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THE CHANUKAH GIFT

by

Colin J Cohen

the first night

How do I begin the story of a snarling, down-and-out girl named Rudi?

That destiny fated her to Yon, the Polo-wearing boy she otherwise would’ve hated? That she fought dragons for him and taunted death? That she was my sister and my twin and my salvation?

No, this flipside-up fairy tale, this punk rock *Cinderella*, must start thirty-five years after all this happened. On a day that started like others. With the sun slinking above I-15 blocks away and my jacket zipped beyond my chin, I rattled a garbage can past Mateo, fixing a heater behind the motel where we worked. I approached a duo of dumpsters and the scruffy man sprawled next to them.

The barrel and I halted, by a dirty needle lying among the sand blowing across the cracked asphalt.

It was begging for a reaction from me. Disgust or shock or surprise. But my only response was to grab the needle with my gloved hand.

“Hey,” came a voice nearby.

Amoun was whooping it up, skipping and snapping his fingers. He whooped it up a lot, getting a kick from an Egyptian bossing a Jew (or a “Hebrew” as he called me). He was reenacting Exodus.

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

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

“I want you to shampoo the hallway carpets,” he said to me, ours being the one Motel 6 with all interior corridors. “And power-wash the walkways. Oh, the people in 122 last night left blood everywhere. Clean that too.”

He swaggered off.

Flinging the needle into the can, I turned to the scruffy man. He got to his feet, straightening his clothes and his hair. He was a regular guest who paid his seventy-dollar bill in nickels.

His finger quivered in the direction of the needle. “That wasn’t mine. I would never leave them on the ground.”

“I appreciate that.”

#

The morning wasn’t alone in its similarity with others.

At the day’s end, Mateo and I took a pair of buses from Hesperia. We were slogging our way along 7th Street in Victorville, an oasis of concrete and glass struggling to rise from the common source of both churning beneath it and all around it.

With the two of us approaching a sun eager to sink below the interstate, Mateo snorted at me. He was the closest I had to a friend and the reason I had a job, having managed to convince Amoun that someone with a Computer Science degree could make a good houseman.

“Get off the road, you idiot,” he said to my veering and quickening toward the traffic racing past us. I was chasing its impetus. “You’re gonna get killed.”

Slowing, I shook my head. I tossed up my arms. “If I am to wither in the desert, I cannot get killed by a car.”

Mateo yanked me back, from the path of a blazing red Charger. “Not today, you can’t.”

#

Mateo and I reached the gates of a dusty complex.

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

Mateo dragged a foot forward. “What’s wrong?”

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

Mateo’s face conveyed how tired he was, how he didn’t want to do more fixing. But he lumbered to the car.

“Mateo?” Nichelle called out from inside the gates. “The washing machines are broken.”

“I’ll take a look at them in a while.”

Bending over the engine, Mateo tinkered with it.

Willy lowered his eyes. “Thanks.”

“We’re in this together.”

#

The evening also began like others. I was eating dinner with dozens of men, women, and children, from toddlers to teens, at communal tables grouped in pairs.

Across from me was Gerry, a grizzled man my age, who had come weeks earlier and was slipping silverware into his pockets.

I pretended not to notice this. “How’s it going?”

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

Finishing my plate of sauerkraut and mashed potatoes and corn, I stood.

He edged toward me, his eyes widening. He forced his fears out. “Were there any suspicious characters outside?”

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

Now he had to hide his smirk.

Without humor of my own, I trudged to a table by the kitchen so I could drop off my tray. On the wall hung a calendar and the event that made this evening different. 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 have mattered. I had lost faith years before and religion before that. But the holiday invoked memories and good ones.

They kept playing through my cleaning the hall after dinner and my waiting at the head of a winding line of people outside the office where we would check in for the night. They only faded with Mateo’s puttering by me with a towel in his hand.

It was my turn. I stepped into the cramped room, where Josh sat crouched over a desk. A man in his thirties with a graying beard, bulging belly, and red cheeks, he reminded me of Santa Claus, without the jolly or good cheer.

I couldn’t tell whether he was aware of me. He was gazing at an oversized schedule like it held the galaxy’s mysteries.

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

I held back a grunt, coming from explaining to him five nights a week why I couldn’t do this. “I work in the morning.”

He didn’t hold back his own grunt and crossed out my name. “Kitchen, tomorrow night.”

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

“Hey,” he said.

In his hand was a bulging white envelope. “This came for you.”

I didn’t give it much regard. I snatched it and left the office, walking a pair of paces to the cubbies. Tossing the towel into mine, I exited the dorm. Under the bright lights, I entered a courtyard passing as a diner, with a dozen weathered booths and as many lost people passing time in them.

One man was rubbing out a stain from his coat, over Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge* screeching from his phone. Groaning, he doused the stain with what was in his cup and rubbed harder. But the stain wouldn’t let up. Neither would he. Nor would the four people in the booth ahead, swatting flies.

Two women were behind him. They were telling tales, of hunting for jobs they didn’t want and of plans for leaving the shelter they wanted to believe.

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

He must laugh at women too.

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

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

I leafed through the crinkled and aged sheets, my disinterest decreasing with each. The person who had written them came rushing at me. It caused me to gape at the envelope and its return address, of a Yon Levy in Livingston, New Jersey.

More shocking than this was the postmark dated thirty-five years earlier.

#

The wind was bucking. A chill scorched the air. It was a Southern California night so unlike those that had existed in my childhood from the opposite coast. It had been sunny and room temperature in Cali all year round on TV. Nobody wore jackets or sweaters.

Alone at a booth in the courtyard’s corner, I was perching under a full moon. It silhouetted the palm trees and canyons to my right and my processing the pages in front of me.

Failing at this, I took out my plastic phone. One they gave out for free to people like me. “Obamaphones,” many of us called them despite him not having been president in years. He wasn’t the guy who came up with them either. But we had to give them some name, to differentiate them from those that people wanted.

The phone was low on battery. It was low when charged. But I plugged it in at an outside wall outlet and took an extended breath, dialing a number I was sure I had forgotten.

It rang.

A sudden and unknown fear overcame me. It pushed my finger over the disconnect button. I willed myself to tap it.

“Hello?” she said.

George W. Bush had been president when I’d heard this voice last, but I would’ve recognized it after a thousand years. It was the same as it had been, confident and unafraid and soaring.

I reached out to touch it, to be part of it. But I didn’t speak.

She repeated herself.

Words tumbled from my mouth. “It’s me.”

Rudi had to wait for words too. Longer than I had. “Where are you?”

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

“Service ended a while ago.”

I faltered, unable to get to the point. I could only stare at the pages. I did so until I had convinced myself they were real. “It’s crazy but, but I got a letter today . . . from Yon.”

“Yon?”

Rudi gasped for air. I could sense she was falling. I was falling with her.

I stopped myself, for her sake. “It’s right here.”

“What is?”

“A journal he wrote.”

“He never wrote a journal.”

“You certain about that?”

She paused, for a while. “I’m never certain. The lack of it comes with my job.”

“You want me to mail it to you? Or I could scan it with my phone and email it. There’s this new app that uses a machine-learning technique I’ve been reading about to do character recognition. It might untangle Yon’s scribble.”

“You can’t read it?”

I huffed. “I can. But I skimmed through it, it’s real personal.”

“You were important to him. He must’ve wanted you to have it.”

“But . . . how could he have sent it to me?”

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

I hesitated. I didn’t want to revisit the past and the nightmare buried in it. Nor did I want her to. Both made me tremble. But with a silent sigh, I ordered the pages by the numbers on the bottom. I read Rudi a story that I’ve narrated with my own perspectives of it.

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

#

When you read someone’s journal, there’s an expectation that it will start at their story’s beginning. But Yon’s started at the end.

Through the corner of his eyes, the reflection from the room’s mirror was overwhelming, of a peaked and skeletal eighteen-year-old frame in a white terrycloth robe, with flat chestnut hair so bare that it didn’t cover his scalp. The image so troubled Yon that he concentrated on the yellow ribbon he was tying over a red gift-wrapped box, with snow falling in front of him between a window and the hospital across the street. The off-whiteness staggered from the afternoon skies, in time with a Glenn Miller song from a half-century earlier playing from a portable stereo by the bed.

A chain jingled. It drew Yon toward a golden-haired dog, guarding him by the door with the urgency of its life.

Yon returned to the ribbon, mindful of how he had to get it right. He tied and untied it, resting between the two.

#

With sweat pouring down his face and the afternoon gone, Yon tugged at the ribbon’s ends.

Two perfect loops spread across the box. He gushed at them, raising himself and the box off the bed.

Lightheaded and wobbly, he couldn’t keep his socked feet from slipping. He collapsed onto his knees on the wood paneling with a boom and a holler and a set of hacking coughs, sending him and the dog into a panic.

Would he ever get up? The finality of his disease never ceased looming.

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

Yon wiped his forehead and stood. He staggered and limped out the door with the box into the living room, followed by the dog, matching him step for step.

He neared a mantle and the simple metal menorah on top of it. Under it, he lowered himself to his knees. This took longer than it had taken him to lift himself. But he got the gift on the floor.

The front door creaked forward.

Glaring at him in the threshold with her hands on her hips was a woman his age who couldn’t have been more different. She contrasted with him and herself. Her powder-white face contrasted with her spiked black hair and with her heavy black eyeshadow and with a glossy black lipstick that matched her nails. Contrasting with all this was the oversized blue-and-white football jacket she was wearing that had “Yon” and a “C” stitched into it.

Her presence spread a blanket of warmth over Yon, making him forget his doom. It wouldn’t wane. It was so overpowering that he wrestled with what to say. “You’ve caught me.”

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

“You’ve already given me it.”

“But I did get you some . . .”

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

Pulling out an envelope wrapped in gold paper fashioned from stars, she twitched. Her eyes stretched and her brows rose.

He leaned toward her. “What’s the matter?”

Her startle got starker. She shook all over. “He must’ve slipped it into my bag.”

“Who?”

“The old man at the store.”

“Can I open it?”

She didn’t answer. She kept shaking.

With a gentle touch, Yon slid the envelope from her. With the same touch, he opened it. He withdrew a white card that could’ve come from a board game.

Now it was her turn to lean toward him. She was toppling over. “What is it?”

“It says, ‘One Replay’ . . . and in fine print . . . ‘*Caveat Amor*.’”

#

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

“Did you hear me?” said a familiar female voice from Yon’s right.

He didn’t answer. He couldn’t. His attention was on the image reflecting off a light-soaked window, of a confused but striking and broad-shouldered seventeen-year-old boy. One with a flock of wavy hair and an olive complexion, who was wearing the blue-and-white football jacket with his name and the “C” stitched into it.

The girl repeated her question, shifting Yon’s focus to two other items in the reflection: the turquoise school backpack across his shoulder and who was hanging over his other arm.

Her name was Darlene, the prettiest girl at Columbia High School. With her strawberry-blonde permed hair and legs without end and a billion-dollar smile, she could’ve become a model. The Jewish Brooke Shields, people called her. But her ambitions went beyond that. “Yon?”

He spun toward her. “What?”

“I said, ‘Happy Chanukah.’”

This roused Yon to his new reality. That he was standing by a cathedral-like school half old and half new. He was by its front doors, with his friends and dozens of other kids, talking and joking around with their breaths tinting the morning air.

Straining to reconcile his present situation with his previous one and the minutes he had spent with the crazy-looking girl he couldn’t recall beyond this, Yon grasped at the most logical conclusion: he had been dreaming. The girl, the apartment the two shared, the disease that had been killing him, it all had to have been a dream.

But there was a problem with this. A dream may appear real while it’s happening, but when you wake, it becomes obvious what it was.

This wasn’t. It had been as real as what he was experiencing now. The two traits that it shared with a dream were, as when waking from one, he had a limited memory of it, and he was forgetting it.

With awkwardness, Yon yanked his arm from Darlene. He swung his backpack off his shoulder. From it he whipped out a spiral notebook and a pen, using the latter to scrawl on the double-sided lined white paper.

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

He shook her off. “I gotta write this down.” He wrote all he could remember, from tying the yellow ribbon to reading the card. “One replay? A replay of what?”

Darlene gripped his arm harder. “What are you talking about?”

Yon didn’t answer. His mind was on a more troubling riddle.

Shouldn’t he have been happy that whatever he had experienced wasn’t real? He was healthy. Death was way off in the distance.

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

Before that, you could say that he had a semblance of happiness, coming from that his heaviest contemplations were over “suede vs. leather.” Now the weight of his weightlessness could’ve brought Atlas to his knees. The one time this wasn’t true, the one time he was happy, was the time with the girl in his dream.

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

No one answered Joey’s question. All the chatter tailed off. The silence got so loud that Yon gravitated toward it. He became so shocked that he couldn’t stop shuddering.

Approaching the school from the parking lot below it were two people. The first was a middle-aged man in an off-the-rack blue suit, who had a crew cut and a pockmarked face. But what they were all eyeing was the girl a few steps behind him. A girl incapable of a quiet entrance.

It was the same girl from Yon’s dream, with the same wild hair and makeup, carrying the same white canvas seabag over her shoulder. The differences were the Walkman she was clutching and what she was wearing: a navy overcoat, faded and torn jeans, and a pair of black Chuck Taylors.

The last two she had on before either were in fashion or were close to coming into it. Yon wrote that he couldn’t remember anyone wearing Converse since he had been a kid. What was more bizarre was that there were no laces on them.

She must’ve been some sight that morning, the way she clashed with the suburbia around her. Punks weren’t a novelty in early 1980s America or a lifestyle choice. They were an aberration of humankind, decried by a popular TV show called *Quincy* as a murderous menace.

Today, no one would give the girl a second gawk in the Bible Belt. But it must’ve been as if she had fallen from the stars. The creature from *Alien* would’ve been less horrifying to everyone. They had all seen that before.

There was another sight Yon hadn’t observed: the girl’s apathy.

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

I’m certain, too, the indifference the girl was projecting was hiding, the cowering child underneath her, desperate for a way out.

It was Yon who was apathetic. He told me that, before all this happened, he had struggled to wake in the morning.

Closer the girl got to him.

His knees buckled. A sensation that he had often experienced playing football. But at no time did he experience it like this or this much. “Who is she?”

No one answered.

The girl acknowledged the eyes on her. Her apathy turned into a scowl. She stared down the entire school, ready to fight them all. Cranking the volume of her Walkman, she sang with a song that Yon had never heard, about someone who belonged to a “Blank Generation.”

Yon didn’t care for punk rock. Nor did he get it. But this song was different. It was different from any other. The lyrics were about him or someone who could’ve been him. Someone who had it all and nothing. Someone surrounded by others but alone. Someone frantic to get away. It didn’t matter if this meant never coming back anywhere.

The girl stopped singing. Her eyes locked onto Yon. He was the only one there, the only person in the world. She glared at him as she had in his dream. She glared and snarled.

Shaking off his disorder, Yon grimaced. But not at her. It was at himself and his attraction to a girl who was vile in many ways but fascinating in many more.

It wasn’t because of his dream that she fascinated him. She was unlike any girl around. She stood so uprightly, and it mattered not how others regarded her. His heart pounded with each step she took toward him. His body tilted forward. He was tipping over.

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

The girl kept following the man in blue, but she turned her spite onto Joey. “How would you like to go next year as a rug?”

Joey didn’t respond. He couldn’t.

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

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

The girl opened her mouth to retort. But the man ahead of her interrupted. “That’s enough.”

She sneered at him and returned her glare to Yon, along with her snarl.

Yon was close enough to the girl to detect how bloodshot her eyes were and how she was sweating despite the weather. Above all this, she was oblivious to Mariana and the set of doors the two were heading toward.

Mariana was mousy with no makeup, who under her plain black wool coat wore a white blouse and a plaid skirt that flowed below her knees. She could’ve been going to Catholic school.

She hurried to the entrance without heeding who was hurrying with her. She and the new girl were about to slam into each other, avoiding it at the last instant.

Wide-eyed and wider-mouthed, Mariana gazed at the girl. She was witnessing a new form of life. “Hey.”

The girl gazed back, without the wide eyes or the wider mouth. She raised her fist at her, insulted by the recognition. “Hey, how about some dentures?”

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

This wasn’t good enough for the girl. She went after her.

She didn’t go far. Her blue escort grabbed her by the arm. “What did I tell you, Rudi?”

No response came.

Moaning, the man flew his shoulder into the heavy wooden doors. He tossed Rudi into the building, following her inside.

“Who are you?” Yon whispered, at a volume only he could hear and only a sliver, with his fear accelerating past the red line.

#

I broke off from the story. One too fantastic to believe.

But was it crazier than the pages in my hand or the postmark on the envelope?

Having no answer, I took a different direction.

Yon wasn’t the only one curious about Rudi. This particular Rudi was a stranger to me.

I lowered the page I had been reading. “Who were you?”

She didn’t want to answer and wasn’t bashful about it. “This isn’t my story.”

“It belongs to all three of us.”

Rudi stayed silent. But I was in control and wouldn’t read her any further till she relented.

She did so but with a grumble. “What I’ll say is that I had bigger worries than some preppy jock.”

“Such as?”

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

“But Yon got to you.”

“That doesn’t mean it was love. I had no interest in him at all, despite how gorgeous he was. Or because of it. He was the best-looking guy ever, better looking than any celebrity. He could’ve posed for Michelangelo. And that turned up my bile. I was sure that he was stuck-up and boring. Most guys like that are, in my experience. But . . .”

“But what?”

Rudi grumbled more, more than before. “There was this way about him, in the way those amber eyes of his were cutting through me. It was like he knew me better than I did, that there was nothing I could hide from him. This threw me.

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

I doubted that. But I continued reading.

#

Yon and Darlene entered the school, with Yon there in body and his spirit jumping between his reality and dream.

Down the corridor, Rudi and her escort stood by the school offices and the principal, a man wound tighter than the most inoperable knot, wearing a tight brown suit and a tighter brown tie.

The principal jabbed his finger at Rudi, baring his teeth at the man. “I want to reiterate what I told your superior. I don’t care about the importance of your case. We have enough of a criminal element here.”

Rudi slung her arms across herself. She crooked her lips. “*The real Nazis run your schools!”*

The principal thrust himself toward her. “What did you say?”

“Don’t you worry, Mr. Gonzales,” the pockmarked man hooted, grabbing Rudi by the neck. “She won’t be giving you trouble for more than a month or so. With any luck, less.”

The man hauled Rudi away, past Mr. Criss, a guidance counselor.

He was the one person that morning that Rudi didn’t put off or horrify. It was all over his face.

This surprised her. It was all over her face.

#

Along with others shuttling to class and yakking about nothing, Yon wandered the third-floor hallway, clueless of where he was wandering through or to.

He had taken spins in both a washer and a dryer. Coming to his first-period computer class, he couldn’t walk straight.

His mind wasn’t on it, but he poked his head inside the door anyway.

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

This didn’t make Yon’s heart pound or make his knees buckle or make him tip over.

The bell rang.

Instead of spending the hour punching the code that would’ve spewed a bunch of zeros across a page, Yon continued down the hall, glimpsing into each classroom he passed.

At the corridor’s end, he entered a stairwell. He climbed down to the second floor and glimpsed down that hall, with a doubt hanging over him and about to collapse on top of him.

Had his time in the apartment with Rudi, along with the disease that had been killing him, not been a dream?

If it hadn’t been, it meant the incredible. That someone had gifted him the chance to replay a part of his life and elude his fate.

*Caveat Amor*.

Yon never took Latin, but he felt that he had gotten the gist from the fine print on the card.

*Beware Love*.

Was that why his replay began right before meeting Rudi? Did he need to beware of her? Would falling in love with her trigger the event that leads to his disease and death?

He stopped, with haste.

Why was he chasing after her? No matter how she had capsized him, she couldn’t be worth dying over.

But this could have been what made her so exciting, all the risk that came with her. She was a one-woman rollercoaster, and Yon was in need of a thrill.

“What are you doing?” somebody squeaked.

Yon swung himself around, in the direction of a teacher whose name he had never bothered to learn. A man who didn’t come up to his neck, with shoe-polish black hair like President Reagan’s, as well as an argyle sweater over a yellow button-down Oxford and a paisley tie.

“What?” Yon muttered.

“Why aren’t you in class?”

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

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

“Yeah, I guess I’m out of it today.”

Yon scurried down the hall, closing in on another stairwell.

He swirled back. The teacher was gone.

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

With an anxiousness that heightened and widened with each step, Yon strode to the open door and a setup common at the school. Three tables stretched along three walls, forming a square with the teacher’s desk in front.

Slouching at the back table by herself was Rudi, wearing spiked bracelets and a tattered white T-shirt held together by safety pins. Which had “Black Flag” handwritten on it in marker above four black bars drawn in the shape of a flag.

As he had outside, Yon grimaced. This time questioning how he could end up with such a girl. She couldn’t care about anyone.

He persuaded himself that his dream had to have been one. Yet he couldn’t budge, neither him nor his eyes, from Rudi and all there was about her.

Darlene broke his trance. She was sitting in the center of a gaggle of girls, congregating by the table along the wall that separated the class from the hallway.

Yon went back and forth, between Darlene and Rudi. He compared the two.

Darlene was better in all tangible ways. Looks, in particular. But it was in the other ways, the ones that weren’t tangible at all, that she didn’t compare to Rudi.

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

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

“She had Frankenstein for inspiration,” Darlene quipped.

The teacher sighed. It seethed from her. “Wrong Shelley. But it was a nice try, Ms. Cantor. Almost.”

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

She marched the book all the way to Rudi, with Yon slanting from her line of vision.

Sneering at Rudi’s stab at apathy, the woman dropped the book onto the table in front of her.

It bounced.

Rudi yawned, with deliberateness.

Scowling, the teacher clenched her hands behind her back. “Have you ever read poetry?”

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

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

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

Overcome with giddiness, the woman galloped to the center blackboard. She had written the poem “since feeling is first” in perfect script.

She immersed herself in its beauty. “What can anyone tell me about E. E. Cummings?”

Darlene smirked. “He wrote his name in lowercase.”

Rudi slammed her forearms onto the table. “That’s a myth.”

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

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

Basking in herself, Rudi propped her feet onto the table. She hung her hands behind her head, lifting her chair back. “Basically, he was a punk.”

The teacher laughed, without her hand over her mouth and less at Rudi’s assertion than at her. “Is that so? He didn’t dress the part.”

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

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

Rudi and her chair smashed to the floor. She knotted her face. “Too bad the same can’t be said of you.”

The woman stared daggers at Rudi. Lots of them.

Returning to the poem, she read it aloud.

Poetry wasn’t Yon’s taste. It was less so than punk rock. So, with Krasner’s voice echoing through the classroom into the hallway, he started off, with her words fading.

*my blood approves,*

*and kisses are a better*

*fate than wisdom*

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

*- the best gestures of my brain*

*is less than*

*your eyelids’ flutter which says*

*we are for each other*

Without realizing it, Yon was back in the room’s doorway.

Rudi had removed her feet from the desk and was tilting forward. She was pushing the table over.

The poem came to an end. Krasner whirled toward the class, with as much excitement as Rudi’s. This swept through the room. “His words mix splendor and dissonance,” the woman cried, “and he riddles them with the passion he’s unleashed. Cummings was a Romantic above all. Or a ‘neo-Romantic’ as some call him.”

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

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

Rudi turned toward the door. She had registered that someone was there.

This someone opened her jaw. I picture that her whole biosphere went turvy-topsy in less than a flicker, with nothing in it conforming to what she had expected or would.

Yon’s jaw opened too. It came from her eyelids and how they had fluttered.

He stumbled away, his mind drowning in an unbearable uncertainty.

Had his eyelids been doing the same?

#

In the school cafeteria at lunch, Rudi paraded through the center aisle with a tray laden with food. There had been an eruption of it, with fruit on top.

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

She ignored them, or she acted like she did. I can say that it did matter to her how others regarded her. This would anger her. It must’ve been why her ignoring amplified.

It didn’t last. She came upon someone she couldn’t ignore, from a table of football players and beautiful girls, with amber eyes.

Yon pivoted from her. He convinced himself that her eyelids hadn’t fluttered, that he had imagined it.

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

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

So why was he shivering all over?

Shaking this off, Yon became aware that Darlene was next to him and that her arm was around his.

He wasn’t the only one aware of it. Rudi twisted herself around. She stormed toward the back wall, no longer coming across apathetic or uprightly. She was about to smash through the bricks.

At the empty table by them she plopped down. She picked at her pile.

Dawdling in her trajectory came a boy with a more modest lunch, who was in another place as he often was. Eliot was bones and skin, with a pimply face and greasy brown hair, wearing a stained purple button-down polyester shirt, tan Haggar slacks whose cuffs dragged across the floor, and dirty white Keds. He wasn’t cool. He was the kid bullies dream of, to the extent some felt sympathy for him, including the ones who would bully him anyway.

Eliot got to the back table and who was there. He stiffened mid-step.

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

“I . . . I usually eat here.”

She clenched her fists, raising them toward him. “So?”

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

Giving him no further notice, Rudi took a notepad and a pen from her seabag. Peeping at Yon, she doodled.

#

Glowering at what Yon was unable to evade, Darlene brushed her hair back. “Can you believe she’s in my poetry class?”

Yon, of course, could believe this. But he kept quiet.

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

“What do you mean?”

“She’s a big-time druggie.”

“How did you figure that out?”

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

“NA?”

“Narcotics Anonymous.”

Yon wanted this to make a difference, to dissuade him from his snowballing obsession of Rudi. He wanted and wanted and wanted.

But it didn’t make a difference.

What could?

#

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

This included Yon, horror-struck by the “D” on top of his, from his usual front-row seat.

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

The woman was about to add further invective. But a presence disturbed her.

Rudi sauntered into the classroom, clutching a crumpled printout of her class schedule. It could’ve been a fast-food wrapper she was about to discard.

The woman peered into Rudi, down and up and several times over and with incredulity, at the girl’s discordance with the order of her classroom. “Yes?”

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

Her incredulity higher, Elkind stormed to Rudi. She grabbed the printout and uncrumpled it. Her eyes lasered onto it. “We’ll see about that, Miss Weiss.”

Pain shot across Rudi. Mountains of it. “*Ms. Weiss*.”

“Excuse me?”

“Do I look like a ‘miss’?”

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

Rudi turned toward an equation.

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

Rudi wheeled 180 degrees toward the woman. “You’re joking, right?”

“I rarely joke about partial fraction decomposition.”

Rudi sighed. But she plowed to the blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk. She weighed the problem.

In less time than that she answered it, filling the board with numbers and formulae.

The teacher stepped back. “That took me fifteen minutes to solve this morning.”

Rudi finished, writing “Q.E.D.” next to the solution, in letters that extended across a board. Raising the chalk over her head, she dropped it onto the easel, much as Ms. Krasner had dropped the textbook.

It bounced as the book had.

Mrs. Elkind’s face lit up. “Quite easily done.”

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

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

Rudi snagged the schedule from the woman. She trudged toward a seat by the back wall, with Yon drifting back toward the mark on his test.

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

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

Realizing that she meant his hair, Yon fell back in his chair and faced her. “Better?”

“Not really.”

Yon laughed.

This stunned Rudi. I bet it was because she couldn’t anymore pretend that he was stuck-up. Or boring.

#

Numb and befuddled from his whirlwind day (or had it been a year?), Yon floated out of a first-floor stairwell into the hallway. He and hundreds of others were leaving school at the day’s end.

Coming to a restroom and the familiar female voice inside it, he halted.

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

Who could she be howling at?

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

The door flew at Yon, smacking him in the face. Rudi dashed from the bathroom in her coat.

It took a while, but the door returned to its frame, with Yon’s eyes on Rudi.

He begged himself not to follow her. It was his choice, in what he did with his life and his so-called replay. It was no other’s and wasn’t hers. He didn’t have to end up that peaked and skeletal and doomed frame. He could change his fate. It was so easy.

Yet he couldn’t not follow Rudi. He followed her down the hallway, and he followed her when she turned left toward the front doors, and he followed her through them. He followed her outside. She was trotting toward a crowd on the edge of Parker Avenue and a happening that had enraptured them.

She approached Darlene, who was standing alongside Lis, a platinum blonde with a ponytail and girl-next-door looks. The two were whispering among themselves and snickering at Rudi.

Joey rambled behind them, tapping Lis’s shoulder.

She flew toward him.

He pitched his thumb behind himself. “Let’s go.”

Without the slightest linger and if tethered to him, Lis went with Joey, leaving Darlene to snicker at Rudi alone.

Rudi wouldn’t snatch the girl’s bait. She continued to the throng, tiptoeing over a shoulder.

Swelling with fury, she pushed through everyone. Yon wrote in his journal that she was Moses parting the sea. She was an irresistible force.

She got to the street and a golden-haired dog, who was whimpering and bleeding in the road by the curb. The same dog from Yon’s dream.

Rudi kneeled beside the animal. She swooped it up into her arms. She rose with it and cradled it, and she comforted it and calmed it. Never had Yon witnessed such gentleness. It belied all she was about.

But what didn’t?

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

Mariana was jumping up and down and all around, flailing her arm down the road. “I volunteer there on weekends. The vet’s really awesome.”

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

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

#

Clutching the dog, Rudi raced through the school parking lot with Yon, to a Harley Sturgis.

She gaped at it, catching her breath. “You drive a motorcycle?”

“I live dangerously.”

“I bet.”

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

“Come on,” he squealed.

It took eons, but she crept onboard, doing so as if onto a hot stove. Though she did no more.

He wheezed. “I suggest you put your arm around me, unless you want to fly there.”

She remained hesitant. But she hauled one arm around him, continuing to hold the whining dog in the other.

They bolted from the lot onto Parker. Picking up speed, they got to the corner of Valley. Zooming left, they zipped through traffic, weaving around cars and trucks and running both lights and stop signs.

Driving with recklessness Yon was good at. He did it all the time, to make himself feel that he was alive and that this had meaning. But never had it brought him any. Coming close to death didn’t bring it.

Only now had meaning come.

#

In the packed and ultra-bright animal hospital waiting area, Yon and Rudi were scrunching next to each other, with their glances straight ahead and Yon doing all he could not to admit how good he felt pressed against her, both there and on the bike. “The dog’s gonna be all right.”

Rudi gave him one of her snarls. “You can’t be sure of that.”

“Actually, I can.”

“What?”

“You’ve got some blood on your coat.”

She inspected it. “It’s not the first. You’ve got some too, on the back of your jacket.”

“It’s all right.”

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

Both their attentions shifted. A veterinarian in glasses and a white lab coat verged upon them, reading from a chart.

The two stood. They waited for the woman.

She stopped, continuing to read. “She’s in bad shape.”

Rudi slumped over.

Lowering the chart, the vet’s demeanor picked up. “She’s got a lengthy recovery, but she’ll be fine.”

Rudi picked herself up. “Yeah?”

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

Neither Rudi nor Yon spoke.

The vet eyeballed them. “I assume you two can’t pay for this.”

“I can,” Yon said, pulling out his wallet and a credit card from it and handing it to her.

The woman took it and took off, leaving the two to search for words beyond their reach.

With abrupt unease, Rudi backed up, dragging her feet. “I should be going.”

“You want a lift?” Yon asked.

“I’m fine.”

She moved with greater hurry. She bumped into a wall.

Veiling her embarrassment, she twirled around and fled from the office, with Yon’s eyes locked on to her. They remained locked on to her after she was gone.

#

Yon was lying on his bed, writing in his notebook, with crumpled pages all around him on the floor and “Over Under Sideways Down” playing on his stereo.

He had written all that had happened that day, several times over. He’d also sketched scenes on the papers’ edges.

Getting the words close to right, he dropped his pen.

The music changed, into the same Glenn Miller song from his dream or whatever it was. But now it was playing in his head.

He was inside it too. He was dancing with someone in his arms, whose cheek pressed against his and whose heartbeat matched not only his but the beat bound by the trombone.

Never had Yon been so perfect, so himself. He wanted to stay this way. He prayed for the rising melody to never fall.

“Yon, you up?” his mother said from outside his door.

The music changed back into the Yardbirds. Yon opened his eyes.

He was clutching a pillow.

“Yon?”

Concealing his frustration, above all from himself, he heaved the pillow onto the floor. “Yeah?”

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

“Some other time.”

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

What he couldn’t hear was Glenn Miller. No matter what he did or how much he did it, the song wouldn’t return. Not a fragment.

His mind wandered, to a girl and what she was doing, despite being certain that it shouldn’t have wandered there. That his life depended on him not getting within a light year of it.

#

My mind wandered to that girl too. “What were you doing?”

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

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

“You were what?”

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

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

“But what?” I said.

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

“I didn’t holler back. I fell to the floor and gasped for breath, with sweat running down my face and my arms around my legs. I was willing myself to be in another place. Any place but that one.

“But this didn’t work. It never did.

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

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

“Yon wasn’t on your mind?” I asked in a playful tone.

“Why do you think I was listening to Bad Brains?” she growled. “I had been listening to them since I’d left that animal hospital. They had me running over parked cars.”

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

“Now I couldn’t listen to them. Instead, I yanked out the drawing I’d made at lunch. With surprise. I had been sure that I’d been drawing Lee Ving, my crush at the time. Me and most punk girls on the planet and probably lots of punk boys too.

“The drawing did have Ving’s eyes. They were piercing into me when rendered in two dimensions. But the hair was too wavy and the nose and chin too chiseled.

“Then it hit me who was staring at me from the drawing.

“Furious at myself, I ripped out the page and crumpled it. I threw it across the floor. But . . .”

I tipped forward in my seat. “But what?”

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

“I have one last question.”

“What’s that?”

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

“Some of this I’ll keep to myself.”

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

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

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

“What do you mean?” she said.

“That was the last page he sent me.”

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

“But that’s all he sent.”

“Today.”

“What?”

“That’s all he sent you *today*.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are seven more nights of Chanukah.”

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

“Call me tomorrow night.”

There wasn’t a doubt in her voice that I would have a reason to.

#

I shoveled Yon’s pages back into the envelope.

It was past midnight. The moon had buried itself behind clouds, taking the palm trees and the canyons with it. The one gleam came from the courtyard. It burned into the night. It would all through it.

I had to work the next morning. But I couldn’t go to bed. I had to get a bus pass so I could get to work. Getting one in the morning had been iffy.

This getting was a ritual, regardless of who was working the night shift. But with Josh it was the worst. Some nights he would make me stand outside the office till my feet ached, enjoying my reliance on him.

He didn’t make me wait much that night. He got up and tugged the glass door back. “Yes?”

I told him.

With false ambivalence, he led me from the dorm to a room beside the dining hall. In the corner of it, he unlocked and opened a vault taller than him. He drew from it a stack of day passes that the shelter got for free.

He offered me a pass. But he wouldn’t let go. “This is a pretty sweet deal you get here, free transportation each day.”

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

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

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

Not responding in any way, no matter how I wished I could, I went off. I stuffed the pass into my wallet and returned to the dorm.

Slipping down the hall, I passed an open door to sleeping quarters on my left. This was where not only the women slept but the children. Teenage boys had to sleep there.

As uncomfortable as this must’ve been for the women, leaving the shelter would’ve been worse. No one wanted to be on the streets of Victorville in the winter, but the cold was the least bad awaiting women there, making them more dependent on the place than the men.

Our quarters were past them across the hall. I pushed myself through the doorway, to snoring so loud that it could’ve woken a cemetery. Including the one in Arlington.

Careful with my steps, I made my way through the dark, in a tomb filled with dozens of bunk beds and all the weary men on them. I stumbled to the back and my bed.

Climbing to the top, I kicked off my shoes. I also took off my coat and jeans and slid them under the pillow with Yon’s letter. Stretching out on the slight and rotting mattress, I struggled to fall asleep. This struggling was another ritual. On this night, it was the same and not.

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

the second night

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

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

Waves of darkness swept over me. With them came the demons, crawling into my head and pushing me down. They pushed me below myself, making me believe that I would never get up. They reminded me of how I had messed up my life and how I couldn’t undo it or make it bearable. All I could do was give in to it and wither.

Over and over they cried this to me in ear-splitting silence.

I turned and tossed and covered my head, from both them and my fear of escaping them. I prayed too, for the sun to rise. So I could go to work and focus on it. So it could numb me.

#

*Fllliiiickkkk*.

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

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

Some ignored the glare by hiding in their pillows. But I got up with those who had reason to or had wanted to pretend it. I tossed my pillow from my clothes and hauled out my wallet and opened it.

Satisfied that my five dollars was there, I returned the wallet to my jeans and put it and my coat and shoes on. I crept through the tomb to the door.

Mateo was asleep in a bottom bunk.

I shook him. But he only groaned.

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

He laughed but did no more.

I went into the corridor, to the cubbies stacked in three rows. On the day I had arrived at the shelter over the summer, they gave me a compartment on top despite my lack of elevation. I had to imitate a primate to get to mine and to my towel, shower bag, and a clean set of clothes.

Into the men’s bathroom I carried them, to a trio of sinks. I shaved and brushed my teeth alongside a fellow riser. Here I had to accept the decay reflecting off the mirrored wall. No morning went by without me getting grayer and gaunter.

This morning was no different. Yet I was humming the song my sister had sung on her first day at Columbia. I kept humming it, strolling toward the shower stalls down the way, with a verve that I couldn’t deny was there.

By the bench that spanned the stalls, I undressed. I took my wallet from my jeans. Which we all learned to do if we wanted to have money when we left the stalls.

Having your money stolen while you showered was a rite of passage at the shelter. It happened so often that the staff would laugh when people complained about it. They had laughed weeks earlier when someone had lost hundreds of dollars.

What’s funny is that this didn’t happen to me. The thieves did go through my wallet during my first shower there, returning it to the wrong pocket. But they left my five dollars alone. Either it wasn’t worth pulling out or was too pitiful to steal. Or both.

But this made me paranoid. It was why I would check my wallet when I woke and why I would put it in my shower bag.

With this that morning I stepped into the stall. I fired the hot water at me, enjoying the few minutes of normal allotted to me each day.

#

I got a bagged lunch from a guy working in the kitchen and made a cup of green tea. All I could stomach this early.

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

My eyes locked onto a group of women in the booths, getting their kids ready for school. They were giving them a similar normal that I had enjoyed in the shower. Above that, they were making them feel special in a place where they weren’t. They were making them feel that they mattered, that someone loved them.

One mom was brushing her child’s hair. Others admired theirs while they played. Another was checking her son’s homework. She was on an epic quest.

On the surface, the kids weren’t different from those with homes. But beneath this was what made them different. The rumor was that it was kids stealing everyone’s money by the showers. Whether true or not, there was worse they could’ve been doing.

My eyes drifted.

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

Was it their way of guaranteeing attrition?

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

An additional quality that set Nichelle apart was how she didn’t suffer from any psychological or substance issue that I could tell. She was a victim of circumstances she couldn’t control. The combination of her husband going to prison and medical bills had overwhelmed her. She was staying at the shelter to save money, to get herself over the water and to get her four kids back from wherever the authorities had taken them.

“Saturday night we’re having it,” she said to Wendy.

“Having what?” I asked.

Nichelle’s head darted around. She leaned it 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.”

“Are you serious?”

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

“How will you pay for it?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

#

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

But there was no bus going down this road, despite the largest mall in the Victor Valley being on it, along with any store you could imagine. Each morning, Mateo and I had to take a pair of buses that crisscrossed the valley and all the concrete and glass strewn across it.

On both buses that day, I sat by the window under darkening skies, into the desolation. It was hard to believe that we were a few hours from Los Angeles. Or from anywhere. It was a setting for a dystopia. Though there was a shine off in the distance striving to break free.

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

“*Slota*,” I mumbled, getting off into the slosh.

“What’s that?” Mateo said.

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

“Uh-huh.”

Mateo was hungry. So we scurried to the convenience store down the block by the 76 gas station.

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

He pried open the box. “If Hannibal’s army had doughnuts, they would’ve won the Third Phoenician War for sure.”

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

“That one too.”

He stuffed a doughnut into his mouth. The two of us jogged in the faltering rain to the motel. We punched in on the PC in Amoun’s office.

Stepping out of it, we came upon the guy with the nickels, paying for his room.

The counter became swamped in Jeffersons and Monticellos. The poor clerk had to count each one, more than fourteen hundred after including tax.

The automatic doors opened. Amoun skipped inside. He was snapping his fingers, whooping it up as usual. He was Fred Astaire in *Top Hat,* and I was his Ginger Rogers. “Where is my Hebrew?”

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

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

“Whenever I get a chance.”

“Be a *mensch* and get a chance now.”

#

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

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

Accompanying me that morning in the muddy sand was my sister. She had climbed into my head. I broke the tedium by listening on my phone to the Bad Brains album she had mentioned.

I hadn’t heard the band in decades. So I was surprised that they connected with me as they had when I was a teenager. I strutted about, paying no attention to the cleaning woman who had pushed her cart outside for a cigarette break.

She had the fairest name of them all: Sania. It’s Urdu for “splendid,” and it fit.

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

Sania shared the same elation Nichelle got from her waking each day. Defying the bleakness of her job and her environment, she was about to erupt from whatever it was percolating inside her.

Spying on me and my strutting, through the toking of her “fag” as she called it, Sania gave me the kind of accentuated wave that I had come to anticipate each day.

I waved back, feeling my own elation for but a moment. But I also questioned who she was and why she was there. I couldn’t say why I had.

#

Work ended early in the afternoon. But the first bus was late, making me late for the second. The one that came next was late too. It took close to four hours to get to the shelter.

Dinner was ending. People were lining up to check in for the night.

Switching into my highest gear, I made a sandwich. I ate it, cleaning the kitchen and peeping at the television in the rec room. I had flipped it onto *Upstairs, Downstairs* on PBS and was commiserating with the servants.

#

Only a few people remained in line when I got to the end of it.

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

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

My turn in the office came. But there was no letter from Yon.

“You certain there was nothing for me today?” I said to Josh.

“What do you mean?”

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

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

I didn’t answer. I grabbed a towel and left.

“Laundry, tomorrow morning,” he called out.

“I work tomorrow morning,” I shot back.

“Dining hall bathrooms, tomorrow night.”

I left the office, my head hanging. I took the towel to my cubby and tossed it up. Lumbering forward, I went into the courtyard to call Rudi, my head hanging lower. It was bringing me to the ground.

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

“Vaguely.”

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

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

Gerry got more joyful. He pointed at me. “That’s what they want you to think.”

“If you’ll excuse me . . .”

“I hear you’re a hacker.”

“Where did you hear that?”

“I hear stuff.”

“I’m not a hacker.”

“But you know computers.”

“Sure, but—”

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

“I’m sorry, but—”

“—I’ll pay you.”

“How about on Sunday? I’m off.”

“Terrific.”

I meandered toward the corner booth.

“I almost forgot,” he said.

Grunting, I turned around.

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

I should’ve been angry. But so giddy was I that I thanked him for stealing my mail.

Hurrying off with it to the corner booth, I ripped open the envelope and yanked out its contents. I called Rudi.

She answered on the first ring. “Yeah?”

“You were right.”

“You sound surprised.”

“You ready?”

“Since last night.”

#

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

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

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

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

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

*She couldn’t be worth dying over*.

The danger of Rudi roared back. Yon balanced his excitement of her with his fear.

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

The latter title nabbed his eye. Its telling of a creature stuck in a world absurd to him had fascinated Yon when he was a child. But in recent months, the more it had enthralled him, the more he could empathize with that duck. He would empathize with him like he would with another fictional character, from another book he had been revisiting.

Passing the cases, Yon slid by the Yardbirds posters on his walls. He neared a framed reproduction of *Girl with a Pearl Earring.*

He wandered to the day he got it, without grasping why he had.

#

Yon stood outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with his parents and all the other people waiting for the black-tie event to begin.

His father kneeled before him on the sidewalk, to fix his crooked bow tie.

“I don’t get why we had to dress up,” Yon whined.

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

“What’s so special about a painting?”

His father’s face lit up. “You get one chance to experience Vermeer for the first time.”

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

Closer he got to the painting, dragging his feet. The colors and their blends were beyond what he could imagine. They exploded at him, flooding his eyes. He wanted to play in them.

But what hit him harder was the girl’s happiness. He would often stare at it from his bed and question its source.

#

Yon came back to his bedroom, turning toward the full-length mirror in the room’s corner. A mirror similar to the one that he had avoided in his dream or whatever it was.

He avoided this one too. His eyes were on the gold chai necklace he was wearing. The one he had gotten on his *bar mitzvah.*

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

Yon gripped the pendant, the Hebrew word for “living.” Balancing for a second time his fascination and fear of Rudi, he mulled the word’s meaning.

Was it about pushing yourself from one place to the next? To keep yourself breathing for as much as possible? Or was it about attaining some end?

#

Wearing his football jacket over a white wool Polo sweater, along with the same brand of starched pleated khakis and a pair of polished black Gucci penny loafers, Yon carried his backpack down a winding wooden staircase.

His soles and heels clanked off the gleaming wood, to the beat of Julie London’s velvety voice bouncing off the walls. She was singing “Two Sleepy People” from a record playing in the living room.

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

At the stairs’ bottom, he turned right. He inched toward a wall that separated the hallway from the dining room and from a woman who had turned fifty and had her dirty-blonde hair tied in a bun.

Clad in a blue Dior dress that complemented the floral arrangement in the center of an oak table, Mrs. Levy was tapping her fingers and toes to the music from the table’s near end, her eyes everywhere but at the empty seat at its far end. A seat that would forever be empty.

She was so lonely. Was that how he would be when he was her age? Would he spend his days doing nothing other than revisiting times that could never return?

With the tenderest of mercies, the song ended.

Yon came into the room. Jostling by a cabinet, on top of which stood a sculptured stone menorah and the remains of candle wax from the previous night’s lighting, he plopped down next to his mother, dropping his backpack by his feet. He and the woman exchanged good mornings.

Elizabeth swept into the room from the kitchen, in a pristine white uniform. She served them a breakfast of omelets and hash browns and orange juice and coffee. She left the *New York Times* and the *Star Ledger* on the table with them, without reason to believe that anyone would touch either.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Levy said to her, with an aristocratic tone that she was well aware was an affectation.

Elizabeth acknowledged the acknowledgment. She went off with her silver tray into the kitchen.

Forcing a sigh, Mrs. Levy forced herself to pick up her knife and fork and eat. But with her son not doing the same, with him picking at his food, she set down her utensils. “What’s wrong?”

Yon carried on with his picking. “Nothing.”

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

He didn’t respond.

The woman sighed a second time, louder and with less force, tossing her hands onto the table. “It must be this diet kick you’re on.”

Now the sigh was Yon’s. “It’s not.”

“So what is it?”

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

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

“What about her?”

“She’s perfect for you.”

“For me or for you?”

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

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

“This girl you’ve fallen for.”

He tossed up his hands. “I haven’t fallen for her.”

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

Part of Yon wanted to laugh. But the other part grabbed his backpack off the floor. He got to his feet and took off.

“Will she be coming tonight?” his mother asked.

Yon slowed. “She’s not easy to like.”

“We have that in common.”

“You have a lot in common. More than I would’ve thought till now.”

“I’d love to meet her.”

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

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

He walked out. Though, from the wall, he returned to his mother.

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

#

Yon parked his bike in the school parking lot.

A sight startled him. He had to convince himself it was real.

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

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

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

They both laughed.

This was a bigger surprise to Yon than the two walking to school together. He had met Mariana in elementary school, but not in all the years since had she come close to a smile.

The two girls entered the building. Yon headed there himself. At the doors, another sight drew him. A red Porsche 924 was stopping on Parker.

No kid at Columbia, no matter how rich they were, went to school in a Porsche, including in what was at the time the cheapest version of it. Kids at Pingry might’ve gone to school in Porsches, but not kids there.

He stared at the car and the silhouette of someone inside it.

Someone who was staring at him.

#

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

Rudi didn’t speak. She was elsewhere.

“Rudi?”

“What?”

“Are you all right?”

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

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“I could skip stuff.”

“I want you to tell me it all.”

I was averse, more than so. But instead of starting an argument, I changed the subject. “How did you and Mariana become friends? It never made sense.”

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

“How did it happen?”

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

“‘You must want those dentures,’ I growled with my fists out when I jumped off the bus.

“She just about fainted. So I let up and told her the dog was all right. And we talked. And all that made us different, and this kept on and on, wasn’t important. What was important was that we both needed a friend. Me especially.”

#

Rudi turned more heads at lunch.

She paraded through the cafeteria’s center aisle with her tray stacked with food, wearing a faded black Springsteen T-shirt that had “sucks” scrawled over it in white paint.

The interest people were showing her that afternoon was different from the day before. The story of what she had done for the dog must’ve spread. No one was in fear of her or expressing shock at her. What they were expressing was closer to warmth.

Rudi ignored them, until she came upon someone she couldn’t ignore.

Yon’s eyes were on her, with Darlene’s arm around his.

Rudi stormed off, I’m sure pretending that she wasn’t storming.

#

Darlene humphed at the source of Yon’s captivation. She clenched his arm like she wanted to split it apart. “I thought Ms. Krasner was gonna kill her in class this morning. For twenty minutes, she argued with her over some arcane Ferlinghetti poem. Who does that?”

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

Someone who cares does that.

#

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

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

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

But Rudi glared back. She could’ve plowed through him.

She plodded past him, toward the back table. Mariana was at one end, conveying the same excitement she had that morning, and Eliot was at the other, shivering on glimpse of her, dying to make himself invisible.

With Owen keeping up his glare at Rudi, Yon felt a sensation that he never had before.

He was frightened for someone.

#

Yon’s fright hadn’t let up at lunch’s end.

He followed Rudi from the cafeteria. He couldn’t make himself not do this.

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

Jared fit in less than Rudi had but for a different reason. He came from rural Georgia and spoke with what people believed was a funny accent. But what amused them the most was how he would dress for church, wearing long-sleeved dress shirts and dress pants and a tie. He would wear this in the brutal heat. He’d clutch a dogeared Bible too, including in gym class, where he did nothing but sit and read.

To anyone at school who gave him consideration, Jared was a caricature. One they could dismiss with ease.

Rudi and Jared ambled down a corridor. They happened to turn to each other.

Yon was expecting that Rudi would treat him as she had with Owen. But she surprised Yon some more.

Despite having less in common with Jared than what she had with Mariana, Rudi did what no one in school had bothered to do. She dug beneath the caricature.

She recognized what was there. They both recognized this in the other. It was all over their faces.

With excess haste, they rambled off in different directions.

#

Yon floated from the first-floor stairwell into the corridor at the day’s end, his head spinning from that afternoon’s math class.

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

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

He got to the crowd. He pushed through it to Rudi.

She was facing Owen in her overcoat, with a chemistry book under her arm and a face many stages past apathy. She was fighting the urge to fall into a coma.

Despite this, Yon felt rage. He leapt toward Owen. Only to freeze.

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

“I’ll give you three seconds,” Rudi said to Owen. “One . . . two . . .”

Owen got toothier. “Three.”

Yawning, Rudi dropped her seabag onto the floor. With the same casualness, she took her chemistry book in both hands. She swung it across Owen’s jaw, knocking him headfirst onto the lockers and to the floor.

The physics book dangling from his paw, Owen lay in a state of semiconsciousness, with quiet clamoring through the hall. Yon could hear his own heart beat.

Rudi cocked her head toward Eliot, who was standing next to her with his mouth and eyes stretched outside their limits. She raised her brows at him. “I suggest you pick up your book. Like, right now.”

Eliot sped to Owen. He ripped the book from him. “Thanks!”

Thundering at Eliot’s jubilation with a mix of a sneer and a snarl, Rudi thrust her finger in his direction. “This doesn’t mean we’re friends or nothing.”

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

Her sneering and snarling heightening, Rudi fell to one knee. She got her bag.

Everyone’s eyes were on her.

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

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

A greater puzzlement came with it. What further could she care about and who?

Rudi stood with her bag, her glower returning. It shone on Yon like a spotlight. “What do you want?”

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

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

Yon couldn’t respond. Worse, he was certain he was blushing.

Rudi took off.

He couldn’t fight the compulsion to take a chance. It didn’t matter where it would lead him or if it meant making a fool of himself in front of someone who might not give a damn. “Please, I’ve never gotten lower than a B, and I haven’t a hint how I’ll pass the AP exam.”

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

“Don’t you fear failure?”

She didn’t answer. The two searched for words that were miles above them.

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

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

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

“*Oy vey,”* she moaned.

She lurched toward the man, who was doing his all to keep the snicker inside him from the justice Rudi had meted out.

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

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

Rudi stopped, to fling her bag over her shoulder. She fingered the frayed rope holding it together. “I’m kinda busy.”

“He’s alive!” a boy yelled.

Rudi marched toward the principal.

“Later?” Yon asked.

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

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

“—I’ll find it.”

Stomping her feet, Rudi restarted her march toward the principal and his office, swinging her arms like a gunslinger.

Yon couldn’t budge from her.

Joey interrupted this. He snagged him by the shoulder from behind. “Coach wants to talk, to all of us.”

Yon shook him off. “Not today.”

“What do you mean?”

Joey wasn’t the only one surprised by Yon’s answer. He surprised himself, being the type of person who obeyed. Yet he continued through the school doors.

Outside them, he hurtled to a halt before the same red Porsche that had been there that morning. A man in a leather jacket was leaning against the hood with his arms crossed.

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

Rudi was benign in comparison. He had but a passing resemblance to a human.

#

In a pizzeria on South Orange Avenue, Yon sulked.

With the sun setting behind his window, it was becoming obvious that Rudi had stood him up. Never had this happened to him, but this would’ve been the one occurrence of it that would’ve mattered.

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

He went back and forth over this.

Grunting, he reached for his jacket.

Rudi strutted inside.

Swirling toward a waiter, Yon got his attention. The man rushed through the kitchen doors.

Rudi came to Yon’s table. With reticence she did.

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

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

The two ran out of words. Silence hung over them.

Spying the chair across from Yon, Rudi whisked it out and flipped it around. She plopped down on it, letting her bag collapse onto the floor. But she didn’t take off her coat.

She twisted her lips. “This is not a date.”

“Of course not,” he said, persuading himself of this.

Disappointment came across her face. Was it on his too?

Also on her face was vexation. “What would your girlfriend say about this?”

“Girlfriend?”

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

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

“But what?”

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

“No.”

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

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

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

Rudi pondered him, with guardedness.

“Where you from?” he asked.

“Lots of places.”

“Such as?”

“Such as Trenton or thereabouts.”

“What are you doing here?”

She stretched her arms. Plunging her elbows onto the table and dropping her chin onto her fists, she shut her eyes. “I can’t imagine what I’m doing here. I can’t stay awake in this town.”

Yon dipped his hand into his backpack. “I can imagine what you’re doing here now, helping me with calculus.”

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

“Why would I ask you here?”

She didn’t answer.

He yanked out a heavy white textbook, sending a pair of other books onto the floor.

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

“Me too,” he said, returning the two books to his backpack. “But I read it only enough to write an essay. This time 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?”

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

Rudi crossed her arms. She crimpled her face. “Speak for yourself.”

“I am.”

Fear fell over Rudi, and Yon couldn’t figure out why.

Could it have been because she could no longer make herself believe that she was “so not him”? That she would no longer have excuses for not caring about him?

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

“How about some Cokes?”

“You got it. Just give me a few.”

“Yon!” shouted an accented voice from the restaurant’s other side.

Both Yon and Rudi swayed toward Mr. Agnellino, a wrinkled-faced man wearing a suit that hadn’t fit him in decades. He was stooping over a table with many receipts and other papers on it.

Yon waved at him.

Waving as well, Mr. Agnellino did a double-take of Rudi. Twice he did.

Rudi went back to Yon. “Everyone knows you here.”

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

Yon lobbed his head at the mushrooms and red peppers on top of the pizza. “I hope you don’t mind, I’m a . . .”

Rudi gaped at him. “Vegetarian?”

“You too?”

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

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

Rudi opened her mouth to retort. But with nothing leaving it, she shook off her coat. She pulled out a slice and blew on it.

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

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

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

Rudi took a bite. She struggled to mask how good it tasted and how this taste was exploding in her mouth. It was all over her face through more and more bites.

Yon had never observed anyone eat. Never had he reason to. He didn’t have one now. But he was amazed at how she made the act of eating unordinary. All about her was unordinary.

A silliness overcame him.

“What?” she yelped.

#

The pizza and Cokes finished, Rudi did a karate chop into the open calculus book. “So you get it? There are four variations of problems. All you have to do is identify which and follow the pattern for solving it. You don’t have to get how you’re getting it.”

“Wow,” Yon said. She had drawn a curtain that he hadn’t been able to tell was there.

Rudi edged toward the clock on the wall. “I gotta run.”

Yon’s mind remained on the book. “Yeah.”

She jumped up, tossing on her coat. He did the same with his jacket and stuffed his textbook into his backpack. Leaving some money on the table, he and Rudi staggered toward the door, with Rudi carrying her seabag by its rope.

He stretched out for words, grabbing the first he could. “It’s amazing how easy you make calculus.”

“It *is* easy when you stop fearing it, making it the same as any other fear.”

The two reached the entrance. Yon reached for Rudi’s hand.

He stopped himself, opening the door for her.

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

Yon held the door open.

With accentuated disquiet, Rudi pushed herself outside, slinging her seabag over her shoulder. She slung it with such force that the tattered rope broke. The bag fell to the ground, its contents spewing out. Making matters crueler, there was a breeze, enough to blow her belongings around.

“*Oy vey!”* she squealed. Kneeling onto the sidewalk, she stuffed her stuff into the bag.

A balled page rolled to Yon’s foot. He snatched it and uncrumpled it, exposing her drawing of him.

Never had his image rendered so. She’d captured what no photograph or mirror could: the bright-eyed boy climbing out from under the trappings to discover what was there. More remarkable than the drawing itself was how she could see in him what he couldn’t. It sent him tumbling into a fog.

Rudi ripped the paper from him. “That’s mine!”

She sprinted off.

“Thank you,” he said.

She did a half revolution toward him and quaked. “Thank me for what?”

He flicked his finger at the drawing.

Fumbling about, she whipped the paper behind her back, her face turning shades of scarlet and vermilion. They were burning through her powder-white makeup. “It’s not you! It’s Lee Ving!”

“I couldn’t guess who that is.”

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

Yon laughed, making Rudi madder. “What’s-so-funny?”

“That punk girls blush.”

Floored, Rudi took a step back and another, seeking a response that wasn’t coming.

He stepped toward her. “Or that they could make me blush. I had no idea that they read poetry and help bullied kids and stray dogs and . . . jaded football players.”

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

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

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

“I kinda do,” he said. But what he had wanted to say was, “I really do. I want this more than I want to breathe.” He wanted to holler it. But the only hollering he did was across a page of his journal.

“You shouldn’t,” her voice echoed into the night.

She followed it.

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

#

This time Rudi interrupted the story.

She told me that “who she was” wasn’t as important as “where.” She had gotten lost.

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

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

“And that was?”

She groaned. “It was figuring out his angle. Everyone had one and that he didn’t was driving me crazy.”

The pause on the line made me lean forward. “And?”

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

#

So lost was Rudi that it took her twice the time to get back to the school than it had taken her from it.

At the bus stop on Valley not far from this, she knotted the rope of her bag.

A noise sent her spinning toward the school parking lot.

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

“What are you doing here?” she shouted.

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

“What a shock.”

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

“What?”

“They stopped running a while ago.”

“That’s wonderful. Tripleplusgood.”

Flapping her arms, Rudi motored down Valley.

“Is that from *Dr. Strangelove?”* Eliot asked.

“Close.”

“I could give you a ride.”

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

“Where’s that?”

“Near Irvington.”

“I live *in* Irvington.”

#

Eliot made a left. The car lumbered that way and somehow in one piece.

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

“What’s so crazy about that?”

“Take a gander at me.”

“I am taking one.”

Taking one at another sight, Rudi swatted her arm down the road. “Behind that blue sedan.”

He parked.

She opened her door. “Thanks.”

“Sure, anytime.”

She jumped outside, waiting for a reason she couldn’t fathom.

“Tomorrow,” she said.

He inclined toward her. He was falling over. “Tomorrow?”

“At lunch.”

Eliot’s delirium surged out. “Yeah?”

“Just don’t push it.”

#

Yon entered school in the morning, stopping in the corridor.

Rudi was outside the girls’ bathroom with her hands on her hips. “You have to come out sometime.”

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

“The best ones aren’t.”

Mariana didn’t respond.

“Come on,” Rudi pleaded, “you look amazing.”

The door squeaked back.

Mariana slithered out. Or someone who resembled her.

This Mariana was wearing makeup. It was but a touch. On any other girl, you wouldn’t have picked it up. But on her, you couldn’t help it.

“What are you doing with that makeup?” the principal barked from his door.

Both girls rocketed themselves toward him. Mariana lowered her eyes, as far as they would go. “Nothing, Daddy.”

Rudi fell back. “Daddy?”

The principal stomped toward Rudi. Yon was certain that he would strangle her. His hands were moments from her throat. “Is there anything in this school you haven’t corrupted?”

“You.”

#

Rudi paraded through the cafeteria’s center aisle with her pile of food.

This afternoon, no one cared.

Yon, who was behind her and straying toward his usual table with his own lunch, sensed her curiosity. Her head rotated left and right.

She discovered the reason behind the lack of interest in her, coming upon the table where Owen was roosting, with his head on his arms and a barrage of paper balls hitting him from all directions.

Lingering nearby, Rudi peeked at him.

Yon peeked too, at her growing conflict. He couldn’t guess its source.

She grunted. “That’s enough.”

The assault went on.

Rudi repeated her command, louder and firmer.

The paper balls ceased.

With another grunt, she sat across from Owen. She talked to him.

Snowballing past curious, Yon sat at a table across the aisle from them.

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

Owen didn’t speak or react.

She wheezed. “Come on, lift that chin.”

“So you can punch it?”

“Better karma. I need better karma.”

Owen raised his head. He did so with less enthusiasm than a dog gets into a tub of water. But he got it over the table.

The two regarded one another, displaying an innocuousness uncommon to them both.

This ended. Eliot brought his lunch next to Rudi, his hair like hers, black and spiked.

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

“What’s a Quincy Punk?” Eliot asked.

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

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

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

Eliot dove toward it, his eyes ablaze. So excited was he that he dropped off his chair. “I want one of those.”

Owen winked at Rudi. “We’re creating a delinquent.”

Heading toward the three with her lunch was Mariana. She was more different than earlier. In addition to that makeup, she had confidence. Not only Tommy noted it. So did a lanky redheaded girl who moseyed by her.

Mariana swam in the attention, all the way to the seat across from Eliot. “I’d get a tattoo too. But I’m already grounded till next century.”

#

The four bantered. Nonstop they did.

They weren’t the coolest kids that afternoon or the best looking or the most athletic, but their presence drew the entire lunchroom. They were the midpoint of their world. This included the principal’s.

Marching into the cafeteria, he wasn’t pleased. He charged toward them.

Magic happened. All four laughed. They laughed the way friends do when they’ve been friends forever and not because of some crazy-looking girl from Trenton.

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

The laughter died down. Rudi got wind of Jared a few tables over, who had only his Bible to keep him company. His loneliness reminded Yon of his mother’s that morning.

Jared couldn’t avert his eyes from the four, no matter how he feigned otherwise.

Rudi was ignoring him. But she had no more success than she had with Owen. So she waved him toward their table.

Jared pointed to himself, expressing a meekness that was amplifying itself. “Me?”

“Yes, you!” she bellowed, expressing no meekness at all.

With tentativeness he rose. He stammered to them with his lunch, his tentativeness doubling with each second that passed. It was taking him forever to get there.

Realizing that Rudi wasn’t going to let anyone eat alone, Yon started for their table with his tray.

Rudi turned his way. All eyes at the table did.

Embarrassed, Yon scurried off.

“What’s going on with you and Yon Levy?” Mariana yapped.

Rudi took her time in answering. “Would you believe partial fraction decomposition?”

“No.”

Happiness came over Yon. A gust of it propelled him forward.

#

Yon’s happiness hadn’t subsided at the day’s end.

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

But upon his floating from the stairwell on the first floor, there was no Rudi or any commotion or disturbance. An eerie normalcy hung over the hallway.

He traipsed through it and the building’s front doors.

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

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” she screeched, suppressing her fright and flailing at it.

The man paused. For less than an iota he did.

Slapping Rudi across the face with the back of his hand, he expressed a cold-bloodedness that made evident that this was the least he could do.

The blow knocked Rudi backward. It sent her wobbling.

Yon leapt toward them. But like with Owen the day earlier, he froze. This time from the handgun in the man’s waist.

It wasn’t the gun itself that froze him. It was the future that it played out in his mind, of that peaked and skeletal and doomed frame.

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

“Deke!” she pleaded.

Deke threw open the passenger door. He pushed Rudi inside the car and slammed the door. Coming around to the other side, he scowled at Yon and jumped into the driver’s seat.

He sped off, from the parking lot and down Parker.

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

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

But the better part of him woke. It got him to his bike and down Parker. It brought him to the end of it.

The Porsche was nowhere. But Yon kept onward by veering right onto Clinton. He drove down it to the stop sign at the intersection of Sanford, where a handful of blocks away was Springfield Avenue, among the main thoroughfares in the area.

Deke’s car wasn’t in sight. Yon couldn’t determine whether this disappointed or relieved him. But he steered onto Sanford anyway.

At the corner of Springfield, he squinted down the busy street. The Porsche wasn’t to his left. But to his right it was, off in the distance.

He raced toward it, without checking the road, in the path of an oncoming car.

Swinging his body from it, he missed the car but headed for a parked one.

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

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

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

He stayed hidden. He lost track of time.

Rudi sprang from the car, caked in fear. She shut the door and ran into the house.

The Porsche took off, exposing the blue sedan parked in front of it.

Now what?

Yon was unsure. But he got off his bike. He staggered toward her house, moving as if pushing himself through a hurricane. With each step, this became more accentuated. He was moving slower than Jared had in the lunchroom.

He got to her door. There was no bell, so he knocked. A couple of times he did.

This accomplished nothing. Banging on the door accomplished the same.

“Rudi?” he yelled.

Quiet was all that came back.

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

He passed the side of Rudi’s house. A backyard was behind it.

Unable to do otherwise, he teetered toward it.

#

Confused by what I had read, I asked Rudi how she could not hear Yon banging on her door and yelling her name.

“I wasn’t there. I was so frightened when I ran into that house. The walls were closing in and collapsing onto me. I was panicking for a way out.

“I ransacked the place for one. I ripped it apart. But there wasn’t so much as a bottle of aspirin or a warm can of beer. All I could do was what I did when I was a kid. I slunk under the bed. I also cranked Richard Hell on my Walkman. I cranked it so that I wouldn’t’ve noticed an apocalypse.”

#

“Rudi?” Yon called out, creeping alongside her house’s cracked wall. One that might’ve fallen apart if touched.

There was no answer. But sounds were coming from inside the house.

He repeated himself and louder.

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

Whipping himself toward it, he confronted the man who had ushered Rudi to school on her first day. The guy with the crew cut and pockmarked face, who was wearing another off-the-rack blue suit and was holding a gun at Yon’s head.

Yon raised his hands, as high as they would go. In such a state was he that his life didn’t flash before him. Only death had. It was a pull of a trigger away.

“You with them?” the man growled.

Yon willed himself to keep from shaking. He squeezed out an answer. “With . . . with what?”

The man didn’t respond. He examined Yon, from his toes to his fingertips.

Maintaining his glare, he pulled out a badge from his jacket. He showed it to him. “FBI. Take off while you can.”

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

But he slowed by the Maplewood Public Library on Baker Street. He rolled onto its lot and parked.

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

Why would the FBI be involved?

His other certainty was that the answer to this question would only be in the building next to him.

He got off the bike. He scooted up the ramp and into the library and to the Reference section. In the days before the web, the lone means of learning about a recent event was the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*. It indexed articles from hundreds of magazines and journals.

A librarian directed him to an aisle containing copious volumes of these books going back decades. At the aisle’s end were lesser versions of more recent editions. He took down the last few months and brought them to a table. He skimmed through them.

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

*Such as Trenton or thereabouts*.

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

No articles referenced the city. So he went through the other books. In one from November, he came upon an entry for a *Newsweek* story: “Punk Rock Turns Deadly.”

His arms thrashing about, Yon sprinted to the magazine stacks near the library’s entrance. He grabbed the issue.

He sifted through its pages. Passing an article about the mysterious illness that had been afflicting the gay community, he came to what he had been seeking. Under the headline was a mugshot of Deke.

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

The “unnamed teenage girl” could be but one person.

Yon dropped both his head and the magazine. “She *is* a monster.”

#

Void seeped from the desert. It seeped into a bleakness engulfing the courtyard and suffocating me.

My breath pierced it.

“That, that’s all,” I said, dragging the last page behind the others.

Rudi didn’t speak.

I asked her if she was all right.

She didn’t speak to this either.

“I said it before, I can skip—”

“—I want to hear it all,” she interrupted.

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

“All of it,” she screamed with a fury unchanged in thirty-five years.

“No.”

“What?”

“I said, no.”

“You can’t . . .”

“I can’t what?”

“You can’t do this to me,” she cried, her voice splintering. “He was my *bashert*. My *destiny*. And . . .”

“And what?”

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

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

“You’re not the only one who can disappear,” she shrieked. “I can disappear a whole lot better than you. And for longer!”

“What?”

She didn’t answer.

“What does that mean?” I gasped. I was forever sure that Rudi was stronger than me. But what if she wasn’t?

“You won’t get away with skipping a comma,” her voice rasped. “You won’t.”

Now it was my turn not to speak.

“Call me when you get the letter,” she babbled.

She hung up.

I couldn’t move. All I could do was curse the pages in front of me, praying them away, along with myself. I only stopped when the shelter’s gate and its clanging roused me.

Kitty slithered inside, a woman in her twenties. So wispy was she that a stiff wind could’ve blown her away.

Like some other women in the shelter, she worked at an Amazon fulfillment center down the hill in San Bernardino. They all worked ridiculous hours, getting home late at night.

She neared me.

“Hey,” I said.

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

“You okay?” I asked.

Without responding, she accelerated into the dorm.

I pretended to ignore this. I folded Yon’s pages. Shoving them into the envelope, I followed Kitty into the building so I could go through my ritual with Josh.

It was no surprise that I had to wait. But the reason was different from normal.

Josh was talking behind his closed door to Kitty, who was more doe-like than before.

Shaking, she reached into her back pocket and pulled out some cash. She offered it to Josh, shaking more.

He ripped it from her hand and counted each bill. He counted them twice.

the third night

I brought my cup of green tea into the courtyard that morning, deciding what to do about Yon’s journal and Rudi.

The sun was out, but it wasn’t yellow. A wildfire in neighboring Riverside County had turned it ashen, along with the sky and the booths and the flies swarming around them.

That didn’t stop people from swatting the flies. Not a second went by without a *whhhaaackkk*.

At the corner table, Nichelle and Wendy were scarfing down cigarettes and coffee. But they weren’t as upbeat as they had been the day before.

Wendy shook. “I can’t believe she’d leave like that.”

I joined them. “Who left?”

Nichelle spun toward me. “Kitty. She left in the middle of the night.”

“Why?” I asked next, with surprise.

Wendy growled. “That’s what we’re trying to figure out. She was gone this morning, with all her stuff.”

“I heard someone crying,” Nichelle said. “It woke me.”

Wendy dropped her fists onto the table. “Someone’s crying every night.”

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

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

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

Wendy shook for a second time. For a second time she growled. “She would’ve told us or texted us or returned one of ours. She wouldn’t’ve left like that.”

Nichelle eyed me. “She’s the third woman who has since I’ve been here. A few weeks ago it was Jill.”

“Before that it was Corinne,” Wendy added.

Over the years, I had witnessed lots of terrible. I believed that I’d become numb to it. Nothing, no matter how bad it was, could unnerve or upset me. But for some reason this did both. I couldn’t get why.

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

Nichelle leaned toward her. “We need a cake.”

“Josh said he’d get us one.”

“He did?”

“He told us last night that he gets a veteran’s discount at a bakery by his house.”

#

The women who had left the shelter were rattling inside my brain on the buses to work. Kitty the most. I couldn’t hide from her or her fright.

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

Doing my best to ignore the loudness and the inanity of their exchange, I mumbled, “*Cui bono?”*

“What’s that?” Mateo asked.

“It’s Latin for *who benefits?* Who could benefit from these women vanishing from the shelter?”

Mateo shifted from me.

“What’s going on?”

He shifted farther. “Forget about it. You can’t change it, and it’s not the worst he’s done.”

“Someone at the shelter did something to them?”

Mateo said nothing.

“Who?”

He said more nothing.

“Josh?”

Mateo turned back to me. He shook his head. But I couldn’t tell whether he was shaking it at my question.

“We should tell someone,” I said.

He gave me a sideways glance. “Someone working in the shelter? You might as well have chickens complain to the foxes.”

“We could tell someone outside it.”

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

“But—”

“—Forget about it, if you want to keep a roof over yourself and your job.”

“What?”

“Before you came, there was this guy. He couldn’t have been older than twenty. But he already had a wife and three kids. During a cubby check, they fished out an empty Grolsch bottle from his. The kind with those fancy ceramic caps. He had picked it up somewhere because 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 their kids, if they’d send them into the streets over trash, what would they do to someone who made the slightest tremor in the water? And don’t fool yourself into believing that you’ll hold down your job on the streets. You won’t.”

“But—”

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

#

I wiped the moisture from my forehead, climbing toward the third floor with my mop. Which I plunged into the yellow pail of hot water waiting for me on the landing. It was close to the day’s end, but I had two other staircases to mop.

Here I was over fifty, exhausted in many ways, running around, doing a job similar to those I had as a teenager, and I questioned if I would ever not be doing it. I questioned if I’d be stuck in this awful desert, with all the awfulness inside it, for the same forty years as the Hebrews of old. Above all this, I questioned why I was doing it.

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

Fear prevented it, of what struck each morning before dawn and of what had struck worse before I got a job. The lone cure for it scared me the most.

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

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

#

I finished late and missed my first bus, leaving me with time before the next one came. *Mucho tiempo*. It’s the single element homeless people have too much of.

Lacking a better option, I took my bagged lunch, along with my self-pity, into the conference room. I flipped on the light.

I wasn’t alone. Sania was on the floor in a corner, gawking at her phone in tears.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out.

Embarrassed, she jumped to her feet. She ran from the room.

I stepped back. “Sania?”

She kept running.

This on its own was enough to stop me from feeling sorry for myself.

#

The afternoon was a futile quest to glean sense from what had happened in the conference room.

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

Only on stepping into the dining hall that night was I reminded that it was Friday. Rich and his merry band of volunteers were serving dinner, making me forget all but it.

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

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

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

Now I didn’t mind it so much.

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

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

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

#

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

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

I tipped my head toward the seat across from him. “*Mogu li k vam prisoedinit’sya?”*

Mels assented. “*S udovol’stviyem*.”

I joined Mels, another volunteer at the shelter, who had been a client of it years back.

Mels was as different from me as Rich, and not because of where he was from. Each day he wore a Donald Trump T-shirt. He went to church in them. He must’ve had dozens because he never wore the same one. He had Trump socks as well, and I cringed at what he might’ve been wearing under his pants.

But I adored him anyway because he tolerated my pidgin Russian.

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

Or could it have been that, with a name like his, he wasn’t that particular?

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

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

What the music meant to Mels was apparent that evening. It had etched itself onto him.

The song he had been listening to reached its end. I asked him if he could play “Koni priveredlivye.” He obliged.

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

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

I’ve loved the song from the first I had heard it. Mikhail Baryshnikov danced to it in the film *White Nights*. Each version I’ve experienced since has been different. But none moved me like the one in the courtyard.

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

#

Cleaning the dining hall bathrooms, I ran into Hank and smirked. “Let me guess what you were up to today?”

“Go ahead.”

“You walked to San Francisco and back.”

“Too easy.”

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

Upon hearing of this, I chalked it up as another tall tale, among the many I’ve heard from homeless people. Till 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 had also spent semesters at MIT, and he had mad carpentry and electrical skills. He was more of an anomaly at the shelter than I was. But I figure he was another of us who couldn’t keep lashing their horses forward.

#

I turned from Hank.

Someone fist-bumped me. His fist swallowed mine.

Brawny with a bald head and a mustache and *mi vida loca* tats by his eye, Mario was someone who could’ve stared down the Devil. But he was the sweetest guy in the shelter. Not a person there had he not taken under his ample wings when they’d arrived. He made us all feel safe and welcome.

The two of us would often tease each other over our shared experiences. Tonight it was his turn. “Pastor Vic was here for you.”

“Yeah?”

“He’s expecting you. All you gotta bring are knee pads and a toothbrush. The knee pads are optional.”

#

Wanting to make sure that I would get Yon’s letter that night, I got into the check-in line before Gerry. I got into it well before him, and I kept checking for him over my shoulder.

Josh was off that night. A new guy named Bob was working in his place.

I could feel the lack of stress as we waited. I got Yon’s letter without hassle, taking it to the corner booth.

Tearing open the envelope, I remembered that I hadn’t decided whether to keep reading the story to Rudi. I had been avoiding the decision.

I was avoiding it now.

*I can disappear a whole lot better than you*.

I feared the story and what it could do to both Rudi and me. But I feared more not telling her. I also couldn’t deny that I was eager to discover the envelope’s contents.

Pulling out the entries, I chose to wing it. I plugged in my phone and called Rudi.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“For what?” I asked with feigned ignorance.

“For getting mad.”

“It’s all right. But you shouldn’t be going through this.”

“But you’re gonna tell me it anyway.”

“But I’m gonna tell you it anyway.”

#

On the morning after reading the *Newsweek* article, Yon felt the same sickness he had the night before. It rose with the gray skies over his home. It dangled above him.

He couldn’t shake the sickness off. It overwhelmed him so that his fate was no longer on his mind.

Hate was.

This hadn’t eased on leaving his house. But he had no idea what to do about it.

So he stayed away from Rudi. He got to school late and didn’t go to lunch, spending the hour hiding in the library.

But he couldn’t stay away from her in Calculus class. Before it started, he sat in his usual front-row seat, staring into space.

How would he react to her? Would he curse? Would he demand an explanation?

Neither. She had killed a Jew or had participated in it. There could be no rationalization of it, no excuse for it. He would never speak to her. He told himself this twice and repeated it three more times.

The bell rang.

Rudi staggered into the classroom, shaken from what had happened with Deke.

Ignoring this, or pretending to, Yon kept straight ahead. But he couldn’t conceal his disgust.

Surprised by it, she dragged herself toward the back wall. With the surprise came another reaction. One that surprised him.

Hurt.

How could you hurt a monster?

All he was certain of was that he had.

#

Yon took a different approach the next day. He acted as if Rudi hadn’t come into his life.

At lunch, he was listening to his friends’ dumb jokes and was telling some. With his eyes meeting Darlene’s, he pleaded with himself to feel the slightest toward her.

A commotion interrupted the two, whisking them toward it.

Rudi had bumped into someone, sending her tray to the floor. A tray close to empty.

She lifted it and piled hate onto Yon. But it couldn’t mask the same hurt as before. It accentuated it.

Yon wasn’t the only one attentive to this. Mirth fell over Darlene. She wrapped her arm around Yon’s. She wrapped it like a snake.

He turned from them both and himself.

“What is your problem?” Joey bellowed to Rudi from the table’s other side.

She marched off.

“That’s right. Run away, loser. Not all of us are scared of you or that sucker punch you threw. I’d like you to try that with me.”

Rudi continued her marching. But she slowed.

Lis slumped past her, with her head down.

Like she had with Jared days earlier, Rudi recognized a trait in the girl. Only she recognized it.

#

“Many have attacked Leibniz for arguing in *Theodicy* that we live in ‘the best of all possible worlds,’” Mr. Little said to the class from behind his desk, “most famously and brutally Voltaire in *Candide*.”

Yon heard this, but he wasn’t listening. He was going through the same motions he had in all his classes.

The bearded man raised himself from his chair. “But is this fair? After all, he wasn’t saying we live in a perfect world. A man smart enough to discover calculus must’ve seen that it wasn’t.

“What he was saying is that it’s not possible to imagine a world better than what we’ve got. If you don’t believe him, try conceiving one. I bet you can’t, and it’s because of free will. The single means of removing the suffering and ugliness in our world is by eliminating free will. It’s the reason bad happens. But it’s also what brings us good and the infinite possibilities that come with each next moment. What’s more, if we could eliminate the bad, we’d never appreciate the good or realize how precious each of our finite moments are.”

The teacher returned to his seat. He swiveled on it from left to right. “Along with free will, we have life and all that makes it worth living: poetry and music and art. We have love. Best of all, we have Pink Bubblegum Ice Cream at Baskin-Robbins this month.”

Some in class laughed.

Yon didn’t, but he was listening. He was also imagining those infinite possibilities. He was imagining one, no matter how impossible it was.

#

Yon got home late from school. He had become so lost in himself that he couldn’t remember driving.

Slithering through his front door, he stopped outside the living room and came out of his daze. His mother had a guest: an old movie on TV.

A year earlier, she would’ve never been doing this. But it wasn’t unusual anymore. She had given up living. Apart from making out her will, all she did these days was listen to Julie London and watch old movies and go shopping. They were the circle of havens where she could escape, to before the summer and from all that came after it.

Her companion that afternoon was *Miracle on 34th Street*. Having nothing better to do, Yon leaned against a wall in the hallway and joined them.

Santa was speaking Dutch with the refugee girl. They sang a Christmas song together with her on his lap.

His mother was crying. This was more out of character for her. Through the whole awful summer that had passed, she didn’t cry. She didn’t when he was doing it all the time. Yon believed that nothing could get to her, like that other someone.

But she was as human as her.

#

I got curious about that “other someone.”

“What were you doing during this?” I asked Rudi.

“I wasn’t doing.”

But I would learn this was an exaggeration.

#

Rudi had convinced herself that Yon’s change toward her didn’t matter, that she had expected it.

But she couldn’t deny the funk she was in and that all her treads had flattened. The one way of lifting them was going to the animal hospital and calling on the dog she had helped rescue.

The dog would brighten her. Visiting her was stepping into a flashlight. Despite all the pain and misery that dog must’ve been feeling, she would go nuts when Rudi showed up. She wouldn’t stop licking her and wagging her tail.

I believe that this wasn’t all to these visits. A lot of Rudi was in that dog, left at an early age to fend for herself without the means of doing so. This must’ve drawn her.

“You better be careful,” the vet said to Rudi, passing her caressing the napping pup on her lap. “You’ll get attached.”

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

“Not yet.”

“How much longer does she have to stay?”

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

“He did?”

“He’s pretty nice.”

Rudi didn’t react.

The vet gushed. “He’s pretty handsome too.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

#

Rudi didn’t visit the dog only by herself. On weekends, she would go with Mariana when she volunteered at the hospital.

One afternoon, she went with someone other.

She was waiting for the bus by the school. Owen came. The two exchanged heys and turned toward the road.

“Where you heading?” he asked.

“The animal hospital.”

“You sick?”

Rudi laughed, 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. Over and over she did, wagging her tail.

“She likes me,” he said, not believing it.

Rudi petted the dog’s head. “They can tell when someone’s nice.”

“No one’s ever called me that.”

“I know what that’s like.”

“I bet she wouldn’t be licking me if she knew about my record.”

“She doesn’t care about mine.”

“We have a lot in common. Other than that you’re smart.”

“You’re not so dumb.”

“They held me back in fifth grade. Twice.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re dumb.”

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

“What do you want?”

“I don’t want to quit, that’s what I want. But it ain’t so simple.”

“Why?”

Owen inched away. “I . . . I don’t read so good.”

Rudi hesitated. “I could help you.”

Surprised, he inched back to her. “You’d do that?”

“Someone helped me. We all need help at times.”

“I wouldn’t have believed that you ever needed help.”

“You’d be wrong.”

Their eyes met. They stayed this way until Owen’s went astray.

#

Rudi and Owen faltered toward the bus stop. His sight was in all directions but on her.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He wouldn’t tell her. But she wouldn’t let up.

“I saw how Yon was ignoring you,” he said. “I would never do that.”

Thrown off, Rudi became quiet. She hung her sight in all directions but on him.

Owen stammered. “I, I’d be good to you. I swear I would.”

She stayed quiet.

Becoming embarrassed, he started off. “I better go.”

She shouted his name, but he moved faster, with more fright. More than he could’ve ever invoked.

#

Yon returned to the same loathing that he had felt before meeting Rudi, to all in his horizon, above all of himself.

Would he ever feel different?

One day he could.

He was wandering through a hallway between classes. Rudi was doing the same in the direction of Joey, who was arguing with Lis, much as they had been doing of late. But it was louder than normal, with greater animation, and panic was on the girl’s face.

That wasn’t all on her face. One of her eyes was swollen.

Yon wasn’t the only person who spotted it. Rudi came upon the pair. Her gaze fell upon the girl and Joey, who dumped scorn onto her. “Run away, loser.”

That was about what she did. She trudged off as if she didn’t care.

Lis took off. But Joey grabbed her arm. He hoisted his at her. “You’re still not getting it! But you will!”

Rudi halted, feigning an allusion to a pause.

Turning around, she strode behind Joey. “I’d like you to try that with me.”

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

She dodged it.

Hitting a locker, he squawked in pain. He let go of Lis.

She sprinted down the hallway. So frantic was she to get away that she ran into Jared exiting a stairway.

“I’m so sorry,” he cried, his whole body wobbling.

She didn’t say a word. But she calmed in his gentleness and scurried down the hall.

Yon returned to Rudi and to Joey, who cocked his fist back with his face bright red. “Try to miss this one.”

“There won’t be a ‘this one,’” she said with matter-of-factness. Swinging her leg into his groin, she sent him to the floor squealing in pain.

“WHY?” Yon wrote when describing this in his journal, filling half a page. It made no sense. It made less when he remembered how Lis had been snickering at Rudi on her first day of school.

But it makes sense to me. Rudi wasn’t doing it for Lis. She was doing it for all the Lises. All the ones who couldn’t fight back. That included herself.

With a cold stare, Rudi stood over Joey, squirming on the floor. She put her hands on her hips. “It’s not fun when the girl hits too, is it?”

His only response was to continue to squirm.

She wandered off. “Next time I won’t be so nice.”

Rudi’s apathy returned.

But she wasn’t fooling Yon, who could no longer fool himself.

#

Yon parked his bike in the school lot the following morning.

Rudi approached the building. Without acknowledgment, she passed him straddling his seat. He wasn’t there.

I suppose this was like the scene from *The Third Man*, where Alida Valli walks past Joseph Cotten, never to take notice of him, at that instant or ever.

That was how the movie ended. But Yon’s story couldn’t end with that kind of perfection, regardless of how he wanted it to.

Rudi entered school.

Yon remained on his bike. He waited, for nothing in particular.

The bell for first period rang. He went inside. Not bothering with his locker, he went straight to his computer class.

Through its door, he poked his head.

People were punching cards, like they did each day.

Escaping this, Yon stumbled off. He stumbled down the hall and down the stairwell to the second floor. He stumbled down that corridor too, cognizant of where he was stumbling toward.

“I was impressed by some of your poems,” came Ms. Krasner’s voice.

Yon raced to the room’s doorway. Rudi was slouching in the back row with her arms crossed.

The teacher handed papers to the class. She stopped by Rudi, with a frown and one last page. “Of course, there was some substandard work.”

Rudi slouched lower.

The teacher dropped the paper before her. “This wasn’t one of those.”

Shocked, Rudi raised herself toward the “A+” on the page’s top.

Krasner stared daggers at the poem. Lots of them. “I expected to hate this. Boy, did I. But, damn you, girl, you gave me no choice. It’s too bad Cummings died before you were born. You two are coupled souls. Fellow punks.”

Yon’s curiosity dipped him forward. He read the poem’s opening verses.

*so tall*

*yet never reaches the floor*

*so sure*

*but cant say*

*what he wants*

Rising above curious, Yon dipped further, to read the remaining lines. He was toppling over.

Rudi turned toward the door. She turned to Yon like she had when he had been there last.

Becoming overwrought, beyond what he was, she slung the poem behind her back.

The teacher leaned over, to discover the source of Rudi’s upheaval.

“Can I help you?” she growled at Yon.

He rushed off.

“Apparently,” Krasner’s voice rang out from the classroom into the hall, “Ms. Weiss had inspiration for her poem.”

#

Rudi interrupted the story, with a laugh.

I had to ask. “What’s so funny?”

“That’s not exactly what the teacher said. I kinda remember her saying, ‘Ms. Weiss had inspiration for her poem. A very cute one.’”

#

Yon didn’t sleep that night. He tossed himself around, wanting to make the words of Rudi’s poem disappear or not matter.

His tossing hadn’t ceased with daybreak. He tossed from side to side and down and up.

Why couldn’t a monster write that poem? Were they not capable of beauty?

He remembered the music class that he had taken years before. The teacher one morning played the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*. They were the most beautiful sounds he had ever heard.

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

By the time his alarm clock rang, Yon had come up with all the excuses he needed to believe that nothing had changed. He had free will too. Exceeding all that, he had fear.

Yet he jumped to his waist and off his bed, into the shower. He had no delusions as to why.

#

The garage door opened, exposing a silver Jaguar and a gold Mercedes convertible as well as the Harley parked between them.

This sped onto the driveway with Yon. It sped down Overhill Road and all the way to Rudi’s house. Hiding behind the old burgundy pickup truck, he waited.

He couldn’t say what he would say to Rudi, but he was hopeful words would come. Any had to be better than none.

She and the FBI agent left the house. They meandered toward the blue sedan.

Rudi wasn’t wearing her coat despite the cold. But what was more obvious was how frightened she was and how she was dying not to show it.

The sedan drove off.

Yon followed it, a good distance back. Not to school but along Springfield Avenue, all the way to Downtown Newark.

The car reached the courthouse on Federal Square. It steered into a multilevel garage across the street.

Yon went up the road. He parked in a lot on street level and waited a second time.

Rudi and the FBI agent left the garage. They crossed the street into the courthouse.

Yon followed them. He continued his waiting by the courthouse doors.

With the day burning at full might, Rudi exited the building with the FBI agent and a man who had an expensive haircut and an expensive charcoal three-piece suit. They all stopped by a set of steps.

“The grand jury should issue an indictment in the next few days,” the man in charcoal said to Rudi. “We’ll bring you back when the trial starts.”

“If I’m alive,” she whined.

She slunk down the stairs, followed by the FBI agent, who sneered at her the whole way to the garage.

#

The blue sedan slowed by Columbia on Valley Road.

Rudi hopped out. Without bothering to close the door, she scampered toward the school.

The FBI agent shut the door and drove off.

Yon jumped the curb. He rode over a patch of grass to the parking lot. He slipped beside Rudi.

She shone the same hurt as before. “What do you want?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, idling the bike.

She pressed on toward the school.

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

Rudi froze. “What?”

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

Swinging herself toward Yon, she shook her fists at him. “Have you been following me?”

“Ever since you got here, I was sure . . . I was sure that I was figuring out who you were. But it’s me I’ve been figuring out.”

“And who are you?” she snapped.

Yon recited her poem, word for word.

*so tall*

*yet never reaches the floor*

*so sure*

*but cant say*

*what he wants*

*every kiss*

*every blush*

*every broken heart*

*i wanna shout him outside in*

*i wanna SCREAM him through the walls*

*i wanna make him see*

*what i see*

*the what i see*

*when i see me*

Yon rode to Rudi and her startle. “I’m the guy in the picture you drew.”

She kept silent.

He lurched toward her, startling her more than his reciting had. It scared her too, enough to jump back.

“Or I want to be,” he let out.

With a tentative step, she drew near him, unsure of herself and of him. She was about to cry. “You made me feel so . . .”

“I’m sorry.” He struggled to make out his voice.

She took another step toward him. The two plunged forward.

But the school bell rang, ceasing them both.

Rudi shook her head. “I wanna be anywhere but in class.”

“I’ve got the best anywhere.”

#

Rudi focused on the waterfall, from the rocks she and Yon were hanging over in the South Mountain Reservation. A woodlands preserve that stood in contrast to the state’s overdeveloped image.

“I met Deke in the hospital we were sent to clean up,” she said over the rushing water. “It feels like forever ago, but it was no more than six months back. He didn’t impress me, but he did give me my name.”

Yon gaped at her. “What do you mean?”

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

“What’s your real name?”

“One that makes me chuck.”

Rudi heaved a breath. “A whole lot was making me chuck. Nothing was going on but drugs, and they were making me chuck. So, after I got out of the hospital, I visited Deke.”

She paused, forcing her eyes from the water onto the trees around them. “He was cranking ‘Blank Generation’ by Richard Hell on this gigantic stereo outside his house. He cranked it for twenty minutes. He cranked it so that I heard it five blocks away.”

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

“It’s my favorite. Listening to it is the one time I’m not alone. The one time there’s someone like me. I’ve got an infinite tape of it in my bag. So there’s always a good song on.”

“I like it too.”

Now it was Rudi’s turn to gape. “You do?”

“That was the one time I heard it, but yeah. It’s stupid, but I swore . . . I swore that you were singing about me.”

Rudi returned to the waterfall. “Deke played some Iggy next and X and the Adolescents, and the hook was in. Worse than drugs. It was the first substitute I had for them. In some ways, it was better. It lasted longer, and the only aftereffects were bruises.

“I’d spend days at Deke’s listening to records. He had hundreds. He stole them all. He also stole a copy of *The Decline of Western Civilization* and a projector. We played that movie on his living room wall a jillion times. Some nights we’d run it all night. I can imitate each inflection on Lee Ving’s face when he sings.

“The music was light, surging through me, making me ten feet tall. It made me into someone who wasn’t a victim. Someone no one was pushing around and who was never afraid. Someone who could splatter the world under her boot and breathe a bonfire. Most of all, the music got me from each day to the next and to and from each rottenness.”

Yon lowered his eyes. “It didn’t matter, it didn’t matter that Deke hated Jews?”

She got angry. “It didn’t. I could give you a bunch of excuses. My mom raised me on that crap. But I never questioned it, not with her or my stepdad and not with Deke and his friends. I buried my head in myself. I pretended that it had nothing to do with me.”

The conversation fell quiet. They both went back to the water, avoiding what they both needed to talk about.

This broke. Yon blurted out, “What about the kid that got killed?”

Rudi struggled to answer. She had to close and open her eyes a number of times. “Deke, he would put on shows in his house with local bands. I was dealing for him at them. A pair of college kids showed up one night, and I sold them some weed. I talked to one, and we danced. It was nothing, but Deke got jealous. And when he learned they were from a Jewish fraternity . . .”

“He killed him.”

“There was violence at these shows. Some people, they hear in the music what’s not there. They hear what they want to hear, not just the violence but the racism. The truth is that it’s the one music that speaks out against it. It speaks out against all isms. It shouts it as loud as can be. It shouted it so loud that I heard it. And Richard Hell is Jewish. So is Keith Morris. Ron Reyes is Puerto Rican, and Bad Brains are Black. Deke is the one who told me this. But to him and people like him, every song is a call for a race war and a second Holocaust. Every song is about splitting someone’s head open. A couple of times, he put people in the hospital. But never did he do this.”

Rudi was on the cusp of falling apart, with the pieces tumbling into the ravine. “He had the kid on the floor and wouldn’t stop beating him. And I did nothing.”

Yon raised his eyes at her. “That’s all you could’ve done.”

“I could’ve tried.”

“You are.”

Smoke churned from Rudi. “Don’t make me into a hero. I’m cutting a deal, like jillions of other losers.”

“You’re not a loser!”

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

“She’s the one who lost.”

Rudi’s face showed how she yearned to believe him, how desperate she was for it.

He edged toward her. “That blood you said was on your overcoat, it was the kid’s, wasn’t it?”

She didn’t answer. She recoiled from him.

“Wasn’t it?” he repeated, louder.

“They all ran when they heard the sirens. Deke ran. I wasn’t sure what to do. I was pressuring the boy’s wounds with my coat when the cops came.”

“You’re not wearing it today.”

“I forgot it. I was so out of it this morning. I didn’t sleep last night. I haven’t slept through the night since it happened. I keep seeing that kid. I relive the same ten minutes, with it ending the same. No matter what I do, he dies. He dies because of me. Nothing will change this.”

Yon wanted to respond. He wanted to take her pain. But no means of it would come. So he spoke the first words that did. “You must be cold.”

Rudi crossed her arms, only now cold. She scowled. “I’m fine.”

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

She kept her arms crossed. But he wouldn’t relent.

Giving in, she let him put the jacket on. But she cringed at the corniness of it.

He helped her through the sleeves. “It looks good on you.”

“How would you know?”

“Believe me, I know.”

They finished with the jacket. Yon reached for Rudi’s hand.

But he didn’t take it. He peered into the forest, recalling how difficult it had been getting Rudi through it.

#

Rudi followed Yon through the trees, staggering through branches and tripping over rocks in her laceless Chuck Taylors. She staggered and tripped until she fell down a mound into some leaves and dirt.

He muted his laughter. “You all right?”

She jumped to her feet, slapping the filth off her knees. “If you hadn’t guessed, I’m not exactly a Camp Fire Girl.”

#

Yon returned to the falls. “I come here often. This is my favorite place. My earliest memories are of this forest. When I was a kid, there was a deer paddock on Crest Drive where we parked. I’d feed them Cracker Jack from my palm.”

Rudi laughed. “That must’ve done wonders for their teeth.”

She listened to her echo and the peacefulness of it, wading in the beauty around her. “You were right, this *is* the best anywhere.”

Yon supposed one better. Any “where” with her in it. But he only wrote this in his journal. The words that came out were, “The falls help me, they help me forget.”

“I wanna forget. I wanna forget it all.”

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

#

Yon sagged into the hospital room, toward the larger-than-life man wilting before him.

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

The man hiked his head off the pillow, through the pain. “I wish, I wish I could be here for your first time.”

“You’re a bit late for that, Dad.”

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

“What makes you sure I haven’t?”

“I’m sure.”

Yon couldn’t speak.

His father hiked his head further. “You get one chance to fall in love for the first time. Don’t let it get by you.”

#

Back at the waterfall, Rudi was surprised. It came from what Yon had said about his father.

Surprise wasn’t all she was expressing. It mixed with a sorrow deeper than he could conceive.

This surprised him. She continued surprising him, by draping her arm around him.

He did the same to her.

Taking a hit of mountain air, she mused. “This forest, it reminds me of . . .”

“What?”

She shook him off. “It’s stupid.”

“Tell me. Please tell me.”

“It reminds me of a fairy tale.”

She surprised him more, more than ever. “You read fairy tales?”

“I did when I was a kid. The library was the one place I could hide, from my mom and especially from my stepdad. I’d spend all afternoon there. I did this before I could read.”

Merriment came over Rudi. “I pestered this old librarian to teach me. She would sit outside in the garden and play classical records, and I would pester her. ‘You’ll learn when you start school,’ she would tell me. But I couldn’t wait, not a fraction of a second, not with no one to read to me. I pestered and pestered her till she caved.”

Rudi’s merriment rose higher. Higher than the trees. “For a month of afternoons, she taught me. I remember it all, sitting on her lap in the sun, with all those books and Bach and Pachelbel and Monteverdi behind us. Then I read all the fairy tales they had. I wrote my own, too, and illustrated it.”

“Get out,” Yon uttered.

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

“What was it about?”

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

“It’s not nonsense to me.”

Rudi gauged him, both him and what he had said, lowering her head onto his shoulder.

This didn’t surprise him. It shocked him. Not the act but his reaction to it. Girls had done this to him a jillion times, but never had it meaning, not to them or to him. Nor had it made him feel as good as he did at that moment.

But why had it? Was it because all Rudi did had meaning and that this in itself had meaning?

“I . . .” he stammered, with raindrops falling onto him. He wanted to say, “I want you to be my girl.” He wrote it across a whole page of his journal. He wrote it on many and wanted to do more than say it. He wanted to shout it. He wanted all the living and the dead in the forest to hear him. He could hear the words echo back.

*I want you to be my girl*.

But he was afraid. He was afraid of her and of death and most of all of not fearing either.

The words he said to her were, “You hungry?”

#

Yon and Rudi sat opposite each other at a booth in Grunnings, with a pair of Cokes beside them.

The diner abutted the reservation, with the window in back providing a view that overlooked the forest. Which was enchanting the two.

An old song played. It swayed them in its direction.

Tables over, a couple older than the music were listening to it from the jukebox at their table.

The song unnerved Yon. It was the same one that had been playing in the bedroom at the beginning of his story and in his head on the night after meeting Rudi.

But should it have unnerved him? Shouldn’t he have expected it? Shouldn’t he have assumed that the playing of it was as inevitable as the crazy-looking girl across from him?

She swayed back to him. “I’ve heard this song, in a sort of dream I had the night I got here.”

Yon got more unnerved. “A dream?”

“Yeah, I was . . .”

“Dancing with someone?”

“How did you . . .”

He didn’t answer.

She became unnerved herself. She had to compose herself to continue on. “Anyway, I couldn’t remember where I’d heard it before. But I do now. They were playing it at the end of that *Quincy* episode. The one where he went after punk rock. This was his example of the music I should be listening to.”

Yon’s eyes drifted. “I guess you don’t like it much.”

“I didn’t say that. It’s different, ancient.”

He swung back to her. “Like E. E. Cummings?”

She gave him one of her dirty looks.

“It’s called ‘Moonlight Serenade’ by Glenn Miller. It was a hit back in the thirties. I remember my grandma listening to it on repeat all day in her room on one of those 78 players. Sometimes, I’d sit outside her door and listen with her. Never did I get tired of it. I hadn’t heard it in years, till my . . .”

“Till your what?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

The song reached its break, sending Yon and Rudi gravitating toward it.

The couple were kissing.

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

Yon froze, in reaction to how Rudi had reacted to what he had said or had come close to saying. Both dread and excitement were in her eyes. He felt them both and could tell that their cause was the same. He was in love with the crazy-looking girl across from him. Only now was he aware of it and now so was she.

Smidgen by smidgen, he moved toward her and she to him. They couldn’t stop or slow. Their lips were a breath away.

“Two garden salads,” barked a voice, jumping the two back in their seats, with the song coming to an end.

The waitress served them the salads, along with a heaping dish of skepticism. “That’s all you guys want?”

Yon got bashful. “That’s all you’ve got without meat.”

“Kids today,” the woman hissed. She stomped off, leaving Yon and Rudi to laugh.

Through this, he lifted his head toward a table down the way. “They do have fries.”

She winced. “No, thanks.”

“So, how did you become a vegetarian?”

“You’ll laugh at me.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“It was because of *Bambi*.”

He came close to falling over. “*Bambi?”*

She seethed at him. “You’re laughing at me.”

“I’m not. Well, maybe I am.”

“When they shoot his mom and he cries out for her, I felt exactly what he was. It was real personal for me. What about you? How did you become a vegetarian?”

“One morning I was. It could’ve been those deer I fed Cracker Jack to as a kid. Or it could’ve been *Howard the Duck.* But I never did see *Bambi*.”

#

Yon paid the bill at the register. He and Rudi sauntered toward the exits.

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

“I can’t tell you what I’ll do after today. Deke isn’t going away.”

“How did he learn you were here?”

“That I can’t tell you either. But it isn’t because I’m testifying against him. I told him that I was staying with an uncle, and he believed me.”

“What does he want from you?”

“What he’s wanted since we met.”

The two came to the front doors. Rudi opened one for Yon.

“Touché, Ms. Weiss,” he said.

They stepped outside under an awning. It was raining. This was getting harder.

Yon reached out his hand into the wetness. “I could call my mom. She could give us a lift.”

Without an allusion to a pause, Rudi strutted into the falling water, to the Harley. She straddled the seat. “You said you lived dangerously.”

Beaming, Yon hustled into the rain. He leapt onto the motorcycle.

Rudi whipped her arms around him. He gunned the bike.

It sped from the parking lot and down South Orange Avenue, making a sharp left onto Harding Drive. This was so sharp that the two could’ve kissed the ground.

The Harley regained balance. Rudi screeched, slinging her legs over him. “I’m so alive!”

He wanted to holler it with her, louder than she had.

Instead, he checked his rearview mirror. She was tilting her head back to catch the falling water. But what was clearer was her joy. Never had joy been clearer to him, including on the girl in the Vermeer painting.

Was it on his face?

Another pearl plunked Yon. He had gotten the bike on the day he’d gotten his driver’s license, but this was the first he had fun on it. Did he ever have fun before her?

#

Yon parked by his house, with the rain petering out, with the fun.

Rudi had become quiet.

He discovered why. She was gawking at his house, discomfort draping over her.

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

“Funny.”

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

“Not approaching warm.”

Yon got off the bike.

An image in his mirror whipped his head around. A car was coasting down the road. A red Porsche like the one Deke drove.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He wandered toward his house. “Nothing.”

She didn’t follow.

He wheeled toward her. “Come on.”

“Take me home. You obviously know where it is.”

“We’ll dry off. Then I’ll take you home.”

Wheezing, she followed him into the house to the cavernous foyer, falling into a fog.

Yon lifted her from it. He took a pair of towels from a closet and offered her one.

Dropping her seabag onto the floor, she took the towel. She used it to dry herself. He did the same with his own towel.

“Mom?” he called out. “Elizabeth?”

There was no response.

Rudi handed Yon her towel. “Who’s Elizabeth?”

“You’ll see.”

Rolling her eyes, Rudi shimmied off his jacket. She offered it to him.

He didn’t want to take it. He wanted it hers forever. But he nabbed it and tossed it and the towels onto the staircase’s handrail.

She gave him another of her dirty looks. “You’re gonna leave them there? A punk wouldn’t do that.”

“Elizabeth will pick ’em up.”

“Elizabeth, of course.”

Hoisting a bowl of wrapped white chocolate truffles off an end table, Yon offered it to Rudi.

She grimaced. “White chocolate?”

“It’s my favorite.”

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

Yon took a piece for himself. He purred as he ate it.

Rudi clutched her hips, her grimace stronger. “Can’t you see how ridiculous we are together? We’re barely the same species.”

Yon grimaced back. “It only appears that way. The truth is I’ve never met anyone more like me. But you’ve already figured this out, haven’t you?”

Rudi searched for a response. Unsuccessful, she climbed the winding wooden staircase.

“Where you going?” he cried.

“I wanna see the rest of this palace.”

He followed her, over her singing another song he had never heard. Though its lyrics about a house and the paper-thin veneer of happiness inside it were too familiar.

How did she do it? How’d she get what he was about better than he got himself?

Nearing the second-floor landing, Rudi halted, both herself and her singing. She twisted back to Yon. “Some people say that I remind them of her.”

“Who?”

Rudi cast up her arms. “*Siouxsie*. But I remind myself more of Exene. I sound like her too, don’t you think?”

Yon’s mind churned. It churned awhile. “Susie who?”

Rudi frowned. “What music do you listen to? I mean other than Glenn Miller.”

“I listen to the Yardbirds.”

“And?”

“Whatever’s on the radio.”

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

Rudi twisted herself back around. She resumed up the staircase, followed by Yon.

On the landing, she came to another stop, by a framed autographed photo of Ronald Reagan on the wall and cringed.

“What?” he yelped from behind her.

“What a surprise, you’re a Republican.”

“My dad knew him.”

“You don’t say?” she scoffed.

“They weren’t what you’d call friends. Their politics were different. But when my dad died, he called my mom. He spoke to her for twenty minutes, the president of the United States. He could’ve sent a card. No one would’ve blamed him. So, yeah, I’m a Republican.”

Rudi wanted to respond. She opened her mouth to do so. But in lieu of it, she trotted down the second-floor hallway.

He went after her. “Where you going now?”

She didn’t answer. She got to the door at the hallway’s end and grabbed the knob.

He grabbed her arm. “Don’t go in there, my mom wouldn’t like it.”

“*My mom wouldn’t like it*,” she squealed.

Shaking off his hand, Rudi thrust open the door. She jaunted into a bedroom unlike any she could’ve imagined outside of a fairy tale, with a king-size canopy bed, a crystal chandelier, and many pieces of antique furniture.

She eyeballed it all. “Your mom *is* the Queen of Navarre.”

“Can we go now?” he pleaded.

Deeper she went into the room. He with her. Coming to a closet that covered the length of a wall, she ran her fingers through dozens of dresses, strolling from one side of it to the other. “You’d never see me in a dress.”

He huffed. “Who says I want to?”

Rudi paused at the last dress, a white wedding gown wrapped in plastic. She snickered. “Marriage, what an outdated and sexist . . .”

The dress’s train broke her concentration. There was no end to it. “It’s like the one . . .”

Yon didn’t let her finish. He slammed the sliding door in her face.

Rudi flicked her wrists at him. “Now do you get how wrong we are? How I’d embarrass you all the time?”

“I’m not embarrassed!”

“You want to spit on me.”

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

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

She hesitated but started off.

This was Yon’s chance. The chance that he had been waiting for since Rudi had come into his life. The chance to get her out of it. The chance for him to keep it. All he had to do was let her walk.

But he took her hand.

The incredible happened. She trembled, from his touch alone. The tremble had so many meanings that his mind couldn’t process them all. This and her startle gave him the courage to pull her toward him.

She resisted. “Let go of me.”

He didn’t. Nor did he stop pulling.

Rudi’s fury rose. “Don’t you realize how easily I could lay you out on the floor? And you’d stay there!”

He had no doubt of this, but his excitement grew. He pulled harder.

She kept resisting. Neither was getting anywhere.

They came to a stop. They didn’t move or speak. But her resistance was weakening. She was trembling some more, this time her lips.

“You better not hurt me,” she murmured. He struggled to make out her voice.

Throwing off his hand, she jumped onto him and kissed him, hurling her arms and legs around him. This sent them spinning through the room and knocking into walls. They knocked into furniture too, sending lots of it to the floor.

Yon was beyond caring. There was nothing but her kiss. It shuddered through him and made him scream. It didn’t matter that only he could hear it. It got so loud that it became deafening.

This drove him into her further. They were thrashing about and were about to smash through a window.

A sound prevented it, of someone clearing their throat.

The two broke their kiss. They opened their eyes, spinning them toward the doorway.

Standing there with her arms crossed and her own fury was Yon’s mother.

#

The stars were sparkling that night. Never had they been so bright. They lit up the desert and the courtyard, making both prettier than they were.

Under the stars, I took my time releasing that night’s final page onto the table. I sensed Rudi was blushing. I was enjoying it.

“Wipe off that smirk,” she snapped.

“Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow.”

#

I worked on Saturdays and needed a bus pass.

But they weren’t in the vault, and Bob couldn’t locate them elsewhere. This meant that I’d have to get one in the morning, with all the vagaries that would accompany it.

Yet I skipped into the men’s quarters.

I wasn’t the only one in a good mood. Instead of snoring, everyone was ragging on Héctor and laughing. It was boisterous as it bounced from wall to wall in the tomb.

Héctor was a Mexican-American who pined for Mexico City. He loved the scents that would waft over its streets and the weaving of its people through the tapestry. Most of all, he loved the food. “It tastes better there,” he swore to me.

But Héctor wasn’t a Mexican citizen, so the authorities kept sending him back to America. He was only staying at the shelter to save enough money to make another run for the border.

Héctor worked at a warehouse down the hill in Ontario, packing trucks all day. Before I had gotten the job at the motel, he got me some shifts with him. It was soul-crunching work that left you in grime that would take days to remove. But never did this get Héctor down. Which came from the dream that would never die.

“*Vato*,” Mario cooed from the tomb’s near side, “you must be the only Mexican who ever got deported *from* Mexico.”

The room exploded in laughter.

Hank added to it by saying, “You should ask Trump for help. I’m sure he’d pull some strings for you.”

Héctor’s silhouette conveyed how desperate he was not to laugh. But he did so anyway. He refused to stop. He was punching his bed.

I laughed, too, but not at the jokes. It was because, for the first time since I had come to the shelter, I didn’t feel that I was in one. We were a bunch of guys joking around on a Friday night. That felt great.

the fourth night

My Saturdays weren’t much different from other days. They weren’t much different for any of us at the shelter. Each day could’ve been another or the same.

One difference on this Saturday, apart from Lynnette’s birthday party that night, was that I had no means of getting to work. I had to wait for the shelter’s assistant director to come in that morning and track down the bus passes.

Standing at the gates, my shadow splitting the alley into two, I didn’t need to check my phone to tell that time was running out to make my first bus.

The man’s cobalt station wagon swished past me. It swirled left and came within a sliver of a wall. There were marks on it from when it hadn’t missed.

Dan staggered from the car toward me. He was a hefty man in his fifties and slow in many ways. He took his time hunting for the passes. But he had no more success than Bob had.

He scowled at me. “Do you really need one right now?”

“I have to be at work in Hesperia. 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 only $3.00.

“A day pass costs $3.50,” I said.

“It was $3.00 the last I bought one.”

“It’s not $3.00 now.”

This didn’t convince him. I had to get out my phone and show him the website for the Victor Valley Transit Authority before he would drop the last pair of quarters onto my palm.

#

Running for the bus didn’t help.

I missed it and got to the motel an hour late. Which meant that I would have to move faster than normal if I wanted to make it back for the party.

Among the tasks Amoun would give me was cleaning the uncommon messes in the rooms so the cleaning women could get through the common ones before the next guests arrived. Uncommon messes like that blood in Room 122 earlier in the week.

There would be plenty of uncommon messes after a Friday night. In one room I had to mop the walls, where hung a combination of wine and a substance more solid.

It was humbling work, for someone who had needed a lot of humbling.

Sania pushed her cart into the room.

“Hey,” I said to her.

Embarrassed, she scurried into the bathroom. “I’m sorry about yesterday.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

“It’s . . . I read a disturbing article on the Internet yesterday.”

“Yeah?”

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

She pushed her head through the doorway. “It’s terrible what these women go through.”

From the terrible in her eyes, it was obvious that she wasn’t speaking about hypothetical women. But it wasn’t obvious what to say about it. Neither of us spoke.

With greater embarrassment than before, she scampered back into the bathroom.

I pretended to work, searching for words to say to her. “Is there no one you can talk to?”

“About what?” she asked with false innocence.

Without answering, I lowered my mop into the bucket. I dragged it to the front door by the bathroom.

Sania was cleaning the sink. She was fighting to keep herself together. “Don’t look at me like I’m a victim,” she grunted, glued to the running water. “I hate that.”

I flinched from her. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t say that either.”

“I . . .”

“You might be wondering how I ended up in this dump.”

“It had crossed my mind. But I’ve wondered it about many people. I’ve wondered it about myself.”

She was hesitant to say more.

“You don’t have to tell me,” I said.

“I wanted to be a doctor. I got good marks in school and was all set to go to the university in Leeds. But my parents weren’t so set. They wanted me to marry a guy twice my age. To keep me out of trouble, they said. Actually, to say ‘they wanted,’ isn’t factual. I didn’t have a choice. Until I came upon an ad for au pairs on Craigslist.”

“I can guess the rest.”

“No, you can’t.”

I was quiet in response. I must’ve had the dumbest of faces.

She shook her head. “I had this behind me. I’m starting classes at Cal State next month.”

“That’s terrific.”

“But I don’t have it behind me.”

“You should try—”

“—They don’t help. These people, they’re so far from getting me and what I went through.”

“I have a sister . . .”

“What is she, a counselor?”

“Not exactly. But she helps a lot of people. It’s an obsession for her, fixing the world or her piece of it. You should see her house and all the people she’s taken in over the years. It’s because of all she’s been through. She’s not so far from you, and she’d get you.”

“I don’t . . .”

“I could call her.”

I dug into my pants pocket. I yanked out my phone.

Sania spun toward me. “You mean now?”

Ignoring her, I swiped at the screen.

“I don’t have time,” Sania cried. “I have to finish my rooms before check-in.”

“Talk to her for a few minutes.”

“What’s up?” Rudi asked, picking up on the first ring.

“You must be busy. But there’s someone I would like you to speak with. She could use some help.”

“Put her on.”

I offered the phone to Sania. But she wouldn’t take it.

“Please,” I whispered.

With a grumble, she plucked the device from me. She spoke with Rudi.

I hurried from the room with my mop and bucket, shutting the door behind myself.

Sania opened it, popping her head into the hallway. “What about your phone?”

“I’ll get it from you later.”

#

I left the motel after my shift and was crossing Cataba Road to the bus stop.

Sania yelled my name.

She ran to me, with my phone in her hand and the happiness back on her face.

I felt happy along with her, beyond what I would’ve expected I could have.

We hugged. For a while we did.

“Your sister is amazing,” she said.

“Believe me, I know,” was my response.

We broke our embrace. She handed me the phone. “It was like talking to my older sister. Better. Rudi and I are doing a video call tomorrow morning with someone she knows. Someone . . . someone like me. She runs a support group in LA. Rudi says that I can participate remotely.”

“It’s gonna work out for you.”

“How can I thank you?”

“Get well. It could inspire me to do the same.”

“One day I could be the one giving help.”

“Life’s a series of ever-renewing cycles.”

“That sounds kind of Sufi.”

“Kind of Sufi, kind of Kabbalah. It’s all much the same. We’re all much the same.”

I took off.

“She’s worried about you,” Sania called out. “Your sister.”

“She’s not the only one.”

“I told her that I’d keep an eye on you. Or two.”

“I appreciate that.”

#

I got curious about the trafficking ring Sania had mentioned. I searched for the story on the bus, discovering a few on local news sites.

The police had arrested two men in Old Adelanto, a miserable place one town over that made Victorville Paradise in comparison. They believed that the men had an accomplice, but the only other detail that stuck out was that both men had served in the army together a handful of years earlier.

#

The afternoon was slipping past the alley.

I came through the shelter gates and upon the birthday decorations Nichelle had gotten her mittens on. I came upon Nichelle too.

She rambled toward me, with flashes of panic and frustration. “Have you seen Josh?”

I started to answer, but Mateo called my name and drew me away. “There’s a letter for you in the office.”

Nichelle flung her hands at me, her panic and frustration higher. “Have you seen Josh?”

“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 have time to buy one.”

Mateo crossed his arms. He shook his head. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Nichelle pointed down the road. “Stater Brothers has a sheet cake for twenty bucks. That includes decorating it.”

“We can all chip in,” I said.

Mateo shook his head a second time. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“They can’t throw us all out.”

“They can’t?”

Ignoring this, Nichelle and I went through the courtyard. We collected money in super stealth mode.

I was surprised that most gave. Some gave all the change in their pockets—all many had—for a girl most couldn’t have described.

Sharon, who worked there on weekends while completing her nursing degree, also gave, having figured out what we were up to. She gave despite how it could’ve gotten her fired.

Mateo gave as well, in spite of himself, and I threw in my five dollars, hoping it would make me less paranoid about losing it.

We raised in excess of what we needed, enough for some trimmings.

Héctor sped me to the supermarket in his car. We got the cake and had it decorated, returning with it, a box of candles, snacks and soda, and a teddy bear.

Nichelle took the cake from me. She tossed ten candles onto it.

“They’re coming!” someone shouted from the gates.

Nichelle lit the candles. Another someone turned off the lights.

They flipped them on with Lynnette and her mother entering to a chorus of “Happy Birthday to You.”

None of us could forget the shock and joy on that girl’s face. Above all her mother, who was driving back her tears. So was Nichelle, whose mind must’ve been on her own kids.

With fervor leaping from her, Lynnette blew out the candles. She would’ve smashed through a ceiling if one had been over her. On that night, she was a normal ten year old. A normal girl celebrating a birthday, made to feel that she was special and mattered and loved.

We, too, were normal people attending a birthday party. The party was as much for us as for Lynnette. That could’ve been why everyone gave. We needed it as much as she did, if not more.

#

Josh showed up, with no cake.

But he was surprised to see a cake. Lynnette and her mother hadn’t been so surprised.

Nichelle stormed toward him, her fists raised. “Where were you?”

“I got stuck on the 395. Some police action.”

This caught my attention. The 395 went through Old Adelanto. But what heightened my attention was recalling that Josh had been in the army, like the two men the cops had arrested.

Could this have been other than a coincidence?

#

For the second night in a row, I got ahead of Gerry in the check-in line and well ahead of him.

Josh handed me the letter that had been waiting for me on the desk. But he wouldn’t let it go. “How did you guys get the cake?”

I fumbled about for an answer, staring at the words on the desk’s nameplate: *JOSHUA MAXWELL*. “I, I had some money on an old EBT card. We’re allowed to use that, right?”

He didn’t respond. But he released the envelope.

I left the office.

“I’m gonna be watching you,” he called out.

“*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?”* I shot back, in my Jersey-accented Latin.

“What’s that?”

“It’s from a poem by Juvenal.”

What I didn’t tell him was what it meant.

*Who watches the watchers?*

Only one person could.

#

I strutted into the courtyard with Yon’s letter.

The party was ending. Lynnette and other kids were finishing the banana split sundaes that Rich had made for them, from ice cream he had conjured.

Rollicking in the beauty of this, I brought Yon’s letter to the corner booth. I called Rudi.

Unlike that morning and all previous nights, it rang many times. It occurred to me that this set of entries would include difficult ones.

On the fifth ring, she picked up.

Without small talk, I opened the envelope. I continued the story.

#

Yon struggled to come to terms with what was happening. That he was against a window in his mother’s bedroom, with Rudi wrapped around him and his mother glaring at them both.

The rain had ended, with the falling sun projecting onto the woman, drenching her in light and shade, making her glare sharper.

All Yon’s reality bull-rushed him at the same moment. Releasing his arms from Rudi, he swung himself toward the woman, sending Rudi crashing to the floor with a thump.

“Sorry about this, Mom,” he mumbled, with Rudi jumping to her feet.

Mrs. Levy stepped up her glare. “It’s fortunate for all of us that I didn’t arrive about ten minutes later.”

“It’s not like that, Mom. Really.”

Yon and Rudi trudged toward his mother. They were passing through a swamp. Closer the two got to the woman and her disgust, of Rudi and her hair and her clothes and her makeup. She didn’t bother to hide it.

The pair stopped in front of her. Sneering at the two, Mrs. Levy examined them down and up and all around. Her glare got stronger. “Did you come from the shower?”

“It’s not like that, Mom,” Yon screeched under his breath. “The rain caught us. Sorta.”

The woman clenched her teeth. “Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

“This is Rudi, my . . .”

“I’m his friend,” Rudi blurted out. “Sorta.”

“Will your friend be staying for dinner?” Mrs. Levy asked Yon.

“Yes,” he said at the same time Rudi said, “No,” with the glare shifting to her face.

The woman’s jaw returned to its clenched position. The disgust returned to her face. “By all means stay for dinner, Rudi. I’m dying to learn more about you.”

#

Rudi and Yon were sprawling out on the living room couch, with Rudi extra overanxious. “She hates me. And if I were her, I’d hate me too.”

“It’s that you remind her of someone. Someone close.”

“Wait till she learns about my record and all the drugs I’ve done. Which is just about every one, by the way.”

“I don’t care about the past. I . . . I don’t care about the future either. All I care about is now.”

“Some of us can’t separate our past from our now. Or our future.”

“Listen—”

“—And she’ll be overjoyed when she learns about the kid who got killed.”

“I don’t care.”

“Take me home.”

“After dinner.”

“Mariana said that she lives near you.”

“Down the block.”

Rudi jumped to her feet. “Point me in her direction.”

“Stay. Please stay.”

With exaggerated misgiving, Rudi fell back onto the couch.

Yon lifted a remote off the coffee table. “How about some TV?”

Crossing her arms, Rudi screwed her face. “I hate TV.”

Yon switched it on anyway. He flipped through the channels. Pausing at football highlights, he gave Rudi an inquisitive glance.

She crinkled her nose. “I hate football and all pursuits that involve large groups of people who act alike. Which I define as ‘any group larger than one.’”

Yon returned to the television and his flipping. He came to MTV and a Van Halen video. He gave Rudi another glance.

She didn’t bother to acknowledge it. Or the video.

He continued flipping. He landed on a UHF station. A peculiar man in a checkered suit and fedora was telling a more peculiar puppet that Squeeze would be performing later in the show.

With her face agog, Rudi uncrossed her arms. “I hate all TV but this.”

“What’s that?” Yon asked, his eyes on the screen.

“You’re telling me that you watch *Uncle Floyd?”*

Not getting an answer, she, too, put her eyes on the irreverent comedy show, whose existence few were aware of. I’m not sure Floyd was.

Out of nowhere, Rudi and Yon laughed, at the same dumb joke, sending them toward each other in surprise.

She shook it off. “It means nothing.”

“Dinner’s ready!” Mrs. Levy called out.

#

Rudi and Yon took seats across from Mrs. Levy, by a table setting that Rudi viewed with confusion and wary. “Why do I have four plates?”

Yon scowled at his mother. “We usually don’t eat so formally.”

The woman glowed back at him. “It’s a nice change.”

Yon kept up his scowl, mindful of how his mother was wanting to make Rudi feel out of place and how this was working.

He turned to Rudi. “It’s real simple. The first plate is the charger—”

“—The what?”

“It’s for show.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Then comes the dinner plate, the salad plate, and the soup bowl. The plate off to the side is for bread.”

Vexation came over Rudi. “Why can’t I use the same plate? Is it some kind of crime?”

Mrs. Levy laughed, with condescension. “You eat however way you want, my dear.”

Rudi bristled.

The kitchen doors opened. Elizabeth swept into the room, to serve them from a tray of piping-hot parsley soup.

This serving made Rudi uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as she had been outside the house. She hid this under another quip. “Now I know where they got the idea for *Upstairs, Downstairs*.”

Elizabeth and Yon smirked. But it wasn’t so funny to Mrs. Levy, who glowered at no one in particular. “Thank you, Elizabeth.”

The smirk fled from Elizabeth. She shuffled off with her silver tray.

Rudi’s gaze fell upon her soup in bewilderment.

Mrs. Levy enjoyed this. “I should warn you, Rudi. My son’s been on a fad of late that I’ve regrettably indulged.”

Rudi raised herself from the bowl. “What do you mean?”

“He doesn’t eat meat.”

Yon picked up his spoon. “Rudi’s a vegetarian too.”

“How convenient,” the woman yelped.

Rudi did her best to hide her snarl. But it came out. “I’ve been a vegetarian since I was fourteen.”

“I’m sure you have, dear.”

Rudi got angrier. But with Yon sipping his soup, she calmed. She took her own sip.

Astonishment came over her. “This is good. It sure beats stale fries.”

Unsettled by the comment and its implications, Yon peeped at Rudi.

She took another sip. This one larger. She slurped it too, drawing the scrutiny of Mrs. Levy.

The woman turned to her son, straining to maintain her composure. “Tell me, Yon, wherever did you two meet?”

“Rudi is in my math class.”

The woman gaped at him. “Aren’t you taking AP Calculus?”

“Rudi is the smartest one there. She might be the smartest person in school.”

Rudi snorted. “That’s not true.”

“What did you get on your SAT?”

“I forget.”

“I bet. I bet it was perfect.”

“You’d lose that bet. They cheated me out of a few points.”

Mrs. Levy’s expression revealed how much she didn’t want this to win her over. But it let her down.

Yon couldn’t hold back his excitement. “You should’ve been there when she solved this partial fraction decomposition integration. She solved it like addition. Even Mrs. Elkind was impressed. And that was before Rudi wrote ‘Q.E.D.’ beside it.”

Mrs. Levy’s face lit up. “Quite easily done.”

“Actually,” Rudi countered, “it means—”

“—*Quod erat demonstrandum*.”

Yon leaned toward Rudi. “My mom was Phi Beta Kappa at Radcliffe. The other night she mentioned that she saw E. E. Cummings in person at school.”

“Really?” Rudi uttered.

Mrs. Levy shook her head. “That was ages ago, Yon.”

Yon’s eyes fell upon his mother. “He was giving what he called a ‘nonlecture’ at Harvard. As he walked to the lectern, she and some other girls hopped up and recited . . . what was the poem of his you recited?”

The woman sighed. “‘Buffalo Bill ’s.’”

“And what did he do?”

She sighed a second time. “He stopped and turned to us and let us finish. Then he took out his handkerchief and waved it. I was certain he’d cry. The world for decades had forgotten him, and here were these silly coeds treating him like a rock star.”

“Wow,” was all Rudi could say.

Yon couldn’t hold back his excitement any more than before. “Rudi wrote a poem in his style for one of her classes.”

Spiraling toward him, Rudi hoisted her fist. “Don’t you dare recite it.”

Mrs. Levy put down her spoon. She clasped her hands. “Well, Rudi, you certainly are a Renaissance woman: calculus and modernist poetry. If only the school offered a beauty class.”

Unlike with the woman’s previous barbs, Rudi had no retort. Her sole reaction was to flinch, in abundance.

“*Mom*,” Yon snarled.

Disregarding this and him, the woman continued. “Do you actually pay someone to do that to your hair?”

“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?”

Mrs. Levy rose in her chair, shaking her wrists. “We had ideas! We weren’t painting our faces and running around like idiots!”

Rudi slammed her forearms onto the table. “That’s not what we’re doing! We’re expressing who we are and how we feel. And either you can’t get this or can’t handle it. And probably both.”

The woman had no response. So she changed course. “I didn’t catch your last name, Rudi.”

“Weiss,” Rudi snapped.

Mrs. Levy gaped at her. She gaped harder and longer than she had at her son. “You’re Jewish?”

“Wwwhat?” Rudi stammered, her shock deeper than the woman’s. “‘Weiss’ is German, isn’t it? It means ‘white.’”

“It’s also a common Jewish name.”

“I have heard you say, ‘*oy vey*,’ Yon interjected. “More than once.”

Rudi spun toward him. “That’s Jewish?”

Mrs. Levy crossed her arms. “It’s Yiddish.”

“You think I could be Jewish?” Rudi asked Yon, with horror.

Twisting her lips, Mrs. Levy humphed. “Are you ashamed of it?”

Rudi turned from them both, her horror increasing. “Not in the way you believe.”

Silence followed. A good amount of it. It continued with them going back to their soups.

Mrs. Levy ended it. She stretched her head in her son’s direction. “You’ll never guess who I ran into this afternoon at the Short Hills Mall . . . Darlene. So beautiful, so . . .”

The woman assayed Rudi, from all sides and perspectives. “So unlike any other.”

Rudi lowered her head and her spoon. She also crossed her arms and legs.

Yon would’ve never guessed that Rudi would’ve been self-conscious of her looks or insecure about them. But his mother’s current line of attack was hurting her more than the others. Doubt was rising over her and dropping her defenses.

He dipped his head at his mother. “That’s enough.”

“I’m telling it as it is. I bet Rudi can tell too.”

“As I told you before, I’m sorry about what happened this afternoon. But that doesn’t give you the right to treat Rudi this way. I won’t have it.”

“Darlene was telling me how she got into Penn. Swarthmore too. Of course, she’s waiting for you to decide.”

“She shouldn’t.”

“And why is that?”

“Darlene’s gorgeous, there’s no question about that. She’s smart too. She can be funny at times. But I can barely stand the sound of her voice. I cringe whenever she touches me.”

“Well, you weren’t cringing this afternoon.”

Yon was about to reply. But Rudi interrupted him. She shot up her head, scrambling to keep her emotions from flying out with it. “Listen, Mrs. Levy, despite what you saw earlier and despite what Yon thinks he feels, there’s nothing serious going on between us.”

Yon leaned over the table. “Nothing but Glenn Miller.”

“Glenn Miller?” his mother gasped.

“But that’s nothing serious. It’s not as if we feel and want the same or that we dream the same or that we laugh at the same dumb jokes or that any incredible happens when I take her hand.”

To disprove this, to both his mother and Rudi, he put his hand on hers.

She trembled, like she had in his mother’s bedroom.

Frightened and wobbly, Rudi yanked her hand away, exceeding her breaking point. “Next week, Yon, next week you’ll move on to someone new.”

“That’s not true.”

“I’m some exotic flavor you’ve never tasted.”

It was Yon’s turn to slam his arms onto the table. “That’s not true!”

“Look at me,” she babbled, far from him and herself. “Really look. Not at my hair or at my clothes but at who I am. I’m not gonna end up with some preppy football player Republican. Nor am I gonna end up at Penn or Swarthmore. We all know that I’m not gonna end up anywhere!”

Rudi jumped to her feet. She swarmed from the room.

Yon jumped to his own feet.

“Let her go,” his mother whispered.

“Shut up!” he barked. He ran after Rudi.

“She’s not for you!”

“Her eyelids’ flutter tells me you’re wrong!”

Yon got to the foyer. Rudi was slinging her seabag over her shoulder. On the verge of tears, she threw open the door and ran.

He followed. He flew outside at the same moment she reached the street. “Rudi!”

“Leave me alone!” she shrieked. “I was doing just fine until I met you, and now . . .”

“Rudi?”

She wrenched herself toward him. “What can you possibly . . .”

“It’s the other way around.”

“What?”

“Yeah, I’m good-looking . . . and rich. I made All-State last year, and I could go to any college I want. But all I see is how slight I am. Slighter than paper.

“If you see more, there could be more.”

Rudi lingered, along with a twinge of hope in her eyes.

Neither lasted. She spirited off into the night, with him unable to move or to say the words he wanted to say. The same ones he had wanted to say to her by the waterfall.

#

I didn’t have to ask Rudi what had happened after she left Yon’s house.

Hearing the pause on the line after I finished the entry, she must’ve expected the question. She began telling me.

#

Rudi wandered through Newstead, getting nowhere but upset, at herself.

If sex had been clouding her mind, she could’ve written off what she was feeling. But it wasn’t. Nor was it Yon. It was his hand and how she wanted to hold it. There could be no reasoning for this. There was no way to rationalize it.

Doing what she did when troubled, Rudi reached for her music. However, the one negative aspect of punk rock is that there are no love songs. None at all. Few songs broach the subject. But she had one with her: “Love Und Romance” by the Slits, the most cynical song ever written about the feelings swirling around her.

This was what she wanted to hear. Or was what she told herself.

Rudi snatched the tape. She threw it into her Walkman and reached the song. She cranked the volume all the way, screaming with Ari Up. She screamed with her for what could’ve been hours, rewinding the song each time it had finished. She rewound it so many times that she could press the rewind button to the song’s beginning in one go.

But no matter how she screamed or how many times she listened to the song, she couldn’t regain her old self. This was when it hit her that she had gotten herself cooked, that she was “head over heels in love,” no matter how stupid it sounded, and that there was nothing further she could do about it but cry. Which hadn’t happened in so many years that she couldn’t remember when it had last. What was crazier was that she couldn’t figure out why she was crying or whether she was crying because she was happy or sad.

Halting in the road, she wiped her eyes.

A rickety woman was walking a rickety dog across the intersection ahead.

Rudi darted toward them.

The woman took a full step back, for the obvious reason. But Rudi’s tears must’ve ushered another instinct. A much less malevolent one. “Are you all right, sweetheart?”

“I’m lost,” Rudi said, suspecting the words had infinite meanings.

“Where do you want to go?”

“A friend of mine lives nearby. Her name is Mariana Gonzales.”

“Oh, I know the Gonzaleses. What a nice family. They live on Overhill Road up the way. You can’t miss it. It’s a yellow house with a lovely Nativity scene in the yard.”

“Thank you!” Rudi cried. She lunged to hug the woman.

But she stopped herself and sprinted off, I bet with the woman seeking sense from the enigma that had been in front of her. An enigma wrapped inside a paradox.

#

Rudi rang the doorbell for a third time.

She doubted that anyone was home, despite all the lights in the house.

The door cracked open.

There was Mariana, her jaw slack but nothing exiting it.

“Can I come in?” Rudi begged.

Mariana flung herself around, toward a faint voice inside the kitchen.

Returning to Rudi, she took her arm. “You’re lucky my dad’s on the phone. Quick.”

This was how they snuck up the stairs into Mariana’s bedroom, where Mariana locked the door.

Grabbing a flashlight from a bureau drawer, she flipped it on. In the same motion, she flicked off the room’s light and collapsed onto the floor with Rudi, who told her all that had happened since her happening with Yon outside the school.

Mariana couldn’t contain her glee. “He’s in love with you. You should be happy, just about every girl in school is crazy about him.”

Shaking her whole self, Rudi wormed away. “Not me.”

“‘The lady doth protest too much, methinks.’”

Rudi slipped a peek at Mariana. “Nobody gets that quote right. You must love Shakespeare.”

“I actually wrote a modern teenage version of *All’s Well That Ends Well* for the Drama Club last spring.”

“*All’s Well That Ends Well?* Isn’t that the one where the woman tricks her husband into sleeping with her by pretending to be someone else?”

“I kinda glossed over that part when I described it to my dad.”

“And you wrote a modern version of it? That’s awesome.”

“The teacher said that I should become a playwright. But it’s silly.”

“Why?”

“How many women playwrights have you read?”

“Lillian Hellman, Lorraine Hansberry, Sophie Treadwell. There are tons.”

“I’ve never heard of those people.”

“Whose fault is that?”

Mariana slapped her thigh. “Don’t change the subject.”

“There is no subject.”

“There is from where I’m sitting.”

“You need glasses.”

“It’s you who needs them.”

Rudi tossed up her hands. “How could I be in love with him? He’s a Republican!”

Mariana couldn’t contain her glee any more than before. “I’m no expert, but I don’t suppose you get to choose.”

“You say that you’re no expert, but you sure sound as if you’re speaking from experience.”

Mariana became embarrassed.

“I get that your dad is strict, but you must be hot for someone.”

Mariana blushed. But she wouldn’t add upon it.

“Come on, spill it,” Rudi demanded.

Mariana kept up her reluctance. But Rudi kept prodding, and Mariana relented. “There is this someone.”

“Yeah?”

“We notice each other and stuff.”

“What’s his name?”

Mariana’s reluctance kept up. But Rudi wouldn’t let up, and Mariana gave in. “Terry.”

“Terry? Is that the guy . . .”

“Terry . . . Louise.”

Quiet followed, an uncomfortable amount of it. It led Mariana to shut off the flashlight.

“Why did you turn off the light?” Rudi asked.

“You must hate me,” Mariana said.

“Why would I hate you?”

“Because I’m a . . .”

Rudi seized the flashlight. She flipped it on, shining it onto herself. “I think it’s cool.”

“You do?”

“It takes courage to be different.”

“That’s my problem.”

“What is?”

“I don’t have courage.”

“Have you talked to this, this Terry Louise?”

“God, no.”

“Why not?”

“My dad would kill me. He’d kill me if I talked to boys.”

“Are you gonna live your entire life for your dad? Are you gonna marry some guy and have babies just to make him happy?”

Mariana said nothing.

Rudi thrashed about, both her arms and body. “‘To thine own self be true!’”

“Sshhh!” Mariana squealed. “My dad would freak out if he caught you here.”

“Tomorrow you’re gonna march right up to Terry, whether it’s in the hallway or wherever it is you two do your noticing, and you’re gonna say hello.”

“No way.”

“Either you talk to her or I won’t talk to you. I won’t be friends with a coward.”

#

With a glint of glimmer sneaking through the looming squall, in what was passing for the morning outside his windows, Yon sat on his bed as he had for hours, his head on his knees and his arms around his legs.

*Leave me alone!*

For the jillionth time, Rudi’s words flew at him. The ones that had given him another out. One better than before. All he had to do to avoid his fate and fulfill the replay of his life was to do what she had wanted and stay away from her.

But he had less success at persuading himself of this than he had the last he tried or on any other occasion.

He got off his bed. Without showering, he tossed on a white tee and some 501s. Slipping into a pair of Docksides and his football jacket, he left his room and his house. He sped from it on his bike in the spitting rain, all the way to Rudi’s house.

He didn’t bother with the old burgundy pickup truck. He parked in front and waited.

No one left the house. Nor was there any sign that anyone was inside it, and the blue sedan wasn’t anywhere. More troubling, Yon recalled the Porsche that had been outside his house the day before, as well as a pair of words more troubling than that.

*Caveat Amor*.

Had the fine print on the replay card really meant *Beware Love?* Or did it mean *Let Love Beware?*

Yon checked his watch. With school about to begin and the rain stronger, he raced to Columbia. At the red light at the corner of Valley and Parker, he turned toward the school.

Rudi and Mariana were starting through the parking lot. Rudi wasn’t wearing her coat. She had on the same clothes as the day before.

Deke’s Porsche shot into the school’s lot from Parker. It circled around, grinding to a stop beside the two girls.

They stopped with it. Its window rolled down.

Rudi blanched and reeled. So did Mariana. Deke couldn’t have knocked them back farther if he had run into them.

The light turned green. But Yon didn’t drive down Parker. He made a U-turn in front of a bus, sending it to a jolting stop.

Jumping the curb, he rode over the grass to the lot. But he kept his distance from the Porsche, idling well behind it. No matter how he wanted to be brave, he couldn’t make himself be it.

Rudi’s head fell. Like a boulder into a chasm it fell.

She inched alongside the car to the passenger door. Which she slunk through despite the pleas of Mariana and the writhing of her arms.

The Porsche bolted off, from the lot and down Parker.

But Yon didn’t follow it. He was more afraid than ever.

Mariana spotted him. Her frantic jacked up. “Aren’t you going after her?”

He didn’t respond.

Her face reddened. “You stupid idiot! She only went with him because he was threatening you!”

Yon sought for these words to matter, to get him to move. He clenched his eyes shut and willed himself forward.

But he couldn’t go anywhere.

*You get one chance to fall in love for the first time. Don’t let it get by you*.

The words of his father couldn’t make him budge either.

A pair of footsteps opened his eyes. He forced them to it.

Owen rushed at him from the bus stop. He was panting for breath and furious. He had an expression that said, *if she were my girl, I would’ve already saved her*.

This got Yon moving. He gunned his bike. He followed the Porsche to Route 22, a highway that bisected the state’s width.

On the border of Newark, Deke cornered onto the lot of a seedy motel. He parked by a room in the pouring rain, with Yon pulling up nearby.

Deke leapt from the Porsche. He strutted to the other side.

Rudi was getting out with less urgency and an expression that was fighting to project apathy and failing at it.

Snickering, Deke grabbed her arm. He tugged her outside and shut the door, dragging her away.

Yon got off his bike, but he kept quiet. It was his last chance to do so. He was certain of it.

The two made it to the room. Deke shoved the key into the lock.

Yon shook all over. “Rudi!”

She and Deke spun toward him.

“What are you doing here?” she hollered, her face flush with equal amounts of anger and fear.

“What are you?” he hollered back.

Deke sprang toward Yon. But Rudi stopped him with her arm, pleading with him under her breath, “You promised.”

“What’s going on?” Yon whined.

Rudi raged at him, her fear higher than before. “How dumb can you be? I’m walking into a motel room with another guy. Can’t you see that I’m trash?”

Yon wanted to believe this. But he couldn’t make himself do so. “That’s not ‘the what i see’!”

“Go home!”

He wouldn’t.

Deke opened his jacket, exposing the gun in his waistband. “Listen to her, man. Unless you wanna end up like that other kike.”

Frantic, Rudi collared Deke. She hauled him off. “Let’s just do this.”

“Sure thing, babe.”

The two returned to the room. Deke unlocked and opened the door. The two entered.

Yon stepped forward. “I want you to be my girl!”

Deke reacted by pausing a few paces into the room. But Rudi went on like she didn’t hear or care.

Yon wouldn’t give up. Throwing out his chest, he rose to his toes. He shouted with all his might, “I want you to be my girl!”

Deke snared the door. Scowling at Yon, he cranked his head down the highway. “Take off while you can.”

Continuing in his scorn, Deke slammed the door and locked it, with Yon frozen, simmering in his panic.

*Take off while you can*.

The words sounded familiar to Yon. He supposed that Deke had said them before.

But he recalled that it had been someone other.

His head churned. Behind him to his right was the blue sedan and inside it the FBI agent, sneering at him through the open window.

A lamp crashing to the floor sent Yon back toward the room.

“You’re not getting off that easy!” Deke yelled. “You can’t believe I’d let you testify!”

“I’m not!” Rudi yelled back.

“That’s right, you’re not!”

The two fought, followed by one hitting the floor.

“You must’ve forgotten who taught you!” Deke roared. “I taught you it all! I made you a man—better than a man! And all you wanna do is screw Jews!”

Yon leapt toward the door. But he didn’t leap further. “There’s nothing you can do. He’d kill you.”

The fighting went on, with Rudi no longer sounding tough. She sounded like a frightened child. The one who had been hiding under her toughness, desperate for a way out.

Yon returned to the sedan. “Aren’t you gonna help her?”

The FBI man added to his sneer. His contempt had runneth over. “All in good time, young man. All in good time.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“Backup. You can’t expect me to confront a dangerous armed suspect without backup, can you?”

It all became clear to Yon. As clear as the makeup on Rudi’s face. It was the FBI who had told Deke where Rudi was and what she would do. They had no intention of having her testify. She was an addict with a record. She was unreliable. But the man in the car, he would be the perfect witness to murder. The perfect means toward a conviction. That was all that mattered.

Rudi called out for help.

Yon drifted toward her. He did so recognizing that he didn’t have a choice in what he did and didn’t and never had. Free will was nothing but a joke. If given a jillion replays of his life, he would make the same choice each one.

He’d choose her.

Hurling himself at the door, he was about to smash into it.

#

There was silence after I finished the entry. Silence on the line and silence in the courtyard and silence in the alley and on Amargosa Road past it. All sound had switched off.

This kept on.

With a moth floating below the flickering light above me, I couldn’t come up with words to say to Rudi. I could tell she was crying. It didn’t matter that I couldn’t hear it.

“Call me tomorrow,” she slurred, her voice less than a whisper.

“Tomorrow’s Sunday, there’s no mail.”

“Call me anyway.”

She was about to hang up, but I couldn’t let her go. “I never told you how I came into this story.”

“You never did.”

#

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

It happened before dawn, with the sole source of light coming from the street lamp over my room.

My grandpa had screamed.

This wasn’t unusual. He would scream at this time, from the hell that had followed him from the pits of Verdun and from a worse hell in the war that came after it.

But this scream hadn’t come from my grandparents’ bedroom. The two were arguing in the kitchen below my room.

I listened to them, unaware of how this would unhinge my life. I grasped that they were screaming in German.

This was unusual. They spoke English most often, while at times breaking into Czech, a language associated with wonderful memories for them both. German, though, was associated only with terror despite it being their native tongue. The terror hung over our family, waiting to swoop down and take a piece of it at any chance it got. The one exception the two had for speaking the language was when they didn’t want me to follow what they were saying.

Yet I picked up a few words that Grandma said. “She, she’s a Nazi. Like her . . .”

Grandpa said nothing. There was quiet.

It faded when the kitchen door opened and the screen door beyond it creaked forward.

With faltering steps, Grandpa shuffled outside to the house’s side. He raised and lowered the garbage can’s metal lid. The echo of it emptied into the skies, along with his shuffling back into the house.

I was drowning in curiosity. So, throwing on some clothes, I stumbled from my room. I snuck down the stairs and out the front door.

With daylight skulking across our neighborhood, spreading a shimmer across the lawns and the road, I made my way to the garbage can and lifted it.

A crumpled page from a newspaper was on top.

I pulled it out and uncrumpled it. It was from the *Star Ledger*. The headline read: “Drug Dealer Shot Dead in Newark Motel Room.”

Underneath the headline were the mugshots of two people. The first was the dead man. The other was a punked-out teenage girl who otherwise was the same as me.

I was staring into a funhouse mirror. I wasn’t a normal teenager in the early 1980s, with my wild curly brown hair and scruffy face. But I was the cover of *Tiger Beat* compared to her.

Feeling sudden coldness, I concentrated on the story.

Unable to make out the text, I snuck back into the house and up the stairs to my bed, hypnotized by the article. What grabbed me right off was that the circumstances of all that had happened were unclear. All that was certain was that an unnamed minor had broken into the motel room where Deke Cox and Gertrud Weiss had been fighting and that Deke had attacked the boy, who lost so much blood that the doctors couldn’t say if he would make it.

But what grabbed me harder and around the throat was that Deke and Gertrud were skinheads, with criminal records and ties to neo-Nazis, and that they were involved in the killing of a Jewish Rutgers student that fall.

All this couldn’t sink in. That I could have a twin living within driving distance of me was incredible enough, but that she was a skinhead and a murderer of Jews was beyond this. I had spent years forgetting a near-identical evil. My instinct was to rip the paper apart and forget further.

But my curiosity continued, along with my drowning in it, enough to reread the article. I read it several times.

I made out that what it hadn’t said could’ve been as important as what it had. There was no mention of who had killed Deke or what had happened to the girl who had to have been my sister. The lone clue they gave was that she and the boy went to a high school in the area. Though I would learn that this wasn’t much of a clue.

Some suburban families build pools. Others build gardens or game rooms. Mine built a library. It was mammoth, with interconnected rooms and more books than in my high school library. It had some rare books as well, such as a French edition of Gogol’s *Dead Souls* that a young Marc Chagall had illustrated, whose imagery would haunt many of my childhood nights. My adult ones too.

The library included a bookcase of all telephone directories in New Jersey. I yanked out the one for Essex County and those for the adjoining ones.

Browsing through them, I discovered that there were dozens of high schools within an hour’s drive from the motel, spread out everywhere. Locating her appeared an impossible task, until I recalled that I was the grandson of a man who had made these quests ordinary.

I left the library, and I pushed myself through the kitchen doors.

My grandparents were beside the white porcelain table that had been there as far back as my memories went. The two weren’t making an effort to eat their breakfast and were somewhere but not there.

I stood before them as still as possible. “Hey.”

Neither spoke. Nor reacted.

I tipped my head at Grandpa. “Remember how I was telling you that I’m taking a film class at school?”

“*Cože?”* he mumbled, stuck in his stupor. He followed this by gulping down an entire cup of piping hot coffee.

For years, my grandpa had been suffering from a form of dementia. One difficult to diagnose, let alone treat, and which fluctuated. For periods he would be lucid. During others he’d be in another place and time. His past and present were fighting it out in his head. There were also periods as this, where it was difficult to tell which was winning.

I hoped for the best. “For my class project, I’ve decided to make a documentary on New Jersey. I’m gonna need your car in the afternoons for a while.”

He slid toward me in his seat. “*Jistě*. *Surely*. Just remember to bring it home on Fridays before service.”

“Yes, Grandpa.”

“It would not hurt if you joined us.”

“Yes, Grandpa.”

“The rabbi is forever asking about you. The cantor too. It is time.”

I slunk off, feeling guilty about lying to him. But I justified it by telling myself that he would’ve done the same.

#

Each weekday afternoon, I would cut last class and drive to multiple high schools. I’d show my sister’s picture from the newspaper to students and teachers and anyone I’d pass.

But none recognized her, despite the shooting having been a story for days on the local TV news.

I’m not sure how often I gave up, but it was considerable. It wasn’t only the search’s futility weighing on me but my doubts as to what I would say to my sister if I did locate her. Greater than that, I feared how it would dredge up the nightmare that had derailed me and could derail me worse than before.

Was I doing my best not to find her? So I would have an excuse for not facing her and the past?

I can’t answer this. But I kept getting into Grandpa’s well-rusted Matador. I kept searching.

#

I reached a dead end. I had been to all high schools in the area and to a few outside it and was no closer to my sister than when I’d begun. I had no choice but to give up for good.

“How is that documentary of yours coming?” Grandpa asked me one night during dinner.

“Everywhere is the same.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everywhere in New Jersey is the same.”

“You are not looking well enough. There are gems everywhere in the state. There are gems in Newark. Especially there.”

“Hillside too,” Grandma interjected. “Some of my favorite homes are in Hillside. Of course, they cannot compare to my old villa in Vinohrady. But nothing can.”

Grandpa agreed. “Hillside is a perfect example. Who would expect such lovely homes on the border of Newark and Elizabeth?”

“Hillside?” I said. “Isn’t that where Pingry is?”

“Exactly my point,” he pointed out, pointing at me. “You would never believe that the most prestigious private school in the state would be in Hillside. But there it is.”

At that half-instant, that I hadn’t checked any private schools smacked me upside my head. I must’ve assumed that a girl like my sister must’ve gone to a public one.

#

The next afternoon, I drove to Hillside and the leafy campus of Pingry. A place rich kids from all over northern New Jersey went.

Years earlier, a chunk of my sixth-grade class went there rather than to the local junior high. Which I believe had more to do with the school’s racial makeup than its academics. Parking my car, I came upon a guy that I had been friends with. He jumped into an Alfa across the lot and drove off. Both would’ve gotten lost in the snow.

Like I had at the other places I’d been, I asked everyone I passed about the girl in the picture, despite feeling less hopeful than normal.

I was not surprised that they all shook their heads.

With a grunt, I decided to leave and forget about my sister for a final time. But nearing Grandpa’s car, I came upon three boys. I showed them the photo.

One kid, a skinny one with short, frizzy sandy hair and light blue eyes and a wardrobe out of *GQ,* peered into the image. “Isn’t she the one who shot that drug dealer?”

“How do you know she shot him?” I asked, having never discovered who fired the gun.

“There are rumors.”

“I guess she doesn’t go here.”

“She goes to Columbia. A friend of mine was telling me about her. He goes there.”

“I went to Columbia a few weeks ago. Nobody knew her.”

“It doesn’t surprise me.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are rumors,” he repeated.

He and the others took off.

My frustration flew out. “What rumors?”

“I’m not saying,” he said with smugness that made me ill.

#

The following day, after getting home from school, I whisked Grandpa’s car keys off the bureau in the dining room and headed out.

This time I had a reason to believe that I was heading somewhere or could hope I was. But was it to a good place?

I dithered in the direction of our house’s front door, passing Grandpa. He was asleep on the living room couch by a rerun of *Columbo* on the TV, much as he had been doing in the afternoons for years.

He had been retired since before I came to live with him and Grandma when I was a child. He didn’t have a lot to do during the day, with Grandma working. She was a decade younger than him and the director of the local YM-YWHA.

Along with being alone a lot, Grandpa was running low on steam and any place to use what he had. I would question if this was the cause of his stupors.

Eyeing him that day as I went by, I wished he could’ve been with me. I wished I could’ve given him purpose. I also could’ve used his help.

With uncertain anxiety, I left the house. I drove to Maplewood. Like I had the last I was there, I parked on Valley Road by a diner called Ralph’s.

Kids streamed from the school and meandered through the parking lot. I showed the photograph to all those who went by.

They all shook their heads, not glimpsing at the newspaper clipping or at me. They were avoiding both. They had been doing this when I had been there before, but only now did I pick it up.

Not far from the school doors, I approached two girls. One was mousy and conservative-looking. The other was lanky and redheaded.

The mousy one slowed, her eyes widening. She stopped steps from me. “Are you her brother?”

“Yeah,” I said.

She took the final steps, wrapping her arms around me. More than surprising me. “I’m Mariana, Rudi’s best friend.”

“Rudi?”

It hit me, that no teenage girl in America would call herself “Gertrud,” and no punk.

Mariana released her arms. The two of us faced each other.

“You’re her best friend?” I asked, corroborating the girl in the photo with the one in front of me.

“She didn’t tell me that she had a brother.”

“Probably no one told her either. Where is she?”

“She’s been calling me 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.”

“Yon Levy. He’s at St. Barnabas. That’s a hospital in Livingston, off South Orange Avenue.”

“He hasn’t left the hospital?”

“I have no clue what’s wrong with him.”

#

“I’ve heard the rest,” Rudi interrupted.

The moth escaped the light above me. It dashed toward another in the distance, reaching it as a car horn blared down the road, breaking the silence around me.

“You haven’t heard all of it,” I said. “Me neither.”

“It’ll have to wait till tomorrow. I have to get up early.”

“I don’t work tomorrow. I can call you earlier.”

“Call me anytime after noon, my time.”

#

Because I wasn’t working the next day, I didn’t need a bus pass from Josh. But I had no choice but to notice him when I went to bed.

He was standing by the entrance to the women’s quarters. He was leering at them, in the way a wolf does at its prey, his eyes sparkling with delight.

*Who watches the watchers?*

I didn’t sleep a lot that night. But it wasn’t because of snoring that was louder than normal. Nor was it because of waves of darkness and demons that never came.

With my eyes locked onto the nothingness around me, I was figuring out what I should do about Josh.

I wasn’t figuring out much.

the fifth night

I surprised Josh on Saturday night by volunteering to do the house laundry on Sunday morning. I surprised him each Saturday night.

It was the worst chore at the shelter, washing the towels and bedding from the previous day and hanging them on clotheslines behind the dining hall. I also had to collect and fold them when they were dry. But it had one perk: I got to wash my own laundry afterward, before the others who had signed up for it that day.

That morning I steered the laundry cart around the table and chairs in the dorm toward the daylight. Its wheels jangled and jingled over the floor and fell with a high-pitched *booommmm,* from my pushing the cart over the step onto the courtyard.

In front of me stood Patrick, a gray, balding man grousing to Sharon.

He was the most loved person at the shelter, a veteran who saw action in Vietnam. But he didn’t care to talk about that. Instead, he would regale us with stories from the set of *Road House* and the role he played in it as a drunk at the bar. A role he was too qualified to play.

His flurry of fame came during a brawl scene when he laughs at someone’s thumping, ahead of another someone thumping him. It lasted a handful of seconds, but these would repeat in him forever.

“I’m not one to complain,” he said to Sharon, squinting from the shine above.

“What is it?”

“I woke this morning submerged in urine.”

“You what?”

“Theo, the guy in the bunk above me, doesn’t want to get up and go to the bathroom during the night. So he uses plastic bottles. Those two-liter Coke bottles. This morning, one broke all over me.”

She went off with a wince. “I’ll handle it.”

I did all I could not to smirk at Patrick. Without success.

He smirked back. “When it rains, it pours!”

#

With the shine bearing down on me in the courtyard, I waited for two loads of wash to finish.

A few booths down from me sat Willy and Dzsenifer, drinking coffee after finishing their breakfast.

It wasn’t easy for couples at the shelter. They couldn’t hold hands, much less have marital relations. For that, they had secluded places outside the shelter. An unwritten list of these they passed between them, along with a creative set of euphemisms, with new places added and others removed when circumstances warranted it.

Willy and Dzsenifer were a few years younger than me, but they could’ve been teenagers by the way they were ogling each other in the courtyard that morning. They stayed in love despite their troubles. It might’ve been what kept them moving forward.

“How’s your car?” I asked Willy.

He crossed his fingers and thumbs. “I’m praying for another week. Till payday, so I can get a new starter.”

“They’ll let you buy one?”

“We’ll be gone. That’s where the rest of the paycheck will go: for the deposit of our new apartment.”

#

I brought a basket of laundry outside.

Josh was prancing from the shelter at the end of his shift. He owned it and us.

*Who watches the watchers?*

Juvenal crawled into my head. He wouldn’t crawl out. I couldn’t shoo him away. He remained there after I hung up the towels and bedding and got me mulling.

A side effect of homelessness is the helplessness that accompanies it. You feel that you are unable to affect your own situation and all those around you. You are nothing but a spectator of life. A ghost.

But what if I could affect change?

The question got me to take out my plastic phone. I trained on its screen, deciding whether to cross the digital Rubicon and return to a side of me that I was sure I had lost and wasn’t sorry about losing.

With a drawn-out breath, I launched an anonymous web browser called Tor, on speculation that Josh had a connection to the two men the cops had arrested. I learned that the FBI provided access to their criminal database through an API that lets programmers use this data in their applications.

Josh couldn’t have gotten a job at the shelter if he had felony convictions, but the same wasn’t true for misdemeanors and arrests. These could’ve established a pattern that made him a person of interest in the police’s hunt for the traffickers’ accomplice.

Establishing this pattern wouldn’t be simple. The agency protected access to their database through keys, strings of numbers and letters and symbols that authenticate requests and are unbreakable. Though this system isn’t infallible. Despite means of securing keys, programmers are often lazy and leave them in their source files. So I scanned the web for one in public code repositories.

There wasn’t any. Which meant that if I wanted to learn more about Josh, I would have to scan private repositories for a key, and that wouldn’t have been legal. Using the key would’ve been less so.

I begged myself not to do it. I screamed at it to stop, that no one would care what a homeless man discovered, that it could screw me up greater than I already was. My lack of a criminal record was about all I had going for me.

With frustration and anger, I flung my phone down the table. It crawled to a halt and hung over the edge. But I remained trained on it and Kitty’s fright.

The leading sites for private repositories were GitHub and GitLab. Because the latter geared itself toward software development and because government agencies and contractors favored it, it was the better target.

On their website, they disclosed vulnerabilities they had discovered over the years. One allowed attackers to inject commands when importing files from GitHub. They had fixed this, but I came upon another instance in the same codebase where I could perform a similar exploit.

Next, I hunted down my old toolkit and created a GitHub repo. By installing a terminal app on my phone, I turned it into a low-end computer. Into which I injected code into GitLab and spawned a reverse shell, where I grepped the repositories, locating a key in one.

The rest should’ve been routine. All I had to do was write a simple Python script that employed the key to access the FBI’s database. The first part of the script would’ve identified Josh in the database. The second would’ve taken the result from the first to list out his record.

But I hadn’t programmed in years. Many bugs were in my simple script. I had many problems getting them out.

#

A pair of lungs heaved.

Gerry was at the corner booth in his sweatshirt and cap, with a puppy-dog face and his manila folders spread across the table.

His belief that the CIA director was stalking him wasn’t the craziest conspiracy theory that I had heard from homeless people. No person I’ve met on the streets has been without a theory. Most have lots and imaginative ones, often involving the Bilderberg Group or the Trilateral Commission or the Rothschilds. At the highway’s end, it’s easier to believe that someone has loaded the dice than to blame the one who’d been rolling them.

Needing a break from my script, I joined Gerry at the booth.

“Are you having a happy Chanukah?” he asked.

“Who told you I was Jewish?”

“I hear stuff.”

Ignoring the unease he caused, I sought his stalker. This required a few web searches with a normal web browser. I got the man’s address and phone number and where he worked as well as his picture.

I showed it to Gerry. “Your typical middle-aged ambulance chaser.”

My words brought him cheer. He was splashing around in them. “The perfect cover.”

I opened my mouth to respond. But Mitchell, the gangly guy who slept in the bunk below mine, drew my attention. He marched to us in a washed-out Obama Hope T-shirt.

Holding out his hand to Gerry, he sneered. “My phone.”

Gerry returned to his bashful look. He reached into his sweatshirt pocket, pulling out a plastic device similar to my own. “I couldn’t help myself.”

Mitchell took it and shook it at him. “I bet you’re the one stealing everyone’s money in the shower.”

“I’m not a thief. I’m a kleptomaniac. There’s a difference.”

“And that is?”

“I may take your wallet, but I’d never steal your money.”

Mitchell stormed off.

“Besides,” Gerry called out, “they stole my money too.”

Mitchell stopped. “You can bet if I had kleptomania, all they would call me was a thief.”

Not receiving a response, he took his phone to a booth up the way and listened to “Enter Sandman.”

This amused Gerry. “You guys listen to Metallica?”

Mitchell glowered at him. “Us ‘guys’ invented rock ’n’ roll, not to mention blues, hip-hop, R&B, soul, reggae, jazz . . .”

“What about disco?”

“Don’t lay that one on us. It was you ‘guys’ who were listening to it.”

“You also invented hardcore punk,” I interjected.

“We did?”

I waved Mitchell to the booth. I played him a video of a pair of Bad Brains’ concerts at CBGB from the early eighties. Punks of all varieties slammed into each other in front of H.R. (and at times on top of him), creating a thunderous mosaic, unaware that Gerry would one day regard this as unusual.

#

Taking a break from my script cleared my head.

Returning to my code, I was able to traverse the JSON objects that the FBI’s API endpoints sent back. Josh’s record spewed out on my phone’s terminal.

Or the absence of it.

There was nothing. No Joshua Maxwells in San Bernardino County existed to the agency.

Convinced that I had made a mistake, I triple-checked my script and the results from it. But there were no mistakes.

Undeterred, I scoured the Internet, for aliases and past addresses and rumors related to Josh, and for a connection between him and the two jailed men.

Not only did I come up empty but the few articles about Josh were positive. He volunteered with teens in crisis and people with disabilities. He had a wife and two kids and was vice-chairman of his local PTA. He had a dog too. One of those fluffy ones. He was as perfect as you could get. Way more perfect than me.

I begged myself some more. To forget about Josh and Kitty and all the other women. To keep my mouth and my eyes shut. To do nothing but “smile and wave” as Mateo put it.

But I couldn’t make myself forget. The wanting of it did the opposite.

The most frustrating part of this was that, a week earlier, it wouldn’t have been true.

#

Mitchell, Gerry, and I weren’t the only ones that day engaged in an eighties flashback.

Finishing my own laundry, I returned to the courtyard. Nichelle, Wendy, and a few others were playing Trivial Pursuit, a special edition of it that focused on the decade I had come of age.

They made me feel my age. None had an answer to the vegetable-themed doll craze that had 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 they got me recalling my own experiences during that time.

Locating a quiet booth, I called Rudi. “You wanna hear how I met Yon?”

She grumbled. “I told you, I’ve heard this.”

“Not all of it.”

#

In the blinding-white reception area of St. Barnabas, I asked for Yon’s room.

The man, also in white, checked the patient directory. “He’s in the Isolation Ward.”

“Isolation?”

“It’s for isolating infectious or possibly infectious patients.”

#

Approaching Yon’s room, I passed signs on the doors leading to his that warned about the dangers of being there.

They didn’t scare me. I must’ve felt the same immortality many young people feel.

Or was it a different fate I feared?

I got within steps of his room, my sneakers squeaking on the shiny white floor.

“What’s the contamination level?” one doctor whispered to another across the corridor.

“That is the question. It’s impossible to say how much of the blood supply this has affected. We can’t test for it.”

“So we should expect more of these cases.”

“‘Expect’ is too mild.”

Hearing labored breathing and coughing, I stopped at Yon’s door.

He was lying in bed, showing the effects from the beating he had taken. He scribbled in a notebook with a glumness that pervaded each stroke. He could’ve been making out his will.

Despite this, I disliked Yon. He was the type of guy I disliked and often hated. He was “sublime” in human form, in spite of his appearance (or because of it). If this was how he was, beaten and unshowered and unshaven, I could only imagine how he was before.

To me, Yon was the type of guy who never had a bad day. A type so different from me. But at that moment he wasn’t as different as I had wanted to believe.

I tapped on his door. But it sounded like a knock, like I had pounded my fist onto it.

This startled Yon. But not as much as I did. He expressed the same shock Mariana had. “You, you’re her . . .”

“Can you tell me where she is?”

His answer was a series of coughs. Loud, hacking ones. He followed them with returning to his scribbling without another word.

Glancing around, I couldn’t figure out what to do.

On a bureau across the room was a pen and one of those yellow sticky pads. I started toward it. “I’ll leave my name and number.”

He continued to write. “Keep your distance from me.”

I jotted down my information. “Tell her, please tell her that I want to talk to her.”

He didn’t acknowledge me or what I had said.

With nothing further to accomplish, I set out.

A nurse entered the room. She was wearing a mask and rubber gloves and was pushing a medical cart toward Yon. But what stood out was her fright. She was closing in on death.

#

I strode from the elevator on the hospital’s ground floor into the whiteness.

There she was, my sister. She had flopped herself onto an easy chair in the distance. Coming across as if she hadn’t slept in months, she had her arms around herself and the same face as in the mugshot, apart from the black streaks that had run down her cheeks.

I realized that she hadn’t realized me. I had the urge to run. I eyed the exits and hurried toward them.

But I didn’t get there. I stopped, seeking the courage to confront her and to discover the truth about her and to go through another bout of my own truth.

It took a while for this courage to show, and there wasn’t a lot of it. But it was enough to stagger toward her.

To be honest, “stagger” isn’t the right word. “Inched” wouldn’t have described it either. It must’ve taken minutes before I was near enough for her to catch a whiff of me.

She recognized my resemblance to her, but it didn’t surprise her. It made her mad.

“Hi,” I mumbled in front of her, unable to come up with better, despite having practiced this from when I had learned about her. “I think I’m . . .”

She swiped at her streaks, making them worse. “My brother.”

“I . . .”

“What do you want?”

“What do I want?” I said, feeling my own fury. “I learn that I have a twin and that she might be a Nazi or a neo-Nazi and . . .”

“And a murderer?”

“I . . .”

“You can see that it’s true.”

The problem was that I couldn’t do this. It was the opposite.

She got angrier. “So you can go back to your little life and forget about me, in the same way I’m gonna forget about you. I’ll forget about you the second you slink away.”

I couldn’t breathe. I gasped for air and hurried toward the exits without saying more. I hurried through the automatic doors too. I keeled over outside them.

#

I needed a pause from my story.

Stretching my legs outside the booth, I asked Rudi what she had been doing between the night at the motel and the day I had met her in the hospital.

She couldn’t tell me much. She couldn’t remember much. One of her few vivid memories was of a dream.

#

Rudi woke in a hospital bed. So consumed with pain was she that she cursed. She did until she couldn’t anymore.

With no one coming to help her, she stumbled off the bed into the hallway. She became awash in her loneliness. Not a soul was anywhere.

She wandered down the corridor, to a supply closet. Feeling worse pain, she threw open its door.

Inside it was a glass cabinet filled with pill bottles. Locked, she smashed the glass with her fist. She snatched a bottle at random, tearing off its top.

It was empty. So she chucked it onto the floor and snatched another bottle. But it, too, was empty. As was the next and the one after that. They were all empty.

Cursing more than before, she shook her bloody fist, her pain and loneliness worse.

She went back to the hallway. Scrambling through it, she passed rooms that were without exception empty. She passed hundreds, coming to Yon’s. He was lying in bed, beaten but happy as Darlene held his hand from a chair, with the two gazing into each other’s eyes.

Mrs. Levy was also happy and gazing, at the two from her own chair by the door.

“Yon?” Rudi said.

He didn’t respond.

Frantic, she shouted his name. She punched him. But he wouldn’t react. She wasn’t there.

#

Rudi woke, for real.

Like in her dream, she was in pain from the beating she had taken. She cursed as she had in it.

“Rudi?” chirped a voice to her right.

Mariana was sitting beside the bed. She had a look similar to the one she had when Rudi had met her but for a different reason.

Rudi rolled into a ball, away from her. “What are you doing here?”

“Next time you’re in trouble . . . you might want to tell your best friend.”

Drowning in emotion, Rudi spun toward Mariana. She hugged her with all she had.

Remembering Yon, she released her arms and asked about him.

“He’s in another ward. I went to see him, but he wasn’t awake.”

“I gotta go to him,” Rudi yelped, falling from the bed onto the floor.

Mariana helped her up. “You’re not going anywhere. Not for a while.”

“How is he? How’s Yon?”

Mariana shook her head.

#

Rudi lingered in bed for days, strung out on the drugs the hospital had given her and her mind stuck on a septuple of words.

*I want you to be my girl*.

Weeks earlier, these would’ve been the most ridiculous words she had ever heard. Now they were the only ones.

It wasn’t only Yon’s words that embraced her. Or how he’d screamed them to her from outside the motel room. It was how she had wanted to run into his arms when she’d heard them. She’d wanted, in that half-moment, to give it all up to him, to never more belong to herself.

She didn’t because she wasn’t there for herself. She told me that ignoring him was her first selfless act.

*I want you to be my girl*.

The words dragged Rudi out of bed. They sent her searching for Yon. She stumbled through the hospital corridors with them echoing over her head.

*I want you to be my girl*.

She got to his room. Other words replaced the seven.

“Leave me alone!” he screamed in between coughs, and he wouldn’t let her get anywhere near him. Nor would he place his eyes on her when she came to his door.

After that, he was gone. For a reason no one would explain, the hospital transferred him to a different one.

Registering that her dream had come true, Rudi left the hospital. She did far from all right.

This was where it all got blurry. Most pill bottles she would encounter weren’t so empty.

In the pieces and bits she could recall, she would blunder through streets and hallways or crawl across floors, with both sets of Yon’s words fighting it out in her head. Along with this, she fought the worthlessness that she had battled since her mother had left and her compulsion to self-destruction. Both were propelling her nowhere.

One day, she came to a library. Recalling the safety that another had provided her when she was a child, she staggered inside. She stole a paperback copy of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. She couldn’t say why she had. She had read it years earlier in the same class that she’d read *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Night after night, she clutched the book, the words on its tattered cover pushing her toward the words she wanted to believe. The ones she had no choice but to believe. They pushed her all the way to Yon’s new hospital.

He wouldn’t talk to her there either, or place his eyes on her. So she flopped herself onto an easy chair in the waiting room.

What she was waiting for, she couldn’t say. But it was the one “where” to go.

I wasn’t the first who found her there. Yon’s doctor had. He’d told her what Yon had. It had caused the streaks on her face.

#

I was standing against a wall by the entrance of St. Barnabas as it got dark. I wanted to leave. But I couldn’t make myself go. I couldn’t return to Rudi either.

The automatic doors opened. There she was, with her hands on her hips.

I stammered. “How, how did you . . .”

“This is where I’d be.”

She leaned against the wall next to me. Both of us facing ahead, we stood in silence for God knows how long.

Rudi broke this. “When I was a kid, I came upon a picture of us when we were babies. You couldn’t tell us apart.”

“You can now.”

We both laughed, for God knows how long.

I shook my head. “I’ve no memories of you at all.”

“Me neither. They must’ve split us up soon after that picture.”

“But why?”

“I suppose my stepdad had no use for a boy.”

I shuddered. I had believed forever that I had it bad. But I’d been wrong.

Shaking this off, I grappled with what to ask next. “What about . . . what about our dad? All Grandpa could tell me was that his last name was Cohen.”

Rudi got squeamish. “That’s more than Mom told me, more than I would’ve presumed she could’ve.”

“And where is she?”

“That I can’t tell you either. And that’s the one ‘that’ I’m grateful for.”

“I guess she was pretty messed up.”

“You can say that.”

“She’d been through a lot.”

“She wasn’t the only one.”

“She was born in Prague,” I said, restraining a heave. It was not from defending a woman that no one could but from returning to my nightmare.

I struggled to get the rest out. I had to shove the sentence over my tongue. “After the war, they deported her and her Czech mother to Germany because, because her dead father had been a Nazi. An SS officer.”

When my grandpa had told me this, when he told me that he wasn’t my grandpa and told me about the man who was, it sent me into a tailspin I would never escape. Rudi was as shocked as I had been. But she feigned otherwise, gaping at me. “The apple doesn’t rot far from the tree.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m just like him.”

“You’re not. Neither of us.”

“I thought I was Jewish. I wanted to believe I was.”

“You are Jewish. We both are. It’s complicated. My grandparents . . . I mean our grandparents, they adopted our mother.”

“What happened to her mom?”

“The two were staying at a resettlement camp in Nordhausen. The Czechs had hated them because they considered them German, but the Germans hated them because they didn’t consider them this. Some people in the camp, they killed her mother. They killed her in front of her and came close to killing her. Grandma says that she couldn’t make it through a night without pills.”

I sucked in a bunch of air. “Try to remember that, try to remember it the next time you hate her. That’s what I do.”

Rudi was confused. “I don’t get it. If her father had been a Nazi, why would Jews adopt her?”

“It’s difficult to explain. Grandpa had met her mom before he left Prague. She reminded him of his late first wife. But there was more to it. Grandma couldn’t have children. Grandpa didn’t have any either. Then this chance came for them both. They also wanted to see our mother as some kind of Ruth.”

“Ruth?”

“From the Bible. She wasn’t Jewish but was married to one. When he died, rather than returning to her people, she joined her mother-in-law and became a Jew. She would later become the great-grandmother of King David.”

“But our mom was the child of a Nazi. How could they adopt her?”

“I guess they wanted to fix the world or their piece of it. It sounds corny, but it’s part of who we are as a people.”

“It’s not corny to me. But they failed. Badly they failed.”

“Could be. But I wouldn’t be here if they hadn’t tried. Nor would you. So we’ll have to wait on that one.”

Rudi said nothing.

I changed the subject. “I saw Yon earlier.”

“He won’t see me.”

“Why?”

“This is my fault.”

“What do you mean?”

“None of this would’ve happened if I hadn’t shown up here . . . if he hadn’t lov . . .”

“So you two . . .”

Rudi said more nothing.

“Is he gonna be okay?”

“He, he’s got this strain of pneumonia that’s been going around. 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 was so terrified?”

“She’s an idiot, that woman. His doctor doesn’t wear that crap around him. He’s not terrified.”

“But it is a contagious form of pneumonia?”

She glowered at me. “It’s not contagious.”

I changed this subject too. “I learned about what had happened, from the newspaper and TV. But they didn’t say much.”

“This guy Deke, he was beating me. He was killing me. He only didn’t because Yon broke into the motel room.”

Rudi slumped over. “I don’t get why he did. He had no chance against Deke. He had to know that. Why would he do it?”

“The alternative,” I mumbled, “it could’ve been worse.”

“Yon surprised Deke. He picked him up and threw him into a wall, right through the plaster. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe that anyone would do that for me.

“I struggled to get off the floor. So Yon leaned over me. He was crying worse than I was. That’s when Deke jumped him. He beat him worse than he’d beaten me. I wanted to help, but my legs wouldn’t move.

“I saw Deke’s gun on the floor. I reached for it, but it was out of my . . . and Yon, he wasn’t gonna last.

“I lunged forward. I grabbed the gun. I shot Deke.”

“Are you in trouble for that?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? If I’d been anyone but me, they would’ve given me a medal.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m not the one in a hospital bed.”

“What about, what about the other boy?”

“What other boy?”

“The one who got killed a few months back.”

“Are you asking me if I killed him?”

“I’m not sure what I’m asking.”

Rudi became angry, as angry as before. “And if I told you I killed him?”

I peered into her eyes. I sank myself into them. “I wouldn’t believe it.”

She shifted from me.

“Where you staying?”

“Around.”

“Grandpa and Grandma would—”

“—I want nothing from them.”

“They had no idea you existed. They would’ve never left you like that.”

Rudi didn’t react, not at all.

I had many more questions, but I couldn’t form any. All I could do was push myself off the wall. “Can I come back?”

“I’m here all the time.”

#

I visited Rudi at the hospital a lot.

It was slow at first. Some days fewer than a pair of phrases passed between us. But we loosened up after a while.

I told her about my “little life” and our grandparents. Most of all I 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 all the important moments in my life. I told her as well how he’d come up with a way to forgive me for all that I’d put him through. I told her how no one could’ve been more my grandpa.

Rudi told me about her life too. I learned how alike we were despite how unalike we had grown up. I expected us to have the same birthday and similar aptitudes, and I loved punk rock as much as she did, but we had surprising similarities. Such as the books we had read. This included unusual ones like Miguel de Unamuno’s *Mist* and Kōbō Abe’s *The Woman in the Dunes*. Though they shouldn’t have surprised me. Both books were about people who learned that they didn’t control their fate. This would’ve appealed to both of us.

Rudi and I were also different, beyond how we dressed or wore our hair. She had a strength I didn’t. It wasn’t her physical prowess. That’s not strength. Any coward can hit someone. Her strength came from her ability to charge ahead, no matter what was in her path, as she was doing with Yon. At the same time, there was warmth under her strength. Warmth beyond what I could give. Her smile would forever be unexpected, but it would come. It would light up all that was around her.

So, regardless of her flaws, I would come to view Rudi as a perfected me. The me I wanted to be but never could or would be.

#

One shivering afternoon, I was scampering to the hospital from the parking lot.

Rudi wasn’t in her chair. She was outside the doors and panicked.

I hustled to her and asked what was wrong.

“Yon’s gone.”

I jumped to the worst. “Gone?”

“He left the hospital.”

“And went where?”

“Nobody knows. Or cares. A nurse was smirking about it. I almost broke her teeth.”

“You said that he was too sick to go anywhere.”

“He is. I gotta get to him.”

“All right, I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Where you going?” she yelled as I sprinted off.

“To get help.”

#

Grandpa turned off the TV with the remote.

He frowned at me from the living room couch, shaking his head. “I cannot do it.”

I threw out my hands at him. “She’s not a Nazi or a murderer. She’s my sister, your granddaughter.”

His head kept shaking. “Your grandmother, she would never forgive me. You have no idea what she went through with your mother. She cannot go through that another time.”

I joined him on the couch and pleaded. “Please, Grandpa, only you can find him.”

“You did a pretty good job of finding her.”

“Because you gave me the most important clue, without trying to. I also had a sense of where she was. Yon could be anywhere.”

“I cannot help anyone anymore. I am a useless old man who spends his few good days with idiot boxes.”

“You can do it. We can do it together.”

Grandpa lowered his head, from the choice before him. It stayed there until he shook it.

“Talk to her for a few minutes. How can that hurt?”

#

Grandpa and I approached the entrance of St. Barnabas.

Rudi was more panicked. She was about to crumble.

Grandpa had been hesitant the whole way there. But on sight of his granddaughter for the first time outside her mugshot, his hesitancy grew. I was sure that I would have to tow him to her.

The sight of Grandpa didn’t please Rudi either. Her fists quaked and her nostrils rose as we got to her.

“Sorry, we’re late,” I said.

Grandpa tipped his hat to Rudi, his eyes as stretched as they could be. “*Servus*.”

She tossed a finger in his direction and snarled at me. “Who’s that?”

“Your grandfather.”

Twisting herself from us, Rudi crossed her arms. “I told you, I want nothing from him.”

“Remember when I told you that he had been a police detective? What I didn’t tell you was that he’d been a really good police detective.”

“In what century?”

“This one,” Grandpa deadpanned.

I had to bite my tongue. “He can find Yon. He might be the only one who can.”

Grandpa shook his head, for the umpteenth time that day. “I did not say that I would.”

I turned to him. I didn’t speak, but I was begging.

He took the conversation into a different direction. “Did I ever tell you how I went searching for Franz Kafka when he went missing?”

“Yes, Grandpa. Lots.”

“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 acted. But it alarmed his family. His sister . . .”

Grandpa couldn’t finish. Rudi sighed at a volume that drowned him out. Uncrossing her arms, she came back to us. “All right.”

“First of all,” Grandpa said, “are you certain that this Yon of yours is missing? Kids run away and return. Your mother did all the time.”

“You don’t get it. He needs to get back to this hospital right now. His life depends on it.”

Now Grandpa sighed. “Have you checked his home?”

“I called. But he hasn’t been there. He and his mother have been fighting. They’ve been fighting over me. I doubt she’s been to the hospital.”

“Where could he be?”

“There’s this waterfall that he goes to in the forest, but you’d never find it. I can’t.”

Grandpa pointed behind himself, toward the trees in the distance. “The one in the reservation, behind Grunnings?”

“Yeah,” Rudi gasped, her mouth wide enough for wasps to nest in it.

“What about friends or relatives?”

She had no response.

“Do you have a picture of him?”

Rudi yanked a page from a phone book out of her bag. “I don’t have a picture, but his mother must. I can give you her address.”

“All right, I will seek your Yon. But understand that it does not work like in these TV shows you Americans watch, where they solve the entire mystery in exactly one hour. It takes time.”

“He doesn’t have any.”

“Meanwhile, I have a friend who works at your school. You can stay with him.”

Rudi’s mouth opened, wider than before. “What?”

“And you will return to school.”

“The hell I will!”

“I was too lenient with your mother. Because of all that she had been through, I let her get away with it all. On this occasion, I will practice that . . .”

Grandpa couldn’t latch onto the words he was reaching out for. He became lost.

“*Jak se řekne?”* he whispered to himself.

He snapped his fingers. “‘Tough love.’ I will practice ‘tough love.’”

“Listen—” Rudi began.

“—If I had done this with your mother, she could have been here to tell you what to do. It is possible that she would not have to do this. But I am smart enough to learn from my mistakes. So these terms are, how do you say, nonnegotiable.”

Rudi lowered her head, in the same manner Grandpa had in the living room. It was as if she had grown up seeing him do this. “I want updates every day.”

“Give me until Monday. Then we can meet by your school daily when it lets out. Do we have a deal?”

#

“You will enjoy Stephen,” Grandpa said to Rudi, his hand clutching the car’s door. “You have commonalities.”

Shuffling off, he headed toward a house not far from the reservation. The endless trees silhouetted the kids playing under them in the front yard.

By the front door, Grandpa rang the bell.

A man came outside. He leaned down and hugged Grandpa. He hugged him like he was hugging his father.

Rudi fell forward in her seat.

“Who is he?” I asked.

“Mr. Criss. He’s a guidance counselor at Columbia. What ‘commonalities’ could we have?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t tell whether the question was rhetorical.

#

I plugged my phone in at the wall by the booth and asked Rudi about life with the Crisses.

“Pink. It was pink.”

#

Pam Criss led Rudi up a flight of stairs. “We’ve been foster parents for years.”

A woman in her late thirties, she had stepped out of an Ivory commercial. The wholesomeness was loud in her.

Two preteen boys ran down the stairs toward them. They came close to running them over.

“But we haven’t had a girl in ages,” Mrs. Criss went on, with the two women furthering up the staircase. “It’s going to be so nice.”

Rudi didn’t speak. She was doing her best not to scoff at all that was around her.

They got to the second floor and meandered down the hallway. “If you ever need advice,” the woman cooed, “just ask.”

“Advice?”

“Girl stuff.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

They came to a door. The woman opened it, exposing a frilly and pink girl’s bedroom. Along with the dolls and dollhouses and doll accessories, were four pink walls, a pink carpet, a pink bed that Goldilocks could’ve slept in, and a pink dresser. There was also a mirror on the dresser, framed in pink. The one oasis was the unpink portable stereo next to it and a stack of cassettes.

Pam raised her arms. “This was my bedroom when I was growing up. Isn’t it special?”

“It’s not ordinary.”

#

Rudi was lying on her way-too-soft bed, her eyes gazing out the windows into the empty Saturday afternoon, with Janis Ian’s *Between the Lines* playing on the portable stereo.

Mr. Criss knocked on her open door with a folder in his hand.

Rudi kept silent.

He showed her the folder. “I got your file from Mrs. Cavender. Is there a reason why you haven’t applied to college?”

Her silence continued.

The man let out a wheeze. “It’s a bit twilighty in the day, but I’ve got a friend in the admissions office at Princeton. I could call in a—”

“—I wish you two were more like my parents and didn’t care.”

“I’ll make that call anyway.”

He started off. But he stopped and went back to her. “I noticed that you’re required to attend meetings. I’m gonna hold you to them. And I’ll know if you don’t go.”

#

Rudi sat on the house steps, her attention on the trees and what was behind them, with sounds and smells coming from the barbecue in the backyard.

The front door opened. Pam hopped out. “The steaks are about ready.”

“Terrific,” Rudi uttered. “Tripleplusgood.”

“But we have baked potatoes and corn on the cob. You can eat that, can’t you?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You haven’t been hungry since you got here. I can relate to that.”

Rudi eyeballed the woman, who sat next to her and embraced her.

She made Rudi uncomfortable. But not as uncomfortable as she would’ve expected.

“I met Stephen on my first day of South Mountain Elementary,” the woman said. “We were *the* couple. I had this fantasy of the life we’d have together.”

The woman drifted. “But it didn’t turn out that way. And I’d spend my days worrying about him, and I got really, really thin.”

“And?” Rudi asked.

“I didn’t give up on my fantasy. I didn’t when everyone was telling me to. *I* was telling me to.”

“So did you . . .”

“I never did get the fantasy. I guess it doesn’t work that way. But without holding on to it, without refusing to let it fall, I wouldn’t’ve gotten my reality. And it’s pretty darn good.”

Against her will, Rudi rested her head on the woman’s shoulder. “You know, you’re okay.”

“So are you. You have to remind yourself of that.”

#

Monday afternoon, Grandpa and I parked outside Columbia on Parker Avenue.

Waiting for Rudi, we listened to a haunting rendition of Pergolesi’s *Stabat Mater* coming from the car’s stereo. The two women singing it were emptying themselves onto us.

In my younger days, I never heard Grandpa listen to this music. But in recent years I often had, most often the last movement, “Quando corpus morietur.” Pergolesi wrote the piece during the last days of his life when he wasn’t that older than Yon. This movement, in particular, touches upon this.

*While my form here fades,*

*May my soul Thy goodness praise.*

Grandpa had been listening to the music so much of late that I asked him why. I asked him, too, why he would be listening to a Catholic hymn.

He insisted that he had no special reason for listening to it. But he added that music had no religion. He told me that a Jewish choir had many times performed Verdi’s *Requiem* at Theresienstadt. Performances that were indelible upon their listeners, including on the Nazis who would show up for them. He said that they had sung it as if the words were their own and had flowed from their mouths since childhood. “Oh, if you could have heard the soprano sing ‘Libera me’ at the end of it,” he murmured with a slight bow of his head. ‘*Libera me, Domine, de morte aeterna in die illa tremenda*.’ It wasn’t only her voice begging for deliverance. It was all of ours. You could hear them everywhere, and I tell you that God Himself must have been in tears.”

#

Looking back, I believe Grandpa did have a reason for listening to *Stabat Mater*. Similar to what *Mist* and *The Woman in the Dunes* had meant for Rudi and me, the musicwas his means of accepting fates he didn’t control.

#

The school let out. A thousand people pushed through the doors at the same time.

Rudi wandered out, through all the people hanging outside.

Everyone was avoiding her. They were frightened of her.

I figured this was normal. Till Mariana avoided her, the girl who was her “best friend,” dragged by the lanky redhead she had been with on the day I’d met her.

There wasn’t only fear of Rudi on display. One girl, with venom in her eyes, hurled a gay slur at her and scurried off.

Rudi ignored it all. But all of it was bothering her. She was the loneliest person in all the universes.

She came upon someone sitting on the stoop outside the school. He was a hulking boy with a receding hairline and eyes sadder than her own. I got the feeling that he could relate to whatever she was going through.

Conflict was on his face too, enough to sink ten Hamlets.

I opened my window, poking my head through it. “Rudi!”

She ran to our car and inside the back door. “Well?” she asked, tilting toward us.

Grandpa turned down the music. “Mrs. Levy was kind enough to give me a photograph of Yon. She also gave me the names and phone numbers of his relatives and friends in the area.”

“What makes you sure that he’s in the area?”

“White chocolate.”

“What?”

“There was a bowl of white chocolate truffles at Yon’s house. A wrapper from one was at those falls of yours. It was no more than a day old.”

Grandpa reached inside his jacket, for a Polaroid of a tire track. He showed it to Rudi. “There were also fresh tracks from that Harley Sturgis of his. I must say, these Harleys, they cannot compare to the Jawas I rode in my Prague days, but they are very nice bicycles.”

Rudi’s shoulders drooped. “How will any of this help us discover where Yon is right now?”

“I told you that it would take time.”

Exhaling, Rudi fell back in her seat.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“They know.”

“What?”

“That Yon’s sick. They’re talking about him as if he’s got the plague.”

“Is that why everyone was avoiding you?”

Grandpa spun toward me with concern. “You did not tell me that he has a contagious disease.”

Rudi scowled. “It’s not contagious. He’s got pneumonia.”

“If it’s just pneumonia and it’s not contagious,” I countered, “why was he in the isolation ward? And why is everyone so afraid of him? What are you not telling us?”

Rudi wouldn’t say, making my worry worse.

“Are you positive that you are not sick?” Grandpa asked Rudi.

She kicked her door open. “They checked me out, I’m fine.”

“There was one other tidbit.”

Rudi stopped.

Grandpa bent toward her. “Mrs. Levy was further kind enough to check Yon’s accounts. He has not used his credit cards, but he has taken some cash with his ATM card.”

“So?”

“The amount that he took and that he is not staying with friends or family lead me to believe that he is staying in a hotel. A cheap one. You would not have an idea of which?”

“I only have an idea of one. But he’d never go there.”

#

We drove to the motel in Newark anyway. But floundered in a river of traffic on Route 22.

Through his rearview mirror, Grandpa faced Rudi’s anxiety. “While we are waiting, I can tell you my Kafka story.”

I waved him off. “This isn’t a good time, Grandpa.”

“The story will have meaning for your sister.”

I continued dissuading him. But it would’ve been easier making the traffic disappear.

#

It was the day after New Year’s in 1923.

The twenty-five-year-old man who would become my grandpa was shuffling down Eliška Krásnohorská Street in Josefov, the Jewish quarter of Prague. He was carrying a bouquet of white roses as he had each Friday night. They covered his chest in their brilliance.

He quickened, with each step closer to his goal.

Voices interrupted his zeal, from a block away in the Temple on Geist Alley, today known as the Spanish Synagogue. They were chanting “Shalom Aleichem,” like others had in the shul of his youth 800 kilometers to the east.

*Bless me with peace,*

*Angels of peace,*

*Angels of the Most High.*

Beneath these voices was what was calling out to him. *Come celebrate with us*. *Come celebrate life*.

This was also beneath the voices coming from outside a pub on Pařížská Street, a block in the other direction. They called out to him in the same way.

He ignored them both. Through the kaleidoscope of light cascading over the cobblestones, he strolled into his apartment building.

In the lobby was a woman around thirty, shivering on the stairway in her overcoat. With distress, she jumped to her feet. “Hermann Weiss?”

He tipped his hat to her. “*Servus*.”

“My name is Ottilie Davidová,” she said. “My sister Elli lives in this building. She says that you’re a policeman.”

He neared her. “What can I do for you?”

“Our brother Franz has been missing for days. Franz Kafka is his name.”

“Franz Kafka?”

The name sounded familiar to Hermann. He had to comb through his memory to get why it had. “The writer?”

“You, you’ve heard of him?”

“I read one of his stories at the university. But I haven’t heard of him since. Does he continue to write?”

“Not successfully, I’m afraid. He worked as an insurance clerk until tuberculosis forced him into early retirement.”

“Did you file a missing persons report with the police?”

“Yes, but they won’t help us. They told us this.”

“Well, I can’t imagine what you expect from me. I’m a beat cop and not a good one. Twice they’ve threatened to fire me. The third time may be the charm.”

“Elli told me that she had coffee with you and your wife. She said that you were smart and ambitious.”

“Let’s suppose that’s true. What could I do? He could be anywhere in Europe by now.”

“Please, Franz may be a nobody to the world, but to us he is special. We must get him back.”

“When did you see him last?”

“Tuesday evening. He had been staying with me at my house on Golden Lane. The next morning he was gone, with his suitcase and belongings.”

“He could’ve gone to a sanitarium.”

“He wouldn’t have gone without telling us. He didn’t tell his girlfriend either. She’s as worried as we are.”

Hermann yearned to decline the woman’s request. The words took shape in his mouth. Not only was it an impossible task, but he was tired and wanted to relax over the weekend. Above that, he wanted to spend time with his wife, who hadn’t gotten over a tragedy from months before.

But there was desperation in Ottilie’s eyes. Desperation he couldn’t evade any more than he could Rudi’s. “Do you have a picture of him?”

From her purse, she pulled out a photo. She handed it to him. “It’s old. He’ll be forty this year.”

“I could check the train stations.”

“Oh, thank you, Herr Weiss.”

“Let me drop off these flowers, and I’ll have a look. But I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

#

Hermann went to Wilson Station, the main terminal in Prague. He showed the picture of Kafka to everyone who worked there.

None recognized him.

Next, he traveled to Masaryk Station, where he had the same lack of success. So he was ready to give up. He convinced himself that he had done all that he could.

Starting home, he stopped, recalling there was a commuter station in Dejvice, not far from where Kafka had been living. The station the new country’s president used when visiting his summer home in Lány.

#

No trains were stopping in Dejvice until morning, and the new tram lines to the expanding outskirts of Prague had stopped running for the night. Hermann had to hitch rides on cars and buggies to get to his destination and do plenty of walking. It was after midnight when he got to the aging building.

From a distance, it was dark and empty. But by its doors a dimness projected from inside. It illuminated the dozen people waiting on benches as well as a ticket booth and the man inside it.

Hermann hiked into the building and to the clerk, who was wearing a suit a hundred years old. He showed him Kafka’s photo. “Have you seen this man?”

The clerk didn’t stir from his paperwork. “He was here, a few nights ago.”

“Do you remember where he went?”

“Ústí nad Zapomněním.”

This puzzled Hermann. “I’ve lived in this country for years, but I’ve never heard of Ústí nad Zapomněním. I’ve been to Ústí nad Labem and have read about Ústí nad Orlicí but no . . .”

“Do you want a ticket or not?”

“How much?”

“One crown, ninety-nine hellers.”

“That’s a rather odd amount,” Hermann said. But he dipped his hand into his pants pocket. He plucked out two crown coins, placing them under the ticket window.

The clerk took them and wrote out a train ticket. Which he slipped below the window along with a heller that he tapped. “Don’t lose this. You’ll need it to pay the ferryman.”

“The ferryman?”

Hermann waited for an answer. But none was coming. So he took the ticket and the coin. He sat on a bench across from a man who was reading the latest edition of a Czech daily called *Lidové noviny*.

“Excuse me, sir,” Hermann said to him, “my Czech is a work in progress. Could you tell me what *zapomnění* means?”

“Oblivion.”

“So ‘Ústí nad Zapomněním’ would mean ‘The Mouth . . .’”

“The Mouth at the River of Oblivion.”

Hermann was pretty sure that there was no such river anywhere in what people would later call the First Czechoslovak Republic. He wanted to give up another time.

*Go home*. He told himself this over and over. *Go home*. But Ottilie’s eyes remained in his head. They wouldn’t go anywhere. Nor would he.

With nothing to do but wait, he set his mind on the man’s newspaper and its headline: “Jaroslav Hašek Hospitalized in Grave Condition.”

Hermann struggled through the opening paragraph. He learned that they didn’t expect the famed author of *The* *Good Soldier Švejk* to survive.

He shook his head, having loved what was a three-volume collection of books and what many consider the first anti-war novel. He loved the books despite needing his wife to translate parts of it. Like many World War I veterans, he recognized his own life in its pages. It made him less alone.

A sound broke Hermann’s concentration. A train with a single passenger car was sputtering into the station.

#

The railroad car Hermann stepped aboard was similar to the clerk’s suit. It was a hundred years old.

With his discomfort heightening, he took a seat on a wooden bench with the others and waited. For so much time he did that he was ready to give up some more.

A stout middle-aged conductor entered the car. “I do hope everyone has their heller with them,” he said in a bellowing bass voice. “The ferryman will not provide passage without proper fare.”

He lumbered through the car, punching the tickets of those he passed. He came to Hermann.

Hermann gave him his ticket. He showed him Kafka’s picture. “I’m searching for this man.”

The conductor’s eyes didn’t leave the ticket. “He was on the train the other night.”

“The one to Ústí nad Zapomněním?”

“What other?”

“When will we get there?”

“You have a journey ahead of you, young man. Sit back and rest. I’ll be certain to tell you when we get there.”

Hermann took the ticket. Leaning against his seat, he shut his eyes.

The train sputtered from the station. It did with such paucity of motion that someone could’ve overtaken it on foot.

“It’ll take us days to get out of Prague,” he groaned.

*The Mouth at the River of Oblivion*.

The words returned to Hermann’s head. Why they had wasn’t obvious, but they kept themselves there until it occurred to him that the river *was* familiar.

But where had he heard of it?

*The ferryman will not provide passage without proper fare*.

“Charon,” Hermann cried.

Opening his eyes, he recalled how, in Greek mythology, Charon ferried the dead across the River of Oblivion to the afterworld, after they paid him a coin. “It’s ridiculous. This must be a joke.”

He jumped up in quest for the conductor, with the train moving slower than before.

The conductor marched into the car. “Ústí nad Zapomněním. Last stop, Ústí nad Zapomněním.”

“But we just left Prague!” Hermann yelled.

“We’ve been traveling all night, sir. Check your window if you don’t believe me.”

Hermann did. It was morning outside and covered in fog.

#

Hermann staggered from the train. With a dogged unwillingness, he followed the others.

They made their way up a hill. Toward what, he couldn’t tell. All he could make out was a river to his left, whose flow was a trickle, and the cliff he was ambling alongside that overlooked the water.

He proceeded up the hill, coming to a stairway that led down the cliff to a dock where stood a handful of people.

Spinning wheels sent his head in the opposite direction, toward a grimacing woman in a dirty blue uniform, pushing an empty garbage bin up the hill.

He showed her the picture of Kafka and asked about him.

She pointed ahead. “If he’s here, he’s there.”

Hermann followed her finger. Through the fog was a castle-like structure on the hill’s peak.

“What is it?” he asked.

“A place of death, it is. And plenty of it.”

Hermann froze. He wanted to return to the station and to Prague. He had been around too much death in his young life.

Turning back, he came to another stop.

A boatman in a hooded cloak was rowing a skiff down the river toward the dock.

Hermann’s fear rocketed. “Charon.”

Stumbling forward, he took a step closer to the cliff’s edge and another. He kept stumbling and stepping until he slipped and tumbled down the hill, all the way to the bottom.

#

Hermann woke on a stretcher, in a dark and dank hospital corridor, wearing nothing but a nightshirt.

Leaping to his waist and feeling dizzy, he grasped his forehead.

A bandage was on it. He was sore all over. Yet he got off the stretcher onto the floor.

Steadying himself, he moved forward. He shuffled down a winding hallway, coming to a set of doors.

He pushed himself through them.

Men on beds had packed a hall-like room. No less than a hundred were in an area that stretched beyond Hermann’s vision.

“Franz Kafka?” he squeaked.

No one 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 an answer. He couldn’t tell if anyone was breathing.

The first exception to this was in a room by a stairway. A group of five men had encircled the bed of an obese man around forty, who had a coif of curly brown hair and a filthy nightshirt.

The man was the center of attention due to the notebook he was reading aloud. “Lieutenant Dub, who thought the terrible liquor was going to his head, tapped his finger on the table and lucidly explained to Captain Ságner: ‘The district commissioner and I have always said, “Patriotism, loyalty to duty, self-achievement, these are the true weapons in war.” I’m reminded of this especially today when our troops are on the cusp of crossing the border.’”

The obese man fell silent, lowering both his notebook and himself.

The men surrounding him, who you would’ve sworn had been listening to the voice of God, eyed each other with dismay.

“Well?” one said.

The obese man took offense. “Well, what?”

“Aren’t you going to finish?”

“There is no more, gentlemen. It’s probable that there will be no more.”

“But you can’t end it without finishing the story,” pleaded another man.

“I can if I must.”

“Would you,” babbled a feeble voice, belonging to a man wobbling a leather-bound book in his hand, “would you sign my copy?”

“What for?” howled the obese man. “What good will it do you now?”

The feeble man wilted, chafing the obese man, who tossed out his hand. “Give it here.”

Without taking a breath, the feeble man handed him his book and a pen from his shirt pocket.

The obese man signed and returned it.

“Thank you, Mr. Hašek,” the feeble man sang, clutching the book like a newborn. “Thank you so much.”

“Jarda. My friends call me Jarda. All of you, call me Jarda.”

The men walked off, exposing a broken-down wheelchair by Hašek’s bed.

Gawking at who was only paces away, Hermann took a handful into the room, all the way to Hašek and his hate.

Eluding this, Hermann turned toward the men to his left and the expanse past them.

He cupped his mouth. “Franz Kafka? Is there a Franz Kafka here?”

“I am Franz Kafka,” came a timid voice from the nothingness.

#

Grandpa broke from his story. We came to a motel on the edge of Newark that had no name.

The car screeched to a stop by the office. Above it on the roof was a single-word sign, the single clue to the place’s purpose. The red glass covering the “M” had broken apart in many sections, leaving the yellow light behind it bare and harsh.

With one of his famous drawn-out moans, Grandpa exited the car. He shuffled through the building’s door.

“So that’s a Matador,” the clerk droned, repeating a joke from a TV commercial years earlier that wasn’t funny when it came out.

Grandpa spoke to him, his agitation mounting.

He came out with his head hanging. Opening his door, he thumbed behind himself. “That *vůl* in there . . .”

Rudi exploded. “That what?”

“That *ass*,” I translated.

“Thank you,” Grandpa said to me. “That *ass* would not ‘spill the beans’ as you people say. Nor could I bribe him.”

Rudi slammed her forearm against the door. “I told you that Yon wouldn’t come here.”

“But that does not mean that he will not come. I will add this place to my daily checklist on that . . .”

Grandpa reached for the right word, as he had outside the hospital. But this time “*Jak se řekne?”* couldn’t help him. He had to rely on me. “What do you call that contraption in the living room?”

“A PC, Grandpa.”

#

Grandpa and I waited outside of Columbia.

Most kids that day weren’t wearing jackets despite the season. There were so many hanging outside that the front doors weren’t in view.

In a wink, everyone scattered.

Rudi swept through them.

This afternoon, she wasn’t alone. She was holding the hands of two boys. One was the hulking kid from the other day. The other was gripping a Bible.

The three made their way toward us with defiance. So did the geeky boy behind them, struggling to keep up. They were flipping off the entire school, not with their fingers but with their faces.

Following them from the building was a man. He was wearing a brown suit and a brown tie and came across as the typical no-nonsense principal in how he was crossing his arms.

But his smile gave him away. He was smiling at the four in the way a parent does when their children please them beyond expectations.

#

“You wanna tell me the story behind this?” I said to Rudi, with the afternoon dropping below the courtyard.

“No.”

But she did so anyway.

#

Rudi was slouching at the cafeteria’s back table by herself, like she had been doing since returning to school. The tables around hers were empty as well.

She picked at her food.

The silence in the room lifted her from it.

Owen was standing in front of her with his food.

He turned toward the quiet and everyone’s shock. “I got curious about that disease. The one you’re so sure she’s got. So I went to the library last night. For the first time ever I went. And you know what? You people, you’re so sure I’m dumb, but you’re way dumber than me.”

The silence and shock continued. Owen sat across from Rudi, who was as silent and as shocked as the others, if not more so.

“While I was at the library,” he said to her, “I asked about that word . . . *karma*. This is the good kind, right?”

Rudi couldn’t answer. She was too busy keeping herself from crying.

Owen extended his paw to her.

She grabbed his fingers, lowering her head and shaking it.

“Come on, lift that chin.”

She did, but with a guilty smirk. “I don’t deserve you . . . not when I . . .”

“No one thought I deserved anything till I met you.”

Jared and Eliot joined them with their lunches, masking their guilt.

Rudi made it easy for them, by pretending that nothing had happened. But she couldn’t pretend the same with Mariana, who was off in the distance next to Terry, doing her own pretending.

#

Grandpa didn’t have much to report that day.

It was obvious to both him and me the increasing doubt Rudi was having and that fatalism was setting in. It must have been why he stayed out so late that evening.

He hadn’t come home when I fell asleep.

#

I returned from school the following afternoon. Grandpa was tossing in his sleep on the living room couch, with *Columbo* playing at full volume.

This wasn’t one of his good days.

I stopped beside him. “Grandpa?”

He wouldn’t wake. So I shut off the television with the remote and shook him until he did.

“Ana?” he said as he rose.

I averted my eyes. “No, Grandpa, 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 given them to her last. “White roses.”

“Let’s go get some.”

I stood. I was about to help Grandpa up. But the computer running in the room’s corner drew my eyes.

It aggravated me, having told Grandpa multiple times, in multiple languages, that the CRT monitor could burn in if left on when not in use.

I got close to the monitor. What was on the screen altered my mood to a trance.

Shaking this off, I typed some commands on the keyboard.

The dot matrix printer next to the monitor churned.

#

Rudi stepped through the Matador’s back door with her shoulders down.

Raising them toward me, she became surprised.

I was in the driver’s seat, with Grandpa asleep next to me, muttering in Czech.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“He overdid it last night.”

“You sure he’s up to this?”

I wasn’t sure. But I didn’t say it. Because Grandpa needed this as much as Rudi did. He needed a reason to move forward, and I needed him to have it. Because I needed him.

Grandpa woke. He jolted, banging into the door with both his elbows. Tears formed and came down his cheeks. “*Drž se dál od vlaku!”* he shrieked, repeating his last words to Ana, when he had begged her to stay away from the train taking him to Theresienstadt. “*Prosím tě se drž*.”

“What’s he saying?” Rudi asked.

“Remember when I told you that our mother had been through a lot? So has he.”

“That music he’s been listening to . . . the Pergolesi.”

“You’ve heard of Pergolesi?”

She snarled at me like I had asked the stupidest question ever. “Put it on.”

I did.

What she did stunned me more than her knowledge of Late Baroque music. She leaned up front, taking Grandpa’s hand with both of hers. She caressed it. “Sshhh.”

This was the first I witnessed the nurturing side of her. A side that contradicted all she was about but one fundamental to all she would become.

Grandpa calmed. He fell asleep.

Rudi sat back.

I pulled out the printout I had made and showed it to her.

“What is it?”

“He mapped all lodgings in Yon’s price range that are within thirty kilometers of here and has been visiting them. He visited them all yesterday. He must’ve been up all night.”

Wide-eyed, Rudi examined the printout. “Did you program that for him?”

“Don’t let that Luddite spiel of his fool you. He was programming the computer the day we got it. I noticed this afternoon that he wrote a serial communications library in C so he could scrape data from CompuServe.”

#

The day disappeared behind the shelter. Rudi told me that she had to go.

With the dusk, the shine and its warmth left, leaving a chill and a gust that whisked through the courtyard and me.

But the story wouldn’t go with the light. I returned to it later on my bunk. It came alive under the cacophony rumbling through the tomb. Snores from one side of it got answers from those on the other.

#

Over the next week, after checking on Grandpa when I returned from school, I would drive to Columbia myself.

On most days, Rudi would be outside on the stoop with her friends. They’d be helping Owen with his homework, reveling in a bond blooming with each day.

One afternoon overcast with frost, a girl joined them. She had blonde hair and a ponytail and was as different from them as they were from each other.

Sitting next to Jared, Lis took his hand. But what I recall more was her face. She was in another place. A good one.

I honked my horn, shattering their peacefulness.

Rudi and I took off. We went to the South Mountain Reservation, where I wandered through a dusting of snow.

Hanging over a rock by the waterfall, Rudi had her arms around herself and her eyes closed, humming an old song I recognized but couldn’t name. She got stuck in multiple places, on multiple times through it, but she wouldn’t give up on it.

The tune came. She wouldn’t stop humming it. She hummed it with the same bliss that had been on Lis’s face.

Only now can I imagine how she was crossing her arms not against the weather but in remembrance of a time she had wanted to return.

#

Like the previous afternoons we had spent in the reservation, Rudi and I came across nothing. Everywhere we did.

Despite being the grandson of a larger-than-life detective and hearing his stories to the point that I could reenact the pauses he would make between the words, I lacked the most important skill he had: the ability to see what was hiding in front of me.

Lacking momentum, Rudi and I returned to the car on Crest Drive, a street that cut through the forest’s width.

I got to my door and froze. Some unknown had caught my eye. It drew me to it, along with Rudi.

In a clearing were motorcycle tracks. The same sort that had been in Grandpa’s Polaroid. They headed for a tree, swerving from it at the last moment.

I opened my mouth. “He was trying to . . .”

Rudi rushed off. I followed her.

She called out, “I need to go somewhere.”

#

The snow was falling harder. It was a sheet of pure white.

Rudi and I parked by the South Orange Recreation Center.

“Why did you want to come here?” I asked.

“There, there’s a meeting. Attending is actually a condition of my probation. But this is my first time here.”

“Is it open?”

“You wanna come?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t have one.

The hour crept toward six. Some people streamed into the building. They were all a blur.

Rudi kept waiting. Only well after the hour did she leave the car.

I hesitated but went with her, no stranger to these types of meetings or the need to go to them. We entered the building. Climbing to the second floor, we approached a room and the chanting inside it that was far from in unison.

It was of a prayer. One that I also was no stranger to.

*God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*The courage to change the things I can,*

*And the wisdom to know the difference.*

*Just for this day.*

The voices ended. We snuck through the doorway.

By it was Jared on a folding metal chair, a kind ubiquitous throughout the room. He sat with his Bible on his lap, away from the others, who had scattered and were wistful. I could tell that no one wanted to be there and at the same time they all did.

“Jared?” Rudi whispered.

He feigned surprise. His presence didn’t shock her either.

We joined him.

A man in front stood from behind a table covered in keychains of different colors. He had a weathered face. It reflected all of us. Each line on it told a tale. “We have some new people. My name is Frank. Feel free to introduce yourself.”

No one spoke.

“Does anyone want to share?”

He got the same response.

“Anyone?”

Frank wouldn’t relent. He swayed toward the room’s far back corner. “Stephen?”

A man stepped from the shadows. It was Mr. Criss.

With his head down and his steps steady, he marched to the front, to a beat only he could hear.

“My name is Stephen,” he said, “and I’m an addict.”

“Hello, Stephen,” was our reply, in the robotic manner common at meetings like these.

“I’ve been clean for thirteen years. Thirteen. To some of you, that may be lifetimes. But not to me.

“I was gone before I returned from the war. I was some piece of work. You wouldn’t have wanted to have been 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, like this had happened to him all the time. He smiled not *at* me but *on* me.

“I was born that day. That day and each one since. Each one I’m sober. Each one I’m loved. Each one I’m back holding a gun on that little old man with the funny accent. The one who smiled on me.”

Mr. Criss returned to his corner. He went with his head down. But he wasn’t marching with steady steps. The beat had gone.

“Anyone?” Frank said.

Jared raised his hand, doing so like it and his arm were of iron.

Surprised, Frank waved him forward.

Dragging his feet in a haphazard manner, Jared made his way to the table, clutching his Bible. He clutched it with all he had.

Next to Frank he sought words. “My name is Jared, and I’m an addict.”

“Hello, Jared,” most of us said, with greater energy than before. Rudi was the loudest.

“I’ve been clean, for sixteen months I’ve been clean. That was when I came to, in a house I didn’t know, with people I had never met, in a town I hadn’t been. Right now, right at this second, I’m no more than a day from going back. The sureness of it never leaves me. It’s there when I’m at school and when I’m at home with my mom and when I sit and pray.”

Lowering his head, Jared lifted his Bible. “Don’t let this fool you. I’m worse than all of you. You, too, Mr. Criss. I can’t wear short-sleeved shirts in the summer, so messed up are my arms. My legs too. I’ve lied and stolen . . . I’ve sold myself. Worse than all that, I’ve hurt people. I’ve really hurt them. I’ve hurt my own mother. Nothing will make up for it. No Bible verses, no good deeds, nothing.”

With his hand shaking, Jared lowered his Bible. But he didn’t raise his head. “The one difference between now and sixteen months ago is that I’m not alone. Not only has my mom been great, despite having every reason not to be, but I have friends. Real friends. Friends who care about me. And it’s for this I pray. I pray for it all the time. I pray not only that I’m not alone but that I know I’m not alone.”

Jared made his way to the back. He was moving slower than he had to the room’s front but in the same manner.

He got to us.

Rudi rose and clutched him. She clutched him like he was clutching that Bible.

He cried. He couldn’t stop. He was crying after the two sat and another man began to share.

A few others shared after him.

“Anyone?” Frank asked.

No one spoke. Though Jared encouraged Rudi by placing his hand on hers.

She didn’t react. Frank moved on.

Rudi jumped up. She stormed to the table, racing herself. “My name’s Rudi. I’ve been clean for a few weeks.”

“Hello, Rudi,” was the response. I shouted it.

“I forgot to say that I’m an addict,” she said to Frank.

“It’s all right.”

“I probably didn’t because, because I like to pretend that I’m not. I like to pretend that I’m tough and that I’m in control and that I’ve licked my problems. But I’m an addict, and I will always be an addict, and I’m not tough and I’m not in control and I’m about to fall apart.”

Frank took her hand.

She squeezed his. But she had to steady herself. She closed and opened her eyes several times, struggling to get more out. “I must’ve been to hundreds of these. I’ve never shared. I’ve mocked the whole idea. But I’m not the same person. For the first time, I’ve let someone close.

“I can’t remember when I wasn’t alone. I was alone regardless of how messed up I got. I would never let anyone within fist’s length.

“But I’ve met someone. Someone who makes me so mad because he makes me want to believe that I matter and have meaning, that all around us is meaning and that it all matters and that there’s actually a reason to be alive. He might not be alive right now, and I can’t make it if he’s not.”

#

I got home late that night. Grandma was tucking a blanket over Grandpa, who was lying on the living room couch in a daze.

“Where have you been?” she asked me.

I stopped near them, stammering, “I, I was at one of my meetings.”

“I was under the belief that you no longer went to them.”

“But I should.”

Lifting a spoon from the coffee table, Grandma placed it in the bowl beside it. She brought some of her famous chicken soup to Grandpa’s mouth.

He would have none of it. He shook his head. He kept it from the spoon. “*Srnčí na pepři si dám*. *S kroketama*.”

Grandma poured ridicule onto him. A whole hilltop of it. “You know well, old man, that there is no venison in this house, peppered or otherwise. Nor are there potato croquettes. You will have to suffice with my soup.”

Neither would give in.

But she won out. He let her feed him, with her wiping his chin after each spoonful with her handkerchief.

“I love this man,” she said, 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 became lucid enough to resume searching for Yon. But with the two of us waiting in his car outside Columbia in our usual spot on Parker Avenue, he wasn’t hopeful.

The school let out. But there was no Rudi. Or her friends.

A pair of stragglers left. They were snickering about Rudi and Yon. It sent me into a panic. I opened my door.

Rudi exited the school, holding the hand of another of her friends. It was Mariana. The two had been through the inferno together. Both their faces showed tears.

I waved at Rudi.

Turning to Mariana, she embraced her and said goodbye. She sprinted toward the car, with Mariana not budging. Yet she was breaking apart. “I’ll call you tonight!”

#

Recalling this moment from my bunk, I recalled with it that I had never learned what had happened between Rudi and Mariana and how they’d made up.

I had to learn. I had to learn it at that instant. I fumbled to the floor, coming close to crashing onto it. Snagging my phone from the bed, I made it through the tomb and scampered into the courtyard, without my coat or my shoes (or my pants). I called Rudi.

There was so much wind whizzing about that I had to shout to get through it.

“What’s wrong?” she said, forcing herself awake.

“I need to ask you a question.” I told her what.

“Can’t it wait?”

“I’ll never get to sleep.”

We compromised. She gave me the quick version. “It was me who let out what Yon had or confirmed it.”

“Mariana. You told her.”

“The night she told me about meeting you, she told me about the rumors some were spreading about Yon. She didn’t believe them, she said. Lots of people didn’t. Yon didn’t fit the profile of those with the disease at the time.

“So I told her. At first, she couldn’t speak. Then she went nuts. The whole world was going nuts. Remember how people believed that you could get the disease from a toilet seat? She believed this. She was sure that I had it and that she’d get it too. ‘You used my bathroom!’ she screamed. ‘How am I gonna explain this to my dad?’”

“I tried to calm her, but she hung up, and never did I feel so afraid. That’s why I lied to you guys. I was afraid you’d go nuts too.”

“We might’ve,” I said.

“Mariana told Terry what I had told her. It blew up from there.”

“You weren’t mad at Mariana?”

“Are you kidding? I wanted to kill her. But . . .”

“But what?”

“The day we were hugging, a lot had happened earlier. A scene at lunch that shook everyone. I was processing it all as I was leaving school.

“Mariana was waiting for me in the corridor by the entrance. But I wouldn’t recognize she was there.

“Terry made up for it. She was by the exits and madder than me. She slammed open a door.

“Mariana spun in her direction, but she wouldn’t go with her, and Terry ran out, screaming, ‘It’s over!’

“With her eyes down, Mariana returned to me. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

“I ignored her. I started to go. But I couldn’t keep going. I guess, I guess it was because she had given up a lot to make us right. Whatever my reason was, I just stood there.

“‘You were the best friend I ever had,’ she whimpered.

“My body slid toward her. My arms spread wide. ‘I still am.’”

#

I said goodnight to Rudi. I went back to bed.

But the story wouldn’t go to sleep. It kept unraveling before me like waves onto a shore, crashing onto me with each snore.

#

Rudi reached the Matador, surprised that Grandpa was in the driver’s seat.

She stormed into the back, shutting the door. “He was here!”

I shot toward her. “What?”

“Yon came to the cafeteria at lunch. He was drunk, with his head shaved.”

“And?”

“He was standing in front. No one noticed him at first. But when they did, they all fled, including his so-called friends.”

“Because he has pneumonia?” Grandpa asked.

“He’s dying,” I said. “Isn’t he?”

Rudi didn’t answer.

“Is this the disease that I have been reading about?” Grandpa asked next. “The one that has been afflicting homosexuals?”

“Obviously, it’s afflicting more than them,” Rudi barked with defensiveness, no doubt believing that someone Grandpa’s age would be homophobic.

He wagged both his finger and his head at her. “You must stay away from this boy.”

“I’m not staying away from nothing.”

“This is a deadly and contagious disease. They are not aware of what is causing it or how it spreads. They are only aware that it kills.”

“It’s not contagious, not in the way everyone believes.”

“How can you be certain?”

“Because the whole world would have it!”

“They could. I read that it can take years before it manifests.”

“If we all have it, what difference does it make?”

“You are not to go near him.”

“Listen—”

“—I will find him, I promise you that. It does not matter if I get sick.”

“You won’t get sick!”

“Stay away from him!”

“I won’t!”

“Stay away or I will!”

“Do what you want!”

Rudi kicked her door open. She lurched through it.

Startled, Grandpa must’ve feared that he would lose his granddaughter like he had his daughter. “Please, please do not go.”

Rudi paused. For a while she paused.

Returning to her seat, she slammed the door.

“What happened after everyone fled?” Grandpa said to her.

“He went crazy, tossing over tables and chasing people. I ran after him. But he ran from me. He drove off on his bike when I got outside.”

“Did he give you a notion of where he might be going?”

“No, but that wasn’t all. He had a Walkman on. He was screaming this Black Flag song.”

“Is there some significance to that?”

“He doesn’t listen to that type of music. I wouldn’t have believed that he had heard their name.”

“He could have heard them on the radio.”

“They don’t play that type of music on the radio, Grandpa,” I interjected.

“So it is possible that he bought one of their recordings recently. But many stores here must sell recordings.”

“Not these.”

“Where could he have bought these?” Grandpa asked Rudi.

“I couldn’t tell you,” she snapped. “I haven’t been buying records.”

“We could go to a library and get a phone book,” I said, “and call each store.”

Rudi shook her fists. “That would take all day.”

“Do you have a better suggestion?”

She pounded her knees. “There’s a library and a pay phone in the school.”

Swinging out her door, she hurtled from the car. But she came to a halt.

Owen was passing through the parking lot, to the bus stop on Valley Road.

“He’d know where to buy them,” she whispered.

She yelled his name, a number of times, each one louder. But he was too far away, joining a bunch of people waiting for the bus crossing Parker.

Rudi leapt into the car. She karate-chopped down the road. “Stop that bus!”

Grandpa sped off. He didn’t wait for Rudi to close her door. She could only do so during the squealing right we made into the intersection.

Grandpa’s instincts took over, like they would do at moments of frenzy or when he wasn’t paying attention. He swerved onto the left lane, putting us in the path of a truck and its horn.

I flailed my arms to the right. “*Do práva, Dědo!”* I flailed them three times. “*Do práva!”*

Grandpa remained calm. “I know, I know.” With the same calm, he yanked us from the truck’s path. He cut off the bus turning from the curb.

Now the bus honked its horn, doing so as the truck had.

Rudi shrunk in her seat. “Where did you learn to drive?”

“Uzhhorod,” Grandpa said with matter-of-factness. “If the Habsburgs had won the First World War, everyone would be driving on the proper side of the road.”

The bus kept honking its horn.

Spinning toward Rudi, Grandpa pointed out the car. “The bus.”

Rudi didn’t move. Because of Grandpa’s forearm and the number tattooed on it. It transfixed her in horror.

“Rudi?” I whispered.

This got her out of her fog, enough to get from the car and bumble toward the bus.

#

I fell asleep in the tomb.

It all disappeared: Rudi and the bus, along with the story and the snoring. Darkness set over them all.

the sixth night

No one took my place on my days off.

I would have more work than normal on Mondays, and Amoun expected me to get it done in the same four hours. I would run around more than normal.

With twenty minutes to go on this Monday, I had caught up and had to clean the field by the back lot. Laboring in the brisk midday gloom, my mind wandered to Josh and what I should do with what I hadn’t learned about him. Why it did when there was nothing I could do, I can’t say. I couldn’t get it to stop. Bad Brains couldn’t get it to stop.

All that could was *Larks on a String,* an old Czech movie I’ve seen so many times that I can recite its lines from the end to the beginning.

Set during the early years of Communism, it’s about a group of intellectuals and misfits who had gotten on the authorities’ worst side. 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.

Failure to achieve this would mean a prison sentence and the uranium mines and the unnatural death that would come from it. So the men were birds perching on the barest of strings. Any breeze could blow them over for good.

Among those who would fall is a former librarian who was there because he refused to destroy the works of Schopenhauer. Despite this (or because of it), he would quote Kant during the movie. Such as the one from the end of *Critique of Practical Reason*: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily I reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral code inside me.”

“Why am I thinking of this?” I cried, gripping a diaper I had pulled from the weeds.

The answer came fast. It was this “moral code,” the kind that so thrived in my sister, that was keeping my mind on Josh against all reason, practical or otherwise.

The slamming of a door got me out of my funk.

Sania had pushed her cleaning cart outside for a cigarette break. The woman with the beautiful name and the voice that you would’ve sworn was Paul McCartney’s.

She gave me one of her accentuated waves. She gave me encouragement too, with her eyes. She could sense my struggle.

Evading this, I returned to the search for Yon.

#

Owen told Rudi on the bus about the two places where he bought punk records.

One was in a flea market open on weekends. The other was not far from Columbia, called Vintage Vinyl.

We went to the latter, driving to Springfield Avenue in Irvington and a shop you would never notice unless you wanted to. We passed it twice before we sighted it, amid blight on all sides. The sun couldn’t brighten it.

Grandpa parked across the street. He, Rudi, and I scampered through the busy road into the store. It was empty apart from the compact, muscular man behind the counter, who was wearing a shredded Bay City Rollers T-shirt three sizes his junior and singing with Keith Morris and “Back Against the Wall,” playing on a turntable steps away.

I couldn’t tell which voice was louder or shriller. They smacked through the building and struck the window in front. They threatened to break it apart.

The man confounded Grandpa. He studied him by the door.

Rudi and I walked around. What stood out to me about it was that, despite lacking the area of some Cadillacs, each record was great. It was a faultless selection of music from the fifties to the present, with apparent disregard as to whether any of it would sell. It was more of a record collection than a store.

Among the treasures were all thirteen Captain Beefheart albums. They also had an alternative version of John Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme* and a section dedicated to the bands that had performed in *The Decline of Western Civilization*. This included the record playing.

As important as what was there was what wasn’t: all records in the *Billboard Top 200*.

What also stood out were the copies of *Trouser Press* on the counter. This was a cult magazine about the independent music scene that I had heard about but had been certain was a legend. It had never been in my view.

The man behind the counter got tired of amusing Grandpa. Ceasing his shrilling, he scratched the needle across the record. He whipped himself toward him. “Listen, pops, we have old records. But not *that* old.”

Hiding his smirk, Grandpa pulled out the picture of Yon. He showed it to the man and asked about him.

The man’s churlishness increased. “And you are?”

Rudi struggled for words. “Yon and I are . . .”

He gawked at her with disbelief. “You and Yon?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I bet,” he said with a roll of his eyes.

“Please . . .”

“The name’s Butch.”

“Please, Butch. Yon’s sick. He’s sick and alone and . . . I love him.”

Butch’s expression softened. “He comes in here and buys old Yardbirds records.”

“Has he been here recently?” Grandpa asked.

“A week ago.”

“And he bought a Yardbirds record?” was my question.

“Actually, no. It was all sorts of off. First, he was off and trashed. But more off was how he pulled out a copy of *Damaged*.”

“By Black Flag?” Grandpa asked next.

Raising his eyebrows, Butch rotated them toward Grandpa. “Your knowledge of punk rock is impeccable.”

Grandpa wanted to hide his smirk a second time. But he couldn’t.

Butch returned to me. “Yon asked me if it was any good. So I told him. I told him it was the best. But I also told him it was no Yardbirds. I told him he’d certainly hate it. But that’s what he wanted and that’s what he bought. He had me make him a tape of it too.”

Grandpa took hold of my shoulder. “Apart from it being ‘the best,’ is there some special quality to this *Damaged?”*

I went back to Butch. “Do you have another copy?”

He craned his head toward a stack of albums.

I tugged out the record. I showed Grandpa the image on the cover, of Henry Rollins with his head shaved and his bloodied fist through a mirror.

Grandpa recoiled. “We better get to this boy quickly.”

I shook the record. “It’s not what you’re thinking. I’ve listened to this a lot. There were times I’d listen to it all afternoon when I came home from school, and there wasn’t one that I didn’t feel better because of it. It’s full of anger and rage and self-hatred, but many songs have this . . . I can’t describe it . . . a mad desperation.”

“For what?”

“Hope,” Rudi said.

She startled me. But she shouldn’t have. I should’ve figured that what I had experienced when listening to the record hadn’t been unique to me. She and many others must’ve felt the same when they listened to it. If Yon had, we had reason to hope as well.

Grandpa turned to Butch. “I presume Yon did not mention where he is staying.”

“Why would he?” he snapped.

Grandpa had no more questions. I placed the record on the stack. The three of us started out.

Huffing, Butch pointed down the street. “He was swerving that way.”

“Toward Newark?” Grandpa asked.

#

We parked at the same decrepit motel in Newark that we had been at before.

No one had fixed the sign. The light coming from it was as harsh as before. Moreover, Yon’s bike wasn’t there.

“I told you that he wouldn’t be here,” Rudi groaned, with frustration overwhelming her voice.

Grandpa opened his door. He stepped onto the lot. “But that does not mean that he was not here.”

He walked off.

“What’s he doing?” Rudi groaned next.

I had no answer.

Grandpa shuffled through the grounds. It wasn’t obvious what he was doing.

He stopped for a less obvious reason. Which made me question whether he was having another of his stupors and what we would do if he was.

Coming out of his haze, Grandpa hurried to a parking space. He kneeled onto the ground, yanking out the Polaroid of Yon’s tire tracks from his jacket.

Rudi and I charged from the car. We sprinted to him.

He showed us a track frozen in the dirty snow. “Yon was here and recently. Because this was not here the last time I was.”

“He could come back,” I said.

Rudi groaned some more. “Or he could be anywhere.”

Grandpa wriggled to his feet. He resumed his shuffling.

I took a different direction. I pictured what I would be doing if I were Yon, the boy who had been so different from me when I’d met him but who was no longer different at all.

Closing my eyes, I focused on the album he had been listening to. I shuttled through the songs, searching for the one that could’ve been keeping him above ground. The one that could’ve prevented him from hitting that tree.

One stood out. It opened my eyes. “What was Yon singing in the cafeteria?” I asked Rudi.

Her frustration compounded. “What does it matter?”

“I’m not sure.”

“It’s the one where the guy screams, ‘Keep me alive.’”

“‘Room 13.’”

“What was that?” Grandpa uttered.

I lifted a finger toward him and checked the rooms. There were twenty across two floors. The numbers of those at street level began at 101. The ones above did at 201. “The song he was singing is ‘Room 13.’ But there’s no room 13 here.”

“But at another hotel . . .”

Rudi and I ran to the car, with Grandpa behind us.

#

The Matador sped from the motel.

Rudi and I read through the printout for the nearest hotel.

She grunted. “These can’t be the fastest routes.”

Grandpa disagreed. “I mapped the geocoordinates of each lodging and calculated the distance between them all.”

“Did you use a Mercator projection?”

He jumped back in his seat. “They teach you about Mercator projections?”

“Did you use one?”

“I wanted to use one, but I could never do partial fractions. So I used an orthographic projection.”

*Boys are bad at math*.

Rudi took the printout from me. “I need a pen.”

Opening the glove compartment, I got her a Bic. I sat on my knees in awe as the equations spewed over the page.

“Are you familiar with Dijkstra’s shortest path algorithm?” I asked.

#

Rudi and I got us to the lodgings faster. But it wasn’t getting us to Yon. Not a single one had a room 13.

“Thirteen is an unlucky number in America,” Rudi bemoaned to Grandpa with her head on her knees and her arms around them. “No one would want to stay in a room 13. That’s probably why the song’s called that. This is hopeless.”

But we had no other clues. We had to pursue this one.

At a red light, Grandpa couldn’t ignore Rudi’s panic in his rearview mirror. He decided that this was a good time to continue his Kafka story.

#

Hermann approached a bed where lay a frail man in a spotless nightshirt, whose lengthy feet hung over the mattress.

He stopped by him, with the area around them awash in the dull light reflecting off the river behind the man through a row of windows. “Franz Kafka?”

Kafka answered with a string of coughs, each harsher, with increasing degrees of bewilderment.

Hermann reached for a hat that wasn’t there, tipping his hand instead. “*Servus*.”

Kafka became more bewildered and alarmed.

Ignoring this, Hermann eased himself onto the empty bed next to Kafka’s. “It’s an honor to meet you, sir. I enjoyed that book of yours. *The Metamorphosis*, wasn’t it?”

“Who told you that I was here?”

“Your family sent me.”

“There you are!” boomed a voice. With it came an enormous woman with cropped black hair and colossal black eyes. “I’ve been searching all over for you, Herr Weiss. I’ll get your stretcher so I can bring you to your bed.”

Hermann patted the mattress he was sitting on. “What’s wrong with this one?”

“I guess it would be all right.”

“Am I all right?”

“You’re lucky Mrs. Veselá was around when you fell down that cliff. You can bet that ferryman wouldn’t have helped you. He wouldn’t have helped you if you had your heller with you.”

“I must’ve lost mine in the fall.”

“You shall not be needing it, not for many years to come. The doctor says that, with bed rest, you’ll be fine in a few days. And when you do go home, you can bring Herr Kafka with you. He belongs here as much as you do.”

“I must be daffy from my fall, nurse. You’re not implying that ferryman is Charon?”

“I care not what his name is. He’s a *vůl*, I tell you. A *velikánský vůl!* What right did he have to take my mother before her time? I was a girl. I needed her.”

Overwrought with emotion, the nurse scampered off.

Hermann leaned toward Kafka. “I’m in a madhouse, and the inmates are running it.”

“That’s what I believed. But now . . .”

“Don’t tell me you believe that boatman is Charon.”

“Is it crazier than airplanes or radios? When I was a boy, I would’ve believed such to have been as fantastical as Charon. But . . .”

The spinning of wheels interrupted him.

A scowling Hašek was straining toward them in his wheelchair. He got to their beds and quaked. “Just what we need here: more Jews. Can a Czech go anywhere these days to escape you? Perhaps not in death!”

“What did I tell you, Mr. Hašek?” howled the nurse, returning with Hermann’s chart and dropping it onto the railing of his bed. “Keep your prejudices to yourself. You’ll soon discover how meaningless they are. Very soon!”

The nurse stomped off, with Hašek sneering at her.

“This is the famous Jaroslav Hašek,” Kafka said to Hermann. “Or should I say, infamous?”

“I gathered that.”

Hermann frowned at Hašek. “I can assure you, sir, that many Czechs and Jews have shared death. I’ve witnessed it.”

“Are you telling me that you served in the army, little man?”

“And I have an Order of the Iron Crown to show for it. Which I’d gladly chuck into that river to get any of my friends back. I wouldn’t care if they were Czech, German, or Jew. The bullets didn’t.”

Hašek turned his antipathy onto Kafka. “Did he call you ‘Franz Kafka’?”

“I did,” Hermann said.

“Franz Kafka, the writer?”

“You’ve heard of me too?” Kafka yelped.

“I’ve read some of your stories, if you can call them that. ‘Absurd nonsense’ is a better name . . . men turning into bugs and ridiculous penal colonies.”

“You are one to judge, Mr. Hašek. The author of dreck. The ramblings of a drunkard. A common street urchin can write more coherently than you. Hell, my Czech is terrible, but *I* can write it better than you.”

“You filthy . . .”

Hašek stumbled from his wheelchair and to Kafka, swinging his fist at him.

This missed Kafka. It missed him by a lot. Though it knocked his end table onto the floor, along with the lamp and bell on top of it.

Panting, Hašek rolled up the sleeves of his nightshirt. “It’s time for a pogrom.”

Kafka expressed no fear. “I should warn you, my father was a competent boxer in his day. He taught me well. Despite my pathetic state, I can put you down. Especially in your pathetic state.”

“Boxer? Your father . . . your father isn’t Hermannek, is he?”

“He is.”

“He’s got a shop on Staromák?”

“That’s right.”

Hašek couldn’t corral his humor. It stampeded from him.

Returning to his wheelchair, he plopped onto it. “That man, he’s more Czech than me.”

Kafka said nothing.

Hašek twirled his head toward him. “He’s the one person in Prague who can drink me under the gutter. He’s done it to me twice, and that’s the times I remember.”

Kafka said more nothing. But he couldn’t corral his humor any better than Hašek had.

“How come you’ve never been out with him?”

“I’m afraid we are different men.”

“Yeah, I bet you’re a disappointment to him.”

Kafka cringed but stayed quiet.

Hašek raised his arms to his shoulders and flapped them. “You, a member of the literati, snooting too high above to lower yourself to us ordinary folk.”

“Listen to you talk as if you were a proletariat. You must be the richest novelist in the country, especially with no publisher to pay. I bet Čapek doesn’t earn what you do. Why, what you make off *Švejk* in a single day must exceed my writing earnings for a lifetime.”

The nurse pounced through the doors. “What’s wrong? I heard a bell.”

“I’m sorry, nurse,” Kafka said. “I knocked the table over by accident.”

The woman rambled to them, swinging her fists. Glowering at Hašek, she lifted the table, setting the lamp and bell onto it. “Don’t let this ruffian bully you, Herr Kafka.”

Hašek waved her off. “Have no fear of that, Nurse Černá. He’s the son of one Hermann Kafka of Old Town Square, Prague. A man who stared down a whole street of rioters. And I should know, I was one of them!”

The nurse sneered at Hašek and scurried off.

Letting loose more antipathy at both Kafka and Hermann, Hašek scurried off himself.

#

Hermann spent the afternoon persuading Kafka to go home with him.

“I’m a dead man,” Kafka said between a fit of coughs. “Whether I die tomorrow or in six months makes no difference.”

“It makes a difference to your sisters. And to your girlfriend.”

“I’m a burden to them all.”

“It didn’t appear so.”

“They’ll be better off when I’m gone, especially Ottla. She’s in a bad marriage with a horrible man. She’s only staying with him so I’ll have a place to stay. She’d leave him otherwise.”

“Are you sure of that? Your death could make her life worse. None of us can have certainty over what comes after us. That could be the whole point of living: to discover what happens and be a part of it. To influence it and affect it. Don’t you want to be a part of what happens next?”

“Not anymore.”

“There must be some ‘next’ worth living for.”

“I can’t imagine one.”

“But if I can, will you come back with me?”

Kafka began to answer. But the nurse interrupted him from the door. “You have a visitor, Herr Kafka.”

A well-dressed man Kafka’s age came toward him.

“Thank you, Max,” Kafka said. “Thank you for coming.”

Hermann leapt from his bed. “Max? Are you Max Brod, the author of *Nornepygge Castle?”*

“You’ve heard of me?”

“He’s heard of me,” Kafka interjected with a snicker.

Wanting to give the men some privacy, Hermann checked the exits. “I could use a walk.”

He didn’t go far. Unsteady from his fall, he took a seat on a plush chair by the doorway. With the two men conversing in the distance, he became drowsy and fell asleep.

#

Hermann woke, from Hašek and Brod’s yelling by Kafka and his bed.

Hašek writhed at Brod. “You goddamn Jew! For years now, you’ve been a goddamn Jew!”

Not finished with his tirade, Hašek tossed his head toward Kafka. “And you write as badly as he does.”

Hašek didn’t wait for a response. He spun the wheels of his chair, hurrying from the two as fast as he could.

He approached Hermann and slowed. His ire rose.

A gravelly voice came from Hašek’s right. “Don’t you worry about them.”

Hašek spun toward its source.

An unshaven man was lying in bed, scoffing at Kafka and Brod. “They’ll get theirs sooner than soon.”

This threw Hašek off-balance. “What do you mean?”

The man glanced around. Lifting the lapel of his nightshirt, he exposed a swastika pin.

Hašek turned white. “You, you stay away from me.”

“What are you getting so upset about, Jarda?”

“My name is Jaroslav. But don’t you call me that. Don’t you call me ‘Mister Hašek.’”

“You and me, we’re the same.”

“We’re not the same. We’re not the same at all. I may be a bigot, but I’m not you!”

Hašek sped away. He pushed himself through the room’s doors, leaving Hermann with the man, who broke out into laughter.

#

Kafka and Brod continued talking by Kafka’s bed.

The two became agitated and argued. This got louder with Hašek’s returning to the room and his stopping by Hermann.

Brod rushed off, toward the doors.

Kafka shook. His entire body did. “You must do what I say! You must burn them all!”

Brod didn’t respond. He came to the men.

“Burn what?” Hašek demanded.

Brod wouldn’t answer. He burst through the exit.

Conflict fell over Hašek. It kept falling.

With his own burst, he followed Brod into the hallway.

#

Grandpa broke from his story.

With the afternoon’s remains dipping below an industrial landscape inseparable from the New Jersey Turnpike ahead of us, he suggested that we go to the waterfall before dark.

We turned around, coming to a country road as different from the turnpike as the day was from the night switching places with it. The road passed through the reservation’s length and all the trees, as well as the quiet sweeping through them.

Rudi pressed her nose against the window, humming the same old song she had been humming by the waterfall.

Her voice faltered. We reached a body of water that dropped into our vision from nowhere.

“Reservoir,” she said.

Grandpa sneaked a peek at it. “What about it?”

“Yon 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.”

#

So near were we to the waterfall that we went anyway.

Yon wasn’t there. Though Grandpa eyed the ravine with concern.

“What?” I whispered to him, from outside Rudi’s earshot.

He wiggled his head at a smashed vodka bottle below. “That was not here the last time I was.”

I had come across the broken glass the last time I was there. But it didn’t register as important. “So?”

He didn’t answer.

#

We returned to Newark, in pursuit of a reservoir that didn’t exist.

The confirmation of this came at the Newark Public Library’s main branch, by a woman locking its doors. She told us that she hadn’t heard of an old one either.

Everyone we asked in the streets said the same or close to it.

During his decades as a police detective, my grandpa had been on many quixotic quests. But the great knight-errant himself would’ve given up on this one, if for no other reason than that it was in a neighborhood far from La Mancha. It was clear that Grandpa wanted to give up. He only didn’t because there were no alternatives. We needed to get to Yon now.

Grandpa kept pulling the car over. He kept asking people, including a middle-aged woman pushing a shopping cart of groceries down an empty block.

“I’ve never heard of any reservoir,” she said, causing Grandpa to bellyache. “But I remember Reservoir Pizza. My brother cried when they left town.”

Rudi dove toward the woman. “Do you remember where it was?”

“I sure do. On the corner of 14th Avenue and 9th Street.”

#

The Matador sped right onto 14th Avenue.

There was no sign that a reservoir had been nearby. Nor were there motels or hotels. But Grandpa drove on. He drove through each street in the area.

We came to a complex that offered furnished rooms by the week.

“I did not consider apartments,” Grandpa said.

He raced onto the parking lot, to a set of ramshackle units opposing each other. By number 13 were the remnants of a motorcycle.

Rudi swatted her arm at it. “That’s Yon’s!”

Grandpa parked by the unit, with Rudi flying out of the car before it came to a stop.

She tried the door. Unsuccessful, she banged on it with both fists. “Yon!”

No response came.

We rushed toward her. “Now what?” I said to Grandpa.

He didn’t answer. He inspected the area.

Wrenching a set of lock picks from his jacket pocket, he told us to cover him.

Rudi sprang his way. “What?”

He slapped the picks onto his hand. “*Honem! Šup! Šup! Šup!”*

*Fast* was how Rudi and I crouched around and over him. We shielded him.

He picked the lock and opened the door. We flew inside.

Yon was on top of a creaky Murphy bed in the cramped studio. Like Rudi had described, he had shaved his head and was drunk. He was dangling from consciousness, thrashing to the music playing on his Walkman. Which was so loud that I could tell he was listening to “Room 13.”

Rudi plunged onto him. But he didn’t react. He didn’t when she jostled him.

I crept toward him and the sweating he was doing. He had soaked his bedsheets along with the pillows and his clothes. He was swimming in them.

Shocked, I shifted my gaze toward Grandpa.

He raised an empty vodka bottle off the floor. The same brand that had been by the waterfall.

Tossing the bottle into a garbage pail, Grandpa checked Yon’s pulse.

His concern grew. Lurching forward, he grabbed the phone off an end table and dialed 911. “I need an ambulance. I need it in a hurry.”

I continued my shifting. This time around the room. Yon had broken the four walls. He had been smashing into them. He’d also smashed the full-length mirror by the bathroom, with more than one fist. Blood was on it too.

“Yon!” Rudi pleaded, desperate to get him to respond.

He wouldn’t. She wasn’t there.

The song ended. Yon hit the stop button on his Walkman. He followed this by reversing the tape and pressing play and screaming “Keep me alive!” with Henry Rollins.

He kept screaming it.

#

Grandpa, Rudi, and I sat in the emergency room of St. Barnabas. One of us was sitting with impatience.

Grandpa took Rudi’s hand with both of his. He took it like she had taken his in the car a week earlier.

Like he had done, she calmed. She also expressed a reverence as jarring to me as her nurturing had been the week before. “I’ll never forget what you did, for a nobody like me.”

Exiting a door down the hall was a jaundiced man in a white coat. He stepped our way with the same frightened nurse who had been in Yon’s room when I had met him. She was wearing another mask and another pair of gloves and was as frightened as before.

Rudi jumped up. “That’s Dr. Kleinsten.”

Grandpa and I stood.

The doctor stopped by us, with the nurse scampering off.

“How is he?” Rudi asked. She was begging him.

“He’s determined to kill himself, and succeeding.”

“What can I do?”

“Ever heard of ‘tough love’?”

Rudi drifted toward Grandpa.

“You’re the only one who can give it to him.”

Rudi wandered down the hall, to the room the doctor had left. Her feet never left the floor.

“What are his chances?” Grandpa said to the doctor.

“Chances?” the man repeated, as if the question had been in a language he didn’t speak.

“His chances for survival.”

“No one has survived this or has experienced any remission.”

“How long does he have?” I asked.

“I know of no case where the patient has lived for a month, and his is as bad as there is. His immune system has shut down. If the pneumocystis doesn’t kill him, some other complication will, at any time.”

The doctor took off.

I called out to him.

He came to a reluctant halt. “What?”

“If it’s true that you’re unaware of what causes the disease and how it spreads, how is it that you are not wearing a mask and gloves like that nurse you were with?”

The doctor got angry. He thundered off. “I didn’t become a doctor to hide from sick people.”

Having nothing other to do, Grandpa and I went back to our seats. In the silence that followed, I wanted to thank him for what he had done. But it was he who thanked me.

“For what?” I said.

“For dragging me to my granddaughter. It would have been a tragedy if you had not.”

“What about Grandma?”

“She will not be thanking you. Or me. Especially me. I might not leave the living room couch, and she might move this outside.”

#

I returned to the shelter late in the afternoon. The night was falling onto the alley.

Willy slammed the hood of his Civic and swore.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, reaching him and the headlights projecting down the road.

He kicked the car.

“I bet Mateo can fix it.”

“It’s gone,” he yelled, kicking the car with all he had. “The engine, the job, the apartment—all of it gone!”

He continued kicking the car, without making a mark. Or a scratch.

A truck stopped him. It staggered beside us, squealing to a halt.

It was donating food from a local restaurant, an event not uncommon at the shelter. But it continued to surprise me how generous people were in a city that wasn’t thriving. People from churches would drop off food, and on multiple occasions carloads of pizzas had arrived uncredited, as they had in a Jason Statham film called *Redemption*. The second time it had happened, I questioned whether life was imitating art or whether it was the other way around. I questioned whether this happened all over.

The donation that afternoon surprised me more than normal. It included dozens of cartons of choice steaks and ribs as well as many boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables.

The gift overwhelmed all of us. That’s why Josh didn’t have to ask us to unload the truck. On our own, we formed a chain from the alley through the dining hall and into the kitchen. We passed the boxes between us, talking of what a wonderful Christmas meal it would make. Not only on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, but through New Year’s. It’d be Christmas all week.

It took a half hour to get it all off the truck. But no one complained. For one night, fortune hung over us. It didn’t favor the bold and refused to go anywhere. It hung over Willy and Dzsenifer, despite losing their chance for escape. It made everyone feel that the gift was in part from them.

#

I got into the check-in line after cleaning the rec room. A commotion was coming from behind the office’s closed door.

Josh was arguing with Héctor. They were shouting at each other with their voices and hands.

Héctor sped from the room. He passed me and went to his cubby. He heaved his belongings onto the floor.

“What happened?” I asked.

He crammed his stuff into a dusty silver suitcase. “I got thrown out.”

“Why?”

“I wouldn’t do his wet work.”

“His what?”

Not answering me, Héctor blew by with his suitcase. He returned to the office. “I need my passport.”

Josh wrangled to his feet. “Your what?”

“I gave you my passport for safekeeping when I came here.”

Héctor pointed toward the dining hall. “You put it in the vault.”

Choking on his animus, Josh took off. “Wait here.”

#

Josh came back to the dorm and the office. He raised his eyebrows at Héctor. “Your passport has gone missing.”

Héctor got madder. But he couldn’t stay that way. He was about to cry.

Escaping this, he dragged his suitcase along the ground, disappearing into the night.

#

Another letter from Yon arrived that day. Bringing it into the courtyard, I called Rudi.

Anticipation was rising in her voice. She couldn’t keep it down.

#

It was difficult getting through the first pages Yon had sent me. He had garbled most entries.

In a quasi-coherent one, he described his transfer to St. Barnabas after his original hospital refused to treat him upon learning what he had. In another, he mentioned an encounter with his mother in the hospital.

“I blame myself,” she said to him by the door and all the whiteness. “I should’ve sent you to Pingry.”

Yon’s response was to roll to the other side of his bed and cough.

Annoyed, the woman puffed and she huffed. “You must promise me that you’ll stay away from her.”

“I won’t.”

“After what she’s done to you? After she’s ruined your life?”

“It’s you who should stay away,” he growled, keeping his eyes from her. They had locked onto the woods through his windows and what was behind them.

“If I go, I’m not coming back.”

He coughed some more.

She stormed from the room. Her steps faded, becoming deafening.

Yon wasn’t sorry about it.

#

What Yon didn’t describe were his encounters with Rudi. He didn’t write about her, apart from a brief passage where he lamented at how he would never make love to her.

He wrote less about the disease ravaging him. All he mentioned was that his countdown had begun. Only the units of measurement were unknown.

What followed after this was a fractured sentence about leaving St. Barnabas. Following that were nothing but streams of semiconsciousness. I inferred from these that he moved from motel to motel, drinking himself to sleep and waking this way.

One morning, he got on his bike and drove anyway. One moment he was swerving through traffic on Route 22. The next he had made it to the waterfall.

He spent the day on the rocks, cursing himself and his fate and who he blamed for it. He screamed this into the skies and above, only letting up when he ran out of vodka.

Smashing the bottle onto the ravine, he returned to the roads. He swerved through them. Only Vintage Vinyl would interrupt this.

He bought the Black Flag record because he remembered the T-shirt that Rudi had been wearing on her first day of school and the tattoo that had been on Owen’s arm and because staring at the record’s cover was like doing so into a mirror. But he had no doubt that Butch had been right, that he would hate it.

Yet, back in his room, he slid the tape into his Walkman. He tossed his headphones on and hit play.

Henry Rollins crawled into his head. He took over the screaming.

*My name is Henry, and you’re here with me now*.

Rollins’ screaming sent Yon teetering. It knocked him from his knees and from all that was under them. He would swear that Rollins was screaming at him, at him alone, screaming all he was feeling but unable to express. But what toppled Yon over was how Rollins was screaming about more than how life sucks. He screamed more about how he wanted to change it and how he wouldn’t give into it or stop screaming about it.

This inspired him. “Room 13” inspired him, but also “Rise Above” and “Life of Pain” and “Damaged II” and “What I See.” Each song focused on a different facet of his bile till there wasn’t a sliver that Rollins hadn’t dissected and tossed out. Bleaker songs such as “Depression” and “Thirsty and Miserable” offered traces of promise too.

The tape ended. Yon played it another time, smashing into the walls and punching the mirror.

Each pass through, his anger lessened. By the fourth, his darkness had gone. All that remained was the mad desperation to hope.

He sobered the next morning and played the tape over. Many times over. It was his one substitute for self-pity. His one means from it. The one substance that wouldn’t let him have it.

It moved him forward too. It got him up in the morning and to sleep each night and through all his attempts at killing himself. It also led him to a punk club in the Alphabet City section of Manhattan called A7 and a band that must’ve been Ism, because he talked about them playing a cover of “I Think I Love You,” with bodies flying across the stage and the room.

He collapsed onto a corner of it, invisible to it all and himself.

#

Yon’s first lucid observation was after returning to St. Barnabas. He woke to the angel hovering above him. One in contrasting black and white, with no shades of gray.

Forgetting all that had happened, he murmured her name.

The forgetting didn’t last. He remembered it all, rumbling, “I told you to leave me alone.”

Instead, Rudi grabbed his hand. She was breaking it apart, angrier than ever. The fury was hammering through her.

“Are you crazy?” he screeched. “I’m infected!”

He squirmed his hand. But she held on. He couldn’t yank it from her. He could only turn away. “Go. Please go.”

“Not till we have it out.”

He wouldn’t. He clenched his eyes closed. He prayed for her to leave.

But she wasn’t going anywhere anymore. He had no choice but to go back to her.

“There’s gonna be some changes around here,” she snarled, her voice lashing out at him. “From now on, you’re gonna take care of yourself. And you’re gonna do what that doctor tells you! And . . .”

She couldn’t finish. Her voice fractured. Her lips trembled. The raging punk towering over him changed back into the frightened child. The one who had been crying inside the motel room. She fell apart, seam by seam.

With nothing holding her together, her knees buckled. She tumbled onto him, taking him into her arms. “And you’re gonna love me,” her voice rasped. “You are. Because I love you. God, how I love you!”

Yon swelled up. “How could you love me?”

“I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to love anyone, including me. But you’re the most magnificent person I’ve ever met or will ever meet. You make my whole rotten life worth it.”

Yon didn’t speak. But tears ran down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpered. “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry? You think I’m mad at you? Don’t you get it? I don’t want you to watch me die.”

“But I’m gonna watch you live, I am, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Yon willed himself to resist her. With all he had left he willed it.

But he couldn’t. He no longer belonged to himself or would.

So he grasped her, harder than she was grasping him.

“Yoni!” she shrieked. She cried with him. Her tears mixed with his and became one.

“I can’t live without you,” he said. “It’s not a figure of speech or a hyperbole or whatever the right term is. It just is.”

#

None of us were sure whether Yon would make it through the night. The doctor was the least sure.

Rudi refused to leave him. She kept refusing, despite a nurse threatening to call security. The cops couldn’t have dragged her away.

All night she clutched him, humming “Moonlight Serenade” during each of his bouts with the shivers.

“I’m so scared,” he stammered to her.

“Me too. But not as much as when I was alone.”

He gripped her arms. He held on.

#

The nurse shoved her medical cart from Yon’s room. As usual, she was wearing a mask and gloves and wanting to be anywhere but there.

Most days this bothered Yon, no matter how he pretended otherwise. But now it didn’t matter.

The reason was the man next to him on his bed, who was wearing a suit and a kippah but had no mask or gloves and was holding his hand.

Yon wrote how floored he was that this man he had revered his whole life was touching him and unafraid.

“Is there anything I can get you?” the rabbi asked, with a gentle voice that belied his size.

Yon opened his mouth. But he had to pinpoint the words. “Could, could you bring me a Bible?”

Where did this come from? It was a question with no answer. Never had Yon an interest in it before. He couldn’t say that he had one now. But the spark had come and he’d let it out.

“I’ll bring one tomorrow, Yonatan,” the rabbi said with his head skewed.

He released Yon’s hand and stood. Turning from him, he did a double take. Twice he did.

Yon sought the cause of it.

Rudi was in the doorway, wearing his football jacket and holding a cold compress. She was aloof.

“Hey,” Yon said to her.

“Hi,” she said back, her voice a notch above audible.

“This is Rabbi Orenstein, from my temple.”

Rudi forced a smile.

Yon lifted himself toward her. “This is my . . . my . . .”

“I’m his girl,” she said. I bet she said it not only to the rabbi and to Yon but to herself.

Feigning confidence, she plodded to the rabbi. She told him her name, offering him her hand.

He shook it, with his own forced smile. “Nice to meet you.”

The man’s befuddlement of Rudi and her appearance heightened. He hurried back to Yon. “You must be looking forward to returning home.”

Yon didn’t answer, with his eyes elsewhere. They were on the waterfall.

“We’re getting a place,” Rudi interjected.

“We *could* get one,” Yon growled.

“We *are* getting one.”

“You’re eighteen, Rudi. I won’t saddle you with all this.”

“It’s my choice, not yours!”

“What if, what if I don’t get out of here?”

“You’re getting out of here.”

“Well,” the rabbi said, stifling in his discomfort, “there are nice apartments across the street. I’ve been inside a few. Some you can rent furnished.”

Yon moaned. “They’d be out of our price range. We don’t . . .”

“The synagogue has a fund for these kinds of situations.”

Rudi stretched toward the man. “You do understand that we’re not married.”

“Under normal circumstances, that would be a problem. But under these . . .”

Yon moaned louder.

But the rabbi waved him and his doubts off. He started toward the door. “Let me handle it.”

He left, with Rudi peering into the doorway. She was peering into it after he was gone. “Are all rabbis like him?”

Yon peered with her. “They aspire to be.”

Rudi climbed onto the bed, to apply the compress to Yon’s face and forehead. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Yup.”

“Well?”

“You’ll have to get out of here to get it.”

#

Rudi and I stood in front of Dr. Kleinsten. She wasn’t breathing.

The doctor read through a chart. Several times he did.

He lowered it, with an amazement that shone through his suppression of it. “The pneumocystis has passed.”

“Yeah?” Rudi blurted out. “So he can leave?”

“I guess. But you need to get realistic about this, Ms. Weiss. I keep trying to tell you that. Not that there’s no cure for what Yon’s got, but that there’s none on the horizon. Not that there’s no name for his disease, but that there’s no understanding of the virus underlying it. We can’t say for certain that it is a virus. I’ve got an obligation to be forthright with you. In cases such as his . . .”

Rudi wouldn’t listen to any more. She soared down the hall, refusing to let reality take a step in her direction.

I followed her. We entered the elevator.

The rabbi was there. “Hi,” he said with awkwardness.

She said the same, with the same awkwardness.

The two stayed straight ahead. The elevator descended.

She lowered her eyes. “I want to thank you for the apartment. It’s terrific.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I, I have questions.”

“Questions?”

We got to the ground floor and exited. “This isn’t the place or time,” Rudi said.

“Our synagogue, Beth El, is on Irvington Avenue, not far from the intersection of South Orange Avenue. I have office hours each morning.”

#

Rudi helped Yon inside a door.

Switching on the light, she exposed the same one-bedroom apartment from Yon’s dream, as well as the golden-haired dog that had also been in it.

Yon felt surprise at the dog running toward him with her tail wagging. But the surprise vanished when he realized that the apartment and the dog’s presence in it couldn’t have been otherwise.

The dog jumped into Yon’s arms. She licked his face.

He gushed. “She remembers me.”

Rudi leaned against him. “How could a girl forget a hero?”

“How did she end up here?”

“No one claimed her. I talked to Dr. Kleinsten. He agrees that a dog could be good for you. She’ll keep you company when I’m not around and give you to-dos. And, to be honest, I could use an unconditional friend. So we’ve adopted her.”

“*We?”*

Rudi scratched behind the dog’s ears. “We’re calling her Flutter.”

Yon laughed. “What about the matching collars?”

“They’re in the living room,” she said with her own laugh.

“All right.”

Flutter licked his face some more. A lot more.

#

The excitement of having a home, and all the love inside it, was too much for Flutter. She had fallen asleep before dinner was over and was snoring on the makeshift bed Rudi had set up for her on the kitchen floor.

At a table steps away were Rudi and Yon, along with the remains of a Reservoir pizza and a pair of Cokes. Like what they had on their first date or whatever it was.

Rudi stood. She lifted Yon to his feet. She led him to their bedroom door, blushing as she had outside the restaurant, with Yon’s movements as halting as hers.

The two stepped into the room’s threshold. Yon’s copy of *Damaged* sat against the wallon the floor.

He picked it up, with a joy sparring with the tears pushing their way out. Only now did he recognize how it had saved him.

“That you were listening to that was a real shock to me,” she said.

“It’s the best, and I’m not the only one who believes it.”

Rudi released Yon’s hand, so she could walk to the portable stereo on an end table by the bed’s far side. The stereo that had belonged to Mrs. Criss, who had given it to Rudi as a going-away present.

Rudi hit play. “Moonlight Serenade” filled the room.

Yon pointed at it agog. “Where did you get that?”

“I got the record at the library and made an infinite tape of it. You can listen to it all day if you want.”

“And never get tired of it.”

Yon checked out the room. On the bed was a wrapped package. “What’s that?”

“A housewarming gift.”

“*Rudi*. I should be the one giving gifts. You’ve given me too much.”

“It’s nothing. Go on, open it.”

Yon put down *Damaged*. The two sat on the bed. Opening the gift, careful not to tear the wrapping, he uncovered her crumpled drawing of him set inside a simple black frame.

He raised it with a smirk. “I’ve always wanted a picture of Lee Ving.”

With her own smirk, she shoved him onto the bed. She leaned down to kiss him.

He stopped her, with a shake of his head. “I can’t.”

She snarled at him, as she had on the day she’d met him and on so many after it. “There are only a few *can’ts*, and jillions of *cans*.”

This time the tears got past Yon. He couldn’t stop them.

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. “The infinite possibilities.”

#

Yon described his first night with Rudi in colors.

They trickled over him with each kiss and touch—blues and yellows and violets. Colors as vivid as those in the Vermeer painting his parents had taken him to see.

The colors not only flooded his eyes. He felt them in Rudi’s lips and fingers and toes, and he heard them in Glenn Miller’s trombone.

There was ivory too. Michelangelo had carved her out of it. She was perfection. His perfection.

By the time he had passed out, she’d become his lover. Not in all senses but in all the ones that mattered.

#

Yon woke. With fright he did. It was dark. He couldn’t tell if Rudi was there.

But there she was, asleep in his arms and clinging to him, like he would slip away if she let go.

This recalled to Yon the afternoon by the waterfall, when Rudi had lowered her head onto his shoulder. He had believed that this was the best he could feel. But it was nothing compared to now, to holding her and protecting her and feeling her breathe against him.

This would be his reason to live. So he could keep feeling her body next to his.

“I’m never gonna die,” he said to himself.

He kept repeating it till he believed it.

#

I rang their apartment doorbell the next afternoon, carrying an oversized ceramic bowl covered in tinfoil.

Rudi opened the door, with a Bible in her hand and her finger marking the spot she had been reading.

It wouldn’t be the last I would catch her with a Bible or a similar book, and she would often get embarrassed by it. Fumbling about, she hid the book behind her back like it was a *Playgirl*.

What led her to it? Was it the same spark as Yon’s? Or was it a desire to make meaning from what wasn’t making any?

Her eyes set upon my bowl. “Whatcha got there?”

“Grandpa wanted to give you guys a housewarming present. A jar of his *utopence*.”

“His what?”

“Pickled sausages.”

Not letting a grimace form on Rudi’s face, I hoisted the bowl. “But we made you a salad instead.”

Rudi hugged me. She hugged me in the doorway for God knows how long.

#

“How’s next Saturday?” I asked from the dining room table across from Yon.

“I’m not sure,” came Rudi’s voice from the kitchen.

“You can’t avoid her forever.”

“It’s not me who’s been doing the avoiding.”

“Saturday will be fine,” Yon said to us both.

Rudi marched into the room, carrying the salad bowl in one hand and a plate of omelets in the other. She crooked her face at Yon.

Flutter jumped up to get at the food.

Rudi turned from her, toward us. “Rule number one here: no feeding Flutter from the table. Breaking it will be a capital offense.”

Neither Yon nor I dared a reply.

Rudi used tongs to serve the salad and the omelets. She joined us.

Yon and I picked up our utensils. We peeped at each other with skepticism and tasted the omelets.

“This is good,” Yon gasped.

I gasped too, louder than he had. “Yeah.”

Rudi slammed her forearms onto the table. “What were you guys expecting?”

“Glass and nails?” I mumbled. “And rusty ones.”

Yon and I laughed.

Rudi laughed too, slapping my arm. She sent me to the floor.

She was feeding Flutter a tomato under the table.

#

It took a lot of cajoling from Grandpa and me to get Grandma to meet Rudi. That was only after she stopped throwing stuff at us.

Agreeing to lunch, she made clear that it would be a one-time event.

The three of us waited outside the Matador by Rudi and Yon’s apartment building in the early afternoon chill. We waited awhile, with Grandma’s discomfort rising. A bomb was about to go off.

From the building’s front door, Rudi and Yon slithered out. They approached us with wariness.

Grandma sneered at Rudi. “Look at her. She . . . I cannot imagine what she is.”

It wasn’t Rudi’s appearance that upset Grandma. It was how she reminded her of my mother. More fear was on display than disgust.

Yon and Rudi made it to us.

“Hi,” Rudi said.

Grandma didn’t respond.

I was doubtful whether we would make it through lunch. Or get there. But this would prove minor compared to what happened next.

“Jeeeewww!” someone yelled beside us, coming from a car of hooting boys slowing at a red light down the way.

We all inched toward Grandpa.

He played it down, like he did whenever his Jewish looks got him attention. I had been witness to this a number of times, but never was it as bad as this. He wanted to make himself disappear.

All of us wanted to pretend that it didn’t happen. All of us but Rudi.

At the time, I believed that her reaction had come from the number tattooed on Grandpa’s arm. But now I believe she was remembering when she didn’t react, when she didn’t stand up to hate.

Whatever her reason was, she stormed toward the car with her fists drawn.

“Where you going?” Yon called out.

She kept storming.

“You can’t change the world!” he hollered.

“Just watch me!” she hollered back.

Rudi got to the car and hoisted a rock. She smashed the front passenger window with it, shattering it to pieces.

Leaning toward the boys and their frightened faces, she brandished the rock. “That’s my grandpa you’re laughing at.”

The driver didn’t wait for the light to change. He sped through it. He sped through the next one.

Grandpa whispered into Grandma’s ear, “Not much of a Nazi, I would say.”

She wasn’t convinced. But we did make it through lunch. We also made plans for a Sabbath dinner the following week.

#

I swept the night’s pages off the table, along with the envelope.

Saying goodnight to Rudi, I started toward the dorm and the shimmer trickling from it.

But I didn’t get there.

Josh exited the dining hall, with a carton of ribs. One of those we had brought inside. He carried it through the courtyard to the back of his bright-red pickup truck parked outside the gates, where he had packed a dozen other cartons.

With a heave, he tossed the carton beside the others.

A *thhhuuddd* rang out. People could’ve heard it in Hesperia.

Josh returned to the dining hall. He stepped into the kitchen. He opened the freezer and removed another carton.

Coming outside with it, he noticed me without worry. I was a fly who couldn’t harm him. Or a ghost.

He strutted off, rendering the gift we had received and all the effort made by many to make it happen to nothing. That’s when that pesky “moral code” began gnawing at me.

#

Needing a bus pass for the next day, I had to wait for Josh to finish carrying out the cartons. I had to wait as well for him to return from wherever he took them.

All this made that gnawing deeper.

It was past three when he led me to the vault.

A passport was inside it. I didn’t need to guess whose it was.

Josh whipped out the passes. He offered me one, snorting at me. “Is there a problem?”

I didn’t answer. I snatched the pass and scrambled off so I couldn’t answer.

the seventh night

I woke before dawn.

It wasn’t the waves of darkness that woke me or the demons pushing me down. I hadn’t felt them in days and couldn’t figure out why.

Was it because, unlike the times before, my mind wasn’t on myself?

#

I got my cup of green tea from the kitchen and dallied into the courtyard under the bluish clouds passing over it, toward the corner table and the hazy yellow climbing behind the canyons.

Wendy was in the booth by herself. She was upset.

I sat across from her and asked what was wrong.

She wouldn’t tell me.

A woman named Zara stopped by her. “I heard that you got a job at Amazon. Congratulations.”

Wendy wouldn’t talk to her either. She got more upset.

The same wasn’t true of Zara. Exhilaration shot through her. “Josh said that he could get me a job there too. A late shift.”

Wendy winced. “Don’t.”

“Why?”

She didn’t answer. She grabbed her coffee and cigarettes and huffed off.

“It’s all gone,” Mitchell hollered at a handful of guys sitting in a booth across from me. “All the ribs and all the steaks we schlepped into the freezer last night. Each one of those cartons. Someone stole them all.”

The entire booth swayed toward Gerry.

He lifted his sweatshirt. “Where could I put them?”

Mateo’s eyes wandered. They suggested that he had expected the food would disappear. “So much for that Christmas dinner.”

“All they left was the fruit and vegetables,” Mitchell added.

Patrick did a drumroll on the table. “They must’ve been thinking of our health.”

Everyone laughed. I laughed. We were like those creatures in Whoville, the ones who woke to empty houses on that famous Christmas morning. It didn’t matter that the Grinch had stolen our gift. What was behind it did. Josh couldn’t steal this.

#

I was power-washing the walkways outside the motel.

Mateo lumbered by with a cleaning woman. She had been at the shelter earlier in the year and had gotten Mateo his job.

*Life’s a series of ever-renewing cycles*.

The two were chatting about the company Christmas party, happening the following week. They had been chatting about it since I got the job in the summer. There was such longing in their voices. This was the best they could aspire to. It made me suppose that, from the day after the party, they would be chatting about next year’s.

“Hey,” spoke a voice nearby.

Amoun was whooping it up as usual, skipping and snapping his fingers. “I have good news for you. I’ve decided to make you full-time in January. I will raise your salary too, all the way to minimum wage.”

I fell over, in laughter. Not only because of what he had said. I loved this man. I loved him like I had loved that pastor. He gave me a job when nobody would.

He laughed with me. “Happy Chanukah.”

“Thank you,” I said to him. “The Coptic Christmas is coming soon, isn’t it?”

“January 7th.”

“*Pikhristos Avmasf*.”

My terrible pronunciation both humored and heartened him. “*Khen Omethmi Avmacf*.” He patted me on the shoulder and swaggered off.

The news should’ve made me happy. With a full-time job and a cheap enough apartment, I could’ve left the shelter. It was possible that I could’ve kept back the darkness and the demons for good.

*Mann tracht, un Gott lacht.*

Grandma’s saying came calling.

Two drifters broke my concentration. They were in a room across the way, breaking the window’s seal.

They pried the glass out. One by one, they tossed their belongings outside, to evade the reception area and whatever was waiting for them.

It was pathetic. But my witnessing of it was more so.

#

I floundered toward the shelter in the fading light.

An ambulance raced from it.

With dread, I scurried to and through the gates. Hank was beside them.

“What happened?” I asked.

“Dzsenifer had a stroke. One moment she’s talking to some people in a booth. The next she’s on the ground.”

His words drew me to the courtyard and to Willy, who was on a bench surrounded by others. They were comforting him, but his life had sped off. He was desperate for the means to and from the hospital without a running car or money.

That’s how it can be for homeless people. The badness climbs on top of each other.

Hank started toward the bench. “It hasn’t been the best of days. They kicked Mario out.”

“For what?”

“Josh found a knife in his cubby.”

#

It was a somber line of people waiting to check in that night. I couldn’t tell whether their minds were on Willy and Dzsenifer or on their own fragility.

Mine was on both.

It was a relief to get Yon’s letter from Josh. With it in my fist, I sped into the courtyard to call Rudi.

But I couldn’t do this right away. I learned that I had “volunteered” for street showers.

Two nights a week, we let people living on the streets inside the shelter for a shower. Most had been clients that the shelter had kicked out for various reasons. Rather than moving on, they camped out in the alley by the gates or down the block behind Starbucks.

What kept them here? Could they have had nowhere better to go? Or did it not matter where they went?

One of these people would help out at the shelter with lunch when I was around, in exchange for a meal. His name was Fred. He had been a lawyer. Elements of it remained under the decay.

My chore that night was to sit in the men’s room. I had to sit there while they undressed before they showered and while they got back into their dirty clothes afterward.

Why we had to do this to them, why we had to dehumanize them beyond how they were, was no one’s guess. None could explain it to me.

The men that night were like the drifters escaping the motel. They were pathetic but not as much as me.

Doing my best to avoid this, I positioned my chair in their general direction and pulled out Yon’s letter. I called Rudi.

We would be passing over more dark passages that night. So I asked her if she was ready.

But I was readying myself.

#

I rang the doorbell, with my grandparents and I waiting outside Rudi and Yon’s apartment.

During the previous times I had been there, I hadn’t noticed the hospital through the hallway windows. But at night, with the building’s lights shining, it beat me over the head. It made me flinch.

*Only the units of measurement were unknown*.

Yon’s countdown was ongoing. But I didn’t want to believe it. I switched my sights onto my grandparents.

Grandma wasn’t any more excited than she had been before her last encounter with Rudi. But she wasn’t sneering. I took this as a positive sign.

The apartment door swung open with a sweeping swish over the shag carpet. Out came the aroma from the challah and potato knishes baking in the oven, luring us forward. An agitated Rudi let us inside.

Yon and Flutter greeted my grandparents. I followed Rudi. She sped to the heaping pan of kasha cooking on the stove and the pot of soup simmering next to it.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

She spun toward me. “I can’t get the matzo balls right.”

Grandma grunted. “We call them ‘knaidels.’”

“I can’t get the knaidels right.”

“How did you prepare the chicken fat?”

“They’re vegetarian.”

“Vegetarian knaidels? In chicken soup?”

“Parsley soup.”

The shock of this sent Grandma wobbling. She had to grip the sofa with both hands. “Vegetarian knaidels in parsley soup?”

Steadying herself, she caught Grandpa’s eye. “Have you ever heard of such?”

“Just now,” he deadpanned.

Grandma hissed at him, dismissing him with a wave. Taking Rudi by the arm, she led her into the kitchen. “Let us see what we can do.”

“At least, Gertie,” Grandpa called out to her, “at least you will not have to worry about eating unkosher.”

“Gertie?” Rudi uttered. “Your name is . . .”

“Gertrud.”

“So I’m . . .”

“You have apparently been named after me.”

I was hoping this would make a crack in the frost. But the two wouldn’t stop arguing. They argued over the stove, experimenting with combinations of all ingredients in that kitchen. A couple of times they came close to blows.

But damn if those wouldn’t be the best knaidels I would ever eat.

#

Before dinner could start, Rudi had to light the Sabbath candles and recite the blessing over them.

We were all nervous for her. Including Grandma.

Rudi placed a scarf over her head and lit the candles. She was the most nervous. Her hands quivered.

Lighting the candles was easy. So was waving the light’s spirit into her home. Harder was singing the Hebrew prayer. None of us were sure what to expect. I’m sure she was the least sure.

Out came her voice, with the quiet that passed through the room in reaction to it.

Rudi slid toward us. “That bad?”

No one answered. But “bad” couldn’t have formed in any of our minds. Though Grandma had become pained. It pulled all of us toward her. Including Rudi. She lowered her scarf and stepped to the woman. “What’s wrong?”

Grandma shook her head. “Your voice, it, it is your mother’s.”

The two fell silent. They didn’t move.

Grandma broke this. She broke down, taking hold of Rudi and crying.

Rudi didn’t react. She stayed quiet and still.

“I miss her so much,” Grandma said.

Warring with her own emotions, Rudi wrapped her own arms around the woman. “I miss her too. I don’t want to, but I do. I can never remember the bad. I remember her buying me cotton candy at the circus and cradling me after a nightmare.”

“I remember too, whenever I close my eyes.”

“She . . .”

“She never could let herself be a part of us.”

Rudi’s face lit up. From what she would say next, it was because she got where Grandma was coming from. “‘Your people are my people,’” she murmured, quoting from the book of Ruth. “‘Your God is my God.’’”

Grandma cried harder. She gripped Rudi harder, murmuring back with a quote from the same verse. “‘And not even death shall separate us.’”

The two continued their embrace. These two women, whose differences couldn’t have been starker. The granddaughter of a Nazi and a woman whose life the Nazis had wrecked. A punk rocker and a gentlewoman, separated by generations and continents and mores.

But they were the same.

#

So stuffed were we after dinner that none of us could stir. None more so than Flutter, who had sprawled out on the floor.

Rudi stretched her arms. “Grandpa, I want to hear the rest of your Kafka story.”

“*Oy vey,”* Grandma yelped. “Do not get him started. You will never get him out of your house.”

Everyone laughed. None more so than Grandpa. But he wasn’t going to let this opportunity get by him. So, he filled Yon in on the story’s beginning and brought it to an end.

#

“Brod!” Hašek yelled.

He followed the man down the hospital corridor in his wheelchair. His voice was so piercing that it was painful to hear.

None of this was Hermann’s business. But he dipped his head into the hallway anyway. His curiosity over why Hašek would care what Kafka wanted Brod to burn overwhelmed him.

Why would he care about Kafka at all?

Hašek chased Brod in a corridor bereft of light. The two men were figures.

Panting for air, Hašek struggled forward. “If you don’t stop, I will follow you to Prague. I will haunt you to your last days. I swear I will!”

Brod slowed to a halt.

Hašek came behind him. Lifting himself from his chair, he grabbed Brod. “What does he want you to burn?”

Brod wouldn’t respond.

Hašek shook him. “Answer me!”

“His novels.”

“Novels? He has written novels?”

Brod didn’t answer.

“Are . . . are they like his stories?”

“Better.”

“And you, you’re gonna burn them?”

“What can I do?”

Hašek threw Brod and himself into a wall. He forced the man to face him. “What gives you the right?”

Brod pointed to himself. “They’re not mine. They’re his.”

“What gives him the right, the selfish little yid!”

“Let go of me.”

“Listen to me, you worthless wretch. You’re gonna publish those novels, every one.”

“No.”

“The greatest writer Prague has beheld, and you’d turn his poetry into ash? You’d be damned. For such a crime, there can be no absolution!”

“Let go of me!”

Brod pushed Hašek away, sending him to the floor. He rambled off.

“You won’t burn them, Brod!” Hašek shouted. “You can’t do it!”

#

Hermann returned to his bed.

“What was that all about?” Kafka said.

Hermann rolled over, away from the man. “I can’t say.”

Hašek came back to the room. He was smoldering at Kafka.

“What was that all about?” Kafka demanded.

Hašek waved him off. “I can’t see how it’s your concern.”

The man veered right. He thrust himself toward his bed. But he didn’t go far. He paused, with his back to both men.

“What’s the matter?” Kafka asked.

Hašek lowered his head.

“Did you hear me?” Kafka asked next and louder.

“You’re looking at a jealous man, Herr Kafka.”

“Jealous?”

“When I told you the other day that I had read some of your stories, I lied.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve read them all. Every single one. I have them stacked in my home. I’m jealous of you, of your talent and accomplishments.”

“Me?”

“I wish I could write like you, that my words could flow as yours do, from the page onto someone’s soul. But I’m only a scribbler. It doesn’t matter how many books I sell. Nothing will change that I’m a failure.”

Teary-eyed, Hašek turned toward Kafka. “I never wanted the money. I wanted to be a real writer and not some peddler of dreck as you called me.

“That’s why I got so mad at you. You weren’t the first to call *Švejk* that. That’s what they all called it. That was why I had to put it out myself. No one would touch it. Not because they believed it wouldn’t sell, they were certain it would. It was because they didn’t want to be associated with dreck or with me.”

Hašek sped off. He yanked his wheels from them.

“*Švejk* isn’t dreck,” Kafka called out, causing Hašek to come to another stop. “I was lashing out. The truth is . . . I loved every page. Every single one. You’re a modern-day Rabelais, Mr. Hašek. Švejk stands eye to eye with Pantagruel and Gargantua. If this happens over the heads of publishers, never you mind. History is never nearsighted.

“Let me tell you a story. I was crossing Palačák when I came upon a group of boys. They were playing out a scene from *Švejk*. The last one from the first book, if I remember right. The one where Lieutenant Lukáš curses Švejk for giving him the colonel’s stolen dog. These boys, they performed it so perfectly and with such delight.

“Through them, Mr. Hašek, Švejk will live on past you. He will live forever. These children, they will pass him onto their children and their children’s children. And were you aware that Max is preparing a German translation of it?”

Hašek jolted back in his chair. “He is?”

“Soon the whole world will love Švejk. They will love him as we do. He is all of us, our follies and our fears, but most of all our joys.

“I should be the one who’s envious, of you. You called yourself a failure, but they’ll forget me before I’m lowered into the ground.”

“Don’t be so sure about that, Herr Kafka,” Hašek said, rubbing the tears off his chubby face. “Don’t be so sure.”

#

Late into the evening, Hermann was persuading Kafka one last time to go home with him.

“If you won’t live for others,” he said from his bed, with his eyes on the ceiling, “what about for yourself? What would you miss?”

Kafka said nothing.

Hermann crossed his arms. “Oh, what I would miss. I’d miss the sun setting over the Vltava. I can’t imagine life without it. But more than that, I’d miss the marvel in the eyes of a child when you tell them a story. I would’ve given any price to see it in the eyes of my child. The one who was stillborn. And what about the kiss of a woman? You can’t tell me that you wouldn’t miss that.”

Kafka continued saying nothing. So Hermann gave up and went to sleep, consigned to leaving the following day without him.

#

Hermann woke in the night.

Kafka was reading from a slim hardcover book, a first edition of *The Metamorphosis*, the only edition at that moment. The man’s gaze was on it as if it were his son or daughter.

Hermann yawned. “I have the best reason yet for you to live.”

Ignoring him, Kafka continued to the next page.

Hermann lifted his head toward the man. “It’s rather selfish, I’ll admit, but I’d love to read another of your stories. I’m positive that I’m not the only one.”

#

Hermann woke a second time.

It was morning and Kafka was standing over him in a suit, with his open and packed suitcase on his bed.

“You better hurry,” he said. “There’s one train out of here. It leaves in an hour.”

Hermann jumped onto the floor. But he froze. His nightshirt had jumped out at him. “My clothes.”

“I sent Nurse Černá to get them.”

Kafka’s copy of *The Metamorphosis* was on Hermann’s end table. Hermann tipped in its direction. “What’s this doing here?”

“A belated Chanukah gift.”

Hermann picked up the book. He checked inside its cover.

Kafka had inscribed it to him.

“Thank you, Herr Kafka,” Hermann whispered. “Thank you.”

Kafka opened his mouth to respond. But the spinning of wheels interrupted him.

Hašek was heading toward them in his wheelchair. Slowing to a stop, the man was in a dour mood. “Would you gentlemen do me the honor of accompanying me to the dock?”

Raising his fist, he showed them the one-heller coin between his fingers.

#

Kafka wheeled Hašek to the staircase, the one on the cliff overlooking the river, with Hermann a few steps back and carrying Kafka’s suitcase.

Hašek leaned over the steps, at the handful of people boarding the boat from the dock. He balked. “I had no idea there were so many stairs. I won’t make it.”

Kafka offered him his hand. “But we will.”

Hašek took it. Kafka brought him to his feet.

“I see it now,” Hašek sang, glimpsing up at Kafka.

“What?”

“Your father.”

Smiling, the two made their way down the steps. They did so with their arms around one another. Together each complemented the other to the extent that they appeared as one healthy body.

“You think they’ll have some good pubs?” Hašek said.

“I’m certain of it.”

“I’ll save you a seat.”

“I’d like that.”

Both men tired. They rested midway.

“Can I call you Franta?” Hašek asked.

“You may.”

“And you, you call me Jarda. That’s what my friends call me.”

The two furthered on. They got to the dock. Hašek paid Charon his fare, and Kafka helped him into the boat.

It pulled away.

“You know what?” Hašek called out, his face reflecting the blinding sun. “I’m no longer afraid.”

“Neither am I,” Kafka said, waving his friend goodbye. “Neither am I.”

#

Grandma tossed up her arms, at the row of floodlights on the ceiling and the heavens beyond them. “Kafka must be sick of that story. Hašek too.”

Everyone laughed. None more so than Grandpa.

Flutter leapt to her feet and joined in. She bayed in elation.

“Well, I loved it,” Rudi said, grasping Yon’s hand with a hint of dampness in her eyes.

Grandpa had been right. The story did have meaning for her. The same meaning the Black Flag record had for Yon.

#

Spring came, and Yon’s eighteenth birthday.

This would’ve been an accomplishment for anyone. For him, it was bigger.

To celebrate it, Grandma cooked him dinner at our house. As a way of welcoming him into our family, she made him all the Czech dishes she could make without meat.

These weren’t many but were delicious. Among them were stuffed peppers and fried mushrooms and lots of dumplings, both potato and fruit.

#

The next day, Rudi held a party for Yon by the waterfall.

She had told everyone that the only gift they were to bring was themselves. She must’ve recognized how difficult it would’ve been getting gifts for him.

What do you give someone who’s about to die?

I drove Yon and Rudi and Flutter to the falls that afternoon, along with a cake Rudi had baked, a few boxes of Reservoir pizza, and soda.

Owen and Eliot were already there. Jared and Lis came later. So did Mariana.

A motley bunch we were that day, sitting on the rocks in the sun, listening to a tape of Yon’s favorite Yardbirds songs that Rudi had made. Over “Happenings Ten Years Time Ago” and Yon and Owen’s arguing over whether Beck or Page was the better guitarist, I took account of all of us. Myself the most.

There wasn’t a shred of commonality. There was no rationale for us spending this time together. But here we all were. Here we belonged.

#

The party ended early. I helped Rudi carry all the stuff to the car on Crest Drive.

She asked me to bring Yon back from the falls while saying goodbye to Mariana.

I returned to the rocks. Yon was hanging over them next to Jared and Lis. Their eyes were on the ravine and the water churning onto it.

“Some people back home have the same,” Jared said, with Lis holding on to him from behind. She held on with all she had. “It’s only dumb luck I don’t.”

Yon gazed deeper into the water. “There could be a reason.”

“What reason could there be for me to live and not you?”

“That’s not what I mean. What you survived could give you a reason to do what you wouldn’t’ve done.”

#

We left the reservation in the Matador, passing South Mountain Elementary on the way to Pathmark so Rudi could get groceries.

Reading Is Fundamental was having a readathon behind the school. Volunteers were welcome.

“Let’s do it,” Yon cried.

“You sure you’re up for it?” Rudi said.

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

It was obvious that Yon was exhausted. It was why Rudi ended the party early. But we couldn’t refuse him on his birthday.

I turned around and drove down a steep hill to the blacktop behind the school. Dozens of children were waiting, with a handful of adults organizing them into groups.

It was no surprise that the adults got frightened on whiff of Rudi. But what was surprising was how the kids didn’t. Her appearance drew them as if she were a superhero, and that wasn’t far from the truth. They all wanted to be part of her group, and they loved Flutter and the matching spiked collars the two had on. They encircled the dog and petted her.

“Be gentle,” Rudi said to them. “She’s been through rough times.”

The kids took heed. Some may have been recalling their own rough times.

#

All three of us ran reading groups on the field below the blacktop. So did others.

But Rudi’s was the largest and the loudest and got the most notice. The kids in hers took turns on her lap. Others sat next to Flutter. She helped them voice out the syllables that made up each tale they read.

Like she had with Owen, she was repaying a debt that afternoon, for when the librarian took the time to teach her to read. But what I remember is how she made reading magical for those kids. She bestowed upon them a secret wand that opened worlds, as many as they could picture. The marvel on their faces remains with me.

All afternoon we read with the kids. But Rudi did nonstop with hers. It was impossible to tell who was enjoying it more.

#

The sun fell.

The readathon’s organizers had to shut it down, sending the kids in Rudi’s group screeching. But Rudi was the most disappointed.

“You should become a teacher,” the woman running the event said to Rudi.

Earlier, she had been the most frightened person there. Now she was the least.

#

Yon stayed healthy in the months that followed. He stayed away from the hospital. There were days that I couldn’t tell he was sick or could pretend it. I could pretend these wonderful times, the best that would come my way, would last forever.

But I would learn the truth of this period from his journal.

They hadn’t yet given his disease a name, at least one that everyone could agree on, and there were no treatments for it. All Dr. Kleinsten could do was treat his symptoms.

These had no end. Among them were the Kaposi lesions that would form on Yon’s face and body. As she had with Mariana, Rudi taught Yon how to use makeup, after experimenting with foundations and concealers till she got the right blend.

Rudi’s care didn’t end there. She would often have to change their bedsheets during the night due to the sweating Yon would do. At times she’d do this twice a night. On top of that, she had to nurse him through each cold and sickness. Any could’ve been fatal.

The reason I was ignorant of all this was that Rudi never let on to how much they were struggling. I remember her as happy during this period. I would never see her as happy as she was with him.

#

Despite their troubles, Yon and Rudi developed the kind of everyday routines any couple would.

This included hikes into the woods with Flutter. “The beautiful afternoons of normal,” Yon would call them, where they wouldn’t stop arguing. They’d argue about the news and about politics and about music. They’d argue about the weather. But these arguments never mattered to him because there was never a moment that hinted of dull. Nor was there one when she wasn’t holding his hand.

The two also went to Dr. Kleinsten’s office each week. They would go over his condition and get the latest test results and prognoses. No matter how depressing this got, Rudi would glean a positive.

One day she couldn’t.

“I have some good news,” the doctor said to them across from his desk. “A hospice that’s willing to take Yon.”

Rudi’s mood fell with her body. “Hospices are for people who’ve given up.”

“It would make both your lives easier.”

Yon agreed. He was tired of fighting the disease and wanted to ease Rudi’s burden. He wanted her to have a life outside of taking care of him.

Rudi would have none of it. “We’re not giving up. We’re not.”

#

Another of Rudi and Yon’s routines was spending their Saturdays at Vintage Vinyl. They would bring lunch and listen to records all day with Butch.

They didn’t listen only to their kinds of records. Some days they would pick a bunch at random and listen to them the whole way through. They listened to records that they wouldn’t have had otherwise, like *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison* and *Patti LaBelle*. Adoring the latter, they bought it and had Butch make a tape of it for them.

On other days, the two would binge on the British imports Butch would get because he liked the bands’ names. Such as the Cure and the Psychedelic Furs and Echo and the Bunnymen, who were all years away from becoming known in America. Among these records was a single from a group as obscure in England as they were here and got Rudi so worked up that she called me. “You gotta listen to this. The guy sings, he sings like he means every word.”

She put the phone to the record. I heard “Hand in Glove” and the voice of Morrissey for the first time.

The two also listened to that Coltrane album I had happened upon on my first visit to the store. Yon loved the music. But he loved more the poem Coltrane wrote in the liner notes. The one that he played his saxophone to in the record’s final movement.

Two lines of it, in particular, took hold of him and wouldn’t let go.

*God breathes through us so completely . . .*

*So gently we hardly feel it . . .*

#

The entry puzzled me.

How could Yon’s faith have grown the closer he got to the end? How could he have had greater hope the greater his hopelessness got?

I’ve spent nights answering these questions, and I don’t believe that I’ll do so in full. But could this eighteen-year-old boy have tripped upon the purpose of faith?

Was it to raise us when we have nowhere left to fall?

#

Rudi and Yon didn’t spend all that time at Vintage Vinyl for the music or the poetry. They also went for Butch, who would make them laugh all day. This was possible because Butch didn’t care about Yon’s disease. He refused to treat him in a different manner because of it.

He was as rude to him as he was to everyone.

#

The laughter and music and hope couldn’t fill all Yon’s days.

On a gray and drab morning, he sat beside his bedroom window, with the leaves of fall tumbling from the trees. He sat beside the window into the afternoon. He was sitting there in the dark.

Rudi came through the door. That summer, she had graduated from high school and had gotten a job. One that was personal to her. She worked at the first counseling center in the state to help the increasing number of those diagnosed with what they had just named AIDS, often working late.

“What’s wrong?” she asked Yon.

He wouldn’t tell her. He remained fastened to the window. He remained there after she helped him from the chair into bed.

She joined him, wrapping her arms and legs around him. “Tell me. Please tell me.”

He wouldn’t. But she wouldn’t stop pressing, and he relented. “Today I realized, I realized that I’d never see the leaves grow.”

#

Yon woke with the sun.

He woke with surprise, coming from Rudi’s absence and all the pots in the room. They were everywhere, filled with young and green and growing life.

Bringing another into the room was Rudi. She was filthy, having spent the night hauling plants from a nursery down the road. She must have spent herself too. But she refused to show it.

“It’s spring,” she said, her eyes matching the morning in the window. “It will always be spring.”

#

Rudi had to work on select Saturdays. On one, I drove Yon to Vintage Vinyl in her place.

We stepped from the car with a pizza. I couldn’t avoid how slight Yon had gotten in the face. Which must’ve been why he would wear an Oakland A’s baseball cap when he went out. So others wouldn’t have to avoid it as much.

The cap couldn’t hide Yon’s hair and how it wasn’t so wavy. But he wasn’t so doomed either. He stood in defiance of his fate. This was on display to the whole world.

We entered the empty store. My eyes widened. “You’ve got the new DKs album,” I blurted out, laying the pizza onto the counter.

Butch pulled out a slice. “Go ahead, put it on.”

Whipping out *Plastic Surgery Disasters*, I hustled behind the counter with it to the turntable.

Yon stopped by Butch. “Rudi’s having a birthday.”

“Me too,” I said, dropping the recordonto the player and the needle on top of it.

“Him too,” Yon went on, with the Dead Kennedys filling the store. You could tell it was them from the opening chord. “But I’m at a loss as to what to get her, and he’s no help at all.”

Butch lowered his pie and swallowed. “Well, don’t look at me. There’s a reason I’m single.”

“But you guys love the same stuff.”

“Except you.”

“Come on, if you were having a birthday and could have whatever you wanted, what would it be?”

Butch didn’t need a second to answer. “To see Bad Brains live.”

“They’re good?”

“They’re good,” I confirmed.

“Do they play at that A7 place?”

“They usually play at CBGB,” Butch said. “But they left town.”

“What about . . . what about Black Flag?”

“They’re in LA. They do come out here to play, but not now.”

“Lee Ving?”

“You mean Fear? They’re also in LA.”

Yon tossed his head at the record I was playing. “Them?”

“San Francisco.”

“Is there anyone good playing around here?”

“I’ve got flyers somewhere.”

Butch checked under the counter and through the clutter. He whipped out a bunch of papers, setting them down.

One made Yon shine.

#

Rudi was dragging herself into her apartment after longer than a full day of work.

Yon dragged her out.

“Where are we going?” she whined.

He led her into the corridor. He kept dragging her.

She shut their door in front of a charging Flutter. Though this didn’t prevent the dog from making herself heard.

The dragging went on. The two got to the building’s front door.

She resisted. “I’m beat.”

“You won’t be,” he said, flinging himself and her outside.

A driver in a black uniform was standing alongside a white limousine. The kind she might’ve ridden in if she had gone to her high school prom.

“What’s going on?” she demanded.

“There’s one way to learn.”

#

Amid heavy traffic in Lower Manhattan, the limousine idled beside a parked car not far from CBGB.

Rudi put her nose to the window. “Why are we stopping here?”

Yon guided her chin toward a poster on the wall. It revealed that Richard Hell was performing that night.

“Happy Birthday,” he said.

This shocked her. But through it she kissed him. She kissed and kissed him. Nothing could get her to slow.

*kisses are a better fate than wisdom*

Yon recalled the poet’s words. The ones that had come from that classroom on the day he’d met Rudi. He recalled, too, the man’s overromanticized notions of life.

He was living them.

#

Hand-in-hand, Rudi and Yon passed through the crowded bar to the back where the bands played.

“Rudi?” a voice bellowed.

Rudi released Yon’s hand, turning toward a young woman with blue hair and facial piercings, who was next to a group of punks that made Rudi conservative-looking.

“Leila?” Rudi gasped, embracing the woman.

“Where have you been?” Leila squealed, embracing Rudi back. “You haven’t been anywhere.”

“I’ve been busy.”

The two let go of one another. Rudi said hello to the others.

Retaking Yon’s hand, she introduced him, leading to some uncomfortable stares. Yon didn’t fit in with them any more than Rudi had with his friends.

He didn’t take offense. “I’ll meet you by the stage.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“Stay with your friends.”

“But . . .”

He swung his head at a door. “I gotta go to the bathroom anyway.”

#

Yon was burning up.

He doddered into the graffiti-covered men’s room. So sick was he that he had to lean against a wall.

He slid all the way down it to the floor. He was unsure if he would get up.

“You missed Bad Brains,” Leila wailed at Rudi outside the door. “You missed every show.”

“I had no clue they were in town.”

“You said you loved them.”

“I do love them. I listen to that tape you gave me all the time. I couldn’t get through a day without it. Remember how we would skip over the slow reggae songs? I don’t anymore. I especially don’t skip them.”

“We’re gonna follow them down the coast, all the way to hell. We’re leaving after last call. Why don’t you come with us?”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got a better to-do.”

“What could be better than Bad Brains?”

“There’s only one ‘what.’”

“It’s got to do with that guy, doesn’t it?”

“It’s got to do with that guy.”

“Who is he anyway?”

“I told you, his name is Yon.”

“Yeah, but *who* is he?”

“The boy I love.”

“The boy you what?”

“He’s what gets me through the night.”

No longer did Yon feel sick. He felt himself rising from the floor.

#

Yon took a seat at an empty table not far from the stage, with a crag plummeting onto him.

He had believed that he needed Rudi more than she needed him, that their relationship was one-sided. But after hearing what she had told Leila, he questioned this.

It didn’t make him happy. It scared him that he wouldn’t be around for her. It shook him into a daze.

He came out of it. Rudi jumped onto his lap.

“*Rudi*,” he grumbled.

“What?”

“It’s your birthday, hang with your friends.”

“They’re not my friends. We just love all the same music and hate all the same wrongs. That doesn’t make you a friend.”

She added to this by singing to him. “*You are my friend.*” She sang it as Patti LaBelle had on the record the two had come to adore.

Resting her head on Yon’s chest, Rudi said, “You’re my friend, despite not loving all the same music or hating all the same wrongs. You’re my friend in spite of it.”

Touching Yon’s face, Rudi felt how hot it was.

She vaulted to her waist. “You’re sick. We’ve been through this. You’ve gotta tell me when you’re sick.”

“I’m okay.”

“We’ve gotta go home.”

“We’ve gotta stay.”

“Do you want to go back to the hospital?”

“I’m going back, no matter what. But not tonight. Tonight we’re watching Richard Hell.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s your birthday!”

“Each day is my birthday! Each day I come home to you, it’s my birthday. Each day I wake to you, it’s my birthday. I don’t need this.”

But Yon wouldn’t yield. Nor would he let her make a fuss over him. All she could do was hold onto him and hope for the best.

They waited for Hell to play. This went on.

#

Hell and his band came on stage. They performed “Blank Generation.” The song that helped two lonely people see that they weren’t alone.

With Hell singing for the jillionth time about the feelings that marked the decade of our youth, Yon wrote that if he had glanced down at the two, he might’ve caught onto how they were glancing up at him with their arms and bodies entwined. To them, he was singing the most beautiful love song ever written.

#

Yon had been right. He returned to the hospital.

Would he ever leave?

It was a question he asked on many days.

But we were determined to make these days happy. For Yon, that meant reading all the classics, old and new. I raided my grandparents’ library to make this happen.

On one raid, in a darkened nook, I came upon a tattered and slim hardcover book that startled me. An original edition of *The Metamorphosis*.

“It can’t be,” I said, snatching the book and opening its cover.

Despite my bad German, I could read the inscription.

*To my good friend Hermann,*

*Franz Kafka*

From the first I had heard Grandpa’s Kafka story, I was doubtless that there was truth in it. But I was also doubtless that this was well beneath it.

Now I wasn’t so doubtless.

#

I came to Yon’s room with a stack of books.

Rudi was next to him on the bed, below the picture on the wall of a boy who longed for what he couldn’t imagine. She was reading aloud from *The Collected Poems of E. E. Cummings*.

*i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)*

“I wish I could write those kinds of words to you,” Yon said. “Words that speak without spoken.”

“Yours speak plenty.”

I knocked on the door.

The two greeted me, with *The Master and Margarita* slipping from my grip.

Climbing off the bed with her book, Rudi sat in a chair beside it, in front of a bureau and the box of Reservoir pizza that was on top of it with a pair of Cokes. I put my books next to another stack on the bureau by the other side of Yon’s bed.

Rudi took out a slice and offered it to Yon.

He couldn’t eat it, no matter how much weight he was losing. He grimaced.

From the old stack, I lifted *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*. “You done with these?”

“Yeah.”

My head swung toward a copy of *Ficciones* under the pizza box. “What about the Borges?”

“Nah.”

“You’re telling me that you can get through Boccaccio and Potocki in a couple of days but can’t finish that puny one in a week?”

“I can’t stop reading it.”

“What’s so special about it?” Rudi asked.

Yon reached for the book. “I’ll show you.”

He kept reaching. So Rudi dropped her pizza and got it for him.

Halting in places, he flipped through the pages. He came to the story he wanted. “This is my favorite, ‘The Secret Miracle.’”

“That’s Grandpa’s favorite too,” I said. “He reads it on the anniversaries of his first wife’s death.”

Yon lifted his head toward Rudi. “It’s set in Prague.”

She took the book, eyeing the story’s first page. “What’s it about?”

“This playwright during World War II. The Nazis arrest him and sentence him to death, and he’s upset about it.”

“I should hope so.”

“But he’s not upset about dying. Well, he could be upset about that too. But what upsets him more is that he’ll never write his opus, his reason for being. So he begs God for a one-year reprieve so he can write his play. And, guess what, God grants him his wish.”

“So he doesn’t get shot?”

“Oh, he gets shot, right on time.”

“I don’t get it.”

“On the morning of his execution, the soldiers stand him against a wall and fire their guns. But the bullets freeze. The whole world freezes. The playwright freezes too. But he’s conscious through it all.”

Yon paused, stepping into the story. “What’s a fraction of a second for everyone becomes a year to him. He gets to write the play in his head. He doesn’t care that it won’t be famous or celebrated or known. Achieving greatness is enough. He dies happy. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Rudi squirmed in her seat. “I guess.”

Yon edged toward me. “She’s not much of a believer, no matter how much her nose is in that Bible.”

Rudi got upset. She skyrocketed to her feet. “How could I believe in a God that would let this happen?”

Not waiting for an answer, she scampered from the room. She might not have been aware that she was clutching the book.

Yon’s sight followed her out the door. “I have my reason for being. My greatness.”

#

I stayed with Yon late into the night.

We discussed the books he had read. He had so much enthusiasm for them that I felt guilty for taking them for granted. I felt guilty for taking so much for granted.

He fell asleep.

I took the old books from the bureau, sending the paper under them to the floor. It was in Yon’s handwriting, titled “angels wear spikes”:

*even punk girls blush*

*and love*

*harder than they punch*

*and they kiss you to tears*

*while you die in their arms*

I placed the page, along with the words that spoke without spoken, beneath the new stack of books and left.

Rudi was on the floor outside his door, gripping the Borges book. It was gripping her too.

“You okay?” I said.

She didn’t respond.

I sat next to her. Her eyes were on the last page of “The Secret Miracle.”

“Did you read it?” I asked.

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. He writes as if he were making authentic and objective observations.”

“No, it’s true. All of it.”

I said nothing. Years later, the truth in Borges’ works would overwhelm me, most of all in this story. But at that moment it was only a story.

Unsure of what to do, I took Rudi’s hand.

She cried, pressing her shoulder against mine.

I wanted to cry with her.

#

I woke before dawn.

Rising to my waist, I could make out voices and music from downstairs.

“It is heroic what you are doing for those people,” Grandma said in the kitchen, with an old German cabaret record playing in the den next to it.

“They’re the heroes,” Rudi countered. “Not a day passes that they don’t humble me.”

Hearing the two didn’t shock me, despite how early it was. They talked over the phone a lot and late into the night, and they got together as often as possible. They were making up for lost time.

“How are you holding up?” Grandma asked.

“I’m okay.”

“You forget that I raised your mother. You lie as badly as she did.”

Rudi was silent. But I could sense she was grappling. “What am I gonna do? What will I do when he’s gone?”

Grandma measured her words. “You will do what I did after my first husband passed. You will live. You will live big. You will live so big that when the two of you meet next, when you meet for good, he will be proud of you. You will be proud of you.”

She and Rudi must’ve hugged, because not another word passed between them till Grandma uttered, “You are yet grating the potatoes too fine.”

“*Sakra!”* Rudi cried.

“You speak Czech! Did your mother teach you?”

“My brother.”

“Oh, do not learn it from him. He tortures it as much as your grandfather does. I will teach you. I will teach you all its poetries. It is so pretty that people do not speak it. They sing it.”

“What’s that music you’re listening to?”

“Dora Gerson. Artur and I, we would drive to Berlin to hear her.”

“It’s wonderful.”

“You like it?”

“I’m gonna make a tape of it. Yon will love it too.”

“You keep surprising me, Rudi. It is such a joy at my age to be surprised.”

“What is she singing about?”

“Times that cannot return.”

The two danced. Their footsteps bounced off the linoleum floor onto the walls and the ceiling, in beat with Grandma’s voice singing with the music.

*Vorbei, vorbei, vorbei—*

*Ein letztes Wort,*

*Ein letzter Gruß—vorbei.*

Grandma’s voice broke. I wasn’t the only one who noticed it.

“What’s the matter, Grandma?” Rudi asked.

“They burned her,” she said, 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 early that morning. Rudi and Grandma were putting on their coats in the foyer.

I got to the landing. Grandma was dipping into her purse.

She took out a check and offered it to Rudi. “Your grandfather and I want to give this to you.”

Rudi wouldn’t take it. “We’re doing okay.”

“Why will you not let me spoil you?”

“You already spoil me, Grandma, with the one thing I need.”

#

Grandpa and I came to Yon’s room to pick Rudi up for lunch. *The Master and Margarita* was in his hands.

He pointed the book down the hall. “She’s visiting Cary.”

Grandpa tapped the cover. “How was it?”

“It says Bulgakov spent his last twelve years writing it.”

“He could not get it published while Stalin and his like were around. So he kept writing and writing it. That is why it is so unmatched.”

“He couldn’t’ve known that it would ever come out. What motivated him to keep going?”

“It must have been the woman that he based Margarita on.”

#

Cary was one of Rudi’s clients.

Grandpa and I came to the door of a tallish man with a thinnish beard. He had the same tubes coming in and out of his body that Yon had.

“I’ll be ready in a moment,” Rudi said.

She introduced us. Grandpa held out his hand to the man.

Cary didn’t take it. He turned to Rudi with apprehension. “Have you told him about me?”

Grandpa kept his hand out. “There is nothing that she could say that would make a difference.”

The two shook hands. Neither wanted to stop.

Grandpa tipped his head toward a box behind Cary. “Is that a domino set?”

“Yeah, unfortunately it’s a lost art. No one can play.”

“I love dominoes.”

#

An unexpectedness happened. Grandpa showed up at the hospital a lot.

He spent this with Cary and many AIDS patients. He became a surrogate grandfather to them, the most to those whose families had shunned them. Grandpa would be there whenever they needed a kind word, and he’d play board games with them and bring them gifts, as any grandpa would. More than that, he listened to them and never judged.

In return, Grandpa got a receptive audience for his detective stories. More than that, he got purpose. No longer did he spend his afternoons with a TV, and never did I hear him listen to Pergolesi anymore.

#

One patient was immune to Grandpa’s charms.

His name was Tony. He wouldn’t respond to anyone. He was already dead and waiting for his body to acknowledge it.

But Grandpa refused to give up. He would sit next to him and tell him his stories, all afternoon at times.

This didn’t work. So he told him the story that he seldom told, of Ana’s death, crying himself to sleep.

#

Grandpa woke from a crash.

It came from a tray that a nurse had dropped when she entered the room.

Grandpa hadn’t been the only one crying. Tears were streaming down Tony’s face.

The nurse wiggled her head at them. “How?”

“I suppose,” Grandpa said, “I suppose this terrible disease cannot rob you of what makes us all human.”

#

With the afternoon disappearing in Yon’s window, Rudi carried another box of Reservoir pizza into the room.

She brought him the pizza whenever she could. She brought it that day, disregarding his connection to a feeding tube, in addition to those that helped him breathe and get fluids. She brought it because it connected him to his old life and to being alive.

Yon’s focus was on a bureau and the simple metal menorah on top of it that the rabbi had left earlier.

“It’s gonna be Chanukah soon,” he said after she didn’t say a word. She didn’t say hello.

Rudi strode to the menorah. She lifted it. “Grandma’s been showing me how to make potato latkes. For the first time ever, we didn’t have to substitute ingredients.”

“I must admit, when I was a kid, I had serious Christmas envy. My friends, they had Santa Claus and reindeer and Christmas trees, and all we had were a bunch of candles. So the oil burned in the Temple for eight days?”

Yon pushed himself toward Rudi. “But I get it now. The miracle wasn’t the oil lasting eight days. It was that it lasted longer than what anyone could expect. That’s what we have to be thankful for. That’s what we always have to be thankful for, the exceeding of expectations.”

Rudi didn’t speak. She didn’t have to. Her glazed-over eyes said it all.

#

Despite how sick Yon was, he insisted on spending Chanukah at home.

From how his story had begun, he must’ve been curious as to what would happen during the replay of it.

I, too, was curious. But Yon made but one entry during the holiday.

*Chanukah was different this time, and I got a better* *gift. But Rudi’s holding back*.

#

“What does this mean?” I said to Rudi.

She groaned. “Why are you asking me?”

“What was it that you were holding back?”

“I can’t imagine what he’s talking about.”

“What was the gift you gave him?”

“I don’t remember. Not only the gift but the entire holiday.”

“What about the old man in the store at the beginning of the story, the one who slipped the envelope into your bag, with the wrapping made from gold stars?”

“That’s not how I remember it.”

I didn’t believe her. Not a word. But I continued with the story.

#

Yon returned to the hospital after Chanukah.

On his first day back, I staggered to his door and through it with a collection of tomes from an unabridged edition of Burton’s translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*. They were anchoring me to the floor.

Yon was sealing a bulging and blank envelope.

“You want me to mail that for you?” I asked.

“I’ve got it.”

I strained to lift the books. “This should keep you a while.”

The telephone rang.

Unloading my bundle onto the bed, I hurried to the phone. Next to it was an oversized book. A multilingual volume from the Talmud.

This is a set of teachings on the Torah, the Bible’s first five books. It applies what’s in them to solve unsolvable problems, such as “why does God allow suffering?”

The book confused me. It hadn’t come from my grandparents’ library. Nor had Yon requested it. It wasn’t the type of enjoyable reading he enjoyed.

I answered the phone.

“It’s me,” Rudi said. “I had to work late, and I missed the last bus. I hate to beg . . .”

“I’ll be right there.”

#

I stepped from the elevator into the hospital lobby.

Rabbi Orenstein was on a sofa in the distance, next to a middle-aged woman who had her dirty-blonde hair tied in a bun.

I headed toward them, wanting to say hello to the man.

“I told you that I would keep it a secret,” he said to the woman. “But I shouldn’t.”

“How’s he doing?” she asked, affecting disinterest.

“Better than I would’ve supposed. Rudi has—”

“—I don’t want to talk about her or hear about her.”

“But you should.”

Furrowing her brow, the woman sank it.

The rabbi sighed. “I’ll admit that she’s challenging to the eyes. But underneath that . . . I’ve been a rabbi for decades, I visit families caring for their loved ones all the time. But none as devoted as that young lady.”

The woman got madder. “She feels guilty.”

“Guilty?”

“She’s the one who did this to my son, by dragging him into the gutter with her.”

I wanted to rage at the woman. I wanted to tell her what an idiot she was, how wrong she was, how she couldn’t match Rudi’s height if she climbed the Empire State Building.

But this wasn’t what Rudi would’ve done or what she would’ve wanted me to do. Most of all, I didn’t have the guts to say it.

Instead, I ran outside.

This was when I raged.

#

Rudi was waiting for me on a street corner when I got to her office building in Florham Park.

I never understood how she got her job. She couldn’t have been qualified for it out of high school. But her personal experiences must’ve counted more. Those she had in excess. Also, not many could’ve wanted the job.

This required her to reach out to those with the disease, both at the office and in the hospital. She would spend her days lifting men who had lost hope, despite being in short supply herself. That could’ve been 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 she would often do nothing but hold their hands or hug them. She’d make them feel that they mattered, that someone loved them.

That evening, through the darkness, it was obvious that the months of doing her job, along with taking care of Yon, were weighing on Rudi. She was about to fall over.

Part of this came from what she was carrying. A few of those oversized Talmud volumes. Which she plopped onto her lap.

Driving off, I tapped the top book. “There was a time when women weren’t allowed to read these and recently.”

“Those times aren’t coming back.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Have you gotten any answers in them?”

She turned away. “But no matter how I try, I can’t stop searching.”

#

“*Pizzu do nemocnice přivezu*,” I said to Rudi, driving down South Orange Avenue.

She gave a go at repeating it but got stuck on the “ř,” a sound that can take English speakers months to get right, if ever.

“You sure you want to learn this?” I asked.

She heaved a sigh. “Under the ridiculous consonants and grammatical absurdity lies a chunk of me.”

Her whole life, Rudi had been a leaf blowing in the wind. She had uncovered the roots, but she was still figuring out how to plant them.

“You’ll need nine lives before you can speak Czech,” I quipped.

“It’s no harder than Hebrew. Or Aramaic.”

I peeked at the books in her lap. “Are you reading these in the original?”

“It’s hard enough getting at the truth, but when you’re not reading the right words . . .”

We got to Reservoir. Parking outside it so Rudi could get dinner for Yon and herself, I opened my door.

“Wait here,” she pleaded.

“Why?”

“Please.”

Confused, I closed my door. She slunk into the busy restaurant.

It became clear why she didn’t want me with her. The people working there were glowering at her. The most obvious of these were an old man in an ill-fitting suit by the register and the woman behind the counter, who dropped a pizza box onto it in front of Rudi.

It bounced multiple times, causing people in the restaurant to discover why.

Rudi ignored this. Fighting to project apathy, she paid for the pie with haste.

She left with more.

#

I dropped Rudi off at the hospital.

She stayed up late with Yon, so they could share their day of hopes and fears. Though they weren’t the only ones sharing.

“I can’t wait to meet her,” Rudi said into the phone from the chair next to Yon’s bed, reading a volume from the Talmud.

She listened to the voice, continuing to the next page and getting annoyed. “I *am* going to college. I want to be sure for what.”

Glancing at Yon and his state, she said, “I gotta run. I’ll call you next week.”

She hung up. “Mariana says hi. So do Owen, Jared, and Eliot. I had breakfast with them this morning. With Lis away, they’ve literally become the Three Musketeers*.* They go everywhere together.”

“Who could be responsible for that?” Yon asked.

Sneering, Rudi let the book down onto the other volumes. Taking out a slice of pizza, she brought it to Yon’s mouth.

Whisking himself from her, he knocked his water tray onto the floor. “I hate it. And what I hate worse is that I hate it. I hate this place. I hate this bed. I hate me.”

Rudi wouldn’t give up. She had become used to these outbursts. “You don’t want them to put back the feeding tube, do you?”

*Feeding tube*.

The mention of it was enough for Yon to turn back and gobble pie. The tube made him feel more machine than human.

He gobbled as much as he could. But the words weren’t enough to keep the pizza down. He had to clench his eyes shut and force his body to obey. Sweat poured down his face. His body shuddered.

The misery subsided. But it took its time.

Yon opened his eyes to Rudi. She was holding his hand, expressing greater pain than what he felt. She wanted to take his pain. She would’ve taken it all if she could.

He fought for what to say to her. He was flailing for it. “Why, why do you go through all this?”

“Through what?”

“You could’ve sent me a card. No one would’ve blamed you.”

Anger shot across Rudi’s face. Like what had been there when the two had it out. Releasing his hand, she dropped the pizza onto the box and stood. “We need to talk.”

With grudging assent, he wriggled his frame to his left, careful to keep his IV from coming out.

She joined him. She draped her arm around him, and he lowered his head onto her chest and took her hand with both of his. But she said nothing. She was waiting for inspiration.

“Let’s be clear,” she growled. “I didn’t do any of this for you. I did it all for me. I’m the most selfish person alive.”

He responded in caresses. He caressed her hand with his, and he caressed her arm with his cheek.

She waited for more inspiration, more than she had before. “I . . . I’ve become tired of my look. So what do you say I get some new clothes and a new haircut? I could be, I’m gonna be, I’m gonna be someone who won’t embarrass you.”

He didn’t respond at all. Or move.

“Did you hear me?”

“I fell in love with a punk rock girl. A girl who was nobody but her. Nothing less will do.”

Rudi buried her head in his shoulder, I suppose to stop herself from crying. Squeezing him with all her might, her voice rasped, “You, you’re my fairy tale.”

#

Grandpa and I stopped by Cary’s room so the two could finish the dominoes tournament they had begun days before.

Cary wasn’t there. Rudi was on his stripped bed, her arms around her legs and her apathy face full on.

“Where’s Cary?” Grandpa asked.

“Gone.”

“Gone?”

“He passed away last night.”

With his head down, Grandpa shuffled toward the bed. It took him ages to get there.

Sitting next to Rudi, he held her. “I have seen too many friends and loved ones go. I wish I had some potion to give you. But what I can say is, if these people, if they remain with you, they never pass.”

Rudi rested her head on Grandpa’s shoulder. “He’s the third this month. I can’t keep doing this.”

“If you do not, who will?”

#

Yon no longer had the energy to read. We took turns doing it for him.

Grandpa’s Kafka story had made him curious about *The* *Good Soldier Švejk*. He asked me to tell it to him.

“‘Do you know, Švejk, what is a march battalion?’” I read from Grandpa’s cherished copy one afternoon.

“‘I respectfully report, Lieutenant, sir, that a march battalion is what we call a *maršbaťák*, as a *marška* is a march company. We are forever shortening.’

“‘Well, Švejk,’ came the grave voice of the lieutenant, ‘since you enjoy such shortenings, I will inform you that you’ll be joining me in a *maršbaťák*. But don’t think that on the front you’ll get to partake in the kind of stupidities you have here. Does that bring you joy?’

“‘I respectfully report, Lieutenant, sir, that it brings me tremendous joy,’ answered the good soldier Švejk. ‘It’ll be something truly wonderful when the two of us fall on the battlefield for the emperor and his family.’”

Yon and I laughed. We couldn’t do otherwise.

Rudi popped her head into the room, her eyes on Nurse Templeton, who was checking Yon’s vital signs. Which she did without a mask or gloves. Or fear.

Petite and a few years older than us, the nurse had curly blonde hair that settled below her shoulders and pale blue eyes. She was among the few in the hospital who wanted to take care of Yon. She requested the assignment, becoming a personal nurse to him and other AIDS patients.

She walked past Rudi on her way out.

“Thank you, Kim,” Rudi said, meaning each word.

I handed Rudi a book: *Pohádky Boženy Němcové*.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Fairy tales. Grandpa would read them to me when I was a kid. They’re so famous over there that the woman who wrote them is synonymous with the genre.”

Rudi opened the book.

“It’s not exactly your taste,” I blurted out, “but it’ll help you with learning—”

“—It’s exactly her taste,” Yon interrupted, causing Rudi embarrassment.

She shook it off. “You up for company?”

Yon sat up. “Sure.”

My grandparents came into the room, with Grandma carrying a casserole dish. “You must be tired of hospital food and all that pizza. So we brought you some noodle kugel. Vegetarian, of course.”

She took it over to Yon. To make room for her on the bed, he shifted over.

His IV came out. Blood dripped down his arm. “Stay away from me!”

Grandpa ignored him. He grabbed a towel, using it to clean Yon’s arm. “Blood cannot frighten me.”

Grandma wasn’t frightened either. She sat next to Yon and fed him.

The phone rang. Rudi picked it up.

The voice on the other end dumbfounded her. She walked the receiver to the room’s corner, with her dumbfounding increasing.

“Mrs. Levy?” she whispered, at a volume so low that if I hadn’t seen her lips move, I wouldn’t have gotten what she had said.

The lone response was Rudi’s disappointment.

#

Rudi worked late so often that my picking her up became a daily ritual.

Part of this entailed getting a pizza at Reservoir and all the unpleasantness that went with it and never wavered.

On one gloomy night, a sheen rose over it.

Collecting the pizza at the counter, Rudi froze. Rabbi Orenstein was gazing at her from a few tables over. He gazed at her with pride and ardor. She was his own child.

This wiped away the apathy she was feigning. She battled to make it out the door.

#

Rudi and I got off the elevator at Yon’s floor with the pizza. We started down the corridor.

“Rudi?” Dr. Kleinsten called out.

His voice was ominous. So ominous was it that Rudi had to force herself to turn toward the man, who was forcing his feelings down his throat.

“What is it?” she asked.

“The pneumocystis has gotten worse. A lot worse. If, if you have any special plans . . .”

“Have you told . . .”

“Yes.”

“When? When will he . . .”

“I wouldn’t leave him tonight.”

Rudi meandered toward Yon’s room, with me following her.

The doctor took a few steps with us. “I have to say this. You gave that boy a year of life. You alone. That doesn’t happen every day.”

She said nothing. We approached Yon’s room and the coughing and labored breathing inside it.

I wanted to tell Rudi words too. I wanted to tell her how I loved her. I wanted to tell her how wonderful she was and how all the ugliness I had been through didn’t matter because without it there’d be no her. I wanted to tell her this so much. But the words wouldn’t come.

We got to the doorway.

Some words came to her. “I’ll call you tonight.”

She started inside the room. But she stopped and hugged me.

“I wish I could . . .” I stuttered, struggling to keep myself together, for her sake.

“You’re saying it.”

#

Yon wrote of how he took the news the doctor had given him.

He took it better than Rudi had. He had expected it, from his waking in the hospital after the beating he had taken. In a sense he was relieved. His suffering would end.

The only pain after he died would be Rudi’s. All day he searched for the means to ease it.

But none came.

#

Rudi made it into Yon’s room.

He was turning a page in the Borges book. It took him lifetimes.

Hearing her footsteps, he hid the book under the covers. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to hide it. Or be sorry for it.”

“I don’t want to upset you.”

“You can’t.”

“I bet I can.”

“How?”

“I talked to Him today.”

“Him?”

“I believed that I had all that I’d wanted. I really did. But today I realized I didn’t. So I asked Him.”

“Asked Him what?”

“I asked Him . . . I asked Him if I could have you.”

“You have me.”

“I mean later.”

Rudi couldn’t speak. Or breathe. She gaped at him until she could do both. “What did He say?”

“He hasn’t gotten back to me yet.”

“He must be busy.”

“Yeah, and there was that, there was that I cursed Him pretty badly a while back.”

“He must be forgiving about that.”

“I hope so.”

Rudi sought another round of inspiration. It took her lifetimes.

She turned toward the door. “I need to go somewhere. But you’ve gotta promise me that you won’t go anywhere.”

“Go?”

“Promise me.”

He considered what she had asked. For a while he did. “I . . . I love you.”

She ran from the room. “I love you too!”

“Where you going?”

“I’ll tell you tomorrow!”

Yon hoped she was right. He hoped all night.

#

Finishing the last of Yon’s pages that night, I felt tears coming down my face. I couldn’t prevent them any further.

With both my hands, I wiped them away, discerning that the street people had finished showering and must’ve had for some time. Though the floor was wet with their footprints. It sparkled from them.

“There’s one night left,” I said to Rudi, struggling to keep myself together, for her sake.

“Call me tomorrow, but a few hours later than normal. There’s a dinner after service.”

We hung up, and I left the bathroom. I was surprised that the women’s shower was running in the room across the way.

“You owe me,” came Josh’s voice from inside it.

“Not like this,” Wendy bawled with fear overwhelming her voice.

“I could throw you out,” Josh said, his tone yielding but in control. “I could throw you out for just about any reason. Any at all.”

Silence followed. Too much of it.

Furious, I wanted to bang on the door and scream at him. I raised my hand to do this.

But the weaker part of me was stronger, despite the so-called “moral code” inside me.

So I took the path of ease, the path of cowardice. I slithered down the hall, convincing myself that there was nothing I could do for her.

With this came hate. It was more at myself than at Josh.

the eighth night

With Wednesday off, I expected an extended day of introspection and self-flagellation. With greater of the latter.

I did get the extended day. But it was not what I had expected, and it was of neither introspection nor self-flagellation.

It began with my stumbling into the courtyard’s murk that morning. Nichelle was screaming at a handful of people in a booth. Her fists were shaking. “He was in the bathroom with her!”

Mateo’s head tilted in confusion. “You were there with them?”

“Wendy was taking a shower after getting back from work. And Zara was waiting for her at the table by the office so she could ask her some questions about working at Amazon. Josh came out and ordered Zara to bed, and he walked into the women’s room like it was nothing. He locked the door behind himself! Zara said that Wendy was crying when she returned.”

“But Zara doesn’t know what happened in the bathroom, does she?”

Nichelle didn’t answer.

“What’s going on?” I asked her.

“Wendy left in the middle of the night, with all her stuff. Because of Josh.”

“You can’t be sure of that,” Mateo shot back.

“I can. You don’t see how he slobbers over us from our door each night.”

“But—”

“—I’m calling the cops.”

She took out her phone.

Mateo slapped the table. “What will you do when they throw you out? Have you asked yourself that and what’ll happen to your kids?”

Nichelle hesitated.

“Tell it to Dan,” Mitchell implored her. “Then it’s his responsibility. Then you can’t get into trouble.”

Instead, she dialed a number. She was fearless. It reminded me of someone other.

“I was outside the women’s bathroom last night,” came my voice. Or a voice that sounded like mine. Though it was more like that “someone other.” My perfected me. “Josh was threatening her . . . assaulting her. I was also around when he stole the steaks and ribs.”

Mateo roared at me, with his hands and body. “Are you willing to file a police report? You won’t be able to take it back!”

I hesitated, in the same way that Nichelle had. But I wasn’t fearless. I wasn’t sure what words would come out, if any. “I’ll file it.”

Nichelle leaned toward me. “You sure?” Her eyes were giving me an out.

“I’m sure.”

She called the police. Behind her Mateo was glaring at me.

#

Nichelle and I waited outside the shelter gates. We kept waiting.

The murk had gone, but there was no sun. It was hiding behind 7th Street.

I supposed my reticence would return and heighten when the consequences of what would happen became clearer and nearer. But I felt better, about me.

A police car came. Moving like behind a funeral procession, it pulled up beside us. A burly, bald cop climbed from the vehicle and took my report.

He grunted. “I need to speak to the person in charge.”

Nichelle pointed through the gates, toward the office. “Dan, he’s the assistant director.”

The policeman plodded inside. Nichelle and I went back to waiting.

We didn’t wait much.

Nichelle jumped up on his approach. “Well?”

The policeman shook his head at her. “This Josh has every right to be in the bathroom with the girl.”

“She’s not a girl. She’s over thirty!”

“He has the right to be in there.”

“In the women’s room while she showered?”

“If that’s where he has to carry out his duties. You two should be ashamed. This Josh is a good guy. He’s got a family. He’s a vet. Dan was telling me how he volunteers in the community. He’s helping you lowlifes, and this is how you thank him.”

“He was threatening her . . . assaulting her. We have a witness.”

The policeman sneered at me. “What he heard is not enough. It’s hearsay.”

“That’s not what ‘hearsay’ means,” I said, regretting the words before they made it out of my mouth.

He sneered at me more than before. “She’ll have to file the complaint herself.”

Nichelle thrashed about. “She’s gone!”

“So am I.”

“What about the food he stole from us?”

“Dan says that there’s no record of steaks or ribs delivered in the past week.”

“Because Josh was in charge that night!”

“I bet you’re lying about that too.”

The policeman dove into his car and went off. He went a lot faster than he had come.

*To the average person, we’re garbage, no better than cons*.

Mateo’s words rumbled below my feet, with Nichelle and I facing each other with a glumness that was trampling us.

We slipped through the shelter gates. Mateo was scowling at me, with his arms crossed. “Dan wants to see you both in the office. You first.”

“Don’t you have to be at work?” I asked.

“You should’ve asked yourself that.”

#

I meandered into the office. I did so not glum. I couldn’t figure out why.

Dan had stuffed himself behind the desk, next to an underling who was taking notes. He told me to take a seat.

“You have to leave,” he said the moment I had sat. “You have to leave now. You broke so many rules that I haven’t a clue where to begin. And I warn you, repeat any of this outside the shelter, and we’ll sue.”

“Good luck serving the papers.”

“You should’ve let us handle it.”

I rose in my chair. I wasn’t the Empire State Building, but I no longer lacked elevation. “You’ve turned blind eyes, all of you, to what’s going on here. If it was only thievery, some could excuse you for that. But not for the abuse of women without family or friends or protection. Worse than that, you’ve created an environment that let it happen. You’ve let a monster reign to prey.”

“That’s a lie!” he barked, grabbing the phone on his desk. “I should file charges against you!”

“For what?”

His mind shot into overdrive. “Perjury!”

This time I kept my mouth shut. I recognized how doing otherwise would’ve accomplished less than what I already hadn’t.

I also ceased resisting Mateo’s advice. Getting to my feet, I smiled and waved.

#

It didn’t take many minutes to pack what I had brought with me months earlier, into the same grimy blue backpack I’d also brought.

I had accumulated other stuff since coming to the shelter, but I didn’t take it, recalling the nifty Meister Eckhart saying my grandpa had told me when I left for my first job after college.

*The more we have, the less we own.*

#

With my backpack across my shoulders, I stepped into the bathroom, to the mirrored wall behind the sinks.

The image projecting off it was as gray and as gaunt as ever. But it wasn’t rotting.

I hadn’t fixed the world or my piece of it, but the pursuit of it had meaning. The same meaning Rudi had gotten from her pursuit of it, what she got from it to that day. It could’ve been what has kept many of us Jews pursuing it, despite how at times we would make a mess of it.

Above all this, it might’ve been why I wasn’t glum and why the waves of darkness and demons no longer scared me as much and why I no longer felt like a ghost.

#

I left the dorm. Nichelle was waiting for me at the shelter gates. She was eluding me too.

Patrick slid beside me. “Dan didn’t kick her out. He believes that you duped her into it.”

I started toward her, picking up speed as I closed in.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

“You’re a hero,” I said, with joy that wouldn’t have been possible eight days earlier. “You risked more than I ever could.”

We hugged.

“Josh might get away with this now,” she whispered, “but they won’t bury it ever. I promise you that. He will never be alone with another woman or girl here. He’ll never have the chance. We’re all gonna be watching him.”

*Who watches the watchers?*

Juvenal had to wait a pair of millennia to get an answer to his question, but he got one. The one that could stop all the Joshes.

“Congratulations,” Mateo groaned.

Nichelle and I broke our hug.

Mateo was masking his “I told you so” face, but he wasn’t masking it much. “You got thrown out and for nothing.”

“It wasn’t for nothing. I satisfied my moral code.”

“Your what?”

“I remember what Ben Gazzara told us on the set,” Patrick interjected from behind us.

“What was that?” I asked.

“He said, ‘Evil can only prevail when good men do nothing.’”

“It was Edmund Burke who said that.”

“You sure? He could’ve picked it up from Benny.”

“He could’ve.”

The conversation’s turn chafed Mateo. He was ready to bite my head. “The truth’s closer to what your Uncle Lenny sang. ‘*Everybody knows the war is over. Everybody knows the good guys lost*.’”

“Everybody but me.”

“These ‘good men’ you speak of must’ve been in short supply during the Holocaust. And in Nanking. And after that Prague Spring of yours. And Tiananmen Square. And they must’ve gone extinct when the Khmer Rouge murdered millions of their own people in a country the size of Missouri and no one cared.”

“The Dead Kennedys cared.”

Mateo opened his mouth. But the only words that would come out were, “Now what will you do?”

“I’m gonna give Palm Springs a try. It’s warmer.”

“And gayer.”

“I could use some gaiety. It is the season, after all.”

“What about Amoun?”

“He’ll have to get himself another Hebrew.”

“In Victorville?”

We both laughed. We embraced too. I thanked him for getting me a job and for being my friend.

Without looking back and with owning more than I ever had, I swaggered through the gates and down the alley. In recent years, “being woke” had become a slur. But it wasn’t to me. I reveled in it. I was Christopher Plummer crossing the Alps.

“Enjoy the streets, loser,” Josh called out.

As with Dan, I wasn’t going to respond. It wouldn’t have made a difference. But I came to a stop. “Enjoy prison, winner.”

“I’m not going to prison.”

“Not today and not tomorrow. But one day.”

“How can you be certain?”

“I have faith.”

#

The shelter kicking me out wasn’t all bad. I was free to spend money.

At my bank, I took a hundred dollars from the ATM. I bought a debit card at Walgreens, using it to buy a train ticket to Palm Springs over the phone.

However, the one train didn’t leave until 4:30 the following morning. So I had *mucho tiempo*.

Having nothing better to do and no place better to do it, I made my way toward D Street and the Amtrak station at the end of town.

This place was notorious. Multiple people had told me that those who would hang out there would roll others, often after drugging them. But this was at night. During the day it was in a border region of nice. There was a field beside the pretty station, with trees and canyons behind them.

I sat on the grass in the near warmth and took them in.

#

With the sun falling, I jumped to my feet, remembering that I hadn’t gotten Yon’s last letter.

I hurried toward the shelter. But I stopped with as much hurry. Fearing that the letter would “go missing” if I went back and asked Josh for it, I made a call instead.

“I heard you got kicked out,” Gerry said.

“Yup.”

“The tentacles of the CIA reach far and wide.”

“You can say that again.”

“The tent—”

“—How’s that kleptomania of yours?”

#

Gerry handed me Yon’s letter by Starbucks.

I thanked him and walked off.

“Give my best to Rudi,” he said.

I froze, positive that I had misheard.

He made it clear that I hadn’t. “Just don’t tell her that it came from me. I told her that I was visiting relatives.”

I whipped myself toward him. “You know her?”

“She’s so sad and lonely on Chanukah, in spite of all the people in our house and at work. She misses you. She misses many. Last year she was desperate enough to . . .”

“The letters from Yon, they were from you?”

“I was fixing some leaky pipes in the basement when I came upon boxes. They were wet, so I took out the contents. Yon’s journal was among them.

“I wanted to make Rudi happy this holiday, as happy as she’s made me. I could only do this through you.”

“How did you find me?”

“You put your address on the I-9 that you filled out for your job. The security on these government servers, it’s woeful. But I needn’t tell you that. Nor will I need to tell it to Josh after I ruin his life. It’s nothing like the security on the bank sites I would pwn before my confinement.”

Gerry’s shoulders drooped. “I can’t understand why Rudi took me in after I got out. Maybe she saw a pinch of good. Maybe one day I will too.”

#

I returned to the train station, processing all Gerry had told me.

In such a haze was I that I didn’t realize that the sun had gone until I’d gotten back. Which brought a darkness that would come in darker ways.

The temperature fell with the light. The winds rose. With the station closed, I had to sit on a bench by the tracks. Never had I been so cold. It was colder than some nights I had spent in Eastern Europe when the temperature was dozens of degrees below zero, no matter what measuring system you used.

With the chill came the zombies. They came from the shadows. These were homeless people, the same as me and others I’ve met. But they weren’t the same. Lacking semblances of being, they roamed the grounds in a fog, making utterances only they could gather while wielding crowbars that they swung through the air against horrors only they could see.

They should’ve frightened me. But my disease had robbed me of fright from physical harm. This has gotten me through rough spots over the years, as all predators, regardless of how many legs they have, feed off fright and need it to attack. But my disease couldn’t rob me of sorrow. I felt it plenty, for all of us.

#

Time dragged its legs that night. Checking it on my phone dragged them further.

To break the monotony, I went into the 7-Eleven across the street to buy hot chocolate and snacks. I also tallied the freight cars that would pass at intervals close to clocklike. I listened, too, to *A Love Supreme* on my phone.

But time only stretched.

#

The monotony came to an end in the guise of a man standing by the tracks down from me.

He was different from the others that night. He was no zombie. He had no crowbar and was in no fog.

Turning in my direction, he had emptiness in his eyes. The same that has been in mine. But his was crueler.

This did scare me. I was scared of becoming him, because I could tell what he wanted to do.

Another freight train approached.

The man returned forward. He counted down aloud. The entire desert could hear him. “10 . . . 9 . . . 8 . . .”

The train bore down on us.

Getting to zero, the man ran across the tracks. He ran over the train’s frantic horn. It called out to him. It pleaded with him and begged.

Reaching the other side, he kept running. He ran into the night and through the nothingness.

He didn’t turn back.

#

Earlier, it had taken the Victorville Police an hour to send one squad car to the shelter. But it didn’t take a minute for three to speed into the station’s lot.

Being I was the one person around, it was easy for them to assume that I had been the one running across the tracks. They weren’t pleased.

A man proceeded toward me with wariness. It increased with each step.

Though his demeanor changed, through the checking of my explanation and my train ticket (and my record).

He jabbed his thumb at the tracks. “Whoever it was put a real panic into the train’s driver.”

“I bet,” I said.

“You have no idea why he was playing chicken with the train?”

“It wasn’t chicken. It was Russian roulette.”

Not responding to this, the cop went back to the others. So their trip wouldn’t be a waste, they chased the zombies through the grounds. This went on into the night. I had a seat to my own Keystone Kops picture, a bad one, with the police seeking to herd and capture those who were on the other side of either.

#

The chase wound down.

I remembered that I had forgotten about Rudi. I took out Yon’s letter and my phone and rang her. “Sorry to call you so late.”

“Are you all right?”

“Why do you ask?”

“What’s that commotion?”

“Just some kids.”

I opened the envelope and pulled out the pages. But I paused. “What about you? Are you okay? I mean really okay?”

“I’m really okay. I am now.”

#

The morning shone into Yon’s room through the shades. They couldn’t hold it back. Nothing could.

This didn’t stop Yon from drowsing off. He had been drifting into and out of consciousness since Rudi had left the night before. With each one he had drifted out of, he doubted more whether he would drift back into another.

“Hey,” Rudi’s voice chimed.

This was loud enough to wake him and push him toward her. He came close to falling from the bed.

Her tired but joyful face was poking through the doorway. “Shut your eyes.”

“They were.”

“Shut them more.”

“What’s going on?”

“Just do it.”

He clicked his tongue but obeyed.

“You can open them,” she said, waltzing into the room with a paper shopping bag.

Disbelief fell over Yon, from what Rudi was carrying in her other hand: the train from the white wedding gown she was wearing.

Smirking, Rudi dropped the bag. She showed off the gown, releasing the train. It didn’t fit in the room.

He rubbed his eyes. “You’re wearing a dress.”

She tossed her hands onto her hips and snarled at him. “It’s a one-time event. So enjoy it while it lasts.”

The gown was familiar to Yon. “It’s the one my . . .”

Mrs. Levy stepped through the doorway, lifting her feet over the train into the room.

The woman would later tell me and others how shocked she had been at the state of her son. But she said that the bigger shock was how happy he was, happier than she could remember.

Concluding, at that instant, that there could be but one reason for her son’s all-too-obvious contradiction, Mrs. Levy took this person’s hand. “Hello, Yon.”

He shook his head. Many times he shook it, unable to believe what his mind was telling him.

“Mom?” he cried, opening his arms.

She ran to her son and hugged him. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m the one who’s sorry.”

“I missed you.”

“I . . . how did this . . .”

The woman let go of Yon, so she could turn to Rudi. “You were right about her, we do have a lot in common. Hopefully, she’ll outgrow it.”

“How did this happen?” he said. The words gave him energy.

“Shall we tell him?” his mother asked Rudi.

#

A taxi drove off, exposing Rudi and the shopping bag outside the white manor in Newstead. The house that had so frightened her the first she was there.

It frightened her the same. But she had no hesitation in approaching it. She marched to the door. Taking a gaping breath, she rang the bell and prayed. She prayed for one wish.

*The courage to change the things I can.*

*Just for this day.*

The door slid back. Elizabeth took a glance at Rudi, shifting her eyes away.

Rudi exhaled. “Hi.”

The woman shifted her eyes farther. “Hello.”

“Is Mrs. Levy home?”

“I’m sorry.”

The air rushed from Rudi. But the woman added, “I’m afraid she won’t talk to you.”

“Please,” Rudi whispered, “Yon’s dying. He’s dying right now.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Please.”

Elizabeth grappled over what to do.

“All right,” she said. “I’ll try.”

“Thank you so much.”

“I’m not promising.”

Elizabeth scurried off, leaving the door open.

Sounds followed. The muffled sounds of two women talking. They got louder and more animated until there was no muffling at all.

“How dare you talk to me like that!” Mrs. Levy hollered.

“Somebody has to!” Elizabeth hollered back.

“Tell her to go away!”

“You tell her!”

The conversation ended. Another sound started. Footsteps. They stomped toward Rudi, followed by Mrs. Levy. She appeared in the doorway with a scowl. “What do you want?”

Rudi exhaled another time. “Hi.”

“What-do-you-want?”

“Yon’s very sick.”

“As if I weren’t aware of this. Who do you think has been paying his medical bills, not to mention for that nest of yours?”

The latter revelation stunned Rudi, but she pretended it hadn’t. “Why won’t you visit him?”

“He’s made his bed, *literally*.”

Enraged, Rudi pitched her fists. “I’d tell you how he got it if it mattered. But it doesn’t. The disease doesn’t care who, why, or how. People like you care!”

“What do you want from me, money?”

“That’s all you rich people live for: money, making it and spending it and lording it over others. If you ever left this palace, you’d discover there’s a whole world out there!”

Rudi now wasn’t angry alone. Mrs. Levy’s face turned a shade darker than red. She became another someone. Someone Rudi found menacing.

This someone lurched toward her with her own fists pitched, backing Rudi up for the first since Deke had died.

“You rich people?” the woman howled with a gruff accent. One years removed from her normal one. “You can’t be stupid enough to believe that I was born in this, this palace. They didn’t allow Jews in this neighborhood when I was your age.”

The woman’s nostrils blazed. “You want the whole world to cry for you because of how rough you’ve had it. You want them to cry you a sea. Well, I’m from Flatbush, the worst part of Flatbush. Growing up, we had no heat, no hot water. Half the time we ate pickles! So don’t you lecture me, you . . .”

Mrs. Levy didn’t finish. Slinging herself around, she stormed into her house. She was about to slam the door.

“This is your last chance!” Rudi yelled.

The woman froze, her hand gripping the wood. Her knuckles were whiter than snow.

Rudi didn’t budge either. “This is your last chance to say goodbye, your last chance to make it right. There won’t be another. Please, Mrs. Levy, hate me all you want, but don’t hate Yon. He doesn’t deserve it.”

Mrs. Levy didn’t react. Rudi couldn’t say whether she ever would.

It took eons, but the woman’s head started around. It reached Rudi. “Let me get my coat.”

“There’s a favor I need to ask.”

#

Mrs. Levy zoomed into her house, with Rudi stopping in the doorway.

“You’re not wearing my dress,” the woman said, shaking her entire body in a constant motion. The idea of Rudi marrying her son was horrid enough but that she wanted to do so in her wedding gown was too much.

“Mrs. Levy . . .”

The woman thrust herself at Rudi. Surprised by her desperation, she paused. For a full stop she did. “Don’t you see how outrageous this is?”

Rudi lowered her eyes. “I do. You have every reason to say no. I would.”

The woman thrust herself back around. But she didn’t go anywhere. “All right, you can wear the dress. But I won’t be part of this, this so-called wedding. I will say goodbye to my son and leave.”

Rudi assented, without saying a word.

Mrs. Levy didn’t dawdle. She hiked up the winding and gleaming wooden staircase. “You know the way.”

Rudi followed.

Elizabeth was staring at them from below, in bewilderment.

#

Mrs. Levy sat on the edge of her king-size canopy bed, her arms and legs crossed. She projected disinterest at Rudi’s putting on the wedding dress.

But her disinterest waned. How the gown fit Rudi recalled to the woman the day she had worn it.

This got her off the bed and to a dresser. From it she grabbed a box of needles.

Kneeling beside Rudi, she shortened the sleeves, becoming lost. She got so lost that she became as stationary as she had been outside her house.

Rudi turned to her. “You okay?”

The woman returned to the dress. “On my first date with Yon’s father, he took me to *The Sound of Music* on Broadway. He wasn’t paying much attention to it. Or to me. It wasn’t exactly love at first sight.”

“I know how that is.”

“So you can imagine my surprise after we got engaged when he told me that he wanted me to have the same dress Mary Martin wore on our first date.”

“I never miss the movie when it comes on TV. I’ve never told anyone that, including Yon.”

Mrs. Levy stood. She led Rudi to a full-length mirror in the room’s corner, where Rudi blushed at her image.

This must’ve melted whatever coolness the woman had left, because she cooed, “You’re so beautiful.”

Rudi blushed further. “Nah.”

“Don’t argue with your mother-in-law.”

The last word stunned Rudi. She couldn’t suppress it as she gazed at the woman in the mirror.

The woman met her gaze. “Not until after the honeymoon. That’s how it was with my mother-in-law. She was all peaches and cream until after the honeymoon.”

Rudi sagged. “I guess I won’t have to worry about that.”

“What do you mean?”

Turning from the mirror, Rudi grasped Mrs. Levy. She teared. “There’s not gonna be a honeymoon.”

At a loss as to what to do, the woman grasped her back. “Please don’t cry, you’ll ruin your makeup.”

“I can’t help it.”

“Oh, well, you can’t ruin it more than it is.”

Both women laughed.

Breaking their embrace, they took each other’s hands.

Mrs. Levy lobbed her head toward the hallway. “We better hurry, we’ve got a wedding to go to.”

#

Rudi tossed her hands onto her hips. She stepped toward Yon with another of her snarls. “So, are you gonna marry me or what?”

He gushed. “You call that a proposal?”

“It’s the best you’re gonna get.”

“I remember someone telling me that marriage is an outdated and sexist—”

“—You’re making me mad now.”

“We’d need a . . .”

Rabbi Orenstein came into the room. He had swallowed a whole flock of canaries.

He took a juice glass from behind his back. “I believe that’s my cue.”

“We need to get you a tux,” Mrs. Levy said to Yon.

“A tux?”

“And I’ll have to get my hands on a photographer.”

“And guests will be coming soon,” Rudi interjected.

Yon’s jaw fell. “Guests?”

“What about music?” Mrs. Levy asked Rudi.

With giddiness, Rudi took her portable stereo from the shopping bag. She slapped it onto the bureau next to Yon and hit play. “Moonlight Serenade” filled the room.

Now Mrs. Levy’s jaw fell. “Glenn Miller?”

With her giddiness higher, Rudi sat on the bed next to Yon. Taking his arm, she told the woman that she would forever call her mother, “It’s our song.”

“Kids today.”

#

Wearing an itchy suit that the moths in my closet were more familiar with than I was, I hustled into Yon’s room with a cardboard box, with the rabbi leaving so he could complete his rounds before the ceremony.

Rudi’s appearance sent me teetering, along with the box.

She vaulted toward me and pirouetted.

I did a triple-take. “Who are you? And what have you done with my sister?”

Slapping my arm, she sent me toward the floor for a second time, along with the box.

But she caught me. She threw her arm around me. “You’re gonna have to give me away, big brother.”

“I’m not sure Jews do that,” I said, laughing at what she had called me. She calls me that to this day, despite us never learning who had been born first.

“We’ll make our own rules.”

I opened the box, revealing a three-tiered wedding cake. On top of it stood painted wooden figurines of a bride and a groom, with the bride’s hair black and spiked. “Grandma was up all night making this.”

“Where are they?”

“They left me off in front. But I should tell you . . .”

“Is this what I got dressed up for?” Butch squawked in the corridor.

He strutted into the room in a Black Flag T-shirt, with a green tie around his neck.

Rudi hugged him. But she got annoyed at the record in his hand. “What’s that?”

“A gift.”

“I told you, no gifts.”

“It’s not for you.”

Butch trotted to Yon, handing him *Live Yardbirds: Featuring Jimmy Page*.

It startled Yon. “I’ve never heard of this.”

“It was only out for a week. It includes some early Zeppelin songs.”

“Wow.”

“Now you have some music to listen to when you get home.”

Battling his emotions, Yon took Butch’s hand, with both of his. “Now I have some music to listen to.”

#

With slow and careful steps, Grandma led into the room a dazed Grandpa, who was somewhere but not there.

Rudi and her dress sent Grandma to an abrupt halt. She cast her arms above. “My sweet little girl!”

“No one has ever called me that,” Rudi quipped.

“You better get used to it, because I will be saying it all the time, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

Rudi ran into her snatches, with the two kissing each other’s cheeks and Grandma choking on her words. “You have none of my DNA, but you have all of my soul.”

Neither wanted to let go. But they did.

Rudi drifted to Grandpa and his daze.

“*Už jsme na Lucerně?”* he asked, giving away his location: the dance hall in Prague he had frequented as a young man.

“I am afraid that this is not one of his good days,” Grandma said.

Rudi didn’t mind. She took him into her arms. “Thank you, Grandpa, for giving me this day.”

Squeezing him tighter, she murmured, “*Mám tě strašně moc ráda*,” telling him in the language he loved how much she loved him.

#

Tony wheeled himself into the room.

This Tony was different from the one earlier. Since his moment with Grandpa, never was he without a smile. But never was it as bold as that day.

He stopped by Yon. He seized his hand. “I guess this means you’re off the market.”

Yon laughed. “It appears so.”

“The best usually are.”

#

Mrs. Levy was able to hire a photographer. He sprinted into the room after the tailor, who fit Yon into a tuxedo under the direction of Mrs. Levy.

Nurse Templeton came next, on her day off, bringing more men that Rudi had helped raise, there to return the favor.

The Crisses came too.

Following them was the rabbi. “We have another guest.”

Into the room snuck Mr. Agnellino with a stack of pizzas.

Rudi stammered to them with alarm. “We didn’t order pizzas.”

“These are on me,” Mr. Agnellino said.

“I don’t get it.”

The man dropped the boxes onto a dresser. “For months you have come into my restaurant. You come each day and buy a pizza from me, even though me and all of us there are mean to you. And none of us can figure out why. Why is it that she cannot get the message, this awful person everyone speaks so terribly about?”

Rudi’s eyes darted away.

Mr. Agnellino’s followed them. “Then the other day, Rabbi Orenstein, God bless him, he tells me who the pizzas are for. He also tells me all the wonderful things you have been doing for this poor . . . and I have never been so ashamed.”

Rudi wouldn’t let him stay this way. “Forget it.”

“I will not forget it. You are a saint.”

“I’m not.”

“Listen to me, this is a subject that I have some knowledge about. You are a saint. They come in all shapes and sizes . . . and hairstyles.”

Rudi gave it her all not to smirk, but it came out.

Mr. Agnellino raised his hand, over both his shoulder and his head. “From this day on, for as long as I own that restaurant, for as long as my children and grandchildren own it, we will treat you as a member of the family when you step inside. This is a promise.”

She hugged him. He hugged her back.

“You’re staying for the wedding, aren’t you?” she asked.

He agreed.

“So, are we ready?” the rabbi asked.

Rudi couldn’t answer.

Mariana had charged into the room. She was wearing a blue gown, alongside a woman in a red one, who had auburn hair and glasses and the manner of someone about to meet her in-laws for the first time.

Mariana screamed her head off, flapping her hands and shimmying all over. Rudi did the same. They flew into each other.

“I was sure you wouldn’t make it,” Rudi cried.

Mariana’s friend crossed her arms. “She drove so fast that I don’t remember crossing Delaware.”

“It’s easy to miss,” Mariana said.

#

In a place and time far from that day, I would reminisce about this moment and others with Mariana.

She never did become a playwright. After college, she moved to Hollywood to become a screenwriter.

All kinds of years later, ones that included all-night calls with Rudi, she achieved success, becoming known for her striking female characters.

I ran into her on Sunset Boulevard. Amid the heat and smog, she said, “I write about larger-than-life people. But Rudi is the only one I’ve met. There’s probably some of her in all the ones I’ve created. More than some.”

#

Rudi and Mariana broke their hug.

Mariana beamed at the woman next to her. “This is Sandra.”

Rudi took Sandra’s hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you. Thank you for coming to my wedding, with no notice.”

“Thank you for inviting me. This is so romantic, and you look so totally awesome.”

The rabbi came behind Rudi. “I hate to be a spoiler, but I need to be leaving soon.”

“All right. Let’s get this on.”

“Wait for us!” shouted a boy down the corridor, along with his footsteps and others.

Eliot ran into the room. He was a senior and wasn’t so geeky. His suit, shirt, and tie came close to matching. He was on the way toward the brash man he would become, who’d go to Stanford before becoming an engineer and a high-tech entrepreneur in Silicon Valley.

Rudi embraced him. “My favorite Quincy Punk!”

Owen came next, in a suit that made mine appear comfortable.

With the help of his friends, he had graduated from high school. He was working at a local auto repair shop. Later on, with an investment from Eliot, he would run a whole chain called Good Karma, whose motto was, “We treat our customers like friends. Because they are.”

Rudi jumped into his arms, the arms of a man who, from somewhere past the bleacher seats, she had come to love. 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 missionary group with the woman he had run into on his ascent from the bottom, he would spend his career traveling the world, giving care and comfort to anyone in need, making the most from the second chance he got.

Rudi held him the longest. It must’ve been because he, beyond the rest of us, could relate to all the conflicting feelings she must’ve been having, of both happiness and doubt as to whether she deserved any of it.

Stopping herself from crying, Rudi released her arms from Jared. She turned toward the rabbi. “We’re ready.”

The man blinked at the photographer’s flash. “Where do I start? I’ve never done a wedding like this. We have no *ketubah* or *chuppah*. We have no wine. What we do have are two young people who love each other. I can more than attest to it. So hopefully God will give us a pass on the rest.

“Rudi, you’re supposed to circle the groom seven times. But under the circumstances, why don’t you sit next to him?”

Mrs. Levy, who was beside Yon on the bed, got up. Rudi took her place.

We crowded around them. The rabbi gave Yon a kippah. He struggled to put it on.

The rabbi returned to Rudi. “You *are* Jewish? I’ve presumed by your last name and your interest in the Talmud and Hebrew and . . .”

She didn’t respond. She couldn’t. In spite of all the reading she had done and all the cooking and Sabbaths she’d experienced and all Jewish law told her, she couldn’t say what she was. That leaf blowing in the wind had kept blowing.

The rabbi scanned the room. “I realize that this is all rather un—”

“—She’s Jewish,” Mrs. Levy interrupted, placing her hand on Rudi’s shoulder.

Rudi placed her hand on the woman’s.

The rabbi remained hesitant.

“She is our granddaughter,” Grandma called out, leading the rabbi to tilt toward her and Grandpa. “She is as Jewish as we are.”

“Thank you, Grandma,” Rudi said, with a voice rooted in love. “That was better than the cake.”

“Who has the rings?” the rabbi asked next.

The question stunned Rudi. Its answer came in silence.

“Someone does have the rings?”

Rudi slumped over. “We don’t have any.”

Mrs. Levy grabbed her wedding ring. “Oh, yes, you do. You have one.”

The woman took off the ring. She offered it to Yon.

He wouldn’t take it. “I can’t let you do that, Mom.”

“Your father would’ve wanted you to have it. He would’ve been so proud of you. I’m proud of you. This is our wedding gift to you.”

Yon shook his head. He shook it multiple times. But he took the ring.

The rabbi leaned over 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.’”

Yon slipped the ring onto Rudi. But he struggled with the words, worse than he had with the kippah. There were several false starts and a greater number of pauses after he got it started.

But he got through it.

Now it was Rudi’s turn. No one needed to tell her what to do. Nor did it matter that she had no ring for Yon. Wrapping her finger around his, she locked her eyes onto him and took her vow: “*Ani l’dodi, ve dodi li*. *I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine*.”

“All we have to do is break the glass,” the rabbi said.

He got the juice glass. Covering it in his handkerchief, he set it between Yon’s foot and the bedpost.

Yon pushed, with all he had. But the glass wouldn’t crack.

The rabbi peered into the hallway. “I could get a light bulb. It would be easier.”

Yon would have none of it. “I can do it.”

He gave another push. But he came no closer.

Rudi stretched toward the rabbi. “Is it that important?”

“Yes, it’s that important!” Yon snapped, his face red and sweating. “It signifies that joy must be tempered. No one gets this more than us.”

Rudi was coming undone. But she stayed in one piece. She took Yon’s free hand. “You can do it, Yoni. You can do it.”

Yon clenched his eyes closed. He clenched Rudi’s hand, willing himself to break the glass.

Everyone in the room was crying. Grandpa was crying. So was the photographer, who had to stop taking pictures. A set of teardrops also rolled down Yon’s cheeks, along with the glass’ splintering.

“*Mazel tov!”* the rabbi yelled, leaping off his feet.

The room erupted in applause. But this didn’t dampen anyone’s tears. They bathed Mrs. Levy’s face. She ran into the hallway, calling out for her son.

Watching her go, the rabbi wiped his cheeks with the back of his hands and returned to us. “What comes next is the *yichud*, where we give the bride and groom twenty minutes of seclusion.”

Mr. Agnellino grabbed the pizzas. “We can eat downstairs.”

He went off with the boxes, with the rest of us trailing behind him, congratulating the couple and shaking their hands.

Yon did so with all the affection he could muster. He wasn’t saying goodbye but farewell.

My turn came. “Brother.”

He brought me close to him. “Brother.”

Mariana was the last to leave. She had been crying before the ceremony began and was crying while clutching her best friend. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too,” Rudi screeched with one arm around her and the finger of her other hand around Yon’s.

Giving Rudi one last squeeze, Mariana released her arms. She stumbled from the room.

Yon dug under his blanket. “Shut your eyes.”

“What’s going on?” Rudi groused.

“Just do it.”

She clicked her tongue. But she complied.

It took time, but he gave her the okay. She opened her eyes, to him placing his chai necklace around her neck.

She helped him and clasped the chain.

“This is my wedding gift to you,” he said, “to remind you.”

She gripped the pendant between her fingers.

“But it isn’t to remind you of me. It’s to remind you of that word . . . *living*, the most precious there is. Don’t you dare forget it.”

Rudi could no longer stop what had been destined. She cried.

Yon got angry. “Don’t get soft on me now, Rudi. That’s not what I signed up for.”

“I don’t want to live without you.”

He took her hand. “Each person you touch, I will touch. Each life you change, I will change.”

Rudi cried more. To hide from this, she leaned over the stereo. She hit play.

“Look at us,” she babbled, with Glenn Miller serenading them with his trombone. “Who would have thought?”

“Me. I knew it from the beginning.”

Neither knew what to do next. This lingered.

Yon snarled. He snarled at Rudi as she had at him so many times. “So, are you gonna kiss the groom or what?”

“You call that a proposition?”

“It’s the best you’re gonna get.”

With a gentle touch, she placed her hands on his chest. With the same touch, she kissed him. By less than the breadth of a particle had their lips met.

Yet he swooned.

#

That was how Yon’s journal ended.

But that wasn’t the end of his story. This was clear from the beginning of it and from that cryptic entry he wrote.

*Chanukah was different this time, and I got a better* *gift. But Rudi’s holding back*.

Desperate for the story’s end, I begged Rudi for it, with another freight train approaching in the distance.

“I told you,” she grumbled, “I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

“Grandma was right, you lie badly, as badly as Yon. And that’s the best compliment anyone could get.”

“I swear I don’t know.”

“You do.”

I kept pressing, but she kept denying, and I couldn’t bribe her with more pages.

“Please,” I said, “it’ll be the best Chanukah gift I’ll get.”

She laughed. Without adding to it.

But she couldn’t turn down my request on the last night of Chanukah. Not because she was my sister but because she was a rabbi. The kind others would aspire to be.

#

The end of Yon’s story began on the same night that his story had begun. That first night of Chanukah. The one that Rudi had argued that nothing special had happened.

That year it coincided with Christmas Eve. So many were shopping. With the day tumbling from the skies and snow falling all around her, Rudi stood outside a mobbed Livingston Mall.

This was a place she loathed, like all places like it. But she wasn’t there for herself.

So, listening on her Walkman to Lee Ving’s most unusual holiday take, the closest punk rock would get to Yuletide cheer, she stormed into the building and through a corridor that led to the stores, toward a woman who was leaving with two children and twice that many bags.

Horrified by Rudi’s appearance, one that must’ve been more menacing because of all the snow on her, the woman pulled her kids from Rudi’s path as if she were a charging lioness, and that wasn’t far from the truth.

#

Rudi shuffled through a row of men’s shirts in a department store called Bamberger’s.

She had been in the mall for hours. It was all ordinary when she needed what wasn’t.

*What do you give someone who’s about to die?*

Across the room, a heavyset and anxious security guard was prattling into a handheld radio, his sights bolted onto Rudi.

Taking this as a sign to go elsewhere, she left, followed by the guard. He followed her till she departed the store and reached the mall area, where she swayed to a railing and what was below it.

An ill-stuffed Santa was going through the motions.

“Fake,” she growled. “This whole place is fake.”

She trudged toward an escalator. But she paused.

A chocolate shop was behind it.

#

With his hands and body shaking, the teenage clerk dropped white chocolate into a paper bag.

He offered it to Rudi, his hands and body shaking more.

Frowning, she slapped money onto the counter. She snagged the bag and took off. She flew down the escalator and past it. But, with her reaching a corridor leading to the parking lot and the bus stop beyond it, a toy store window caught her eye.

In it was a miniature waterfall. Like the one Yon loved but couldn’t visit anymore. Best of all, she had enough money to buy it.

“There it is, Mommy!” came a voice from the store’s other side. “There it is!”

Rudi wanted to hurry into the store and buy the waterfall. But she stuck her head around the corner.

A girl of around five was jumping up and down in front of a lone Cabbage Patch doll in the window. The source of that craze that had swept the nation.

Her mother crept toward the doll. She examined both it and its price.

Slinking toward her daughter, she searched for words. “I’m sure, I’m sure next year we . . .”

The girl hid her disappointment, by avoiding her mother’s eyes. “It’s all right, Mommy. Really.”

“How about some hot chocolate?”

The two slogged off, hand in hand, with their heads hanging.

Rudi wanted to ignore this. She wanted above that to forget all the disappointing Christmases she had experienced as a child. They all came soaring at her. The mornings without a tree, let alone presents. The mornings that were no different from any other. The mornings where she wasn’t special and didn’t matter and had no love.

The ignoring and forgetting wasn’t easy. But she did both. She hurried into the store and to a counter.

Behind it kneeled a man with black-rimmed glasses and a bow tie who had outlived time.

He lifted himself. It took ages, but he got to his feet.

Unlike all others Rudi had encountered at the mall that day, the man wasn’t frightened of her or disgusted by her. He expressed warmth. “Happy Chanukah.”

Believing that he must’ve been talking to another person, Rudi glanced around the store.

But there was no one nearby. So she spun toward him, not getting his kindness but not getting more how he could tell she was Jewish when she herself couldn’t.

He edged toward her. “What can I do for you?”

Her eyes fell upon the waterfall in the window. They stayed on it. But she asked for the doll.

The man took it from the window. “You’re lucky. This is our last one. We literally couldn’t keep them in stock. That’s why we had to mark the price up so much.”

He brought the doll to the counter. “Do you want me to wrap it?”

Rudi squinted out the window, at the mother and daughter sipping from cups at a bench in the distance. “If you can do it fast.”

“It won’t take but a minute.”

The man wrapped the doll, in gold paper fashioned from stars.

“Could you do me a favor?” she said.

“What’s that?”

She pointed to the mother. “Could you give the doll to that woman?”

The man froze. In mid-wrap he froze.

He bent in the direction of Rudi’s glossy black fingernail. “I don’t understand.”

“Tell her, tell her that she’s won a contest or that it’s some kind of store promotion. Tell her whatever you want as long as it’s not in front of her girl.”

The man kept his attention on the pair. He must’ve noted their sadness, because he returned to Rudi and expressed more warmth. I bet he expressed it more than before.

“What about you?” he crooned. “What can I get for you to give?”

She fished through her seabag for her purse. “I’m fine.”

The man finished with the wrapping. Rudi slapped money onto the counter and sped off.

“Don’t you want a receipt?” he asked.

“No.”

“Or your change?”

Rudi didn’t answer. She ran from the store, cursing her stupidity.

By the corridor she stopped, in the same place where she had before, and for a reason unknown waited.

The old man left the store. With a plain-paper shopping bag in his hand he left, inching toward the woman and her girl. The one who would still believe in fairy tales.

#

Rudi opened the door of her apartment, to “Moonlight Serenade.”

Yon staggered and limped a red gift-wrapped box to the simple metal menorah on their mantle, followed each step by Flutter. She followed him like her life depended on it.

No longer was Yon the gorgeous football player Rudi had first met, but nothing was ever as beautiful. She wanted to seal this inside her.

Yon lowered himself to his knees. He lowered the gift under the menorah.

Turning toward Rudi, he said, “You’ve caught me.” He said it with a smile. A smile she loved because he was only smiling for her.

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

“You’ve already given me it.”

“But I did get you some . . .”

She marched to him. Kneeling beside him, she took off her seabag and reached inside it for the chocolate.

Which he enjoyed that night in the arms of his gift.

the end