.”

“I’m a burden to all of them.”

“It didn’t sound like it.”

“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 sure of that? Your death could make her life worse. You can’t know. None of us can be sure of anything. Perhaps that’s the whole point of living: to find out what happens next. Don’t you want to know what happens next?”

“Not anymore.”

“There must be something worth living for.”

“I can’t think of a thing.”

“But if I can, will you come home with me?”

Before Kafka could answer, he was interrupted by the nurse, who called out from the door, “You have a visitor, Herr Kafka.”

Both men turned forward, and they saw a smiling and well-dressed man around Kafka’s age approaching them. He stopped in front of Kafka’s bed, and Kafka said, “Thank you, Max. Thank you for coming.”

“Max?” Hermann uttered. “Are you Max Brod? The author of *Nornepygge Castle?”*

“You’ve heard of me?” Brod uttered back in surprise.”

“He’s even heard of me,” Kafka interjected with a bit of a grin.

Wanting to give the two men some privacy, Hermann rose from his bed and told them: “I think I’ll have a little walk.”

Hermann didn’t walk far. Still wobbly from his fall, he saw a comfortable-looking chair by the doorway and sat on it. Then, while watching the two men converse in the distance, he felt himself getting drowsy, and he soon drifted off.

Hermann woke. He woke abruptly. He didn’t even know why he had at first. Then he saw Hašek and Brod yelling at each other by Kafka’s bed.

“You goddamn Jew!” Hašek screamed at the man while flailing his arms. “You’ve always been a goddamn Jew!”

Hurriedly, Hašek wheeled his chair toward the door. He wheeled it as fast as he could, which wasn’t very. He only slowed when he noticed Hermann, and he glared at him as he stopped in front of him.

“Don’t you worry about them,” came a gravely voice to Hašek’s right.

Hašek turned toward it, and he saw a smiling and unshaven man lying in a bed nearby.

“They’ll get theirs soon enough,” the man went on while nodding toward Kafka and Brod.

“What do you mean?” Hašek growled.

The man glanced around. He looked every which way before he lifted the lapel of his night shirt, exposing a swastika pin.

This horrified Hašek, who muttered, “You, you keep away from me.”

“What are you getting so upset about, Jarda?” the man replied.

“My name is Jaroslav. But you can call me ‘Mister Hašek.’”

“I’m just like you, and you know it.”

“I’m not like you. I’m nothing like you at all!”

Angrily, Hašek pushed himself through the door, leaving the man to stare at Hermann. He stared at him for a few moments before he burst out into laughter. He laughed and laughed and wouldn’t stop.

For a long time Kafka and Brod talked by Kafka’s bed, watched by Hermann from the door.

Suddenly, the two men became agitated, and they started arguing over something. Not only did Hermann see this but so did Hašek, who had just returned to the room and had stopped not far from 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 reply. He just continued to the door.

“Burn what?” demanded Hašek.

Brod didn’t answer. He just pushed his way through the door.

Hermann noticed that Hašek looked conflicted. He looked as if he weren’t sure what to do. He looked this way for many seconds before he followed Brod out the door.

#

Grandpa again broke from his story, this time when the sun began to set. He suggested we check the waterfall before it got too dark.

This took us down a long country road that passed through the length of the reservation and all the trees there, and I noticed that Rudi was humming the same old song she’d been humming by the waterfall. She only stopped when we came upon the Orange Reservoir. “The reservoir,” she mumbled.

“What about it?” Grandpa replied as I turned to her.

“Tommy once told me that his father grew up in Newark,” she answered, “by the old reservoir there.”

“There is no reservoir in Newark,” Grandpa insisted while shaking his head.

“But there must’ve been.”

We were so close to the waterfall that we decided to check it anyway. But Tommy wasn’t there, nor was there any sign of him. So we returned to Newark and began looking for a reservoir we knew didn’t exist. This was confirmed when we got to the main branch of the Newark Public Library as it closed, by a woman who was locking its front doors. It was confirmed, too, by everyone we asked in the streets.

During his long career as a detective, my grandfather had been on many quixotic quests, but even the great knight-errant himself would’ve given up on this one. It was obvious Grandpa wanted to give up as well, and he probably only didn’t because there were no other clues, and he knew that we needed to find Tommy right away. So he kept pulling over the car and asking random people in the street. This included a middle-aged woman who was pushing a shopping cart full of groceries down a dark and empty block.

“There’s no reservoir in Newark,” she told us, causing Grandpa to turn to Rudi in exasperation and sigh. “But I remember Reservoir Pizza,” the woman went on. “My little brother cried when they left town.”

“Do you remember where it was?” Rudi asked as she leaned forward in her seat toward the woman.

“I sure do,” the woman answered with a nod. “On the corner of 14th Avenue and 9th Street.”

The Olds turned right onto 14th Avenue, where we saw no sign that there had once been a reservoir in the area. Nor did we see any motel or hotel or anything like it. But Grandpa kept driving. He drove through every street in the neighborhood, and we finally came upon something: a cheap apartment complex that offered furnished rooms by the week.

“I did not even think of apartments,” Grandpa murmured to himself before he spun onto the parking lot, where a bunch of ramshackle units faced each other. In front of number 13 were the remains of Tommy’s bike.

Grandpa parked beside it, and Rudi ran out and banged on the door with both her fists. She also called out Tommy’s name. But there was no response and the door was locked.

“Now what?” I asked Grandpa as we hurried toward her.

He didn’t reply. He just glanced around. Not seeing anyone anywhere, he pulled out a set of picks from his jacket pocket and told us to cover him.

“What?” Rudi muttered.

“*Honem!”* he quietly howled.

*Quickly* was just how Rudi and I crouched around and over Grandpa. We shielded him from view, and it didn’t take him more than a handful of seconds to pick the lock and open the door.

After he turned on the light, we saw Tommy in front of us, lying on a creaky single Murphy bed in the cramped studio. As Rudi had described earlier, his head was shaved and he was drunk. He was barely conscious as he swayed to the music on his Walkman, which was cranked so loudly that I could tell he was listening to “Room 13.”

Rudi fell upon him on the bed. But he didn’t react, even when she shook him and started screaming. He just kept swaying to the music.

As I inched up to him, I noticed how badly he was sweating. Never had I seen anything like it. He was sweating so much that his bedsheets were completely soaked.

Turning from this, I watched Grandpa pick up an empty vodka bottle on the floor. He glanced at it before he tossed it into a garbage pail and checked Tommy’s pulse, and I could see the worry on his face.

Hurriedly, he grabbed the phone off an end table by the bed and dialed a number. “I need an ambulance,” he told the person on the other end of the line.

While he gave them our location, I looked around the room, and I saw that all four walls were broken apart. It was as if someone had been smashing into them. The full-length mirror by the bathroom was smashed too, by more than one fist.

“Tommy!” Rudi pleaded while trying to get him to respond.

But he wouldn’t. All he did was hit the stop button on the Walkman. He followed this by reversing the tape a little and pressing play, and he screamed “Keep me alive!” with Henry Rollins. He screamed it again and again.

Grandpa, Rudi, and I sat in the corridor of St. Barnabas, with one of us sitting more impatiently than the others. We sat there for hours.

Rudi’s anxiousness seemed only to increase with time. Seeing this, Grandpa took her hand. He took it much like how she had taken his in the car a week or so earlier. Like what she had done to him, this calmed her a little, and she turned to him and smiled, and he smiled back.

At the same time, she saw a large man in a white coat approaching us, along with the same frightened nurse I had seen in Tommy’s room when I had first met him. Like then, she was wearing a mask and a pair of gloves and looked frightened.

“That’s Dr. Kleiner,” Rudi uttered, and all three of us rose.

The doctor stopped in front of us while the nurse rushed off. After removing both her mask and gloves, she took a deep breath. It was as if she’d been holding it for days.

“How is he?” Rudi asked the doctor.

“He seems determined to kill himself,” the man told her. “And if he keeps doing what he’s been doing, he’ll succeed. That I can promise you.”

“What can I do?”

“Ever heard of ‘tough love’?”

Rudi glanced at Grandpa, and she nodded.

“You’re the only one I see who can give it to him,” the doctor went on.

Without saying a word, Rudi slowly started down the hall.

“What are his chances?” whispered Grandpa to the doctor.

“Chances?” the doctor whispered back, as if it were a question he couldn’t comprehend.

“His chances for survival.”

“I don’t know of anyone who’s survived this or has experienced any kind of remission.”

“How long does he have?” I asked.

“That I can’t say with certainty,” Kleiner replied. “We don’t even have a name for this disease yet, apart from some vulgar and highly inaccurate ones. But I haven’t heard of a case like his where the patient lasted more than a few months, and most of these weren’t as bad as his. Understand that his immune system is completely shot. If the Pneumocystis pneumonia doesn’t kill him, something else surely will.”

The doctor started off, and I said, “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” he uttered after he came to a stop and turned back to me.

“If it is true that you don’t know 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 question made the doctor angry. He marched off and growled, “I didn’t become a doctor to hide from sick people.”

Not knowing what else to do, Grandpa and I returned to our seats. In the silence that followed, I wanted to thank him for everything he had done, but it was he who thanked me.

“For what?” I gasped.

“For making me know my granddaughter,” he told me. “It would have been a great loss if I had not.”

“What about Grandma?”

“She will not be thanking you. Or me. Especially me. I may never again leave the living-room couch, and she just may move this outside.”

I got back to the shelter early in the evening, just as a large truck arrived. It sputtered beside the gates in the alley and came to a grinding halt.

It was there to donate food from a local restaurant. This was not an uncommon sight, but it always surprised me how generous people were, especially in a city that wasn’t exactly thriving. People from nearby churches would often drop off food, and more than once dozens of pizza boxes arrived anonymously, just as they had in a Jason Stratham film I once saw called *Redemption*. After it happened a few times, I wondered if life was imitating art or whether it was the other way around. I wondered if this sort of thing happened all over.

This particular donation of food particularly shocked me. The restaurant donated many heavy cartons of choice steaks and ribs as well as lots of boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables. I think everyone in the shelter was overwhelmed by this. That’s probably why the staff didn’t even have to ask us to help unload the truck. On our own, we formed a long chain from the alley through the dining hall and into the kitchen, and we passed the boxes between us while talking about what a great Christmas dinner this would all make.

It took more than a half-hour to get everything off the truck and into the freezer. But no one complained. We all had smiles on our faces. I think it made everyone feel that they were a small part of a gift that was anything but small.

Another letter from Tommy arrived for me that day. As soon as I got it from Josh during check-in, I rushed into the courtyard with it and called Rudi. I could hear the anticipation in her voice, no matter how hard she tried to mask this.

It was difficult getting through the first handful of journal entries that Tommy had sent me that day, as they were mostly incoherent.

In one, he described his transfer to St. Barnabas after the hospital he was originally at refused to treat him once they learned what he had. He also described an argument with his mother in the hospital over both his disease and Rudi. She stormed out of the room at the end of it, and he was sure he’d never see her again and wasn’t sorry about it.

What he didn’t describe was his encounters with Rudi. He barely wrote about her, apart from an entry where he lamented at how he’d never make love to her. He wrote even less about the disease that was ravaging him, and he didn’t mention why he left St. Barnabas.

After that happened, there were pages of nothing more than bits and pieces and streams-of-consciousness. I inferred from these that he moved from motel to motel every day. At all of them he drank himself to sleep every night. He woke up this way too.

Despite this, one morning he got on his bike and drove. One moment he was swerving through traffic on Route 22, and the next he had somehow made it to the waterfall. He spent all day there lying on the rocks and drinking, where he cursed himself as well as his fate and the certain something he felt was responsible for it. He screamed this into the skies and beyond and only stopped when he ran out of vodka.

Again, he drove. He drove until he found himself in front of Vintage Vinyl. He wasn’t expecting much from the Black Flag record he bought there. He only bought it because he remembered the T-shirt Rudi was wearing on the day he met her.

When he got home, he put the tape in his Walkman, and he put his headphones on and hit play. This was when Henry Rollins crawled into his head. From then on that night, it was he who did the screaming. Tommy would swear that he was screaming at him and him alone. He screamed at him all night. What surprised Tommy was how Rollins wasn’t just screaming about how life sucks but how he wanted to do something about it and how he wouldn’t give into it or stop screaming about it.

Tommy found this inspiring, even if he didn’t know why he had. By the fourth time through the tape, all the darkness surrounding him was gone. There was only the music and that mad desperation to hope.

After he sobered the next morning, he again listened to the music. He listened to it all the time. It was the only thing that could keep him from his self-pity. The only thing that wouldn’t allow him to have it. It was also what kept him going. It was what got him up in the morning and got him to sleep every night. It was also what led him to a punk club in the Alphabet City section of New York called A7, where he saw a band that I guessed was Ism, as he talked about them playing a cover of “I think I love you” as he sat in a corner, invisible to everything.

Tommy’s first clear observation was finding himself again at St. Barnabas and seeing Rudi hovering over him, looking angrier than he had ever seen her. She was squeezing his hand too. It felt as if she were going to break it apart.

He squirmed it away from her, and he spun from her and howled, “Are you crazy? I’m infected!”

“You can’t get rid of me that easily anymore,” she told him.

“I told you to leave me alone.”

Instead, she retook his hand, and she squeezed it even harder than before.

Again, he tried to squirm away his hand. But this time she held on, and he hollered, “Just go already.”

“Not until you look at me,” she told him.

He didn’t. He just closed his eyes and tried to will her away. But this didn’t work. She wasn’t going anywhere. So he opened his eyes, and he reluctantly turned back to her.

“There’s gonna be some changes around here,” she snarled. “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. She just stood there, and Tommy watched the angry punk girl towering above him turn once more into the frightened little girl. The same one he’d heard crying from inside the motel room. She fell apart in front of him, seam by seam. When there was nothing left to hold her together, her knees buckled, and she tumbled onto him, and she grasped him and screeched, “And you’re gonna love me. Because I love you. God, how I love you!”

Tommy didn’t respond. But he could feel the tears rolling down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpered. “I’m sorry for everything.”

“Sorry?” he uttered in surprise. “You think I’m mad at you? Don’t you understand? I don’t want you to watch me die.”

“But I’m gonna watch you live, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Tommy again tried to resist her. He tried with everything left in his rotting body. But he couldn’t, and this was when he knew he no longer belonged to himself and would never again. So he grasped her. He grasped her even harder than she was grasping him as she screamed out his name.

“I can’t live without you,” he murmured with his eyes clenched closed. “It’s not a figure of speech or hyperbole, or whatever the right term is. It just is.”

The nurse quickly pushed her medical cart out of Tommy’s room. As usual, she was wearing a mask and gloves and was looking as if she wanted to be anywhere but there.

Usually, this bothered Tommy, no matter how much he pretended it didn’t. But this time it really didn’t matter. This was because there was a man sitting on his bed beside him, who was wearing a suit and a kippah and who was not only not wearing a mask or gloves but was leaning over him and holding his hand.

Tommy wrote about how floored he was by this, that this man he had revered his whole life was touching him and not afraid.

“Is there anything I could get you?” the man softly asked with a gentle smile.

“You think,” Tommy mumbled with some embarrassment, “you think you could get me a Bible?”

“Sure thing, Tommy. I’ll bring one tomorrow.”

Reluctantly, the man released Tommy’s hand, and he rose. After he turned to the door, he saw something that shocked him. Tommy noticed this, and he spun his head and saw Rudi nervously standing in the doorway, wearing his football jacket and carrying a cold compress.

“Hey,” Tommy said to her.

“Hi,” she said back with her voice barely audible.

“This,” he went on while nodding at the man beside him, “this is Rabbi Orenstein, from my temple.”

Rudi forced a smile at the man, and Tommy pointed at her and told the rabbi: “This is my . . . my . . .”

“I’m his girlfriend,” she called out, I bet not only to the rabbi and to Tommy but to herself as well. She then marched right up to the rabbi and offered him her hand while telling him her name.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he let her know as he shook her hand. He shook it with a smile that was anything but forced before he turned back to Tommy and noted, “I guess you’ll be going home soon.”

Tommy shook his head, without looking at the man.

“We’re getting a place,” Rudi interjected.

“Maybe,” Tommy countered. “I said, ‘Maybe.’ And that’s only if I ever get out of here.”

“You’re getting out of here,” she growled.

“I see,” the rabbi muttered while trying to hide his discomfort. “Well, there are some very nice apartments across the street. I’ve been inside a few. I think you can even rent them furnished.”

“They’d be way out of our price range,” Tommy insisted with another shake of his head. “We don’t even . . .”

“You know,” the man interrupted, “the temple has a fund set aside just for these kinds of situations.”

“You understand that we are not married,” Rudi let him know.

“Ordinarily, that would be a problem,” the rabbi replied. “But under the circumstances . . .”

“I don’t know,” Tommy groaned while shaking his head once more.

But the rabbi waved both him and his doubts off, and he started toward the door while saying to them: “Let me handle everything.”

He left, with Rudi staring at the doorway. She stared at it long after the man was gone. When she finally turned back to Tommy, she asked, “Are all rabbis like him?”

“I think they aspire to be,” he answered as she sat on the bed and applied the compress to his head.

“I have a big surprise waiting for you,” she told him.

“Should I be worried?” he quipped.

“Yup.”

“Well?”

“You’re gonna have to get out of here to get it.”

I glanced at Rudi as the two of us stood in the hospital corridor in front of Dr. Kleiner. It didn’t seem as if she was breathing as she gazed at the doctor, who was reading through the medical chart in front of him. He read it many times before he lowered it and told Rudi with some surprise in his voice: “It seems that the Pneumocystis has passed.”

“Really?” Rudi muttered. “So he can go home?”

“I guess. But you need to be realistic about this, Ms. Weiss. There’s no cure for what he’s got, nor is there any on the horizon. I’ve got an obligation to be forthright with you. In cases like his . . .”

Rudi wouldn’t listen to the rest. She just marched down the hall, refusing to allow reality to get in her way.

The door creaked opened, and Rudi helped Tommy inside it. She further turned on the light, which exposed a small but well-furnished one-bedroom apartment and a little golden-haired dog. This ran up to Tommy with her tail wagging furiously, and she jumped into his arms and licked his face over and over.

“She remembers me,” he said with lots of surprise.

“How could a girl forget a hero?” Rudi said back.

“So this is your big surprise. What’s she doing here?”

“No one claimed her. I talked to Dr. Kleiner, and he said a dog could be good for you. She’ll keep you company and give you something to do when I’m not home. And, to be honest, I really could use an unconditional friend. So we’ve adopted her.”

“*We?”*

Rudi grinned, and she scratched behind one of the dog’s ears while mentioning, “We’re calling her ‘Flutter.’”

Tommy chuckled, and he joked, “What about the matching dog collars?”

“They’re in the kitchen,” she answered with a nod and her own chuckle.

“All right,” he relented, and Flutter responded by licking his face even harder than before. 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 now snoring loudly on the makeshift bed Rudi had set up for her on the kitchen floor.

Watching this with smiles was Rudi and Tommy at a table steps away, where lay the remains of a Reservoir Pizza and a pair of Cokes, just like what they had on their first date or whatever it was.

Slowly, Rudi rose from her seat. Just as slowly, she lifted Tommy to his feet by his hand, and she nervously led him to their open bedroom door, with Tommy feeling far more nervous than how she looked.

In the threshold of the room, Tommy spotted his copy of *Damaged* against the wallon the floor, and he picked it up with a smile.

“That you were listening to that was a real surprise to me,” she told him.

“It’s the best,” he said while continuing to smile at the record, “and I’m not the only one who thinks this.”

Rudi released Tommy’s hand, and she walked over to a portable stereo on an end table by the side of the bed and hit the play button, and they listened as the sounds of “Moonlight Serenade” filled the room.

“Where did you get that?” Tommy asked while pointing at the device.

“I found a copy of the record at the library,” she told him, “and I made an endless tape of it. You can listen to it all day if you want.”

“And never get tired of it,” he remarked before he noticed a small gift-wrapped package on the bed beside him. “What’s that?” he blurted out while nodding at it.

“A little housewarming gift,” she told him.

“*Rudi*. I should be the one giving gifts. You’ve given me too much already.”

“It’s nothing. Go ahead, open it.”

Tommy put down the record, and the two sat on the bed together. After picking up the gift, he opened the wrapping. He opened it gently so as not to tear it, and he uncovered her crumpled drawing of him set inside a simple black frame.

He grinned at it and said, “I’ve always wanted a picture of Lee Ving.”

She grinned back, and she pushed him onto the bed. She also leaned down to kiss him. But he stopped her and whispered, “I can’t.”

“There are only a few things you can’t,” she softly grumbled, “and millions you can.”

He grinned once more, this time while thinking he would cry. But he controlled this for the moment as he caressed her cheek with the back of his hand and mumbled, “The infinite possibilities.”

Tommy couldn’t put his first night with Rudi into words. He could only describe it in colors. They trickled over him with every kiss and touch—shades of blue and yellow and violet. He could feel them in her lips and fingers and could hear them in Glenn Miller’s trombone. There were tears too. He couldn’t tell if they were his or hers, but he was swimming in them and in her.

By the time he passed out, she had become his lover. Maybe not in every way, but in all the ones that mattered.

Tommy woke in the middle of the night.

At first, he was frightened because it was dark and he couldn’t see Rudi. He couldn’t tell if she was there. Then he realized she was asleep in his arms and that she was clinging to him. She was grasping him as if he’d slip away if she let go.

This made him recall the afternoon by the waterfall, when she had put her head on his shoulder. He had thought that this was the best he could ever 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 that he could keep holding her and keep feeling her pressed against him. “I’m never gonna die,” he whispered, and he repeated it again and again until he believed it.

I rang their apartment doorbell at around noon the next day, with a big ceramic bowl in my arm that was wrapped in tinfoil.

Rudi answered the door, and I was surprised to see a Bible in her hand, with her finger marking the spot she’d been reading. It wouldn’t be the last time I’d catch her with a Bible or something like it, and she’d often be embarrassed by it, like she was right then. Quickly, she hid the book behind her back, and she nodded at the bowl while asking, “Whatcha got there?”

“Grandpa wanted to give you guys a housewarming present,” I told her. “A jar of his *utopence*.”

“His what?”

“Pickled sausages.”

Rudi grimaced.

“But we made you a salad instead,” I said.

She hugged me. She hugged me in the doorway for a long time.

“How’s next Saturday?” I called out to Rudi from the dining room table, where I sat across from Tommy.

“I don’t know,” she replied from the kitchen.

“You can’t avoid her forever.”

“It’s not me who’s been doing the avoiding.”

“Saturday will be fine,” Tommy uttered.

Rudi entered the room carrying the salad bowl in one hand and a large plate of omelets in the other, and she glared at Tommy, who just smiled back. At the same time, Flutter started jumping up on Rudi to get at the food, and she told everyone: “Rule Number One around here: no feeding Flutter from the table. Breaking it will be a capital offense.”

Tommy and I nodded, and Rudi used a pair of thongs to serve the salad and the omelets. After she sat down, we all picked up our utensils, and Tommy and I glanced at each other skeptically before trying the omelets, which surprised both of us.

“This is really good,” he gasped.

“Yeah,” I gasped back.

“What were you guys expecting?” she cried out.

“I don’t know,” I sheepishly replied. “Glass and nails?”

Tommy and I laughed, and Rudi grinned too before she playfully slapped my arm, sending me to the floor, where I noticed her feeding Flutter a tomato under the table. So I was still smiling when 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 things at us. Even once she agreed, she made it clear that it would be a one-time event.

The three of us waited outside Grandpa’s Olds in front of Rudi and Tommy’s apartment building. We waited awhile, with Grandma looking more uncomfortable with each moment that passed. Finally, the front door of the building opened, and Rudi and Tommy stepped outside, and they forced smiles at us as they hesitantly approached.

Grandma grimaced at Rudi. She also shook her head as she whispered, “Just look at her. She . . . I do not even know what she is.”

I don’t really think the problem was how Rudi looked. I think it was how she reminded Grandma of my mother. There was far more fear on her face than disgust.

Tommy and Rudi stopped in front of us, and Rudi nervously mumbled, “Hi.”

Grandma didn’t respond, and I wasn’t sure we’d make it through lunch or even get there. Then something happened that made this problem seem small.

“Jeeeewww!” screamed someone from a passing car.

We spun toward it and saw a car of laughing boys come to a stop at the red light a short distance away.

Everyone glanced at Grandpa, who shrugged it off and grinned, just like he did whenever his Jewish looks got him unwanted notice. I had seen this happen to him more than once, but this was the worse. I could tell he wanted to make himself disappear.

I think all of us wanted to pretend that this didn’t happen. All of us but Rudi. At the time, I thought her reaction came from having seen the number tattooed on Grandpa’s arm. But looking back at it now, I think she was remembering a time when she didn’t react, when she didn’t stand up to hate. Whatever her reason was, she marched toward the car with her fists clenched.

“Where you going?” Tommy called out.

Rudi didn’t reply. She just continued marching.

“You can’t change the world!” Tommy hollered.

“Just watch me!” she hollered back.

She reached the car and picked up a rock, and she smashed the front passenger window with it, shattering it to pieces. She then leaned toward the boys and their frightened faces. While brandishing the rock at them, she groaned, “That’s my grandpa you’re laughing at.”

The driver didn’t even wait for the light to change. He sped through it as fast as he could. He sped through the next one too.

“Not much of a Nazi, I would say,” Grandpa whispered to Grandma.

Grandma didn’t looked so convinced. But at least we made it through lunch. We even made plans for a Sabbath dinner the following week.

Having finished that night’s pages, I said goodnight to Rudi and headed toward the dorm.

However, I stopped cold when I saw Josh exiting the dining hall with one of the heavy cartons of ribs we had earlier brought inside. He carried it out of the shelter and onto the back of his red pickup truck outside the gate, where lay a lot of similar cartons. It was packed with them. He then returned to the dining hall and entered the kitchen, where he opened the freezer and grabbed another carton.

As he came outside with it, he both noticed me and smiled. He did without the slightest worry. It was as if I were a fly who couldn’t harm him if I tried.

I continued watching him as he brought the carton to his vehicle, and I realized that not only the gift we had received but all the effort made by many to make it happen was for nothing. This was when that pesky “moral code” again began gnawing the inside of me.

the seventh night

I woke before dawn.

But I didn’t feel the endless waves of darkness passing over me and pushing me into the floor. I realized that I hadn’t felt them in days, and I didn’t know why. I couldn’t make sense of it. But I think it was because, unlike all the times before, I wasn’t thinking about myself. I was thinking of anything but it.

I got my cup of green tea from the kitchen and walked into the courtyard and to the corner table. Only Allison was sitting there, and it was obvious she was upset about something. So I asked her what was wrong.

She didn’t reply.

“I heard you just got a job at Amazon,” some woman said to her as she passed. “Congratulations.”

Allison didn’t reply to her either. She just grimaced and picked up her coffee cup and cigarettes, and she walked off in a huff.

“It’s all gone,” Mitchell told a handful of guys who were sitting in a booth a short distance from me. “All the ribs and all the steaks we carried into the freezer last night. Every single carton. Someone stole them all.”

“So much for that Christmas dinner,” Matt replied with a bit of a shrug, as if he had been expecting it.

“The only thing they left was the fruit and vegetables.”

“They must’ve been thinking of our health,” Phil cried out with a big smile.

Everyone laughed. I laughed too. I guess we were kind of like those creatures in Whoville who woke up to empty houses on that famous Christmas morning. It didn’t matter that the Grinch had stolen our gifts. It really was the thought that counted, and this was something that no one could steal, not even Josh.

I was power-washing the sidewalks outside the motel around midday when Matt and one of the cleaning ladies walked by. They were talking about the company Christmas party, which was happening the following week. The two had been talking about it since I got the job in the summer. Almost every day they talked about it. I could always hear the longing in their voices, as if this were the best thing they had to look forward to. It made me wonder if, from the day after the party, they’d be talking about next year’s one.

“Hey,” came an accented voice from behind me.

I turned around, and I saw both Amoun and his smile.

“I have some good news for you,” he told me. “I’ve decided to make you full-time at the beginning of the year. I am even going to raise your salary, all the way up to minimum wage. How does that sound?”

I grinned.

“Happy Chanukah,” he murmured to me with another of his smiles, before he patted me on the shoulder and walked off.

This news should’ve made me happy. With a full-time job, I could’ve left the shelter. Matt and I were even talking about getting an apartment together. Maybe I’d even be able to keep the darkness away for good.

So I was trying hard to understand why I wasn’t happy. At the same time, I noticed a pair of addicts inside the room across the way, who were breaking open the seal that kept the windows there permanently sealed. They afterward started tossing their things out the window one by one, I supposed so they wouldn’t have to pass the reception area and the something there waiting for them.

It was pathetic, but I wondered if watching them was even more so.

When I got back to the shelter late in the afternoon, an ambulance was speeding off. I rushed inside the gates and asked someone what had happened.

“Jennifer had a stroke,” he said. “Just like that. One moment she’s sitting in the booth with a bunch of people and talking and the next she’s on the ground.”

My eyes turned toward the courtyard and to Billy, who was sitting on a bench surrounded by others. They were trying to comfort him, but his life had just sped off. He had no way of even getting to the hospital.

It was a somber line of people who waited to check in that night. I think all our thoughts were with Billy and perhaps on our own fragility. So I was happy to think about something else when I got Tommy’s letter from Josh. With it gripped in my fist, I rushed into the courtyard to call Rudi. Though I couldn’t do this right away, as I learned that I had “volunteered” for street showers.

Two nights a week, we let the people living on the streets come inside the shelter for showers. Most of them had been kicked out of the place for various reasons over the years, usually for drinking or drugs. Instead of moving on, they camped out in the alley not far from the gates or a little down the way behind the Starbucks. I never understood what kept them there. Maybe it was that they had nowhere else to go, or maybe it was that it just didn’t matter where they went.

One of these people even volunteered at the shelter. I’d always see him helping out with lunch whenever I was around. His name was Len and was once a lawyer. He still kind of looked like one under all the decay, especially that night.

My job was to sit in the men’s room for the next few hours and watch them. I had to watch them undress before they showered, and I had to watch them dress again in their dirty clothes afterward. Why we had to do this to them, why we had to dehumanize them even more than they already were, was anyone’s guess. Certainly no one could explain it to me.

Like the addicts I had earlier seen escaping the motel, these people were pathetic. But, like then, they weren’t as pathetic as me. To avoid this, I positioned myself in a chair facing their general direction and took out Tommy’s letter, and I called Rudi.

Knowing that we would likely again come upon some of the more difficult parts of the story, I asked her if she was ready for this. But I think I was more readying myself.

I rang the doorbell as my grandparents and I waited outside Tommy and Rudi’s apartment door. I noticed that Grandma once more didn’t look too excited, but this time she wasn’t grimacing either, and I took this as a hopeful sign.

The door swung open, along with the unmistakable aroma of challah and potato knishes baking in the oven, and an anxious Rudi quickly let us inside. While Tommy and Flutter greeted my grandparents, I rushed up to Rudi as she hurried toward the kitchen. “What’s wrong?” I asked her after I noticed a big pan of kasha cooking on the stove.

“I can’t get the matzo balls right,” she screeched as she stopped and spun back to me, almost shaking in exasperation.

Loudly, Grandma sighed, and she turned to Rudi and said, “How did you prepare the chicken fat?”

“They’re vegetarian matzo balls,” Rudi told her.

“In chicken soup?”

“Parsley soup.”

The shock of this almost sent Grandma to the floor. Though she recovered enough to gasp, “Vegetarian matzo balls in parsley soup?” She then turned to Grandpa and added, “Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

“Just now,” Grandpa deadpanned.

Grandma hissed at him, and she waved him off with both her hands. But she also took hold of Rudi by the arm and led her into the kitchen while saying, “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 something unkosher.”

“Gertie?” Rudi muttered. “Your name is . . .”

“Gertrud,” Grandma replied.

“So I’m . . .”

“You have apparently been named after me.”

I was hoping this revelation would make a little crack in the ice, but over the next hour the two couldn’t stop arguing. They argued over the stove while trying countless combinations of ingredients. A couple of times they even came close to blows.

But damn if those matzo balls wouldn’t be the best I’d ever eat.

Before dinner could start, Rudi had to light the Sabbath candles and recite the blessing over them. I think we were all nervous for her, even Grandma. Silently, we watched her put a scarf over her head and light the candles, and I could see that she was the most nervous of all. Her hands were shaking.

But lighting the candles was the easy part. Waving the spirit of their light into her home with her hands was also easy. Much harder was singing the Hebrew blessing. None of us knew what to expect when she began. I’m sure she didn’t. Then came her voice and all the quiet that roared through the room in response to it.

Sensing this, Rudi slowly turned to us, and she mumbled, “That bad?”

No one replied, but I’m sure “bad” wasn’t the word on any of our minds. Though Grandma did look pained for some reason. Noticing this, Rudi put down the scarf and stepped up to the woman and asked her what was wrong.

“Your voice,” Grandma yelped with her head shaking, “it is just like your mother’s.”

The two stared at each other. They did for a long time before Grandma finally broke down and put her arms around Rudi.

Rudi didn’t react. She just stood there, not sure what to do.

“I miss her so much,” Grandma explained as she started crying.

It took a while, but Rudi put her arms around the woman too. While trying to hold back her emotions, she told her: “I miss her too. I don’t want to, but I do.”

“She just never could let herself be a part of us.”

Rudi smiled. From what she would say next, I think it was because she finally understood where Grandma was coming from. “‘Your people are my people,’” she whispered, quoting from the book of Ruth. “‘Your God is my God.’’”

This made Grandma cry even more. She gripped Rudi even harder, and she replied with a quote from the same verse: “‘And not even death shall separate us.’”

We were all so stuffed after dinner that none of us could move. This included Flutter, who was sprawled out on the floor.

Eventually, Rudi stretched her arms, and she said, “Grandpa, I want to hear the end of your Kafka story.”

“*Oy vey!”* Grandma shrieked. “Do not get him started. You will never get him out of your house.”

Everyone laughed, especially Grandpa. But he wasn’t going to let an opportunity like this go to waste. So, after he filled Tommy in on the beginning of the story, he finished it.

#

“Brod!” Hašek yelled as he followed the man down the hospital corridor.

Hermann knew that none of this was his business. But he couldn’t help peek into the hallway, where he saw Hašek racing after Brod as best he could in his wheelchair.

“If you don’t stop,” Hašek cried out while panting, “I will follow you to Prague. I will haunt you to your last days if I have to. I swear I will!”

Brod slowly came to a halt, but he didn’t turn around. He just stood there as Hašek rolled up to him and stopped. Awkwardly, Hašek lifted himself out of the chair before he grabbed hold of the man for balance and demanded, “What does he want you to burn?”

Brod didn’t answer. So Hašek shook him. He shook him and hollered, “Answer me!”

“His novels,” Brod muttered.

“He has written novels?” Hašek gasped.

Brod nodded.

“Are, are they like his stories?” Hašek softly asked.

“Better,” Brod answered.

“And you, you’re gonna burn them?”

“What else can I do?”

Hašek threw Brod and himself into the nearby wall and forced the man to face him, and he roared, “What gives you the right?”

“Me?” mumbled Brod. “Their not mine. Their 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 last one of them.”

“No.”

“The greatest writer Prague has ever known, and you’d turn his poetry into ash? You’d be damned. For such crime there can be no absolution!”

“Let me go!”

Brod pushed Hašek away, causing him to fall onto the floor, and he rushed off.

“You won’t burn them, Brod!” Hašek hollered. “I know you won’t!”

Hermann returned to his bed.

“What was all that screaming about?” Kafka asked.

“I really can’t say,” Hermann replied after he turned from the man.

Hašek came back to the room, and he glared at Kafka. He glared as he slowly approached.

“What was that all about?” Kafka demanded once the man was just a short distance from him.

“I don’t see how it’s any of your business,” Hašek growled before he turned and started toward his bed. But he didn’t go far. He came to a sudden stop, and he sat there with his back turned to both men without saying a word.

“Is something wrong?” Kafka asked.

“You are looking at a jealous man, Herr Kafka,” Hašek mumbled with his head down.

“I don’t understand,” Kafka mumbled back.

“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 one. I still have them in my home. You see, I’m jealous of you. Jealous of your talent and accomplishments.”

“Me?”

“I wish I could write like you. I wish my words could flow like yours do, from the page onto someone’s soul. But I’m just a scribbler. It doesn’t matter how many books I sell. It doesn’t change this. Nothing can.”

Slowly, Hašek turned his teary face toward Kafka and cried, “I’ve never even cared about the money. All I wanted was to be considered a real writer and not just some peddler of dreck as you called it. You wanna know why I got so mad at you the other day? Because you weren’t the first one who called *Švejk* that. That’s what the publishers called it. They all called it that. That’s why I had to put it out myself. No one would touch it. Not because they thought it wouldn’t sell. They knew it would. But they didn’t want to be associated with dreck or with me.”

Hašek started off. He did so quickly.

“I don’t really think *Švejk* is dreck,” Kafka called out, causing Hašek to come to another stop. “I was just lashing out at you. The truth is . . . the truth is I loved every page. You’re a modern-day Rabelais, Mr. Hašek. A Cervantes even. And if publishers can’t see that, never you mind. History will prove them wrong.

“Let me tell you a little story. Not so long ago, I was crossing Palačák when I saw a group of boys 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 stealing the colonel’s dog. These boys, they knew it so perfectly, and you should’ve seen them laugh. Through them, Mr. Hašek, Švejk will live on past you. He will live forever. These children will pass him onto their children and their children’s children. And did you know Max is preparing a German translation of it?”

“He is?” muttered Hašek in shock.

“Soon the whole world will know Švejk and 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. I’ll be forgotten before I’m lowered into the ground.”

“Don’t be so sure, Herr Kafka,” Hašek told him as he rubbed the tears off his face. “Don’t be so sure.”

All afternoon and into the evening Hermann tried to convince Kafka to go home with him the next day. But every reason he came up with for Kafka to keep living was either refuted or ignored. Finally, he gave up and went to sleep, consigned to leaving without him.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Hermann awoke, and he saw Kafka reading from a thin hardcover book, an edition of *The Metamorphosis*. He was looking at it as if it were his own child.

“I think I’ve found the best reason yet for you to live,” Hermann told him after he stretched his arms and yawned.

Kafka didn’t reply. He just turned a page in his book.

“It’s rather selfish, I’ll admit,” Hermann went on, “but I’d sure like to read another of your stories. I bet I’m not the only one.”

Hermann again woke. This time it was morning, and he saw that Kafka was hovering over him and dressed in a suit, with his open suitcase on his bed.

“You better hurry,” Kafka said. “There’s only one train out of here, and it leaves in a half-hour.”

At once, Hermann jumped out of bed. “My clothes,” he uttered when he noticed his hospital gown.

“I just sent Nurse Černá to get them,” Kafka let him know.

Hermann grinned, and he noticed that Kafka’s copy of *The Metamorphosis* was lying on his end table. “What’s this doing here?” he asked as he pointed at it.

“Consider it a belated Chanukah gift,” Kafka replied before he fastened his suitcase.

Hermann picked up the book and opened the cover, and he saw that it was inscribed to him. “Thank you, Herr Kafka,” he murmured. “Thank you.”

Kafka was about to reply when he was interrupted. He was again interrupted by the screeching sound of wheels. They both turned toward it and saw Hašek approaching them. The man came to a stop in front of them and said, “I was wondering if you gentlemen would do me the honor of walking me to the dock.” He then raised his big fist and showed them the one-heller coin between his fingers.

Kafka wheeled Hašek to the staircase on the cliff overlooking the river, with Hermann a few steps behind them.

Hašek glanced down, at both the staircase and the handful of people boarding the boat from the dock, and he mumbled, “I didn’t realize there were so many steps. I don’t know if I can make it.”

“But we can,” Kafka told him as he offered him his hand.

Hašek took it, and Kafka lifted him to his feet.

“I can see it now,” Hašek muttered while looking into Kafka’s eyes.

“See what?” Kafka asked.

“Your father.”

Kafka grinned, and the two men slowly started down the steps. They did with their arms around each other and with each complementing the other to the extent that they appeared as one healthy body.

“Can I call you Franta?” Hašek asked.

“You may,” Kafka answered.

“And you, you call me Jarda. That’s what my friends call me.”

It took a while, but the two reached the dock. There Hašek paid Charon his fare, and Kafka helped him into the boat, which began to pull away.

“You know what?” Hašek called out with his face beaming with joy 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.”

#

“Even Kafka must be tired of hearing that story,” Grandma exclaimed with her arms extended to the heavens.

Everyone laughed, especially Grandpa.

“Well, I liked it,” Rudi declared before she grabbed Tommy’s hand.

I could tell by the expression on her face that Grandpa had been right. The story really did have meaning for her. Perhaps it had the same kind of meaning that that Black Flag record had had for Tommy.

Spring came, and with it Tommy’s eighteenth birthday. This would be a big accomplishment for anyone but for him it was especially big. To celebrate it, Grandma made him a big dinner at our house. As a way of welcoming him into our family, she made every Czech dish she knew that could be made without meat. The list of these was short but delicious and included stuffed peppers and fruit dumplings and fried mushrooms.

The next day was a Sunday, and Rudi held a small party for Tommy by the waterfall while 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 early that afternoon, along with a cake Rudi had baked, a few boxes of Reservoir Pizza, and some soda. Owen and Eliot were already waiting for us. Then Jared and Beth came, and so did Maria and her new girlfriend Wendy.

A motley bunch we were that day, sitting on the rocks in the bright sun while listening to a tape of Tommy’s favorite Yardbirds songs that Rudi had made. As Tommy and Owen argued over whether Jeff Beck or Jimmy Page was the better guitarist, I glanced at everyone there. I glanced at myself too. It was hard to find a shred of commonality. There was no rationale for us spending this time together, but here we all were. Here we all belonged, especially me.

I helped Rudi carry everything back to the car as the party ended, and she asked me to bring Tommy back from the falls while she said goodbye to the others on Crest Drive. When I returned to the rocks, I saw Tommy sitting on the edge of them next to Jared and Beth. They were all staring into the ravine below.

“A couple of people I know back home have the same thing,” Jared told Tommy, with Beth holding on to him from behind. “It’s only dumb luck that I don’t.”

“Maybe there’s a reason,” Tommy said.

“What reason could there be for me to live and not you?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I mean what you’ve survived could give you a reason to do something you would’ve never done. Something big.”

It was still early when I drove Rudi and Tommy and Flutter home.

We passed South Mountain Elementary School down the road from the woods, where Tommy noticed a sign outside. Reading Is Fundamental was having a readathon on the blacktop behind the school and volunteers were welcome.

“Let’s do it,” he cried out in excitement.

“Are you sure you’re up for it?” Rudi asked.

“I’m sure. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Rudi and I could tell that Tommy was tired, but we couldn’t refuse him on his birthday. So I drove down a steep hill to the large lot behind the school, where dozens of children were waiting along with a handful of adults, who were organizing everyone into reading groups. Not surprisingly, most of the latter looked frightened when they caught a glimpse of Rudi. But what was surprising was how the kids weren’t. They weren’t frightened of her at all. Her appearance drew them as if she were some kind of superhero, and maybe she was. They all surrounded her and wanted to be part of her group. They liked Flutter, too, and the matching dog collars the two had on.

“Be gentle,” Rudi told the children as they encircled the dog and began petting her. “She’s been through some rough times.”

The kids, many of which had likely been through their own rough times, took heed. They treated her as if she were a newborn baby.

All three of us headed reading groups on the big field behind the blacktop, along with lots of others, but Rudi’s group was the largest and got the most attention by far. The kids in hers all took turns sitting on her lap while others sat next to Flutter, and she patiently helped them voice out the syllables that made up each of the tales they read together. I didn’t know it at the time, but I bet she was repaying a debt that afternoon, for when that librarian took the time to teach her how to read.

For hours, we read with the kids. But Rudi did nonstop without a break, and it was impossible to tell who was enjoying it more. The happiness was all over her face.

When the sun started to fall, the organizers of the event had to reluctantly shut it down. This sent the kids in Rudi’s group shrieking in disappointment. But I think Rudi was the most disappointed of them all.

“You should become a teacher,” the woman running the event told Rudi as we were leaving. Earlier, this woman had been the most frightened person there, but now she had a big smile on her face. Rudi, too, was smiling. She smiled all the way to the car.

The weeks and months went by, and it seemed to me that Tommy stayed healthy. Just as importantly, he stayed out of the hospital. There were days I couldn’t even tell he was sick, or I could easily pretend he wasn’t. I could pretend these wonderful days, the best I’d ever know, would last forever.

Though there were a lot of things I couldn’t see about Tommy and would only learn from reading his journal. They still hadn’t given Tommy’s disease a name yet, and there still were no treatments for it. All Dr. Kleiner could do for him was help treat his symptoms, and these were endless.

Among them were the Kaposi lesions that would appear on his face and body. Like what Rudi had done with Maria, she taught Tommy how to use makeup. She did such a good job of this that I never knew about the lesions or the makeup.

Rudi would also often have to change their bedsheets in the middle of the night because of all the sweating Tommy would do. Sometimes she’d have to do this two or three times a night. She had to nurse him through every little cold and sickness too, as any one could’ve been fatal.

A big reason why I never knew about any of this was because Rudi never let on how much they were struggling. I remember her as happy at this time. I would never see her as happy as she was with him.

Despite all their troubles, Tommy and Rudi were developing the kind of everyday routines that any couple would have. This included taking walks into the woods with Flutter, where they would argue about everything and anything. There was nothing they could seem to agree upon, but it never mattered to him because there was never a moment with her that even approached dull, especially with her hand clenching his.

They also went to Dr. Kleiner’s office every week, where they went over his condition and got the latest test results and prognoses. No matter how depressing this got, Rudi would always find something positive. Then one time she couldn’t.

“I’ve got some great news for you two,” the doctor said to them across from his desk. “I finally found 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,” Kleiner insisted.

“We’re not giving up,” Rudi insisted back while grabbing Tommy’s hand and holding on to it for dear life. “We’re not.”

Another routine Rudi and Tommy had was spending their Saturdays at Vintage Vinyl, where they’d bring a pizza or sandwiches and listen to records all day with Butch.

They didn’t just listen to records they liked. Often they’d pick one at random and listen to the whole thing. They listened to records they would’ve never heard otherwise, such as *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* and *Patti LaBelle*. They liked the latter so much that they bought it and had Butch make a tape of it for them.

They also listened to that Coltrane album I saw the first time I was at the store. Tommy noted how the music blew him away, but he said that it was nothing compared to the poem Coltrane wrote in the liner notes, to which he played his saxophone in the record’s final movement. Two lines of this poem, in particular, grabbed him and wouldn’t let go:

*God breathes through us so completely . . .*

*so gently we hardly feel it . . .*

Rudi and Tommy didn’t spend all that time at Vintage Vinyl just for the music or even the poetry. They went there for Butch too, who’d make them laugh all day long. He also didn’t care about Tommy’s disease and refused to treat him differently because of it. He was just as rude to him as he was to everyone else.

After Rudi graduated high school early that summer, she got a job. One that was personal for her. She worked at the first counseling center in the state to help the increasing number of those diagnosed with what had just been named AIDS, and she often had to work on Saturdays. On one of these, I drove Tommy to the store in her place. As we stepped out of the car with a pizza, I noticed how thin Tommy had gotten, especially in the face, and I realized that was probably why he was always wearing an Oakland A’s baseball cap when he went out, so you couldn’t see it as much.

Even with the cap, I saw how Tommy’s hair was no longer as thick and wavy as it was when I first met him. But his smile was the same, which was on display to all of Irvington as we stepped into the almost empty store.

“You got the new DKs album,” I blurted out with surprise the moment I saw it in the stacks.

“Go on,” Butch told me with a nod and a grin as he pulled out a slice of pie, “put it on.”

Quickly, I grabbed the record and rushed behind the counter with it to the turntable as Tommy stepped up to Butch.

“Rudi’s having a birthday soon,” Tommy mentioned.

“Me too,” I also mentioned, as I put the second side of *Plastic Surgery Disasters* on the player, which was something I always did when listening to a record for the first time.

“Him too,” Tommy said with a grin while he nodded at me, before the unmistakable sound of the Dead Kennedys filled the store. You could tell it was them from the first chord. “The thing is,” Tommy went on, “I don’t know what to get her, and he’s no help at all.”

“Well, don’t look at me,” Butch insisted. “There’s a reason why I’m single.”

“But you guys like the same things.”

“Except you.”

“Come on,” Tommy grumbled with another grin, “if you were having a birthday and could have anything you wanted, what would it be?”

Butch didn’t even need a second to answer this: “To see Bad Brains live.”

“They’re good?” Tommy asked.

“They’re good,” I affirmed.

“Do they play at that A7 place?” Tommy asked next.

“They usually play at CBGB when they’re up here,” Butch told him. “But they just went back to DC a little while ago.”

“What about . . . what about Black Flag?”

“They’re in LA. They do come out here to play sometimes, but the hell if I know when.”

“Lee Ving?”

“You mean Fear? I think they’re also in LA.”

“Them?” Tommy meekly uttered after he pointed at the record I was playing.

“San Francisco,” Butch replied.

Tommy sighed, and he said, “Is there anyone good playing around here?”

“I think I’ve got some flyers for CBGB somewhere.”

Butch looked under the counter. He looked in and through all the clutter down there, and he pulled out a bunch of papers and put it on the counter. Not only did he look through it, but so did Tommy, and he saw one name that made him shine.

Rudi dragged herself into her apartment after a long day of work, only to find Tommy dragging her back out of it.

“Where are we going?” she whined as he led her into the hallway by the hand.

“You’ll see,” he told her as she shut their door just before Flutter could run out. Though this didn’t stop the dog from being heard.

Tommy kept dragging, and the two approached the front door of the building.

“I’m really beat,” she insisted with a loud sigh.

“You won’t be,” he insisted back before he flung himself and her outside, where they saw a tall driver in a black uniform waiting for them by a long white limousine. The kind she might’ve ridden if she had gone to her high school prom.

“What’s going on?” she asked with a bit of a grin.

“There’s only one way to find out,” he replied with a much bigger grin.

The limousine crawled its way through traffic in lower Manhattan before coming to a slow stop beside a parked car not far from CBGB.

Rudi looked out the window, and she said, “Why are we stopping here?”

Tommy answered by pointing out the window, at a flyer on a wall that noted Richard Hell was performing that night, and he murmured, “Happy Birthday.”

She responded first with shock. Then, she started kissing him. She kissed him again and again and wouldn’t stop kissing him.

*kisses are a better fate than wisdom*

Tommy remembered the words of the poet. The ones he had heard coming out of that classroom on that day he met Rudi. He remembered as well the man’s overly-romanticized notions of life and knew they were all true.

Hand-in-hand, Rudi and Tommy passed through the crowded bar on their way to the back, where the bands performed.

“Rudi?” called out a female voice.

Rudi released Tommy’s hand, and she turned to a short young woman with blue hair and facial piercings, who was standing alongside a small group of punks who made Rudi look conservative.

“Leila?” Rudi howled in surprise before hugging the woman.

“Where have you been?” Leila cried while she hugged Rudi back. “We haven’t seen you anywhere.”

“Busy. I’ve been busy.”

The two broke their embrace, and Rudi briefly said hello to the others. She then grabbed Tommy’s hand and introduced him, leading to some uncomfortable gazes, as Tommy didn’t fit in with them any better than Rudi had with anyone he knew. But he didn’t take it personally. He just forced a smile and told Rudi: “I’ll meet you by the stage.”

“I’ll go with you,” she replied.

“Stay with your friends,” he replied back before nodding toward a set of nearby doors and adding, “I gotta go to the bathroom anyway.”

Tommy was burning up. He could feel this the moment he entered the graffiti-covered men’s room. He was feeling so sick that he had to lean against a wall, and he slid all the way down it to the floor and wasn’t sure he’d be able to get up.

“You missed Bad Brains,” came Leila’s exasperated voice from outside the bathroom. “You missed every show.”

“I didn’t even know they were in town,” Rudi confessed.

“I thought you loved them.”

“I do. I listen to that tape you gave me all the time. I’m not sure I’d get through a day without it.”

“We’re gonna follow them down to DC. We’re leaving right after the show. Why don’t you come with us?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got something better to do.”

“What could be better than Bad Brains?”

“I can only think of one thing.”

“It’s got something to do with that guy, doesn’t it?”

“It has everything to do with him.”

“Who is he anyway?”

“I told you. His name’s Tommy.”

“Yeah, but *who* is he?”

“The boy I love.”

“The boy you what?” Leila hollered.

“He’s what gets me through the night,” Rudi told her.

Suddenly, Tommy didn’t feel so sick. He even felt himself rising off the floor.

Tommy took a seat at an empty table not far from the stage, and he realized something. For a long time, he had thought that he needed Rudi much more than she needed him and that their relationship was all one-sided. But after hearing what she had just told Leila, he started doubting this, and this didn’t make him happy at all. It scared him knowing that he wasn’t going to be around for long. It scared him so much that it put him in a daze. He only came out of this when Rudi jumped onto his lap.

“*Rudi*,” he grumbled.

“What?” she grumbled back.

“It’s your birthday. Hang out with your friends.”

“They’re not my friends,” she told him. “Not really. We just like the same music and hate the same things. That doesn’t make you a friend.”

Suddenly, she smiled, and she started singing to him: “*You are my friend.*” She sang it just like Patti LaBelle had on the record the two so unexpectedly came to love. Then, after putting her head on his chest, she added, “You’re my friend even though you don’t like all the same music and don’t hate all the same things. You’re my friend in spite of it.”

Reaching up to touch Tommy’s face, Rudi felt how hot it was. It caused her to jump a little, and she growled, “You’re sick, Tommy. We’ve been through this over and over. You gotta tell me when you’re sick.”

“I’m fine,” he insisted.

“We gotta go home.”

“We 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!”

“Don’t you get it? Every day’s my birthday. Every day I come home to you it’s my birthday. Every day I wake up to you it’s my birthday. I don’t need this.”

But Tommy wouldn’t relent. He wouldn’t budge from his chair. Nor would he let her make a fuss over him. So she just held onto him and hoped for the best, and they waited for Hell and his band to play.

Finally, they took the stage, and they played “Blank Generation.” They played the song that helped two lonely people see that they weren’t so alone. Tommy noted in his journal that, as Hell sang the song, probably for the millionth time, if only he had looked into the crowd, he might’ve seen the two not far away, with their arms and bodies entwined, looking up at him as if he were singing the most beautiful love song ever written.

As Tommy had expected, he returned to the hospital, and I think we all wondered if he’d ever leave, especially him. But we were also determined to make these days happy for him. For Tommy, that meant reading every great book there was, and I raided my grandparents’ library to make this happen.

On one of these raids, in a darkened crook I came upon a thin hardcover book that caught my attention. A first edition of *The Metamorphosis*.

“It can’t be,” I muttered before I pulled the book out and opened its cover. Even with my bad German, I could read the inscription:

*To my good friend Hermann,*

*Franz Kafka*

I had always known there was a lot of truth underneath Grandpa’s Kafka story, but I was always sure that it was well beneath it.

Now I wasn’t so sure.

I came to Tommy’s room with a big stack of books under my arm. I found Rudi lying on the bed next to him, underneath the drawing hanging on the wall, of a boy who longed for something he couldn’t even express. She was reading to him, from another book that had come from my grandparents’ library: *The Collected Poems of E. E. Cummings*:

*here is the deepest secret nobody knows*

*(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud*

*and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows*

*higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)*

*and this is the wonder that’s keeping the stars apart*

*i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)*

“I think your poem is better,” Tommy told her.

“You’re a bad liar,” she replied with a chuckle.

“So I’ve been told,” he replied back with his own chuckle.

I knocked on the door, and they turned and greeted me. After Rudi stumbled off the bed with the thick book, she sat in a chair beside it, next to a bureau that had a box of Reservoir pizza on top of it along with some Cokes. While I put the books I had brought with me next to another stack on the bureau on the other side of Tommy’s bed, she put hers on the floor and pulled out a fresh slice of pie and tried to feed it to Tommy. However, despite all the weight he was losing, he wouldn’t eat it. He just grimaced and shook his head, and he turned toward me.

“You done with these?” I asked as I pointed to the old stack.

He nodded, and I picked them up while noticing a copy of *Ficciones* hidden underneath the pizza box. “What about the Borges?” I asked next while pointing at it.

He shook his head, and I uttered, “You’re telling me that you can get through Boccaccio and Potocki in a couple of days, but you can’t finish that little book?”

“I can’t stop reading it,” he insisted.

“What so special about it?” wondered Rudi after she finished a bite of pizza.

“I’ll show you,” he said as he weakly reached for the book.

She put down her slice, and she pulled out the paperback from under the box and gave it to him. Slowly, he flipped through the pages. He did until he found the story he wanted. “This is my favorite,” he told us. “‘The Secret Miracle.’”

“That’s Grandpa’s favorite too,” I let him know. “He reads it every year on the anniversary of his first wife’s death.”

“It’s set in Prague,” Tommy explained to Rudi, “just like he was.”

“What’s it about?” she wondered after she took the book from him and curiously glanced at the story’s first page.

“This playwright during World War II,” Tommy told her. “The Nazis arrest him and sentence him to death, and he’s really upset about this.”

“I should think so,” Rudi remarked.

“But he’s not upset about dying,” Tommy insisted. “Well, maybe he’s a little upset about that. But what really upsets him is that he’ll never write his opus, his reason for being. So one night he begs God for a one-year reprieve, so he can write his play. And, guess what, God grants him his wish.”

“So he doesn’t get shot?”

“Oh, he gets shot, all right. Right on time.”

“I don’t get it.”

“On the morning of his execution, the soldiers stand him up against a wall and shoot him. But as the bullets fire, everything freezes. Even the playwright freezes. But what’s a fraction of a second for everyone else becomes a year to him, and he gets to write his play in his head. He doesn’t even care that no one will ever see it or know about it. It’s enough that he knows he wrote it, and he gets to die happy. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“I guess,” Rudi mumbled with a shrug before she lowered her eyes in disappointment.

Slowly, Tommy turned to me and grinned, and he mentioned, “She’s not much of a believer, no matter how often her nose is in that Bible.”

This angered Rudi. She rose from her seat with the book clutched in her fist and growled, “How could I believe in a God that would allow this to happen?”

She stormed out of the room. I’m not sure she even knew that she still had the book in her hand.

“I already have my opus,” Tommy murmured as he happily stared into the empty doorway. “My reason for being.”

I stayed with Tommy late into the night. I stayed until he fell asleep. For hours we discussed the books he had read. He had so much enthusiasm for them that it made me feel guilty for taking them for granted. I felt guilty for taking lots of things for granted.

As I left his room under the weight of the books he had finished, I saw Rudi sitting on the floor outside his room. She was staring into the Borges book.

“You all right?” I mumbled.

She didn’t reply.

I sat next to her, and I noticed that she was gazing at the last page of “The Secret Miracle.”

“You read it?” I whispered.

She shook her head but not at my question. “It’s not a story,” she told me with her eyes locked on the page. “It’s not fiction. It’s not.”

“That’s his style,” I explained. “All his writing reads like that. You know, like he were making an authentic and objective observation.”

“No. It’s true. Every word of it. I know it.”

I didn’t know what to say to her. Many years later, I would find the truth in Borges’ works overwhelming, especially in this story. But back then it was only a story to me. Still, I took Rudi’s hand, and she started crying. She also leaned her head on my shoulder, and I started crying too.

I woke before sunrise, and I realized that it was because of the sound of voices and music coming from downstairs.

“I think 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 replied. “Every day they humble me.”

I wasn’t too shocked hearing the two, despite how early it was. It seemed like they talked every day over the phone, sometimes well into the night, and they got together as often as they could. I guess they were trying to make up for lost time.

“Be careful not to grate the potatoes too fine,” Grandma said.

“*Sakra!”* Rudi cried out in exasperation.

“You speak Czech!” Grandma uttered in surprise. “Did your mother teach you?”

“My brother.”

“Oh, do not learn it from him. He speaks it almost as badly as your grandfather. I will teach you. I will teach you all its poetries.”

“What’s that music you’re listening to?”

“Dora Gerson. My first husband and I, we would drive to Berlin all the time just to hear her sing.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“You really like it?”

“I think I’ll make a tape of it. I bet Tommy would like it too.”

“You always surprise me, Rudi. It is such a joy at my age to be surprised.”

“What’s she singing about?”

“Times that can never return.”

Right then, the two started dancing. I could hear their footsteps on the linoleum floor as well as Grandma’s voice as she sang with the music:

*Vorbei, vorbei, vorbei —*

*Ein letztes Wort,*

*Ein letzter Gruß — vorbei*

Grandma’s voice began to break, and I wasn’t the only one who noticed this.

“What’s wrong, Grandma?” Rudi murmured.

“They burned her,” she answered with her voice breaking even more. “They burned her at Auschwitz. But they could not burn that voice. Listen to it. It outlives them all.”

With the sun disappearing in Tommy’s window, Rudi walked into the room carrying a box of Reservoir pizza.

She brought him one almost every day. She brought it that day even though she knew Tommy was connected to a feeding tube. She brought it because the pizza was one of the few things that still connected him to his old life and to being alive.

Staring at him in the doorway, Rudi noticed how he was having trouble turning a page of the Borges book. He noticed her, too, and he clumsily put the book under the covers and muttered, “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?”

“You know, I really thought the other day that I had everything I wanted. But this morning I realized there was something else. Something big. So I asked Him.”

“Asked Him what?”

“If I could have you.”

“You already have me.”

“I mean, later.”

Rudi froze. For countless seconds, she couldn’t say a thing or even breathe. She just stared at him until she finally mumbled, “What did He say?”

“He hasn’t gotten back to me yet,” Tommy replied with a bit of a grin.

“He must be pretty busy,” she replied back with her own grin. One she had to force.

“Yeah, and then there was that I cursed Him pretty badly a while back.”

“He must be forgiving about those kinds of things.”

“I sure hope so.”

I brought Tommy a trio of thick tomes from an unabridged edition of Richard Francis Burton’s translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*. I could barely carry them all. As I stepped through the door, I saw him sealing a thick and blank envelope.

“You want me to mail that for you?” I asked as I nodded at the envelope.

“I’ve got it,” he told me.

“All right,” I told him back before I lifted the books as best I could and said, “This should hold you for a while.”

The telephone rang. I walked over to the bureau to pick it up when I saw an oversized book beside it. A bilingual volume of the Talmud, which is a collection of teachings on the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. It tries to apply what’s written in them to answer questions that aren’t so easily answered, such as “why does God allow suffering?”

The book confused me, as I knew it hadn’t come from my grandparents’ library, nor had Tommy ever expressed an interest in reading it. It certainly wasn’t the type of easy reading he enjoyed. It was anything but.

“Hello?” I uttered into the phone after I answered it.

“It’s me,” Rudi answered. “I had to work late today, and I missed the last bus. I hate to ask . . .”

“I’ll be right there.”

When I stepped out of the elevator in the hospital lobby, I saw Rabbi Orenstein in the distance with his back to me, sitting on a sofa next to a middle-aged woman who had her dirty-blonde hair tied tightly in a bun.

I started toward them, wanting to say hello to the man, who I had met a few times and liked.

“I told you I would keep it a secret,” he softly said to the woman. “And I will.”

“How, how is he doing?” the woman asked while feigning disinterest.

“As good as could be expected, I guess. Fortunately, Rudi—”

“—I don’t want to talk about her or even hear about her.”

“But maybe you should.”

The woman shook her head.

“You know, I’ve been a rabbi now for many decades,” the rabbi went on. “I see sick people and their families all the time. But never have I seen anyone as devoted as that young lady. And, believe me, there are many things related to Tommy’s disease that aren’t so pretty.”

“She probably feels guilty,” the woman growled.

“Guilty?” the rabbi muttered.

“She’s the one who did this to my son, by bringing him into the gutter with her.”

I stopped right behind them, and I wanted to scream at the woman. But somehow I knew this was not what Rudi would’ve done or what she would’ve wanted me to do. So I instead rushed out of the building.

Only then did I scream.

Rudi was waiting for me on the street corner when I got to her office building in Florham Park.

I never really understood how she got the job. She certainly couldn’t have been qualified for it right out of high school. But I guess her personal experiences counted for more, especially as she had those in excess. Also, there probably weren’t a lot of people back then who wanted the job.

This required her to reach out to those with the disease, whether at the office or in the hospital. She would try to lift up these young men, men who had lost all hope, despite being in short supply herself. Maybe that was the whole point: to raise all boats in the rising tide.

What they would talk about she never told me. All she would say was that often she would just hold their hands or hug them. She would try to make them feel that they were still human and still alive.

That evening, even in the darkness, I could see that the months of doing this job, along with all the time she had spent taking care of Tommy, were weighing on her and in more ways than one. She looked as if she were about to fall over. Though, when she stepped into the Olds, I noticed that part of the reason for this was that she was carrying a few of those oversized volumes of the Talmud, which she put on her lap as I drove off.

“You know,” I said to her while tapping the top book with my finger, “it wasn’t too long ago that women weren’t even allowed to read these books.”

“Those days are never coming back,” she matter-of-factly replied.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Have you found any answers in them?”

“No, but I can’t seem to stop looking.”

“*Pizzu přinesu do nemocnice*,” I said as Rudi and I drove down South Orange Avenue.

Rudi tried to repeat it, but she got stuck on the “ř,” which is a sound that doesn’t exist in English or in almost any other language. Even for some Czechs it’s difficult. Grandpa once told me that he had a friend named Jiří who couldn’t say his own name until he was five.

“Are you sure you want to learn Czech?” I asked her.

“Underneath the unpronounceable consonants and grammatical absurdity lies a big chunk of me,” she replied.

I think it was more than just that. I think Rudi once saw herself as a leaf blowing in the wind, and all of a sudden she noticed the roots. But she was still trying to figure out how to plant them.

“But Czech is so difficult,” I told her while shaking my head.

“It’s no harder than Hebrew,” she said back.

This surprised me, and I turned to the books in her lap and said, “Are you reading those in Hebrew?”

“It’s hard enough getting at the truth,” she explained, “but when you’re not even reading the right words . . .”

I parked outside Reservoir, so Rudi could pick up dinner for herself and Tommy.

“Just wait here,” she told me after I opened my door.

“Why?” I asked in confusion.

“Please.”

Reluctantly, I closed my door, and I watched her step outside and into the busy restaurant. It didn’t take more than a handful of seconds for me to understand why she didn’t want me to come inside with her. Many of the people working there were glaring at her, especially an old man in a poorly-fitting suit, who was standing by the register with his arms crossed and a snarl on his face. The woman behind the counter was glaring at her, too, right before she dropped a pizza box onto it in front of her.

Rudi ignored the bitterness. With a face fighting to project apathy, she quickly paid for the pie, and she left even quicker.

I dropped Rudi off in front of the hospital and went home. Like on most nights, she stayed up late with Tommy so they could share their day of hopes and fears. On this night, though, it wasn’t just them doing the sharing.

“I can’t wait to meet her,” Rudi spoke into the phone while sitting on a chair next to Tommy and reading a page in the Talmud. After listening to the reply, she turned the page and insisted, “I am going to college. I just want to be sure for what.”

Glancing at Tommy, she noticed how he wasn’t looking so good, and she uttered, “I gotta go. I’ll talk to you next week.”

She hung up the phone, and she told Tommy: “Maria says hi. So does Owen, Jared, and Eliot. I had breakfast with them this morning. Would you believe they’ve literally become *The Three Musketeers?* They go everywhere together.”

“I wonder who’s responsible for that?” Tommy muttered.

Rudi didn’t reply. She just put the book on top of the other volumes, and she placed the pizza box on top of them and took out a slice, which she tried to feed Tommy. But he groaned and looked away, and he shook his head over and over.

“You don’t want them to put back the feeding tube, do you?” she murmured.

Just the mention of this was enough for Tommy to turn back to her and gobble down pizza. He gobbled as much as he could. But it didn’t help him keep it down. He had to clench his eyes closed and force his body to obey. He could feel the sweat pouring down his face, and he could feel his body shake.

Finally, the misery began to subside. He took a deep breath and opened his eyes, and he saw that Rudi was holding his hand and that she looked more pained than how he felt. It was as if she was trying to take his pain from him. I know she would’ve taken it all if she could.

“I don’t know why you go through all this,” he murmured while struggling with his words.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“You could’ve just sent me a card. No one would’ve blamed you.”

This angered Rudi. She glared at him for many seconds while trying to come up with a reply. Finally, she released his hand and put the slice of pie on top of the box and stood up, and she said to him: “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Realizing she wanted to lie beside him, he wiggled his frame and slid a bit to his left while careful not to let his IV come out, and she joined him on the bed. She put her arm around him too, and he laid his head on her chest and gripped her hand.

“Don’t think for a second that I’ve done any of this for you,” she told him as coldly as she could. “I did it all for me. I’m the most selfish person alive.”

Tommy smiled. He smiled and caressed her hand, and again she was lost for words.

“I was thinking today,” she eventually mumbled, “I was thinking maybe I could change my look a little. Get some new clothes, a new haircut. Maybe I could be, I don’t know, maybe I could be someone who wouldn’t embarrass you.”

Tommy didn’t answer. He didn’t say a word.

“Did you hear me?” she whispered.

“I fell in love with a punk rock girl,” he whispered back. “A girl who was nobody but her. Nothing less would do.”

She responded by burying her head in his shoulder, I suppose to stop herself from crying. She also grasped him. She grasped him as hard as she could and gasped, “You . . . you’re my fairy tale.”

It wasn’t long before Tommy lacked the energy to read. So we all took turns doing it for him. Grandpa’s Kafka story had made him curious about *Good Soldier Švejk*, so he asked me if I could tell it to him.

“‘Do you know, Švejk, what is a march battalion?’” I read from Grandpa’s cherished copy of the book one Sunday afternoon by Tommy’s bed.

“‘I respectfully report, Lieutenant, sir, that a march battalion is what we call a *maršbaťák*, just like a *marška* is a march company. We are forever shortening things.’

“‘Well, Švejk,’ came the grave voice of the lieutenant, ‘since you enjoy such shortenings, I will inform you that you will be going with me in a *maršbaťák*. But don’t you dare think that on the front you’ll get away with 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 will be something truly wonderful when the two of us fall on the battlefield together for the emperor and his family.’”

Both Tommy and I laughed. We did as Rudi peeked her head in the room, seeing not only this but also Nurse Templeton checking Tommy’s vital signs, who was doing so without a mask or gloves.

A small and slight woman a little older than us, the nurse had long curly blonde hair and light-blue eyes and was one of the few in the hospital who actually liked taking care of Tommy. She even requested the assignment and became almost his personal nurse.

“Thank you, Kim,” Rudi murmured to the woman as she left the room, with a smile that was answered in kind.

“I brought you something,” I told Rudi, and I handed her a Czech book entitled *Pohádky Boženy Němcové*.

“What is it?” she asked.

“A collection of her fairy tales,” I answered. “I know that’s not exactly your thing. But it will help you with learning—”

“—It’s exactly her thing,” Tommy interrupted with a grin, and Rudi grinned too, with more than a little embarrassment.

“Up for some company?” She then asked Tommy.

“Sure,” he mumbled.

My grandparents stepped inside the room, with Grandma carrying a casserole dish. “You must be tired of hospital food and all that pizza,” she said. “So we brought you some noodle kugel. Vegetarian, of course.”

The two walked over to him. To make room for her on the bed, Tommy moved over a bit, and his IV came out, and a little blood dripped down his arm. “Stay away from me!” he cried out in horror.

But Grandpa didn’t pay attention. Calmly, he grabbed a towel, and just as calmly he cleaned Tommy’s arm with it while telling him: “Blood does not scare us.”

Grandma sat on the bed next to Tommy, and she began feeding him as the phone rang.

Rudi picked it up and answered it. I could see that the voice on the other end of the line surprised her. It was all over her face as she walked the receiver to the corner of the room, where she whispered, “Mrs. Goodwin?”

The only response was the disappointment on Rudi’s face as she lowered the phone.

Rudi began working late so often that me picking her up became a daily ritual. Part of this entailed getting a pizza at Reservoir and all the unpleasantness that came with it, which never once let up. But on one particularly gloomy night, it was brightened a bit when Rudi, after she collected the pizza at the counter, saw Rabbi Orenstein smiling at her from a table a short distance away. He was smiling at her as if she were his own child. This obliterated the apathy she was feigning, and she struggled to make it out the door.

Rudi and I got off the hospital elevator at Tommy’s floor with the pizza, and we started down the hallway.

“Rudi?” came the voice of Dr. Kleiner, causing both of us to come to a sudden stop. His voice sounded so ominous that it took Rudi many seconds to turn toward the man, who seemed to be fighting back his tears.

“What is it?” she murmured as softly as she could.

“The Pneumocystis has gotten worse. If, if you have any special plans . . .”

“Does he know?”

The doctor nodded, and none of us said anything for many seconds.

“When?” she finally asked.

“Soon.”

Rudi nodded, and she turned around and walked to Tommy’s room, with me following close behind.

“I want you to know something,” the doctor called out, with Rudi and I continuing down the hall. “You gave that boy a year of life. A year he wouldn’t’ve had otherwise. That’s no small thing.”

Rudi said nothing, and we approached Tommy’s room and the sound of coughing and labored breathing that was coming from inside it. As we reached the doorway, she mumbled, “I’ll call you tonight.”

I nodded, and she took a step into the room. But she stopped herself and hugged me.

“I wish I knew what to say,” I uttered while trying to keep myself together, for her sake.

“You’re saying it,” she cried out.

Tommy wrote in his journal about how he took the news the doctor had given him. He took it better than Rudi. He had long expected it, from the time he woke up in the hospital after Deke had beaten him. He was even a little relieved to find out, as he knew his suffering would end. His only concern was Rudi, knowing that the only pain after he died would be hers. All afternoon he thought of some way he could ease this. But he could think of nothing.

Rudi slunk into his room, and she saw him staring at the simple metal menorah on the bureau, which the rabbi had left for him that morning. “It’s gonna be Chanukah in a few days,” he said after she didn’t say a thing, not even hello.

“I know,” she muttered. “Grandma’s been showing me how to make potato latkes. We didn’t even have to substitute any of the ingredients.”

Tommy grinned a bit while he continued to stare at the menorah, and he mentioned, “I must admit, when I was a kid, I had some serious Christmas envy. My friends, they all 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 eight days. What’s the big deal, right?”

Slowly, he turned his head toward Rudi, and he told her: “But I finally get it. The miracle wasn’t that the oil lasted eight days. It was that it lasted longer than 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 didn’t reply. She just stood there. She did for a long time.

“There are a few things I need to do right now,” she finally blurted out. “But you gotta promise me you won’t go anywhere.”

“Go?”

“Just promise.”

He thought about this, and he murmured, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she shouted as she rushed out of the room.

“Where you going?”

“You’ll find out!”

She disappeared down the hall. As her footsteps began to fade, Tommy heard her call out the rabbi’s name.

I didn’t realize tears were falling down my face until after I finished reading the last of Tommy’s entries that night. Quickly, I wiped them away, and I noticed that all the street people had finished showering and probably had a long time before.

“There’s only one night left,” I told Rudi as I tried to keep myself together, again for her sake.

“I know,” she told me back. “Call me tomorrow, but a few hours later than normal. I have to go to a dinner after services.”

We both hung up, and I left the bathroom, where I suddenly felt something was wrong. I didn’t know what it was, but it caused me to stand there silently.

“Another hundred,” came Josh’s voice from inside the women’s room a few steps away. “Give it to me.”

“But you promised me fifty percent.” I heard Allison plead.

“That was after expenses.”

“But . . .”

“You know,” Josh interrupted, with his tone soft but in control, “I could throw you out for just about anything. Actually, anything at all.”

“How am I ever going to make enough money?”

“I just may be able to help you out.”

I wanted to barge through the door right then and confront him. I even raised my hand to push the door open. But the weaker part of me was stronger, despite that so-called “moral code” inside me. So I just did the easy thing. I slunk down the hall while trying to convince myself that there really was nothing I could do for her.

the eighth night

I had Wednesday off, and I expected a long day of nothing.

While I got the long day, it was not what I expected, nor was it of nothing. This began early that morning when I walked into the courtyard and saw Nicole raging.

“He was in the women’s room with her!” she shrieked to a bunch of others.

“Do you see it happen?” Matt demanded.

“No, but Sarah saw him follow her in there.”

“Is she willing to file a complaint with the police?”

Nicole didn’t answer.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Allison left last night,” she told me. “Because of Josh.”

“You don’t know that,” Matt insisted.

“I know it, and I’m calling the cops.”

She took out her phone.

“What are you going to do when they kick you out of here?” Matt cried out. “What about your kids?”

Nicole hesitated. She hesitated awhile before she started dialing a number.

“I heard them last night in the women’s room,” I muttered, or someone who sounded like me. Though perhaps it was more like my sister I sounded. My perfected me. “He was threatening her,” I went on. “He’s probably trafficking her too, and all the other women who’ve left in the middle of the night. I also saw him steal the steaks and ribs.”

“Are you willing to file a complaint?” Matt howled.

“I’ll file the complaint.”

“You sure?” Nicole whispered.

“I’m sure,” I told her.

She called the police, and I turned to Matt, who just shook his head at me.

Nicole and I waited outside the gates of the shelter for the police. We waited for more than an hour. I thought I’d get more reluctant the longer we waited, especially when I thought about the consequences of what would happen. But I only felt better about it as time went on. I also felt better about me.

Finally, a police car pulled up in front, and a burly bald policeman in his thirties slowly got out of the vehicle and took my report.

“I need to speak to someone in charge,” he told us afterward.

“Dan,” Nicole said to him as she pointed through the gates. “He’s the assistant director.”

The policeman went inside, and Nicole and I again waited. This time we didn’t wait long. No more than five minutes later the man returned.

“Well?” Nicole excitedly uttered.

“This Josh had every right to be in the bathroom with her,” the policeman replied.

“In the women’s room?”

“Even in the women’s room, if he has to carry out his duties there.”

“His duties? He was threatening her, and he’s trafficking her too. We have a witness!”

The policeman turned to me and growled, “What he heard could’ve meant lots of things. It’s no proof.”

“What about stealing all that food from us?”

“This Dan person says there’s no record of any steaks and ribs being delivered in the past week.”

“That’s because Josh was in charge that night!”

“Sorry, I can’t help you.”

The policeman started toward his car, and I called out, “Josh has got a record. Just check it out.”

At once, the cop came to a halt, and he spun to me and hollered, “How do you know he’s got a record?”

“I . . . I just know.”

“Do you know if he’s got a warrant out for his arrest?”

I shook my head and mumbled, “There’s no warrant.”

“Then you’ve got nothing,” he barked before he got in his car and sped off.

Glumly, Nicole and I looked at each other for a few seconds before we went back inside the gates.

“Dan wants to see you,” Matt let me know with his arms crossed and a glare on his face, “in the office.”

I nodded and asked, “Don’t you have to be at work?”

“If only you had asked yourself that.”

I stepped inside the office, knowing exactly what was coming. I did with my head up.

Dan was sitting behind the desk next to one of his underlings, and he told me to take a seat in front of him while his underling took notes.

I sat down, and he said to me: “You have to leave. You have to leave right now. You broke so many rules that I don’t even know where to start. And be warned, if you mention any of this outside the shelter, we’ll sue.”

“Good luck serving the papers,” I told him while trying to suppress a chuckle and not doing a very good job of it.

“You should’ve let us handle it.”

“You’ve turned a blind eye to all the abuse here, to all the young women leaving in the dead of the night, to all the thievery . . .”

“That’s a lie!” he barked as he reached for the phone on his desk. “I should file charges against you right now!”

“For what?”

“Perjury!”

For a handful of moments, I thought about explaining to him what “perjury” actually meant. But while rubbing his nose in his own ignorance might’ve been enjoyable, it wouldn’t’ve accomplished a thing. So I finally took Matt’s advice as I rose to my feet. I smiled and waved. I also opened the door, which is when I noticed an envelope on the desk. A letter from Tommy.

“Can I get my letter?” I asked while pointing at it.

It didn’t take me long to pack my things into the same grimy blue backpack I came here with. With this and a small plastic bag of odds and ends, I went to the bathroom, where I saw myself in the big mirror. While I looked as thin and as old as ever, my image wasn’t so rotting, and I smiled.

This was still on my face when I left the dorm and approached the gates of the shelter, where Nicole was bashfully waiting for me. Fortunately, she didn’t get kicked out. Dan thought that I had duped her into everything, and I was happy about that. She needed the place a lot more than me.

“This is not the end of this,” she whispered to me as we hugged. “I promise you that. Everybody’s gonna be watching him.”

*Who watches the watchers?*

Now there wouldn’t be only one.

“Congratulations,” came Matt’s voice.

Nicole and I broke our embrace, and I turned toward Matt a few steps away, who was trying to hide his “I told you so” face but was not trying all that hard. “You got thrown out and for nothing,” he went on.

“It wasn’t for nothing,” I insisted. “I satisfied my moral code.”

“Your what?”

“Do you know what Patrick Swayze once told me?” Phil called out as he approached us from behind.

“What was that?” I asked him after I turned toward him.

“He said, ‘Evil can only prevail when good men do nothing.’”

“It was Edmund Burke who said that.”

“You sure? Maybe he picked it up from Paddy.”

“Maybe.”

“Now what are you going to do?” Matt wanted to know.

“I think I’ll give Palm Springs a try,” I answered. “At least it’s warmer there.”

“And gayer.”

“I could use a little gaiety,” I said with a grin, which he returned. “It is the season, after all.”

“What’s Amoun going to do?” Matt wanted to know next.

“I guess he’ll have to find himself another Hebrew.”

“In Victorville?”

We both laughed. We hugged too, and I thanked him for getting me the job and for being my friend.

Without looking back, I walked through the gates and started down the alley.

“Enjoy the streets,” came Josh’s voice from behind me.

Like with Dan, I wasn’t going to reply. Like then, I knew it wouldn’t’ve changed anything. But still I uttered, “Enjoy prison.”

“I’m not going to prison.”

I stopped and turned back to him and said, “Not today, and probably not tomorrow either. But one day.”

Again, I started off.

“How can you be so sure of that?” he called out.

“I have faith,” I called back.

The one good thing about getting kicked out of the shelter was that I could finally spend my own money. So I walked to my bank and took out a hundred dollars from the ATM. Then I bought a prepaid debit card at Walgreens and used it to buy a train ticket to Palm Springs over the phone.

The problem was that there was only one train to Palm Springs, and it didn’t leave until 4:30 the next morning, which meant I had a long wait ahead of me. With nothing better to do and no better place to do it, I started toward D Street and the Amtrak station there at the end of town.

This was one of the more notorious places in the city. More than one person told me that people got rolled there all the time, often after being drugged. But this was only at night. During the day, it wasn’t such a bad place. There was a big field behind the pretty little station as well as lots of trees and canyons behind them.

After the sun fell, though, darkness came in more ways than one. The station closed, and I had to sit outside on a bench. The temperature also fell and the winds rose. Never had I felt so cold as I shivered there in front of the tracks. It was even colder than some nights I had spent in Eastern Europe when the temperature was well below zero, no matter what measuring system you used.

With the cold and darkness came the zombies. They came from nowhere. These were homeless people like me and all the others I had known over the years, but they weren’t the same. With their lifeless eyes, they aimlessly roamed the station grounds in a fog, uttering incoherencies only they could understand while wielding crowbars that they swung through the air against horrors only they could see.

I guess I should’ve been frightened of them. But I had long been robbed of my fear of physical harm. This had actually gotten me through some rough situations over the years, as all predators, regardless of how many legs they have, feed off fear and need it to attack. But this didn’t mean that I’d been robbed of my sorrow. I felt this plenty, for all of us out there.

Time moved slowly that night. This was made worse by checking it on my phone every few minutes. I tried to break the monotony by going into the 7-Eleven across the street to buy coffee and snacks. I also tried counting the endless fright cars that would pass every ten minutes or so. I even listened to *A Love Supreme* on my phone. But all this seemed to make time move even slower.

The monotony was only broken a little after midnight when I saw a man standing by the tracks a short distance from me. Unlike all others I had seen that night, this man was no zombie. He had no crowbar, and he was in no fog. He was in anything but one.

He turned to me, and I saw the emptiness in his eyes. It was the same emptiness I had seen many times in my own eyes. Only his was worse, and this actually 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. As it got closer, the man turned back to the tracks and started counting down aloud: “10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . .” When he got to zero, he ran across the tracks in front of the train. He ran over the sound of the train’s frantic horn. Over and over it called out to him.

He made it across the tracks with a second to spare, and he continued running. He ran into the night and into the nothingness. He didn’t look back.

Earlier that day, it had taken 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 of them to speed into the station’s lot. Not seeing anyone there but me, they naturally thought I had been the one who ran across the track, and none of them look too pleased as they glared at me. They glared for nearly a minute before one slowly approached.

After he checked my explanation and my train ticket (as well as my record), the cop’s demeanor and tone quickly changed. “Whoever it was put a real fright into the train’s driver,” he told me with a bit of a cackle while pointing his thumb at the tracks.

“I bet,” I said.

“Do you have any idea why he was playing chicken with the train?”

“He wasn’t playing chicken. It was Russian Roulette.”

The policeman said nothing in reply. He just returned to the others.

So their trip wouldn’t be a total waste, they decided to chase the zombies through the grounds. This went on for twenty minutes. It was like watching a bad Keystone Cops picture, a really bad one, as the police tried to herd and capture people who were well past either.

As the fun began to wind down, I remembered that I hadn’t called Rudi. So I took out Tommy’s envelope from my jacket pocket as well as my phone, and I dialed her.

“I’m sorry to call you so late,” I told her.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Why, why do you ask?”

“What’s all that commotion in the background?”

“Oh, it’s just some kids playing.”

With that, I took out the pages from the envelope and began reading them to her.

With the sun burning brightly into his room through the open shades, Tommy drowsed off, no matter how hard he tried to keep himself awake. He’d been drifting into and out of consciousness since Rudi left the night before, and each time he drifted out of it he wondered if he’d ever drift into it again. Then he realized something. He realized that his story couldn’t end like this. He knew this because of how it began.

“Hey,” came Rudi’s soft voice.

Tommy opened his eyes, and he saw her tired but smiling face peeking inside the doorway while looking as if she were hiding the biggest secret in the world.

“Close your eyes,” she ordered.

“They just were,” he grumbled.

“Close them again.”

“What’s going on?”

“Just do it.”

He sighed but complied. A moment later, she told him: “You can open them now.”

He did. With lots of surprise, he saw Rudi strut inside the room. She was carrying a shopping bag in one hand and the long train of the beautiful white wedding gown she was wearing in the other. After putting down the bag, she showed off the dress while releasing the train.

“You’re wearing a dress,” he gasped.

“It’s a one-time thing,” she growled with her hands on her hips. “So enjoy it while it lasts.”

The gown looked familiar to Tommy. It looked so familiar that he muttered, “It looks like the one my . . .”

Slowly, Mrs. Goodwin entered the room, and she smiled meekly at Tommy.

At the end of that eventful day, the woman would tell me and others in the lobby of the hospital how shocked she had been when she first saw the state of her son. But she said what was even more shocking was how happy he looked. He looked happier than she had ever seen him and knew there could be only one reason for this all-too-obvious contradiction.

She took this person’s hand and murmured, “Hello, Tommy.”

“Mom?” he screeched while shaking his head, unable to believe what he was seeing. He opened his arms too, and she rushed up and hugged him.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered.

“I’m the one who’s sorry,” he muttered back.

“I missed you.”

“I . . . I . . . how did this . . .”

Mrs. Goodwin broke her embrace, and she turned back to Rudi and said, “You were right about her. She is a lot like me. Hopefully, she’ll outgrow it.”

“How did this all happen?” Tommy wanted to know. He wanted to know this so badly that it gave him a burst of energy.

“Shall we tell him?” his mother asked Rudi.

A taxi drove off, exposing Rudi, who was carrying the shopping bag and gazing at the big white manor in Newstead. The one that had so frightened her the first time she saw it.

It frightened her again. But this time she had no hesitation in approaching it. She marched right up to the door, took a deep breath, and rang the bell. She prayed too. She prayed for one thing:

*The courage to change the things I can.*

The door slid open. Standing there was Elizabeth, who glanced at Rudi in surprise before quickly turning away her eyes.

“Hi,” Rudi muttered.

“Hello,” spoke the woman.

“Is Mrs. Goodwin home?”

Elizabeth shook her head, causing Rudi to feel all the air leave her. But afterward the woman added, “I’m afraid she won’t see you.”

“Please,” Rudi begged. “Tommy’s dying. He’s dying right now.”

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“Please.”

The woman thought it over, with a face full of conflict. Finally, she muttered, “All right, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you so much!” Rudi cried out.

“I’m not promising anything,” she told Rudi back before she hurried off, leaving the front door open.

It didn’t take long before Rudi heard the muffled sounds of two women talking. These got louder and more animated until they weren’t muffled 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!”

Right then, Rudi heard another sound, of footsteps. They were marching toward her and were followed by Mrs. Goodwin, who appeared in the doorway with a snarl. “What do you want?” she snapped.

“Hi,” Rudi muttered.

“What-do-you-want?”

“Tommy’s very sick.”

“You think I don’t know that? Who do you think has been paying his medical bills, not to mention for that little nest of yours?”

The latter revelation shocked Rudi, but she tried to pretend it didn’t and asked, “Why won’t you see him?”

“He’s made his bed, literally,” the woman growled.

This made Rudi furious. “He got it from tainted blood!” she yelled with her fists shaking. “Not that it matters. The disease doesn’t care who, why, or how. Only people like you care!”

“What do you want from me, money?”

“That’s all people like you ever think about: money. Making it and spending it and lording it over others. Well, maybe if you left this palace once in a while, you’d see there’s a whole world out there!”

Now Rudi wasn’t the only one furious. Mrs. Goodwin’s face turned a shade darker than red, and she became someone else. Someone that even Rudi found menacing. This someone took a step toward her with her own fists clenched, and then another, causing Rudi to step back in fear of someone for the first time since Deke died.

“People like me?” the woman roared with a strange and gruff accent. “You think I was born in this, this palace? They didn’t even allow Jews in this neighborhood when I was your age. You, you think you’ve had it rough, but you know nothing. 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 . . .”

Instead of finishing her thought, Mrs. Goodwin spun back to her door and rushed back into her house, and she was just about to slam the door when Rudi called out, “This is your last chance!”

The woman stopped, but she didn’t turn around or even move.

“This is your last chance to say goodbye,” Rudi went on. “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.”

For many seconds, Mrs. Goodwin just stood there. Then slowly she turned her head, and she stared at Rudi for a few moments before mumbling, “Let me get my coat.”

“There’s a favor I need to ask.”

Mrs. Goodwin ran inside her house, followed by Rudi.

“You’re not wearing my dress,” the woman hollered while shaking her head in a constant motion. The idea of Rudi marrying her son was terrible enough but that she wanted to do so in her wedding gown was too much.

Rudi stopped in the doorway, and she called out, “Mrs. Goodwin . . .”

Mrs. Goodwin stopped too, and she spun to Rudi, and she saw the desperation in the her eyes. This caused her to pause for a moment, but still she told her: “Don’t you see how outrageous this is?”

“I know,” Rudi murmured as she lowered her eyes. “You have every reason to say no. I would.”

The woman turned back around, but she didn’t go anywhere. She just sighed and uttered, “All right. You can wear the dress. But I won’t have anything to do with this . . . this so-called wedding. I’m just going to say goodbye to my son and leave.”

Rudi nodded. She did even though the woman couldn’t see it, and she followed her up the long winding wooden staircase. As she reached the top, she noticed Elizabeth staring at them from below. She was staring in bewilderment.

Mrs. Goodwin sat on the edge of her bed with her arms and legs crossed, and she feigned disinterest as she watched Rudi put on the wedding dress. But she couldn’t do this for long. After seeing how well the gown fit Rudi, she found herself rising off the bed and stepping up to her. From a nearby drawer, she grabbed a small box of needles, and she knelt in front of her and started shortening the sleeves a little.

“On my first date with Tommy’s father,” she mumbled while looking lost in another time, “he took me to see *The Sound of Music* on Broadway. He didn’t seem to be paying much attention to it. Or to me, for that matter. It wasn’t exactly love at first sight.”

“I know how that is,” Rudi told her.

The woman grinned, and she went on, “So you can imagine my surprise when, after we got engaged, he said he wanted me to have a dress just like the one Mary Martin wore on our first date.”

“I always watch the movie when it comes on TV,” Rudi mentioned. “I watch it every year. I’ve never told anyone that before, not even Tommy.”

Mrs. Goodwin rose to her feet, and she led Rudi to a full-length mirror in the corner of the room, where Rudi blushed at her image. This must’ve melted whatever coolness the woman still felt toward Rudi, because she again grinned, and she murmured, “You’re so beautiful.”

“Nah,” Rudi insisted while shaking her head and blushing even more.

“Don’t argue with your mother-in-law.”

This last word surprised Rudi. It was all over her face as she stared at the woman in the mirror.

“At least not until after the honeymoon,” the woman continued. “That’s how it was with my mother-in-law. She was all peaches and cream until right after the honeymoon.”

“I guess I won’t have to worry about that,” Rudi remarked with her head down.

“What do you mean?”

Rudi started to cry, and she turned to Mrs. Goodwin and hugged her, and she muttered, “There’s not gonna be a honeymoon.”

The woman hugged her back, and she told her: “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. They laughed loudly. They also broke their embrace and grabbed each other’s hands, and Mrs. Goodwin said, “We better hurry. We’ve got a wedding to go to.”

Once the two women had finished their story, Rudi again put her hands on her hips, and she took a step toward Tommy and growled, “So, are you gonna marry me or what?”

“You call that a proposal?” he muttered.

“It’s the best you’re gonna get.”

“We . . . we’d need a . . .”

Rabbi Orenstein entered the room with a big smile on his face, and he pulled out a juice glass from behind his back and told everyone: “I believe that’s my cue.”

“We need to get you a tux,” Mrs. Goodwin said to her son.

“A tux?” he uttered.

“And somehow I’ll have to find a photographer.”

“And the guests will be coming any minute,” Rudi interjected.

“Guests?” Tommy uttered next.

“What about music?” Mrs. Goodwin asked Rudi.

Rudi took the portable stereo from the shopping bag, and she placed it on the bureau next to Tommy, and she hit play. The sounds of “Moonlight Serenade” filled the room, causing Mrs. Goodwin to gasp, “Glenn Miller?”

Rudi responded by sitting on the bed next to Tommy and taking his arm, and she told the woman she’d forever call her mother: “It’s our song.”

“Kids today,” Mrs. Goodwin mumbled while shaking her head.

Wearing an itchy suit that the moths in my closet knew better than me, I arrived with a big cake box just as the rabbi left the room so that he could complete his rounds before the ceremony.

I was shocked at Rudi’s appearance. I was so shocked that I almost fell over, along with the cake. Seeing this, she grinned as she came up to me and did a pirouette.

“Who are you?” I cried out. “And what have you done with my sister?”

She giggled. She also slapped my arm, again almost sending me to the floor, along with the cake. But she grabbed me at the last moment. She also put her arm around me and said, “You’re gonna have to give me away today, big brother.”

“I don’t even know if Jews do that,” I replied, after chuckling a bit at what she had just called me. She calls me this to this day, even though we never did find out who was born first.

“We’ll make our own rules,” she insisted.

I opened the cake box, revealing a beautiful multilayered wedding cake. It even had painted wooden figurines of a bride and groom on top of it, with the bride’s hair spiked a bit. “Grandma was up all night making this,” I said.

“Where are they?” Rudi asked.

“They’ll be here soon. They dropped me off in front. Though I should tell you . . .”

“Did someone say something about a wedding?” howled Butch.

We turned around and saw Butch march inside the room, wearing a Black Flag T-shirt and a blue tie around his neck. He was also holding an old record.

Rudi ran up to him and hugged him. Though afterward she pointed at the record with some annoyance and said, “What’s that?”

“A gift,” he said back.

“I told you, no gifts.”

“It’s not for you.”

Without waiting for a reply, Butch walked up to Tommy, and he handed him a copy of *Live Yardbirds: Featuring Jimmy Page*.

Tommy looked at the record in surprise, and he muttered, “I’ve never even heard of this.”

“It’s very rare. It was only out for like a week.”

“Wow.”

“Now you have something to listen to when you get home.”

Tommy smiled. He smiled while trying to keep himself together. He also took Butch’s hand with both of his and told him: “Now I have something to listen to.”

Slowly, Grandma led Grandpa into the room by the arm, with Grandpa looking as if he were anywhere but there.

“My little girl!” Grandma cried out with her hands in the air when she saw Rudi in her dress.

Rudi rushed into her arms, and the two hugged and kissed.

“Perhaps you have none of my DNA,” Grandma murmured to her, “but you have all of my soul.”

Slowly, they broke their embrace, and Rudi turned to Grandpa.

“*Už jsme na Lucerně?”* he mumbled, thinking he was at the dance hall in Prague he frequented as a young man.

“I’m afraid this is not one of his good days,” Grandma said.

Rudi smiled at him, and she took him into her arms and whispered, “Thank you, Grandpa, for giving me this day.” After pulling him even closer, she added, “*Mám tě strašně moc ráda*,” telling him in the language he loved just how much she loved him.

Mrs. Goodwin was somehow able to hire a photographer on no notice. He rushed into the hospital room just before the tailor, who fit Tommy into a tuxedo under the watchful gaze of Mrs. Goodwin.

Nurse Templeton was the next to arrive. She came even though she wasn’t even working that day. The rabbi returned as well. He did while calling out, “Look who I found.” He after led into the room a bashful Mr. Agnellino, who was carrying a large stack of pizzas.

Rudi walked up to them in surprise and uttered, “We didn’t order pizzas.”

“These are on me,” Mr. Agnellino replied.

“I don’t understand.”

He didn’t answer her right away. First, he put the pizzas on a nearby dresser, and he turned toward her and said, “You know, for a long time now, you’ve been coming into my restaurant. It’s seems like every day you come, and you buy a pizza from me, even though me and everyone else there is mean to you. And none of us can understand why. Why is it that she cannot get the message? This awful person everyone says such terrible things about. Then, 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’ve been doing for this poor . . . and, and I’ve never been so ashamed.”

“Forget about it,” she insisted.

“I won’t,” he insisted back. “You’re a saint.”

“I’m not. Really.”

“Listen to me, I know a little about these things. You’re a saint. They come in all shapes and sizes . . . and hairstyles.”

Rudi tried hard not to smile, but she couldn’t help herself.

“I want you to know something,” Mr. Agnellino went on. “I want you to know that, from this day on, for as long as I own that restaurant, for as long as my children and grandchildren own it, you will be treated like a member of the family whenever you step inside. This is a promise.”

She hugged him, and he hugged her back, and she muttered, “You’re staying for the wedding, aren’t you?”

He nodded, and the rabbi called out, “So, are we ready?”

Before Rudi could reply, Maria rushed into the room. She was wearing a blue gown and was alongside a small woman with auburn hair, who was wearing a red dress and dark-rimmed glasses and looking like someone about to meet her in-laws for the first time.

Maria screamed her head off. She also threw up her arms while shaking all over, and Rudi did much the same before the two ran up to each other and hugged.

“I didn’t think you’d make it,” Rudi cried out.

“She drove so fast I don’t even remember passing Delaware,” interjected her friend.

“It’s easy to miss,” Maria maintained as the two continued to hug.

Many years later, I would reminisce about this moment and many others with Maria. She never did become a playwright. After college, she moved to Hollywood and became a sought-after screenwriter known for her strong female characters. I once ran into her on Sunset Boulevard. Amid the heat and smog, she said to me: “I write about heroes all the time. But Rudi’s the only one I’ve met. There’s probably a little of her in every one I’ve created. Probably more than a little.”

Rudi and Maria finally broke their embrace, and Maria pointed to the woman beside her and said, “This is Sandra.”

“It’s great to finally meet you,” Rudi told her as she shook her hand. “Thank you for coming to my wedding and on such short notice.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” Sandra told her back. “I’ve never heard of anything so romantic, and you look so totally awesome.”

“I hate to be a spoiler,” the rabbi interrupted, “but I really need to be leaving soon.”

“All right,” Rudi replied. “Let’s get this on.”

“Wait for us!” came the voice of a boy down the corridor, along with his footsteps and those of others.

Eliot rushed into the room first. He was a senior now and no longer looked so geeky. He looked like the confident young man he was becoming. He’d eventually go to Stanford as well as to Silicon Valley, where he’d become an engineer and a high-tech entrepreneur.

“My favorite Quincy Punk!” Rudi howled as she hugged him.

Owen came into the room next. With the help of his friends, he finally graduated high school and was working at a local auto repair shop. Some years later, with a little investment from Eliot, he would run a whole chain of them called Good Karma, whose motto was: “We treat our customers like friends. Because they are.”

Rudi jumped into his arms, into the arms of the man she had so unexpectedly come to care about, and she kissed him on the cheek, causing him to blush.

Jared was last to enter. He was premed at Seton Hall University just down the road and would eventually become a doctor. Working for a missionary organization, he’d spend his life traveling the world, giving care and comfort to anyone in need while making the most of his second chance.

Rudi hugged him the longest and hardest. I think this was because he knew more than anyone else there all the conflicting feelings she must’ve been experiencing, of both happiness and doubt as to whether she deserved any of it.

While wiping her eyes a bit, Rudi released her arms from Jared and said to the rabbi: “We’re ready.”

“Well, where do I begin?” he told everyone as he looked around the room. After blinking a bit at the flash of the photographer’s camera, he added, “I’ve certainly never done a wedding like this. We have no *ketubah* or *chuppah*. We don’t even have wine. But what we do have are two young people who love each other. Something I can attest. So hopefully God will give us a pass on the rest. Now, Rudi, you’re supposed to circle the groom seven times. But under the circumstances, why don’t you just sit next to him.”

Mrs. Goodwin, who was sitting next to Tommy on the bed, rose, and Rudi took her place. Once all of us had crowded around them, the rabbi gave Tommy a kippah, which he struggled to put on.

Finally, he got it, and the rabbi turned to Rudi and said, “You are Jewish, right? I’ve just assumed by your last name and your interest in the Talmud and Hebrew and . . .”

Rudi looked as if she weren’t sure how to respond. Even after all the reading she had done and all the cooking and Sabbaths she’d experienced, I think she still wasn’t sure what she was, no matter what Jewish law told her. I think she still thought of herself as that leaf blowing in the wind, looking for someplace to root herself.

Again the rabbi looked around the room, and he mumbled, “I realize that this is all rather un—”

“—She’s Jewish,” Mrs. Goodwin interrupted before putting her hand on Rudi’s shoulder.

Rudi smiled, and she put her hand on top of the woman’s. But the rabbi was still hesitant.

“She is our granddaughter,” Grandma declared, causing the rabbi to spin toward her and Grandpa. “She is as Jewish as we are.”

“Thank you, Grandma,” Rudi murmured, in a voice rooted in love. “That was even better than the cake.”

“Who has the rings?” the rabbi asked next.

This question floored Rudi and was only answered with quiet.

“Someone does have the rings,” the rabbi went on as he looked around the room once more.

“We don’t have any,” Rudi mumbled in embarrassment.

“Oh, yes, you do,” Mrs. Goodwin insisted. “At least you have one.”

After taking off her wedding ring, she offered it to Tommy, who shook his head and told her: “I can’t let you do that, Mom.”

“Your father would’ve wanted you to have it,” she told him back. “He would’ve been so proud of you right now. I’m proud of you. This, this is our wedding gift to you.”

Reluctantly, Tommy took the ring.

“Put the ring on Rudi’s right index finger,” the rabbi let him know, “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 even more than he had with the kippah. But, after many false starts and even more pauses once he got it started, he got through it.

Now it was Rudi’s turn, and she didn’t need to be told what to do. But she didn’t have a ring for Tommy. So she put a finger around his, and she murmured, “*Ani l’dodi, ve dodi li*: *I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine*.”

“We just have to break the glass,” the rabbi told everyone. He found the juice glass and wrapped it in his handkerchief before putting it between Tommy’s foot and the bedpost.

Tommy tried to break it. He pushed with all the strength he had left in his body. But he just couldn’t do it.

“Maybe I could find a light bulb,” the rabbi suggested. “It’d be easier.”

“I can do it,” Tommy growled.

Again, he tried, and again he couldn’t break it.

“Is it that important?” wondered Rudi.

“It’s that important!” Tommy hollered with his face red and sweating. “It signifies that joy must always be tempered, and no one knows this more than us.”

It took a few moments for all this to sink in for Rudi. But once it had, she took his free hand with hers, and she whispered, “You can do it, baby. I know you can.”

Tommy clenched his eyes closed, and again he tried to break the glass, and he wouldn’t stop trying. There wasn’t anyone watching this who wasn’t crying. Even Grandpa was crying, and so was the photographer, who had to stop taking pictures. A set of teardrops also fell down Tommy’s cheeks just as the glass cracked.

“*Mazel tov!”* the rabbi called out.

The room erupted in cheers, but this did nothing to stop everyone’s tears. Mrs. Goodwin’s face, in particular, was bathed, and she ran out of the room while calling out her son’s name.

“What comes next is called the *yichud*,” the rabbi said to everyone after wiping his face with the back of his hand and taking a long deep breath, “where, by Jewish law, we’re supposed to give the bride and groom twenty minutes of seclusion.”

“We can eat downstairs,” Mr. Agnellino shouted as he picked up the pizza boxes and headed out the door. Slowly, we all followed him after congratulating the couple and shaking their hands. Tommy tried to do this as warmly as he could, as he knew he wasn’t just saying goodbye but farewell.

The last person to leave was Maria. She’d been crying since before the ceremony began and was still crying when she hugged her best friend and muttered, “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” Rudi muttered back.

Reluctantly, Maria broke her embrace and left the room, and she closed the door behind herself.

“Close your eyes,” Tommy ordered while glancing at the ring on Rudi’s finger.

“What’s going on?” Rudi grumbled.

“Just do it.”

Rudi did. Moments later, he told her to open them, and she saw him putting his chai necklace on her.

“This is my wedding gift for you,” he explained. “Something to remind you.”

Rudi gazed at the pendant, and she took it in her fingers.

“But it isn’t to remind you of me,” he continued. “It’s to remind you of that word . . . *living*. The most precious word there is. Don’t you ever forget it.”

Tommy clasped the necklace, and Rudi leaned over to the stereo and hit play. With music pouring into the room, she turned back to her husband and said, “Just look at us, Tommy. Who’d have thought?”

“Me,” he replied matter-of-factly. “I knew it from the beginning.”

Rudi didn’t reply back, and the two just stared at each other as if they didn’t know what to do next.

“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.”

Slowly, she leaned toward him, and she gently kissed him, with their lips barely touching.

Still, he swooned.

The elevator door opened, and Rudi rushed into the hospital waiting area and toward us.

We were still trying to process what we had just witnessed. Nobody was eating and barely a word had been spoken.

Rudi flew into the arms of Mrs. Goodwin, who mumbled, “Tommy, is he . . .”

“He wants a piece a cake,” Rudi uttered. “That son of yours is so strong. He’s so much stronger than me.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” the woman murmured.

Tommy was right. His story couldn’t end like this, and he hung on after the wedding.

This was just another small miracle in a year full of them, another chance to exceed expectations. No one knew how long it would last, but with the holidays upon them and with the hospital unable to do anything more for Tommy, the two decided to spend what time they had in their home together. He even got to listen to that Yardbirds record.

This was how Tommy’s journal ended. But like him, I knew from the beginning of the story that this wasn’t the end of it. I knew, too, that only Rudi knew the end. So I asked her.

But she wouldn’t tell me, and I no longer could bribe her with more of the story.

“Please,” I begged her over the phone. “It’ll be the best Chanukah gift I’ll get.”

She chuckled but still didn’t say a thing. For a long time, she didn’t. But I knew she couldn’t turn down a request on the last night of Chanukah. Not just because she was my sister but because she was also a rabbi. The kind others would aspire to be.

The end of Tommy’s story began on the first night of Chanukah that year. This happened to coincide with Christmas Eve, so the stores that day were mobbed. As the sun set and the snow fell all around her, Rudi found herself in front of the Livingston Mall, which was a place she loathed, just like all places like it. But she wasn’t there for herself.

While listening on her Walkman to Lee Ving’s most unusual take of the holiday season, Rudi marched inside the building. She marched as well through a corridor that led to the stores, in the direction of a woman who was leaving with two small children and lots of shopping bags. Horrified by Rudi’s appearance, which was likely made even more menacing because of all the snow on her hair, she pulled her kids out of Rudi’s path, as if Rudi were a charging lioness, and perhaps she was.

Rudi shuffled through a row of men’s shirts in a department store called Bamberger’s. She had already been in the mall for an hour by then and had found nothing. Everything seemed ordinary when she needed something that was anything but.

*What do you give someone who’s about to die?*

Just then, Rudi noticed a heavyset middle-aged security guard, who was anxiously watching her not far away while talking into a handheld radio. Taking this as a sign to try someplace else, she sighed and headed back toward the mall area, followed by the guard every step of the way. He followed her until she left the store. There she walked to a railing and looked down, and she saw a poorly-stuffed Santa Claus who was doing nothing more than going through the motions.

“Fake,” she growled, “like everything here.”

Angrily, she started toward the escalator and the exits below. But she stopped when she saw a chocolate shop across the way.

With his hand shaking, the frightened clerk put some white chocolate into a paper bag. He afterward offered Rudi the bag, with his hand shaking even more.

Rudi glared at him. She also slapped some money onto the counter and grabbed the bag, and she rushed out of the store and down the escalator toward the exits. But as she reached a corridor leading to the parking lot and the bus stop beyond it, something in a toy store window caught her eye. It was a miniature waterfall, much like the one Tommy loved but was no longer strong enough to visit. Best of all, she had just enough money to buy it.

“There it is, Mommy!” came a girl’s voice from the other side of the store. “There it is!”

Rudi didn’t want to look. She wanted to hurry inside the store and buy the waterfall. But she couldn’t help peeking her head around the corner of the building, where she saw a little girl of around five jumping up and down in front of the store’s window as she pointed at a lone Cabbage Patch Doll.

Slowly and without nearly as much excitement, her mother walked up to the window and glanced at the doll. She especially glanced at its price before turning to her daughter. Rudi could see the sorrow in her eyes as she tried to find the right words. “Maybe . . . maybe next year,” she told the girl.

The girl tried to hide her disappointment. But she couldn’t look her mother in her eyes as she muttered, “It’s all right, Mommy. Really.”

“How about some hot chocolate?”

The little girl nodded, and the two walked off hand in hand with their heads hanging.

Rudi tried to ignore this. She also tried to forget all the disappointing Christmases she had experienced as a child. This took some time, but finally she did both, and she rushed into the store and through it until she came upon a counter. Behind this stood a little man with thick glasses and a bow tie, who looked older than time.

He turned to her. Unlike everyone else she had encountered at the mall that day, he smiled at her. He smiled warmly and said, “Happy Chanukah.”

Thinking he must’ve been talking to someone else, Rudi glanced around. But there was no one else nearby. So she turned back to the man in surprise, not only not understanding his kindness but how he could tell she was Jewish when she herself hadn’t known.

“What can I do for you?” the man murmured.

Rudi looked at the waterfall in the window. She looked and looked at it, but she pointed at the doll.

The old man smiled, and he took the doll from the window while telling her: “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, and he asked, “Do you want me to wrap it?”

Rudi looked out the store window, and she saw the mother and daughter drinking hot chocolate at a bench not far away, and she told the man: “If you can do it fast.”

“It won’t take but a minute,” he insisted, and he started wrapping the gift. He wrapped it with a fancy gold paper fashioned from countless little stars.

“You think you could do me a favor?” Rudi wondered.

“What’s that?” the man mumbled.

She pointed out the window at the mother and daughter, and she said, “Could you give the doll to that woman over there?”

This surprised the man. He stopped with the wrapping and looked out the window at the two sitting at the bench. He then turned to Rudi and uttered, “I don’t understand.”

“Tell her,” she replied, “I don’t know. 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 little girl.”

Again, the old man looked at the woman and the girl. He looked at them longer than before, and he must’ve noticed their sadness, because he spun to Rudi and smiled at her again. I’m sure he smiled even warmer than before.

“What about you?” he softly asked. “Can I get something for you to give?”

“I’m fine,” she grumbled before she started fishing through her seabag for her purse.

The man finished with the wrapping as Rudi put some money on the counter and rushed off.

“Don’t you want a receipt?” the man called out.

“No,” Rudi called back.

“Or your change?”

Rudi didn’t answer. She just left the store and headed out of the mall, cursing her stupidity. But at the corner of the corridor she again stopped. She stopped in the same exact place she had stopped before, and she turned around. For a reason even she didn’t know, she waited too.

The old man exited the store. He did with a plain paper shopping bag in his hand. With a bit of a smile, Rudi watched him inch toward the woman and the little girl. The little girl who’d still believe in fairy tales.

Rudi opened the front door of her apartment, to the sounds of “Moonlight Serenade.” There she saw Tommy walking a red gift-wrapped box toward the simple metal menorah on their mantlepiece, followed every step of the way by Flutter. The dog followed him as if her life depended on it.

Rudi noted how Tommy was no longer the gorgeous football player she had first met. But she found him more beautiful than ever and wanted to keep this locked inside her.

Tommy knelt, and he put the gift under the menorah. Turning to Rudi, he smiled, and he said to her: “You’ve caught me.”

She shook her head, and she mumbled, “I didn’t get you anything.”

“You’ve already given me your gift.”

“I did get you a little something,” she insisted. After marching over to him, she kneeled beside him before taking off her bag and reaching inside it for the chocolate.

Which he enjoyed that night in the arms of his gift.

the end