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THE CHANUKAH GIFT

by

Colin J Cohen

Blurb

On a Chanukah in a bleak desert, a homeless man reconnects with his twin sister when he receives a series of letters postmarked forty years earlier. Inside them is a journal he reads to Rudi, of a dying teenage boy they knew, who’s gifted the chance to replay the last year of his life and avoid the one thing that will end it. Her.

As Tommy can only vaguely recall Rudi, this seems easy. He has everything: looks, wealth, and a bright future while she’s a troubled punk with no future at all. But he can’t control his fascination of a girl unlike any other, even after he uncovers an evil that threatens to destroy them both.

With elements of mystery, magic realism, historical fiction, and memoir*, The Chanukah Gift* is a coming-of-age novel about the unstoppable pursuit of a happily ever after, 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 know I had a twin when I was growing up until she came crashing upon me.

This would happen 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 past Matt as he fixed a heater behind the Motel 6 where we worked. I pushed it toward the dumpsters, where sat a scruffy and aging man.

A handful of steps from him, I came to a stop, in front of a pair of dirty needles lying among the sand blowing across the crumbling asphalt.

This was a sight so common that my only reaction was to pick them up with one of my heavily-gloved hands.

“Hey,” came an accented voice behind me.

Turning toward it, I saw the motel manager and the big smile on his chubby face. 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 reenacting Exodus all by himself.

I really was kind of his slave. He had me do eight hours of work in a four-hour shift and didn’t even pay me minimum wage. He found a loophole in the law that let him evade it.

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 with interior corridors. “And power-wash the walkways. Oh, 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.

With his hand shaking, he pointed at what I had dropped. “Those weren’t mine. I would never just leave them on the ground like that.”

I tried not to grin. But I couldn’t stop myself. “I appreciate that.”

Like the morning, the afternoon wasn’t much different than most others. Matt and I took a pair of buses from Hesperia and were walking home along 7th Street in Victorville, a whimpering city of concrete and glass that had never quite risen from the sands underneath it.

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

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

Shaking my head, I lifted my arms into the air. “If a man is destined to rot in the desert, he cannot get hit by a car.”

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

The two of us got to the gates of our home. In the alley in front of it, we saw a man brooding over the open hood of a Civic, whose fender was almost touching the ground.

“What’s wrong?” Matt asked.

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

I could tell Matt was tired, that the last thing he wanted to do was fix something else. But he stepped up to the car and gazed into it.

“Matt?” a female voice called out from inside the gates.

“Yeah?” he called back.

“The washing machine’s broken again.”

“I’ll take a look at it in a bit.”

Bending over the engine, Matt began tinkering with it.

“Thanks,” Billy murmured to him.

“We’re all in this together.”

Like the morning and the afternoon, the evening started like most others. I was eating dinner with dozens of others.

As I finished my plate of sauerkraut and mashed potatoes, I noticed the heavyset middle-aged man across from me slipping silverware into his pockets.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

Jerry smirked. “The usual.”

I rose with my tray, and Jerry leaned over the table and whispered, “You haven’t seen any suspicious characters outside, have you?”

“That’s all I see.”

He nodded with the smirk back on his face, and I dropped off my tray in the collection area of the dining hall. Only then did I discover there was something different about this evening. Glancing at a calendar on the wall, I saw 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 before and religion long before that. But the holiday invoked memories and mostly good ones.

These were still playing in my head when I cleaned the dining hall later and 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 an end when the glass door opened and Matt stepped past me carrying a towel.

It was my turn. I walked into the tiny room and up to a large man in his thirties, who was sitting behind the desk and crouched over it. With his graying beard, bulging belly, and red cheeks, Josh looked like Santa Claus, only without the jolly or good cheer.

He didn’t seem to notice me. He was gazing into the large schedule in front of him as if it held the secrets of the universe, and he began writing my name in a slot. “You got laundry tomorrow morning.”

I tried hiding my exasperation, which came from explaining to him night after night why I couldn’t do this, but I didn’t do a very good job of it. “I work in the morning, like I do almost every morning.”

With his own exasperation, he crossed out my name. “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, and I turned back to him.

He held out a thick white envelope. “This came for you.”

Barely glimpsing at it, I grabbed it and walked out of the office. I walked a few steps to a set of cubbies and tossed the towel up into mine.

From there I left the building, and I found myself in a courtyard that was set up like a diner, with a dozen weathered booths and all the lost people passing the time in them.

I stood 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 wanted to believe.

“*Mann Tracht, un Gott Lacht*,” my grandmother would say in Yiddish. “Man plans, and God laughs.”

I continued listening to everyone. I listened to the normality they tried to project. I listened to how vainly they tried.

Vaguely, I recalled the envelope.

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

Glancing through them, my disinterest decreased with each one, until it hit me who had written them. Which led me to grab the envelope and gape at it. With my mouth and eyes stretched wide, 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. Under a full moon that silhouetted the palm trees and canyons to the right of me, I stared at the pages spread out on the table and tried to make sense of them.

I couldn’t. So 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.

I plugged it in and slowly dialed a number, one I hadn’t called in so long that I thought I had forgotten it.

It rang and rang, and suddenly I hoped it wouldn’t answer. I even put my finger over the disconnect button and looked for the will to push it.

“Hello,” came her voice.

I couldn’t recall the last I heard it, but I would’ve recognized it after a thousand years. It was the same as it always had been, strong and confident and unafraid. Along 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.

She repeated herself, and I found some words. “It’s me.”

Rudi had to look for words herself. She looked longer than I had. “Where are you?”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t want to take up 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?”

I could hear her gasping for air and could almost see her falling forward. I even reached out to catch her.

“I know it’s ridiculous,” I told her, “but it’s right in front of me.”

“What is?”

“I don’t know. Some kind of journal he wrote.”

“He never wrote a journal.”

“You sure about that?”

Rudi paused. She paused before answering, “I’m never sure of anything. It kinda comes with the job.”

“Do you want me to mail it to you? 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?”

I shook my head. “I just skimmed through it, but it seems real personal.”

“He must’ve wanted you to have it.”

“But how?”

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

I didn’t reply. I wasn’t sure that I wanted to relive all that had happened, and I was pretty sure that I didn’t want her to.

Still, with a drawn-out sigh, I collected and ordered the pages by the numbers written on the bottom of them, and I looked at the first entry, dated December 24, 1983. What I noticed right away about it was how the date was written in a different-colored ink than the rest of it, as if written at a different time.

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

He was gazing into a full-length mirror, where he saw a tall but gaunt and sickly young man in a white terrycloth robe sitting on a bed, whose hair was so thin that he could see through to his scalp. The other thing he saw was how he was tying a yellow ribbon over a red gift-wrapped box as snow fell through the window beside him and an old Glenn Miller song played from a portable stereo on the end table by the bed.

Hearing a chain rattle, 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.

He returned to the ribbon, and he struggled to tie it. He struggled for what seemed like hours, knowing he had to get it right. Over and over, he tied and untied it, often having to rest between the two.

With the sun having fallen and sweat pouring down his face, Tommy grinned at the big perfect loops spread across the width of the box. Which 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 it, Tommy lowered himself to his knees. This took time, more than it had to raise himself. But he got the gift on the floor as the front door of the apartment creaked open.

He turned toward it, and he saw a young woman his age, who otherwise couldn’t’ve been more different. She contrasted not only with him but with herself. Her powder-white face contrasted with her short and spiked jet-black hair and with her thick black mascara and a glossy black lipstick that matched her nails. Contrasting with all this was the oversized blue-and-white football jacket she was wearing, with “Tommy” and a big “C” stitched into the front of it.

He smiled at her, reflecting the joy washing over him. It just kept coming. It wouldn’t let up and was so strong that he couldn’t think of anything else. But some words mumbled out. “You’ve caught me.”

She didn’t smile back. “I didn’t get you anything.”

“You’ve already given me your gift.”

“I did get you a little something.”

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

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

He leaned toward her. “What’s wrong?”

Her surprise only got stronger as she shook her head. “I don’t know. 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 shaking her head at the envelope.

Gently, he took it from her, and gently he opened it. From inside it he pulled out a small white card, the kind you’d find in a board game.

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

“One Replay.”

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

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

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t. His attention was on the image reflecting off a window, of a confused but handsome and muscular seventeen-year-old boy, who had thick and wavy brown hair and was wearing the blue-and-white football jacket with his name and the big “C” stitched into it.

The voice repeated itself, and Tommy noticed two more things: the gray school backpack across one of his shoulders and the girl his other arm was around.

Her name was Darlene, and she was the most beautiful girl at Columbia High School. With her strawberry-blonde permed hair and long perfect legs and her million-dollar smile, she could’ve easily become a model. The Jewish Brooke Shields everyone called her. But she had bigger ambitions than that. “Tommy?”

He spun toward her. “What?”

Glancing around, Tommy saw 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 talking and joking around while waiting to go inside on a cold but sunny morning.

Trying to make sense of what had happened, or what he thought had, Tommy came to the only conclusion that made sense: 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 like when waking from a dream, he was quickly forgetting it.

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

Alarm came across Darlene’s face. “What are you doing?”

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

He wrote down everything he could remember, from the time he’d glanced into the mirror by the bed, and he read it. He read it again and again. “One replay? A replay of what?”

Darlene’s alarm turned into fright. “What are you talking about?”

Not even Tommy knew the answer. But he did know that he should’ve been happy, that whatever he’d experienced wasn’t real. Gazing once more at his reflection, he saw how healthy and strong he was and how he had his whole life ahead of him.

Despite this, he felt loathing. The same he’d felt for everything around him, including himself, since the summer. He felt this all the time apart from the few minutes with that crazy-looking girl he didn’t know.

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

No one answered Joey’s question, and all the chatter outside the school ceased. The silence got 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 huge middle-aged man in an off-the-rack blue suit, who had a crewcut and a pockmarked face. But what everyone was staring at 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 canvas 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, faded and torn blue jeans, and a pair of black Chuck Taylors. The latter two she was wearing at a time 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, and what was even stranger was that there were no laces on them.

She must’ve been some sight that morning, the way she clashed with the suburbia around her. While today I bet no one would look twice at her even in the Bible Belt, back then it must’ve been like she’d dropped from the moon.

Tommy, of course, had already seen most of this sight. What he noticed about her now was the apathy on her face.

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

The apathy Rudi was projecting was also hiding something. The something underneath it that was always looking for a way out. It was trying to explode from her.

If anything, it was Tommy who was apathetic. He once told me that, before meeting Rudi, he struggled just to wake in the mornings.

Watching her as she got near him, Tommy could feel his knees buckle. Which was a sensation he long knew from playing football, but never did he feel it like this or this hard. He had to stammer to get a few words out. “Who is she?”

No one answered, and he saw that the girl was close enough to notice all the eyes upon her. Her apathy turned into a scowl as she stared down the entire school, looking like she was ready to fight them all. With this she cranked the volume of her Walkman and sang 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 song was different. Unlike any 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.

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

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

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

Joey didn’t respond. He couldn’t.

“Them’s fighting words, Joey,” one of the football players chimed in.

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

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

With a sigh, she returned her stare to Tommy, along with her snarl, and he noticed how bloodshot her eyes were and how she was sweating despite the cold. But most of all he noticed how she was oblivious to the girl heading toward the same set of doors.

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

Maria gazed at the girl in front of her. She gazed with a combination of shock and awe. It was like she was witnessing a new form of life. “Hey,” she mumbled.

The girl gazed back, only without the shock or the awe, and she raised her fist. “Hey, how would you like some dentures?”

Maria didn’t answer, but she did respond. She took a step back in fright and then another.

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

There was no reply.

Grunting, the man slammed one of his thick shoulders into the heavy wooden doors, and he tossed Rudi inside the building like a rag and followed her inside.

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

Tommy wasn’t the only person curious about Rudi, as this one was a stranger to me. So I put down the page I was reading and asked her.

She didn’t want to answer and wasn’t bashful about it. “I thought Tommy was telling the story.”

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

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

She did but with lots of aggravation. “I can tell you that I had a lot more on my mind than some preppy jock.”

“Such as?”

“Such as I was jonesing like hell. I would’ve raced up Everest for a handful of pills and wouldn’t’ve cared what 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, in spite of how gorgeous he was. Maybe it was 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 stuck-up and boring as can be. Most guys like that are, in my experience. But . . .”

“But what?”

Rudi sighed, with more aggravation than before. “There was something about him. Something in the way he was looking at me. No one had looked at me like that. He was looking right through me. It was like he could see everything, and this frightened me. But I brushed it off as nothing more than biological. I can assure you that, by the time I stepped through those school doors, or were thrown through them, I had completely forgotten about him.”

I doubted that, but I continued reading.

Tommy and Darlene stopped in the hallway after entering the school, and they saw Rudi and her blue escort standing in front of the principal and his office as he pointed at her. “I want to reiterate my opposition of having her attend this school,” spoke the tightly-wound man, who was wearing a tight brown suit and an equally tight brown tie. “We have enough of a criminal element here already.”

Rudi sneered and crossed her arms, and she turned from the man and started singing loudly. “*The real Nazis run your schools*.”

“What did you just say?” howled the principal.

“Don’t you worry, Mr. Gonzales,” the pockmarked-faced man cackled as he grabbed Rudi by the neck. “She won’t be giving you any trouble.”

The man dragged her away. He dragged her past one of the guidance counselors as he walked by.

Oddly, Mr. Cross didn’t find her strange looking at all. The man even smiled at her, and this she found strange. It was all over her face.

Along with many others heading to class and chatting about all kinds of nothing, Tommy wandered through the third-floor hallway, not knowing where he was wandering through or to. It was like he had taken a spin in a dryer. He couldn’t walk straight as he came to the open door of his first-period computer class.

His mind was on anything but it, but he glanced inside, and he saw a handful of students entering punch cards for use in the old computer on the other side of the room. That was how you programmed it. You’d type lines of code on the cards, and then you’d wait for an operator to feed them into the machine. Sometimes you’d wait a week just to compile the smallest of programs.

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

At the end of the corridor, he stepped into a stairwell. He climbed down it to the second floor, where he continued looking. He also thought about his dream, and he began to question whether it really had been one.

If it hadn’t, he realized that 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 wasn’t likely compatible with Rudi, as she was the one not-so-random variable, who was at the beginning of his replay and at the end of it. Certainly without her his story couldn’t end the way it began.

So why was he looking for her? he screamed at himself. No matter how she was making him feel, she couldn’t be worth rotting over. But he wondered if this was what made her so exciting, all the risk that came with her. She was a one-woman rollercoaster.

“What are you doing?” came a squeaky voice behind him.

Startled, Tommy spun around, toward 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 muttered to the man.

“Why aren’t you in class?”

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

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

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

Quickly, he scurried off, and he approached the end of the hallway and another stairwell, where he glanced back and saw that the teacher was gone.

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

With anxiousness, Tommy stepped up to the open door, and he peeked inside at a setup quite common at the school. Three long tables stood along the edges of the room, forming something of a square with the teacher’s desk up front.

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

Like outside the school, Tommy grimaced at Rudi. He grimaced while trying 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 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 while rummaging through a stack of textbooks in the far front corner of the room. “You’ll be expected not only to write about poetry 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.

The teacher sighed. Loudly she sighed. The exasperation poured out of her. “Wrong Shelley. But it was a nice try, Ms. Cantor. Almost.”

Sighing once more, though not as loudly, the woman picked out a book, and she marched it toward Rudi. “This is an elective. That means no one is forcing you to take it.”

She marched the book all the way to Rudi. 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 and as deliberately as possible.

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

“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, louder than before, and Krasner again grinned. “Touché, Ms. Cantor.”

Still grinning, the woman stepped to the center blackboard, where the poem “since feeling is first” was written in perfect script and which she gazed at in joyful wonder. “Can anyone tell me something about E. E. Cummings?”

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

Rudi sneered. “That’s just a myth.”

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

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

With a smirk, Rudi put her feet on the table and crossed her arms. “Basically, he was a punk.”

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

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

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

Rudi snarled. “Too bad the same can’t be said of you.”

Krasner glared at Rudi. She glared for a long time, but once more she 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 hallway, he started down it, with Krasner’s voice fading as he did.

*my blood approves,*

*and kisses are a better*

*fate than wisdom*

Surprised, Tommy came to a stop. It wasn’t the words that surprised him but his reaction to them, even if he couldn’t say what it 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 back in the threshold of the room, where he saw Rudi had removed her feet from the desk and was leaning toward the blackboard with something 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, and this shot through the room. “His words not only mix splendor and dissonance,” she cried out, “but are saturated with an irrational passion. Cummings was a Romantic above all else. Or a neo-Romantic, as some call him.”

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

Again, the woman paused as she sat on the edge of her desk. “I want to see this irrational passion in your next assignment, due a week from Wednesday. You will write me a poem worthy of Cummings and 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!”

Slowly, Rudi turned toward the door. She turned as if just now realizing that someone was watching her. With shock, she saw Tommy and his gaze.

Tommy also saw something. He saw her eyelids flutter.

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, even if all Tommy could see was the fruit on top.

Table after table she passed, with waves of heads turning toward her from all directions.

She ignored them or pretended she did. Despite appearances, I know she really did care what people thought of her, and it always angered her. Which likely made her ignore the gazes 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 when he glanced at Rudi, 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.

He wasn’t the only one who noticed this. Rudi spun from him, and she rushed toward the back of the cafeteria, no longer looking so apathetic or uprightly. She looked like she would smash through the wall.

Instead, at an empty table in front of it she came to a stop, and 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 short, with a pimply face and greasy brown hair, who was wearing a blue button-down polyester shirt, brown Haggar slacks, and white sneakers. He wasn’t exactly cool. He was the kind of kid 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 he saw who was sitting there and froze. He froze mid-step.

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

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

“So?” she barked.

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

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

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

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

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

“What do you mean?”

“She’s a bigtime druggie.”

“How do you know that?”

“Beth has gym class with her. She saw her NA keychain in the locker room.”

“NA?”

“Narcotics Anonymous.”

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

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

This included Tommy, who glumly looked at the “D” on the top of his from his usual seat in the front row.

“You should’ve mastered conic sections by now,” the woman continued. “I’m not sure any of you have a chance of passing the AP exam.”

The teacher was about to add 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 like a fast food wrapper she was about to discard.

The teacher looked at Rudi. She looked at her up and down many times over and incredulously. “Yes?”

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

Looking even more incredulous, Elkind marched up to Rudi, and she grabbed the printout and both uncrumpled and read it. She read it again and again. “We’ll see about that, Miss Weiss.”

These words pained Rudi. It was all over her face. “*Ms. Weiss*.”

“Excuse me?”

“Do I look like a ‘miss’?”

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

Rudi turned toward the equation.

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

With surprise, Rudi spun back to Mrs. Elkind. “You’re joking, right?”

“I rarely joke about partial fraction decomposition.”

Rudi sighed, but she stepped up to the board, where she picked up a piece of chalk and gazed at the problem for a handful of seconds. Then she solved it. She solved it in another handful of seconds, filling the board with numbers and formulae.

The teacher shook her head. She couldn’t hide the shock that was seeping out of her. “That took me twenty minutes to solve this morning.”

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, causing it to bounce a few times.

Mrs. Elkind grinned. “Quite easily done.”

With another sigh, Rudi frowned. “It means *quod erat demonstrandum. That which was to be proven*.”

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

Snatching the schedule from the woman, Rudi glanced at Tommy as she headed toward a seat in the back of the room, with Tommy shifting his eyes back to the mark on the paper in front of him.

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

Rudi sighed yet once more, this time louder. “I can’t see over all that wavy hair.”

Realizing that she meant his, Tommy turned to her and leaned back in his chair. “Better?”

“Not really.”

Tommy laughed, and it surprised her, probably because she could no longer pretend that he was stuck-up. Or boring.

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

Reaching a restroom, he heard a familiar voice coming from inside it 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! I don’t even care about you!”

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

Slowly, the door returned to its frame, and Tommy stood and watched her.

“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, especially not hers.

Still, he followed her. He followed her down the hallway, and he followed her when she turned left toward the front doors, and he followed her through them. He followed her all the way outside, where he saw her march toward a crowd of people that had encircled something on the edge of Parker Avenue.

Passing Darlene and a short blonde with a ponytail and girl-next-door looks, Rudi noticed them whispering among themselves as they snickered at her.

“Beth,” growled Joey from behind the two.

They kept snickering, and Joey stopped in back of the blonde and tapped her on the shoulder.

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

Quickly, she followed him.

Darlene now alone snickered at Rudi, who ignored it and reached the crowd, where she looked over someone’s shoulder.

Seeing what everyone was staring at, she pushed her way through them. Tommy wrote in his journal that she looked like Moses parting the sea. She was an irresistible force and kept pushing until she reached the street, where she came upon a small golden-haired dog, who was whimpering and bleeding by the side of the road and looked much like the one from Tommy’s dream.

Rudi kneeled in front of the animal, and she swept it into her arms and cradled it, and she tried to comfort and calm it. Never had Tommy 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 exuberance. “I volunteer there on the weekends. The vet’s really great.”

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

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

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

Rudi glanced at it in surprise as she tried to catch her breath. “You drive a motorcycle?”

Tommy smirked. “I like to live dangerously.”

“I bet.”

With the smirk still on his face, Tommy 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 suggest you put your arm around me, unless you want to fly there.”

Even more hesitantly, she put one arm around him while continuing to clutch the dog with the other, and they shot out of the lot onto Parker.

Moving even faster, they sped to the corner of Valley, where they turned left and raced through traffic while weaving around cars and trucks and running both 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. “You’ve got some blood on your coat.”

Rudi looked at herself and the blood, and she turned to him. “It’s not the first time. You’ve got some too, on the back of your jacket.”

“It’s all right.”

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

“Sure.”

Again, the two looked straight ahead. They looked 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 waited for the news.

The woman stopped in front of them while continuing to read the chart. “She’s in pretty bad shape.”

Rudi lowered her eyes.

While lowering the chart, the vet smiled. “She’s got a long recovery in front of her, but she’s gonna be fine.”

Shocked, Rudi raised her eyes and gaped at the woman. “Really?”

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

Neither Rudi or Tommy said anything, and the woman glanced at the pair with lots of skepticism. “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.

Slowly, Rudi backed up. “I guess I should be going.”

“You want a lift?” he wondered.

“I’m fine.”

Quicker, she moved, and she bumped into a wall.

Trying to hide her embarrassment, she spun around and burst out of the office, with Tommy staring at her. He stared 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 everything that had happened that day. He wrote it many times over until he had the words just right. He even sketched out some scenes on the edges of the paper.

As he put his pen down, he began hearing music. It was the same Glenn Miller song he had heard in his dream, even if, unlike then, it was playing only in his head.

Over and over it played, and he could feel himself dancing to it with his arms around someone. Someone he couldn’t see but whose heartbeat matched not only his but the beat of the trombone.

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

The music came to an end, and Tommy saw that he was clutching a pillow.

“Tommy?”

Trying to hide his frustration, Tommy tossed the pillow onto the floor. “Yeah?”

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

“Perhaps some other time.”

There was no reply, and 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.

Like Tommy, I was wondering what this certain someone was doing then. But like before, she didn’t want to tell me. But she still 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 at,” she screeched.

“You were what?”

“I was listening to Bad Brains’ *Yellow Tape*, which a friend had given me after I got out of jail, and I was doing what I always did when listening to them. H.R., his voice would reach out and grab me and throw me into wall after wall. It still does. I still bang into walls whenever I listen to them, and I can tell you that it 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 Take Over’ was blasting into my head like a jackhammer into concrete. I listened to it like six thousand times. There was nothing but the song as I kept 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 through it, and a voice hollered, ‘Stop that racket!’

“I didn’t say anything back. 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 said next. But I didn’t want anything, especially from him. I especially didn’t want those fries.”

“You weren’t thinking about Tommy?” I asked.

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

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

“Now I couldn’t listen to them. So I pulled out the drawing I had made at lunch, and I looked at it in surprise.

“I really thought I’d been drawing Lee Ving, who was my crush at the time. Me and just about every punk girl on the planet, and probably lots of punk boys too. But there was something wrong with it. While the drawing had Ving’s eyes, which were piercing into me even when rendered in two dimensions, the hair was too wavy, and the nose and chin too chiseled.

“Soon, I realized who was actually staring at me from the drawing, and I tore out the page and crumpled it, and I threw it across the floor. But . . .”

“But what?”

“This did nothing. So I crawled over to the paper and uncrumpled it, and I tried to convince myself that my attraction was hopeless. ‘You’re so not good enough,’ I mumbled. ‘You’re so not him. And this, this is so not a fairy tale.’”

“I have just one more question.”

“What’s that?”

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

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

“That was a yes,” I blurted out as I turned the page, causing Rudi to laugh, just as I saw that I was back at the first page. “That, that’s it.”

I shuffled through the entries, looking for some more, but I couldn’t find 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 that. 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 smirk on her face.

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

“Call me tomorrow night.”

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

It was after midnight when I got off the phone. But even though I had to work the next morning, I couldn’t go to bed. I still had to wait for a bus pass so I could get to work.

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

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

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

I told him.

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

From it he pulled 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. “This is a pretty sweet deal you get here, free transportation every day.”

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

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

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

I left and put the pass in my wallet, and I went back to the dorm and walked down the hall, passing the door to the women’s quarters on my left. This was where not only the women slept but their children. Even their teenage boys had to do this.

As uncomfortable as this must’ve been, leaving the shelter could’ve been worse. While no one wanted to be on the streets of Victorville, 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 quarters was a little past them across the hall. I stepped through its door, to snoring so loud that it could’ve waken a cemetery, even the one in Arlington.

Slowly, I made my way through the dark, in an enormous room filled with dozens of bunk beds and all the weary men sleeping on them. I walked to the back and came to my bed.

Groaning a bit, I climbed to the top, where I took off my coat and jeans and put them under my pillow along with Tommy’s letter.

As I stretched out on the thin and decaying mattress, I tried to fall asleep. This trying was another ritual, and on this night it was both the same and not. What made it different and unlike all 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 it was as loud as before. What did was the same thing that did every night, the thing that was always there but never as strong as at this time.

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

All I could do in response was lay there and 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 to know it was six, as this was when they woke us every day but Sunday, when they waited till seven.

While many that morning tried to ignore the light by any means, I got up with those who had something to do or wanted to pretend it. Like every morning, I pulled my coat and jeans from under the pillow, and I checked my wallet and its contents.

Satisfied that my five dollars was still there, I put the wallet in my jeans and put it and my coat on, and I crawled out of bed and down to the floor.

From there I crept out of the enormous room to the door, where I found Matt asleep in the bottom bunk.

I shook him, but all he did was grumble.

This made me think of an old TV commercial. “Time to make the doughnuts, dude.”

He chuckled but didn’t open his eyes, and I went into the corridor and stepped up to the cubbies that were stacked onto each other in three rows.

When I first got to the shelter that summer, they gave me one on the top even though I’m not exactly tall. So, like every morning, I climbed up like a monkey to get my towel, shower bag, and a clean set of clothes.

With these I walked a few steps into the men’s bathroom and up to one of the three sinks, where I shaved and brushed my teeth alongside another of the early risers. Here I was forced to look at my decaying image in the big mirror. Every morning I seemed older and thinner, and this morning was no different. Still, I found myself humming. I was humming the song my sister had sung on her first day of Columbia, and I kept humming it as I headed toward the shower stalls down the way.

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

The funny thing was that this never happened to me. While the thieves went through my wallet that first morning, returning it to the wrong pocket, they left my five dollars alone. I guess it just wasn’t worth pulling out.

Still, I was paranoid from then on. I always put my wallet in my shower bag.

With it and my towel, I stepped into one of the stalls that morning and turned on the hot water, and I 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, all I could stomach in the morning.

While taking this into the courtyard, I saw some of the mothers getting their kids ready for school. It looked like they were trying to give them the same semblance of normal I had just enjoyed. They were also trying to make them feel special in a place where they were anything but and make them feel 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 seemed 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. The rumor was 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.

I glanced around the courtyard, and I saw Nicole and Allison drinking coffee and smoking at the same corner booth where I had talked to Rudi the night before. They could only do the smoking 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 women, who were both in their early thirties, sitting next to Nicole.

She was someone who made a lie of every stereotype of a homeless person. She worked two jobs as a manufacturing supervisor and was as bright as the long desert days. Also, unlike most homeless people I knew, including myself, she was someone who never lost hope and always conveyed a wonderful joy from being alive. Another difference was how 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 enough to get herself out of the shelter and her four kids back from wherever it was they’d been taken.

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

“Having what?” I asked.

Nicole looked around, and she leaned toward 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 mall in the Victor Valley was on it along with every store imaginable. So each day the two of us took a pair of buses that crisscrossed the valley and all the concrete and glass strewn across it.

Looking out the window that morning, it was difficult to believe that we were only a few hours from Los Angeles. It didn’t look like we were anywhere.

The trip to work took an hour and a half but that was only if one of the buses weren’t late and that happened rarely. On this day, though, the buses got us to the motel a few minutes early, just in time for a rain shower.

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

“What’s that?” Matt asked.

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

“Uh-huh.”

In spite of the rain, Matt wanted something to eat, so we walked to the convenience store down the block by the 76 gas station.

Recalling what I had told him earlier, with a smirk he bought a box of doughnuts with his EBT food card, another exception the shelter allowed when it came to spending money.

“If Hannibal’s army had doughnuts,” he said as he opened the package when we left, “they would’ve won the Third Phoenician War for sure.”

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

“That one too.”

He stuffed one of the doughnuts into his mouth, and the two of us went back to the motel, where we punched in on the PC in Amoun’s office.

We stepped out of it just as the guy with the nickels came 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.

She was still counting them when the automatic doors swung open and Amoun stepped inside with one of his smiles. “Where is my Hebrew?”

I smiled back and raised my hand. “Right here, Pharoah.”

He turned to me, with his smile still on his face. “Have you been cleaning out the weeds by the back lot?”

“Whenever I get a chance.”

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

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

As I toiled out there that morning, I thought of my sister and decided to break the tedium by listening on my phone to the Bad Brains album she mentioned the night before.

I hadn’t heard the band in decades, so I was surprised that they still connected with me. They connected with me as much as they had as a teenager, and I started strutting about. Which was when one of the cleaning women walked outside with her cart for a cigarette break.

She had the most beautiful name I’ve 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. She was an immigrant, like most of the cleaning women at the motel, but she was young and from England. She even sounded like Paul McCartney. Also like Nicole, Alaya was full of life. Despite the bleakness of her job and surroundings, she always had a smile on her face, and she seemed she would burst from the excitement bubbling inside her at any moment.

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

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

Work ended early in the afternoon, but both buses home were late. It took more than four hours to get to the shelter.

I got there as dinner was ending and people were lining up so they could check in for the night.

Quickly, I made myself a sandwich and ate it while cleaning the kitchen and glancing now and then at the television playing in the rec room. It was showing the modern update of *Upstairs, Downstairs*, and I found myself commiserating with the servants.

There were only a few people left in line when I got there. But getting to the front of it took forever as I anxiously waited for the envelope I hoped would be waiting too. I felt the same anxiousness I had every Chanukah day as a kid, waiting for the present that was waiting for me.

I wanted to believe Rudi had been right, that another letter from Tommy would be in the office, despite my pessimism of not only this but 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 no letter from Tommy on the desk. Still, I asked anyway. “Anything come for me today?”

“Like what?” Josh asked back.

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

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

I didn’t reply. I grabbed a towel and started out.

“Laundry tomorrow morning,” he said.

“I work tomorrow morning,” I shot back.

“Dining hall bathrooms tomorrow night.”

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

Jerry stepped in front of me as I left the building, in his ubiquitous blue sweatshirt and brown Cali cap, and with a smile on his face and a set of manila folders under his arm. “Remember when I told you how the Director of the CIA is stalking me?” he said.

“Vaguely,” I said back.

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

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

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

“If you’ll excuse me . . .”

“I hear you’re a hacker.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I hear things.”

“I’m not a hacker.”

“But you know computers.”

“Sure but—”

“—I don’t. Not at all. And I need help getting information on this guy.”

“I’m sorry, but—”

“—I’ll pay you.”

“How about on Sunday? I’m off then.”

“Terrific.

I started off.

“I almost forgot,” he called out.

Sighing, I stopped and turned around, and I saw Jerry bashfully holding out Tommy’s letter. “I couldn’t help myself,” he uttered.

I should’ve been angry, but I was so happy to see the letter that I actually thanked him for stealing my mail before hurrying off with it. I rushed to the corner booth, where I ripped open the envelope and pulled out its contents, and I called Rudi.

She answered on the first ring. “Yeah?”

“You were right,” I told her.

“You sound surprised.”

I giggled. “You ready?”

“Since last night.”

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

In a bedroom on the top floor of the house, Tommy exited his bathroom wearing a white terrycloth robe. Stopping in the doorway, he peered out the big window in 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 that morning. Everything seemed ordinary in comparison to a certain something else.

In his seventeen and a half years, never had a girl made Tommy shrug. They were just objects to use, much like they had used him. Darlene was the perfect example of both. But in a single day one had sent him tumbling about like he’d been hit by a wave out of nowhere.

Slowly, he passed a pair of tall glass cases. One was dedicated to his sporting and academic triumphs over the years. This included a *Star Ledger* article from the previous winter that named him all-state in football as well as certificates naming him to the honor roll every quarter of his high-school career. The other case displayed the comic book collection he amassed as a kid, with gems such as every issue of *All-Star Comics* and *Howard the Duck*.

Tommy also passed the posters of the Yardbirds on his walls, from their early Clapton years to their last days with Page, and he approached a framed reproduction of *Girl with a Pearl Earring*.

Coming to a stop near it, Tommy’s mind wandered to the day he got it.

Tommy stood in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art with his parents and many other people, who were waiting for the black-tie event to begin.

His father kneeled in front of him, and he fixed his crooked bow tie.

“I don’t understand why we had to get dressed,” Tommy said to him.

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

“What’s so special about a painting?”

His father grinned. “You only get one chance to see Vermeer for the first time.”

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

Closer, he got to the painting, and his eyes widened. Never had he seen such colors. They flew out at him, and he wanted to reach inside them.

But what really caught his attention was the joy on the girl’s face. He’d always wonder what the source of it was.

Tommy returned to his bedroom, and he looked into the full-length mirror in the corner of the room. A mirror not unlike the one he had stared into in his dream or whatever it was.

He stared into this one too. He stared especially at the gold chai necklace he was wearing, the one he got 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 mitzvahs*, his mother bought a new chain for the pendant and gave it to him.

Tommy put the pendant between his fingers, gripping 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 starched pleated khakis and freshly-polished brown penny loafers, Tommy carried his backpack down a long and winding wooden staircase. He carried it 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 in the living room.

It was a perfect song, Tommy wrote in his journal, especially this arrangement. But it depressed him, knowing who was listening to it and why.

At the bottom of the stairs, Tommy inched toward 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.

Wearing a blue Dior dress that complemented the floral arrangement in the center of an oak table and with her dirty-blonde hair tied tightly in a bun, she was sitting at one end of the table as she gazed at the empty seat at the other end. A seat she knew would forever be empty.

She looked so lonely, Tommy thought, and he wondered if that’s how he’d look when he was her age. He wondered if he’d spend his days 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 as a large servant in a pristine white uniform entered from the kitchen, who served them a breakfast of omelets and hash browns, along with orange juice and coffee. She left the latest editions of the *New York Times* and the *Star Ledger* on the table with them, 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 at the woman.

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

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

Tommy continued his picking. “Nothing.”

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

He said nothing, and the woman sighed again, in exasperation. “It must be this crazy diet kick you’re on.”

Now Tommy was exasperated. “It’s not.”

“Then what is it?”

He gave up the pretense of eating and put down his utensils. “I don’t know. I met someone.”

Surprised, the woman turned to him. “Met someone? What about Darlene?”

“What about her?”

“She’s perfect for you.”

“For me or for you?”

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

With his own surprise, Tommy uttered, “Who?”

“This girl you’ve fallen for.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Then we have something in common.”

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

“I’d love to meet her.”

Tommy came to a stop, and he turned back to his mother. “How did you know Dad was the one?”

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

Tommy continued out of the room.

As he reached the wall, he glanced back at his mother and noticed that she was again gazing at the empty chair and that she was again listening to Julie London, even if the music was playing only in her head.

Tommy parked his bike in the school parking lot, and he 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, someone could’ve mistaken them as friends, despite the incongruity of them existing in the same universe.

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

Rudi smirked. “We could get matching 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 on Parker 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 there 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 at him.

I interrupted the story. “This is something I’ve always wanted to know.”

Rudi said nothing, and I could tell something was wrong.

“Rudi?”

“What?”

“Are you all right?”

“It’s just . . . we’re coming 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. But instead of starting an argument, I changed the subject. “How did you and Maria become friends? It never made sense.”

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

“How did it happen?”

“That morning on the bus I was kind of in a netherworld, where the only thing that existed were a pair of eyes. I was also humming this crazy song I’d 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 fun with her.

“‘You must really want those dentures,’ I growled as I stepped off the bus, and she almost passed out. But then I smiled and told her the dog was 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 important. What did was that we both needed a friend. Me especially.”

Rudi once more turned heads at lunch when she walked through the cafeteria with her tray stacked high with food. But it was not for the same reason as before.

The story of what she had done for the dog must’ve spread. Because everyone was looking at her not in shock or in fear but with something approaching wonder and even warmth.

Still, she ignored it. She ignored it until she again saw Tommy staring at her, with Darlene’s arm again around his.

Again, Rudi turned and hurried off.

Seeing what Tommy was staring at, Darlene sneered. “I thought Ms. Krasner was gonna kill her in class this morning. For twenty minutes she argued with her over some arcane Ferlinghetti poem. Who does that?”

Tommy knew. He knew exactly. Someone who cares.

Rudi slowed. She slowed when she noticed Owen Connors glaring at her from a table a few steps 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 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 back at him. She looked like she could’ve plowed right through him as she headed to the back table, where with the same excitement as that morning sat Maria at one end and Eliot at the other, who quivered on sight of her while trying to make himself invisible.

Watching as Owen continued to glare at Rudi, Tommy felt a sensation he had never felt. 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 back.

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

Like Rudi, Jared didn’t fit in, but for a different reason. He moved there 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 this even when it was brutally hot outside. He was always clutching a dogeared Bible too, especially 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 that had come to life, one they could easily dismiss, including the teachers.

Rudi and Jared walked down a corridor, and they happened to glance at each other. Seeing how he was dressed and what he was carrying, Rudi looked like she would glare at him as she had with Owen. But she once more surprised Tommy.

Despite seemingly having even less in common with Jared than she had with Maria, Rudi did something that no one else had bothered. She looked under the caricature, and she recognized something.

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

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

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

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

He reached the crowd, and 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 several stages past apathy. She looked like she was fighting the urge to fall asleep.

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

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

“I’ll give you three seconds,” Rudi groaned without looking at Owen. “One . . . two . . .”

Owen’s grin got bigger. “Three.”

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 onto the lockers and to the floor.

With the thick textbook still in his hand, he lay there in a state of semiconsciousness, with the sound of dead silence roaring through the corridor. Tommy could hear his own heart beat.

Rudi turned to Eliot, who was standing next to her with his mouth and eyes as wide as they could be. “I suggest you pick up your book,” she told him. “Like, right now.”

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

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

But Eliot just turned to Rudi and continued to smile. He smiled in defiance of her before scurrying down the corridor with the book under his arm.

Rudi sighed, and she noticed her bag on the floor.

Dropping to one knee to pick it up, she saw everyone staring at her in shock, and she glared at them. “What’s the matter with you people? Have you never seen anyone get their ass 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.

Rudi rose with her bag, and she saw Tommy’s eyes on her, and her glare returned. “What do you want?”

Tommy tried to come up with an answer. He tried and tried. “I . . . I was wondering, 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. “So it’s true what they say. Boys really *are* bad at math.”

Tommy smirked back, and he was certain he was blushing.

Rudi started off.

Tommy knew right then that he had to take a chance. He had to take it even if it meant making a fool of himself in front of someone who might not give a damn. “Please, I’ve never gotten anything lower than a B in my life, and I don’t know how I’m going to pass that AP exam.”

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

“Don’t you fear failure?”

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

“Weiss!” howled the principal from down the hall.

Rudi spun toward Mr. Gonzales, who was wearing another tight brown suit and another tight brown tie, and who pointed inside his door. “My office, now!”

“*Oy vey,”* she muttered as she started toward the man, who was trying hard to keep from smiling at the justice Rudi had meted out.

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

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

Swinging her bag over her shoulder, Rudi noticed how the rope holding it together was badly frayed. “I’m kinda busy right now.”

“He’s alive!” a student yelled.

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

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

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

“—I’ll find it.”

With these words, Rudi marched toward the principal and his office, with Tommy gazing at her. He couldn’t take his eyes off her.

This was interrupted when Joey grabbed him by the shoulder from behind. “Coach wants to see everyone.”

Tommy shook his head. “Not today.”

“What do you mean?”

Not replying, Tommy hurried out of the school, where he saw the same red Porsche out front he’d seen in the morning. A man in a leather jacket was leaning against the hood of it with his arms crossed.

He was in his twenties and was lean and wiry, with his head shaved and his neck covered in tattoos. But what stood out most was the cold, blank expression on his face and eyes that didn’t seem to blink.

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.

Noticing how the sun was setting in the window beside him, he couldn’t stop thinking he’d been stood up. Never in his life had this happened to him, 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 and saw Rudi strut inside the door.

With a big smile, he spun toward a waiter 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.

He didn’t know what to say to her, so he just blurted out the first thing that popped into his head. “Did you get into trouble?”

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

Again, the two stared at each other.

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

“Of course not,” he muttered while trying to convince himself of this, and he saw her disappointment and wondered if it was on his face.

“What would your girlfriend think about this?” she asked.

“Girlfriend?”

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

“No.”

Tommy laughed. “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, 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 the way Cummings had when he wrote “since feeling is first.” He wanted it badly. But he didn’t want to admit it even to himself, so he demurred. “I don’t know.”

Her only response was to look at him unsurely.

“Where you from?” he asked.

“Lots of places,” she answered.

“Like?”

“Like Trenton or thereabouts.”

“What are you doing here?”

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

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

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

“Why else would I ask you here?”

She didn’t answer as he yanked out a big white book, sending a pair of others onto the floor.

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

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

“Why?”

“I gather you’re not a fan.”

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

Tommy again was wary of exposing too much of himself to her. But he decided to take another chance. “That’s not what it’s about. It’s about being alone, the only person in the whole world. The only one who thinks and feels like you. And being so scared because of it that you don’t even know if you want to live. Holden Caulfield, he isn’t some spoiled loser whining about how he can’t get laid. He’s you.”

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

“I am.”

Tommy could see fear building on Rudi’s face, and he couldn’t understand why. I think it was because she could no longer make herself believe that she was “so not him” and that meant she could have no more excuses for not caring about him.

The waiter came by. He slapped Tommy’s shoulder with one hand and with his other he placed a thin-crusted pie in the center of the table. “Here you go, bud. You need anything else?”

“How about a couple of Cokes?”

“You got it. 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, and they saw an elderly man wearing a suit that was way too small in front of a table with many receipts and other papers on it.

Tommy waved at him. “Mr. Agnellino!”

Mr. Agnellino nodded, and he glanced at Rudi. He glanced at her askance before shaking his head and returning to his papers.

Rudi turned back to Tommy. “Everyone knows you here.”

“My family’s been coming to this place since the thirties, 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 at it and the mushrooms and red peppers on top of it. “I hope you don’t mind, I’m a . . .”

Once more, Rudi became surprised. “Vegetarian?”

“You too?”

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

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

It looked like Rudi would retort. But instead she took off her coat and pulled out a slice and blew on it.

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

She gave him a dirty look. “There’s nothing that isn’t like everything else.”

Despite saying this, as she took a small bite, she couldn’t hide how good it tasted and how this taste was exploding in her mouth. It was all over her face as she took more and more bites.

Tommy had never watched anyone eat before. He never had any reason to, and he wasn’t sure why he was 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 realize was there.

“What?” she demanded.

“Nothing.”

With the pizza and the Cokes almost finished, Rudi pointed into the open calculus book on the table. “So, you see, 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. It was as if a curtain had been drawn that he didn’t even know was there.

Rudi looked up at a clock on the wall. “I gotta run.”

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

Like earlier, he tried to come up with something to say. Like then, he just said the first thing that popped into his head. “It’s amazing how easy you make calculus.”

“It *is* easy once you stop fearing it, which means it’s like everything else.”

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

Not quite appreciating the gesture, Rudi shot him another dirty look, 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. She swung it so hard that the rope broke and the bag fell onto the ground, with most of its contents spewing all over the place. Making matters worse, there was a breeze, enough to blow her things around.

“*Oy vey!”* she cried out as she knelt on the sidewalk and hurriedly collected her belongings back into the bag.

Noticing a balled-up piece of paper by his foot, Tommy picked it up and uncrumpled it, and he saw something extraordinary. He saw himself in her drawing of him.

Never had he seen anything like it. She’d captured something no photograph or mirror had: the small boy trying to climb out from under the trappings, just to see what was there. Even more remarkable than the drawing itself was how she could see things in him that he couldn’t see himself, and he stood in stunned silence as he stared at his likeness.

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

“Thank you,” he murmured.

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

He pointed to the drawing.

Awkwardly, she hid it behind her back, with her face turning shades of scarlet and vermillion. “It’s not you! It’s Lee Ving!”

“I don’t even know who that is,” he said.

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

Tommy laughed.

This only made her madder. “What’s-so-funny?”

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

Rudi was floored. She took a step back and then another as she looked for a response that 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 with me tomorrow in the cafeteria?” he called out.

Rudi stopped. But she didn’t turn around. I don’t think she dared. “You’d want to be seen with me?”

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

“You shouldn’t,” she mumbled as she disappeared into the night.

“Who are you?” he whispered. Like the day before, he whispered it at a volume only he could hear and only barely.

This time Rudi interrupted the story. She did by telling me she was far 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?”

She sighed. “It was trying to figure out his angle. Everyone I knew had one and that I couldn’t see his was driving me crazy.”

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 was fixing the rope of her bag when she heard a sound.

Turning toward the school parking lot, she saw Eliot getting into an old beige Cutlass, one that looked held together by prayer alone.

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

He grinned. “Chess Club.”

“Figures.”

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

“What?”

“They stopped running a while ago.”

“That’s just great.”

With tons of exasperation, Rudi marched down Valley.

“I could give you a ride,” Eliot shouted.

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

“Where’s that?”

“Near Irvington.”

“I live *in* Irvington.”

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

“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 someone.”

“What’s so crazy about that?”

“Come on, look at me.”

“I am looking at you.”

Seeing something else, Rudi pointed down the road. “Just park behind that blue sedan.”

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

“Sure. Anytime.”

She stepped outside, where she paused for a reason she didn’t know. She paused until she uttered, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

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

“At lunch.”

Eliot couldn’t hide his excitement. “Really?”

“Just don’t push it.”

Tommy walked into school the next day, and he saw Rudi standing outside the girls’ bathroom.

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

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

“The best ones usually aren’t.”

Still, Maria wouldn’t leave.

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

Slowly, the door opened and Maria took a single step out. Or someone who looked like Maria. This Maria, though, was wearing makeup. It was just a small amount. On anyone else you might not have noticed it. But on her you couldn’t help notice.

“What are you doing with that makeup?” howled the principal from in front of his door.

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

“Daddy?” Rudi gasped.

Sheepishly, Maria shrugged, with her eyes still locked on the floor.

The principal marched up to Rudi. He looked like he was going to strangle her. His hands were only inches from her throat. “Is there anything in this school you haven’t corrupted?”

“Just you.”

Rudi walked through the center of the cafeteria with her pile of food, with no one paying her attention. Tommy, who was a short distance behind her and walking toward his usual table with his own lunch, could see the curiosity on her face as she glanced left and right.

She only discovered the reason for the lack of interest in her 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.

Stopping beside his table, Rudi watched. Tommy stopped and watched too. He watched the conflict growing on her face and couldn’t imagine its source.

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

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

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

Tommy was now past curious. So he sat at a table across the aisle from them.

“You just need better karma,” Rudi said to 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 say anything or even react.

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

“So you can punch it?” he wondered.

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

Slowly, Owen raised his head, and she grinned at him.

Reluctantly, he grinned back. But this turned into a chuckle when Eliot brought his lunch next to Rudi with his hair much like hers, jet-black and spiked.

With her own chuckle, she unspiked his hair with her fingers. “This is the very definition of ‘pushing it.’ You look like a Quincy Punk.”

“What’s a Quincy Punk?” Eliot wanted to know.

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

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

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

Eliot leaned toward it in awe. “Cool. Maybe I’ll get one of those.”

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

Watching them as she walked to their table with her food was Maria, who looked even more different than before. In addition to that small amount of makeup, she had a lot of confidence. Everyone could see both, including a tall redheaded girl who walked by and smiled.

Maria smiled back, and it was still on her face as she sat across from Eliot. “I’d get a tattoo too. But I’m already grounded till next century.”

The four chatted away, and Tommy wrote how strange they looked together. At the same time, he said it wasn’t so strange.

He wasn’t the only one who noticed this. The principal did when he stepped inside the cafeteria, and he wasn’t pleased. He stormed toward them with his fists clenched.

Then something happened. All four laughed. They laughed like they had been friends forever and not just because of some crazy-looking girl from Trenton.

Seeing his daughter laugh, the principal came to a sharp stop. He stopped with both his eyes and mouth agape. It was as if he were witnessing a miracle, one that he had helped create, and he forgot about his anger and gazed at his daughter and her smile. He gazed at them in wonder.

The laughter died down, and 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. But she had no more success than she had with Owen. So she waved him toward their table with a big sweep of her arm.

Shocked, Jared meekly pointed to himself. “Me?”

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

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

Realizing that Rudi wasn’t going to let anyone eat lunch alone while she was around, Tommy rose with his tray and stepped toward their table. Rudi turned to him as he did, and the two stared at each other, with everyone at the table turning toward him.

Feeling embarrassed, Tommy hurried off.

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

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

“No.”

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 once more awe him.

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

The normalness ceased once he was outside. He saw Rudi and the wiry man with the shaved head and tattooed neck. 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. He paused for the slightest of moments 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 it was the 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, he froze. He froze when he saw a handgun in the man’s waist. He saw not only it 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. We both know it!”

“Deke!” she cried out in pain.

His only response was to throw open the passenger door and toss Rudi inside the car, and he slammed the door shut.

While stepping around the Porsche, he noticed Tommy, and he scowled at him as he jumped into his car and sped off. He sped out of the parking lot and down Parker.

Tommy wasn’t sure what to do. A big part of him wanted to do nothing. It wanted to remain in control of his fate and the replay of his life. So, long after Deke’s car had left, 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 woke, 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 right onto Clinton. He continued on this and 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 onto Sanford anyway.

At 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 sped without looking, in the path of an oncoming car.

Quickly, he 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, where he avoided a trio of pedestrians and 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 fifteen-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 light side of the sun.

The Porsche came to a 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 time.

Hurriedly and with her face soaked in fear, Rudi burst out of the car. She slammed the door shut, and she ran into the house while the Porsche raced off, exposing the blue sedan that had been parked in front of it.

Again, Tommy wasn’t sure what to do. But he got off his bike and headed down the street toward her house. Slowly he headed, with each step moving slower.

In front of her building, he hesitated but stepped up to the house’s door.

There was no doorbell, so he knocked. He knocked a couple of times. He even banged on the door with his fist and called out Rudi’s name.

The only response was silence.

So he returned to the street and sauntered in the direction of his bike. But as he reached the side of the house, he noticed a backyard behind it, and he found himself drifting toward it.

I was confused by what I had read, so I asked Rudi how she couldn’t hear Tommy banging on her door.

“I wasn’t there,” she told me. “I was so frightened when I ran into that house. It seemed the walls were falling on me, and I was looking for a way out. So I ransacked the place looking for one. I ripped it apart. But I couldn’t even find a bottle of aspirin or a warm can of beer. So I did what I did when I was little. I hid under the bed. I also cranked Richard Hell on my Walkman. I cranked it so loudly that I wouldn’t’ve heard a hurricane.”

“Rudi?” Tommy called out as he walked alongside a cracked wall of the house, one that looked like it would fall apart if touched.

There was no response, but he did hear something from inside the house. So he repeated himself and louder.

This was when he heard another something. A clicking sound.

Spinning toward it, 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 wearing another off-the-rack blue suit and pointing a gun at his head.

Tommy raised his hands. He raised them in surrender.

“You one of them?” the man growled.

Tommy tried to keep himself from shaking as he tried to come up with an answer. “One . . . one of what?”

The man didn’t answer. Instead, he carefully looked Tommy over.

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

Tommy hurried away, and he hurried more when 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 ended up in front of the Maplewood Public Library on Baker Street, and he turned onto its 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? The other thing he knew was that the only means of discovering it was in the building next to him.

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.

He asked a librarian where these were, and the man directed him to an aisle where he found stacks of thick volumes of them going back decades.

At the end of the aisle, there were smaller versions of the more recent editions. He pulled the last few months off the shelves and took them to a nearby table, where he skimmed through them.

He went through page after page and volume after volume. But he didn’t know what he was looking for, so he was getting nowhere. 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 November, he came upon an entry for a *Newsweek* article, “Punk Rock Turns Deadly.”

Hurriedly, he rushed to the magazine stacks near the front entrance of the library, and he found and grabbed the issue.

Sifting through its pages, he passed an article about the mysterious virus that was afflicting the gay community and reached what he was looking for. 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. But he hadn’t been charged and wasn’t the only suspect. An unnamed teenage 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 both his head and the magazine. “She *is* a monster.”

“That, that’s all,” I mumbled to Rudi as I put the last page of that day’s entries on the table.

She didn’t say a thing, so I asked her if she was all right.

She still didn’t reply, so I told her, “Like I said before, I could skip—”

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

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

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

“No.”

“You can’t . . .”

“I can’t what?”

“You can’t do this to me,” she screeched with her voice breaking. “He was my *bashert*, my *destiny*. And I miss him. I miss him when I wake. I miss him when I go to bed. I miss him every moment in between. You’ve gifted him back to me, and this isn’t a gift you can just return.”

“That’s exactly what I’m gonna 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 say a thing.

“Call me tomorrow when you get the letter,” she uttered matter-of-factly before hanging up.

I didn’t move. I just kept staring at the pages in front of me, unsure of what to do. I don’t even know how long I did this, and I only stopped when Katie came through the gates of the shelter.

A slender woman in her late twenties, Katie, like some other women in the shelter, worked at an Amazon fulfillment center down the hill in San Bernardino. They all seemed to work crazy hours, including in the middle of the night.

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

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

“Is everything all right?” I asked.

She nodded unconvincingly and rushed into the dorm.

Trying to ignore this, I collected Tommy’s pages and put them in the envelope, and I went into the building too, so I could go through my nightly ritual with Josh.

Not surprisingly, I had to wait, but for a different reason than normal.

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

With her hand shaking even more, she offered it to Josh, who ripped it from her hand and counted each bill.

He counted them twice.

the third night

I was still trying to decide whether I’d keep reading Tommy’s journal to Rudi, and how much of it I’d read if I did, when I brought my cup of green tea to the corner booth in the courtyard, where Nicole and Allison were again huffing down coffee and cigarettes. Though this morning they weren’t so upbeat.

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

“Who left?” I asked as I sat down.

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

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

“No one knows,” Allison growled. “She was gone when we woke up, along with her things.”

“You have no idea why she would leave like that?” Nicole questioned Allison.

“All I know is that she got that job at Amazon. She seemed real excited about it and the possibility of getting out of here.”

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

Allison again shook her head, and again she growled. “She would’ve said something or texted us or returned one of ours. She wouldn’t’ve left like that.”

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

Allison nodded. “Before that it was Michelle.”

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

“Do we have everything for the party?” Allison whispered to Nicole, trying to change the subject.

“Everything but the cake,” Nicole replied.

“Josh said he’d get it for us.”

“He did?”

“He said he gets a veteran’s discount at the bakery near his house.”

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

On the second of them, there was only one passenger besides Matt and I. A middle-aged woman way in the back, who was ranting about her gay son in Palm Springs to the driver way in the front.

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

“What’s that?” Matt asked.

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

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

This time he turned from me, and he grumbled, “Just forget about it. There’s nothing you can do, and it’s not even the worst thing that’s happened there.”

“We should tell someone.”

“Tell who? You think anyone cares 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. If you want to keep a roof over your head this winter, not to mention your job.”

“What do you mean?”

“Right 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 bunch of little kids. During one of the random cubby checks, they found an empty Grolsch bottle in his. You know, the kind with the fancy ceramic caps. He 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 sage advice of that penguin in *Madagascar*. ‘Just smile and wave. Smile and wave.’”

I wiped the sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand as I approached the third floor of the motel with my mop, which I dropped into the yellow pail of water waiting for me on the landing. 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 and in many ways. Here I was over fifty, running around doing the kind of job I had as a teenager, and I wondered if I’d ever not do it. I wondered if I’d be stuck in this awful place, with all the awfulness around it, for the same kind of forty years as the Hebrews of old. Most of all, I wondered why I was doing it.

Finding no 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 before I got a job. I especially feared the only cure for it.

I had to keep the job, I knew, 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.

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

My shift ended, but I still had time before the first bus 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, 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.

I called out her name, but she just kept running.

All afternoon I tried to make sense of what I had seen in the conference room, not just on the buses but on the long walk to the shelter from the bus stop. 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 serving dinner in the kitchen. Which made me forget everything else.

The shelter employed a full-time cook, whose meals were as unpleasant as her. All week I looked forward to Fridays and Saturdays, her days off. On them, Rich and his group would come in and turn the same slop we ate every night into gourmet meals with multiple courses. Just as importantly, he would treat everyone who walked into the 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. Instead, he and the others chose to gift this time to us.

This was driven by faith. Something I was only aware of because they would softly play the local Christian rock station on a portable stereo while they worked.

I knew this station well, from a recent stint at Pastor John’s mission in the forests of Lytle Creek, as it was the only one we were allowed to listen to. Whenever I had a moment’s rest from plodding in the man’s fields or from the screaming of his sermons, the station would torture me by playing the same dozen songs, with the songs repeating the same phrases over and over and over.

But now I didn’t mind it so much.

Rich and I had become friendly during the months I’d spent at the shelter, despite all the reasons we shouldn’t have been. Other than the strange fondness we shared for *Jesus Christ Superstar*, we had nothing in common and could agree on less, and we’d often argue over the issues of the day and over plenty of theological ones.

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.

I took my meal of spiced tonnarelli and vegetables outside into the courtyard and stopped at a booth where an old man was eating by himself.

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

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

Mels grinned and nodded toward the seat across from him. “*S udovol’stviyem*.”

I joined Mels, who was another volunteer at the shelter, after being one of its clients a few years earlier.

Like Rich, Mels 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 pants. But I liked him anyway, especially because he tolerated my pidgin Russian.

The Russian language is similar to the Czech I learned from my grandparents. But it’s dissimilar enough that I have trouble speaking it well. Still, unlike many Russians I’ve known, Mels would let me speak to him in it. Maybe he had a longing to converse in his mother tongue, no matter how terrible it was spoken. Or maybe, with a name like his, he just wasn’t that particular.

That night, Mels was listening 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 parallels between the four went beyond their style of music and its subject matters. Like those three, Vysotsky was Jewish, and like them, he may not have had a perfect voice. But it didn’t matter. He sang with a soul that was all you heard.

Mels once told me that Vysotsky’s songs had helped him through the gulags in the 1970s, even at times when he could only listen to his memories of them. As the song he was listening to that night came to an end, I could see on his face what the music meant to him. It was etched onto it.

I asked him if he could play “Koni priveredlivye,” and he 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 it can be translated correctly. I certainly can’t. But the title matters little.

The song is about a man 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 as they carry him to the abyss.

I’ve loved the song from the first time I heard it. Mikhail Baryshnikov danced to it in the film *White Nights*. Every version of it I’ve heard since is somehow different, but none moved me like the one in the courtyard. I think it was because I realized the lyrics were about a lot of us at the shelter. This included not only me but perhaps Mels. He was crying at the end of it, and I felt like crying with him, and I might have if I had been capable of any real emotion.

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

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

“Go ahead,” he said back with his own grin.

“You walked to San Francisco and back.’

He giggled. “Too easy.”

You’d never know by looking at this scrawny sixty-year-old chain-smoker that he was an athletic marvel. He came to the shelter after walking from Barstow in less than a day, trekking the forty miles through the scorching desert along a set of train tracks while carrying a forty-pound backpack.

When he first told the story of this, I chalked it up as one of the many tall tales I had heard from homeless people over the years. Then I went to the mall with him one day. I was a half mile behind him when he got there. He walked faster than most of us run.

Hank also spent a few semesters at MIT, and he had mad carpentry and electrical skills. He was an even bigger anomaly at the shelter than me. But maybe he was just another of us who couldn’t keep lashing their horses forward.

I made sure I got in the check-in line before Jerry.

Josh was off that night. Some new guy named Bob was working in his place, and I could feel the lack of stress as we waited. I got Tommy’s letter from him without hassle, and I took it to the corner booth.

Only then did I remember that I hadn’t decided how much of Tommy’s journal I would read to Rudi, if any. I still couldn’t decide. So I pulled out the entries and chose to wing it as I plugged in my phone and dialed her number.

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

“For what?” I asked with feigned ignorance.

“For getting mad at you last night.”

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

“But you’re gonna tell me it all anyway.”

“But I’m gonna tell you it all anyway.”

On the morning after reading the *Newsweek* article, Tommy felt the same sickness he had the night before. It hadn’t let up, but he had no more idea of what to do about it than he had then.

So he avoided Rudi that day. He went to school late and didn’t go to lunch, spending the hour hiding in the school’s library.

But he couldn’t avoid her in Calculus class. Before it started, he sat in his usual front-row seat and stared into space as everyone streamed inside while wondering how he’d react when he saw her.

Would he scream and curse? Would he demand an explanation?

Neither, he decided. She killed a Jew or had something to do with 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 repeated it once more.

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

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

Through the corner of his eyes, he saw her surprise as she headed toward the back of the room, along with something else. 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, Tommy tried a different approach. He acted as if Rudi had never come into his life. At lunch he was again listening to his friends’ dumb jokes and was telling some too. He even smiled at Darlene as she smiled at him and tried to feel the slightest something toward her.

This was interrupted by a commotion nearby. Both he and Darlene spun toward it and saw that Rudi had bumped into someone and that her tray was on the floor. A tray with almost no food on it.

Slowly, Rudi picked up the tray, and she glared at Tommy. But this couldn’t hide the same hurt he saw the day before.

Noticing this, Darlene’s smile changed. It changed into a smirk as she wrapped her arm around Tommy’s. She wrapped it like a snake.

Tommy turned from both of them and probably himself.

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

Rudi glanced at him before marching off.

“That’s right, keep walking, loser,” Joey called out to her. “Not all of us are scared of you or that sucker punch you threw. I’d really like to see you try that with me.”

Rudi continued her ignoring and marching, but she slowed when she reached Beth, who was walking past her with her head down.

As she came to a stop, Rudi turned back to her while looking like there was something about the girl she found off.

“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, “most famously and brutally by Voltaire in *Candide*.”

Tommy was barely listening. He was going through the motions, like he had 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 was not.

“What he was saying is that it’s not possible to imagine a world that’s better than what we’ve got. If you don’t believe me, try conjuring one yourself. I bet you can’t, and it’s because of free will. The only way to improve the world we have 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 as many good things and all the infinite possibilities that come with every next moment. Just as importantly, if we could eliminate the bad things from happening, we’d never appreciate the good or realize how precious each of our finite moments are.

“Along with free will, we have life and everything that makes it worth living: poetry and music and art. We have love. And let’s not forget we have Pink Bubblegum Ice Cream at Baskin Robbins this month.”

Many in the class laughed. 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 got home late from school. He was so lost in thought that he couldn’t remember driving home.

He only came out of it when he stepped through his front door and saw his mother watching an old movie on the TV in the living room.

A year earlier, she would’ve never been doing this in the middle of the day. But it wasn’t unusual anymore. It seemed that 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. They were the only places she could escape, to 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 with her. He watched the part where Santa speaks Dutch with the little refugee girl, and he watched the two sing a Christmas song. During the latter, he saw his mother was crying.

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

“I wasn’t doing anything,” Rudi grumbled.

But I would learn this was an exaggeration.

Rudi convinced herself that Tommy’s sudden change toward her didn’t matter and that she had even expected it.

But 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 she could do to inflate it: go to the animal hospital and see the dog she had helped rescue.

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

I bet there was more to it than that. I think Rudi saw herself in the dog, left at an early age to fend for herself without the means of doing so.

“You better be careful,” the vet said to Rudi one afternoon as she passed her caressing the napping pup on her lap. “You’ll get attached.”

Rudi shook her head. “It’s too late for that. No one’s claimed her?”

“Not yet.”

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

“A few more weeks, maybe a month. Fortunately, that young man, the one you brought her here with, paid for three months of care.”

“He did?”

“He’s pretty nice.”

Rudi shrugged.

“He’s pretty handsome too.”

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

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

Rudi mostly visited the dog by herself and sometimes with Maria when she worked on the weekends. Then one afternoon she went with someone else.

While she was waiting for the bus in front of the school with some others, Owen came to the stop.

The two nodded at each other and exchanged heys before they turned toward the road.

“How’s it going?” he asked.

“It is going.”

“Where you heading?”

“The animal hospital.”

“You sick?”

Rudi grinned, in spite of herself. “I’m going to see a dog.”

“Yeah, I heard about that.”

“Where you heading?”

“Nowhere. Home, I guess.”

“You wanna come with me?”

The dog licked Owen’s hand. She licked it over and over while wagging her tail.

“She likes me,” he muttered with surprise.

“Dogs can tell when someone’s nice,” Rudi said.

“No one’s ever called me that.”

“I know what that’s like.”

“I wonder if she’d be licking me if she knew about my record.”

“She doesn’t seem to care about mine.”

“I guess we have a lot in common, other than that you’re smart.”

“You’re not so dumb.”

“I got held back in fifth grade. More than once.”

“That still doesn’t mean you’re dumb.”

“Everyone thinks I’m dumb, especially my dad. He wants me to drop out and get a job.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t know. I’d really like to succeed at something. But it’s not so easy.”

“Why?”

“I don’t read so good.”

“I could help you.”

“You’d do that?”

“Someone once helped me. We all need help now and then.”

“I wouldn’t think you ever needed help.”

“You’d be wrong.”

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 could.

While wandering a hallway in between classes, he saw Rudi doing likewise, in the direction of Joey, who was arguing with Beth, much like they’d been doing lately. But it was louder and more animated than normal, and Tommy could see the panic on Beth’s face. He also saw that one of her eyes seemed swollen.

He wasn’t the only one who noticed it. As Rudi reached the pair, she gazed at the girl and then at Joey, who growled, “Keep walking, loser.”

She did just that. She walked off like she didn’t care.

At the same moment, Beth tried to rush off. But Joey grabbed her arm, and he raised his at her. “You’re still not listening to me! But you will!”

This was when Rudi came to a halt.

After pausing for a moment, she turned around and marched up to Joey, stopping right behind him. “I’d really like to see you try that with me,” she said.

Grunting, Joey swung the back of his hand at her.

Rudi ducked, and he hit a locker and screamed in pain. Which caused him to let go of Beth, who fled down the hallway. So frantic was she to get away that she didn’t see Jared exit a stairway, and she ran into him.

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

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

Tommy turned back to Rudi and to Joey, who cocked his fist back with his face bright red. “Let’s see you miss this one.”

“There’s not gonna be a ‘this one,’” she told him before swinging her leg into his groin, sending him to the floor squealing in pain.

“WHY?” Tommy wrote 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.

Coldly, Rudi stood over Joey with her hands on her hips as he squirmed on the floor. “It’s not so fun when the girl hits back, is it?” she uttered.

He didn’t reply. He just continued to squirm.

“Next time I won’t be so nice,” she added, and she wandered off 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 noticed Rudi in the distance approaching the school.

He sat and watched her. He watched as she passed him without looking at him, and he watched her step into the school.

He didn’t follow. He just waited outside, for what he didn’t know.

Only after the bell for first period had rung did he go inside.

Not even bothering to go to his locker, he went straight to his first-period computer class, where outside its open door he saw everyone punching cards as usual.

Sighing, he walked off. He walked down the hall and down the stairwell to the second floor, and he walked down that corridor, knowing exactly where he was walking to.

As he got close to Rudi’s classroom, he heard Ms. Krasner’s voice. “I was actually impressed by a few of your poems.”

Tommy walked up to the open door, where he saw Rudi slouching in the back row with her arms crossed while the teacher handed papers to the class.

“Of course, there was some substandard work,” the woman said when she stopped in front of Rudi with a frown and one last page in her hand.

Rudi lowered her eyes.

“But this wasn’t one of those,” the teacher told Rudi as she placed the poem in front of her.

Surprised, Rudi lifted her eyes. With even more surprise, she gazed at the “A+” on top of the page.

Krasner pointed at the poem. “I didn’t want to like this. I really didn’t. But you gave me no choice. You know, it’s too bad Cummings died before you were born. I think he would’ve found you a kindred soul. A fellow punk.”

Tommy couldn’t control his curiosity. He leaned forward and read the first lines of the poem.

*so tall*

*but never reaches the floor*

*so sure*

*but cant say*

*what he wants*

Tommy was now past curious. So he leaned forward some more to read the rest of the poem. He almost fell over.

Like the last time Tommy had been standing there, Rudi slowly turned toward him.

She saw not only him but his shock, and this came over her face as she hid the poem behind her back.

Stepping forward to discover what Rudi was gaping at, the teacher noticed Tommy. “Can I help you?” she asked.

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

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

Rudi broke the narrative. She did with a chuckle.

I had to ask. “What so funny?”

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

Tommy didn’t sleep that night. He tossed himself around in his bed while trying to make the words of Rudi’s poem disappear or at least not matter.

But they kept pounding the insides of his head. They wouldn’t leave.

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 a few years before. The teacher one morning played the prelude to Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, and he thought it was the most beautiful thing he ever heard.

But Wagner was a monster. He was a monster in the same way Rudi was.

By dawn, Tommy had come up with all the excuses he needed to believe that nothing had changed, and he had free will.

But 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 opened, exposing a silver Jaguar and a tan Mercedes convertible and the Harley parked between them.

This sped onto the driveway along with Tommy, and it sped down Overhill Road. 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 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 warm out. But what he noticed more was how frightened she looked and how hard she was trying not to show it.

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.

As 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, by the courthouse doors.

With the midday sun burning brightly, Rudi exited the building with the FBI agent and a man who had an expensive haircut and an even more expensive gray suit, and the three stopped at 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 said as she marched down the stairs followed by the FBI agent, who smirked at her the whole way to the garage.

The blue sedan slowed in front of Columbia on Valley Road.

While it was still in motion, Rudi swung open her door and jumped out. Without even closing the door, she made her way to the school.

The FBI agent shut the door and left, and Tommy jumped the curb and rode over a small patch of grass to the parking lot, and he drove alongside Rudi.

She glanced at him, and once more he saw her hurt.

“What do you want?” she growled.

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

She continued toward the school.

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

Suddenly, Rudi came to a stop. “What?”

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

Spinning toward Tommy, Rudi clenched her fists and raised them at him. “Have you been following me?”

“You know, 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 answered by reciting her poem. He recited it word for word.

*so tall*

*but never reaches the floor*

*so sure*

*but cant say*

*what he wants*

*every kiss*

*every blush*

*every broken heart*

*i wanna shout him inside out*

*i wanna scream him through a wall*

*i wanna make him see*

*what i see*

*the what i see*

*when i see me*

Tommy rode up to her. He rode up to both her and the shock on her face. “I’m the guy in the picture you drew.”

She said nothing, and he leaned toward her, shocking her even more than the poem had. It scared her too, enough to step back.

“Or I want to be,” he mumbled.

Tentatively, she took a small step toward him, unsure of both herself and him and looking like she would cry. “You made me feel so . . .”

“I’m sorry,” he said. He said it as softly as he could.

She took another step toward him, and the two leaned forward, 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 whispered back.

Rudi stared into a waterfall from the rocks she and Tommy were sitting on in the South Mountain Reservation.

“I met Deke in the hospital we were both sent to clean up,” she mumbled with her voice barely audible over the rushing water. “It seems like forever ago. I didn’t think much of him, but he was the one who gave me my name.”

Tommy turned to her in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“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, I was bored. There was nothing going on but drugs, and even they were boring. So, after I got out of the hospital, I visited Deke at his house.”

Rudi paused. As she looked up from the water, she glanced at the endless trees surrounding them. “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. Listening to it is the only time I’m not alone, the only time I know there’s someone like me. It’s actually in my bag, the song. It’s the last song on every tape I’ve made. That way I know there’s always something good coming up.”

“I like it too.”

Now Rudi was surprised. “You do?”

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

Rudi’s eyes returned to the water. “Deke then played Iggy and X and Jim Carroll, and I was hooked, worse than drugs. Sometimes I’d spend days there listening to records. He had hundreds of them. He even stole a copy of *The Decline of Western Civilization* and a projector too. We watched that movie on his living room wall just about every night. Sometimes we’d run it all night. I know it so well that I can imitate every inflection on Lee Ving’s face when he sings.”

While shaking her head, Rudi added, “There was nothing but the music and how it made me feel. For the first time I was strong. I was no longer just a victim, I could do something about it. I could smash through the whole world. More than that, the music got me from each day to the next and to and from every rottenness.”

“You didn’t know Deke was a racist?” Tommy asked.

“Of course, I knew,” she growled. “I was raised on that crap. And I never questioned it, not with my mom or my stepdad and especially not with Deke and his friends. I buried my head in myself and pretended that it had nothing to do with me.”

The conversation fell quiet. They both went back to staring into the water while avoiding what they both knew they had to talk about. They did until Tommy blurted out, “What about the kid that got killed?”

Rudi tried to answer. Though she had to close and open her eyes a number of times before she could get the words out. “Deke would sometimes put on shows in his house with local bands. 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, and we danced a little. It was nothing, but Deke got jealous. And when he found out they were from a Jewish fraternity . . .”

“He killed him,” Tommy muttered.

“There was violence at these shows. 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. The truth is that it’s the only music I know that speaks out against it. It speaks out against every ism there is. It shouts it as loud as can be. It shouted it so loud that even I heard it. And Richard Hell is Jewish. So is Keith Morris. Ron Reyes is Puerto Rican and Bad Brains are black. Even Deke knows this.

“But to him and people like him, every song is a call for a race war and a second Holocaust. Every song is about splitting someone’s head open. A couple of times Deke had put people in the hospital but never anything like this.”

Rudi gasped for breath. She looked like she would fall apart, with the pieces tumbling into the ravine below them. “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.”

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

“You’re not a loser!”

“Even my mom thought so! She left me without saying a word, like I wasn’t even there.”

“She’s the one who lost.”

Rudi looked into his eyes. She looked for a long time and like she was trying to believe him.

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

She didn’t answer. She just turned from him.

“Wasn’t it?” he repeated. He repeated it louder.

“Everyone ran when they heard the sirens,” she said. “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, your coat.”

“I forgot it. I was so out of it this morning. I didn’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 again and again, and it always ends the same. No matter what I do, he dies. He dies because of me. Nothing will ever change this.”

Tommy wanted to say something to her right then, something that could’ve taken her pain. But nothing came. So he uttered the first thing that did. “You must be cold.”

She crossed her arms, as if only now did she realize she was cold, and she glowered. “I’m fine.”

He took off his jacket anyway. “I want you to wear mine.”

She kept her arms crossed.

But he wouldn’t relent, and she finally let him put the coat on her. But she sneered at the corniness of it as she put her hands into the sleeves.

“It looks good on you,” he told her.

“How would you know?”

He grinned. “Believe me, I know.”

They finished with the jacket, and he reached for her hand. But he stopped himself and instead peered into the forest while recalling how difficult it had been getting Rudi to walk through it.

Rudi followed Tommy through the trees while stumbling through branch after branch and tripping over rocks in her laceless Chuck Taylors. She stumbled and tripped until she fell down a small hill into some leaves and dirt.

He stopped and turned to her. “You all right?”

“If you hadn’t noticed,” she moaned as she rose to her feet and wiped her knees, “I’m not exactly a Campfire Girl.”

Tommy smiled. He smiled all the way to the falls.

Tommy was again smiling as he stared into the roaring water.

“I come here a lot,” he told Rudi. “It’s my favorite place. Do you know 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 cackled before gazing at the beauty around her and listening to the peacefulness of it. “You were right. This *is* the best anywhere.”

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

“I wanna forget. I wanna forget everything.”

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

Tommy stepped inside a hospital room, toward the larger-than-life man withering in front of him.

Slower and slower he moved, over the sounds of “Two Sleepy People” playing from a tape recorder by the bed.

The man smiled. He smiled through the pain as he strained to lift his head. “I wanted, I wanted to be here for your first time.”

Tommy forced a smile back. “You’re a little late for that, Dad.”

His father laughed. “I meant the first time you fall in love.”

“What makes you think I haven’t?”

“I’d know.”

Tommy didn’t know what to say. So he just kept forcing a smile.

“You only get one chance to fall in love for the first time,” the man went on. “Don’t let it get away from you.”

Back at the waterfall, Tommy glanced at Rudi.

He saw the surprise on her face from hearing about his father, a surprise mixed with a sorrow deeper than any he’d seen, and this surprised him. She always surprised him, and she continued doing so when she put her arm around him.

He did the same to her as she took a deep breath of the mountain air and murmured, “This place, it kinda reminds me . . .”

“What?”

She shook her head. “It’s stupid.”

“Tell me. Please tell me.”

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

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

“I did when I was little. The library was the one place I could escape, from my mom and especially my stepdad. Sometimes I’d spend all afternoon there, even when I couldn’t yet read.

“I kept pestering this old librarian to teach me. Every day she would sit outside in the garden playing classical records, and I would pester her. ‘You’ll learn when you start school,’ she kept telling me. But I couldn’t wait. I couldn’t wait another fraction of a second. So I pestered and pestered her until she caved in.

“For a month of afternoons, she taught me. I can remember it all, sitting in her lap with all those books and the sun on my face and Bach and Pachelbel and Monteverdi all around us.

“Then I read every fairy tale they had. I even wrote my own and illustrated it.”

“Really?”

“It was just stick figures and finger paint and junk like that. But I was so proud of it. I so wanted to believe in it and make it come true.”

“What was it about?”

“Oh, I don’t know . . . a girl and a prince and a happily ever after. The usual nonsense.”

“I don’t think it’s nonsense.”

Like before, Rudi looked into Tommy’s eyes. She looked like she was gauging him. She looked and looked and 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 make him feel as good as he did 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 stammered as he felt a couple of raindrops on his head. He wanted to tell her, “I want you to be my girl.” He wrote it across a whole page of his journal. He wrote it on lots 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 hear the words echo back to him.

*I want you to be my girl*.

But the only words that came out 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 staring into when they heard an old song playing nearby.

Turning toward it, they saw a smiling elderly couple a few booths over, who were listening to the music from the small jukebox at their table.

The song unnerved Tommy, as it was the same he had heard at the beginning of his story and in his bedroom on the night after meeting Rudi.

But he wondered whether he should’ve been unnerved by it. He wondered if he should’ve expected it, that he should’ve known the playing of it was inevitable as the girl sitting across from him.

She spun toward him with a grin. “I know this song. I heard it in this weird sort of a dream I had when I first got here.”

Tommy became more unnerved. “A dream?”

“Yeah, I was . . .”

“Dancing with someone?”

“How did you know?”

He shrugged.

“Anyway,” she continued while looking unnerved herself, “I 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.”

“I guess you don’t like it too much,” he said.

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

“Like E. E. Cummings?”

Rudi smirked.

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

“Until your what?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

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

“My dad once told me,” Tommy said after he and Rudi returned their glances to each other, “he told me that when he first danced with my mom, Julie London was singing ‘Two Sleepy People’ at some nightclub they were at in New York City. It would always be their song. The playing of it would remind him of how it struck him at that moment he was in lov . . .”

Tommy stopped. He stopped while watching Rudi’s face react to what he had said or had almost said. He could see both her fear and excitement and felt them both and realized they’d come from the same thing. 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 toward him. They couldn’t stop, and their lips were about to meet.

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

The waitress put the salads in front of them, along with a heaping dose of skepticism. “You sure that’s all you guys want?”

Tommy shrugged. “It’s the only thing on the menu without meat.”

“Kids today,” the woman groaned while shaking her head and marching off, leaving Tommy and Rudi to giggle.

“You know, they do have fries,” he said to her.

“No, thanks,” she grumbled as she took a small bite of the salad.

“So, how’d you become a vegetarian?”

“You’ll laugh at me again.”

“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, I knew exactly what he was feeling. It was real personal for me. What about you? How did you become a vegetarian?”

“I really don’t know. 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 in front of the diner, and he and Rudi started toward the doors and slowly.

“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. “Deke isn’t just gonna go away.”

“How’d he find you here?”

“That I don’t know either. But he doesn’t know that I’m testifying against him. I told him I was staying with an uncle.”

“What does he want from you?”

“What he’s always wanted.”

The two reached the doors, and Rudi opened one for Tommy with a grin.

He grinned back. “Touché, Ms. Weiss.”

The two walked outside, and they saw that it was raining and that this was getting harder. “I could call my mom,” he said. “Maybe she could give us a lift.”

Ignoring this, Rudi marched into the falling water and up to the Harley, and she sat across the seat. “I thought you liked to live dangerously.”

Grinning once more, Tommy hustled into the rain, and he jumped onto the bike.

With her arms around him, he gunned it out of the parking lot and down South Orange Avenue before making a sharp left onto Harding Drive. It was so sharp that the two were almost touching the ground.

Quickly, the bike regained balance, and Rudi screamed. She screamed and wrapped her legs around him.

He glanced at her in his rearview mirror, and he saw her tilt her head back to catch the water in her mouth. But what he really noticed was her joy. Never had he seen anyone so happy, not even the girl in the Vermeer painting, and he wondered if it was on his face.

Something else struck Tommy. He had gotten the bike on the day he had gotten his driver’s license, but this was the first time he 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 on her face as she gazed at his big house.

“I thought Versailles was in France,” she quipped.

“Funny,” he said.

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

“Not even close.”

Tommy got off the bike, and he noticed something in his rearview mirror.

Whipping his head around, he saw a car turn down Overhill Road. A car that looked like the red Porsche Deke drove.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he answered, and he started toward his house. But she didn’t follow, and he spun back to her in exasperation. “Come on.”

She shook her head. “Just take me home. You obviously know where it is.”

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

She sighed. Loudly she sighed. But she followed him into the house and to the large foyer, where she gazed at her surroundings as if in another world. She gazed until Tommy took a pair of towels from a nearby closet and offered her one.

Dropping her seabag onto the floor by the door, she took the towel and used it to dry herself while Tommy did likewise with his own.

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

There was no reply.

“Who’s Elizabeth?” Rudi asked.

“You’ll find out.”

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.

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

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

“Again with Elizabeth.”

Tommy spotted a bowl of wrapped white chocolate truffles on an end table, and he grabbed it and offered it to Rudi.

She grimaced. “White chocolate?”

“It’s my favorite,” he told her.

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

Tommy took a piece for himself, and he cooed as he ate it.

Rudi grimaced even more, and she put her hands on her hips. “Can’t you see how ridiculous we are together? We’re barely the same species.”

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

Rudi searched for a response. Not finding one, she started up the long, winding wooden staircase.

“Where you going?” he called out.

“I wanna see the rest of this palace,” she called back.

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

Approaching the second-floor landing, Rudi came to a sudden halt. She ceased her singing and flung herself toward Tommy, who came to a stop a few steps below her.

“Some people say I look like her,” she said.

“Who?” he asked.

Rudi became exasperated. “Siouxsie. But I think I look more like Exene. I sound like her too, don’t you think?”

“Susie who?”

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

“I don’t know. I listen to the Yardbirds sometimes.”

“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.

On the landing, she again stopped when she came upon a framed autographed photo of Ronald Reagan on the wall. She stopped and snarled at it.

“Now what?” he yelped from behind her.

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

“My dad actually knew him.”

“You don’t say?” she gasped irreverently.

“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.”

It looked like Rudi would respond. She even opened her mouth. But instead she marched down the second-floor hallway.

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

She didn’t answer, and she reached the door at the end of the hallway and 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.

Shaking off his arm, Rudi thrust open the door, and she stepped inside a bedroom I’m sure unlike anything she’d seen in real life, with a large canopy bed, a crystal chandelier, and many pieces of antique furniture.

She stood and gaped at it all. “Your mom really is the Queen of Navarre.”

“Can we go now?” he begged.

Instead, she stepped deeper into the room, and he 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 dresses as she walked from one end of the closet to the other. “You’d never see me in a dress.”

“Who says I want to?” he snapped.

She paused at the last dress, a white wedding gown wrapped in plastic, and she snickered at it. “Marriage, what an outdated and sexist . . .”

Suddenly, her voice faltered. Something about the dress and its long train broke her concentration. “It’s just like the one . . .”

Tommy didn’t let her finish. He slammed one of the sliding closet doors in her face, and she turned to him and his anger.

“Now do you see how wrong we are?” 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 but started off.

He grabbed her hand as she passed, and something incredible happened. He felt her tremble and from nothing more than his touch. It was a tremble that meant so many things that his mind couldn’t process them all. This along with the shock on her face gave him the courage to pull her toward him.

She resisted. “Let go of me.”

He didn’t, nor did he stop pulling.

“Don’t you realize how easily I could lay you out on the floor?” she howled. “And you’d stay there!”

Tommy knew this was true, but it just excited him more, and he pulled harder.

She didn’t stop resisting. Neither was getting anywhere. So they both stopped and stared at each other. They stared for a long time.

Then she sighed. Loudly she sighed.

Throwing off his hand, she jumped into his arms and 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. There was only 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 about and almost smashed right through a window.

One thing prevented it. The sound of someone clearing their throat.

They broke their kiss and opened their eyes, and they turned toward the doorway.

Standing there with her arms crossed and a frown on her face was Tommy’s mother.

I took my time putting down the page and could just about see Rudi blushing on the other end of the line.

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

I cackled. “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 in the vault. So I would have to try to get one in the morning, with all the hassle I knew would come with it.

Still, I was in a good mood when I walked into the men’s quarters, 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. He especially wanted to live in Mexico City. He loved the smells wafting over its streets, the constant weaving of people through the tapestry, and he loved the food. “Everything just tastes better there,” he once said to me.

But because Hector wasn’t a Mexican citizen, 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.

Hector worked at one of the many warehouses down the hill, packing trucks all day. Before I got the job at the motel, he got me some shifts with him. It was backbreaking work, that left you in filth that would take days to remove. But Hector always had a smile on his face while he worked. Which came from the dream that would never die.

“Dude,” came an accented voice from the other side of the enormous room, “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’d come to the shelter I didn’t feel like I was in one. We were just a bunch of guys joking around on a Friday night and that felt great.

the fourth night

Saturdays were always a working day for me and never much different than any other.

The one difference on this one, apart from Lynnette’s birthday party that night, was that I had no way of getting to work. I had to wait for the assistant director of the shelter to come in that morning and find me a pass.

While standing at the gates, I knew time was running out to make my first bus when his brown station wagon parked outside and he staggered out of it and toward me.

Dan was a hefty man in his late fifties and slow in many ways, and he took his time looking for the passes. But he had no more success in finding them than Bob had the night before, and he turned to me with a scowl. “Do you really need one right now?”

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

“It’s not okay. We’d throw you out if you did that.”

So he gave me the money. But he only gave me $3.50.

“A day pass costs $4.00,” I told him.

He shook his head. “It was $3.50 the last time I bought one.”

“It’s not $3.50 now.”

He didn’t believe me. I had to get out my phone and show him the website for the Victor Valley Transit Authority before he would give me the last pair of quarters.

Running for the bus didn’t help. I just missed it and got to the motel an hour later than usual. So I knew I’d have to move even faster than usual if I wanted to make it back in time for the party.

Amoun would often have me clean the big messes in the rooms so the cleaning women 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.

I had just about finished when Alaya walked inside the room with her cart.

“Hey,” I mumbled to her, not sure what else to say.

With embarrassment, she scurried into the bathroom. Only then did she say something. “I’m really sorry about yesterday.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

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

“Yeah?”

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

She peaked her head through the bathroom doorway. “It’s terrible what these women go through.”

From the look on her face, I could tell she wasn’t speaking about some hypothetical women. But again I wasn’t sure what to say, even more so. She didn’t know either, and we stared at each other blankly until she returned to the bathroom.

“You know,” I called out while pretending 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 the 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 locked on the running water. “I hate that.”

“I’m sorry,” I babbled after spinning away.

“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. I got really good marks in school and was all set to go to the university. But my parents, they had other plans. They wanted me to marry 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 stood silently in response, probably with a dumb look on my face.

She sighed and shook her head. “I thought I had this behind me. I’m starting classes at Cal State next month.”

“That’s terrific.”

“But I guess, I guess I don’t have it behind me.”

“You should try—”

“—They don’t help. I’ve tried. It’s too impersonal. These people, they’re 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 through stuff. It’s kind of an obsession for her, probably 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. I just took out my phone.

“I don’t have time,” she screeched. “I’ve got to finish these rooms before check-in.”

“Just talk to her for a few minutes.”

“What’s up?” my sister said into the phone on 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 use some help.”

“Put her on.”

I offered the phone to Alaya, but she wouldn’t take it.

“Please,” I whispered, and she reluctantly grabbed the device.

She started speaking with Rudi, and I left the room with my mop and bucket and closed the door behind myself. Which Alaya opened right away while peeking her head into the hallway. “What about your phone?”

“I’ll get it from you later.”

I left the motel after my shift and was 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. She hugged me for a long time. “Your sister is so amazing.”

“Believe me, I know,” I said with a grin as we broke our embrace and she handed me the phone.

“It was like talking to my big sister or something. Better, actually. My real big sister won’t talk to me. Rudi and I are doing a Zoom 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 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 giving the help.”

“Life is a series of cycles constantly renewing themselves.”

I smiled at her and started off.

“She’s worried about you,” Alaya called out. “Your sister.”

“She’s not the only one,” I said.

“I told her I’d look out for you.”

“I appreciate that.”

On the bus, I got curious about the trafficking ring Alaya had mentioned. So I searched for the story on my phone, and I found a few on local news sites.

I learned the police had arrested two men in Old Adelanto, a miserable place one town over that made Victorville look like Paradise. They believed the men had an accomplice, but other than that there wasn’t much information. Though one site did say that both men had served in the army together a handful of years earlier.

With the sun setting, I entered the gates of the shelter and noticed all the birthday decorations in the courtyard, which Nicole had somehow gotten her hands on. Along with these I noticed Nicole, who rushed up to me expressing a combination of frantic and frustrated. “Have you seen Josh?” she cried out.

I started to answer, but Matt called my name from a handful of steps away, and I turned toward him.

“There’s a letter for you in the office,” he said.

“Thanks,” I replied.

“Have you seen Josh?” Nicole shrieked.

“No.”

“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.

Nicole pointed down the street. “Stater Brothers has this big cake for twenty bucks and that includes decorating it.”

“We can all chip in,” I said.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Matt groaned again, again with his head shaking.

“They can’t throw us all out.”

“They can’t?”

Ignoring this, Nicole and I went around the courtyard and stealthily collected money.

I was surprised that almost everyone gave, even if it was only the change in their pockets—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 there, gave something when she found out what we were up to, despite knowing she could’ve been fired for it. Matt gave too, however grudgingly, and I threw in my five dollars, hoping it would make me less paranoid about losing it. We ended up with more money than we needed, enough to buy some extras and a gift for Lynnette.

Hector sped me to the supermarket in his car. We got the cake and had it decorated, and we returned with it, a box of candles, snacks and soda, and a teddy bear.

Quickly, Nicole grabbed the cake from me, and she put ten candles on it.

“They’re coming!” someone howled from the gates, and Nicole lit the candles. Another someone turned off the lights, which they flipped back on when Lynnette and her mother entered the gates, to a chorus of “Happy Birthday to You.”

The surprise and happiness on that little girl’s face was something none of us would forget, especially her mother, who was barely holding back the tears. So was Nicole, who was probably thinking of her own little girls.

Watching Lynnette that night as she blew out the candles, I saw a normal ten year old celebrating a birthday. A normal girl made to feel that she was special and that she mattered.

Likewise, we were just normal people attending a birthday party. 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 more.

Josh finally showed up, with no cake. But he was certainly surprised to see one. He might’ve been more surprised than Lynnette and her mother.

Nicole marched up to him with her fists clenched. “Where were you?”

He shrugged. “I got stuck on the 395. Some police action.”

This piqued my interest, as I knew that road went through Old Adelanto. But what piqued it more was when I recalled that Josh had been in the army, just like the two men who’d been arrested.

While I knew this could’ve been nothing more than coincidence, I found myself wondering if it could be more.

Again, I made sure I was ahead of Jerry in the check-in line.

I stepped into the office, and Josh handed me the letter that had been waiting for me on the desk. But he didn’t let go of it. “How did you guys get the cake?”

I stammered as I tried to answer. “I . . . I had some money left on an old EBT card. We’re allowed to use that, right?”

He didn’t say anything. But he released the envelope, and I started out of the office.

“I think I’ll be watching you,” he called out.

“*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?”* I shot back.

“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 into the courtyard as the party was ending. Lynnette and a few other kids were finishing the huge banana split sundaes Rich had made for them, from ice cream he had somehow conjured.

I couldn’t stop grinning at this as I took Tommy’s letter to the corner booth and called Rudi.

Unlike the previous few nights, it rang many times. I think we both knew this would be one of the more difficult parts of the story.

On the fifth ring, she picked up. Without any small talk, I opened the envelope and started reading her its pages.

It took Tommy a while 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 them both.

Quickly, he released his arms from Rudi and spun toward his mother, sending Rudi to the floor.

“Sorry about this, Mom,” he uttered as Rudi jumped to her feet.

The woman continued her glare. “It’s just fortunate for all of us that I didn’t arrive about ten minutes later.”

“It’s not like that, Mom,” he insisted as he and Rudi slowly made their way toward her. “Really.”

Closer the two got to his mother, and Tommy could see the disgust growing on her face. Disgust of Rudi. She didn’t even bother to hide it as the pair stopped in front of her.

The woman looked them over, and she noticed something that got her more upset. “Did you two just get out of the shower?”

“It’s not like that, Mom,” Tommy screeched. “We got caught in the rain. Sorta.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” the woman grumbled through her clenched teeth.

“This is Rudi, my . . .”

Tommy didn’t know what to call her, so he stammered.

“I’m his friend,” Rudi blurted out. “Sorta.”

“Will your friend be staying for dinner?” Mrs. Goodwin asked Tommy.

“Yes,” he answered at the same time Rudi answered, “No,” and she turned to him with the glare now on her face.

“By all means stay for dinner, Rudi,” the woman said 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, with Rudi looking long past anxious.

“She hates me,” she said. “And if I were her, I’d hate me too.”

“It’s just that you remind her of someone,” Tommy said back. “Someone real close.”

“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. I don’t even care about the future anymore. All I care about is now.”

“Some of us can’t separate our past from our now. 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.”

“Down the block.”

Rudi jumped to her feet. “Point me in her direction.”

“Please stay. Please.”

Rudi sighed, and she fell back onto the couch.

Tommy picked up a remote off the coffee table, and he turned to her. “You wanna watch TV?”

Crossing her arms, she spun from him. “I hate TV.”

Tommy put it on anyway and flipped through the channels. He came upon some football highlights, and he turned to Rudi with an inquisitive glance.

She sneered. “I hate football and all things that involve large groups of people who think alike, which I define as any group larger than one.”

Tommy chuckled and returned to the screen and kept flipping, and he reached MTV and a Van Halen video. With another inquisitive look, he glanced at her, and this time she didn’t even bother to say anything. She just scowled.

He continued flipping and found a little UHF station, where a strange little man in a checkered suit and a fedora was telling an even stranger puppet that Squeeze would be performing later in the show.

Surprised at what he was watching, Rudi uncrossed her arms and turned toward the TV. “I hate everything but this.”

“What’s that?” Tommy asked with his attention on the screen.

She glanced at him incredulously. “You really watch *Uncle Floyd?”*

He didn’t answer, and she watched the irreverent comedy show with him.

Suddenly, they both cackled at the same stupid joke, causing them to glance at each other in surprise.

Tommy smiled, and so did she. But 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 that Rudi gazed at in both confusion and wary. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many utensils.”

“We don’t usually eat so formally,” Tommy grumbled while glaring at his mother.

“I thought it would be a nice change,” the woman said.

Tommy continued his glare, realizing that his mother was trying to make Rudi feel out of place and that this was working. “It’s real simple,” he told Rudi. “As the courses come, just use the utensils farthest from you.”

“Why can’t we use the same utensils?” Rudi bellowed. “What’s the big deal?”

Mrs. Goodwin laughed and with lots of condescension. “You eat however way you want, my dear.”

Quietly, Rudi fumed. She kept this up until the kitchen doors swung open and Elizabeth entered the room and began serving them a tray of piping-hot parsley soup.

Tommy could see this 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 Elizabeth and Tommy. But Mrs. Goodwin didn’t find it so funny, and she glowered, at no one in particular. “Thank you, Elizabeth.”

The grin left Elizabeth’s face at once, and she nodded at the woman and shuffled off.

Seeing Rudi stare at her soup in bewilderment, Mrs. Goodwin remarked, “I should warn you, Rudi. My son’s been on a weird fad of late, which I’ve regretably humored.”

“What do you mean?” Rudi asked as she lifted her eyes off the soup.

“He doesn’t eat meat.”

“Rudi’s a vegetarian too,” Tommy said.

“How convenient,” the woman uttered with a knowing smirk.

Clenching her fists, Rudi plopped them onto the table. “I’ve been a vegetarian since I was fourteen.”

“I’m sure you have, dear.”

This only made Rudi angrier. But noticing Tommy sipping his soup, she calmed herself and took a small sip, and she couldn’t hide her surprise. “This is really good. It sure beats stale fries.”

Tommy wasn’t sure how to respond. 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 little loudly, drawing the attention of Mrs. Goodwin, who turned toward her son and forced a smile. “Tell me, Tommy, just wherever did you two meet?”

“Rudi’s in my math class.”

The woman became shocked. “I thought you were taking AP Calculus.”

“I am. Rudi’s the smartest one there. She might be the smartest person in the whole school.”

“That’s not true,” Rudi insisted.

“What did you get on your SAT?”

“I forget.”

“I bet. I bet it was perfect.”

“You’d lose that bet. They cheated me out of a few points.”

Even Mrs. Goodwin had to grin at this, and Tommy couldn’t hold back his excitement. “You should’ve seen her solve this partial fraction decomposition integration. She solved it like it was addition. Even Mrs. Elkind was impressed, and she’s never impressed by anything. Then Rudi wrote ‘Q.E.D.’ beside it.”

“Quite easily done,” exclaimed Mrs. Goodwin.

“Actually,” Rudi replied, “it means—”

“—*Quod erat demonstrandum*,” the woman interrupted.

“My mom was Phi Beta Kappa at Radcliffe,” Tommy let Rudi know. “The other night she was telling me how she saw E. E. Cummings in person at school.”

“Really?” Rudi mumbled.

Mrs. Goodwin shook her head. “That was a long time ago, Tommy.”

“He was giving what he called a ‘nonlecture’ at Harvard,” Tommy continued. “As he walked to the lectern, she and some other Radcliffe girls stood and started reciting . . . what was the poem of his you recited?”

The woman sighed. “‘Buffalo Bill ’s.’”

“And what did he do?”

Once more, the woman sighed. “He stopped and turned to us and watched us finish, and then he took out his handkerchief and waved it at us. I thought he was going to cry.”

“Wow,” was all Rudi could say.

“Rudi just wrote a poem in his style for one of her classes,” Tommy blurted out.

Spinning toward him, Rudi raised her fist. “Don’t you dare recite it.”

“Well, Rudi,” commented Mrs. Goodwin, “you certainly are a Renaissance woman, calculus and modernist poetry. If only the school offered a beauty class.”

Unlike with the woman’s other barbs, Rudi had no retort. Tommy noticed how her only reaction was to recoil.

“*Mom*,” he quietly snarled.

“Do you actually pay someone to do that to your hair?” the woman went on.

“Didn’t you tell me that you were a beatnik?”

“That was completely different.”

“How? Are you saying 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 like maniacs!”

Rudi slammed her fists onto the table. “That’s not what we’re doing! We’re expressing who we are and how we feel. And either you can’t understand this or can’t handle it. And probably both.”

The woman had no reply. So she changed the subject. “I didn’t catch your last name, Rudi.”

“Weiss,” Rudi barked, still furious.

Again, Mrs. Goodwin became shocked. “You’re Jewish?”

“Wwwhat?” Rudi stuttered while looking more shocked than Tommy’s mother. “I, I thought ‘*weiss*’ was German, that it meant ‘white.’”

“It’s also a common Jewish name.”

“I have heard you say ‘*oy vey*,’ Tommy interjected. “More than once.”

Rudi spun toward him. “That’s Jewish?”

“It’s Yiddish,” Mrs. Goodwin explained.

“You think I could be Jewish?” Rudi said to Tommy with horror all over her face.

“Are you ashamed of it?” grumbled Mrs. Goodwin.

Rudi turned from both of them, with her horror increasing. “Not in the way you think.”

Silence followed. A good amount of it. It kept on and on until Mrs. Goodwin told Tommy, “You’ll never guess who I saw this afternoon at the Short Hills Mall . . . Darlene. So beautiful, so . . .”

Glancing at Rudi, the woman added, “So unlike anything else.”

Rudi lowered her eyes and her spoon. She also crossed both her arms and legs.

Tommy had thought Rudi would’ve never been the type to be self-conscious of her looks or insecure about them. But his mother’s current line of attack was hurting her way more than the others. He could see the doubt rising over her face.

“That’s enough,” he growled at the woman.

“I’m just telling it like I see it,” Mrs. Goodwin shot back. “I’m sure Rudi sees it too.”

“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 got accepted into Penn. 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 lifted her eyes. She lifted them while trying to keep the emotions inside her. “Listen, Mrs. Goodwin, despite what you saw earlier and despite what Tommy thinks he feels, there’s really nothing serious going on between us.”

“Nothing but Glenn Miller,” groaned Tommy.

“Glenn Miller?” his mother gasped.

“But that’s nothing serious. It’s not like we feel the same things or dream the same things or that we laugh at the same dumb jokes or that anything happens when I take her hand.”

To disprove this, he put his hand on hers, and again he felt her tremble. She trembled just as she had in his mother’s bedroom.

Rudi yanked her hand away as she reached her breaking point. “Next week, Tommy,” she stammered, “next week you’ll find someone else.”

“That’s not true.”

“I’m just some exotic flavor you’ve never tasted.”

Now it was Tommy’s turn to slam his fists onto the table. “That’s not true!”

“Look at me, Tommy,” she babbled while looking away from both him and herself. “Really look at me. Look not just at my hair or my clothes but at who I am. I’m not gonna end up with some preppy football player Republican, and I’m not gonna end up at Penn or Swarthmore. We all know I’m not gonna end up anywhere!”

Rudi jumped to her feet, and she rushed out of the room as Tommy jumped to his own feet.

“Let her go,” his mother uttered.

“Shut up!” he yelled as he ran after Rudi.

“She’s not for you!”

“Her eyelids’ flutter tells me you’re wrong!”

Tommy approached the foyer as Rudi swung her seabag over her shoulder by the front door. On the verge of tears, she flung open the door and ran out.

He followed. He ran outside as she reached the street, and he called out her name.

“Leave me alone!” she shrieked. “I was doing just fine until I met you, and now . . .”

“Rudi, please . . .”

She stopped and spun toward him, and she threw her arms into the air. “What can you see?”

“It’s the other way around.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I know, I’m good looking . . . and rich. I made all-state last year, and I could go to any college I want. Still, all I see is how boring I am. But if someone like you sees something, maybe, maybe there’s something there.”

Rudi stood for a moment before rushing off. She rushed into the night with him staring at her, unable to move or express the words he wanted to say. The ones he had wanted to say to her 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, because she just started telling me.

Rudi wandered through the streets of Newstead, getting nowhere but more upset, especially at herself.

If her mind had been clouded by 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.

Like she often did when she was troubled, she reached for her music. But 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. Though she had one of these with her. “Love Und Romance” by the Slits, 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 while screaming along with Ari Up. She screamed for what seemed like hours while constantly rewinding the song after it finished, and she rewound it so many times 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. Which hadn’t happened in so long that she couldn’t remember when it had last, and the craziest thing was that she didn’t even know why she was crying or whether she was crying because she was happy or sad.

Wiping her eyes, she saw a little old lady walking a little old dog down the block, and she ran up to them.

The woman took a big step back, for the obvious reason.

But seeing Rudi’s tears as she came to a stop, another instinct must’ve kicked in. A much stronger one. “Are you all right, sweetheart?” she asked.

“I’m lost,” Rudi answered while realizing the words had infinite meanings.

“Where are you trying to go?”

“A friend of mine lives nearby. Her name is Maria Gonzales.”

“Oh, I know the Gonzaleses. What a nice family. They live on Overhill Road just up the way. You can’t miss it. It’s a big yellow house with a lovely Nativity scene in the 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 there was still no response, and she began to wonder whether Maria or anyone else was home even though there were plenty of lights on in the house.

The door creaked opened, and there was Maria, looking shocked. She was so shocked that she couldn’t say a thing.

“Can I come in?” Rudi 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. Quick.”

Quickly was just how they snuck up the stairs and into Maria’s bedroom, where Maria locked the door.

After finding a flashlight in a bureau drawer, she flipped it on as she turned off the room’s light and sat on the floor with Rudi, who told her everything that had happened from her encounter with Tommy outside the school.

Maria couldn’t hide her smile. “He’s in love with you. You should be happy. Just about every girl in school is crazy about him.”

Shaking her head, Rudi turned away. “Not me.”

“‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks.’”

Rudi giggled, and she glanced at Maria. “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!”

Again, Maria couldn’t hide her smile. “I’m no expert, 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,” demanded Rudi.

Maria was still reluctant. But Rudi continued prodding her, and she relented. “Well, there is this someone.”

“Yeah?”

“We’re always smiling at each other and stuff.”

“What’s his name?”

Again, Maria was reluctant. But Rudi wouldn’t let up, and Maria gave in. “Terry,” she said.

“Terry? Is that the guy . . .”

“Terry . . . Louise.”

Moments of uncomfortable silence followed, many of them, and Maria turned off the flashlight.

“Why did you turn off the light?” Rudi asked.

“You must hate me,” Maria answered.

“Why would I hate you?”

“Because I’m a . . .”

Rudi grabbed the flashlight, and she turned it on. “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 any courage.”

“Have you talked to this, this Terry Louise?”

“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 Terry, 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.”

“Either you talk to her or I won’t talk to you. I won’t be friends with a coward.”

With the sun peeking through his window as it crept toward the darkening clouds above it, Tommy sat on his bed much like he had all night, with his head on his knees and his arms around his legs.

*Leave me alone!*

For the trillionth time, he heard the words Rudi had screamed at him the night before. The ones 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 the replay of his life was to do what she wanted and stay away from her.

But he had no more success at convincing himself of this than he had any other time he tried.

So he got off his bed. Without showering, he dressed and sped out of his house on his bike in the lightly-falling rain. He sped all the way to Rudi’s house and didn’t even bother hiding behind the old brown pickup truck. He stopped in front and waited. He waited and waited.

No one came out of the house, nor was there an indication that anyone was inside, and he couldn’t see the blue sedan anywhere.

Glancing at his watch, he saw that school was about to begin. So, with the rain starting to fall harder, he drove to Columbia. He drove there fast.

As he stopped at the red light at the corner of Valley and Parker, he noticed Rudi and Maria walking through the parking lot toward the school. He noticed, too, that Rudi still wasn’t wearing her coat and that she had on the same clothes as the day before.

Tommy noticed something else. Deke’s Porsche raced into the school’s lot from Parker. It came to a grinding halt by the two girls, who stopped and turned toward it as its window rolled down.

The light turned green.

Instead of driving down Parker, Tommy jumped the curb and rode over the grass. But he kept his distance from the Porsche, idling well behind it in the lot. No matter how much he wanted to be brave, he just couldn’t.

Slowly, Rudi lowered her head. She kept it that way as she made her way around the car to the passenger door. Which she stepped through despite the pleas of Maria, who was yelling at her in fright.

The Porsche sped off, but Tommy didn’t follow. He just watched it speed down Parker, feeling more afraid than ever.

Maria saw him and became frantic. “Aren’t you gonna do something?”

He didn’t respond.

“You stupid idiot!” she howled with her arms flailing. “She only went with him because of you!”

*Don’t let it get away from you*.

With the words of his father ringing in his head, 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 motel on the edge of Newark, and he parked in front of a room in the pouring rain.

Pulling up behind the Porsche, Tommy watched Deke jump out of it and strut to the other side, where Rudi was getting out a lot slower, with a face that was fighting to project apathy and failing miserably at it.

Sneering, Deke grabbed her arm, and he pulled her outside and slammed the door, and he dragged her toward the room.

Tommy called out Rudi’s name from his bike, and she and Deke came to a stop, and they 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 that sounded like, “You promised.”

“What’s going on?” Tommy shouted.

“How stupid can you be?” she barked. “I’m walking into a motel room with another guy. Can’t you see I’m trash?”

Tommy wanted to believe this. He tried hard to. Still, he yelled, “That’s not ‘the what i see’!”

“Just go home!”

Tommy didn’t, and Deke opened his jacket and put his hand on the gun in his waistband. “Listen to her, man,” he growled. “Unless you wanna end up like that other kike.”

“Let’s just do this,” Rudi screeched at Deke, and she grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and dragged him toward the room.

“Sure thing, babe.”

The two reached the door, and Deke unlocked and opened it, 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 continued inside as if she didn’t hear or care.

“I want you to be my girl!” Tommy screamed again, as loud as he could.

Slowly, Deke turned to Tommy, and he glared. “Take off while you can.”

While continuing to glare, Deke slammed the door in front of himself, with Tommy gazing into it, frozen with fear.

*Take off while you can*.

The words sounded familiar to Tommy. At first, he thought he must’ve heard Deke say them. But then he recalled it had been someone else.

This led him to glance around. Slowly he did, and behind him to his right he saw the blue sedan and the FBI agent inside it, 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 yelled from inside. “You think I don’t know you’re testifying against me?”

“I’m not!” Rudi yelled back.

“That’s right you’re not!”

The two began fighting, followed by one of them landing hard on the floor.

“I guess you forgot who taught you!” Deke shrieked. “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 didn’t take another. “There’s nothing you can do!” he hollered at himself. “He’d kill you!”

The fighting continued inside the room, and Rudi cried out in pain. No longer did she sound so tough. She sounded more like a frightened little girl, the one who’d been hiding under her toughness looking for a way out.

Tommy spun back to the sedan and the man inside it. “Aren’t you going to do something?”

The man again smirked. He couldn’t hide his glee. “All in good time, young man. All in good time.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“Backup. You can’t expect me to confront a dangerous armed suspect without backup, can you?”

Suddenly, everything became clear to Tommy. He realized that it must’ve 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 record. She was unreliable. But the man in the car, he’d be the perfect witness to murder. The perfect means toward a conviction, and that was all that mattered.

Rudi screamed for help, and Tommy felt himself drifting toward her. He did knowing that he really didn’t have a choice in what he did and didn’t and never had. He knew free will was nothing but a joke. If given a million replays of his life, he’d make the same choice every time.

He’d choose her.

He rushed at the door and was about to slam into it.

There was silence on the line after I finished reading the entry. There was a lot of it, and it continued 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 mumbled with her voice barely a whisper.

“Tomorrow is Sunday,” I let her know. “There’s no mail.”

“Call me anyway.”

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, you never did.”

I woke before dawn. I woke when I heard my grandparents arguing in the kitchen below my room, unaware of how this would change my life.

Groggily, I rose to my waist, and I grasped that they were yelling in German.

This was unusual. Usually they spoke English while often breaking into Czech, a language associated with beautiful memories for both of them. German, on the other hand, was associated only 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. All I heard was quiet. I kept hearing it until the kitchen door swung open, followed by the unmistakable footsteps of my grandfather shuffling outside. They continued to the side of the house, where he opened and closed the lid of the metal garbage can before he shuffled back inside.

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 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 Newark Motel Room.”

Underneath it were the mugshots of two people. The first was the man who’d been killed, who had a shaved head and a tattooed neck, and the second was a punked-out teenage girl who otherwise looked a lot like me.

Looking at her was like staring at myself in a funhouse mirror. I wasn’t exactly a normal-looking teenager in the early 1980s, 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. But feeling suddenly cold, I tried reading the story. The text, though, 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 circumstances of what had happened were 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 other thing that stood out in the article was that Deke and Gertrud were both 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 sink into my head. That I could have a twin living within driving distance of me was incredible enough but that she was a skinhead and possibly a murderer of Jews was too much. My instinct was to rip the paper apart and 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 saw what it didn’t say was almost as important as what it had. There was no mention of who killed Deke or what had happened to the girl who had to be my sister. The only clue they gave was that she and the boy went to a high school in the area. But I would learn this wasn’t much of a clue, 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 at my high school library. It even had some rare books, such as a French edition of Gogol’s *Dead Souls* that was illustrated by a young Marc Chagall, whose imagery would haunt many of my childhood nights.

The library also included a bookcase of every telephone directory in New Jersey. I found the one for Essex County along with those for the adjoining counties.

While browsing through them, I discovered there were dozens of high schools within an hour’s drive of the motel, and they were spread out everywhere. Finding her seemed an impossible task, until I recalled 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 beside the white porcelain table that had been there for as long as I could remember. The two weren’t even trying to eat the breakfast in front of them as they gazed into space.

“Hey,” I uttered as I nervously came to a stop before them.

Neither replied. They didn’t appear to know I was there.

“Grandpa,” I went on, “remember how I was telling you that I’m taking a film class at school?”

“*Cože?”* he muttered. He muttered it without looking at me before gulping down an entire cup of piping hot coffee.

For some time now, 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 place and time. It was like his past and present were battling out in his head. Then there were times like this, where it was difficult to tell which was winning.

“For my class project,” I told him while hoping for the best, “I’ve decided to make a documentary on New Jersey. I’m really gonna need your car in the afternoons for a while.”

It took some time, but he spun toward me. “*Jistě*. Surely.”

I nodded. 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.

For weeks, every weekday afternoon I came home early and drove to a different high school and sometimes two if they were close to 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. It didn’t look like anyone even recognized her, even though it had been a big story for days on the local TV news.

I don’t know how many times I almost gave up looking, but it was a lot. It wasn’t just the futility of the search. 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 I’d have a convenient excuse for not facing her. But I kept getting into Grandpa’s well-rusted whitish Matador and kept continuing to look.

Finally, I reached a dead end. I’d been to every high school in the area and even to a few outside it and was no closer to finding her than 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. “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.”

Grandpa nodded his head a couple of times. “Hillside is a perfect example. Who would expect to see such beautiful homes on the border of Newark and Elizabeth?”

“Hillside?” I muttered. “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 private schools. I must’ve 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. Years earlier, it seemed that 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, I even recognized a guy I had once been friends with as he jumped into an Alfa and drove off.

Like I had at the other places I’d been, I asked anyone I passed if they knew the girl in the picture, despite feeling even less hopeful than normal, and I was not surprised that everyone shook their heads.

So I decided not only to leave but to forget about finding my sister for good. But as I approached Grandpa’s car, I came upon three boys, and I showed them the photo anyway.

“Isn’t she the one who shot that drug dealer?” one boy asked, 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.

He shrugged. “There are rumors.”

“I guess she doesn’t go here. Do you know what school she does?”

“Columbia. A friend of mine was telling me about her. He goes there.”

I shook my head. “I checked Columbia a few weeks ago. Nobody knew her.”

“It doesn’t surprise me.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are rumors,” he said again with another shrug as he and the others walked off.

“What rumors?” I growled.

“I’m not saying,” he bellowed, and I could almost see the smirk on his face.

Once more I came home early from school, and once more 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 sauntered 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.

Grandpa had 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 the director of the local YM-YWHA. So he was left alone a lot. Along with this, it seemed he had run out of steam or any place to use the little he had, and I would often wonder if this was the cause of the stupors he’d find himself in.

Gazing at him that day as I walked by, I wished he could’ve been with me. I wished I could’ve given him some purpose, and I really could have used his help.

I left my house and drove twenty minutes to Maplewood.

Like I had when I was there before, I parked on Valley Road in front of a little diner called Ralph’s, and I crossed the street as kids streamed out of the school and walked through the parking lot.

Like before, I showed the photograph to everyone I passed. Like then, they all shook their heads while barely glimpsing at the clipping or me.

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 asked.

“I think so,” I muttered.

She took the final steps and put her arms around me, which more than surprised me, and she whispered, “I’m Maria, Rudi’s best friend.”

“Rudi?” I uttered before realizing that no teenage girl in America would want to be called Gertrud and certainly no punk.

Maria released her arms, and the two of us gazed at each other.

“You’re her best friend?” I stammered while trying to corroborate the image of the girl in the photo with the one in front of me.

“She never told me she had a brother.”

“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 insisted. “And I don’t know everything either.”

“It’ll have to wait till tomorrow. I have to get up early.”

“I don’t work tomorrow, so I can call you earlier.”

“Call me anytime after noon, my time.”

Because I wasn’t working the next day, I didn’t need a bus pass that night from Josh.

But I noticed him as I went by the office. I gazed at him and was still thinking about him as I walked to the dorm and my bed.

*Who watches the watchers?*

I didn’t sleep much that night, but it wasn’t because of the snoring that was even louder than normal. Nor was it because of the waves of darkness and demons that never came.

While I stared at the ceiling, I tried to figure out what I should do about Josh, and I still didn’t know if it would be anything.

the fifth night

I surprised Josh when I volunteered to do the house laundry on Sunday.

But I did it every Sunday. While 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 once they were dry, it had one perk. I got to wash my own laundry first after I finished.

I showered that morning and brought the house laundry cart into the courtyard, where I saw an old and balding man 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* and of the small role he played as one of the drunks at the bar. A role he was all too qualified to play.

“You know I don’t like complaining,” he said to Sharon while looking and sounding upset.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I woke up this morning covered in urine.”

“You what?”

“Theo, the guy in the bunk above me, doesn’t like going to the bathroom in the middle of the night. So he uses plastic bottles. This morning one broke, and it spilled all over me.”

“I’ll handle it,” she told him as she walked away in disgust.

I tried not to grin at Phil. But I couldn’t help myself.

He grinned back. “When it rains, it pours!”

With the sun bearing down on me in the courtyard as I waited for two loads of wash to finish, I noticed Billy and Jennifer a few booths from me.

It wasn’t easy for couples at the shelter, especially married ones like them. 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 was passed between couples, along with a creative set of euphemisms, with new places added and others removed when circumstances warranted it.

Billy and Jennifer were only a few years younger than me, but they looked like teenagers the way they were ogling each other. They managed to stay in love despite their troubles. Maybe it was what kept them moving forward.

Billy turned to me and smiled.

“How’s you car?” I asked.

“I’m praying for another week,” he said while crossing all his fingers, “until payday, so I can get a new starter.”

“They’ll let you buy one?”

“We’ll be gone by then. We just found a place.”

I brought a basket of laundry outside, just as Josh strutted out of the shelter at the end of his shift. He strutted like he owned it and us.

*Who watches the watchers?*

The words crawled back into my head, and they wouldn’t crawl out, even after I hung up the towels and bedding. Which led me to take out my cheap plastic phone. I stared at it while trying to decide whether to cross the digital Rubicon and give in to a side of me I could never hide from for long.

With both a sigh and a shrug, I opened a web browser and did some searching. I discovered that the FBI provided access to their criminal database through an API that lets programmers use this data in their applications. The agency, of course, protected access to the sensitive information the API exposed. They did through keys, long strings of numbers and letters that authenticate requests and are unbreakable. But I knew from experience that this system of protection was far from infallible. Despite means of securing API keys, programmers are often lazy and include them in their code. So I searched the web, looking for one of these keys in public code repositories.

I couldn’t find any. So if I wanted to learn more about Josh, I’d have to search private repositories for them, and that wasn’t exactly legal. This gave me some pause but not enough.

Two of the biggest sites for private repositories were GitHub and GitLab. As the latter was more geared toward software development, I tried that first.

On their website, they disclosed vulnerabilities they had found over the years. One of these allowed attackers to inject commands when importing files from GitHub. While this had been fixed, I found another instance in the code where I could perform the injection.

After installing a terminal app on my phone, turning it into a low-end computer, I was able to spawn what is known as a reverse shell. From this I searched the repositories, and I found a key in one of them.

The rest should’ve been easy. All I had to do was write a pair of simple Python scripts that used the key I had found to access the FBI’s database, first so that I could find Josh in it and then to list out his record.

But I’d been away from programming too long. I had a lot of bugs in my simple scripts, and I had a lot of trouble getting them out.

While gazing into my phone, I heard a throat clear.

I turned and saw Jerry sitting in the corner booth, with big puppy dog eyes and his manila folders spread across the table.

As far as conspiracy theories went, his belief that the CIA director was stalking him wasn’t the craziest I’d heard from homeless people. Just about every person I’ve met on the streets has had a theory and often a lot. I guess it’s just easier to believe the dice are loaded than to blame the one rolling them. At least Jerry’s theory, unlike most I’ve heard, had nothing to do with Jews.

Needing a break from my scripts, I indulged him. I sat with him at the booth and looked up his stalker. All this required was some simple web searches. I found the man’s address and phone number and where he worked along with his picture.

I showed Jerry this. “Just your typical middle-aged ambulance-chaser,” I told him.

He smiled. “The perfect cover.”

I was about to reply when Mitchell, the guy who slept in the bunk below me, marched up to us. With a sneer, he held his hand out to Jerry. “My phone.”

Bashfully, Jerry reached into his sweatshirt pocket and pulled out the device. “I couldn’t help myself.”

Mitchell grabbed it from him and growled, “I bet you’re the one stealing everyone’s money in the shower.”

“I’m not a thief. I’m a kleptomaniac. There’s a difference.”

“And that is?”

“I may take your wallet, but I’d never steal your money.”

Mitchell walked off in a huff. He took his phone to a booth down the way and began listening to “Enter Sandman.”

Jerry found this amusing. “I’ve never seen a black guy listen to Metallica.”

Mitchell turned to him and glowered. “Black people invented rock ’n’ roll, not to mention blues, hip-hop, R&B, soul, reggae, jazz . . .”

“You also invented hardcore punk,” I interjected.

“We did?”

“I’ll show you.”

He joined us at the booth, and the three of us watched a video of a pair of Bad Brains’ concerts at CBGB from the early eighties. We watched the great band in its prime as punks of all colors slammed into each other in front of H.R. and sometimes on top of him, creating a thunderous mosaic while blissfully unaware that Jerry would one day find this unusual.

Returning to my scripts, I was finally able to traverse the JSON objects that the FBI’s API endpoints returned, and Josh’s record spewed out on my phone’s terminal.

I learned he’d 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.

None of this, I knew, proved anything. It certainly didn’t prove he was the accomplice of those men I had read about. He might’ve even been innocent of all three crimes, however unlikely that was. So again I begged myself to forget it and just “smile and wave” as Matt had put it.

But it didn’t make me forget anything. It only did the opposite.

Mitchell, Jerry, and I weren’t the only ones that day engaged in an eighties flashback.

After finishing my own laundry, I walked into the courtyard and found Nicole, Allison, and a few others playing Trivial Pursuit. They were playing a special edition of it that focused on the decade I had come of age.

It took just a few minutes of watching them to feel old, when none knew the vegetable-themed doll craze that swept the nation or what had inspired the songs “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” and “We Are the World.” The 1980s were as disconnected from them as the 1880s were from me. But it got me thinking of my own experiences during that time, and I found a quiet corner of the courtyard and called Rudi.

“You wanna hear how I met Tommy?” I asked.

“I told you, I already know this,” she grumbled.

“Not everything.”

In the waiting area of St. Barnabas, I asked a receptionist for Tommy’s room.

The man looked it up. “He’s in the Isolation Ward.”

“Isolation?” I mumbled.

“It’s for isolating infectious or possibly infectious patients.”

I approached Tommy’s door, passing various signs posted on the ones leading to his that warned of the dangers of being there.

I wasn’t that scared, maybe because I felt the same kind of immortality many young people feel. Or maybe I was more scared of something else.

Hearing labored breathing and some coughing, I came to Tommy’s open door. I peeked inside and saw a boy my age, who was still showing the effects of the beating he had taken as he lay in a bed and glumly wrote in a notebook. It looked like he was making out his will.

Despite this, I couldn’t help dislike him. He was the kind of guy I always disliked and sometimes hated. He was perfect in every way, even with how he looked, or maybe it was because of it. If this was how he looked beaten and unshowered and unshaven, I could only imagine 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. But at that moment I couldn’t escape the truth that he didn’t seem different.

Softly, I tapped on his door, and he turned toward me with the same kind of shock Maria had. “You, you’re her . . .”

“Maybe,” I said. “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.

Noticing a pen and one of those little yellow sticky pads on a bureau across the room, I stepped toward it. “I’ll just leave my name and number.”

“Keep your distance from me,” he bellowed as he continued to write.

I put down my information and glanced at him. “If you see her, please tell her, tell her I’d really like to talk to her.”

Again, he didn’t reply.

I turned around, just as a nurse entered the room.

She had a mask across her face and rubber gloves on her hands and was pushing a medical cart toward Tommy. But what I noticed most about her was her fright. She looked like she was approaching her own death.

I stepped out of the elevator on the ground floor of the hospital, and I started through the waiting area.

This was when I first saw her, when I first saw my sister. She was slumped over an easy chair in the distance, looking like 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 found her, I wanted to run, especially as I could tell she hadn’t seen me. I eyed the exits and hurried toward them.

But I came to a stop, and I 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 enough to turn around and slowly approach her. Actually, “slowly” isn’t the right word. Even “inched” wouldn’t describe it right. It must’ve taken five minutes before I was close enough for her to notice me.

Strangely, while she recognized my resemblance to her, she didn’t seem surprised by it. Only angered.

“Hi,” I mumbled once in front of her, after unable to come up with anything better to say, despite having practiced this moment from the time I had found out about her. “I think I’m . . .”

“My brother,” she growled as she wiped her face, which only made things worse.

“I . . .”

“What do you want?” she growled next.

“What do I want?” I uttered while feeling my own anger. “Out of nowhere, I find that 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 it’s true. So you can go back to your little life and forget all about me, just like I’m gonna forget about you. I’ll forget about you the moment you walk out that door.”

I couldn’t breathe. I gasped for air and stumbled toward the exits without saying anything more, and I kept stumbling as I passed through the automatic doors, where I stopped and keeled over.

I interrupted my own story. I guess I needed a break.

As I stretched my legs in the courtyard, I asked Rudi what she had been doing between the night at the motel and the day I met her in the hospital.

She couldn’t tell me much. This was because she couldn’t remember much. Oddly, one of her few vivid memories was of a dream.

In it she woke in a hospital bed in pain. It was so bad that she screamed and cursed.

But 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 worse pain, 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 grabbed a bottle at random, and she tore off its top.

It was empty. So she chucked it onto the floor and grabbed another. But it, too, was empty, as was the next and the one after that. They were all empty, and she again screamed and cursed, and she shook her bloody fist, with her pain and loneliness worse.

The latter led her back into the hallway, and she hurried through it, passing empty room after empty room. She passed hundreds before she came to Tommy’s. He was lying in a bed beaten but smiling. He was smiling at Darlene as she held his hand from a chair by the bed.

Smiling at both of them was Mrs. Goodwin, who 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 her.

Becoming frantic, she hollered and yelled and even hit him, but he wouldn’t react. It was like she wasn’t there.

Then she woke, for real. Like in her dream, she was in pain from the beating she had taken, and like then she screamed and cursed.

“Rudi?” came a soft voice from her right.

She turned toward it, and she saw Maria sitting in the chair beside her bed, with an expression much like the one she had when she met her but for a much different reason.

Rudi spun from her in embarrassment. “What are you doing here?”

“Maybe next time you’re in trouble . . . maybe you tell your best friend.”

Overwhelmed with emotion, Rudi turned to the girl and hugged her. She hugged her with everything she had.

Suddenly remembering Tommy, she released her arms and asked Maria about him.

“He’s in another ward,” she said. “I went to see him, but he wasn’t awake.”

“I gotta go to him,” Rudi screeched before she crawled out of bed and fell to the floor.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Maria told her as she helped her back in 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 given her for the pain and with her mind on one thing.

*I want you to be my girl*.

A few weeks earlier, these would’ve been the most ridiculous words she ever heard. But now they were all she thought about. She thought not only about the words and how Tommy had screamed them to her from outside the motel room but at how she had wanted to run into his arms when she heard them.

She only didn’t because she hadn’t been there for herself. She told me that ignoring him was the first selfless thing she ever did.

*I want you to be my girl*.

The words dragged her out of bed, and she went looking for Tommy. She stumbled through the corridors of the hospital, with his words echoing in her head.

But when she found him, the words were replaced by others.

“Leave me alone!” he screamed in between coughs, and he wouldn’t let her get anywhere near him. He wouldn’t even look at her, then and 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 nightmare had come true, she left the hospital, even though she was far from all right. This was when things became blurry, as most of the bottles she’d encounter weren’t so empty.

In the bits and pieces she could recall, she was staggering 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 to a library. Recalling the safety one had provided when she was a child, she went inside, where she stole a paperback copy of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. She didn’t even know why she did, especially as she had read it years earlier.

Night after night, she clutched the book, with the words on its tattered cover pushing her toward the set of words she wanted to believe. They pushed her all the way to Tommy’s new hospital.

He still wouldn’t talk to her or look at her, and she found herself slumped over a chair in the waiting room. What she was waiting for she didn’t know. She only knew it was the only where to go.

I wasn’t the first one who found her there. Tommy’s doctor had, and he finally told her what Tommy had, and this had been the cause of the streaks on her face.

It was getting dark as I leaned against the wall by the entrance of St. Barnabas. But I couldn’t make myself leave. I also couldn’t face Rudi again.

The automatic doors opened, and there she was, staring at me with her hands on her hips.

I tried to get some words out. “How, how did you know I’d be out here?”

“It’s where I’d be.”

She leaned against the wall next to me. With both of us facing forward, we stood silently for God knows how long.

It was Rudi who broke the silence. “I once saw a picture of us when we were little. Real little. You couldn’t tell us apart.”

“You can now.”

We both laughed. We laughed for God knows how long.

“I don’t remember you at all,” I uttered with my head shaking.

“Me neither. They must’ve split us up pretty soon after that picture was taken.”

“But why?”

“I suppose my stepdad had no use for a boy.”

Her words made me shutter. I had always thought that I had it bad growing up. But I knew now I’d been wrong.

“What about . . .” I whispered while trying to figure out what to ask next. “What about our dad?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know who he is. 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 said. I said it with unease, knowing that I was about to defend a woman who couldn’t be defended. “After the war, they deported her and her Czech mother to Germany because her dead father had been a German officer.”

Surprised, Rudi spun toward me. “So I’m not Jewish.”

“You are. 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 in front of her and almost killed her. Grandma says that she couldn’t make it through a night without pills. Try to remember that, try to remember it the next time you hate her. That’s what I do.”

Rudi gaped at me in confusion. “I don’t get it. If her father was a Nazi, why would Jews adopt her?”

“It’s hard to explain. Grandpa knew her mom a little, and I think she reminded him of his late first wife. But there was more to it than that. Grandma couldn’t have children of her own, and Grandpa didn’t have any either. Then 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 our mom was still the child of a Nazi. How could they adopt her?”

“Maybe they were trying to fix the world or their little piece of it. I know it sounds corny, but it’s 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 had no reply.

“I saw Tommy earlier,” I told her.

“He won’t see me.”

“Why?”

“This is all my fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“None of this would’ve happened if I hadn’t showed up here . . . if he hadn’t lov . . .”

“So you two . . .”

She shrugged.

“Is he gonna be okay?”

“He’s got some form of pneumonia that’s been going around, and they’re having a hard 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 learned a little about what had happened, from the newspaper and TV. But they didn’t seem to know much.”

“This guy Deke, he was beating me. Actually, he was killing me. He only didn’t because Tommy broke into the motel room.”

With her head shaking, she added, “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.”

“Tommy surprised Deke and 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 . . . and I shot him.”

“Are you in trouble for that?”

“Are you kidding? If I had been anyone else, they would’ve given me a medal.”

“And are you all right?”

“I’m fine. I’m not the one 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.”

Spinning toward me, she expressed the same anger as before. “And if I told you I killed him?” she growled.

I looked into her eyes. I looked into them as deeply as I could. “I wouldn’t believe it.”

Again, she turned from me.

“Where you staying?” I asked.

“Around.”

“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 react, not at all.

I still had a million things to ask, but I couldn’t think of any. So I pushed myself off the wall. “Can I see you again?”

“I’m here all the time.”

I visited Rudi at the hospital every day.

It went slowly at first. Some days no more than a few words passed between us. But we both loosened up after a while.

I told her about my “little life” and our grandparents. I especially told her about Grandpa and me. I told her how he would crank Smetana’s “Vltava” on our stereo when I was sad as a kid and how he’d perform scenes from it to pick me up. I told her how he’d come up with some nifty Meister Eckhart saying for every big moment in my life. I told her, too, how he’d always find a way to forgive me for all I had put him through.

Rudi told me about her life as well, and I learned how alike we were despite how differently we had grown up. I had expected us to have the same birthday and similar aptitudes, and I liked punk rock almost as much as she did, but we also had surprising things in common. Such as we had read many of the same books, even unusual ones like Miguel de Unamuno’s *Mist* and Kōbō Abe’s *The Woman in the Dunes*. Though I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised, as both books were about people who only thought they were in control of their fate, and I can see how this would’ve appealed to both of us.

Still, Rudi and I were different in a lot of 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 charge ahead no matter what was in her way and to never give in to anything, like she was doing with Tommy. At the same time, there was a warmth under her strength. A warmth that was always beyond what I could give. Her smile would forever be unexpected, but it would always come, and it would light up everything around her. So, regardless of her flaws, 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.

Instead of finding Rudi in her usual chair, she was standing outside the doors and looking panicked.

I hurried up to her and asked what was wrong.

“Tommy’s gone,” she screeched.

“Gone?” I muttered in shock, 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 sick.”

“He’s really sick. I gotta find him.”

“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.”

“She’s not a Nazi,” I insisted. “She’s my sister, your granddaughter.”

Again, he shook his head. “Your grandmother, she would never forgive me. You have no idea what she went through with your mother. She cannot go through that again.”

I sat next to him and begged. “Please, Grandpa, you’re the only one who can help her.”

“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. 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 it. We can do it together.”

Grandpa thought about it. He thought about it awhile, but he shook his head once more.

“Just talk to her for a few minutes,” I pleaded. “How can that hurt?”

Rudi looked even more panicked when my grandfather and I approached her by the entrance of St. Barnabas. She looked like she was coming apart.

Grandpa had been hesitant the whole way there. 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 wasn’t 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.

She pointed at Grandpa and snarled. “Who’s that?”

“Your grandfather.”

Rudi spun from both of us, and she crossed her arms. “I told you, I don’t want anything from him.”

“Remember when I said he was a police detective? 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 asked me.

“Yes, Grandpa,” I answered with exasperation. “Lots of times.”

“Ah, yes, but your sister, she has not heard this story. You see, Kafka was not yet a famous writer. So when he went missing, no one cared. But his family was quite alarmed. His sister . . .”

Grandpa couldn’t finish, as Rudi sighed loudly enough to drown him out.

After uncrossing her arms, she turned back to us. “All right.”

“First of all,” Grandpa said, “how do you know this Tommy 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. “Have you checked his home?”

“I called. But he hasn’t been there. He and his mother have been fighting. They’ve been fighting over me. I 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 in the forest, 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. “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?”

From her bag, Rudi pulled out a page from a phone book. “I don’t have a picture, but his mother must. I can give you her address.”

“All right, I will look for your Tommy. But 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.”

“Meanwhile, I know someone from your school. You can stay with him.”

Once again, Rudi became surprised. “What?”

“And you will return to school.”

“The hell I will!”

“I was 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 . . .”

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 until he mumbled to himself, “*Jak se řekne?”*

This jogged his memory. He smiled and snapped his fingers. “‘Tough love.’ I will practice that ‘tough love.’”

“Look—” Rudi began.

“—If I had done this with your mother, maybe she would be the one to tell you what to do. 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 thought it over for a long time. “I want updates every day.”

“Give me until Monday. Then we can meet in front of your school every day when it lets out. Do we have a deal?”

Again, Rudi thought it over. She again thought it over for a long time.

“You will like Stephen,” Grandpa said to Rudi as he got out of the Matador. “You have things in common.”

He closed the door and approached a house not far from the reservation. I could see the endless trees as they silhouetted the kids playing under them in the front yard.

Grandpa rang the doorbell, and a man stepped outside, who smiled at Grandpa before he leaned down and hugged him.

Surprised, Rudi drifted forward in her seat.

“Do you know him?” I asked.

“That’s Mr. Cross,” she muttered. “He’s a guidance counselor at school. How does he know him?”

“I have no idea.”

“What things do we have in common?” she screeched. But what I couldn’t tell was whether the question was rhetorical.

Grandpa parked outside Columbia on Parker Avenue Monday afternoon.

While we waited for Rudi, we listened to a haunting rendition of Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* playing from a cassette in the car’s stereo. The two women singing it seemed to be emptying themselves onto us.

When I was a kid, I never heard Grandpa listen to this music. But in recent years I’d 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 the music so much, considering 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 just her voice begging for deliverance. It was all of ours. You could hear them in the echoes everywhere, and I tell you even God Himself must have been in tears.”

Looking back at it now, I think Grandpa’s reasons for listening to *Stabat Mater* went beyond this. Similar to what *Mist* and *The Woman in the Dunes* had meant for Rudi and I, I think the musicwas a means of accepting fates he could no longer control.

The school let out. It seemed a thousand people pushed their way through the doors at once.

Soon after, Rudi wandered out and through all the people hanging outside.

I noticed right away how everyone was avoiding her, like they were frightened of her.

At first, I figured this was normal. But then I saw Maria avoiding her, the girl who was supposedly her best friend and was dragged away by the tall redheaded girl I had seen her with on the day I met her.

There wasn’t just fear of Rudi on display in front of the school. One girl, with venom in her eyes, hollered a gay slur at her as she scurried off.

Rudi ignored this and everything else. Though I could see that it was bothering her as she stopped and looked around. She looked like the loneliest person alive.

Then she spotted someone sitting on the stoop outside the school. He was a hulking boy with a receding hairline, who was looking at her with eyes even sadder than her own. It was like he knew exactly what she was feeling.

He turned from her, seemingly out of shame. But I couldn’t tell from what.

I opened my door and stuck my head out. “Rudi!”

She turned and saw me, and she hurried toward our car and inside it.

Grandpa lowered the music, and he and I glanced at Rudi, who anxiously gasped, “Well?”

“Mrs. Goodwin was kind enough to give me a photograph of Tommy,” Grandpa told her. “She also gave me the names and numbers of his relatives and friends in the area.”

“How do you know he’s still in the area?”

“White chocolate.”

“What?”

“There was a bowl of white chocolate truffles at Tommy’s house, and I found a wrapper from one at those falls of yours. It was no more than a day old.”

Reaching inside his jacket, Grandpa pulled out a Polaroid of a tire track, and he showed it to Rudi. “I also found fresh tracks from that Harley Sturgis of his. These Harleys, I must say, while they cannot compare to the Jawas I rode in my Prague days, are very nice bicycles.”

Rudi shook her head. “How is any of this going to help us find where Tommy is right now?”

“I told you it would take time.”

Rudi sighed in frustration, and she sat back and crossed her arms.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She turned from us. “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 with concern growing on his face.

“It’s not contagious,” Rudi insisted.

“If it’s not contagious,” I countered, “why was he in the isolation ward? And why is everyone so afraid of him if all he has is pneumonia? Is there something you’re not telling us?”

Rudi wouldn’t answer, and this just made me more worried.

“Are you sure you are not sick?” Grandpa asked Rudi.

She scowled as she kicked open her door. “They checked me out. I’m fine.”

“There was one more thing.”

Rudi stopped and turned to Grandpa, who added, “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?”

“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 drove to the motel in Newark anyway. But we got stuck in a sea of traffic on Route 22.

Grandpa could see the anxiety in Rudi’s face as he looked at her through his rearview mirror. “While we are waiting,” he said, “I can tell you my Kafka story.”

I shook my head. “I really don’t think this is a good time, Grandpa.”

“I think the story will have meaning for your sister. Actually, I am certain 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 quarter of Prague. Like every Friday night, he was carrying a big bouquet of white roses.

In the building’s lobby, he saw a woman around thirty sitting on the stairway steps in her coat, and he noticed the distress on her face as she anxiously rose to her feet. “Hermann Weiss?” she asked.

“That’s me,” he answered as he warily stepped toward her.

“My name is Ottilie Davidová. 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, with the name sounding familiar. It took a few seconds to realize why it had, and he asked, “The writer?”

“You, you’ve heard of him?”

“I read one of his stories when I was at the university a few years back. What happened to him? I haven’t heard of him since. Does he still write?”

“Not 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 that you were smart and ambitious.”

“Even if that were true, what could I do? He could be anywhere in Europe by now.”

“Please. Franz may be a nobody to the world, but to us he is someone 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. The next morning he was gone, along with his suitcase and his things.”

“Perhaps he went to a sanitarium.”

“He wouldn’t 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, who still hadn’t gotten over the stillborn child she delivered many months earlier.

But there was something in Ottilie’s eyes, a desperation he couldn’t ignore anymore than he could Rudi’s. So he sighed. “Do you have a picture of him?”

“Yes,” she answered, and she reached into her purse and pulled out a small photo and handed it to him. “It’s a little old. He’ll be forty this year.”

“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. He showed the picture of Kafka to everyone he could find who worked there. But none recognized the man.

Next, he tried Masaryk Station, the smaller station in town, where 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.

Then he recalled that there was an even smaller station in Dejvice, not far from where Kafka had been living. The 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 as he reached its doors, he saw a dim light coming from inside and a handful of people waiting on benches. The other thing he saw was a ticket clerk.

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 like the man even glanced at the picture, but he nodded. “I’ve seen him, a few nights ago.”

“Where did he go?”

“Ústí nad Zapomněním.”

Hermann became confused. “I’ve lived in this country now for a number of 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 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 put them underneath the ticket window.

The clerk took them, and he wrote out a train ticket.

This he placed under the window along with the one-heller coin he pointed at. “Don’t lose this. You’ll need it to pay the ferryman.”

“The ferryman?” gasped Hermann.

He waited for an answer, but none was coming. So he took the ticket and the coin and sat on a bench across from a man who was reading the latest edition of a Czech daily called *Lidové Noviny*.

“Excuse me, sir,” Hermann said to the man, “I’m still learning Czech. Could you perhaps tell me what *zapomnění* means?”

“Oblivion,” the man told him.

“So ‘Ústí nad Zapomněním’ would mean ‘The Mouth . . .’”

“The Mouth at the River of Oblivion.”

Hermann was pretty certain that 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 them only grew 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 paragraphs of the article, and he learned how the famed author of *The* *Good Soldier Švejk* wasn’t expected to live much longer.

Hermann shook his head, as he loved what was then a three-volume collection of books and what many consider the first anti-war novel. He loved the books even though his wife had to help him read them. Like many veterans of the first world war, he saw his own life in its pages, and this made him feel less alone.

He was still shaking his head when a train with a single passenger car sputtered into the station.

Like the station 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 so long that he was again ready to give up, just as a stout middle-aged conductor entered the front of the car. “I do hope everyone has their heller with them,” he called out. “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 to Hermann.

Hermann gave him his ticket, and he showed him Kafka’s picture. “Have you seen this man?”

“He was on the train the other night,” the conductor told him.

“The one 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. 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 took his punched ticket and 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*.

The words popped 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 joke.”

Hermann looked 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. 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 other passengers 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 cliff he was walking alongside that overlooked it.

He continued up the hill, and 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.

He showed her the picture of Kafka, and 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 make out a large gothic structure on top of the hill. “What is it?”

“A place of death it is. And plenty of it.”

Hermann came to a stop. He stopped with fear and while wanting to return 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, only to come to another stop when he saw a boatman in a hooded cloak rowing a skiff down the river toward the dock.

“Charon,” he muttered with his fear increasing.

Cautiously, he took a step closer toward the edge of the cliff to get a better look at the man, and then another. Then he slipped. He slipped and tumbled down the hill, all the way to the bottom.

Hermann woke on a stretcher, in a dark and dank hospital corridor, and he saw that he was wearing nothing but a night shirt.

Rising to his waist, he felt faint. He felt like 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.

Steadying himself, he started to move. He stammered down a long and winding hallway and reached an open door.

He looked inside, and he saw that it was packed with men lying on beds. There were more than 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 men. Into each he called out Kafka’s name. But in none did he get a response. It didn’t seem like anyone was even breathing.

The first exception to this was in a room by a stairway, where Hermann saw a group of five men surrounding the bed of an obese man, who was around forty, with a large coif of curly brown hair and a filthy and stained night shirt.

The man was the center of attention because he was reading aloud from a notebook. “Lieutenant Dub, who thought the terrible liquor was going to his head, tapped his finger on the table and lucidly explained to Captain Ságner: ‘The district commissioner and I have always said, “Patriotism, loyalty to duty, self-achievement, these are the true weapons in war.” I’m reminded of this especially today when our troops are on the cusp of crossing the border.’”

The obese man fell silent, and he lowered his notebook.

The men around him, who were looking on as if listening to the word of God, glanced at each other uncomfortably.

“Well?” one 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 lowered his head and everything else, causing the obese man to both sigh and groan. Along with this he snapped his fingers and reached out his hand. “Give it here.”

The man brightened up and hurriedly handed his book as well as a pen from his shirt pocket 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 like it were a newborn. “Thank you so much!”

“Jarda,” Hašek told him. “My friends call me Jarda. All of you, call me Jarda.”

The men smiled, and they started off, exposing an old wheelchair by Hašek’s bed.

Surprised by who was sitting only a short distance away, 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.

He parked in front of its office, and with one of his famous extended moans he got out of the car and went inside the building, and he spoke to the clerk while Rudi and I sat silently by ourselves.

He came out with his head hanging, and he opened his door and glanced at us as he pointed behind himself. “That *vůl* in there . . .”

“That what?” Rudi uttered, unable to control her exasperation.

“That *ass*,” I translated.

“Thank you,” Grandpa said to me. “That *ass* 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. I will add this place to my daily checklist on that . . .”

Grandpa tried to come up with the right word, much like he had outside the hospital. But not even “*Jak se řekne?”* would help him. So he turned to me. “What do you call that contraption in the living room?”

“A PC, Grandpa,” I told him with my own exasperation.

Grandpa and I waited outside Columbia as it let out on an unusually warm and sunny day. There were so many people hanging out in front of it that I couldn’t see the doors.

Quickly, the people dispersed. They did when Rudi marched through them.

This time she wasn’t alone. She was holding the hands of two boys. One was the big kid I had seen the other day and the other was gripping what looked like a Bible. The three seemed defiant as they made their way toward us, as did the small boy who was walking behind them. They were flipping off the entire school, not with their fingers but with their smiles.

“You wanna tell me the story behind this?” I said to Rudi as the sun began to set in the courtyard.

“No,” she replied.

But she did anyway.

Rudi sat at the back table of the cafeteria by herself, as she’d been doing since soon after returning to school. Even the tables around hers were empty.

While picking at her food, she heard silence roar through the hall.

She looked up, and she saw Owen standing in front of her with his own food.

He turned toward the silence, and he saw everyone staring at him in shock. “I got curious about that disease,” he told them, “the one you all somehow know she’s got. So I went to the library last night. I went for the first time. And you wanna know what? You people think I’m dumb, but you’re way dumber than me.”

The silence and shock continued, and Owen sat across from Rudi, who was just as shocked as the others and maybe more so. “While I was at the library,” he mentioned, “I looked up that word . . . *karma*. This is the good kind, right?”

Rudi didn’t answer, as she was doing all she could not to cry.

Smiling at this, Owen reached out his big paw, and she grabbed his fingers while lowering her head and shaking it.

“Come on,” he said, “lift up that chin.”

She raised her eyes and forced a smile. “I don’t deserve . . . not after I . . .”

“No one thought I deserved anything till I met you.”

Bashfully, Jared and Eliot sat next to them with their lunches.

But Rudi made it easy for them by pretending nothing had happened. At the same time, she couldn’t help notice Maria, who was sitting way in the distance next to Terry and doing everything she could to avoid looking at her.

Grandpa didn’t have much to report that afternoon, and he and I could see the increasing doubt Rudi was feeling and that fatalism was setting in. Perhaps that’s why he stayed out so late that evening. He still wasn’t home when I fell asleep.

The following day, I returned from school and found Grandpa asleep on the living-room couch in front of the loudly-playing TV, and I knew 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 until he started rising.

“Ana?” he mumbled.

“No, Grandpa,” I softly told him. “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 and was about to help Grandpa up when I noticed something on the computer monitor a few steps away. At first, I was upset, having often told Grandpa that the monitor could burn in if left on for long periods of time. But when I got a better look at it, I was surprised what was there.

This led me to type a few commands from the keyboard, and I watched the dot matrix printer next to the computer begin to churn.

Rudi stepped into the back of the Matador with her head down.

As she raised it, she saw me in the driver’s seat, with Grandpa asleep next to me and mumbling in Czech.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“I think he overdid it last night,” I answered.

“You sure he’s up to this?”

I wasn’t. But I didn’t say it. I didn’t say anything, knowing Grandpa needed this as much as Rudi. He needed a reason to move forward, and I needed him to have it, because I needed him.

Grandpa started shaking in fright, and he banged into the door with his arms. “*Drž se dál od vlaku!”* he screeched with tears in his eyes, recalling the last words he said 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 told her. “So has he.”

“That music he’s been listening to . . . the Pergolesi.”

“You know Pergolesi?”

She looked at me as if I had asked her the stupidest question ever, and she pointed at the car’s stereo. “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 one of Grandpa’s hands with both of hers, and she caressed it.

This was when I first saw the nurturing side of her. A side that may have seemed to contradict everything she was about but one that would be fundamental to everything she’d become.

It took a while, but Grandpa calmed, and he peacefully drifted off.

Rudi sat back in her seat, and I reached into my jacket for the printout I had made, and I showed it to her. “I found this when I came home today.”

“What is it?”

“He mapped out every lodging within thirty kilometers of here that’s in Tommy’s price range and has been systematically visiting them. He visited them all yesterday and must’ve been up half the night.”

Carefully, Rudi looked at the printout. “Did you program that for him?”

I grinned and nodded at Grandpa. “Don’t let that Luddite spiel of his fool you. He was programming the computer the first day we got it. I noticed this afternoon that he even wrote a serial communications library in C so that he could download data from CompuServe.”

The sun fell behind the shelter, and Rudi told me she had to go.

But the story wouldn’t let go of me. So I returned to it that night as I lay on my bed in the dark.

For the next few days, after checking on Grandpa when I came back from school, I drove to Columbia by myself. I would often find Rudi waiting outside it on the stoop with her friends. It always seemed they were helping Owen 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.

Sitting next to Jared, she took his hand. They both smiled, but what I remember most was the look on her face. She was in another place and a good one.

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 a rock facing the waterfall.

She had her arms wrapped around herself 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 and how her arms were crossed not against the weather but in remembrance of a time she wanted to return.

Like all 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 lacked the most important skill he had: the ability to see what was hidden in front of me.

Rudi and I headed back to the car parked on Crest Drive, a long street that cut through the width of the forest.

I reached my door and noticed something in the opposite direction from where we’d been. I’m not even sure what I noticed, but I wandered toward it along with Rudi, and we found a clearing and a set of motorcycle tracks that ran through it. They looked like the ones from Grandpa’s Polaroid and headed 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 almost a sheet of white when we stopped in the parking lot of the South Orange Recreational Center.

“Why did you want to come here?” I asked.

“This is where NA meets,” Rudi told me. “Attending is actually a condition of my probation. But this is the first time I’ve been to this one.”

We waited. As the time neared six, some people began streaming into the building, who were all ablur.

Rudi continued to wait. She waited until well after six before going into the building.

I went with her, no stranger to meetings like these. On the second floor, we approached an open door, where we heard the echoes of voices chanting a prayer that I also was no stranger to.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*The courage to change the things I can,*

*And the wisdom to know the difference.*

The voices came to an end, and the two of us stepped inside the room.

In the threshold, we saw Jared, who was sitting in one of the ubiquitous folding metal chairs with his Bible on his lap. He was sitting way in the back, far from everyone else.

Rudi whispered his name, and he turned to her and feigned surprise, and she didn’t exactly seemed shocked to see him either.

We sat next to him as the greying man in the front of the room rose from behind a table covered in keychains of different colors. “I see we have some new people here. My name is Frank. Feel free to introduce yourself if you’d like.”

No one volunteered.

“Does anyone have something they’d like to share?” Frank went on.

Again, no one volunteered.

“Anyone?”

Still, no one did. So Frank nodded toward a far corner of the room. “Stephen?”

A man stepped out of the shadows. It was Mr. Cross, who smiled at Rudi as he made his way to the front.

“My name is Stephen,” he told everyone after he reached the table and turned toward us, “and I’m an addict.”

“Hello, Stephen,” we all said, in the kind of robotic manner I had seen often at meetings like these.

“I’ve been clean for thirteen years. Now that may seem like a long time to some of you, but not to me.

“I was hooked when I came back from the war. I was some piece of work back then, that’s for sure. You wouldn’t have wanted to be anywhere in my sight.

“Thirteen years ago, I was robbing a man. A little old man with a funny accent. I had a gun right to his head. But he just smiled. He smiled like this had happen to him a thousand times. He smiled not *at* me but *on* me.

“I was born that day, and on every day since. Every day I’m sober. Every day I’m loved. Every day I think of that little old man with the funny accent. The one who smiled on me.”

Mr. Cross went back to the corner of the room, smiling again at Rudi as he passed us.

“Anyone else?” Frank asked.

Hesitantly, Jared raised his hand, surprising the man, who waved him forward.

Slowly and nervously, Jared approached while clutching his Bible. He was clutching it with all he had.

By Frank and the table, he mumbled, “My name is Jared, and I’m an addict.”

“Hello, Jared,” most of us called out. Rudi was the loudest.

“I’ve been clean for sixteen months. That was when I woke. 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 it 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.”

Lowering his head, Jared lifted his Bible. “Don’t let this fool you. I’m worse than all of you. Even you, Mr. Cross. 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. I mean really hurt people. I hurt my own mother. Nothing will make up for that. No Bible verses, no good deeds, nothing.”

With his hand shaking, Jared lowered his Bible. But he didn’t raise his head. “The 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. Real friends. Friends who care about me. And it’s for this I pray. I pray for it all the time. I pray not just that I’m not alone but that I know I’m not alone.”

Slowly, Jared made his way to the back of the room. He walked as slowly as he had walked to the front of it.

He reached us, and Rudi rose from her seat and clutched him. She clutched him as hard as he was clutching that Bible, and he couldn’t stop crying, even after the two sat down and another man began to share.

A few others shared after him, and Frank uttered, “Anyone else?”

No one spoke, though Jared tried to encourage Rudi by putting his hand on hers.

She didn’t react, and Frank started to move on.

But Rudi stood, and she marched up to the front and told us, “My name is Rudi, and I don’t even know how long I’ve been clean. A couple of weeks, I think.”

“Hello, Rudi,” was the reply. I shouted it.

“I forgot to say that I’m an addict,” she added, specifically to Frank.

“It’s all right,” he murmured to her.

“I probably didn’t because, because I like to pretend I’m not. I like to pretend that I’m strong and that I’m in control and that I’ve licked 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 over the years. I’ve never shared anything. I’ve even mocked the whole idea. But I’m not the same person I was. For the first time, I’ve let someone close.

“I’ve always been alone, even when I was messed up. Even then I wouldn’t let anyone near me. But I’ve met 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 a 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.”

I came home that night and saw Grandma 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 muttered 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 grabbed a spoon from the coffee table and put it in the bowl beside it, and she tried to feed Grandpa some of her famous chicken soup and matzo balls.

But he would have none of it. “*Srnčí na pepři si dám*,” he growled while shaking his head and keeping his mouth from the spoon. “*S kroketama*.”

“You know very well, old man,” she growled back, “that there is no venison in this house, peppered or otherwise. Nor are there any potato croquettes. You will have to suffice with my soup.”

It looked like neither 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 love him. He . . . he is *moje všechno*.”

*Her* *all*.

Grandpa got close enough to his old self to continue looking for Tommy.

But I could tell he wasn’t hopeful as we sat in his car and waited outside Columbia in our usual spot on Parker Avenue.

The school let out, but there was no Rudi, even after the stragglers had left. Though I heard a pair of them snickering about her and Tommy, and I got worried. So I opened my door, just as she walked out of the school holding the hand of another of her friends.

It was Maria. The two looked like they’d been through hell together. Both their faces showed streaks of tears.

Rudi noticed us, and she and Maria embraced and said goodbye before Rudi rushed toward us, with Maria watching her the entire way and looking like she would cry again. “I’ll call you tonight!”

Thinking back to this from my bed in the men’s quarters, it struck me that I never learned what had happened between Rudi and Maria and how they had made up, and I had to know. I had to know right then.

So I climbed down my bunk with my phone and rushed into the courtyard without my coat (or my pants), and I called Rudi.

“What’s wrong?” she mumbled as she tried to wake.

“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 had been me who let out what Tommy had or confirmed it.”

“Maria. You told her.”

“When I came back to school, she told me about the rumors some people were spreading. She didn’t believe them, she said. Lots of people didn’t. Tommy didn’t exactly fit the profile of those with the disease at that time. But then 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 went crazy. The whole world was going crazy. If you remember, people even thought you could get it from a toilet seat. Even Maria thought this. She got hysterical because I had used her bathroom. That’s why I lied to you about Tommy’s sickness. I thought you’d go crazy too.”

“Maybe I would have.”

“Maria told Terry what I had told her, and it blew up from there.”

“You weren’t mad at Maria?”

“Are you kidding? I wanted to kill her. But . . .”

“But what?”

“That day you saw us hugging, a lot had happened earlier. A big scene at lunch that shook everyone. I was still trying to process it all as I was leaving school. That’s when I saw Maria waiting for me in the corridor by the front doors. Again, she was frightened, but for a different reason.

“I wanted to ignore her. I didn’t even want to recognize she was there. But then I noticed Terry 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 go with her, and Terry rushed out while screaming, ‘It’s over!’

“Still, Maria wouldn’t go. She turned back to me and muttered, ‘I’m sorry.’

“I started to walk off. But I stopped. I don’t even know why I did. Maybe it was because I realized that she had given up a lot to make things right. Whatever the reason was, I just stood there, not sure what to do.

“‘You were the best friend I ever had,’ she whispered to me, and I couldn’t stop myself from turning toward her and opening my arms. ‘I still am,’ I whispered back.”

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 in front of me.

Rudi reached the Matador, and she glanced into it and was surprised to see Grandpa in the driver’s seat. She gazed at him as she jumped inside the back door with excitement. “He was here,” she cried out.

Grandpa and I spun toward her, and I uttered, “What?”

“Tommy came to the cafeteria at lunch. He was really hammered.”

Grandpa looked confused. “Hammered?”

“He was drunk. And his head was shaved.”

“Then what happened?” I asked.

“He was standing in the front of the hall. No one even noticed him at first. But then they did, and everyone started fleeing, even his so-called friends.”

“Just because he has pneumonia?” questioned Grandpa.

“He’s dying,” I said. “Isn’t he?”

Rudi didn’t answer.

“Is this that disease I have been reading about?” Grandpa muttered. “The one that has been afflicting homosexuals?”

“Obviously, it’s afflicting more than just them,” Rudi growled with defensiveness, probably thinking that someone like Grandpa would be homophobic.

“You must stay away from this boy,” he shrieked while shaking both his head and finger.

“I’m not staying away from nothing.”

“This is a deadly and contagious disease, Rudi. They are not sure what is causing it or how it spreads. The only thing they know for sure is that it kills.”

“It’s not contagious. Not like everyone thinks.”

“How can you know?”

“Because the whole world would have it by now!”

“Maybe they do.”

“Then what difference does it make!”

“You are not to go near him.”

“Look—”

“—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 her door, and she started to leave.

Grandpa got frightened. Maybe he thought he’d lose his granddaughter like he had his daughter. “Please, 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 said, “and he started tossing tables over. Then he saw me rushing 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 a 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 wouldn’t’ve thought he even 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 recordings recently,” Grandpa said. “But many stores around here must sell recordings.”

“Not these.”

Grandpa turned to Rudi. “Where around here could he have bought these?”

“I don’t know,” she snapped. “It’s not like I’ve been buying records since I got here.”

“We could go to a library and find a phonebook,” I said, “and call every store.”

“That would take all day,” she groaned.

“Do you have a better idea?”

She sighed. “There’s a library in the school.”

Quickly, she swung open her door and started out of the car. But she stopped when she saw Owen walking through the parking lot toward the bus stop on Valley Road.

Cupping her hands around her mouth, she shouted his name. She shouted it a number of times, each one louder.

But he was too far away to hear her as he joined a bunch of people at the stop, who were waiting for the bus that was just crossing Parker.

Rudi jumped into the car. “Stop that bus!” she hollered while pointing at it.

Grandpa sped off, not even waiting for Rudi to close her door. She only could when we made a screeching right into the intersection. This was when Grandpa, as he would sometimes do when he wasn’t thinking, followed his instincts and turned onto the left lane, putting us in the path of a large pickup and its frantically honking horn.

“*Do práva, Dědo!”* I screamed at him while flailing my arms to the right. “*Do práva!”*

“I know,” he calmly replied. “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 to drive?” Rudi gasped.

“Uzhhorod,” Grandpa answered matter-of-factly. “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. So Grandpa spun toward Rudi and pointed out the car. “The bus.”

Rudi didn’t move. She didn’t because she was staring at Grandpa’s forearm and the number tattooed on it. She stared at it in horror.

“Rudi?” I murmured.

Finally, she got out of her shock. She got out of it just enough that she could get out of the car, and we watched her hurry toward the bus.

I was still watching her as I fell asleep in the men’s quarters. I watched her fade.

the sixth night

I always had more work on Mondays than normal, as no one took my place on my days off, and Amoun expected me to get the work done in the same four hours. I’d run around more than usual.

With twenty minutes to go on this particular Monday, I finally caught up and had to clean the large field in back of the motel.

As I labored in the cold but bright midday sun, my mind kept wandering to Josh and what I should do with what I had learned about him. Why it did when I knew there was nothing I could do I can’t say. Not even Bad Brains could get me to stop.

The only thing that could was *Larks on a String,* an old Czech movie I’ve seen so many times that I know every line of it.

Set during the early years of Communism, it’s about a group of misfits who’d run afoul of the authorities. They force them to work in a scrapyard that served as a metaphor: it would smelt them into the kind of new men the regime wanted or else, with the else meaning not only a prison sentence but working in the uranium mines and the unnatural death that would likely come from it. Because of this, the men were like birds perching on the thinnest of strings. Any breeze could blow them over for good.

One of the 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 popped into my head and stayed there. “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 aloud while gripping a diaper I had pulled from some weeds.

The answer came quickly. I realized it was this “moral code,” the kind that thrived so boldly in my sister, that was keeping my mind on Josh in spite of all reason.

Alaya stepped outside the motel with her cleaning cart for a cigarette break, the woman with the beautiful name and a voice like Paul McCartney. She not only gave me one of her accentuated waves but smiled. She smiled like she knew exactly what I was thinking and was trying to encourage me to see it through.

Ignoring this or trying to, I returned to the story of searching for Tommy.

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 spotted it.

Grandpa, Rudi, and I stepped out of the car, and we hurried across the busy road and into the store.

We found it empty apart from the short and muscular man behind the counter, who was wearing a shredded Bay City Rollers T-shirt three sizes too small and screaming along with the Circle Jerks’ “Back Against the Wall” as it blared from a record player a few steps from him.

Not 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 first thing I noticed about the place was that, even though it was smaller than some Cadillacs, every record was great. It was the perfect selection of music from the fifties to the present, 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 were all thirteen Captain Beefheart albums. They also had an alternative version of John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* and a section dedicated to the bands that had performed in *The Decline of Western Civilization,* which included the record that was playing. Just as important as what they had was what they didn’t: every record that was currently in the *Billboard Top 200*.

The other thing I noticed were the 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 a legend, as I had never seen it anywhere.

The man behind the counter got tired of Grandpa staring at him. He stopped his screaming and scratched the needle across the record, and he spun toward Grandpa. “Listen, pops, we have old records. But not *that* old.”

Grandpa grinned, and he pulled out the picture of Tommy and showed it to the man, and he said we were looking for him.

“And you are?” the man growled.

“Tommy and I are . . .” Rudi mumbled.

The man glanced at Rudi incredulously. “You and Tommy?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I bet,” the man uttered with a roll of his eyes.

“Please . . .”

“The name’s Butch.”

“Please, Butch. Tommy’s sick. He’s sick and alone and . . . and I love him.”

Butch’s expression softened. “Look, he comes in here now and then and buys old Yardbirds records.”

“Has he been here recently?” Grandpa asked.

“A few days ago.”

“And he bought a Yardbirds record?” was my question.

“Actually, no. It was kind of weird. First, he was looking weird and maybe even a little trashed, and then he pulled out a copy of *Damaged*.”

“By Black Flag?” Grandpa asked next.

Slowly, Butch turned toward him and raised his eyebrows, and he deadpanned, “Your knowledge of punk rock is impeccable.”

Again, Grandpa grinned.

Spinning back to me, Butch added, “Tommy wanted to know if it was any good. So I told him. I told him it was the best. But I also told him it was no Yardbirds. I told him he’d 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 said to me.

I asked Butch if he had another copy, and he nodded toward a stack of albums to the right of us.

Sifting through it, I found the record, and I showed Grandpa the image on the cover, of Henry Rollins with his head shaved and his bloody fist through a mirror.

Grandpa was shocked. “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 because of it. While it’s full of anger and rage and self-hatred, a lot of the songs have this . . . I don’t even know what you’d call it . . . a mad desperation.”

“For what?”

“Hope,” spoke Rudi.

I looked at her in surprise. I had always thought what I experienced when listening to the record had been unique to me. But I saw now that she and probably many others felt the same thing when they listened to it. If Tommy did, we had reason to hope as well.

“I guess you do not know where Tommy is staying,” Grandpa said to 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 started out.

With exasperation, Butch pointed down the street. “He was headed that way.”

“Toward Newark?” Grandpa wondered.

We parked in the lot of the same decrepit motel in Newark we had been at before and saw that Tommy’s bike wasn’t there.

“I told you he wouldn’t be here,” Rudi snarled with frustration overwhelming her.

“But that does not mean that he was not here,” Grandpa countered before he opened his door and walked into the lot.

“Now what is he doing?” Rudi cried out.

I didn’t know. So I didn’t answer.

The two of us stared at Grandpa as he strolled through the grounds. He did for many minutes, and it wasn’t obvious that he was looking for something. Which made me wonder if he was having another of his stupors, and I wondered what we’d do if he was.

Suddenly, something grabbed Grandpa’s 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 to him, and he showed us a track frozen in the dirty snow. “He was here and not so long ago. Because I did not see this the last time I was here.”

“Maybe he’s coming back,” I said.

“Or maybe he could be anywhere,” groaned Rudi.

Grandpa rose to his feet, and he continued looking.

Instead of doing the same, I tried to imagine what I’d be doing if I were Tommy, the boy who seemed so different from me when I met him but who I knew now was no different at all. This led me to close my eyes and think of the album he’d been listening to. I went through every song on it, trying to come up with the one that could’ve stopped him from hitting that tree.

One in particular came to mind. It caused me to open my eyes and turn to Rudi. “What was Tommy singing in the cafeteria?” I asked.

“What does it matter?” she grumbled.

“I’m not sure.”

“I don’t know the name of the song. It’s the one where the guy screams, ‘Keep me alive.’”

“‘Room 13.’”

“What was that?” Grandpa called out.

“Just a second,” I said as I glanced at the door numbers of the rooms around us. “The name of the song he was singing is called ‘Room 13.’ The room numbers here, they only go up to ten.”

“But at a larger hotel . . .”

Hurriedly, the three of us rushed back to the car.

From her seat in the back, Rudi leaned toward Grandpa as the car sped out of the lot. “When you mapped these places,” she said, “did you use a Mercator projection?”

“You know what a Mercator projection is?” Grandpa gasped.

“Did you use one?” she groaned.

“I wanted to use one, but I have never been good at partial fractions. So I used an orthographic projection.”

Rudi turned to me. “Do you still have that printout?”

I opened the glove compartment.

“I’ll need a pen too,” she added.

I grabbed both and handed them to her, and I watched the equations spew over the page.

“Do you know Dijkstra’s shortest path algorithm?” I asked her.

Rudi and I got us to the lodgings in the area faster, but it wasn’t getting us to Tommy.

As we came to a red light, Grandpa looked into his rearview mirror and glanced at Rudi. Seeing how upset she looked, he decided this was a good time to continue his Kafka story.

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 said as he reached him.

Kafka nodded, along with a string of coughs.

Hermann sat on the empty bed next to his, and he told him, “It’s an honor to meet you, sir. I really enjoyed that book of yours. *The Metamorphosis*, wasn’t it?”

Kafka looked surprised. “How did you know I was here?”

“Your family sent me to find you.”

“There you are!” cried 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 pointing 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 bed rest 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.”

“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.”

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 told him. “But now . . .”

“Don’t tell me you believe that boatman is Charon.”

“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 . . .”

The two were interrupted, 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 by their beds and scowled. “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 and placed it on the railing of his bed. “Keep your petty prejudices to yourself. You’ll soon discover 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 said to Hermann. “Or should I say, *infamous*.”

“I gathered as much,” Hermann told Kafka before he turned to Hašek and frowned. “I can assure you, sir, 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?”

“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 of my friends back. I wouldn’t care if they were Czech, German, or Jew. The bullets didn’t.”

Ignoring this, Hašek turned his scowl onto Kafka. “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’ is a better name for them . . . men turning into bugs and ridiculous penal colonies.”

“You are one to judge, Mr. Hašek. The author of dreck. The ramblings of a drunkard. A common street urchin can write more coherently than you. Hell, my Czech is terrible, but even I can write it better than you.”

“You filthy . . .”

Hašek stumbled out of his wheelchair, and he stumbled toward Kafka and wildly swung his fist at him.

It missed Kafka, and it missed him by a lot, though it knocked his end table onto the floor along with the lamp and bell that were on top of it.

This didn’t deter Hašek, who rolled up the sleeves of his night shirt as he panted. “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 put you down. 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 smiled. He smiled in spite of himself as he stumbled back his wheelchair and sat on it. “Why, that man is more Czech than me.”

Kafka said nothing, and Hašek added, “Do you know he’s the only one 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 said nothing, but he couldn’t avoid grinning.

“How come I’ve never seen you out with him?” Hašek asked.

“I’m afraid we are quite different men,” Kafka muttered.

“Yeah, I bet you’re a big disappointment to him.”

Kafka cringed but once more didn’t say a thing.

“You, a snooty member of the literati,” Hašek went on, “too high and mighty to hobnob with us common folk.”

“Listen to you talk, like you’re some kind of proletariat. You must be the richest writer in the country, especially as you have no publishers 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,” Kafka told her. “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 lamp and bell back on top of it. “Don’t let this ruffian bully you, Herr Kafka.”

“Have no fear of that, Nurse Černá,” Hašek bellowed with a big smirk. “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’s only response was to snarl at Hašek before she hurried off.

As she left the room, Hašek glared one last time at Hermann and Kafka and hurried off as well.

Hermann tried to convince Kafka to go home with him.

“I’m a dead man,” Kafka insisted between a fit of coughs. “Whether I die tomorrow or six months from now makes no difference.”

“It makes a difference to your sisters,” Hermann insisted back. “And to your girlfriend.”

“I’m a burden to 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?”

Kafka began to answer, but 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 in surprise. “Are you Max Brod? The author of *Nornepygge Castle?”*

“You’ve heard of me?” Brod uttered back with his own surprise.

“He’s even heard of me,” Kafka interjected with a cackle.

Wanting to give the men some privacy, Hermann rose from his bed. “I think I’ll have a little walk.”

Hermann didn’t go far. Still wobbly from his fall, he saw a comfortable-looking chair by the doorway and sat on it.

As he watched the two men converse in the distance, he felt himself getting drowsy, and he drifted off.

Hermann woke. He woke abruptly. He didn’t even know why he had. Then he saw Hašek and Brod yelling at each other by Kafka and his bed.

“You goddamn Jew!” Hašek screamed at the man while flailing his arms. “You’ve always been a goddamn Jew!”

After turning to Kafka, the man added, “And you write almost as badly as he does!”

Hurriedly, Hašek wheeled his chair from the two men and toward the door. He wheeled it as fast as he could, and this wasn’t very. He only slowed when he noticed Hermann, and he glared as he stopped before him.

A gravely voice came from Hašek’s right. “Don’t you worry about them.”

Hašek turned toward it, and he saw a grinning and unshaven man lying in a bed nearby. “They’ll get theirs soon enough,” the man said while nodding toward Kafka and Brod.

“What do you mean?” grumbled Hašek.

The man glanced around. He looked every which way and lifted the lapel of his night shirt, exposing a swastika pin.

Hašek was horrified. “You, you stay away from me.”

“What are you getting so upset about, Jarda?” the man replied.

“My name is Jaroslav. But don’t even 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!”

Angry and even more horrified, Hašek pushed himself through the door, leaving the man to stare at Hermann.

This turned into laughter. He laughed and laughed and wouldn’t stop.

Kafka and Brod continued talking by Kafka’s bed, watched by Hermann from the door.

Suddenly, the two men became agitated, and they started arguing.

Not only did Hermann see this but so did Hašek, who had just returned to the room and 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 respond, and he reached the two men and the door.

“Burn what?” demanded Hašek.

Brod wouldn’t answer. He just pushed his way through the door.

Hermann noticed how conflicted Hašek looked. He looked like he wasn’t sure what to do.

Suddenly, he followed Brod. He followed him out the door.

Grandpa broke from his story as the sun began to set. He suggested we check the waterfall before it got dark. This took us down a long country road that passed through the length of the reservation and all the trees there.

While gazing into them, Rudi began humming the same old song she had by the waterfall.

But she stopped when we came to a body of water. “Reservoir,” she mumbled.

“What about it?” Grandpa replied as I turned to her.

“Tommy once told me that his father grew up in Newark, by the old reservoir there.”

“There is no reservoir in Newark.”

“But there must’ve been.”

We were so close to the waterfall that we decided to check it anyway.

But Tommy wasn’t there or any sign of him. So we returned to Newark and began looking for a reservoir we knew didn’t exist. Which 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 and who told us that she knew nothing of any old one either. 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 would’ve given up on this one. It was obvious Grandpa wanted to give up, and he probably only didn’t because there were no other clues and knew we needed to find Tommy right away.

He kept pulling over the car, and he kept asking random people in the street, including a middle-aged woman who was pushing a shopping cart full of groceries down a dark and empty block.

“I don’t know of any reservoir,” she told us, causing Grandpa to sigh. “But I remember Reservoir Pizza. My little brother cried when they left town.”

With a burst of excitement, Rudi leaned toward the woman. “Do you remember where it was?”

“I sure do. On the corner of 14th Avenue and 9th Street.”

The Matador turned right onto 14th Avenue, where we saw no sign that a reservoir had been there. Nor did we see any motel or hotel or anything like it.

But Grandpa kept looking. 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 think of apartments,” Grandpa mumbled to himself as he spun onto the parking lot, where a set of ramshackle units faced each other. In front of number 13, we saw the remains of Tommy’s bike.

Grandpa parked beside it. Before he could even come to a stop Rudi ran out, and she banged on the door with her fists while calling out Tommy’s name.

There was no response, and the door was locked.

“Now what?” I asked Grandpa as we hurried toward her.

He didn’t answer. Instead, he glanced around.

Not seeing anyone, he pulled out a set of lock 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 him. We shielded him from view, and he picked the lock and opened the door.

Rushing inside, we found Tommy lying on a creaky Murphy bed in the cramped studio. As Rudi had described, 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.

Stepping toward him, I noticed how he was sweating. Never had I seen anything like it. His bedsheets and pillow were soaked.

I turned from this, and I watched Grandpa pick up an empty vodka bottle on the floor.

He glanced at it and tossed it into a garbage pail, and he checked Tommy’s pulse with worry all over his face.

Hastily, he grabbed the phone off an end table by the bed, and he called 911. “I need an ambulance. I need it right now.”

While he gave them our address, I looked around the room, and I saw that all four walls were broken apart, like someone had been smashing into them. The full-length mirror by the bathroom was smashed too, by more than one fist.

“Tommy!” Rudi pleaded as she tried to get him to respond.

He wouldn’t. It was as if we weren’t there.

The song came to an end, and Tommy hit the stop button on his Walkman. He followed this by reversing the tape and pressing play before he screamed “Keep me alive!” with Henry Rollins. He screamed it over and over.

Grandpa, Rudi, and I sat on chairs in a corridor of St. Barnabas, with one of us sitting a lot more impatiently.

Rudi’s anxiousness only increased as the minutes went by.

Recognizing this, Grandpa took her hand. He took it much like she had taken his in the car a week or so earlier. Like with him, she calmed, and she turned to him and smiled, and he smiled back.

This was when she saw a tall man in a white coat approaching us, along with the same frightened nurse I had seen in Tommy’s room when I first met him. Again, she was wearing a mask and a pair of gloves, and again she looked frightened.

“That’s Dr. Kleinsten,” Rudi uttered, and the three of us rose.

The doctor stopped in front of us while the nurse scampered off.

“How is he?” Rudi asked the doctor. She was almost begging.

“He’s determined to kill himself,” Kleinsten said, “and he’s succeeding.”

“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 told her.

Rudi started down the hall. Slowly she did.

“What are his chances?” whispered Grandpa to the doctor.

“Chances?” the man whispered back as if it had been a question he couldn’t comprehend.

“His chances for survival.”

“No one has survived this or experienced any remission.”

“How long does he have?” I asked.

“I know of no case where the patient has lived for more than a month or two, and most weren’t as bad as his. Understand that his immune system is completely shot. If the Pneumocystis doesn’t kill him, something else will. And soon.”

The doctor started off, and I called out, “Can I ask you something?”

“What?” he uttered, and he came to a stop and turned to me.

“If it’s true that you are not sure 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 got so mad that he marched off. “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. 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 leave the living-room couch, and she just might move this outside.”

I returned to the shelter late in the afternoon, reaching the alley as Billy slammed the hood of his Civic and cursed.

“Broken again?” I murmured as I got close to him.

He didn’t reply. He just kicked the car.

“Maybe Matt can fix it again,” I said.

“Not this time,” he growled before he kicked the car again. “We were so close!”

He kicked it over and over. He kicked it until a large truck arrived. It sputtered beside us and came to a grinding halt.

It was there to donate food from a local restaurant, a not-so-uncommon sight at the shelter. 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 pizzas arrived anonymously, like they had in a Jason Stratham film I once saw called *Redemption*. After the second time it happened, 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.

The donation that afternoon particularly surprised me. The restaurant donated many cartons of choice steaks and ribs as well as lots of boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables. I think all of us were overwhelmed by it. That’s probably why Josh didn’t even have to ask us to 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 of what a great Christmas dinner it would all make.

It took more than a half-hour to get everything off the truck. But none of us complained. We all had smiles on our faces, even Billy and Jennifer. I think it made everyone feel that they were a small part of a gift that was anything but.

I got in the check-in line after I finished cleaning the rec room, and I heard a commotion coming from behind the closed door of the office.

Josh was arguing with Hector. They were screaming at each other.

The door flew open, and Hector burst out. He passed me and went to his cubby, where he pulled out his things onto the floor.

“What happened?” I asked him.

“I got thrown out,” he howled as he stuffed his belongings into a dusty brown suitcase.

“Why?”

“I wouldn’t do his wet work.”

“His what?”

Instead of answering, Hector blew past me and threw open the office door. “I need my passport,” he yelled at Josh.

“Your what?” Josh yelled back.

“I gave you my passport for safekeeping when I came here.”

Pointing toward the dining hall, Hector added, “You put it in the vault.”

Reluctantly, Josh rose to his feet and walked off. “Wait here.”

Josh returned to the dorm and his office, and he rolled his eyes at Hector. “It seems that it’s gone missing,” he said.

Hector glared at Josh. He glared at him for a long time. But he didn’t say anything. He just rushed off with his things.

Another letter from Tommy came that night. I got it and brought it into the courtyard, and I called Rudi. I could hear the anticipation in her voice, no matter how hard she tried to mask it.

It was difficult getting through the first handful of pages Tommy sent me that day, as they were mostly garbled.

In one of the few semi-coherent entries, he described his transfer to St. Barnabas after the hospital he was at originally refused to treat him once they learned what he had. In another, he mentioned an encounter with his mother in the hospital.

“All I want is an apology,” the woman softly growled by the door.

“An apology?” he muttered while looking away from her.

“And a promise you’ll stay away from her.”

“I’m giving you nothing.”

“Look at what’s she’s done to you, Tommy. Look at how she’s destroyed your life.”

“Go away.”

“If I go now, I’m never coming back.”

Tommy didn’t reply.

She stormed out of the room, and Tommy wasn’t sorry about it.

What Tommy didn’t describe was his encounters with Rudi. He barely wrote about her, apart from a brief entry lamenting at how he’d never make love to her. He wrote even less about the disease that was ravaging him. All he said was that his countdown had begun. He just didn’t know the exact units of measurement.

Tommy followed this with a fractured sentence about his leaving St. Barnabas, and then there were nothing more than bits and pieces and streams-of-consciousness. I inferred from these that he moved from motel to motel. At all he drank himself to sleep, and he woke this way.

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 on the rocks, where he cursed himself and his fate and the certain thing above he blamed for it. He screamed this into the skies and beyond and only stopped when he ran out of vodka.

After smashing the bottle onto the rocks of the ravine, he again drove. He drove until he found himself in front of Vintage Vinyl.

He didn’t expect much from the Black Flag record he bought there. He only bought it because he remembered the T-shirt Rudi had been wearing on the day he met her and the tattoo on Owen’s arm and because staring at the record’s cover was like looking into a mirror.

Still, despite having no reason to doubt that Butch had been right, that he wouldn’t like the music at all, when he got to his room, 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 and took over the screaming.

*My name is Henry, and you’re here with me now*.

Tommy would swear that Rollins was screaming at him and him alone, screaming everything he was thinking and feeling but couldn’t express. What surprised Tommy was how Rollins wasn’t just screaming about how life sucks. He screamed more about 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. It wasn’t just in “Room 13” that he found it but in “Life of Pain” and “Damaged II” and “What I See.” Each song focused on a different aspect of his hurt until there wasn’t a sliver of it that hadn’t been dissected and cast out. Even darker songs like “Depression” offered a glimmer of promise.

When the tape ended, Tommy played it again. He played it while smashing into the walls. With each time through the album, the lyrics became more personal. By the fourth, all the darkness around him had gone. There was only the music and the mad desperation to hope.

He sobered the next morning and listened to the tape again. He listened to it all the time. It was the only thing that kept him from his self-pity. The only thing that wouldn’t let him have it. It was the only thing that moved him forward. It got him up in the morning and to sleep every night, and it got him through all his attempts at killing himself. It’s also what led him to a punk club in the Alphabet City section of Manhattan called A7, where he saw a band that I guess was Ism, as he talked about them playing a cover of “I think I love you” as he sat on the floor in the corner of the room, invisible to everything.

Tommy’s first lucid observation in that night’s entries was after finding himself back at St. Barnabas and waking to the angel in contrasting black and white hovering over him. The one without any shades of gray.

Forgetting everything that had happened to him, he smiled and murmured her name.

Then he remembered. He remembered everything, and he growled, “I told you to leave me alone.”

Instead, Rudi grabbed his hand. She grabbed it like she would break it apart while looking angrier than he had ever seen her. The fury was shattering through her.

“Are you crazy?” he howled. “I’m infected!”

He tried to squirm his hand away, but she held on. He couldn’t even yank it away. All he could do was look away and mutter, “Go. Please go.”

“Not until we have it out.”

He wouldn’t. He shut his eyes and tried to will her to go.

But she wasn’t going anywhere again. So he opened his eyes and reluctantly turned back to her.

“There’s gonna be some changes around here,” she snarled with her voice on the cusp of breaking and her lips trembling. “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, and he watched the raging punk towering over him turn once more into the frightened little girl, the same he had 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 in her arms. “And you’re gonna love me,” her voice rasped. “Because I love you. God, how I love you!”

“How could you love me?” he mumbled.

“I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to love anything, especially me. But you’re the most magnificent person I’ve ever met or will ever meet. You make my whole rotten life worth it.”

Tommy didn’t say anything. But he felt the tears rolling down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpered. “I’m sorry for everything.”

“Sorry? 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 tried to resist her. He tried with everything he had.

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 how she was grasping him as she screeched his name.

“I can’t live without you,” he said matter-of-factly. “It’s not a figure of speech or hyperbole or whatever the right term is. It just is.”

We didn’t know if Tommy would make it through the night.

Rudi refused to leave him, even after a nurse threatened to call security. I doubt even the cops could’ve pulled her away.

All night she clutched Tommy. She clutched him while humming “Moonlight Serenade” during each of his bouts of the shivers.

“I’m so scared,” he stammered.

“Me too,” she told him. “But not as much as when I was alone.”

He grabbed her arms. He grabbed them and held on.

The nurse shoved her medical cart out of Tommy’s room. As usual, she was wearing a mask and gloves and looking like she wanted to be anywhere but there.

Normally, this bothered Tommy, no matter how much he pretended it didn’t. But now it really didn’t matter.

This was because of the man sitting on his bed beside him, who was wearing a suit and a kippah but no mask or gloves and was leaning over him and holding his hand.

Tommy wrote how floored he was that this man he had revered his whole life was touching him and unafraid.

“Is there anything I could get you?” the man asked with a soft voice and a gentle smile, with both belying his size.

“You think,” Tommy muttered with embarrassment, “you think you could get me a Bible?”

“Sure thing, Tommy. I’ll bring one tomorrow.”

The man released Tommy’s hand, and he rose and turned to the door, and 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.

He nodded at the man. “This is Rabbi Orenstein, from my temple.”

Rudi forced a smile at him, and Tommy pointed at her. “This is my . . . my . . .”

“I’m his girlfriend,” she called out, I bet not only to the rabbi and to Tommy but to herself.

With a spurt of confidence, she marched up to the rabbi and offered him her hand while telling him her name.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he told her as he shook her hand with his own forced smile. Tommy could see the bewilderment on the man’s face and that this was growing.

Hiding from this, the rabbi turned back to Tommy. “I guess you’ll be going home soon.”

Tommy shook his head and without looking at the man.

“We’re getting a place,” Rudi interjected.

“Maybe,” Tommy countered.

“We agreed—”

“—You’re eighteen, Rudi. You shouldn’t be saddled with all this.”

“It’s my choice, not yours!”

“We don’t even know if I’m getting out of here.”

“You’re getting out of here,” she growled.

“I see,” the rabbi muttered while trying to mask 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 . . .”

“The synagogue actually has a fund set aside for these kinds of situations.”

“You do understand that we’re not married,” Rudi let him know.

“Ordinarily, that would be a problem. But under the circumstances . . .”

“I don’t know,” Tommy groaned while shaking his head once more.

The rabbi waved both him and his doubts off, and he started toward the door. “Let me handle everything.”

He left, with Rudi staring at the doorway. She stared at it even after the man was gone. “Are all rabbis like him?”

“I think they aspire to be,” Tommy answered before she sat on the bed and applied the compress to his face and forehead.

“I have a big surprise waiting for you,” she said.

“Should I be worried?”

“Yup.”

“Well?”

“You’ll have to get out of here to get it.”

I glanced at Rudi as the two of us stood in front of Dr. Kleinsten. It didn’t seem like she was breathing as she gazed at the doctor, who was reading through a medical chart. He read it many times over before he lowered it with an astonishment he couldn’t control. “It seems the Pneumocystis has passed,” he said.

“Really?” Rudi gasped. “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, and there’s none on the horizon. We don’t even have a name for his disease. I’ve got an obligation to be forthright with you. In cases like his . . .”

Rudi wouldn’t listen further. She marched down the hall, refusing to allow reality to get in her way.

I followed her, and we entered the elevator and saw the rabbi.

“Hi,” he said with awkwardness.

She said the same in reply, with the same awkwardness, and the two looked straight ahead as the elevator descended.

“I want to thank you for the apartment,” she told him. “It’s really great.”

“You’re welcome,” he told her back.

“I, I have some questions.”

“Questions?” he mumbled as we reached the ground floor and exited.

“This isn’t the place,” she said as we came to a stop.

“Our synagogue, Beth El, is on Irvington Avenue, not far from the intersection of South Orange Avenue. I have office hours every morning.”

The door creaked opened, and Rudi helped Tommy inside it.

Turning on the light, she exposed a small but well-furnished one-bedroom apartment and a little golden-haired dog, who ran up to Tommy with her tail wagging furiously.

The dog jumped into his arms, and she licked his face over and over.

“She remembers me,” Tommy uttered.

“How could a girl forget a hero?” Rudi said.

“So this is your big surprise. What’s she doing here?”

“No one claimed her. I talked to Dr. Kleinsten, 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 around. And, to be honest, I could really use an unconditional friend. So we’ve adopted her.”

“*We?”*

Rudi grinned, and she scratched behind one of the dog’s ears. “We’re calling her Flutter.”

Tommy chuckled. “What about the matching 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 harder. She wouldn’t stop.

The excitement of having a home, and all the love inside it, was too much for Flutter. She fell asleep before dinner was over and was snoring loudly on the makeshift bed Rudi had set up for her on the kitchen floor.

Watching her with grins 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 led him to their open bedroom door while blushing as she had outside the restaurant, 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 just kept widening.

She smiled back. “That you were listening to that was a real surprise to me.”

“It’s the best,” he let her know, “and I’m not the only one who thinks it.”

Rudi released Tommy’s hand. She did so she could walk to the portable stereo on an end table by the side of the bed.

She hit play, and the sounds of “Moonlight Serenade” filled the room.

Tommy pointed at the music in shock. “Where did you get that?”

“I found a copy of the record at the library, and I made an endless tape of it. You can listen to it all day if you want.”

“And never get tired of it.”

Tommy noticed a small gift-wrapped package on the bed beside him, and he nodded at it. “What’s that?”

“A little housewarming gift.”

“*Rudi*. I should be the one giving gifts. You’ve given me too much already.”

“It’s nothing. Go on, open it.”

Tommy put down the record, and the two sat on the bed, where he picked up the gift and opened the wrapping. He opened it carefully so not to tear it, and he uncovered her crumpled drawing of him set inside a simple black frame.

He smirked. “I’ve always wanted a picture of Lee Ving.”

She smirked back, and she pushed him onto the bed before she leaned down to kiss him.

He stopped her. He stopped her with a shake of his head. “I can’t.”

“There are only a few things you can’t,” she grumbled, “and millions you can.”

Tommy thought for sure he would cry. But he controlled it as he caressed her cheek with the back of his hand and whispered, “The infinite possibilities.”

Tommy described his first night with Rudi in colors.

They trickled over him with each kiss and touch—shades of blue and yellow and violet, as vivid as the ones he saw in the Vermeer painting his parents had taken him to see. He not only saw the colors but felt them in Rudi’s lips and fingers and toes, and he heard them in Glenn Miller’s trombone.

Then there was ivory. It was as if Michelangelo had carved her out of it. She was perfection. His perfection.

By the time he passed out, she had become his lover. Not in every sense of the word 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 she was there. Then he realized she was asleep in his arms and clinging to him. She was clinging as if he’d slip away if she let go.

This made him recall the afternoon by the waterfall when she put her head on his shoulder. He had thought that this was the best he could feel, but it was nothing compared to holding her and protecting her and feeling her breathe against him.

It would be his reason to live, he told himself, so he could keep feeling her pressed against him. “I’m never gonna die,” he muttered, and he kept repeating it until he believed it.

I rang their apartment doorbell the next afternoon while carrying a big ceramic bowl 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. “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.”

Holding back her tears, Rudi hugged me. She hugged me in the doorway for God knows how long.

“How’s next Saturday?” I called out from the dining room table, where I sat across from Tommy.

“I don’t know,” Rudi answered from the kitchen.

“You can’t avoid her forever.”

“It’s not me who’s been doing the avoiding.”

“Saturday will be fine,” Tommy said.

Rudi entered the room carrying the salad bowl in one arm and a plate of omelets in the other, and she glared at Tommy, who grinned back.

At the same time, Flutter jumped up onto Rudi to get at the food, and she told everyone, “Rule number one here: no feeding Flutter from the table. Breaking it will be a capital offense.”

Tommy and I nodded, and Rudi used a pair of thongs to serve the salad and the omelets.

As she sat down, Tommy and I picked up our utensils, and we glanced at each other skeptically before trying the omelets.

“This is really good,” Tommy gasped with surprise.

“Yeah,” I gasped back with the same surprise.

“What were you guys expecting?” Rudi cried out.

“I don’t know,” I sheepishly mumbled. “Glass and nails?”

Tommy and I laughed. Even Rudi smirked before playfully slapping 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 it would be a one-time event.

The three of us waited outside the Matador in front of Rudi and Tommy’s apartment building. We waited awhile, with Grandma looking more uncomfortable with each moment that passed.

Slowly, the front door of the building opened, and Rudi and Tommy stepped out, and they forced smiles at us as they hesitantly approached.

Grandma sneered at Rudi, and she shook her head. “Just look at her. She . . . I do not even know what she is.”

I really don’t 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 uttered, “Hi.”

Grandma didn’t respond, and I wasn’t sure we’d make it through lunch or even get there. But something happened that made this problem small.

“Jeeeewww!” howled a voice from behind us.

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, like he did whenever his Jewish looks got him unwanted notice. I had seen something like this happen to him more than once but never as bad as this. I could tell he wanted to make himself disappear.

I think all of us wanted to pretend it 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 now I think she was recalling 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 kept marching.

“You can’t change the world!” Tommy hollered.

“Just watch me!” she hollered back.

Rudi 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. “That’s my grandpa you’re laughing at.”

The driver didn’t even wait for the light to change. He sped through it. He sped through the next one too.

“Not much of a Nazi, I would say,” Grandpa whispered to Grandma.

She didn’t looked convinced. But we did make it through lunch. We even made plans for a Sabbath dinner the following week.

I grabbed that night’s journal entries off the table, along with the envelope, and I said goodnight to Rudi and headed toward the dorm.

But I stopped cold when I saw Josh exiting the dining hall with one of the cartons of ribs we had brought inside. He carried it out of the shelter to the back of his red pickup truck outside the gates, where lay many similar cartons. It was packed with them.

After tossing the carton next to the others, he 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 smiled 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 headed out the gates while realizing that the gift we had received and all the effort made by many to make it happen was for nothing.

Which was when that pesky “moral code” began gnawing the inside of me.

I still needed a bus pass for the next day.

Not only did I have to wait for Josh to finish carrying out the cartons, I had to wait for him to return from wherever he took them. All this made that gnawing grow into something stronger.

It was well past three when Josh led me into the room with the vault.

He opened it to get the passes, and I saw a passport inside it.

“Is there a problem?” he growled as he offered me a pass.

I didn’t answer. I just grabbed the pass and hurried off so I couldn’t.

the seventh night

I woke before dawn.

It wasn’t the waves of darkness that woke me or the demons pushing me into the floor. I realized that I hadn’t felt them in days and didn’t know why. I couldn’t make sense of it.

I think it was because, unlike 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 there, and I could tell she was upset. So I sat across from her and asked her what was wrong.

She didn’t reply.

A woman named Zara stopped in front of us and smiled at Allison. “I heard you got a job at Amazon. Congratulations.”

Allison didn’t reply to her either.

“Josh said he could help me get a job there too,” the woman went on.

Allison frowned, and she picked up her coffee cup and cigarettes and sulked off.

“It’s all gone,” Mitchell told a bunch of guys sitting in a booth a few steps away. “All the ribs and all the steaks we carried into the freezer last night. Every one of those cartons. Someone stole them all.”

The entire booth turned to Jerry, who lifted his sweatshirt and said, “Where could I put them?”

Matt shrugged. He shrugged like he’d been expecting the food would be stolen. “So much for that Christmas dinner.”

“The only thing they left was the fruit and vegetables,” Mitchell added.

Phil smirked. “They must’ve been thinking of our health.”

Everyone laughed, including me. I guess we were like those creatures in Whoville that woke to empty houses on that famous Christmas morning. It didn’t matter that the Grinch had stolen our gift. It really was the thought that counted, and this was something not even Josh could steal.

I was power-washing the sidewalks outside the motel when Matt and one of the cleaning women walked by.

They were talking about the company Christmas party that was happening the following week. They’d 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, like it was 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.

“Hey,” came an accented voice from behind me.

I turned around, and I saw 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 to minimum wage.”

I giggled.

“Happy Chanukah,” he said with another of his smiles as he patted me on the shoulder and walked off.

The 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 to understand why I wasn’t happy when I noticed a pair of drifters inside a nearby room, who were breaking open the seal that kept the windows permanently closed.

One by one, they started tossing their things outside, probably to avoid the reception area and something waiting for them there.

It was pathetic, but I wondered if watching them was more so.

I approached the shelter in the setting sun and saw an ambulance race from it.

Hurriedly, I stepped inside the gates and up to Hank, and I asked him what had happened.

“Jennifer had a stroke,” he said. “Just like that. One moment she’s talking with some people in a booth 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. With no car anymore, he couldn’t even get to the hospital.

That’s how it often is for homeless people. The badness just climbs on top of each other.

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. But I couldn’t do this right away, as I learned that I had “volunteered” for street showers.

Two nights a week, we let people living on the streets come inside the shelter for a shower. Most had been clients of the place at one time, who’d been kicked out for various reasons. Instead of moving on, they camped out in the alley by the gates or a little down it behind Starbucks.

I never understood what kept them there. Maybe it was because they had nowhere else to go. Or maybe it just didn’t matter where they went. One of these people even volunteered at the shelter. I’d always see him helping with lunch whenever I was around. His name was Ben and was once a lawyer. He still kind of looked like one under the decay.

My job that night 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 how they already were, was anyone’s guess. Certainly no one could explain it to me.

Like the drifters I had earlier seen escaping the motel, these people were pathetic. But like them, they weren’t as pathetic as me.

Trying not to face this, I positioned my chair in their general direction and took out Tommy’s letter, and I called Rudi.

Knowing we would likely come upon some of the more difficult parts of the story, I asked her if she was ready. But I think I was readying myself.

I rang the doorbell as my grandparents and I waited outside Tommy and Rudi’s apartment, and I noticed that Grandma didn’t look any more excited than she had the last time we met Rudi. But she wasn’t grimacing, and I took this as a hopeful sign.

The door swung open, along with the aroma of challah and potato knishes baking in the oven, and an anxious Rudi let us inside.

While Tommy and Flutter greeted my grandparents, I followed Rudi as she hurried toward the kitchen and the big pan of kasha cooking on the stove. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

She stopped and spun back to me in exasperation. “I can’t get the matzo balls right.”

Loudly, Grandma sighed, and she turned to Rudi. “How did you prepare the chicken fat?”

“They’re vegetarian matzo balls.”

“In chicken soup?”

“Parsley soup.”

The shock of this almost sent Grandma to the floor. She had to grip the sofa with both hands as she gasped, “Vegetarian matzo balls in parsley soup?”

Glancing at Grandpa, she added, “Have you ever heard of such a thing?”

“Just now,” he deadpanned.

Grandma hissed at him, and she waved him off with both hands before taking hold of Rudi by the arm and leading her into the kitchen. “Let us see what we can do.”

“At least, Gertie,” Grandpa called out to her, “at least you will not have to worry about eating something unkosher.”

“Gertie?” Rudi muttered. “Your name is . . .”

“Gertrud,” Grandma told her.

“So I’m . . .”

“You have apparently been named after me.”

I was hoping this revelation would make a crack in the frost, but the two wouldn’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 wouldn’t be the best matzo balls 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 she was the most nervous of all. Her hands were shaking.

Lighting the candles was easy. So was waving the spirit of their light into her home with her hands. 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 the quiet that rumbled through the room in response to it.

This lead Rudi to turn to us. “That bad?”

No one answered, but “bad” couldn’t’ve been the word on any of our minds. Though Grandma did look pained. It was all over her face.

Noticing this, Rudi put down the scarf, and she stepped up to the woman and asked her what was wrong.

“Your voice,” Grandma yelped with her head shaking, “it, it is just like your mother’s.”

The two stared at each other. They kept this up until Grandma broke down and grasped Rudi.

Rudi didn’t react. She just stood there.

“I miss her so much,” Grandma mumbled as she started to cry.

It took a few seconds, but Rudi put her arms around the woman as she tried to hold back her own emotions. “I miss her too. I don’t want to, but I do.”

“She never could let herself be a part of us.”

Rudi smiled. From what she’d 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.’’”

Grandma cried even more, and she gripped Rudi harder and replied with a quote from the same verse. “‘And not even death shall separate us.’”

We were so stuffed after dinner that none of us could move. Especially Flutter, who was sprawled out on the floor.

Finally, Rudi stretched her arms, and she said, “Grandpa, I want to hear the rest of your Kafka story.”

“*Oy vey!”* Grandma shrieked. “Do not get him started. You will never get him out of your house.”

Everyone laughed, especially Grandpa. But he wasn’t going to let an opportunity like this slip from his grasp. So, after he filled Tommy in on the beginning of the story, he brought it to an end.

“Brod!” Hašek yelled as he followed the man down the hospital corridor.

Hermann knew none of this was his business. But he couldn’t help peek into the hallway, where he saw Hašek racing after Brod in his wheelchair.

“If you don’t stop,” Hašek cried out while panting for air, “I will follow you to Prague. I will haunt you to your last days if I have to. I swear I will!”

Brod slowly came to a halt, but he didn’t turn around as Hašek rolled up to him and stopped.

Awkwardly, Hašek lifted himself out of the chair, and he grabbed hold of Brod for balance and uttered, “What does Kafka want you to burn?”

Brod didn’t answer. So Hašek shook him. He shook him and howled, “Answer me!”

“His novels,” Brod answered.

“Novels? He has written novels?”

Brod nodded.

“Are . . . are they like his stories?”

“Better.”

“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. “What gives you the right?”

“Me?” gasped 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.”

“No.”

“The greatest writer Prague has known, and you’d turn his poetry into ash? You’d be damned. For such crime there can be no absolution!”

“Let go of me!”

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 that screaming about?” Kafka asked.

Hermann turned from the man. “I really can’t say.”

Hašek came back to the room, and he glared at Kafka. He glared as he slowly rolled his wheelchair toward him.

“What was that all about?” Kafka demanded.

“I don’t see how it’s any of your concern,” Hašek growled, and he turned and started toward his bed. But he didn’t go far. He came to a stop with his back to both men and without saying a word.

“Is something wrong?” Kafka asked.

Hašek didn’t answer. He just lowered his head.

“Did you hear me?” Kafka asked next, a little louder.

“You are looking at a jealous man, Herr Kafka,” Hašek mumbled.

“I don’t understand.”

“When I told you the other day that I had read some of your stories, I lied.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve read them all. Every single one. I still have them stacked in my home. You see, I’m jealous of you, of your talent and accomplishments.”

“Me?”

“I wish I could write like you, that 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. “I 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 me.

“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 because 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 . . . I loved every page. Every single 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 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 giving him the colonel’s stolen 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 do you know that Max is preparing a German translation of it?”

“He is?” gasped Hašek.

“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 chubby face. “Don’t be so sure.”

All afternoon and into the evening Hermann tried to convince Kafka to go home with him.

“If you won’t live for others,” he said while gazing at the ceiling from his bed, “what about for yourself? Surely, you’d miss something.”

Kafka said nothing.

“I know what I’d miss,” Hermann went on with a smile as he crossed his arms. “The sun setting over the Vltava. I can’t imagine never seeing that again. More than that I’d miss the look of wonder in the eyes of a child when you tell them a story. I would’ve given anything to have seen that look in my own child’s eyes, even just once. Then, then there’s the kiss of a woman. You can’t tell me that you wouldn’t miss that.”

Kafka still said nothing. So Hermann gave up and went to sleep, consigned to leaving the following day without him.

In the middle of the night, Hermann woke, 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 son or daughter.

Hermann stretched his arms and yawned, and he grinned at the man. “I think I’ve found the best reason yet for you to live.”

Kafka ignored him and 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 Kafka hovering over him and dressed in a suit, with his open suitcase on his bed. “You better hurry,” the man told him. “There’s only one train out of here, and it leaves in an hour.”

At once, Hermann jumped out of bed. But he stopped cold when he noticed his night shirt. “My clothes.”

“I just sent Nurse Černá to get them.”

Hermann saw that Kafka’s copy of *The Metamorphosis* was lying on his own end table, and he pointed at it. “What’s this doing here?”

“Consider it a belated Chanukah gift.”

Hermann picked up the book and opened the cover, and he saw that it was inscribed to him. “Thank you, Herr Kafka. Thank you.”

Kafka was about to reply when he was interrupted by the screeching of wheels.

They both turned toward it and saw Hašek approaching them in his wheelchair.

The man came to a stop with a dour expression. “I was wondering if you gentlemen would do me the honor of accompanying 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, the one on the cliff overlooking the river, with Hermann a few steps behind them.

Hašek glanced downward, at both the staircase and the handful of people boarding the boat from the dock, and he shook his head. “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 gazing into Kafka’s eyes.

“See what?” Kafka asked.

“Your father.”

Kafka grinned, and the two started down the steps with their arms around one another. Together each complemented the other to the extent they appeared as one healthy body.

“Can I call you Franta?” Hašek wondered.

“You may,” Kafka answered.

“And you, you call me Jarda. That’s what my friends call me.”

The two reached the dock. Hašek paid Charon his fare, and Kafka helped him into the boat before it pulled away.

“You know what?” Hašek called out with his face beaming with 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.”

Grandma threw her arms toward the heavens. “Even Kafka must be tired of that story.”

Everyone laughed, especially Grandpa.

“Well, I liked it,” Rudi declared as she grabbed Tommy’s hand.

I could tell by the expression on her face that Grandpa had been right. The story did have meaning for her. Perhaps it had the same kind of meaning that that Black Flag record had had for Tommy.

I drove to Columbia one afternoon to help Rudi get Tommy’s things from his locker.

She and Maria were waiting for me outside the school, and we walked inside and saw the principal in the hallway with his back to us, talking to a group of six very angry women.

“All we are asking,” one of them howled, “is that you keep her out of school until we know more about this. You have an obligation to protect the students.”

“I’m not removing anyone based on innuendo,” the man calmly said. “I’m not even removing Mr. Goodwin. That’s not how this country works.”

“We’ll see if the Board of Education agrees.”

Another shouted, “We’ll take this all the way to Governor Kean!”

“Please give them both my regards,” the principal told them.

The women stormed off, and the man turned around and saw his daughter smiling at him.

“What?” he growled.

“Oh, Daddy,” she called out as she ran up and wrapped her arms around him.

“Maria, people are watching.”

“I don’t care.”

With a sigh, the principal put his arms around his daughter, and he noticed that Rudi was smiling at him too, and he couldn’t help smile back just a little.

Spring came and with it Tommy’s eighteenth birthday.

This would’ve been a big accomplishment for anyone, but for him it was especially big.

To celebrate it, Grandma cooked him 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 Rudi held a party for Tommy by the waterfall, after telling everyone the only gift they were to bring was themselves. I guess she recognized how difficult it would’ve been getting gifts for him.

What do you give someone who’s about to die?

I drove Tommy and Rudi and Flutter to the falls that afternoon, along with a cake Rudi had baked, a few boxes of Reservoir pizza, and some soda.

Owen and Eliot were already there. Then Jared and Beth came, and so did Maria. A motley bunch we were that day, sitting on the rocks in the sun while listening to a tape of Tommy’s favorite Yardbirds songs that Rudi had made.

While Tommy and Owen argued over whether Beck or Page was the better guitarist, I glanced at everyone. I glanced especially at myself. 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, even me.

The party ended early, and I helped Rudi carry everything back to the car, and she asked me to bring Tommy back from the falls as she said goodbye to Maria on Crest Drive.

I returned to the rocks, and I saw Tommy sitting on the edge of them next to Jared and Beth. They were 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 could be a reason,” Tommy said.

“What reason could there be for me to live and not you?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. What you’ve survived could give you a reason to do something you wouldn’t’ve done. Something big.”

We left the reservation and passed South Mountain Elementary School down the road from the woods, where Tommy noticed a sign. Reading Is Fundamental was having a readathon 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.

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

Rudi and I knew that Tommy was tired. It was why she ended the party early. But we couldn’t refuse him on his birthday. So I drove down a steep hill to the large blacktop behind the school, where dozens of children were waiting along with a handful of adults, who were organizing everyone into groups.

Not surprisingly, most of the adults looked frightened when they caught a glimpse of Rudi. But what was surprising was how the kids weren’t. 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, and they liked Flutter and the matching spiked collars the two had on.

“Be gentle,” Rudi told the children as they encircled the dog and petted her. “She’s been through some rough times.”

The kids took heed. They treated her like their own.

All three of us headed reading groups on the field below the blacktop, as did many others. But Rudi’s was the largest and got the most attention. The kids in hers 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.

Like she had with Owen, I bet she was repaying a debt that afternoon, for when that librarian took the time to teach her how to read. But what I remember is how she made reading something magical for those kids. She bestowed upon them a secret wand that opened worlds in front of them, as many as they could imagine. The wonder I saw on their faces will never leave me.

All day 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.

The sun started to fall, and the organizers of the readathon had to shut it down, sending 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, she had been the most frightened person there, but now she had a big smile on her face.

She wasn’t the only one. Rudi smiled all the way to the car.

It seemed Tommy stayed healthy in the months that followed, and he stayed out of the hospital. There were days I couldn’t tell he was sick or could easily pretend it. I could pretend these wonderful days, the best I’d ever know, would last forever.

But there were things I couldn’t see about Tommy and would only learn from his journal. They still hadn’t given his disease a name, at least one everyone could agree on, and there were no treatments for it. All Dr. Kleinsten could do was 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 it that I never knew about the lesions or the makeup.

Rudi’s care didn’t end with this. She’d often have to change their bedsheets in the middle of the night because of all the sweating Tommy would do. Sometimes she’d do this two or three times a night. What’s more, she had to nurse him through every cold and sickness, no matter how small, as any one could’ve been fatal.

A big reason I never knew about all this was that 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 their troubles, Tommy and Rudi developed the kind of everyday routines that any couple would have.

This included taking long walks into the woods with Flutter. “The beautiful afternoons of normal,” Tommy would call them, where they would argue about everything. They even argued about the weather. There was nothing they could agree on, but it never mattered to him because there was never a moment with her that hinted of dull, especially when she was holding his hand.

They also went to Dr. Kleinsten’s office every week, where they’d go over his condition and get the latest test results and prognoses. No matter how depressing this got, Rudi would always find something positive.

Then one afternoon 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.”

To Tommy, a hospice sounded good. He was tired of fighting the disease, and he wanted to ease Rudi’s burden. He wanted her to have a life outside of taking care of him.

But Rudi would have nothing of it. “We’re not giving up. We’re not.”

Another of Rudi and Tommy’s routines was spending their Saturdays at Vintage Vinyl, where they’d bring lunch and listen to records all day with Butch.

They didn’t just listen to records they liked. Some days they’d pick a bunch at random and listen to them the whole way through. They listened to records they never would’ve 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.

On other days the three would binge on the British imports Butch would get just because he liked the name of the bands. Among these was a single from a then obscure group that got Rudi so excited that she called me and howled, “You gotta hear this. The guy sings, he sings like he means everything he says.” She afterward put the phone to the record, and I heard “Hand in Glove” and the voice of Morrissey for the first time.

The two also listened to that Coltrane album I had seen there before. Tommy noted how the music blew him away. But he said it was nothing compared to the poem Coltrane wrote in the liner notes and which he played his saxophone to in the record’s final movement. Two lines of it, in particular, grabbed him and wouldn’t let go.

*God breathes through us so completely . . .*

*So gently we hardly feel it . . .*

Rudi and Tommy didn’t spend all that time at Vintage Vinyl just for the music or even the poetry. A big reason they went was for Butch, who’d make them laugh all day long. This was possible because Butch 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.

Not all Rudi and Tommy’s days were filled with laughter or music.

Through his bedroom window one morning, Tommy watched the leaves of fall drop from the trees. He watched them into the afternoon and was still watching them in the darkness as Rudi stepped through the door.

That summer, she graduated high school, and 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 late.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He wouldn’t tell her. He just kept staring into the window, even after she helped him out of his chair and into bed.

She joined him, and she wrapped her arms and legs around him, and she whispered, “Tell me. Please tell me.”

He shook his head, but she kept pressing, and he relented. “I realized today, I realized I’d never see the leaves grow again.”

Tommy woke with the sun in the morning. He woke with surprise, coming not only from Rudi’s absence but from all the pots in the room. They were everywhere, filled with young and green and growing life.

Bringing one of the last inside the room was Rudi, who was filthy, having spent most of the night hauling the plants from a nursery down the road. Tommy could tell, too, that she was exhausted. But she refused to show it.

“It’s spring,” she told him with her face beaming. “It will always be spring.”

Rudi often had to work on Saturdays. On one of these, I drove Tommy to Vintage Vinyl in her place.

As we stepped out of the car with a pizza, I noticed how thin he had gotten, especially in the face, and I realized that was probably why he was always wearing a 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 and was on display to the whole world as we stepped into the almost empty store.

“You got the new DKs album,” I blurted out the moment I saw it in the stacks.

“Go ahead,” Butch told me with a nod 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,” he mentioned.

“Me too,” I mentioned back while putting the recordon the player and the needle on top of it.

“Him too,” Tommy said with a grin as the sounds of the Dead Kennedys filled the store. You could tell it was them from the first chord. “The thing is I don’t know what to get her, and he’s no help at all.”

“Well, don’t look at me,” Butch groaned after he put down his slice and swallowed. “There’s a reason why I’m single.”

“But you guys like the same things.”

“Except you.”

“Come on, if you were having a birthday and could have anything you wanted, what would it be?”

Butch didn’t need a second to answer this. “To see Bad Brains live.”

“They’re good?”

“They’re good,” I confirmed.

“Do they play at that A7 place?”

“They usually play at CBGB when they’re up here,” Butch told him. “But I think they just left town.”

“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? They’re also in LA.”

Tommy meekly pointed at the record I was playing. “Them?”

“San Francisco.”

Tommy sighed. “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 there, and he pulled out a bunch of papers and placed them on the counter.

I noticed how one made Tommy’s face shine.

Rudi dragged herself into her apartment after a long day of work. She did only to find Tommy dragging her back out.

“Where are we going?” she whined when he led her into the corridor.

“You’ll see,” he insisted as she shut their door 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.

Rudi resisted. “I’m really beat.”

“You won’t be,” he insisted, and 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.

As tired as she was, she grinned. “What’s going on?”

He grinned back. “There’s only one way to find out.”

The limousine crawled its way through traffic in Lower Manhattan before coming to a stop beside a parked car not far from CBGB.

Rudi glanced out the window. “Why are we stopping here?”

Tommy answered by pointing to a flyer on the wall that revealed Richard Hell was performing that night.

“Happy Birthday,” he whispered.

She responded first with shock. Then she started kissing him. She kissed him again and again and wouldn’t stop.

*kisses are a better fate than wisdom*

Tommy recalled the words of the poet, the ones he had heard coming out of that classroom on the day he met Rudi. He recalled, too, 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 played.

“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 that made Rudi look conservative.

“Leila?” Rudi howled in surprise, and she grasped the woman.

“Where have you been?” Leila screeched as she grasped Rudi back. “We haven’t seen you anywhere.”

“Busy. I’ve been busy.”

The two let go of one another, and Rudi said hello to the others.

Grabbing Tommy’s hand, she introduced him, leading to some uncomfortable gazes, as Tommy didn’t fit in with them any more than Rudi had with anyone he knew. But he didn’t take it personally. He forced a smile and turned to Rudi. “I’ll meet you by the stage.”

“I’ll go with you,” she told him.

“Stay with your friends.”

“But . . .”

He nodded toward a door. “I gotta go to the bathroom anyway.”

Tommy was burning up when he entered the graffiti-covered men’s room. He was so sick that he had to lean against a wall, and he slid all the way down it to the floor and didn’t know if 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 said.

“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 the coast, all the way to hell. We’re leaving right after last call. 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 think of only one thing.”

“It’s got something to do with that guy, doesn’t it?”

“It’s got everything to do with him.”

“Who is he anyway?”

“I told you, his name is Tommy.”

“Yeah, but *who* is he?”

“The boy I love.”

“The boy you what?”

“He’s what gets me through the night.”

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 while realizing something.

For a long time, he had thought he needed Rudi much more than she needed him and that their relationship was one-sided. But after hearing what she told Leila, he started doubting this, and it didn’t make him happy. It scared him knowing that he wasn’t going to be around for long. It scared him so much that it put him into a daze.

He only came out of it 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. Not really. We just like all the same music and hate all the same things. That doesn’t make you a friend.”

Slyly, Rudi smiled. She smiled and started singing to him. “*You are my friend.*” She sang it just like Patti LaBelle had on the record the two unexpectedly came to love. She then put her head on his chest and added, “You’re my friend even though you don’t like all the same music or hate all the same things. You’re my friend in spite of it.”

Reaching up to touch Tommy’s face, she felt how hot it was, and it caused her to jump up. “You’re sick, Tommy. We’ve been through this over and over. You gotta tell me when you’re sick.”

“I’m fine,” he whined.

“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!”

“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. 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,” the song that helped two lonely people see that they weren’t so alone. Tommy wrote that, as Hell sang of the thoughts and feelings that marked the decade of our youth, probably for the millionth time, if only he had glanced into the crowd, he might’ve seen the two nearby, with their arms and bodies entwined and 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 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 nook I came upon a thin hardcover book that caught my attention. A first edition of *The Metamorphosis*.

“It can’t be,” I muttered as 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 in Grandpa’s Kafka story, but I had always been sure that it was well underneath it. Now I wasn’t so sure.

I came to Tommy’s room with a big stack of books in my arms.

Rudi was lying next to him on the bed, below the drawing hanging on the wall of a boy who longed for something he couldn’t see. She was also reading aloud from *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.

Rudi giggled. “You’re a bad liar.”

He giggled back. “So I’ve been told.”

I knocked on the door, and they turned and greeted me, just as a thick copy of *The Master and Margarita* began slipping from my grasp.

Stumbling off the bed with her book, Rudi sat in a chair beside it, in front of a bureau and the box of Reservoir pizza that was on top of it along with some Cokes. While I put my books next to another stack on the bureau on the other side of Tommy’s bed, Rudi pulled out a fresh slice of pie and tried to feed it to Tommy.

Despite all the weight he was losing, he wouldn’t eat it. He grimaced and shook his head, and he turned toward me.

I gazed at the old stack. “You done with these?”

He nodded, and I noticed a copy of *Ficciones* under the pizza box and pointed at it. “What about the Borges?”

He shook his head.

“You’re telling me you can get through Boccaccio and Potocki in a couple of days but can’t finish that little book in more than a week?”

“I can’t stop reading it.”

“What so special about it?” wondered Rudi.

“I’ll show you,” he said as he weakly reached for the book.

She put down her pizza, and she grabbed the paperback and gave it to him.

Slowly, he flipped through the pages, and he found the story he wanted. “This is my favorite, ‘The Secret Miracle.’”

“That’s Grandpa’s favorite too,” I let them know. “He reads it every year on the anniversary of his first wife’s death.”

“It’s set in Prague,” Tommy said to Rudi, “like he was.”

“What’s it about?” she asked as she took the book from Tommy and glanced at the story’s first page.

“This playwright during World War II. The Nazis arrest him and sentence him to death, and he’s really upset about it.”

“I should think so.”

“But he’s not upset about dying. 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, 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. And this is where the magic happens. 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 see it or know about it. It’s enough he knows that he’s done something great, and he gets to die happy. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Rudi shrugged as she lowered her eyes in disappointment. “I guess.”

Tommy turned to me and smirked. “She’s not much of a believer, no matter how often her nose is in that Bible.”

Rudi became angry. She rose from her seat with the book clutched in her fist. “How could I believe in a God that would let this happen?”

Not waiting for an answer, she rushed out of the room. I don’t know if she even realized the book was still in her hand.

Happily, Tommy stared into the empty doorway. “I already have my opus. My reason for being.”

I stayed with Tommy late into the night. I stayed with him until he fell asleep.

For hours we discussed the books he had just read. He had so much enthusiasm for them that I felt guilty for taking them for granted. I felt guilty for taking many things for granted.

Leaving the room, I saw Rudi sitting on the floor outside his door, staring into the Borges book.

“You all right?” I mumbled.

She didn’t reply.

I sat next to her and noticed she was gazing at the last page of “The Secret Miracle.”

“Did you read it?” I whispered.

She shook her head but not at my question. “It’s not a story. It’s not fiction. It’s not.”

“That’s his style. All his writing reads like that, like he were making an authentic and objective observation.”

“No, it’s true. Every word.”

I didn’t know what to say. 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 cried and leaned her head on my shoulder, and I wanted to cry with her.

I woke before dawn.

As I rose to my waist, I heard 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 told her. “Every day they humble me.”

I wasn’t too shocked hearing the two, despite how early it was.

They had become close after that Sabbath dinner. It seemed 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.

“How are you holding up?” Grandma asked.

“I’m fine,” Rudi insisted.

“You forget that I raised your mother. You lie as badly as she did.”

Rudi didn’t reply right away, and I could almost hear her gasping for breath. “What am I gonna do? What am I gonna do when he’s gone?”

Grandma took many seconds before answering. “You are going to live, that is what you are going to do. You are going to live big. You are going to live so big that when the two of you meet again, when you meet again for good, he will be proud of you. You will be proud of you.”

They must’ve hugged, because they didn’t say another word for a long time, until Grandma mentioned, “You are still grating the potatoes too fine.”

“*Sakra!”* Rudi cried out in exasperation.

“You speak Czech! Did your mother teach you?”

“My brother.”

“Oh, do not learn it from him. He mangles it almost as much as your grandfather. I will teach you. I will teach you all its poetries. It is so beautiful that people do not speak it. They sing it.”

“What’s that music you’re listening to?”

“Dora Gerson. My first husband and I, we would drive to Berlin all the time just to hear her sing.”

“It’s wonderful.”

“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 is she singing about?”

“Times that can never return.”

The two started dancing. I could hear their footsteps on the linoleum floor and 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 it.

“What’s wrong, Grandma?” Rudi murmured.

“They burned her,” she called out with her voice breaking more. “They burned her at Auschwitz. But they could not burn that voice. Listen to it. It outlives them all.”

I left my bedroom, and I heard Rudi and Grandma putting on their coats in the foyer.

As I reached the landing, I saw Grandma reach into her purse.

Pulling out a check, she offered it to Rudi and said, “Your grandfather and I want to give this to you.”

Rudi looked at it and shook her head. “We’re doing fine. Really.”

“Why will you not let me spoil you just a little?”

Rudi smiled. “You’re already spoiling me, with the one thing I need.”

Grandpa and I came to Tommy’s room, looking to pick Rudi up for lunch, and we saw Tommy gazing at the copy of *The Master and Margarita* in his hands.

He put down the book and nodded down the hall. “She’s visiting Gary.”

“How did you like it?” Grandpa asked while pointing at the book.

“It says Bulgakov spent twelve years writing it.”

“He could not get it published while Stalin was alive. So he just kept writing and writing it. That is why it is so great, if you ask me.”

“What do you think motivated him to keep going?”

“Maybe it was the woman he based Margarita on.”

Gary was one of Rudi’s clients.

We came to his open door and saw a tallish man with a thin reddish beard, who seemed to have all the same tubes coming in and out of his body that Tommy had.

He turned toward us, and so did Rudi, who said, “I’ll be ready in a minute.”

She introduced us, and Grandpa held out his hand to the man.

Gary didn’t shake it. Instead, he glanced at Rudi with apprehension and muttered, “Does he know about me?”

“I know all I need to know,” Grandpa answered with a smile and his hand still out.

Gary smiled back, and he shook Grandpa’s hand. He shook it for a long time.

“Is that a dominoes set?” Grandpa wondered as he nodded at the bureau behind Gary.

Gary turned to it. “Yeah. Unfortunately, it’s a lost art. No one knows how to play.”

“I love dominoes.”

“Would you like to play?”

A funny thing happened. Grandpa started showing up at the hospital a lot.

He spent this time not just with Gary but with all the AIDS patients. He became something of a surrogate grandfather to them, especially to those like Gary who’d been shunned by their own families. Grandpa was always there with a kind word, and he would play board games with them and bring them little gifts, just like any grandpa. Most importantly, he listened to them, and he never judged.

In return, Grandpa got a receptive audience for his endless detective stories. More than that he got purpose. No longer did he spend his afternoons in front of a TV, and never again did I hear him listen to Pergolesi.

There was one patient immune to Grandpa’s charms. His name was Tony, and he wouldn’t respond to anyone or anything. It was like he was already dead and was just waiting for his body to acknowledge it.

But Grandpa refused to give up. He would sit next to him and tell him his stories, sometimes all afternoon. Finally, he told him the story he almost never told, of Ana’s death, and he cried himself to sleep.

Grandpa woke to a loud thud. It came from a tray that a nurse had dropped in shock when she entered the room.

Turning to Tony, Grandpa saw that he hadn’t been the only one crying. Tears were streaming down Tony’s face. He couldn’t stop them.

“How?” the nurse muttered while shaking her head and pointing at the man.

“I suppose,” Grandpa told her, “I suppose not even this terrible disease can rob you of what makes us all human.”

With the sun disappearing in Tommy’s window, Rudi walked into the hospital room carrying another box of Reservoir pizza.

Almost every day she brought him one. She brought it that day even though she knew he was connected to a feeding tube, in addition to those that helped him breathe and get fluids. She brought him the pizza because it was one of the few things that still connected him to his old life and being alive.

Staring at him in the doorway, she saw him staring at a bureau and the simple metal menorah on top of it that the rabbi had left for him earlier.

“It’s gonna be Chanukah in a few days,” he said to her after she didn’t say a word, 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 smirked as he continued to stare at the menorah. “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. So the oil in the Temple burned for eight days. What’s the big deal?”

Slowly, he turned his head toward Rudi. “But I get it now. The miracle wasn’t the oil lasting 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 said nothing, and he could see the glazed-over look in her eyes as his words sank in.

Despite how sick and weak he was, Tommy insisted on spending Chanukah at home.

From the way his story had begun, I bet he was curious as to what would happen during the replay of it.

I, too, was curious. But Tommy only made one small entry during the holiday.

*Chanukah was different this time, and I got a better* *gift. But Rudi’s not telling me something*.

“What does this mean?” I asked Rudi while gaping into the page.

“I don’t know,” she insisted.

“What was it that you weren’t telling him?”

“I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“What was the gift you gave him?”

“I don’t remember anything special, not just the gift but the entire holiday.”

I didn’t believe her, not a word, but I kept reading.

Tommy returned to the hospital soon after Chanukah.

I staggered toward his room with a trio of thick tomes from an unabridged edition of Burton’s translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*. I could barely carry them.

As I stepped through the door, I saw Tommy sealing a thick and blank envelope.

I nodded at it. “You want me to mail that for you?”

He shook his head with a grin. “I’ve got it.”

Lifting the books I had brought as best I could, I said, “This should hold you for a while.”

The telephone rang. So I put the books on the bed and walked over to the phone, where I saw an oversized book beside it.

It was a bilingual volume of the Talmud, a collection of teachings on the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. It tries to apply what is written in the books to answer questions that aren’t so easily answered, such as “why does God allow suffering?”

The book confused me, as it hadn’t come from my grandparents’ library, nor had Tommy expressed an interest in reading it. It certainly wasn’t the type of easy reading he enjoyed. It was anything but.

“Hello?” I spoke into the phone.

“It’s me,” Rudi answered. “I had to work late, and I missed the last bus. I hate to ask . . .”

“I’ll be right there.”

I stepped out of the elevator into the hospital lobby, and I saw Rabbi Orenstein in the distance, sitting on a sofa next to a middle-aged woman who had her dirty-blonde hair tied in a bun.

I started toward them, wanting to say hello to the man.

“I told you I’d keep it a secret,” he softly said to the woman. “But I really don’t think I should.”

“How is he doing?” the woman asked while feigning disinterest.

“As good as can be expected. Fortunately, Rudi—”

“—I don’t want to talk about her or even hear about her.”

“But I really think you should.”

The woman shook her head.

“I’ll admit that she’s hard on the eyes,” the rabbi went on. “But underneath that . . . I’ve been a rabbi now for many decades and see sick people and their families all the time, yet never have I seen anyone as devoted as that young lady.”

“She probably feels guilty,” the woman growled.

“Guilty?”

“She’s the one who did this to my son, by bringing him into the gutter with her.”

I stopped behind them and 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 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 understood how she got her job. She certainly couldn’t’ve 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 many people 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 these young men, men who had lost all hope, despite 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’d just hold their hands or hug them. She’d try to make them feel that they mattered and were loved.

That evening, even in the darkness, I could see that the months of doing this job, along with all the time she’d spent taking care of Tommy, were weighing on her. She looked like she was about to fall over.

Though as she stepped into the Matador, I noticed that part of the reason for this was that she was carrying a few of those oversized volumes of the Talmud.

She put these on her lap as I drove off.

I tapped the top book. “You know, there was a time when women weren’t allowed to read these books and not that long ago.”

“Those times are never coming back,” she said matter-of-factly.

“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 to Rudi as we drove down South Orange Avenue.

She tried to repeat it, but she got stuck on the “ř,” which has a sound that doesn’t exist in English or in almost any language. Even for some Czechs it’s difficult to say. 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.

She sighed. “Underneath the unpronounceable consonants and grammatical absurdity lies a big chunk of me.”

I think it was more than just about finding out who she was. I think Rudi once saw herself as a leaf blowing in the wind, and suddenly she noticed the roots. But she was still trying to figure out how to plant them.

“It’ll take you forever to learn Czech,” I uttered.

“It’s no harder than Hebrew,” she uttered back.

Surprised, I turned to the books in her lap. “Are you reading these in Hebrew?”

“It’s difficult enough getting at the truth, but when you’re not even reading the right words . . .”

We came to Reservoir, and I parked outside it so Rudi could pick up dinner for herself and Tommy.

“Just wait here,” she told me as I opened my door.

“Why?”

“Please.”

Reluctantly, I closed my door, and I watched her step inside the busy restaurant.

Right away, I saw why she didn’t want me to come with her. Many of the people working there were glaring at her. This included the old man in a poorly-fitting suit standing by the register with his arms crossed and the woman behind the counter, who dropped a pizza box onto it in front of her.

Rudi ignored this. 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.

Like on most nights, she stayed up late with Tommy so they could share their day of hopes and fears.

On this night, it wasn’t just them sharing.

“I can’t wait to meet her,” Rudi said into the phone while sitting next to Tommy and reading the Talmud.

As she listened to the reply, she turned the page and became upset. “I am going to college. I just want to be sure for what.”

Rudi glanced at Tommy, and she noticed that he wasn’t looking well. “I gotta go. I’ll talk to you next week.”

She hung up the phone. “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 murmured.

Sneering, Rudi put the book on top of the other volumes, and she took out a slice of pizza and tried to feed it to Tommy.

He moaned 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 groaned.

*Feeding tube*.

Just the mention of this was enough for Tommy to turn back to her and gobble down pie, as the tube made him feel more like a machine than human. He gobbled as much as he could.

But the words weren’t strong enough to keep the pizza down. He had to clench his eyes closed and force his body to obey, and he could feel the sweat pouring down his face and could feel his body shake.

Slowly, the misery subsided.

He took a long, deep breath, and he opened his eyes, and he saw that Rudi was holding his hand and looking more pained than how he felt. It was as if she were trying to take his pain. I know she would’ve taken it all if she could.

He struggled for words. “I, I don’t know why you go through all this.”

“Through what?” she asked.

“You could’ve just sent me a card. No one would’ve blamed you.”

Rudi became angry. It built and built on her face, and she glared at him. She looked as angry as she had when the two had it out.

Releasing his hand, she dropped the slice of pizza on top of the box and rose from her chair. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Realizing that she wanted to lie next to him on the bed, he wiggled his frame and slid to his left, careful not to let his IV come out.

She joined him. She put her arm around him, and he laid his head on her chest and gripped her hand.

For many seconds, she said nothing. It was like she was waiting for the courage.

“Don’t think I’ve done any of this for you,” she finally told him and as coldly as possible. “I did it all for me. I’m the most selfish person alive.”

Tommy smiled. He smiled and caressed her hand, and again she struggled for words. He could hear her gasping for breath.

Even after finding some words, she could barely get them out. “I was thinking today . . . I was thinking maybe I could change my look a little. Get some new clothes, a new haircut. I don’t know, maybe I could be, 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 told her. “A girl who was nobody but her. Nothing less would do.”

Again, Rudi gasped for breath, and she buried her head in his shoulder, I suppose to keep herself from crying.

While squeezing him with all her might, she muttered, “You . . . you’re my fairy tale.”

Grandpa and I stopped in front of Gary’s room, so the two could finish the dominoes tournament they had begun a few days before.

But Gary wasn’t there. Instead, Rudi was sitting on his bed with her arms around her legs and her apathy face full on.

“Where’s Gary?” Grandpa asked.

“He’s gone,” she told him.

“Gone?”

“He passed away last night.”

Slowly, Grandpa approached the bed.

He sat on it next to Rudi and put his arm around her. “I have seen so many friends and loved ones pass,” he said. “I wish I could tell you that it gets easier. But what I can say is, if these people remain in your thoughts, they never really pass.”

Rudi dropped her head on Grandpa’s shoulder. “He’s the third this month. I don’t know if I can keep doing this.”

“If you do not, who will?”

Soon Tommy lacked the energy to read. So we all took turns doing it for him.

Grandpa’s Kafka story had made him curious about *The* *Good Soldier Švejk*, so he asked me to tell it to him.

“‘Do you know, Švejk, what is a march battalion?’” I read from Grandpa’s cherished copy of the novel one 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’ll be joining me in a *maršbaťák*. But don’t think that on the front you’ll get to partake in the kind of stupidities you have here. Does that bring you joy?’

“‘I respectfully report, Lieutenant, sir, that it brings me tremendous joy,’ answered the good soldier Švejk. ‘It’ll be something truly wonderful when the two of us fall on the battlefield together for the emperor and his family.’”

Tommy and I laughed. We couldn’t stop.

Rudi peeked her head in the room, seeing not only this but Nurse Templeton checking Tommy’s vital signs, doing so without a mask or gloves.

Small and slight and 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 liked taking care of Tommy. She actually requested the assignment and became something of a personal nurse to him and many of the AIDS patients.

“Thank you, Kim,” Rudi mumbled 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 called *Pohádky Boženy Němcové*.

“What is it?” she asked.

“A collection of fairy tales. I know that’s not exactly your thing, but it’ll help you with learning—”

“—It’s exactly her thing,” Tommy interrupted with a grin, and Rudi grinned back with embarrassment.

“Up for some company?” she then asked Tommy.

“Sure,” he said.

My grandparents stepped inside the room, with Grandma carrying a casserole dish and saying, “You must be tired of hospital food and all that pizza. So we brought you some noodle kugel. Vegetarian, of course.”

The two walked over to him.

To make room for Grandma on the bed, Tommy moved over, 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 cleaned Tommy’s arm with it. “Blood can no longer frighten us.”

Nodding at Grandpa, 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 picking her up became a daily ritual. Part of this included getting a pizza at Reservoir and all the unpleasantness that came with it and never once let up.

But on one gloomy night, the unpleasantness was brightened a little.

Rudi collected the pizza at the counter, and she saw Rabbi Orenstein smiling at her from a table a short distance away. He smiled at her like she was his own child.

This wiped away all 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. Kleinsten, causing both of us to 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 said. She said it so softly that I could barely hear it.

“The Pneumocystis has gotten worse. Much worse. If, if you have any special plans . . .”

“Does he know?”

The doctor nodded.

“When? When will he . . .”

“Soon.”

Rudi turned around, and she started toward Tommy’s room, with me following close behind.

“I want you to know something,” the doctor called out as Rudi and I continued down the corridor. “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 coming from inside it.

We reached the doorway, and she said to me, “I’ll call you tonight.”

I nodded, and she started into the room. But she stopped herself and hugged me.

“I wish I knew what to say,” I told her as I tried to keep myself together, for her sake.

“You’re saying it.”

Tommy wrote of how he took the news the doctor had given him.

He took it better than Rudi. He had long expected it. He 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 finally end.

His only concern was Rudi, as the only pain after he died would be hers. All day he thought of some way he could ease it. But he could think of nothing.

Rudi slunk into Tommy’s room, and she noticed he was having trouble turning a page of the Borges book.

Noticing her, he put the book under the covers. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to hide it,” she told him. “Or be sorry for it.”

“I don’t want to upset you.”

“You can’t.”

“I bet I can.”

“How?”

“I talked to Him today.”

“Him?”

“You know, I thought I had everything I wanted. I really did. But today I realized there was something else. So I asked Him.”

“Asked Him what?”

“I asked Him . . . I asked Him if I could have you.”

“You already have me.”

“I mean later.”

Rudi froze. She couldn’t say a thing or even breathe, and she stared at him until a handful of words mumbled out. “What did He say?”

Tommy grinned. “He hasn’t gotten back to me yet.”

“He must be pretty busy,” she told him 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.”

Rudi looked for a response. She looked and looked and finally found one. “There are a few things I need to do right now. But you gotta promise me that you won’t go anywhere.”

“Go?”

“Just promise.”

He thought about it. He thought and thought and told her, “I love you.”

“I love you too!” she shouted as she rushed out of the room.

“Where you going?”

“You’ll find out!”

Tommy hoped she was right. He hoped all night.

I didn’t realize tears were falling down my face until I finished 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 for a long time.

“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 hung up, and I left the bathroom, and I could sense something was wrong. I didn’t know what it was, but I stood silently for many seconds.

“Another hundred,” came Josh’s voice from inside the women’s bathroom a few steps away. “Give it to me.”

“But you promised me fifty percent,” Allison pleaded.

“That was after expenses.”

“But . . .”

“You know,” Josh interrupted, with his tone soft but in control, “I could throw you out of here. 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.”

Right at this moment, I wanted to barge through the door and confront him. I even raised my hand to push the door open.

But the weaker part of me was stronger, despite the so-called “moral code” inside me.

So I 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 expected a long day of nothing.

But while I did get the long day, it was not what I expected, nor was it of nothing.

It began when I walked into the courtyard in the morning and found Nicole raging at a handful of people. “He was in the women’s room with her!”

“Did you see it happen?” Matt shot back.

“No, but Zara saw him follow her there. She heard them arguing.”

“Is she willing to file a police report?”

Nicole didn’t answer.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Allison left in the middle of the night,” Nicole said. “Because of Josh.”

“You don’t know that,” Matt barked.

“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. “Have you thought about that and what will happen to your kids?”

Nicole hesitated. But she started dialing a number.

“I heard them last night in the women’s room,” came my voice, or a voice that sounded like mine. But perhaps it was more like my sister’s. My perfected me. The one who’d brought light to my darkness. “He was threatening her, and he’s probably trafficking her. I also saw him steal the steaks and ribs.”

“Are you willing to file a police report?” Matt howled.

“I’ll file it.”

“You sure?” Nicole whispered.

“I’m sure.”

She called the police, and I turned to Matt, who shook his head at me.

Nicole and I waited outside the gates of the shelter for the police. We waited and waited.

I thought I’d get more reluctant the longer we did, especially when I thought about the consequences of what would happen. But I only felt better about it as time went on. I felt better about me.

Slowly, a police car pulled up in front of us, and a burly bald cop slowly got out of the vehicle and took my report.

“I need to speak to someone in charge,” he said.

Nicole pointed through the gates toward the office. “Dan. He’s the assistant director.”

The policeman went inside, and Nicole and I again waited. But we didn’t wait long.

“Well?” Nicole screeched when the man returned.

“This Josh has every right to be in the bathroom with the girl,” the policeman said.

“She’s not a girl! She’s over thirty!”

“He has every right to be there.”

“In the women’s room?”

“Even in the women’s room, if that’s where he has to carry out his duties.”

“He was threatening her, and he’s trafficking her. We have a witness!”

The policeman turned to me and glared. “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 or ribs 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.

I knew there was no point of saying any more, but something made me utter, “Josh has a record.”

The cop came to a halt, and he spun toward me. “How do you know he’s got a record?”

“I . . . I just know.”

“Do you know if there’s a warrant for his arrest?”

I shook my head. “There’s no warrant. But—”

“—Then you’ve got nothing.”

“He might be the accomplice . . .”

I couldn’t finish. This was because the cop had gotten in his car, and he took off.

Glumly, Nicole and I looked at each other, and we went back inside the gates, where I saw Matt scowling at me with his arms crossed. “Dan wants to see you in the office.”

I nodded. “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 who was taking notes, and he told me to take a seat in front of him.

I did.

“You have to leave,” he said. “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. I told him while trying to suppress a chuckle, and I didn’t do 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 hollered, and 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.

It didn’t take long to pack the things I had brought months earlier into the same grimy blue backpack I had also brought.

I’d accumulated other stuff since coming to the shelter, but I decided not to take it when I recalled the nifty Meister Eckhart saying my grandfather had told me when I left for college.

*The more we have, the less we own.*

Only now did I realize the opposite was true.

With the backpack across my shoulders, I went into the bathroom, where I glanced at myself in the big mirror.

I looked as thin and as old as ever, but my image wasn’t so rotting.

While I hadn’t exactly fixed the world or even my little piece of it, the trying of it had meant something. Maybe it was the same something that kept us Jews trying even at times when we’d make a mess of it.

I could still feel this something 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 believed that I had duped her into everything, and I was happy about that. She needed the place much 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?*

After two thousand years of waiting, Juvenal finally got his answer.

“Congratulations,” came Matt’s voice.

Nicole and I broke our embrace, and I turned toward Matt, who was trying to hide his “I told you so” face but wasn’t trying that hard. “You got thrown out and for nothing.”

“It wasn’t for nothing,” I insisted. “I satisfied my moral code.”

“Your what?”

“Do you know what Patrick Swayze told me?” came Phil’s voice from behind us.

I turned toward him. “What was that?”

“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.”

“I think it’s more like what your Uncle Lenny sang,” Matt told me as I turned back to him. “‘*Everybody knows the war is over. Everybody knows the good guys lost*.’”

“Everybody but me.”

“I’d really like to know where were all these ‘good men’ during the Holocaust and in Nanking. Or after that Prague Spring of yours. Or Tiananmen Square. Hell, the Khmer Rouge murdered millions of their own people in a country the size of Missouri, and who cared?”

“The Dead Kennedys did.”

Matt wanted to respond. But all that would come out was, “Now what are you going to do?”

“I think I’ll give Palm Springs a try. At least it’s warmer there.”

“And gayer.”

I smirked. “I could use a little gaiety. It is the season, after all.”

“What’s Amoun going to do?”

“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 and while owning more than I ever had, I walked through the gates and started down the alley.

“Enjoy the streets,” Josh called out from behind me.

Like with Dan, I wasn’t going to reply. I knew it wouldn’t’ve changed anything. But still I said, “Enjoy prison.”

“I’m not going to prison.”

I stopped and turned back to him. “Not today, and probably not tomorrow. But one day.”

Again, I started off.

“How can you be so sure?” he shouted.

“I have faith.”

The one good thing about getting kicked out of the shelter was that I was able to spend my money.

I walked to my bank and took a hundred dollars from the ATM, and this felt good. It was like I was a man again.

With the cash, I bought a prepaid debit card at Walgreens and used it to buy a train ticket to Palm Springs over the phone.

But there was only one train, and it didn’t leave until 4:30 the next morning. So I had a lot of time ahead of me.

With nothing better to do and no place better to do it, I started toward D Street and the Amtrak station at the end of town.

This was one of the more notorious places in the city. More than one person told me how people got rolled there all the time, often after getting 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 and many trees and canyons behind them, and I sat on the grass and soaked them in.

With the sun setting, I jumped to my feet. I did when I remembered that I hadn’t gotten Tommy’s last letter.

Hurriedly, I started to the shelter, but I stopped just as hurriedly.

Fearing that the letter might “go missing” if I went back and asked Josh for it, I made a call instead.

“I heard you got kicked out,” Jerry said.

“Yup,” I said back.

“The tentacles of the CIA reach far and wide.”

“You can say that again.”

“The tent—”

“—How’s that kleptomania of yours?”

Jerry handed me Tommy’s letter in front of Starbucks.

I thanked him and started off.

“I almost forgot,” he called out.

I stopped and turned around, and I saw him holding out a piece of paper. It was a copy of the receipt for all those cartons of steaks and ribs as well as the other food the restaurant donated the other day, with Josh’s signature at the bottom of it.

“I found it by your letter,” Jerry said with a smile. “You think someone might find it interesting?”

I smiled back, and I chuckled too.

“I also found these,” he added as he showed me a set of keys and shook them while nodding toward the parking lot.

I looked that way and saw Josh’s red pickup, with Billy sitting in the front seat.

“I’m taking him to see Jennifer,” Jerry told me.

“How’s she doing?” I asked while waving at Billy, who waved right back.

“I have a feeling that things are going to be turning around for them.”

Again, I started off, but I stopped myself and hugged Jerry. We hugged for a long time.

I returned to the station.

The sun had now fallen, bringing a darkness that would come in many ways.

The temperature fell with the sun, and the winds rose. As the station was closed, I had to sit on a bench in front of the tracks. Never had I felt so cold. It was 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 dark 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 were not 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 most predators in the desert, regardless of how many legs they have, feed off fear and need it to attack.

But this didn’t mean I’d been robbed of my sorrow. I felt this plenty, for all of us.

Time moved slowly that night, and it was made worse by checking it on my phone every few minutes.

Trying to break the monotony, I went into the 7-Eleven across the street to buy hot chocolate and snacks. I also counted the freight cars that would pass every ten minutes or so. I even listened to *A Love Supreme* on my phone.

But all this only made time move slower.

The monotony was finally broken when I noticed a man standing by the tracks a little down the way from me.

Unlike others I had seen that night, this man was no zombie. He had no crowbar and 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 I had seen many times in my own eyes. Only his was worse, and this did scare me. I was scared of becoming him, because I could tell right away what he wanted to do.

Another freight train approached in the distance.

As it got closer, the man turned back to the tracks and counted 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 to the other side, 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 but me, they must’ve thought I’d been the one who ran across the track, and they didn’t look pleased as they glared at me in the distance.

Warily, one approached, with his wariness increasing with each step.

But after checking my explanation and train ticket (and my record), the man’s demeanor changed. “Whoever it was put a real fright into the train’s driver,” he told me with a cackle as he pointed 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.”

Not replying to this, the policeman 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 and on. It was like watching an old Keystone Cops picture, a really bad one, as the police tried to herd and capture people who were well past either.

The chase wound down, and I remembered that I hadn’t called Rudi. So I took out Tommy’s letter and my phone, and I dialed her.

“I’m sorry to call you so late,” I said.

“Are you all right?” she wanted to know.

“Why do you ask?”

“What’s all that commotion?”

“Oh, it’s just some kids playing.”

I opened the envelope and pulled out the pages, and I began reading them to her.

With the sun burning brightly into his room through the open shades, Tommy kept drowsing off, no matter how 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 drift back into it.

“Hey,” came Rudi’s soft voice.

Tommy opened his eyes, and he saw her tired but smiling face peeking inside the doorway, and he noticed how she was looking like she was 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 he shut his eyes, and she said, “You can open them now.”

He did, and he watched Rudi strut inside the room carrying a paper shopping bag. He watched this with surprise, which came from what she was carrying in her other hand: the long train of the white wedding gown she was wearing.

Grinning at his surprise, Rudi put down the bag and showed off the dress while releasing the train.

“You’re wearing a dress,” he gasped.

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “It’s a one-time thing. So enjoy it while it lasts.”

The gown seemed familiar to Tommy. “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 was when she saw the state of her son. But she said what was 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 her smile became stronger. “Hello, Tommy.”

Tommy shook his head, unable to believe what he was seeing. “Mom?” he screeched as he opened his arms.

She rushed up and hugged him. “I’m so sorry, Tommy.”

“I’m the one who’s sorry.”

“I missed you.”

“I . . . I . . . how did this . . .”

Mrs. Goodwin let go of Tommy, and she turned to Rudi. “You were right about her. She is a lot like me. Hopefully, she’ll outgrow it.”

“How did this happen?” Tommy wanted to know. He wanted to know it 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 just as much. But she had no hesitation in approaching it. She marched to the door, where she took a deep breath and rang the bell while she prayed. 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 before looking away.

“Hi,” Rudi mumbled.

“Hello,” the woman said.

“Is Mrs. Goodwin home?”

Elizabeth shook her head, causing Rudi to feel all the air leave her. But she added, “I’m afraid she won’t see you.”

“Please, Tommy’s dying. He’s dying right now.”

“There’s nothing I can do.”

“Please.”

The woman thought it over. She thought it over with a face full of conflict. “All right, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you so much!”

“I’m not promising anything,” she told Rudi as she hurried off while leaving the front door open.

Rudi began hearing sounds, the muffled sounds of two women talking. They 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!”

The conversation came to an end, and 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?”

“Hi,” Rudi mumbled.

“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. “Why won’t you see him?”

“He’s made his bed, *literally*.”

Rudi shook her fists at the woman. “He got it from tainted blood! 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 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 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 . . .”

Mrs. Goodwin didn’t finish her thought. She spun back to her door and rushed 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.

“This is your last chance to say goodbye,” Rudi added, “your last chance to make it right. There won’t be another. Please, Mrs. Goodwin, hate me all you want, but don’t hate Tommy. He doesn’t deserve it.”

Silently, Mrs. Goodwin stood in the doorway. It didn’t look like she’d ever move.

Then she turned her head, and she stared at Rudi. She stared and stared before mumbling, “Let me get my coat.”

“There’s a favor I need to ask.”

Mrs. Goodwin hurried inside her house, followed by Rudi.

“You’re not wearing my dress,” the woman howled as she shook her head in a near constant motion. The idea of Rudi marrying her son was horrid enough but that she wanted to do so in her wedding gown was too much.

Rudi stopped in the doorway. “Mrs. Goodwin . . .”

Coming to her own stop, the woman spun toward Rudi, and she saw the desperation in her eyes. Which caused her to pause but not for long. “Don’t you see how outrageous this is?”

Rudi lowered her head. “I know. You have every reason to say no. I would.”

The woman turned back around, but she didn’t go anywhere. “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 nodded even though the woman couldn’t see it, and she followed her up the long and winding wooden staircase.

As Rudi 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.

Seeing how well the gown fit Rudi, and recalling the day she wore it, she found herself rising off the bed and stepping toward a drawer.

From this she grabbed a box of needles, and she knelt in front of Rudi and shortened the sleeves a little.

Suddenly, Mrs. Goodwin paused, and Rudi noticed how lost she looked. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“On my first date with Tommy’s father,” the woman murmured as she continued with the dress, “he took me to see *The Sound of Music* on Broadway. It didn’t seem like he was paying attention to it. Or to me, for that matter. It wasn’t exactly love at first sight.”

Rudi grinned. “I know how that is.”

The woman grinned back. “So you can imagine my surprise after we got engaged when he said he wanted me to have a dress 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, 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. “You’re so beautiful.”

Rudi shook her head, and she blushed some more. “Nah.”

“Don’t argue with your mother-in-law.”

The last word surprised Rudi. It was all over her face as she gazed at the woman in the mirror.

“At least not until after the honeymoon,” the woman went on. “That’s how it was with my mother-in-law. She was all peaches and cream until right after the honeymoon.”

Rudi’s eyes fell. “I guess I won’t have to worry about that.”

“What do you mean?”

Slowly, Rudi turned to Mrs. Goodwin, and she grabbed her as she started to cry. “There’s not gonna be a honeymoon.”

Not knowing what to do, the woman grabbed her back. “Please don’t cry. You’ll ruin your makeup.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Oh, well, I guess you can’t ruin it any more than it already is.”

Both women laughed. Loudly they laughed.

After breaking their embrace, they took each other’s hands, and Mrs. Goodwin nodded toward the door. “We better hurry. We’ve got a wedding to go to.”

The two women finished their story, and Rudi again put her hands on her hips as she took a step toward Tommy with a snarl. “So, are you gonna marry me or what?”

“You call that a proposal?” he stammered.

“It’s the best you’re gonna get.”

“We . . . we’d need a . . .”

Rabbi Orenstein entered the room. He looked like he had swallowed a whole flock of canaries as he took a juice glass from behind his back. “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 guests will be coming any minute,” Rudi interjected.

“Guests?” Tommy uttered next.

“What about music?” Mrs. Goodwin asked Rudi.

Rudi took her portable stereo from the shopping bag, and she placed it on the bureau next to Tommy and 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.”

Mrs. Goodwin shook her head. “Kids today.”

Wearing an itchy suit that the moths in my closet knew better than me, I stepped inside Tommy’s room with a big cake box just as the rabbi left so 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.

Smirking, 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 and slapped my arm, again almost sending me to the floor, along with the cake.

But she grabbed me and put her arm around me. “You’re gonna have to give me away today, big brother.”

“I don’t even know if Jews do that,” I told her, after chuckling at what she had called me. She calls me that 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 multilayered wedding cake. On top of it stood painted wooden figurines of a bride and groom, 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. But I should tell you . . .”

“Did someone say something about a wedding?” howled a voice from behind us.

We turned around and watched Butch strut inside the room wearing a Black Flag T-shirt with a blue tie around his neck.

Rudi hugged him. Though noticing a record in his hand, she pointed at it with annoyance. “What’s that?”

“A gift.”

“I told you, no gifts.”

“It’s not for you.”

Butch walked up to Tommy, and he handed him a copy of *Live Yardbirds: Featuring Jimmy Page*.

Tommy looked at it in surprise. “I’ve never heard of this.”

“It was only out for a week. It even includes some early Zeppelin songs.”

“Wow.”

“Now you have something to listen to when you get home.”

Tommy smiled. He smiled as he tried to keep himself together, and he took Butch’s hand with both of his. “Now I have something to listen to.”

Slowly, Grandma led Grandpa into the room by the arm, with Grandpa looking like he were anywhere but there.

Seeing Rudi in her dress, Grandma stopped and threw her arms into the air. “My sweet little girl!”

“No one’s ever called me that before,” Rudi quipped.

“You better get use to it, because I will be saying it a lot, and there is not a thing you can do about it.”

Rudi ran into her grasp, and they kissed each other’s cheeks, and Grandma choked on her words. “Perhaps you have none of my DNA, but you have all of my soul.”

Slowly, they released their arms, and Rudi turned to Grandpa and his daze.

“*Už jsme na Lucerně?”* he wondered, thinking he was at the dance hall in Prague he frequented as a young man.

“I’m afraid that this is not one of his good days,” Grandma said.

Rudi didn’t care. She clutched him and whispered, “Thank you, Grandpa, for giving me this day.”

While holding him tighter, she added, “*Mám tě strašně moc ráda*,” telling him in the language he loved just how much she loved him.

Tony wheeled himself into the room.

This Tony was much different than the one I first saw months earlier. Since his moment with Grandpa, never once did I see him without a smile. But never was it as wide or as tall as it was when he came up to Tommy that day and said, “I guess this means you’re off the market.”

Tommy laughed. “It looks so.”

“The best ones usually are.”

Mrs. Goodwin was somehow able to hire a photographer with no notice. He rushed into the hospital room with the tailor, who fit Tommy into a tuxedo under the watchful gaze of Mrs. Goodwin.

Nurse Templeton came next. She came even though it was her day off, and she brought some more of the men Rudi had helped raise up, who were there to return the favor.

Mr. Cross showed up too, with his wife.

Following them was the rabbi, who uttered, “Look who I found.”

Into the room walked a bashful Mr. Agnellino, with the big stack of pizzas in his arms.

Rudi approached them with surprise. “We didn’t order pizzas.”

“These are on me,” Mr. Agnellino told her.

“I don’t understand.”

The man put the pizzas on a nearby dresser, and he turned toward her and sighed. “You know, for a long time now, you have been coming into my restaurant. It seems like you come every day, and you buy a pizza from me even though everyone 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?”

Rudi glanced away.

“Then,” he continued, “then the other day Rabbi Orenstein, God bless his soul, he tells me who the pizzas are for. He also tells me all the wonderful things you’ve been doing for this poor . . . and, and I’ve never been so ashamed.”

Turning back to the man, Rudi shook her head. “Forget about it.”

“I won’t. 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 grin, but she couldn’t help herself.

“I want you to know something,” Mr. Agnellino added. “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 as she mumbled, “You’re staying for the wedding, aren’t you?”

He nodded.

“So, are we ready?” the rabbi asked.

Rudi couldn’t answer, because Maria rushed into the room in front of the man, alongside a small woman with auburn hair and glasses and a look of someone about to meet her in-laws for the first time.

Maria screamed her head off, and she flailed her arms and shook all over, and Rudi did much the same before the two flew into each other.

“I didn’t think you’d make it,” Rudi cried out.

“She drove so fast that I don’t even remember passing Delaware,” interjected her friend.

“It’s easy to miss,” Maria insisted.

In a place and time far from that day, I would reminisce about this moment and many others with Maria.

She never did become a playwright. After college, she moved to Hollywood to become a screenwriter.

Many years of struggle later, which included more than a few all-night calls with Rudi, she found success and became known for her strong female characters.

I ran into her once on Sunset Boulevard. Amid the heat and smog, she told 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 broke their embrace, and Maria pointed to the woman beside her. “This is Sandra.”

Rudi smiled and shook the woman’s hand. “It’s great to finally meet you. Thank you for coming to my wedding and on such short notice.”

“Thank you for inviting me,” Sandra said. “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 uttered. “Let’s get this on.”

“Wait for us!” came the voice of a boy down the corridor, along with his footsteps and others.

Eliot rushed into the room. He was a senior now and no longer looked so geeky. He looked like the confident man he was becoming. The one who’d go to Stanford and Silicon Valley, where he’d become an engineer and a high-tech entrepreneur.

“My favorite Quincy Punk!” Rudi yelled as she embraced 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. Later on, 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. She jumped into the arms of the man she had unexpectedly come to care about, and she kissed him on the cheek, causing him to blush.

Jared was the last to enter. He was premed at Seton Hall University down the road and would become a doctor. Working for a small missionary group, he’d spend his career traveling the world, giving care and comfort to anyone in need while making the most of the second chance he got.

Rudi hugged him the longest and hardest. I think because he, more than anyone else, knew all the conflicting feelings she must’ve been experiencing, of both happiness and doubt as to whether she deserved any of it.

Wiping her eyes, Rudi released her arms from Jared, and she turned to the rabbi. “We’re ready.”

The rabbi glanced around the room.

“Where do I begin?” he said to everyone after blinking at the flash of the photographer’s camera. “I’ve certainly never done a wedding like this. We have no *ketubah* or *chuppah*. We don’t even have wine.

“What we do have are two young people who love each other. Something I can more than 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 beside Tommy on the bed, rose, and Rudi took her place.

All of us crowded around them, and the rabbi gave Tommy a kippah.

As he struggled to put it on, the rabbi turned to Rudi. “You are Jewish? I’ve just assumed by your last name and your interest in the Talmud and Hebrew and . . .”

Rudi didn’t respond. I don’t think she could. 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.

Again, the rabbi glanced around the room. “I realize that this is all rather un—”

“—She’s Jewish,” Mrs. Goodwin interrupted before putting her hand on Rudi’s shoulder, which was just before Rudi put her hand on top of hers.

The rabbi was still hesitant.

“She is our granddaughter,” Grandma called out, causing the rabbi to spin toward her and Grandpa. “She is as Jewish as we are.”

“Thank you, Grandma,” Rudi whispered, with a voice rooted in love. “That was even better than the cake.”

“Who has the rings?” the rabbi asked.

The question floored Rudi and was answered with quiet.

Once more, the rabbi glanced around the room. “Someone does have the rings?”

Rudi lowered her eyes. “We don’t have any.”

“Oh, yes, you do,” Mrs. Goodwin said. “At least you have one.”

The woman took off her wedding ring, and she offered it to Tommy.

He shook his head. “I can’t let you do that, Mom.”

“Your father would’ve wanted you to have it. He would’ve been so proud of you right now. I’m proud of you. This, this is our wedding gift to you.”

Reluctantly, Tommy took the ring.

The rabbi pointed at it. “Put it on Rudi’s right index finger and repeat after me, ‘Behold, you are consecrated to me with this ring according to the law of Moses and Israel.’”

Tommy struggled with the words. He struggled 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. It didn’t even matter to her that she had no ring for Tommy. She put a finger around his, and she gazed into his eyes as she took her vow, “*Ani l’dodi, ve dodi li*. *I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine*.”

“We just have to break the glass,” the rabbi let everyone know. He found the juice glass and wrapped it in his handkerchief, and he put it between Tommy’s foot and the bedpost.

Tommy tried to break it. He pushed with all he had. But it wouldn’t crack.

The rabbi peeked out the door. “Maybe I could find a light bulb. 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.

“Yes, 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 seemed Rudi was coming undone. But she held herself together, and she took Tommy’s free hand with hers. “You can do it, baby. I know you can.”

Tommy clenched his eyes closed, and he tried to break the glass. He tried again and again.

Looking around the room, I couldn’t see anyone who wasn’t crying. Even Grandpa was crying. 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 yelled.

The room erupted in cheers, but this did nothing to stop everyone’s tears. Mrs. Goodwin’s face, in particular, was bathed as she ran out of the room while calling out for her son.

“What comes next is the *yichud*,” the rabbi mumbled as he wiped his face with the back of his hand, “where we’re supposed to give the bride and groom twenty minutes of seclusion.”

Mr. Agnellino grabbed the pizzas. “We can eat downstairs.”

He headed out the door with the boxes, and we all followed 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 to leave was Maria. She’d been crying since before the ceremony and was still crying as she clutched her best friend. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” Rudi screeched with one arm around her and the finger of her other hand still around Tommy’s.

Reluctantly, Maria released her arms and left the room, closing the door behind herself.

“Close your eyes,” Tommy ordered.

“What’s going on?” Rudi grumbled.

“Just do it.”

She closed her eyes, and she kept them that way until he told her to open them, and she saw him putting his chai necklace on her.

She helped him, and she clasped the chain.

“This is my wedding gift for you,” he told her, “something to remind you.”

She took the pendant between her fingers, and she eyed it.

“But it isn’t to remind you of me,” he insisted. “It’s to remind you of that word . . . *living*. The most precious there is. Don’t you dare forget it.”

Rudi started crying. To hide this, she leaned over the stereo and hit play.

With the music pouring into the room, she turned back to her husband with a smirk. “Just look at us, Tommy. Who’d have thought?”

“Me. I knew it from the beginning.”

Not knowing what to do next, the two just stared at each other.

“So, are you gonna kiss the groom or what?” Tommy growled.

“You call that a proposition?” Rudi growled back.

“It’s the best you’re gonna get.”

Slowly, she leaned toward him, and gently she kissed him, with their lips barely touching.

Still, he swooned. He swooned as they danced the day away.

This was how Tommy’s journal ended. But I knew it wasn’t the end of Tommy’s story. I knew it not just from the beginning of it but from that cryptic entry he wrote.

*Chanukah was different this time, and I got a better* *gift. But Rudi’s not telling me something*.

So I asked her to tell me.

“I told you,” she groaned, “I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“Grandma was right,” I shot back, “you lie badly, just like Tommy did. And you know what? Perhaps that’s the best compliment anyone could get.”

“I swear I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“You do.”

I kept pressing, but she kept denying, and I could no longer bribe her with more of the journal.

“Please,” I begged, “it’ll be the best Chanukah gift I’ll get.”

She chuckled but 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 that first night of Chanukah, the one Rudi had insisted that nothing special happened.

That year it coincided with Christmas Eve, so the stores were mobbed. As the sun began to fall and snow fell all around her, Rudi found herself in front of the Livingston Mall. A place she loathed, 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 and through a corridor that led to the stores, in the direction of a woman who was leaving with two small children and many shopping bags.

Horrified by Rudi’s appearance, which was likely made more menacing because of the snow on her, she pulled her kids out of Rudi’s path as if she 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’d been in the mall for an hour 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?*

Noticing a heavyset middle-aged security guard anxiously watching her while babbling into a handheld radio, Rudi took 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.

Sighing once more, she walked to a railing and looked down at the ground floor, where a poorly-stuffed Santa Claus 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 spotted a chocolate shop.

With his hand shaking, the frightened clerk put some white chocolate in a paper bag, and he offered it to Rudi with his hand shaking more.

While glaring at him, she slapped some money onto the counter, and she grabbed the bag and 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 peeked 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 as much excitement, her mother walked up to the window and looked at the doll. She especially looked at its price before she turned to her daughter. Rudi could see the sorrow in her eyes as she tried to find the right words. “Maybe . . . maybe next year.”

The girl tried to hide her disappointment. But she couldn’t look her mother in her eyes. “It’s all right, Mommy, really.”

“How about some hot chocolate?”

The girl nodded, and the two walked off hand in hand with their heads hanging.

Rudi tried to ignore this. She tried, too, to forget all the disappointing Christmases she had experienced as a child.

This took time. But she did both and rushed into the store and through it and came to a counter, where behind it kneeled a little man with thick glasses and a bow tie, who looked older than time.

Slowly, he rose. Unlike all others she had encountered at the mall, 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. So she spun back to the man in surprise, not understanding his kindness but especially not understanding how he could tell she was Jewish when she herself didn’t know.

“What can I do for you?” he murmured.

Rudi looked at the waterfall in the window. She looked and looked at it. But she pointed at the doll.

Slowly, the old man took the doll from the window. “You’re lucky. This is our last one. We literally couldn’t keep them in stock. That’s why we had to mark the price up so much.”

He brought the doll to the counter. “Do you want me to wrap it?”

Rudi glanced out the store window, and she saw the mother and daughter drinking hot chocolate at a bench. “If you can do it fast.”

“It won’t take but a minute,” he told her, and he started wrapping the gift. He wrapped it with a fancy gold paper fashioned from countless little stars.

“Do you think you could do me a favor?” she asked.

“What’s that?”

She pointed out the window, at the mother and daughter. “Could you give the doll to that woman over there?”

Surprised, the man stopped with the wrapping and looked at the two sitting on the bench, and he turned to Rudi and shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“Tell her, I don’t know, tell her 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 toward Rudi and smiled at her again. I bet he smiled even warmer than before.

“What about you?” he softly asked. “Can I get something for you to give?”

“I’m fine,” she groaned, and she fished through her seabag for her purse.

The man finished with the wrapping as Rudi put the money on the counter and rushed off.

“Don’t you want a receipt?” he called out to her.

“No.”

“Or your change?”

Rudi didn’t answer. She just left the store and headed out of the mall while cursing her stupidity.

At the corner of the corridor, she again stopped. She stopped in the same place she had before, and for a reason she didn’t know, she waited.

The old man exited the store. He exited with a plain paper shopping bag in his hand. As Rudi watched, he inched toward the woman and her little girl. The one who’d still believe in fairy tales.

Rudi opened the front door of her apartment, to the sounds of “Moonlight Serenade.”

She saw Tommy walking a red giftwrapped box toward the simple metal menorah on their mantlepiece, followed every step of the way by Flutter. She followed him as if her life depended on it.

Rudi noted how Tommy was no longer the gorgeous football player she first met. But never had she seen anything so beautiful, and she wanted to keep this locked inside her.

Tommy lowered himself to his knees, and he put the gift under the menorah before slowly turning toward Rudi.

“You’ve caught me,” he said. He said it with a smile. A smile she loved because she knew he wanted to do anything but smile and that he was only smiling for her.

She didn’t smile back. “I didn’t get you anything.”

“You’ve already given me your gift.”

“I did get you a little something.”

She marched up to him, and she kneeled beside him as she took off her bag and reached inside it for the chocolate.

Which he enjoyed that night in the arms of his gift.

the end