An excerpt from *The Fading Margin*, a novel of roughly 97,000 words

Chapter 1. Corin and Derek, 1988

Life’s possibilities had been distant and abstract for Corin, mere matters of speculation, until the night Brandon slapped Tina in the face with his—well, Corin would have been embarrassed to name it. They were at Kelly’s house, as they were most days after school—Corin, Derek, and usually a few others—listening to Kelly’s records and smoking weed. When it happened, Kelly, tall, overweight, and looking somewhat like a penguin with a two-tone T-shirt reaching his thighs, was putting a Joy Division record on the turntable, while Corin, Derek, and Tina were sitting on the floor. Brandon was above them, leaning on the edge of the bed.

“They have a hood,” Derek was saying, trying to explain the difference between a circumcised dick and an uncircumcised dick.

And Brandon opened his fly, and pulled his out. It indeed had a hood. Then for no discernible reason, he flicked it in Tina’s face. She laughed, but it was an uncertain laugh.

Corin lowered his eyes, disapproving. It was not just that Tina might very well have wished Brandon had kept his dick in his pants, in spite of her laugh. It was also that Brandon dominated the people around him and played with them as if they were mere appendages of himself or lesser beings, unfortunate insects that he had captured in a jar, apparently concluding from the fact that he could treat them this way that he was entitled to. He had rakish good looks—jet black hair and blue eyes, high cheekbones, and a wide mouth that seemed always curled in a mischievous smile. But did his good looks somehow give him authority to do whatever he pleased?

And it was so childish. Had they not grown out of shoving their body parts into each other’s faces?

That was where the epiphany lay: this was different. True, Brandon at ten years old might have exposed himself to embarrassed girls of the same age. But now that he had the beginnings of a beard and had lost his virginity, this was something new. It was worrying—and exciting.

Now Corin could hear Brandon and Amber laugh on the back porch of the house at the bottom of the trail, over the sound of a Pixies song and muffled shouts from inside. He could see a chair in the light from the back door. Corin was squatting next to Mike, a kid from Denver, with a six pack of beer. They had climbed a trail from the back of the house to a high slope. The lights of the city glittered below them, and the stars showed clearly above.

“Think he’s going to fuck her?” Mike said.

Corin shrugged. He took a long drink from the beer he had just opened.

“I would,” Mike said.

Corin looked at him. Mike was gazing out over the lights below. It was as if he were talking about whether Amber was going to plant daisies in her garden. The idea of Brandon fucking Amber made Corin want to howl, made him want to tear his shirt off.

Amber and Brandon stopped laughing. Corin imagined them kissing, imagined Brandon’s hand going up her shirt. Another Pixies song, “Hey,” was playing, and the perfection of the song also nettled Corin. It was like Brandon’s broad shoulders and dangerous good looks, unattainable.

Derek came up the trail and squatted beside them. Derek was taller and stronger than Corin. He had the build of an athlete, while Corin was slight of build and uneasy in his body.

“It’s a lost cause,” he said, looking sympathetically at Corin.

“I know!” Corin said angrily. “Don’t you think I know that? You think I’m stupid?” He threw the now-empty beer can in a bush.

“Chill!” Derek said. “Amber,” he explained to Mike.

“I didn’t know you liked her,” Mike said.

“He’s only desperately in love with her,” Derek laughed.

“Man, shut up!” Corin said.

They sat in silence.

“Sorry,” Corin said after a while.

Derek pushed another beer into Corin’s hand, and Corin opened it and drank greedily, beer trickling down his chin. The music had stopped, and the quiet of the hills surrounded them. The city was a still pool of lights below.

“All the people down there with their nice cars and their nice nine-to-five jobs,” Mike said, “do you think that’s all they ever wanted in life?”

“Nah,” Derek said. “They just get lost. Know what I mean?”

“Maybe that’s what happened to my parents,” Mike said. “Back in the sixties, they were totally in it. They joined a commune.”

Is there anything more predictable than the vague disaffection of youth? Corin was used to rolling his eyes at this Holden Caulfield sort of thing. And yet there was a side to this attitude that Corin might not understand. What was life on a commune, and where might it lead? Maybe there were radical alternatives to the society that made itself visible in the lights below.

Mike stood. “We need more beer,” he said, and started down the trail to the house. Corin thought Mike would one day find himself a plumber. Electrician, maybe. He pounded the palm of his hand with his fist. Whatever might or might not be possible—for society, for Mike, for Corin—he wanted to disappear. He wanted to vanish into the sweet oblivion of the black hills behind them.

“You all right?” Derek said.

“Yeah, I’m all right,” Corin said.

There was another distinction between Derek and Corin: Derek had lost his virginity, and Corin had no expectation of losing his anytime soon.

Was it that important? Would losing his virginity transform Corin in some way? The problem with being a virgin was not knowing. The possibility of sex had already opened dangerous fissures in Corin’s social world. But aside from seeing Brandon brandishing his hooded dick like a scepter, Corin had not really seen into these fissures. He could not understand them, let alone repair them.

And yet this was so ordinary. The people below in the pool of lights, “with their nine-to-five jobs,” must have experienced sex, reconciled themselves to it, and made it a part of their lives. Would Corin really be one of them?

\*\*\*

Derek could not understand Corin’s dissatisfaction. It was not just that Derek had already lost his virginity and had none of Corin’s trouble dating girls. For Derek, life’s possibilities were constrained by a circle of immediacy. Within that circle, everything was possible. He could never have felt discontented about growing up in the eighties instead of the sixties, as Corin did, because growing up in the sixties was too far removed from reality. But within the circle of immediacy were songs perfectly executed on his Strat guitar, friends, particularly Corin, who had discovered and explored the same emotional and intellectual continents and archipelagos as Derek, and girls who wanted everything that Derek wanted: music, weed, and sex.

Derek could have found reason for disappointment. He would not remember it later, but around this time he had hoped, and expected, to date a girl from his school named Cat. She was probably the most widely desired girl he knew. There was a rumor that she was dating a CU student, which was not implausible because she seemed older. Her attention skimmed over the heads of her classmates as if she were waiting for the adults to come. She wore a leather jacket and knee-high boots. Her eyeliner was the color of her hair, coal black. She was ever at ease, confident, above the minor crises that flustered her classmates. Derek thought he and she were a natural pair.

Derek’s parents (that is, his mother and stepfather) had been arguing the night he lost his virginity. His mom had brought a portable computer from the office and was working in the dining room, and this had annoyed his stepfather. This was another instance, for his stepfather, of her incomprehension of boundaries. Computers stayed at work. His mother would win this argument—she always did—but his stepfather would sulk and Derek would feel somehow ashamed for him. Derek left before it came to that. Cat and her friend had gone to Kelly’s house after school, and Derek guessed they were still there, so he got Corin and twenty minutes later they were at Kelly’s.

Derek went around the side of the house where Kelly’s room was and tapped on the window. Kelly’s round face loomed into the window, the little lights of a stereo and the glowing cherry of a cigarette just visible in the gloom behind him. Kelly’s chubby hand came up in greeting, and then he disappeared in the gloom. Derek ran back around the front, where Corin was staring moodily down the road, and Kelly let them in.

It was a large house and the front part was quiet. But when they came to the door of Kelly’s room, they could hear the Smiths playing on the other side.

Cat was sitting up against the head of the bed, looking as though she’d walked out of a club in Berlin, with her black leather and black lipstick. She had a cigarette in her hand and an ashtray in her lap. Her friend Summer, short with blue hair cut close on the sides, sat at the foot of the bed. Julius, who always brought a lot of weed wherever he went, squatted against the wall, wearing a chullo and a wool poncho.

“Is there any more weed?” Cat said, without greeting or even seeming to notice Derek and Corin.

Kelly took a bag of weed out of a drawer and began to fill the bowl of a bong.

Derek leaned against the wall by the stereo and, somewhat against his will, listened to the Smiths song. Behind the poetic brooding, Morrissey’s voice was like a soft hand sliding into your pants. Listening was embarrassing, if not actually emasculating.

“Can I play you some new tunes?” Derek said between tracks. He took a tape out of his jacket pocket—a dub Corin had made for him—and put it in.

“Oh, I know this!” Cat said as “Blitzkrieg Bop” played. “Who is this?” She finally noticed Derek, her eyes flashing as she looked at him.

“The Ramones,” Corin said, before Derek could answer.

Cat looked from Derek to Corin, as if she were trying to find the connection between them. Summer was silently listening.

Restrained yet frenetic, the guitars seemed to sweat and thrash, and Joey Ramone’s voice was pure rock and roll. Derek felt a surge of pride, as if he himself were Joey Ramone.

“You know where the name ‘Ramones’ came from?” Derek asked, feeling that he was being boring but needing to reclaim credit for the music he’d put on.

“No,” Cat said, and took the bong from Kelly.

“Paul McCartney used it as a stage name for a while. Joey Ramone was a Beatles fan. His real name was something else, I forget.”

He sat on the floor and waited for the bong to come his way. If they were at his house, he’d plug in his guitar.

When the bong came, he pulled long and hard. The last time he had got seriously stoned, he had started to have some very serious and lofty thoughts about time, and he wanted to see if he could recover them. This time he would tell everyone before he forgot.

“What is time?” he asked himself, and had no answer. He looked at Cat, who was staring at the ceiling.

Someone changed the music. Now it was Dead Can Dance, medieval, serene, deep, meditative. He forgot time, forgot Cat, forgot why he was there.

“This is cool,” he heard himself say.

The bong came back to him and he took a deep and long pull.

Soon he found himself running his fingers along a female leg that dangled off the bed.

“I love that hurdy-gurdy,” Julius said.

“What?” Cat laughed.

“That instrument. It’s a hurdy-gurdy.”

“You’re stoned.”

For a moment the music snapped into Derek’s attention. He remembered time, the music seemed to have clues about the connections between time and space, and he tried to raise his consciousness to a level where he could see the connection, but he could not. He heard the droning of the hurdy-gurdy, and the rhythm of the chanting, and he felt as though he must have learned something from it, even if he couldn’t say what it was.

The leg moved, and Summer, the girl with blue hair, slid off the bed and sat on the floor next to him. They began kissing. Her nose brushed against his, and her delicacy and vulnerability made his heart throb.

“Will you...?” he said, and stood up holding her hand. She got up and they quietly left the room. No one said anything, at least not until he closed the door. But as soon as the door closed he heard two voices on the other side speak at once. He and Summer were doing something bold and shocking, but he kept her hand in his and she smiled at him.

The walk down the hall seemed long. Derek was still stoned. But his heart was beating fast and he thought only about Summer and her soft hand in his.

There were voices on the other side of Kelly’s little brother’s door, so they kept walking. At the end of the hall they found an empty room with a bed.

Summer put her bomber jacket on a chair and took off her jeans. She had pink, lacy underwear. Derek didn’t know what he had expected, but he was surprised—surprised and gratified—by the pink lacy underwear.

She had a black hair that curled from her left nipple. Derek studied her every feature. He forgot the room down the hall where Corin still sat and Dead Can Dance played. He forgot Cat. He forgot where he was. There was only the sound of his breath, and the sound of her breath, and their touches.

They lay together for a long time. Summer, he thought. Why had I never noticed Summer?

When they finally returned to Kelly’s room, Derek held Summer’s hand and watched Corin’s face. He needed to be sure Corin understood what had happened. It was less that he was competing with Corin than that he needed his friend to know about this momentous event. Corin gave him a gloomy look.

So when they squatted on the hill above the house and Corin ached and wanted to tear his shirt off when he heard Brandon and Amber laughing below, Derek had already lost his virginity, and he’d been dating Summer for about a month.

It seemed to Derek that he and Summer had belonged together from the beginning, and he never gave Cat another thought.

\*\*\*

Corin got to know Summer walking from school to Clean Machine Coffee or the hill to meet Derek when he skipped classes to buy acid or go record shopping.

“Oh!” Summer would say as they walked, as if she’d just remembered something important. “What do you think of *Dr. Strangelove*?”

When she asked about *Dr. Strangelove*, Corin grinned, and imitated Peter Sellers fighting his own right hand as it struggled to give a Nazi salute.

She laughed, her upper lip showing her gums.

“Peter Sellers is sooo good!” she said.

“Oh!” Summer said another time. “Have you seen *Blue Velvet*?”

“Awesome movie. How about *Eraserhead*? Did you see that?”

At that moment, a jeep turned sharply around the corner and a young man in a baseball hat threw a plastic bottle full of liquid at them. It hit Summer’s leg and bounced harmlessly into the street.

“Fuckers!” Corin yelled at the jeep, which was now half a block away.

He’d moved protectively closer to Summer. She laughed, perfectly unfazed.

There was, of course, a firm barrier between Corin and Summer—she was his best friend’s girlfriend. It was always that way: the only girls Corin got close to were Derek’s girlfriends.

Corin had increasingly felt that this was destiny. Even after Brandon slapped Tina with his dick and Corin decided that anything was possible, an instinctive belief in a narrow destiny continued to stunt his expectations.