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Publication Date

2011

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

'Twixt and 'Tween

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Andrew Dirk Sarouhan

June 2011

Thesis Committee:
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The Thesis of Andrew Dirk Sarouhan is approved:

Committee Chairperson

Acknowledgements

Endless gratitude, respect, and love to the fellow writers of my cohort. Our time together produced a rare chemistry, equal parts creative muscle and warm friendship, and washed down with a pitcher of beer or two. For me, it was a realized dream—short but sweet—of joyous immersion in a community of true artists.

To the members of my thesis committee, I cannot thank you enough. Andrew Winer, this project has been a constant effort to merely approach the heights and depths I witnessed in your teachings, your writing, and your friendship. Michael Jayme, you remain a grinning reminder to me of the need to retain a sense of humanity, compassion, and decency that stands both apart and in concert with the task of writing. Goldberry Long, you were the only one who dared to answer my silly question of “*How do you do this writing thing?*” and in doing so, you gave me not only a creative process, but also a narrative voice.

Special thanks to Adam Pelavin and Carly Kimmel. I have long considered the two of you to be the silent guardians of my thesis. Adam, here’s to late nights on my balcony. Thank you for always making me feel legitimate. Carly, in a single afternoon of conversation, you saw through me in a way that few have, and in doing so you have my enduring loyalty and love—here’s to my inevitable failure!

Mom and Dad, thank you for providing the space I needed to finally complete this project. Thank you for standing with me and offering confidence even at the times I couldn’t feel it for myself.

To my lifelong brothers, Jason Sarouhan and Chris Tarbell, know that every word I write is and always has been created with you two in mind—men of integrity and heart.

To Negar Shekarabi, thank you for helping me at a time when I was most in need. I am forever affected by our interactions.

To Lena Schmidt

Because you were there.

Because you're still here.

Dear, dear, dear, how lucky I am.

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Editor's Forward

Tea Reese passed on June 4, 2031, at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. He was fifty-three years old. His death followed a particularly brutal five years in a New York penitentiary.

But before those tragedies, there was much triumph for Tea, including a ten-year journey along U.S. highways, from coast to coast, from state to state, from metropolis to suburb to township to the vast and empty expanses that still, shockingly, exist in this nation. This grand adventure, along with Tea's tireless work to combat the world attention crisis that is now popularly termed The Scattering, is well documented in Jacob Pierce's incredible book *American Griot*.

What you hold in your hands is the story of Tea's life before those nomadic days. These are his memoirs, told in the third person—a particularly Tea Reese fashion of autobiography. The memoirs were kept private until his death, at which point their publication was granted by Tea's trust.

The memoirs themselves were incomplete, and purposefully so, from what we can surmise. In his trust, Tea stipulated that certain gaps in his story (and he listed those unspoken-for events, rather meticulously) be filled in by his lifelong friend Daki Kazantzakis, co-founder and innovator of the world-renowned Galumph Movement. Daki graciously accepted the task, his own writing (as you shall see) going above and beyond what was asked of him by his deceased comrade. We thank Mr. Kazantzakis for his contributions to this project.

*Andrew Sarouhan, lead editor
August 13, 2035*

Chapter 1
San Francisco, 9/26/2034

Well, here we are: my first words of contribution to this thingy-ding project, and the publishers already have a hair up their ass. An hour ago, I rang up the editing team from inside my club for a quick conference call, which was a laugh in itself. See, the green room at the *I* still has a bonafide payphone dangling from the wood paneling by a screw or two. Like a real working payphone, pure vintage, with a coin slot and a metal casing around the cord, and a rotary dial that's probably had more fingers poked at it over the years than the girls who used to dance in this club. I called the publishing house collect and listened to the receptionist scramble around for ten minutes trying to wrangle up enough standard telephones for a conference call, as my payphone ain't exactly compatible with the New Signal devices that most of these baby moguls are sporting nowadays.

They finally got it together, and the six members of the project's editing team congregated in what sounded like a broom closet and introduced themselves to me one at a time. And that's when I told them.

"Fellas, I'll take the gig. Be happy to contribute to the project. And," I say, giving just the right amount of dramatic pause, "I get the first chapter of the book." Then I had the pleasure of listening to the muted mumble of six literati wannabes.

"Mr. Kazantzakis?" a high-pitched male voice finally pipes up.

"You call me Daki, son. I'm not your in-laws."

“Daki. Would it be too much of an inconvenience if we were to call you back in, say, fifteen minutes? Ten minutes?”

“You all need to discuss something amongst yourselves?” I ask, stretching that metal phone cord so I can reach in the green room fridge for my morning popsicle.

The kid with the high voice is back, and he’s being real choosy about his words. “Daki, this project is, first and foremost, Tea’s story, told in his own—”

“You call him Mr. Reese.”

“Mr. Reese’s writing, his memoirs that have been posthumously entrusted to us, it commences—chronologically speaking—long before the two of you ever met, over a decade in fact. From our standpoint, which I’m sure you can understand, there’s a certain flawed logic in having your chapter begin the book. Chronologically speaking. It would create a confusion in continuity to the—”

“I’ve got editor privileges on this gig,” I say with the popsicle jammed into my cheek. “Enough said.”

“Actually, that’s not entirely true. As stated in Mr. Reese’s trust—”

“Tea’s *trust*,” I say. “The guy didn’t have a pot to piss in. Guess who paid for that funeral?”

“But Tea, nevertheless, did have a trust, Mr. Kazantzakis.” The kid starts to get a little revved up, which means he’s taking my chatter too seriously, which means he’s got some personal stake in this project, which is always good info for a guy like me to know. “The trust states that you, Daki, are to be given *limited* editing control, specifically to your own writing. We have a lead editor on this project, whom Tea picked personally.”

“And *whom* might that be?” I ask.

“You’re speaking to him,” the high-pitched voice says.

“What’s your name again?”

“Andrew—”

“Hold on. Popsicle juice on my fingers. Getting sticky. Okay, fire away.”

“My name is Andrew—”

“Listen here, Scooter. My chapter’ll come first. It *needs* to come first.”

There’s an aggravated exhale on the other end of the line, which in my world is good tidings. “And why must it come first?” he finally manages.

“Well, I’ll tell you.” I lay back on the couch below the payphone, the ratty old couch that Tea used to sleep on when he came into town, before he stopped coming into town. Eating that popsicle actually has me a little winded. “I’m chapter one, Scooter, because I’m the goddamn collision. That’s why. Tea and me met—we intersected—and that was the *event*, for both of us. The goddamn collision. Because nothing would have happened for anybody—for me, or for him, or for any of *you*—if that collision hadn’t...” I catch my breath. “If that *asteroid* and that *comet* hadn’t—look, my chapter is coming first.”

I’m starting to like this Andrew kid, because he can obviously here me wheezing like an old man’s fart, but he doesn’t back down. “Despite the importance of your and Tea’s association,” he says, “there were numerous events of great significance in his life before your meeting, and we are committed to providing the reader the most complete story of that life, in it’s intended order.”

“I perused those opening chapters you sent me from Tea’s writing. Kind of a snoozer. I hear the average reader these days gives a book like, tops, a page or two to hook them. This thing won’t sell with that sort of opening, not in the New Signal Age.”

“This project,” so says Scooter, “is not primarily centered on financial gain,” to which I cut him off by laughing straight into the receiver. I let him and the rest of the editing team know that, please, I may die tomorrow but I wasn’t born yesterday, and that just last week I was on a university campus—one of several from which I hold honorary degrees—as a special Welcome Week presenter, and I walked right through a vendor fair in the main quad, and—guess what—every other booth I passed had posters of Tea for sale, posters hanging right next to Bob Marley and Jim Morrison and Che Guevara, and rumor has it that even Old Navy’s got a shirt with Tea’s mug on the front, so don’t try to sell me—I say to the editing team—this line about Tea’s book not being a profit venture, especially for such a tiny booger of a publishing company. “And,” I add when I find my breath, “I know all about the movie deal.”

Scooter comes back quick from that. “This book and the proposed film are totally unrelated projects, and we are neither artistically nor financially connected to—”

“Don’t bullshit the bull, sonny,” I say. “If you won’t play it straight, then maybe I don’t need this gig.”

There’s mumbling on the other end, and a female voice pipes in. “Mr. Kazantzakis, this is Victoria. Line editor for the project. I want you to know how honored I am to be speaking with you. I was a student at Smith College. ’22 to ’26, plus one year after that for my M.A. You galumphed our campus when I was a sophomore.”

“Sure,” I say, kicking my feet up on the arm of the couch. “The Salem Bitch Trials in ’24. Were you one of the lovely ladies we put on the stand?”

“No,” she says shyly, “I was just watching.”

“Victoria, there’re no spectators in a good galumph. Sounds like I failed you, dear.”

“Oh, no. No, Mr. Kazantzakis. Not at all.” Victoria is gushing now, about how, on that day ten years ago at Smith College, I’d masterfully juxtaposed the underlying tenants of Fifth Wave Feminism with the anachronistic-but-still-quietly-prevalent cultural constraints of blah-blah-blah, and she means every damn word of it. And I’m laying on the old couch, listening to the noise of Broadway and Columbus traffic reach loud and clear into the green room, right through the plywood that’s covering all the windows in the club. Victoria’s voice quivers onward, and I think of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, how that night in ‘13 when me and Wes and the gang double-parked that U-Haul full of equipment on Broadway, there was already a note on the club’s door from Larry. *Heard you got this place for a steal*, he wrote. *You know the world’s shifting when even a titty bar can’t make it anymore. Score one for the lunatics.* He ended the note with an invitation to join him for tea that Friday in his office on the top floor of City Lights Bookstore, just down the street from the club. *We are comrades*, he wrote, *in a battle whose heroes change faces, but whose enemy, age after age, stays exactly the same.* I always dug that line. Old Larry died that week, on Thursday, while we were still setting up the *I*, but I used to tell people I had tea with Ferlinghetti anyway.

I reach up and toy with the payphone's rotary dial. "You sound beautiful, Victoria. Are you?"

Victoria doesn't giggle over the phone. She just waits until the giddiness passes, which I respect. "I'd like to think so," she says.

"I bet Scooter over there's got his eyes on you. Right now."

She giggles this time, and Scooter's back now, telling me how he would prefer to retain professional decorum with this and all further conference calls. I interrupt him. "Victoria. Sweet Victoria. In this upcoming cinematic masterpiece that has no artistic or financial connection to our book, tell me Victoria, who's going to be playing Tea?"

"I, um, don't believe the casting has begun quite yet."

"And who's going to play Annie?"

"Who?"

I break into one of my new coughing fits, and Victoria and the gang wait on the line for me to finish heaving. The receiver drops from my hand and dangles, and I swing my legs to the floor and lean forward over my knees. Rumor has it that when Ferlinghetti knew he was going to die that Thursday, he just locked himself into that top-floor office and laid back on his desk, and then he stacked books (mostly his own books of poetry) on his chest until he couldn't muscle in another breath. That was the rumor, anyway, at the street vigil out front of City Lights.

I finally hack up a mouthful of chest gunk and spit it into an empty fishbowl on the floor, one of five hundred fishbowls—all with snorkel attachments—that are spread around the green room. Most of them are still stained that bluish color from the solution

that Wes filled them with for the '31 Invasion From Space gig we pulled in Michigan, our last galumph. Larry's vigil out front of City Lights lasted three continuous days—nobody would leave, and the damn Columbus traffic had to be rerouted. And me, I've got an army of five hundred empty fishbowls and enough remnant notoriety to still make a Smith alumni dampen her panties from three thousand miles distance. Big thrills. I grab the receiver.

“Well,” I say, “I assume the film's producers will be calling me soon. They're going to need one of hell of a makeup artist if they want me to play myself in my younger days.”

Victoria is arguing with Scooter in the background. She gets back on. “Daki, from what we understand—and our information is extremely limited—the film begins at a later point in Tea's life, in his traveling years. You two didn't see much of each other then, right?”

I couch it again. “Rumor and hearsay. We had plenty of contact,” I say. “When exactly does the film start from?”

It's Scooter. “2015, Daki. The opening scene is onstage at your club, during Tea's first great rant.”

“That wasn't his first *great* rant.”

“His first public rant, then.”

“Not even close. Not even fucking close! Tea, that motherfucker, had performed countless rants before that, and they were all public. That's how all this shit—everything—got started. Christ, who the fuck is driving this clown car?” I kick the

nearest fishbowl and it clinks off a half dozen others and rolls underneath the bed I've got set up in a corner.

"Daki," Scooter says, "we can work out the details for the order of chapters at a later time—"

"If they want to film in the club, they're going to pay for it. Pay nicely."

"We'd heard the Hungry I was dark now," Victoria says. "Boarded up, and that you'd sold."

I'm wheezing and searching the pockets of my bathrobe for a lighter. "The *I* ain't sold yet, and the power's still on, trust me. Look, I'm taking the first chapter of this book or it's no deal, and you can rattle off whatever you want about editing powers, but I know for a fact that Tea's trust demands my participation, and I also know there's a whole shit load of gaping holes in his memoirs that you can't fill in without me. So if you want me—"

"The first chapter is yours," Scooter pipes in.

"And you don't edit a goddamn thing I write."

"Agreed. But I am assigning a page limit to that first chapter. A maximum of—"

"Presto! It's a deal." And I hung up on them.

And that was that. I'm well aware what those editors are thinking right now, and what my critics will think once this book is published: Kazantzakis, the egomaniacal has-been, is using his dead friend's book to resuscitate his flat-lined celebrity status. They can say what they want. My chapter is coming first. It needs to, it's my decision, it's been decided, and if you're reading this that means it's been *printed*.

I'm starting to dig this writing kick. It's ten o'clock in the morning and I'm sitting at my card table in the green room with a computer, a sizeable bottle of Grey Goose, and a bowl of cocktail onions. I've got a half-pack of Camels hidden in a cracker box above my fridge because my nurse is too deliciously short to snoop up there. I've got seven hours until said pixie nurse stops by to do my blood-work, and I'm overjoyed to see I have a slight hard-on. I'm ready to tell you about my friend Tea Reese.

But first, a few words about me.

My Pops got called out for a four-week business trip in late September of '96. It was emergency business, first to Cupertino, then straight onto a factory in China. Pops was in the color trade, as in he took your day-to-day items and reproduced them in a variety of colors, primary through tertiary. Sound stupid? Now check that crap drawer in your kitchen and notice how your flashlight and your highlighter and your paperclips and your special polymer water bottle are all in perfect color harmony to your individual perception of your own personality. Pops used to say that he could sell anything if he could make it look like candy, and when that asshole Jacob Pierce wrote his unauthorized biography on the Galumph Movement, he offered Pop's strategy of "brightening the mundane to infantilize the consumer" as a major philosophical and commercial influence on yours truly. Anyway, this four-week emergency business trip was shaping up to be Pop's biggest gig ever, and his flight was scheduled for two days before I was to move into the freshman dorms at UC San Diego. He wouldn't be around to help me.

The trip only added insult to injury, as Pops was the one forcing me off to college in the first place. I hadn't applied to UCSD, or anywhere; prancing off to college wasn't even a blip on my radar screen. Now, I'm not going to claim that I was some industrious young dreamer, brimming with unconventional goals that bypassed higher education. I was a big, fat fuck with a C-average, a fascination with stand-up comedy and old vaudeville routines, and a patent idea for something called a Christmas Tree Bag (later invented by someone else, goddammit). I wasn't a boy with vision, and I don't give a damn that some people have called me a social prodigy; I'm sticking to the "boy without vision" story, if for no other reason than to give a wink-and-nod to all the other boys and girls who, despite not having even an ounce of vision, are going to shake shit up anyway.

Pops didn't see things that way. A few days after my high school graduation, he'd secretly made a few calls—to folks who'll remain nameless—and had me enrolled at UCSD. Then he announced the big news at a charity banquet while I sat next to a senator's daughter who I'd been trying to lay since I had baby teeth—a smart strategy on Pop's part, as he knew I wouldn't throw a tantrum in front of her. I'm sitting at our banquet table, leaning towards this lovely young woman, trying to look down the rim of her dress while I tell both her and her dad that I'll be leaving Fallbrook soon for LA so I can take some improv classes at the Groundlings and eventually open up my own club, and that's when I feel Pop's hand on my shoulder. He leans over the top of me and gets an even better underage cleavage view as he chuckles and says, "This is, of course, after my son completes his business degree at UC San Diego. He'll be the first in our family."

He gave me a big sloppy kiss on the mouth and added that my success was every immigrant father's dream come true.

On the drive home from the banquet, I sat across from my parents in the limousine, smoking cigarettes and staring out the half-opened window. Pops had dropped his smoking habit a few years prior; he'd visited his doctor for a stubborn cough and found out that he'd somehow misplaced thirty percent of his lung capacity.

Pops could tell I was brooding over his announcement. "Is there a problem, Daki?" he asked me. I kept my eyes to the window, closed the glass completely, and blew smoke in his general direction. He waited me out for a whole cigarette, not once fanning the air. Then he drove the shiny point of his tuxedo shoe into my shin. I only allowed the teensiest flinch, just at the corners of my eyes.

"Daki. Is there a *problem*?" Pops repeated.

I stubbed out the cigarette. "I love you, Pops. I got five inches, eighty pounds, and the better half of a century on you. But there's no doubt in my mind who's got the biggest testicles in this limo." I locked eyes with him.

Pops leaned back in the leather seat and put his arm around Moms. I stared at him for another few seconds, just letting the tension thicken up, just waiting for Moms to start playing around with her rings like she did when I made her nervous. Then I cracked a smile. "Really Moms, where do you hide those enormous balls underneath such a dainty cocktail dress?"

That's called reversal of expectation. It's a comedic essential and the framework of irony, not to mention it pretty much boils down the entire Galumph Movement

philosophy, thank your very much Jacob Pierce, you asshole. The testicle joke is simple, no doubt, and not that funny on its own. Luckily, jokes don't come a la carte and humor doesn't exist in a vacuum. It all depends on atmosphere. The bad air brewing in that limo elevated the joke's humor, and I knew it would. Anger always welcomes humor; it begs for humor. We all wanted a punchline right then, I provided it, and they responded. Moms snorted and poked Pops in the ribs, and Pops had his big laugh going—the one that made you doubt that any of his lung capacity was lost. I loved that laugh, and I think I spent most of my childhood trying to coax it out of him as often as possible. Tea would disagree with this, but I say angry people are always the best audience.

“We have an agreement about university, then,” Pops states, wiping his eyes and still laughing.

I lean forward in my seat and half-smile. “How's my inheritance looking?”

“Your inheritance?” Pops studies me like he's both contented and impressed by my question. “Your inheritance is fine.”

“Fantastic,” I say. “Go ahead and write up a contract. I want every cent when you two are gone. In writing by tomorrow.”

“Daki! Be sensible,” Moms says. “You are not the only person to consider—”

“Quiet,” Pops says, squeezing her shoulder. He turns back to me.

“I want a contract,” I repeat.

“You're too old for that nonsense,” Pops says. “You're a man now.”

“I'm not man enough to make my own decisions, apparently,” I snap. “I want a contract.”

“Who else would the money go to?” Pops asks, and the unsaid thing he’s really saying is that my older sister, older by nineteen years, isn’t getting a red cent. See, when Sissy was eighteen, she went off and married a Turkish man from the next town over. I could try to explain more about the cultural/historical/familial intricacies of this decision, but it’s simpler just to say that, in Grecian mathematics, marrying a Turk equals no inheritance.

“You promise me all of it, and I guarantee a college diploma,” I say. “I’ll be every immigrant father’s dream come true.”

That’s when Pops heaved one of his melodramatic Greek sighs and shook his head. “It’ll be ready for you by tomorrow.”

“Groovy,” I said. I lit another cigarette. “You two thinking of dying anytime soon?”

Moms snarled and lunged at me, and Pops shoved her back against the seat and held her there. He wasn’t mad. I could tell. He nodded at me real calm. There was respect in that look, God rest his soul. I cracked the window, closed my eyes and let the breeze hit my face.

Pops was many dimensions of a bastard, but he was no squelcher. The following morning, two contract copies were lying on the table next to my breakfast. He and Moms were already at the country club. I added a dash of brandy to my coffee and skimmed over the contract’s wording. It looked sound. No apparent loopholes. I signed and dated Pop’s copy, right underneath his own signature. Like in past contracts, he’d added XOXO after his signature. I drew a heart after mine. This was our tradition.

Back in my bedroom, I pulled my contract file out of its hiding place in my costume trunk. There they all were: a childhood's worth of successful negotiations.

June 6, 1983: Mr. Daki Kazantzakis, in exchange for hugging his mother every morning, will receive a complete collection of *Return of the Jedi* action figures, including the limited edition Darth Vader with removable mask.

September 16, 1986: Mr. Daki Kazantzakis, in exchange for abstaining from the use of the words *fuck, shit, cock, cunt, asshole, and douchebag* during formal dinners with family business partners, will receive a Z95 Turbo Thrasher go-cart.

November 20, 1992: Mr. Daki Kazantzakis, in exchange for volunteering at the Samaritan House Thanksgiving Food Center for two afternoons (in a row) will receive a four-person trip to Costa Rica during Christmas Vacation. It is required that one of the four guests be an adult chaperone over the age of twenty-five (25).

I flipped through all those wrinkled papers. There were thirty-one contracts total and Pops had left XOXO on every one of them. And now I had the biggest contract of them all, the one that was more like XO,000,000. I tucked the new contract in the file and stuffed the whole thing back in my costume trunk. Then I gave Pops and Moms the silent treatment for the rest of the summer. I mostly stayed away from the house, flaked on afternoon cocktails, and no-showed weekend golf dates. I even bagged out on our annual father-son Caribbean voyage, opting to disappear from the house the day before

we were supposed to leave and spending a workingman's week high off my gourd in a motel room, where I consumed the lion's share of three-letter recreational chemicals. Pops never said a word about any of it, and I didn't even bother to get out of bed when the limousine picked him up for the business trip in September.

It was better that he wasn't around for the move to UCSD. I didn't necessarily want him to see the dorm room decorations I'd been collecting the whole summer and hiding away in the pool shed. Then again, I didn't necessarily *not* want him to see those decorations either. They were all stolen from around Fallbrook: street signs, wheel rims and hood ornaments, a couple stoplights, orange traffic cones with flashers, a barber pole, and the metal insignia from the Fallbrook Rotary Club which, let me tell you, took more than a simple flathead screwdriver to obtain. My prize acquisition was a fully functional parking meter. I planned to somehow sink it into the floor at the center of my new dorm room. Pops would have thrown a fit and gotten a real kick out of it all, at least eventually. He had that prankster blood running through him too. Hell, he once paid a guy to light my brother-in-law's car on fire. Actually, I believe he did that twice.

Even from Cupertino, Pops made sure I was attended to. The morning of my move, two professional haulers rolled up our cobblestone drive in a twenty-six foot truck, Buju Banton blasting out the speakers. Tongans. Big motherfuckers wearing XXXL Dickies, one with an afro-puff, the other in cornrows. Moms took one look and retreated back into the house.

"Thanks in advance, fellas," I said as they leaned against the truck. I gave them each a cigarette and a glass of Mom's killer iced tea. They smoked and drank in silence,

tossed the butts in a fountain when they thought I wasn't looking, and got to lifting my shit. Nice guys. I don't know if I ever caught their names and I sure as hell wouldn't remember them after all these years. Plus, guys who work as movers, plumbers, and exterminators (and all other professions that generally involve the distinct possibility of a revealed ass-crack) never seem too hip on introducing themselves anyway, and that's fine by me. It's just a couple less names to jumble around in my head and eventually forget.

An hour later, the shit was loaded. Afro-Puff and Cornrows were enjoying some more of my cigarettes in the driveway, and I was lugging out my costume trunk. I dragged it towards the truck, ignoring the scratches it made on the walkway and purposefully squashing some ferns and flowers. Cornrows was helping Moms load her golf clubs in the Jaguar. I left my trunk on the walkway and rushed up to them.

"Allow me, my lady," I said, bowing for Moms and snagging her clubs away from Cornrows. He sucked his teeth and went back to leaning on the truck. I placed the clubs in the trunk of the Jaguar and gave them a loving pat, then winked at my dear Moms. "Guess I won't be seeing the fairway for a while," I said. She nodded, her eyes to the ground. "The world will be a lot safer now that I won't have access to golf carts, huh?" Up to that point in my life, I'd managed to sink three different carts in water traps. Moms didn't laugh at my joke, so I stuck my finger in her nose and made her snort and slap my hand away. She finally looked up at me, smiling with sad eyes.

"We didn't take a single walk in the rose gardens this summer," she said. "I haven't heard any new jokes from you."

I nodded and she started to cry real quiet, wiping her nose with the heel of her hand. “Will you visit?” she asked.

“Visit?” I squeezed her shoulders. “How can I visit? You won’t let me bring my car.”

“Your father and I want you to focus. The car would be too much of a distraction.”

“Then how can you expect me to fucking visit!” I yelled in her face—my impulse control was still a teeny bit fragile after that workingman’s week in the motel room. Moms was crying pretty hard then, and she’d managed to completely smear one of her painted-on eyebrows. I didn’t want her to be embarrassed, so I didn’t tell her. I just gave her a big old hug and let her eyebrows and tears and snot and the bullshit of the summer smudge all over my favorite Jimmy Buffett shirt. I peered over the top of Moms’ perm, back at Cornrows and Afro-Puff, and they were looking at me and shaking their heads.

“You fellas like smoking weed?” I asked.

Afro-Puff and Cornrows looked around like maybe there were narcs hiding in the landscaping somewhere, then back at each other, then they both nodded real slightly to me. Moms dug her French manicure into my arm. “Don’t be embarrassing, Daki,” she whispered into my man-cleavage. I hugged her tighter and looked back to the Tongans.

“Listen, I got some righteous herb for us to fire up on the way, so why don’t you two load that trunk in back and warm up the engine.”

They shrugged their shoulders and hoisted the trunk and I helped Moms into her Jaguar and she left without another word.

It's sixty minutes from Fallbrook to the university, which is long damn time when you have two Tongans and a sizeable Greek crammed into a moving truck. We rolled down 15 South and I smoked the guys out as we listened to an old George Carlin routine on the tape deck. I was reciting those bits right in time with Carlin, and the more faded the Tongans got, the more they listened to *me* spitting the jokes and not Carlin. I liked that. It was good herb too: Alaskan Thunderfuck. I guarantee that even if Afro-Puff and Cornrows had told me their real names, that particular neuron went up in a puff of smoke, praise Jah.

There were five separate colleges at UC San Diego when I attended. I've never been back to the place, but considering the state's closure of the bottom-performing university campuses during the '26 budget balance, God knows how many colleges UCSD has now—they sprout up like warts. When I was there, each college was like a mini-school within the larger university, boasting its own distinct *scholastic identity*. That's a fancy way of saying that each college had different general ed requirements and different salad bars at their dining halls. Pops had apparently enrolled me in the university's social justice school, Thurgood Marshall College, which was cute considering the most open-minded thing Pops ever said about *the blacks* was that they were lazy because their ancestors had worked too hard and without a proper contract. The Marshall freshman dorms were plopped down in the northwest corner of the university, just a bunch of gray and turquoise stucco boxes that lined two sides of a grassy quad with a sand volleyball court. Buildings M through S were the big seven-

story fuckers on the north side of the quad. Buildings T, U, and V were a trio of two-story shorties on the quad's south side.

Marshall College didn't have the traditional dorm setup with long halls lined by bedroom doors. They utilized the suite system, which I'm sure they claimed was another one of their efforts at building a global community or something. I was assigned to a second floor suite in U-Building. Afro-Puff, Cornrows, and myself loaded ourselves up with my boxes and made our way across the quad. We climbed U-Building's outside stairway, opened the main entrance, stepped into the hall, and unlocked my suite's door.

And there it was, my new home.

Yup.

I took one step into the suite, dropped my boxes and made Afro-Puff and Cornrows step around me as I took a huge rip of Thunderfuck. Was I unimpressed? Since the age of ten I'd been living on my own in a two-bedroom guest cottage that was a hundred feet away from the main house. I could take a crap and look out my bathroom window at pink magnolia trees, and the whole cottage was guarded by a koi pond moat that I'd dug and a retractable bridge that I'd built. What the hell am I supposed to say about this suite? A college dorm is just an office cubicle with running water; it's just numbers and measurements, nothing better. There were **4** single rooms, **10-by-10** each, **2** on either side of the suite. There were **2** swinging door entrances into the **1** bathroom, where you found **2** stalls (a stall for **#1** and a stall for **#2**), **2** showers, **2** sinks, and **0** windows looking out onto **0** pink magnolia trees. There was a common room with **1** plaid L-couch and **1** plaid chair, both of which I've subsequently seen in the smoking

lounges of numerous low-class airports. There was 1 TV and 1 VCR chained down to 1 table, and the gray of the table matched the gray of the walls so exactly that if you looked at the TV from just the right angle and under just the right chemical influences, the table disappeared into the wall and the TV floated in mid-air.

Yup.

Thankfully, I am, and always have been, a trooper. And thankfully-thankfully, Alaskan Thunderfuck provides a merry buzz. We had the place moved in by noon. Afro-Puff set up my stereo system and popped in an old Lee Perry album. We cracked some warm beers and estimated the sperm count in the couch cushions. Cornrows got a kick out of my purloined home furnishings, though he recommended I not sink the parking meter, considering my room was on the second floor.

I packed us another bowl in the suite's common room, and Afro-Puff kept looking around like he was scared some students or parents were going to walk in. Truth is, official move-in didn't begin until the next day, but Pops had pulled some strings so I could settle in early. He thought that would be more desirable for me. See, back in middle school, my bullshit therapist had told Pops that the reason I acted out around crowds of people was *acute shyness*. Pops, bless his heart, had never forgotten that shitty misdiagnosis, and he'd made the call to the university and gotten me my dorm keys, all so my transition was comfortable. But I didn't tell Afro-Puff any of that as we lit up in the common room—it was more fun to watch him sweat it out.

“We're heading out, Daki,” Cornrows said to me an hour later, rubbing his eyes and slapping Afro-Puff awake on the couch.

“Stick around,” I said, “Plenty of Thunderfuck left. I’ve got this old Lenny Bruce video we can watch too.”

Afro-Puff struggled off the couch and hitched his suspenders back up. “No, man. We got another job up in Escondido at two. We’ll be late as it is.”

“Ah, fuck that other job,” I said, digging through the box with my videos. “I’ll pay you guys to stick around. That’s the advantage of working for a spoiled white kid.”

They laughed and headed for the suite’s main door. “Come on,” I called after them. “You’re leaving me alone in this piece of shit dorm?”

Cornrows cocked his head. “Man, this place is *nice*. You’re lucky.” They headed out the suite into the hall and I followed.

“You guys haven’t told me shit about yourselves,” I said. “How’s the moving business treating you?”

“It sucks, man,” said Afro-Puff. “We ain’t even got air-conditioning in that truck.”

They strolled down the hall to the exit, and I stood at the door of my suite, running my mouth for the hell of it. “No air conditioning? That’s inhumane working conditions and you can’t stand for shit like that. I’m serious. That type of shit needs to be stopped. I’ll buy you air conditioning. I feel that strongly about it. Hell, I’ll buy the whole fucking moving company. You don’t think I can? I can, trust me. I got plenty of money. Once my dad craps out, I could buy the whole damn company. And he’s old. Think about this: you guys want air-conditioning, I want my money; we should just team

up and off my dad and make it look like an accident or something. I'm just kidding, I'm just kidding. But you know what I'm saying?"

They looked back at me and shook their heads, then exited out the hall. I watched them walk down the stairs and disappear below. Then I leaned against the doorframe and took in that big silence in that empty hall. My therapist back in middle school used to make me stand in front of her and practice taking ten deep breaths while remaining perfectly still. I never made it past five before I itched my nose or laughed or flipped her the bird. Standing in that empty hall, I made it to three and returned to the suite.

I opened the sliding glass door in the common room and stepped onto the cement balcony. Cornrows and Afro-Puff drove by in the moving van and didn't notice me waving at them. I lit a cigarette and surveyed the quad. Everything was in quiet order. The lawns and shrubbery were trim. The sand in the volleyball court was evenly combed. The walkways were immaculate. All the windows in all the dorm rooms in all the gray and turquoise stucco boxes had their Venetians pulled shut. I took off my clothes on the balcony and flicked at my pud a little.

Returning inside, I walked a few naked laps around the suite. I rubbed my ass against the gray walls. I left a sprig or two of pubic hair on the TV table. I let the tip of my dick kiss each of my new suite-mate's door handles. These are all extremely therapeutic activities when adjusting to a new home, and I highly recommend them. Go ahead undergraduates, mark your territory. It's a riot.

There was an index card tacked on each of the suite's four bedroom doors, giving the full name of its future occupant. Below that, on each door, was a photocopied ditty

entitled *Human Scavenger Hunt!!!*—just a series of crudely drawn boxes, each filled with a different instruction:

Find someone who went skydiving this summer!!!

Find someone who has owned a parrot!!!

Find someone with your same shoe size!!!

At the bottom of the photocopied page was a message from Marie, our residence advisor apparently, and an obvious lover of the exclamation point, who promised that the first resident to complete the scavenger hunt would win a special prize. Pins and fucking needles, I thought to myself. I ripped the name card from my door and chucked it off the balcony, then checked out the name cards on the three other rooms, sizing up my new suitemates by nomenclature.

Room U-204. Wes Kerwin. It sounded like the name of some dillweed soap actor. And yes, reader, this guy will turn out to be *the* Wes Kerwin. Spoiler alert.

Room U-206. Albert Klemic. Klemic? Doctor, I was out with a naughty, dirty girl and believe I've contracted a burning case of the Klemic.

Room U-205. Tea Reese. Tea. *Tea*. Tea? Easily the highest douchebag potential of the whole lot. I turned his card upside down on his door and decided that I'd take every opportunity to torture this motherfucker for the rest of the year.

Back in my pillbox bedroom, I fired up the Thunderfuck a few times, snapped my Venetians shut and plugged in all the streetlights and other accoutrements. The walls flashed different colors and I paced around the ten-by-ten, stopping for green lights and going on reds. I got stuck on the thought that Pops was, probably at that moment, sitting

at some long executive table in Cupertino landing the contract of a lifetime, and Moms was putting in her eighteenth at the golf course. And I was in a dorm room for the next four years. Yup.

I hauled my costume trunk out of my new dinky closet, unlatched the lid and threw it open. Even with how distorted things looked due to the flashing lights and Thunderfuck, it was real comforting to look inside that trunk full of hats, masks, cloaks, capes, suits, dresses, and accessories. As a kid, I used to wear that shit all the time, pretty much never leaving the house as myself. Moms loved it because I'd accompany her to the boutiques in a white Mark Twain suit and introduce myself as her gentleman caller. Pops, on the other hand, was not too fond of Kaptain Kazantzakis running around his business meetings in underwear and a cape. He tried on multiple occasions to have me sign contracts restricting my apparel, but I always refused. Eventually he was saved by my pituitary gland, which kicked into overdrive a little earlier than most kids; I discovered titties, and I discovered that costumes did not often grant one access to titties. The costumes went in a trunk.

But I never had the heart to throw them away. Sometimes during high school, when my friend's parents barred them from hanging out with me, I'd sit in my cottage and bust open the trunk. The costumes were my only sure-fire cure to boredom. Not the normal type of boredom, but the real deep kind. The type of boredom that pisses you off. See, that's the thing that people don't realize: real boredom is the most dangerous type of anger. When you are bored—and I mean *really* bored—things cease to matter. And when things cease to matter, that's when the shit goes down. People always claim that

it's oppression or propaganda or starvation or bigotry or suffering that bring out the ugly parts of human beings—the parts of us that overthrow governments or bomb buildings or bury dead neighbors in our basements. But I say all of those proposed culprits are just different expressions of the same big boredom, the same enemy that people like me and Larry Ferlinghetti have always fought against for people like you. Tea, when he got hung up on his attention theories in relation to modern media, he called it the New Boredom, and he died fighting against it. But I don't want to talk about that right now. Boredom is boredom, and we've got plenty of time to discuss that shit.

So I'm standing over the costume trunk, and for the first time in my life it's not looking inspiring in there. I'm bored. The lights are flashing all around me and the Thunderfuck is raging, and I'm digging through those costumes, throwing a Pilgrim's hat one way and a James Dean leather jacket another way and a fencing mask another way. Then I'm at the bottom of the trunk and shit is strewn all around my ten-by-ten room, and I'm pulling out the last article in the trunk. It's my Kaptain Kazantzakis cape, and underneath it is the file folder with Pops' contracts. I stand up and pace the room naked, and I look at my newest contract and count all those zeroes that will someday be all my zeroes, so long as I make it through the next four years. And I lose my balance and bump into the parking meter leaning against the wall, and it falls on my foot. And now I'm pissed. I'm bored and pissed, and all I want to do is fuck with someone. Just fuck with anyone. So I get up and start limping and pacing around the room and brainstorming out loud, trying to design the finest fucked up prank that could be pulled to welcome Wes the Dillweed, Klemic the V.D., and Tea the Darjeeling Douchebag to their new home.

Theoretically, I think to myself, suicide would be the only impressive thing. Yup. A good old hanging. How much would that kill the move-in buzz to find some unknown naked fat kid swinging from the ceiling? A couple years prior, I'd shared a bag of mushrooms with a few UCSD folks at a concert, and they'd told me that back in '93 or so, some distraught student had thrown himself from one of the buildings on campus. Fucker was a legend now. Supposedly if your roommate kills himself, the whole suite gets straight A's for the quarter—that was university policy. Shit, I think, if I did something like hanging myself, I'd be doing more than just pulling a stupid prank. I'd actually be performing a hell of a gesture for the new roomies. Years from now, they'd still be clanking their cups together and saying that, thanks to that naked hairy guy hanging from the ceiling, we all kicked off our college careers with 4.0's! Legends about me would circle through the dorms for ages. *Did you hear about that naked guy who offed himself back in '96? Yeah, he didn't even wait for the school year to start. What was his name? What did he know that we don't know? What was he trying to tell us? I wish we could have asked him.*

Now, reader, let's be clear. Did I know all these thoughts were bullshit? Sure. Did I know that I really didn't want to hang myself? Of course I did. I wasn't the suicidal type. But that's the thing: it was *role-playing*. It was a new character for me to try out. It was something to do, and I can be very project-oriented when I want to. So I typed out a few drafts of suicide letters. I'm no Hemingway, but all those letters were so good I couldn't choose between them. One was about a fictitious ex-girlfriend who had dumped me right before I came to school, and how I found her in bed with my Pops. I

figured Pops would get a kick out of that one and have a hell of a time explaining it to Moms. Another was about how my death was in protest of the human rights violations going on in southern Luxembourg. The last one, and this was the best, stated that I was a practicing warlock who had been called back to the Netherworld by the Dark Lord himself, and that my death had been the final step in casting a permanent curse on the entire dorm building. I even scratched a scab on my knee and signed my name in blood!

But you can't just leave a suicide letter. I knew there had to be more to the project. So I composed some love letters to myself on the backs of my contracts. They were all from my fictitious, father-fucking ex-girlfriend, and I wrote them with my right hand to disguise the penmanship. I'm a lefty born on National Left Handers' Day—August thirteenth for all you ignorant racists—which makes me like the Crown Prince of Southpaws. They were good love letters, and I made sure that my fictitious ex-girlfriend spent several lengthy paragraphs describing my sexual prowess. I even dotted all the i's with red hearts.

It was crucial that the placement of the letters around the room be realistic, so I pretended to have a mental breakdown. I actually conjured some tears and snot as I tripped around the space, reading the letters all dramatically, crumpling them up, and throwing them against the walls while moaning and wailing. I capped it off by stomping on an old childhood lamp that Pops had brought me back from Germany. It was an impressive commitment to character, as I was really fond of that lamp.

It seemed more compelling to me that my character would attempt suicide by multiple methods simultaneously. I've always respected that type of determination. I

dug out an old bottle of Vicodin that I'd lifted from a guest at one of Pop's parties, and I spread the pills across my desk and spelled out the word *BYE* with them. Brilliant!

All that was left was the actual mechanics of the hanging, and let me tell you, in a college dorm room that's not easy. I still hold to the theory that those rooms are designed like jail cells, so suicide is nearly impossible. Low ceilings. No rafters. Lucky I'm crafty.

It took a while, and I was sweating like hell by this point, even without my clothes on. I tipped my bed up into a headstand, then I drove some hooked molly bolts into the wall and lashed the bed frame to them with climbing rope I'd once liberated from a gym. The bolts and rope were strong enough that I could safely do pull-ups on the up-ended bed. I took a belt and lashed it to the top of the bed frame, and then I looped a second belt through the first. It was perfect. If I slipped my head through the loop, pulled down on the loose end of the belt to tighten it around my neck, then bent my knees, I'd hang a couple feet above the ground. Very gritty—I could only imagine the rumors that would spread of how I'd had to muscle my way through my own hanging.

The place looked great. The sun had moved away from my window, so the whole room was dark except for those flashing traffic lights, which gave off fantastic shadows of the upturned bed and hanging belts. I checked out the scene from different angles. I left my room and closed the door, then pretended to be Tea Douchebag Reese and opened the door and acted out the horror of finding myself hanging. My version of Tea got really panicked and cried like a baby as he tried to hoist my dangling weight and save my life. But alas, it was no use. What a stunt!

By then, it was late afternoon and the sun was getting lower over the beachside cliffs. The Thunderfuck felt much less thunderous. The room looked good, but it reminded me of the view from the balcony: meticulous but empty. The boredom was returning, and everything felt miserably theoretical.

I decided it would at least be interesting to find out what a good hanging felt like, so I slipped my neck into the looped belt and pulled the end tight. The first time I lifted my legs, the bed frame creaked and my hands released the strap the moment the pressure hit my neck. I fell a couple feet onto my shins, and immediately scrambled back up into the belt loop. I took a deep breath, clutched the strap, and lifted my legs. The edge of the belt cut into the bottom of my Adam's apple. I forced my hands to grip the strap even harder. There was this clock over my desk that made funny animal mating calls at the start of every hour. It had a second hand, so I kept my eyes on it as I hung there, sort of swaying a bit, wondering if Guinness had a record for this sort of thing. There was a loud popping somewhere in my neck that, to this day, still aches on occasion. At fifteen seconds, I got a serious case of cottonmouth and the stars began twinkling in my eyes. I felt something wet drip down my chest and couldn't decide if it was sweat or blood.

I do better in life when I have goals, so I figured to go half a minute. My hands started to numb at twenty seconds, so I tightened my grip before I lost all feeling. My legs lashed out beneath me, but I kept them away from the carpet. This weird sound started to come out of my mouth, similar to the llama mating call that my clock made at 3pm. It was funny, as I'd never even known I could make a sound like that. At twenty-seven seconds, I stopped being able to see much, so I clenched my teeth and tried to time

the final stretch by my heartbeats that had suddenly become real loud. I focused on the mental image of Tea Douchebag Reese finding me there. It was all one hell of a stunt.

When I hit the ground it took me at least a few heartbeats to regain my vision, so I blind-crawled in the direction of where I thought the clock was. By the time the second hand came back into view, I estimated that I'd been airborne for around forty-five seconds. I let out this hoarse laugh and smiled. *No shit*, I kept saying to myself between coughing spasms. *No shit*. I had a newfound respect for hangers. Now I knew what it was like, and that shit was no joke. I dragged my corpse into the desk chair and draw-swallowed a Vicodin. I was feeling better, and it was time for a nap.

Just as I'd just lugged my feet up onto the desk and reclined the chair, someone started struggling with the lock at the suite entrance. I closed the door to my room and shut off all the lights and accoutrements, deciding I was in neither the condition nor the mood to play meet-and-greet. Showing a champion's strength, I mixed up a vodka gimlet and sat back in my chair.

Tea's mom entered the suite first, bringing her special gift of nonstop chatter. The woman had one of those voices where the volume knob was turned up just a couple notches too much—not enough to accuse her of yelling, but enough to gradually bore a hole through your brain. Every statement out of her mouth felt like a proclamation, like she'd just condemned the Catholic Church or discovered gold at the ol' mill. She talked about the heat like it was a bad day at Auschwitz. She marveled at the saintly kindness of the Residence Life Staff for allowing Tea to move in a day early. She loved the couch, she loved the size of the bathroom, she loved the view, and she loved the fucking gray

walls. Then I heard a bedroom door being unlocked across the suite, and suddenly Mrs. Reese was loving Tea's new room. Just loving it. Amazing. Adorable. *Perfect*. Some heavy footsteps went padding by my door and Mr. Reese mumbled that the place looked like a goddamn Motel 6. I nearly choked on my drink.

The Reese clan went in and out of the suite a few times to bring in Tea's stuff. They'd finished the lugging before I mixed my second gimlet, so I figured the guy hadn't brought many things to his new home. That, and the fact that Mr. Reese stated like eighteen times that they could have avoided renting a U-Haul altogether and simply strapped most of Tea's things to the top of the family car. To that, Mrs. Reese let out this loud dingo laugh and shout-spoke that, oh no, they weren't going to risk strapping things to the car roof after the last incident where everyone's clothes went tumbling down the interstate. They all laughed a little and it seemed pretty good-natured. Well, good-natured in the way that married people are good-natured, as they can somehow shit in each other's faces and still make it all a merry passive-aggressive carnival. Shoot me if I ever wed again.

I saw no need to open my door and make nice-nice with the Reese clan. It wasn't because I was *acutely shy*, believe you me. I once had an hour-long conversation with some Spanish emissary friend of Pops while on six hits of acid, and I held my own despite the fact that the guys face kept melting and recoagulating. Here's the deal folks: the human brain can only know a limited number of people, and every time you shake a new hand, somebody else gets forced out of your mental rolodex. Why get to know a guy's parents before you've decided whether you even like that motherfucker? There's a

danger in that; it creates a bond that you might not desire. Having close friends isn't so much about collecting as it is about equipping. The people I know and love are useful to me. They enhance me, plain and simple. You can shake your head and cluck your tongue at that if you want, reader, but that's probably because you've never even taken the time to define friendship and love for yourself. You keep it a fluffy pink abstraction while I'm more comfortable with cold definition. But hey, live and let live.

I knew the Vicodin was kicking in because I was having trouble deciding if the voices I heard were coming from the Reese clan or from my own head. I was entering that beautiful in-between state, just moseying along the borders of wakefulness. I heard Mr. Reese pleading with his wife to let Tea make his own bed. I thought I smelled the smoke from a cheap cigar. The pain at my Adam's apple started tingling in a nice way. I think I may have farted really loud and I had a passing concern that the Reeses heard it and would discover me. I started to drift off as Tea's mother was urging him not to put some Gandhi poster above his desk, but to rather put it above his bed to balance out the room. Then I was asleep and had a dream co-starring Gandhi that I don't care to elaborate on.

It was dark when I regained consciousness, no clue where the light switch was in my new room. I felt around in front of me until I located the door handle and cracked the door real quiet. There was still a voice out in the suite. Peeking through, I could see light coming from Tea's room. He had a halogen lamp turned down to a sort of dim lusty

setting. I threw on this great maroon velvet bathrobe from my costume trunk and snuck my way into the common room.

Now, I won't claim any secret powers of stealth, but I can be pretty damn quiet when I want to. I made it to the common room L-couch and settled into the corner. I figured Tea would spot me in a moment, but until then I would just play watcher. You might call that a little creepy, but I dare you to deny that there's anything more satisfying than observing people when they think they're alone. My opinion, you feel the most familiar with a person when you see them that way.

Tea was oblivious, talking on his cordless phone and pacing in and out of view. "No, that's okay, Mom. I appreciate it. Really. I'm just feeling like staying in tonight. Finishing the unpacking. I know. I know. You and Dad go and get something. I'm not really hungry. I know. I know." He said all this with gentle sugar, clearly a veteran of tolerance in regards to his mother. I was glad I hadn't been forced to meet this guy's parents, and I stifled a laugh when I noticed that the framed Gandhi poster had ended up over the bed.

It took him five minutes to figure out how to end the call, and I counted six *I love you's* come from him, each more mumbled than the last. When he finally hung up, he stood with his back to me in the doorway, looking around the piles of boxes still to be unpacked. It was my first real view of the guy. To be honest, he wasn't quite as douchebagesque as I'd predicted, which was annoying. He stood pretty straight in a pair of tan cargo shorts, an inch or so under six feet. No shirt, built in a way that guys like me wish to be built: thin, but not a rail, with a natural layer of muscle that you could tell the

kid hadn't worked a day to acquire. His neck and lower arms had a hell of a farmer's tan, and the rest of his back was pale with freckles on his shoulders. Also to my annoyance, the guy had this red-brown hair that was straight as shit and hung just perfect in that mop look that was popular back then—the kind of hair that a Mediterranean fucker like me can never achieve. Unless he'd turned around and revealed a third eye or gargantuan honker, I could tell that he was a dude who had friends. I decided that if this motherfucker ended up being full of himself we were going to have beef.

Buffalo Springfield was playing at a low volume on his stereo, which I considered to be a respectable choice. In the grand scheme of early acid bands, Buffalo Springfield is no Moby Grape or New Riders of the Purple Sage, but at least Tea wasn't blasting the goddamn White Album and pretending it made him special and original like all those goddamn Beatles fans that are so profoundly unprofound.

While Neil Young sang *I Am A Child*, Tea stood in front of his doorway like a skipping record. His head turned in quick bird twitches to view different spots in the room, then his body would begin the slightest of movements towards one pile of crap or another before retracting again to its neutral position. He seemed stuck, and after a dozen second-guessed movements, he caught himself in his own stuckness, taking in a deep breath and letting his hands relax to his sides. Then he spoke.

“What are you doing right now?” His voice wasn't aggressive, but it was firm. It was the type of tone that would stop a child in his tracks before he burned the neighbor's house down. I figured he was trying to throw his weight around to establish suite

dominance, so I opened my mouth to let him know it wasn't any of his damn business what I was doing. But before I could, he piped up again.

“Stop. Pay attention. Where are you? What are you doing right now? You're unpacking. But you're not *here*. You're distracted. You don't have to keep putting things away. But you want to finish unpacking tonight. Why? Because you do. Maybe you should take a break. It's okay for you to take a break. Take a break.”

He was talking to himself, addressing *Tea Reese* like he was two people and one person at the same time. Nut job, right? Wrong. And up yours for making that assumption, reader. If you think that talking to yourself is a sign of instability, then you should put this book down now because it isn't for you. But I digress. Tea wasn't finished with his solo conversation quite yet.

“You should take a break. You generally wouldn't take a break, so that's exactly what you need to do. Okay? Okay. Rant a little? You don't feel up to it. That's exactly why you're going to do it. You're going to rant. Okay. Five topics this time, coming from the letters B, K, Q, T, and W. Pick your topics.”

He raised his head up and looked around the ceiling like these topics were flying fish that he was going to hook and reel in. One after another, he named his topics. Barometric Pressure. Kilauea. Quadrepedalism. Tchaikovsky. Wimbledon.

Are you confused, reader? Yeah, so was I. I quietly tucked my knees to my chest and sank low in the couch, hoping that Tea wouldn't notice me before he did whatever it was he was about to do.

With his back still turned to me, he looked up at the poster of Gandhi. His breathing began to change, his shoulders rising and falling at increasingly slower rates. I found my own breathing trying to match the pace, but I couldn't get mine to slow down that much. Then, bit-by-bit, his body shifted. First his knees bent slightly and his legs relaxed. He raised his chin all dignified and straightened his back. Then his right hand pressed flat against his chest, and that's when I got it: he was mimicking the pose of Gandhi in the poster, pretending his hand was supporting that bedsheet toga thing that ol' Mahatma liked to sport. I had a feeling that if he'd turned around at that moment, I would have seen hollowed cheeks and tiny, kind eyes behind round frames, just like the face in the poster.

He held that pose for probably a minute, completely silent. The balcony light gave off a quiet buzzing and there was a hum coming from the fan in the bathroom. Hell, I could hear my own stomach making squishing sounds, begging me for something other than vodka and Vicodin. Then Tea's breathing sped up and his head and torso began rocking back and forth like he was about to take off in a sprint. And in a sense, that's exactly what he did as he kicked off his rant.

Reader, disregard what Scooter said about Tea's first public rant being at my club in 2015. If anything, this moment, in a quiet dorm room in 1996, was Tea's first public rant. This was it, folks. This was the start for Tea, the start of him sharing with others that thing he could do that nobody else could do like him. Forget and disregard all those ranting imitators who have appeared in the last few years and gone on all the talk shows. They're not even close. And if you, reader, never had the honor of witnessing a genuine

Reese Rant, let me try to put it into words. Have you ever had anyone describe to you the details of their favorite guitar solo? You know, the one that had them cheering like a maniac in the middle of the Fillmore dancefloor. Or perhaps someone has tried to amaze you with the description of a spectacular plot twist in a movie you've never seen. Or maybe someone attempted to translate the emotive skills of their favorite modern dancer. If you've ever had the opportunity to sit through descriptions of phenomena like this, you know what a miserable and tedious experience it is. No matter how minute and accurate the details, the story still remains dull as shit. To the listener, it's just secondhand information. It's not the flesh and blood and fucking *energy* of that precise moment when that miracle happened, and that pretty much makes it nothing at all but dehydrated theory. I learned a long time ago to keep the miracles I've seen to myself, otherwise I kill their miraculousness. And, I guess in saying that, I've just decided that I'm *not* going to try and describe a Reese Rant for you right now. It's futile and it won't work, and it's a goddamn shame for all of you who missed the boat, because there never will be another Reese Rant ever again before the fucking Earth cherrydrops into the Sun.

Okay. For Tea's sake, I'll at least attempt a description. Let me try this objectively. Imagine if you can (which you can't) a man standing alone talking non-stop at a hundred miles an hour, yet somehow still making his words clear and audible.

Wait. That's terrible. Let me try it metaphorically. Imagine that the words he is spitting are a train, like a train of thought. Not a singular train of thought, but rather a fleet of five locomotives on five different tracks, all heading in different directions, and

winding around and crisscrossing each other, and sometimes even chugging right next to each other, but never colliding and always accelerating.

I hate this. Okay. Imagine if you can (which you fucking can't) that you only had one professor for all five of your college classes, and that professor would lecture on all five subjects at once, switching rapidly between them, sometimes overlapping two or more topics, somehow never losing his place in any one of the lessons, and near the tail end of the lecture—as the professor is talking so fast and whipping his hand around like he's writing Arabic on air—it seems to you that his words have become gibberish but somehow you still can understand them, and you start to suspect that not only has he been juggling these five topics, but he has somehow merged them into a singular, shining Topic right under your damn nose.

Fuck it. I give up. I insisted on writing the first chapter just so I could describe this event, and it sounds like shit. Sorry, Tea. You should have written this chapter yourself, but you were too goddamn humble for that. Now look at the fucking position you've put me in.

Let's just put it this way: I have absolutely no idea how long my friend ranted that night. Truly. It could have been five minutes. It could have been thirty. I lost myself watching him. All I know is that at one point—as he was really in high gear, as he was spitting that shit like it was his morning prayer and evening meal, as he was comparing the walking patterns of modern equines to Tchaikovsky's rhythmic structure in Symphony No. 6 in B Minor—I noticed that my own legs were doing their share of ambulating. I had gotten off the couch and was making my way straight towards Tea's

doorway. It wasn't a conscious decision, I can tell you that much. I definitely didn't want him to stop ranting. But I needed him to turn around. I needed to see his eyes. Don't ask me why. I'm not really even sure what I was expecting, whether a vacant trance glaze, or a closed-eyed REM twitching, or even zombie whites. I just knew I needed to see those eyes.

I accidentally kicked a cardboard box top that had been lying right in front of his room. Not my most graceful move. Tea's shoulders made the slightest of jumps and the rant cut off. Then I watched as the muscles in his neck and back tensed to force his shoulders down, straining until those two parallel lines in the back of the neck showed clear through his skin. He didn't turn around, but just stared at me through the reflection in the glass of his framed Gandhi poster, just waiting—in my opinion—until his heart rate and breathing wouldn't betray the fact that I'd scared the shit out of him. There was this feeling in his posture, like expectation, like he'd been waiting his whole life for someone to show up at his door and catch that rant.

He and I argued for years as to whether I'd surprised him that night. The little shit always tried to claim that he saw me coming, even once stated that he'd *known* I'd been on the couch the whole time. Bullshit. He just could never surrender the fact that his attention hadn't been fully *aware* of what was going on around him—that he'd performed a private act in a public setting. The little shit.

Me, I felt a bit embarrassed that I'd walked over and kicked that box top, so I planted this swarthy smirk on my face, crossed one leg in front of the other and leaned all casual against his door frame. My eyes locked onto another poster, tacked to Tea's closet

door, one of that poor crispy Vietnamese monk who burned himself alive in Saigon and then got reincarnated on a Rage Against the Machine album cover. It was a helluva poster to have staring at you from the warmth of your bed, which was exactly how Tea had it positioned. I noticed then that the Buffalo Springfield album was no longer playing, that Tea had ranted through the whole thing and I, at some point on the L-couch, had stopped noticing the music altogether.

Tea still hadn't turned around. Suddenly I could sense this really dirty hangover running through my veins from the vodka and Vicodin, and I hoped my eyes didn't look as bad as they felt. We stood that way like two super beings, each unwilling to be a little less super than the other.

"The hell kind of name is Tea anyway?" I say. I was proud of that first line. Still am.

He continues to look at me through the glass, popping the knuckles in his hands as they dangle on either side of him. "My mom was drinking tea when she went into labor with me." He says it casually, keeping any sort of quiver out of his voice.

"Not too healthy for a pregnant woman to drink caffeine," I say. "You might just be a victim of stunted growth."

Tea doesn't reply, just tilts his head to the left a little and shrugs his shoulders.

"Tea Reese," I say, tapping the righted name card on his door with my middle finger. "It's got a good sound to it."

“Daki Kazantzakis,” he says kind of smugly. I know, in that moment, that he knows that he shouldn’t know my name, and I know that he thinks this will surprise me. So I make it look like it doesn’t surprise me.

“Nice pronunciation on the last name,” I say. “Most people make it sound like some oral sex position or something.”

“You related to the author?” he asks.

I have no idea what he’s talking about, so I say I am.

Tea reaches under the pillow on his bed. He turns around and hands me my door’s name card, as well as my jar of Thunderfuck, which I’d apparently left in the common room.

“My parents didn’t see the jar,” he says all reassuringly. I give him the *like-I-give-a-fuck* shrug and stuff the jar into a pocket on the bathrobe. Tea turns to a box of office supplies on his desk and busies himself with unpacking them.

I had to give the kid his props for the way he handled the situation. Both of us were doing our best not to make a big thing out of the rant, which I can definitely appreciate. Don’t get me wrong: I’m all for people harnessing personal lunacy and whipping out the “creative flow of the universe” and whatnot. Hell, I’ve made a very successful career of it. I think it’s great, and I’ve never been able to trust any pea-brain who didn’t have the imagination to understand it. That being said, the only thing worse than a small-minded asshole is a broad-minded dicklick with no sense of tact or pride. You see these hippie-dips all the time, doing their tai-chi in the office lunch room, rolling around with their contact improv friends in the middle of a goddamn public park, reciting

their slam poetry to strangers at a house party—you get me. Here’s the deal: all that creative shit is important and valid, but nobody really likes to watch others do it without invitation. It’s awkward, like watching somebody masturbate or take a shit—an unauthorized outpouring, and by-and-large, humans don’t appreciate being forced to witness the outpourings of others. It’s ritual without occasion, and that, in my mind, is about as embarrassing as it gets, because the ritual world and the everyday world are forced to rub up against each other in broad daylight, which is like the ickiest of dry humps.

“You almost finished unpacking?” I ask.

He nods, still trying to establish some sense of casualness for our first meeting. I oblige him and step through the doorway, grabbing a seat on his bed. Other than the Gandhi and burning monk posters, the room doesn’t have any decorations. Not one photograph of anyone, friends or family or whatever, like the guy is trying to give the impression that he’d spontaneously generated into existence just the other day or something.

“What time your parents leave?” I ask.

“A couple hours ago.” He turns a bottle of Whiteout on his desk so the label faces his way.

“What time is it now?” I ask.

“Almost ten.”

I shake my head, realizing I'd been passed out at my desk longer than I'd expected or wanted to be. That's always worrisome to a guy with chemically recreational habits. I guess asphyxiation really tuckers a fucker out.

"Have you been in your room this whole time?" Tea asks.

"Yup."

"Unpacking?"

"Just hanging."

I look out his only window, to the sand volleyball court directly below. "Tea Reese," I say. "Ever been in a fight?" It's one of my favorite icebreakers.

He stops toying with the desk supplies and thinks about it. "Just once," he says. "In third grade."

I smile. "Did you lose?"

He shakes his head, kind of regrettably. "I hurt the kid pretty bad," he says. "Cory Thorndike." He goes back to his desk supplies.

We sit there in silence, and I can tell I'm not going to hate this guy because he doesn't try to fill the air with stupid questions, like why I hadn't come out and said hello to him and his parents earlier. To me, that's indicative of a guy who's familiar with solitude and privacy, which is a human trait I consider important. My second wife was too scared to eat dinner in a restaurant alone. I once asked her if she was five years old or something and offered to hire her a teenage babysitter next time I left town. We got divorced pretty soon after that.

"You want a drink?" I ask.

He looks over at me a bit too quick, and then tries to nod all casual. I smile, knowing the guy can't wait to get a little alcohol in his gullet.

"You like shots?" I ask.

"I've mostly just drunk from the bottle."

I stand, liking that kind of answer. "Well Tea Reese, we're sophisticated college shitheads now, and we need to get used to shot glasses."

"What are we drinking?" he asks.

"Raki." I figure he'll never know what that was, but his eyes tell me he does, and that sort of pisses me off.

"Opa," he says, tossing the empty box to the floor.

I make my way out his door, then turn around. He's right behind me. I put my hand to his chest and stop him. "There's something important I have to ask you, Tea Reese." He nods, and I point to the Human Scavenger Hunt hanging from his door. "Did you go skydiving this summer?"

He laughs, loud, the way Pops laughed. "Actually," he says, "I spent the whole summer in a pipe."

I pull the jar of Thunderfuck from my pocket. "Me too."

Well, that's not a bad start to Chapter One. My pixie nurse should be here any minute to do my blood-work, so I'll have to write about the rest of my meeting with Tea tomorrow. I'll end this writing session with a quick thought. You know what's crazy to me? Before the Civil War started and the country split up, Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S.

Grant—the two bearded badasses—were part of the same army and had actually graduated from the same military academy. Now, you could be a know-it-all dick like Tea often was and rebut my amazement in this. You could tell me that, at that time in America, West Point really was the only military academy available, so it wasn't that big of a koinkydink that Grant and Lee got trained at the same spot. Thanks, I know that, so don't be a wanker and let me finish my thought. Dig this: Not only were Grant and Lee both graduates of West Point, but they actually were roommates at the academy. That's right. *Roommates*. They used to sit around their room on hot nights in those old-fashioned men's nightshirts, sporting the sleeping hats that look like dunce caps with erectile dysfunctions. They would only keep one candle lit because it was always way past lights-out hour when they'd get their heaviest bonding in. Grant would pull his secret bottle of moonshine from underneath his bed and Lee would tease out his beard with a wooden afro pick or something, and he'd brag to Grant how he was completely annihilating him in their beard-growing contest. And Grant would give him the finger as he tipped that jug of battery acid back-back-back until a little dribbled down his chin, then he'd pass it on to Lee who'd take this pussy sip that he claimed was how Virginians drank their liquor. They'd play relay with that jug while talking about their secret crushes on the officers' wives, both of them hoping that the alcohol flush and new beard were masking their blushes. Then they'd spread a map of the continent on Grant's bed and compete in crazy mock battles. What if I was Genghis Kahn in Pennsylvania and I was bringing my Mongol hordes down to meet your Spartan phalanx in Maryland? What if you were Cortez, backed by your newly acquired army of Aztec warriors, and you were

laying siege on my clan of German mercenaries in New Orleans? The two would roll dice, plot out marching orders, create their lists of armaments and formations, and then debate back and forth the details of the confrontations. And the whole time, as they're fucking around and laughing in whispers, there is this unsaid feeling of respect, like they are aware that Chance has somehow placed two giants of men in one room, two lions of their time sharing a sink and holding farting contests in the early mornings. They both would feel that amazement, but they would never say it out loud, because men like that don't say things like that out loud, because they know spoken words kill the greatest of potentials before they have the chance to **[EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr. Kazantzakis's first chapter, having already largely exceeded its maximum page length, will be continued later in this book. The reader will find that chapter's conclusion at a point that is, chronologically speaking, most appropriate to the timeline of the memoirs.]**

Chapter 2
San Mateo, CA, 6/10/1996

In his valedictorian address at high school graduation, Tea Reese took his allotted four minutes to intermingle Joseph Campbell's structure for the hero's journey with Arnold van Gennep's theories on liminality during rites of passage. They were two ideas—seemingly cousin fruits dangling from the same meditative tree—which Tea had stumbled onto a few months prior. Their connections had been marinating privately in his head since that time, and it felt good to, for once, speak such ideas aloud. Having no desire to bore the graduation crowd (or come off as a presumptuous asshole), Tea kept his language simple, limited his polysyllabic words to an unassuming minimum, and managed to throw in a good-natured joke at the physics teacher's expense. People laughed, which meant they were listening, which was all he wanted.

It was going well. Nearing his closing remarks, he placed his hands on the wooden podium, shifted his gaze away from the crowd of sweltering friends and relatives who fanned themselves with their programs in the heat of the school's vast open court, away from his parents in front row center (Mom in her new peach skirt, jacket, and sunhat and Dad in his trusty old corduroy sport coat), and he redirected his attention to those being celebrated: three hundred figures in red and blue robes, capped with mortarboards and gold tassels that swung slightly in the afternoon breeze like tails of lounging pets. Three hundred sets of eyes, and nearly all were familiar to him in one capacity or another. Classmates. Members of school clubs. Teammates. Neighbors in countless single file lines. Or merely the recipients of Tea's passing hellos during his

regular lunchtime rounds of the court, when he chatted with the student body that had chosen him as their president.

As he delivered his concluding thoughts, his peers were with him, their six hundred eyes trained on him (five hundred and ninety-nine for accuracy's sake, as Mark Maskel had lost one in a childhood accident with a carrot). Their attention bolstered him in his final words as a student of Hillsdale High School.

“Campbell’s theories are not just reserved for the mythic figure. The cycle of the hero, the progression of growth and struggle and discovery and change, the movement towards purpose—and through purpose towards triumphant arrival—is a path common to all of us, whether we know it or not. We are, each of us, significant. Significant on a mythic level. Our very presence brings significance to each other, and to the world. So the great challenge of our lives is not to become important, but simply to recognize that we already are.”

Tea paused and smiled. He considered the words he’d just spoken to be the exact *opposite* of what his audience and peers had expected him to say. He, the poster child of overachievement, wasn’t glorifying future honors and accomplishments, nor casting fiery proclamations of political or social necessity. The challenge he’d issued, for his peers (no matter who they were, or what they had or had not done) to simply *accept* themselves, was easygoing and haphazardly abstract. The words felt dangerous. He wasn’t even sure he fully believed them.

Tea took a deep breath and steadied himself, so as to deliver the last few lines as he’d practiced them in his mirror the night before. His lips parted, and something bright

invaded the outskirts of his vision. He turned his head to the left, away from the graduates, and to the clutter of music stands and black instrument cases where the school band was stationed at the side of the stage. A sophomore, in preparation for the infinite pomp and endless circumstance that the band would kick off just as soon as Tea's speech concluded, had raised his trumpet to his lips to drain the spit valve. The afternoon sun, still very strong, reflected off the trumpet's brass bell and straight at Tea, and as he turned to face it, the glare flooded his sight, even as the final sentences of the speech tumbled forth.

“This graduation ceremony is a rite of passage that ushers us to a new stage in our journey as people of this world. At this very moment, as we wear these caps and gowns that will *never* be worn on any other day in our lives, we sit in a liminal state, neither students nor graduates. But upon receiving our diplomas, we will recognize our significance more than we ever have before...”

Strangely, Tea found that he hadn't yet turned away from the glare, but rather was gripped by it, by how the light danced in and out of his eyes, how the sophomore and his trumpet would appear one moment and then be wiped away by a white-gold, blinding warmth. His words continued to march forward—they were memorized to a level of reflex. But as the light forced his eyes closed and pierced, rather pleasantly, through his lids, Tea suspected that the tone of his final remarks (calm-but-winning during his mirror rehearsals) was taking an unusual leniency.

“We will shift our tassels to the opposite sides of our mortarboards, and we *will* feel greater than when we woke up this morning. And the moment we toss these

mortarboards—these *Frisbee hats*—into the air, we will be forever changed. The hats will fly, and our passage will be completed! The hats will land and we'll be graduates! Class of 1996, there is no one I'd rather take that journey with. I will toss my hat for you. I will toss my hat for you! *I will toss my hat for you!* You are heroes!"

He lowered his head away from the glare.

There was silence. Tea could hear his strained voice ricocheting off the corridors surrounding the court. He slowly opened his eyes. His hands had a white-knuckled grip on the podium and sweat dripped down his head and back. His heart pounded.

That had not been calm-but-winning. Tea kept his eyes to the podium, fearing the blank stares on the faces of his peers. A single phrase looped stubbornly through his mind: *Follow your bliss.* It was Joseph Campbell's signature line, the great mythologist's three word summation for an entire lifetime of scholarship, and now it traveled silently, just once, across Tea's lips. He'd cut the phrase from his speech last night, deeming it too reductive—or perhaps too permissive; he wasn't entirely sure—to the larger subject matter. The silence continued, and Tea concentrated on stopping the shaking in his knees.

Then, a triumphant battle cry erupted from the cluster of varsity linemen sitting in the third row of graduating seniors. All heads, including Tea's, turned towards Clint Donoghue as he stood up, a touch wobbly and red-faced, with his blue robe halfway unzipped. Seemingly happy with the attention, Clint let out another cry and followed it with, "Yeah! We're fucking heroes!" Then he launched his mortarboard thirty feet into the air. There was a mumble from the audience that lasted until the mortarboard hit the

peak of its flight. Then, with surprising symmetry, a dozen more football players stood and an entire squadron of mortarboards took flight. Cheers surged through the senior class. Students, first in meek duos and trios, then in clusters of twenty, rose and tossed their hats. The whole class was on its feet. Mortarboards hovered, and tumbled, and sliced the air everywhichway. Some settled in trees and on top of corridors, and those that descended back to the quad were caught by the seniors and sent back into orbit. Someone began a chant for the Class of 1996. From an unseen location, a pair of khaki pants joined in the aerial display. One student, a bizarre outcast named Cory Thorndike, was on hands and knees, rapidly collecting mortarboards and shoving the hoard into his robe.

Still at the podium, Tea looked out to the audience. Parents were turning confusedly to each other. He felt a surprised smile forming in his cheeks. The seniors had jumped the gun; they hadn't yet received their diplomas, nor been recognized as graduates by the school superintendent. Tea looked through the crowd of red and blue robes to the principal, Mr. Hillborn, on the opposite end of the stage. He was staring back at Tea, a diploma hanging limply in his hand. Tea looked out to front row center; his mom was frantically applauding, her giant peach sunhat bouncing around at precarious angles on her head. His dad's arms were crossed over his chest as he failed to restrain his laughter at the mess: the mess that—Tea realized with astonishment—he had inadvertently created.

Mr. Hillborn leaned into his microphone and, in a voice at once jovial and ominous, informed the Class of 1996 that they had not *yet* graduated. Order was restored,

mortarboards reclaimed, students reseated, ceremony resumed, graduates called forth, Vietnamese and Hindi surnames butchered, and diplomas distributed at leaky-faucet tempo. Then, without a second go at a hat toss, the ceremony was concluded—just like that.

Tea was now squeezing his way through a standing crowd of graduates and celebrants and flashing cameras, inching his way towards his mom and dad. Still camouflaged in the herd of red and blue robes, he could see that his parents had not yet spotted him. His mom's head was scanning the crowd, and his dad had an arm around her shoulder, affectionately yet firmly preventing her tiny frame from charging headlong into the crowd.

Tea was still a good thirty feet away, but no longer struggling forward. He just stood there staring at them, his knees slightly bent so as to hide himself behind the dozens of surrounding shoulders. He wasn't quite sure what he was doing, but he wanted to delay the encounter for a few moments. It needed to feel right; it needed to feel the way such an occasion should feel. To his left, Rhonda Dean and Candace Finn were embracing and cry-laughing. It seemed like an appropriate emotional response for a once-in-a-lifetime event. He waited for his own poignant surge to locate him, but all he got was a quiet tingle in the throat, like there was a lost bug down there. Not the correct sensation. Tea ducked lower as his mom's head swiveled in his direction.

A hand gripped the back of his neck and pulled him into a cluster of Student Body Officers posing for a picture. "We're fucking heroes!" Clint yelled, squeezing Tea's neck even tighter. Clint had managed to muscle Tea in right next to Paige Hillborn, the

principal's daughter and Tea's ex-girlfriend. He smiled at her, the two not having been in this close of proximity for a couple years. She smiled back and flipped him the bird as the camera flashed, and when Tea's eyes recovered he saw that his mother had spotted him and was now hopping up and down in her high heels. He waved an acknowledgment and headed towards her.

The journey through the crowd had the dawdling slug pace of a late-for-class nightmare, as though an extra helping of gravity had latched onto him. His mother was yelling something at him as she hopped up and down, but her shouts were muted in the surrounding noise. She kept saying it, whatever it was, bouncing and chanting a singular phrase like a peach-clad Maasai. Tea muscled another step forward. He wiped sweat from his forehead, a product of the immense conglomerated body heat of this group-being that surrounded him; it was a great blob of heightened life, saturated with unrestrained tears and shouts, to which Tea currently felt more like a perturbed parasite burrowing its way through than a fellow member-cell of the coalition. He steered safely clear of Mr. Hillborn as the principal gave a tight handshake to Jimmy Ehrlich, the only student in the graduating class to wrangle an Ivy League acceptance. Yale. They had rejected Tea. He looked towards his mom, who had now added clapping to her jump-chant routine, creating an impressive polyrhythm. Tea focused on her mouth to decipher what she was saying.

You made it. That's what she was shouting. *You made it!* Over and over again. He should have figured that's what it was. She was offering him—no, bestowing upon him—the conclusive version of their decade-old private mantra: *You're going to make it.*

The expression, only uttered from she to him, was a relic of his childhood; it had been an era defined for Tea by a year-long bombardment of sharp anxiety coupled with intangible terror, a treason of his feelings and senses whose origins could never be explained by him or his parents; the endless year, when his mother's afternoons at work were habitually punctuated by tear-choked phone calls from her eight-year old, repeating to her in strained whispers *I can't do it, I can't do it*, and she forced to interrupt her work to whisper back to her son *you're going to make it, you're going to make it*, over and over until she could coax him into saying it through the receiver ten times in a row, *I'm going to make it, I'm going to make it*, and then ending the call, only to have the crisis repeated a half hour later.

I can't do it. Do what? She'd constantly asked him that during those calls. What can't you do? And he'd blurted out, his voice mottled in childish frustration and grief, some impossible long-division problem or lengthy Social Studies assignment. Even at eight years old he could comprehend her bewilderment: why did something so minor and ridiculous as $7634 \div 42$ create such a crisis in him? It had been impossible for him to explain. He could never articulate that it both *was* and *was not* simply the math problem causing the panic, that there were other conspirators to this terror: the fading light of the day, the afternoon wind bending trees in the garden, the dead mourning dove he'd found on his walk home from school—and yet, even these pieces of evidence were only feebly indicating towards the face of whatever *it* was that he couldn't *do*. He didn't know then, nor had he discovered in the decade since, exactly what was so frighteningly beyond him, what it was he could never do.

You're going to make it. Make what? Make it where? It seemed his savior mantra had been forged in the same vague fires as his childhood tormentor. The phrase had long ago lost its flavor of encouragement for Tea and had instead gained the taste of oath, pledge, or vow: *By my honor, I swear I will make it.* The crazed phone calls had ceased within a year, and the terror had ebbed away soon after, and what had bloomed from those revealed shores was a young man with near-unquenchable drive, with a voracity for achievement and service that no longer needed to call upon his mother's voice for solace. In his high school years, she had only dusted off the phrase in the tensest of moments for him, when he was preparing for four Advanced Placement exams in a single week, and she stood in his bedroom doorway to bid him goodnight and remind him that *you're going to make it*, and he turned from the glare of his desk lamp to reply in a voice that was as full of certainty as fatigue, "I know."

Make it where, he did not know. He only knew it was his duty to arrive—he *would* arrive. He'd always assumed that Where-He-Would-Make-It surely dwelt in a province far away from What-He-Could-Not-Do, and when he finally reached Where-He-Would-Make-It—when, in the distance, he spotted the location of his triumphant homecoming—things would be fine. And from what he could tell in looking at his mom in her new peach outfit, as Tea popped through the last barrier of red and blue shoulders and strode towards his parents, was that he'd apparently made it. He was finally there.

He'd assumed the sensation of arrival would be more alien than this, like stepping off a plane on an unknown continent. Now, making the final steps towards his parents, he felt the tingling bug in his throat joined by a slight tightness. He hoped it was the

beginnings of the strong emotions coming through, because that would be nice and right in this moment of arrival.

His mom threw her arms around his neck. Her sunhat bumped his chin and fell to the ground behind her. He hugged her tight, and by her own strength, she hoisted her mouth to his ear. “You made it,” she whispered. She’d wanted to say it only to him. Her voice trembled and he could feel some sort of wetness collecting on his cheek. “You made it.”

“Yeah. I did,” Tea said. His voice was flat. It sounded wrong. He bent his knees to lower her back to the ground. Her eyes were puffy, and it seemed harder than he’d expected to look into them. “I did, right? I made it.”

“You certainly did,” she said, pulling the tissue from her watchband.

Tea’s dad stepped forward, scooping the sunhat from the ground and replacing it on her head. He gave it a good pat on top and made the brim fall below her eyes. Then he turned to his son. He wore the usual slight grin under his droopy mustache; the grin and mustache worked like sentimental baleen, filtering down the man’s internal states to indecipherable levels of subtlety before they ever reached the surface, giving him the constant look of a person who saw the entire world as but a minor amusement.

“Hell of a speech,” his dad said. “Damn near started a riot.”

“Yeah,” Tea said, shaking his head more than he needed to. “I didn’t expect that to happen.”

Dad leaned in and hugged him, patting Tea on the back and brushing a scratchy kiss across his cheek. “It was a great speech.”

“It was extraordinary!” his mother chimed in.

“Thanks,” Tea said. “It wasn’t too technical, was it? Or, maybe, too—”

His dad laughed and shook his head. “Well, *I* understood it.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Tea mumbled.

“But you forgot to toss your cap,” Dad said, flicking at the hard blue brim above Tea’s eyes.

Tea touched his mortarboard. He must have been too busy watching everyone else throw theirs; too busy realizing they were tossing at the wrong time.

“I was glad you didn’t throw it,” Mom said, taking his hand. “I was afraid you’d lose it.”

His dad chuckled. “Trina, it’s not like he’s going to sport the damn hat around town. There’s a reason they make them so ridiculous looking—it’s a one time thing. That’s what you were saying in the speech, right? See? I told you I understood.”

Tea nodded at Dad and squeezed his mother’s hand. Had the whole senior class really forgotten the correct moment to toss the mortarboards? Except him? It seemed farfetched. Or had they all, collectively, just not given a shit it was the wrong time—simply decided, as the participants of a rite, when *they* felt was the appropriate moment to step forth from their liminal state. Except Tea. He’d been too busy watching Mr. Hillborn watch him.

“For posterity’s sake, I’m glad you kept it,” Mom said. “It took me two weeks to get ahold of that patch, you know.”

Tea removed the blue cap and turned it in his hands. His mother had hot-glued an official UC San Diego patch to the top of the mortarboard. She'd had the patch special-ordered from the university's student store. He traced his finger along the patch and smiled at his mom. "It's great."

"That's the university library," she said, poking at a diamond shaped structure below the patch's lettering. "It's an architectural marvel. I'm so excited for you. You'll get to see that building every day on your way to classes. Wonderful, fantastic classes."

She wrapped her arms around Tea's torso and he got a mouthful of peach sunhat. His mom was overcompensating again for UCSD. She'd been doing this for two months, conjuring instantaneous rapture at the very mention of the school, wowing her son, her husband, and any innocent bystanders with believe-it-or-not factoids about Tea's future home: the university's famed Stuart Art Collection of quirky and mysterious pieces installed throughout the campus; the fact that Sally Ride, the world's first female astronaut, taught an astronomy course there; the school's proximity to world-renowned beaches ("I bet you'll be an expert surfer by the time you graduate, eh Tea?"). And the pandas at the San Diego Zoo. Always the pandas. She couldn't stop about the damn pandas.

Tea was disappointed in himself for being annoyed with her; she was, after all, overcompensating for his sake. All for him. All because he hadn't gotten into Yale. Or Harvard. Or Stanford. Even Berkeley. All because, through whatever divine numbers game, he happened to be one of the application season's rare flukes: the sure-bet kid who

was trudging off to his safety school. The guy who'd done it all, but obviously hadn't done enough to get where he wanted to go. The Ivy League Untouchable.

"You weren't exaggerating about that Jimmy Ehrlich kid," Dad said. "Goofy looking guy. Walks on his toes. Too bad they didn't have a face-to-face interview for Yale. You'd be going there instead of the toe-walker."

"His mother is right behind us, Richey," Mom whispered, jabbing a finger in Dad's side.

"Whoops," Dad smirked, shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks and hoisting his waistline up. He never looked comfortable in long pants, as nearly every working day for him was spent in shorts. The cuffs of the slacks rode high on his ankles, and Tea could see Dad's brown UPS uniform socks peeking out.

"It's better this way. It was a blessing," Mom said, aiming her singsong mostly at Tea's dad. "San Diego is going to be incredible."

"It'll be great, Mom." Tea was staring at the mortarboard, refusing to allow himself to entertain the theory that the reason all he felt right then was a nervous throat tingle was because he hadn't thrown the damn hat, therefore not completing the rite, therefore delaying the appropriate emotions.

His dad was watching him. "Why don't you just toss it now?" he offered.

"Sure," his mom said. "We'll be able to find it."

"No. It's no big deal," Tea said.

Mom tugged on the sleeve of his robe. "If it'll make you feel better—"

“I feel fine.” He handed her the mortarboard and watched her carefully slide it into her purse. Superstition was a mind flaw. He didn’t feel finished because he wasn’t finished. He was the student head of the Grad Night Committee, and he still had an all-night celebration to coordinate. “What time is it, Dad?”

“Four-thirty.”

“I have to move some of the food and drinks down to the parking lot and get them on the busses before the students load in.” This felt better. The tingling subsided. “Can you bring that box of supplies in the car tonight?” he asked his father.

“Of course,” Dad said, placing a gentle hand on the back of Tea’s head. His thick fingers caught hold of the chain around Tea’s neck, and Dad curiously pulled it up and out of Tea’s robe, revealing the large gold-ish key that dangled on the end of the chain.

His father held the key in his palm and stared at it. “Is this—”

“Yeah,” Tea said, averting his eyes to a nearby crowd of friends.

“I didn’t know you still kept this,” Dad said.

“For luck, I’m sure,” his mom offered, taking the key from Dad’s hand and stuffing it back into Tea’s robe.

“Something like that,” Tea said. His father was smiling distantly, his palm still open. “But you’re good with that supply box, right Dad?”

His father recovered himself and nodded. “Today’s supposed to be fun for you too, kiddo. Remember?”

“I know that,” Tea said as he unzipped his robe.

“Follow your bliss,” Dad said.

Tea's breath caught. "What?"

"Like you said in the speech," Dad replied. "Follow your bliss."

Tea stepped out of his robe, keeping his eyes to the ground. "I'm going to round up the Grad Night Committee." He handed off the robe to Dad, whose arm was already extended, like he was old hand at playing a coat rack for his son. Tea started back into the clump of people, shouting to his parents that he'd be back in a few minutes, as soon as he'd located all committee members.

Chapter 3 **1986**

The first time he clicked in, Tea was knee deep in Laurelwood Creek. It was late March, and he was nearing the end of second grade.

His mother had picked him up from school that Thursday, but she didn't drive them back home as usual. Instead, she turned onto Hillsdale Boulevard, past the high school and up the steep hill. The faded blue Chevy El Camino—his father's old hotrod and now the only family vehicle—struggled as it neared the hill's peak, and his mother gave the gas pedal a determined stomp. The engine seemed to remember its old racing days, before Tea was even born, and the vehicle charged up the remaining grade.

She wouldn't tell him where they were headed. It was a surprise, she said. There had been a lot of surprise outings in the last year, ever since his mother's voice had become a presence in the house, ever since Grandma Maggie stopped driving down from San Francisco to *help out*, as she called it, by taking Tea to Denny's for sundaes or on long walks around the neighborhood. That's all he could remember about Grandma Maggie's visits, even though he knew she'd been there several times a week since forever; they'd surely done more than walk and eat ice cream, but it was all really hazy and distant for Tea; that time period, which encompassed the vast majority of his young life, felt more static than living, more like a scattering of blurred stills with indistinct faces, one of which, he assumed, was his.

But then came the last year. That's when his mother's voice had appeared and everything became sharper and more audible—his life jumped into motion. Suddenly his

mother was there; it wasn't that she'd been gone before, but now she was *there*. And she had plans for them. That's when the surprise outings had begun. Up to San Francisco for the windmills and bison and paddleboat ride in Golden Gate Park. Down to Monterey for the aquarium. To the Crystal Springs reservoir for long walks and flashcards and word games. There had been movie nights, and outings to Hillbarn Theatre, and a laser show at the planetarium, all of it in the last year, and as the haziness faded away and didn't come back, Tea had gradually noticed that he was retaining more memories of the happenings in his life.

At the top of Hillsdale Boulevard, his mother turned left, away from Laurelwood Shopping Center and into a residential community, the mostly two-story houses a little newer than the one's in Tea's neighborhood. They parked after a few blocks, and she held his hand as they crossed the street towards a sign that read *Laurelwood Park*. From what Tea could remember, he'd never been here.

The park was simply a vast expanse of healthy lawn interrupted by a single wooden picnic table beneath an oak tree. A small sandy playground occupied the northwest corner. On all sides the park was surrounded by hills, their tops gracefully rounded and green with spring growth, their bottoms dark crowds of oaks that hugged the lawn's perimeter. The sun was warm and the park quiet and empty; the place had a secure feeling to it that Tea liked, tucked in among all the hills.

His mother said nothing, just gave him a moment to take in the view and then renewed her grasp on his hand. She led him towards the playground, though the equipment was clearly meant for kids younger than Tea. They stepped into the sand and

she covered his eyes with a hand. There was a tiny crack between two of her fingers, so Tea closed his eyes to keep from spoiling her surprise. She guided him with her voice. *Three steps straight forward. Take a fourth step. Raise your foot really high. Big step out of the sand. That's it. Nice tiny, careful steps. We're heading down a little hill.* Tea listened to her voice and did exactly what she said, no grasping for the support of her arm or probing the air for obstacles. There was the cool of shade and his feet swept through leafy plants of some sort. Then the sound of running water, growing louder to meet his mother's voice.

Her hand left his eyes. They were at the edge of a creek, only ten feet across but rushing respectably from the recent rains. Overhead was a canopy of twisted branches and Spanish moss from the oak trees that lined the banks.

"This is Laurelwood Creek," she said.

"Like the one behind school?" Tea asked.

"Same one. It starts all the way up here, then runs down the hill, past your school, past the library, and drains into the bay."

He looked down into the water. The shade made it difficult to see the bottom.

"Are we going in?"

"In there? Well," she said, "it's not really for swimming."

He took up a nearby stick, peeled away the moss and loose bark and poked one end into the water. It didn't seem very deep.

"We'll take a trip to a creek for swimming this summer. Or maybe a lake," she said in that excited planning voice that Tea was becoming more accustomed to. "Maybe

up to the mountains. Your father's hauling route goes right through the Sierras. I bet he knows a whole string of good places. We'll ask him when he gets home tonight."

Tea nodded. She squeezed his shoulder. "I thought you might want to get a closer look at the creek," she said.

She smiled at him expectantly, and Tea went back to surveying the creek bottom. This surprise outing was different than the ones in the past, he could tell.

"Take a look at that," she said, breaking the silence. She pointed left, to an enormous metal drainage pipe ten yards away. The entire creek was pouring out from it. Tea dropped the stick and approached the pipe.

The drainpipe emerged almost violently from the earth, its ribbed metal casing jutting out from the natural slope of dirt and ground cover as though impaling the hill with a circular black void. A few strands of yellowed ivy dangled over the gaping mouth, swaying arrhythmically in a breeze that Tea realized, as he grew closer, was coming from the pipe itself. The flowing water reached the pipe's lip and dropped a couple feet to the creek body below. Tea stretched out from the bank and got his hands on the pipe's outer casing, using it as a support to lean his body forward over the creek. Over his shoulder, his mother whispered for him to be careful. He braced his hands on the ribbed metal, reached his head around the lip of the pipe and peered into it.

The space was more than big enough for him to climb into and stand upright, even walk down the pipe if he'd wanted. He didn't. There was no light at the pipe's other end, wherever that might be. The darkness was dimensionless and unwelcoming to the surveying senses, at once empty and engulfing. The sound of the flowing water was

unnatural, rising from the black throat of the pipe and distorted by its own echoes as it traveled forward on the warm, dank breeze. It sounded like the inside of a seashell, that hum of ceaseless, sourceless exhalation which Tea had recently learned was only the shell-amplified song of his own circulating blood; it begged the question as to whose blood he was hearing through the blackness of the pipe. He tried not to pursue the idea—it was just his imagination latching onto an uncomfortable thought, which his imagination did, and he was better to rein it in early. Tea pushed himself away from the pipe and to a standing position. His mother sat back from the bank on an oak stump, waiting for him.

“Mrs. Reed told me you like to watch the creek during recess,” she called out over the sound of the falling water.

He stepped on a flat rock that hung over the bank and dipped the toe of his shoe into the creek. “Tea,” she said. “Those are your new shoes.”

Tea retracted his shoe and looked down into the dark water. Mrs. Reed must have spotted him staring at the creek again at recess on Tuesday. Their classroom windows looked right onto the playground and field, and beyond that the chain link fence that separated the school from the creek. He’d thought it had been long enough since he’d last gone to the fence that Mrs. Reed wouldn’t be watching for him through the windows.

“Mrs. Reed called me yesterday,” his mother explained.

“She doesn’t like me doing that at recess.”

“Watching the creek?” she asked. “I don’t think she dislikes it.”

“She said once that I spent every recess thinking about my bellybutton.”

His mother laughed a little. “Contemplating your navel?”

Tea dipped his shoe back into the water. His mother made no comment. “I don’t do it much anymore,” he said. “Just play tetherball at recess. Mostly.”

He should’ve just picked a section of the school’s fence that was out of Mrs. Reed’s view. But he liked the spot he’d always used, behind the rusted softball backstop in a shady and seldom occupied corner of the field, where two lengths of chain link fence merged at a thick metal pole. He could lean his forehead against the cool metal of the pole and stare down the embankment to the creek. Just watch it go by, contained in the space between the fence and the backstop, the wild sounds of the schoolyard behind him, the creek’s steady flow in front, and he quietly between the two.

“Tea? Mrs. Reed said you were having a tough time on some class work this week.”

“No I wasn’t.”

“The grammar sentences? On Tuesday, I think. Were you having trouble?”

He shrugged, then shook his head.

“She said it took you a long time to copy the sentences from the blackboard. Over an hour.”

“I finished it though.”

“You stayed in at recess to finish it?”

“Not the whole recess.”

“But she didn’t make you stay in? Right?”

He shook his head. “I just wasn’t done. It was only half of recess.”

“What about all the erasing?” she asked, and as the usual cheer in her voice grew forced and thin, she gave Mrs. Reed’s full report, about how he’d inexplicably labored on the sentences long after his classmates had finished. The rest of the class had moved on to Sustained Silent Reading while he sat at his desk looking strained and stuck, writing a word then erasing it, again and again. She detailed how he’d pressed two fingers down hard on the paper to measure the spacing between words, his fingertips red from the pressure, and yet he’d still ended up erasing the words because of some unnoticeable inexactitude in the spacing. Mrs. Reed had even watched him erase an entire sentence after plodding through it for over twenty minutes, all the while exhaling deeply, almost in agony.

“Tea? Honey, it’s not something to worry about. Absolutely *not* something to worry about. I was just curious,” she said, “if you knew why that happened.”

“I wanted to do it right.” He kept his back to her. These sorts of classroom incidents, scattered though far from irregular, were an absurdity he’d learned to stomach privately; oftentimes he was able to wrangle back personal control before Mrs. Reed even noticed the struggle. But to hear his actions aired in a secondhand report, to hear his mother labor at retaining some level of nonchalance and kindhearted levity while replaying such a bizarre act, it was too much for him. “I wanted to do it right,” he repeated.

“Mrs. Reed doesn’t think you have any trouble doing things right. Everything you hand in is just about perfect. She’s told me that every time we’ve talked.”

“It’s perfect because I’m careful.”

“Is the work very hard?”

“No,” he said, and then more surely, “it’s not hard at all.”

He turned to her. His mother smiled and lowered her eyes, scraping a fingernail absently against the tree stump. “Were you really erasing the dot on an *i* over and over again? Mrs. Reed said she watched you do it four or five times for a single dot, until the paper actually ripped from all the erasing.”

Tea said nothing, just looked back towards the blackness in the pipe. The dot over the *i* was the worst part. When he’d first erased the dot and adjusted its placement over the stem of the *i*, he knew the difference was practically imperceptible. A part of him understood that the first dot had been just fine. And yet it hadn’t been fine. *Fine* was, at that moment, no longer fine—it needed to be *right*. The rest of the class cleared their desks and lined up for recess, and he still sat there with two whole sentences to go. He erased the dot and tried it again. Still not right. The looming sensation returned, catching up to him as it always did when he got stuck like this. It chased him closely, this dread, and it sprang quickly whenever an uncomfortable thought held him up. At that moment, it was as strong as he’d ever felt it, not just from its usual perch over his shoulder but this time inside him, a pressure in his throat, as though that looming presence had crawled right down into him. The bell rang. He erased the dot and tried it again. His classmates filed out. He tried the dot again. Still not right. A part of him knew he should just lay the pencil down and go outside, just run that intruding sensation out of himself. He knew that. But he’d been caught. Trapped by the dot above an *i*. His judgment was commandeered, he could feel that. He had no choice but to do it right, so

he erased the dot. The paper ripped and he choked back tears and rushed to the crafts table for scotch tape.

When he'd finally finished the grammar sentences and trudged out to recess, it was not a triumph; he'd felt hollowed out. He'd needed to watch the creek that day, just to breath and get that looming presence to exit his throat and fade away.

"Tea?" his mother asked from the stump. "Do you know why you did that?"

"I was being careful," he said sharply. He kicked a stone into the creek. "I don't know."

She didn't speak again for a while, just sat there maintaining a weak smile as she looked up into the oak trees. He watched her pull absently at her fingers, and an uncomfortable thought took shape: she was going to leave him here. She'd wait for him to turn his back and then she'd run from this spot. She'd reach the car and turn the key frantically in the door lock, peering out over the hood, hoping he couldn't reach her before she started the El Camino's temperamental engine. Then she'd drive away.

Tea stood so it appeared he was staring at the creek, but he kept his mother in the periphery. The uncomfortable thought was gaining undesired logic: his mother knew he couldn't find his way home from the park—he'd never been here. Plus, she knew he liked the creek, so it was a nice place for her to leave him. If his mother left, he would have to live here at the creek, maybe inside that drainpipe. He'd never see her again or hear her newfound voice. He would die in that drainpipe. That was where something went to die.

His mother lowered her chin. “Will you come sit with me?” she asked. “I want to say something to you.” Her voice was steady with resolve, as though some decision had been made. She would leave him here. It was a stupid thought, but he’d lost control of it, and now it was true. He was sure of it.

“I’m not going to do that anymore with the grammar sentences,” he said, the words coming out in a nervous staccato.

“Please come sit with me—”

“Or the creek,” he spat. “I don’t want to look at it during recess anymore.” He dropped to a knee and tugged at the flat rock. His nails dug beneath the rock’s mud encasement and he wrenched it free with a grunt. The rock was bigger than expected, but he stood with it and raised it overhead with both hands as he faced towards the drainpipe. He panted through clenched teeth. His elbows cocked the rock behind his head and took aim on the dark water in the drainpipe. The rock wouldn’t choke that pipe completely, but it was a start.

“Tea!”

His arms screamed and went useless and the rock grazed down his back as it thudded to the mud behind him, coming to rest between his feet.

“Come sit down right now!” She was standing. From what he could remember, she’d never raised her voice at him. Tea sat on the stump. He lowered his head and gave her the chance to run. His mother turned away, arms crossed tightly over her chest. She took in deep breaths. Tea felt a raw sting growing where the rock had grazed his back.

She turned back and knelt next to him. Her hand grasped his chin, forcing his head up to look at her. “I want you to listen to me, Tea.” The anger had been replaced by a wet shine in her eyes, one that grew as she spoke.

“Sometimes people can have feelings that,” she struggled for the right words, “feel wrong. You just wake up one morning and aren’t yourself. Like you’re filled with an emotion that doesn’t seem to fit your life. Like sadness,” she said, her voice turning husky as though the words were thick and difficult to say. “Or fear. Or anger. And the feeling is so strong that it just sticks to you, but you don’t know why. Do you understand?”

“I guess so,” Tea mumbled.

She took his muddy hand and her voice grew conspiratorial. “I have this secret theory about those strange feelings. I’ve never told anyone about it. But I want to tell you.”

“Okay.”

“When you have one of those feelings that is so strong but doesn’t make any sense, I think that feeling isn’t actually meant for you. It was for somebody else, but it got lost or misplaced. Like how a letter sometimes gets delivered to the wrong house.”

“But feelings don’t get delivered.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “How did you feel during those grammar sentences?”

Tea looked towards the drainpipe, absently touching his throat where the looming presence had crawled into him on Tuesday. “Worried, I guess.”

“Worried about doing it wrong?”

“I guess.”

“But the grammar sentences aren’t difficult, are they?”

“They’re easy.”

“Right! And so that horrible worry you felt, as though you had to be extra careful because so much was riding on that silly dot over the *i*, that feeling just didn’t fit. It didn’t make any sense to your life. And that’s why I think,” she said, standing and pointing into the distance, “that somewhere at that moment, while you were worrying about your easy grammar sentences, there was, say, a mountain climber, hanging from a rope on the side of a huge cliff. And he was supposed to feel worried. But he didn’t. Because the feeling that was meant for him got sent to the wrong guy. It was supposed to go to Mount Everest, but it ended up in Mrs. Reed’s class by mistake.”

“And I got it instead,” Tea said. He lowered his eyes. “But you don’t think that’s true. Not really. You’re making it up.”

“No I’m not.”

“It’s not real,” Tea said firmly.

She looked over his shoulder, her mouth slightly open, considering her response. “It still works,” she said. “Even if it’s *maybe* pretend. It still works.”

“Does it work for you?” he asked.

Her eyes continued to stare at him, but the life in them went distant, just for a moment, as though plunging to a restricted depth in her. Just for a moment. Then she returned, her focus now stanch and unbendable. “Yes. It works for me,” she said rigidly.

“The worry you’re feeling isn’t meant for you, Tea. It’s not yours. It came to you by accident.”

He wanted to accept what she said, to believe it as she did, and by believing he could share this secret with her. But what his mother offered was not real. It was pretend. A lie, even. It wouldn’t help him.

Tea looked towards the drainpipe. The creek belched steadily forth from it, wholly unaware of his failed attempt to dam it. The flat rock lay on the bank, lamely, its awkward pose in the mud under the scrutiny of a cloud of black gnats. He’d been brought to tears by the dot over an *i*, and despite how ridiculous that seemed now, how outlandish and corrupted the mechanism in him must be that conjured such behavior, he was sadly confident it would happen again. He really had no idea where emotions came from, or why they arrived in the forms they did. And he wasn’t sure that anybody else knew either. Mrs. Reed had watched him all year in his worried struggles with that looming presence. But she’d offered nothing in the way of solutions. She told him to relax. To just let schoolwork be schoolwork. Mrs. Reed’s advice effectively meant nothing.

He imagined his mother’s theory, emotions whizzing dutifully through the air, heading towards their intended recipients, the sky crowded with these comet-like entities, their hues and movements matching the feelings they conveyed. He imagined the mountain climber, his hands cracked and blistered from the rope, the wind blowing him around the cliff face. But he, the climber, was smiling beneath his frosted beard,

ascending steadily, surprised at his own contentment in such a dire situation, thinking to himself that *climbing this mountain is easier than dotting an i*.

Tea was crying now, silently, hesitant to open his mouth as he was sure some awful, mournful sound would flood out. His mother threw an arm around him and drew him into her shoulder. Her hand pressed on the scrape down his back, making it sting terribly. He wished his mother's theory about feelings was true and not just pretend. But it wasn't true. She shouldn't have brought him here to the creek. Shouldn't have talked with him about his trouble. He could maintain his trouble as a secret, encysted so the ache was dull and, at times, even forgotten. But now that would be impossible. She knew now. He could never forget his trouble because she knew, and now she'd have to share this ache with him. A shameful thought emerged: it would be better if his life just returned to how it had been before, hazy and unmoving, without memories or the discomfort of thoughts, even if that meant the retreat and silencing of his mother's voice.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. It was a shameful thought.

A shudder traveled through his mother when he apologized. She pressed her palms tightly to the sides of his face, framing him before her. She looked both pained and severe. The flesh around her eyes knitted together and she bit down hard on her lips. "You listen to me, Tea. You're meant to have a happy life," she said, the words low and steady. "You'll be happy. I'm your mother, and I *know* that."

Tea wrenched his head from her grasp and retreated to the creek's edge. He caught his breath and tapped nervously at the flat rock with his shoe. The cloud of gnats scattered. His pulse pounded in his ears, muffling the sound of the drainpipe.

His mother's voice, in the short time he'd known it, had never sounded that way. There was a force behind her statement that was new to him. He *will* be happy. It wasn't a flimsy prediction or a stab at wishful thinking; it was an oath from her to him, a ferocious command—perhaps to herself, perhaps to Tea, perhaps to the both of them and to every scrap of the world—that her promise be upheld, that his life, the life of her son, would be a happy one. It was simple: he should just say yes and believe her promise.

Tea looked back at his mother, made sure she was watching, then without a word he stepped off the bank into the creek. He found his footing on the soft bottom and took three sloshing strides to the middle. The coldness caught his breath as his shoes sank into the mud and his pants clung to him up to the knees. He kept his back to his mother, just stared straight down the drainpipe and let her view what he'd done without permission—what new trouble he'd made. The dank air from the pipe blew across his face. He waited, gave her enough time to do whatever she wanted to do, be it yell at him, or take back her promise, or run away as he'd imagined she would.

Nothing happened. He waited and shivered. His new shoes filled with mud. But he heard nothing from the bank. He should have just said yes and believed her.

“Is it cold in there?”

He turned back and Mom was still there, now sitting at the bank. Her shoes were placed neatly next to her, and she smiled at him as she removed her socks and dipped her feet in the water, puckering her face at the creek's chill. She sat back, propped up on her elbows so she could look at him, her feet gently swirling in the water.

“What was the name of the mountain climber?” she asked.

He wriggled his shoes deeper into the mud. “Henry. I guess.”

“Henry.”

“From Montana. Helena. That’s the capitol.”

“Well Henry from Helena, Montana owes you one for handling all that worry while he was climbing.”

“Yeah,” Tea said. “But I bet he was up on the mountain for a good reason.”

“What was it?”

Tea thought about it for a moment. “Saving his dog.”

“That’s a good—”

“No. Saving his kid. His son,” Tea said. “Henry’s son was up there to find medicine. For his dog that was sick, and the only medicine was on top of the mountain. Like a special type of snow that cured stuff. But then Henry’s son got in trouble on the mountain, so Henry had to go up after him. Even though Henry’s ropes are old. Cause he hasn’t been climbing in like forty-seven years. He fell once, forty-seven years ago. And he’s been afraid of heights ever since. So he’s mostly just sat on the couch eating chips and stuff. But anyway, he went up there with his ropes to save his son.”

His mother looked impressed. “It sounds like you did a really good thing last Tuesday by handling all that worry.”

“It’s just pretend, Mom.” But he liked the story. Even if it wasn’t real, the idea of it sat well with him.

Mom kicked some water his way and then lay back further on her elbows. She closed her eyes and breathed deep and contentedly. Even after a year of surprise outings

with her, it still felt incongruous to see her in new places, like it was all just a happy mistake and soon she and her voice would fade away once again. But that wouldn't happen now—she'd promised him. She was in charge of him.

Tea walked slowly downstream, feeling his way around the stones that lingered on the dark bottom. The sounds of the drainpipe faded behind him. He stopped in a warm spot, where sunlight made its way through a hole in the canopy. Beyond it, the creek went around a bend and disappeared, headed down the big hill and towards his school, then past Tea's spot at the fence. All the way to the bay.

The sunlight reflected off the water and changed into golden swirls that danced over the ivy leaves and oak trunks on the banks. Below, the water was clear to the bottom. The current met his ankles and flowed around him. Smoothly. Easily. Tea closed his eyes and took in the warmth of the sunlight.

That's when he clicked in for the first time.

It didn't last long. A handful of seconds. A minute at the most. Just enough time for him to make some decisions, his first decisions, and they came plainly and easily. Then it was done and he was just standing in the creek again.

He nodded, slowly and to himself. Then he walked back up the creek towards Mom and told her he was ready to leave. He wouldn't need to look at the creek anymore.

Chapter 4 1986

A name was needed for what had found Tea at Laurelwood Creek, if for no other reason than because Mrs. Reed always said during writing lessons that if a thing wasn't named specifically, it remained unreal, simply a thing, and *thing* was a purposeless word. That wouldn't do; it was essential that whatever had held Tea for those brief moments in the water have a name, to prove both its realness and the very real sense of purpose it had set ablaze in him. The right name for it was *clicking in*—Tea knew that before he'd even stepped out of the creek. He hadn't made up the name himself. It was his father's term originally.

* * *

Dad spent five out of seven days of most every week on regional trucking routes, winding his way through the “left side” of the country, as he put it. He was an owner-operator and proud of it—his truck, a '72 Peterbilt Pacemaker, had an O/O painted on both her doors in the shape of a Doublestuff Oreo Cookie. Dad simply called her *the rig*. Mom called her *The Mistress*, to which Dad always responded, “The rig, Trina. The rig.”

Tea's father returned each week on Thursday evening. Dinner was often much later that night. In the culture of the household, Tea understood it to be of utmost importance that the meal was held off until Dad's arrival. From one Thursday to another, the moment of his return would vary—a prompt 6:45 one week followed the next by a dinner that commenced well after Tea's scheduled bedtime. But this weekly reunion was important: every Thursday, Mom had the table set by 6:00 sharp, with utensils lying

straight and uniform upon the folded only-on-Thursdays cloth napkins. Candles were lit, and a pair of wine glasses reappeared after five days in the darkness of a cabinet. She'd set the pots on the stove to a patient simmer and only then call Tea into the kitchen. They waited at the table together, from 6:00 to however long it took, passing the time by reading aloud, each with their own copy of a chapter book propped against the edge of a dinner plate, exchanging paragraphs by candlelight.

Dad's approach could be heard from clear up the block, but Mom always insisted that they complete their page. They'd continue to read as Dad backed the Pacemaker into the driveway and within inches of the house, the rumble through the kitchen walls drowning out the final few sentences. Then, with the engine still idling outside, Mom would close her book and say, "Sounds like your dad is home from work," her tone always casual, as though Dad simply worked down the street.

They'd wait at the open front door together, behind the glass screen to keep the warm air inside and the rig's final diesel exhalations out. Dad's silhouette was visible by the pale light within the cab as he gathered his things together and then descended nimbly from the high driver's door. He'd walk around the truck's front and always take a moment at the sidewalk, inhaling deeply as though sampling the air of this place he'd landed in, each breath expanding his already imposing chest as he turned a slow, scrutinizing circle. Tea often found himself nervous as he watched his father standing there on the sidewalk, the wan yellow streetlight above rendering his dad equal parts man and shadow, Dad rocking on his feet as though undecided whether he'd stay or go. Last time he'd arrived—the week before Tea's experience at Laurelwood Creek—Dad had

taken so long at the sidewalk that Tea had lunged forward and wrapped on the glass screen, waving a beckoning palm at his father. Dad had turned, surprised, and with a shrug of his shoulders had lumbered up the driveway. The porch light had found him and edged out the shadows, and there he was smiling on the other side of the screen, a laundry sack slung over his thick shoulder, his brown beard reaching nearly to the bulge of his midsection, his impossibly thin legs still sporting that same pair of faded green canvas shorts he'd departed in the week before—like a Santa Claus down on his luck but no less jolly.

Dad was their special guest each weekend, arriving to alter the household's daily routines just as they were growing five days stale. He'd slide into his chair at the table and pop the cork on a bottle of Chianti, and the very posture of the air seemed to slouch in delicious easiness. He brought the weekly serials from other worlds: the mishaps and misadventures of his old trucker buddies Tanker Yanker and Skunknuts; the latest disclosures from Filthy Stu, a seventy year old toll collector outside Portland who used his booth as a private confessional; the trials in love of an Elko waitress known only as the Lot Lizard. Motown boomed out from Dad's stereo in the den as conversation around the table grew loud and mischievous, laced with off-color jokes that were, for the weekend, permissible. When Dad was home, Tea's mom was not simply *Mom*, but *Dumpling* and *Sweetheart* and *Sugartush*, and though she feigned embarrassment at being proclaimed one of the "great beauties of our time," the blush in her cheeks was beaming even in candlelight. As for Tea, he was never *Tea* to his father; he was perpetually *kiddo*

and *buddy*, and occasionally *son*, but never his actual name—Tea had noticed this in the last year.

On those weekend nights, his parents stayed up late, especially Saturdays, as that evening was the swan song of Dad's weekly visits. Tea would often depart for bed with his parents still in the kitchen, the Chianti near empty and perhaps a second bottle opened, a Tupperware container of homemade baklava (Dad's favorite) already half gone and littering the once immaculate tabletop with an autumnal scattering of phyllo dough flakes. His mother, her teeth wine-stained and eyes red from laughter, usually had her chair scooted closer to Dad so she could prop her feet on his lap as he traced an orbiting fingertip around the rim of his wine glass; this was, in Tea's experience, the height of affection between his parents.

Upstairs in Tea's room, there was a heater vent on the floor next to his bed, and though he was pretty sure his parents didn't know it, their voices found their way to him, drifting up the vent in the kitchen ceiling, traveling through the ducts and out the metal grate to Tea's ear as he lay in the darkness, listening to them, sometimes for hours.

His eavesdropping had begun in the last year, when things had become less hazy and memories were sticking better. That's when he found himself more curious about his parents, and more unsettled by his lack of knowledge of each of them. The events in his own life had begun to retain clearer distinction and order, and his sense of time itself was gaining resiliency; he had a narrative for the last year, a story of who he was each new day based upon a recollected chain of causal links—he knew himself because he knew the story of what had happened before, at least for the last year.

But it was only a year's worth of a story. Everything before that, literally years of childhood events, seemed more like a sloppy collage of fractured images and overlapping sensations, as though his whole early life had occurred outside of time and all-at-once. And as for the years before his parents were Mom and Dad but simply Trina and Rich, before he, Tea, was ever alive or experiencing events in time at all (a concept he was still wrapping his head around), well, that period was painted for him in only the broadest strokes. Tea knew his parents met by chance in San Francisco, when Mom was starting college at Berkeley. She was a recent transplant to California, having grown up in Iowa, where Tea figured her family still was. He knew the capitol of Iowa was Des Moines, but that was from staring at the map in Mrs. Reed's class, so it didn't really count. His dad was already driving trucks when they met and they'd go on dates when he was home from a haul. But he wasn't home that much, because back then Dad was doing the long haul routes across the whole country. So they didn't see each other for weeks at a time. Eventually, though Tea wasn't sure when, Dad switched to shorter hauls. That was when, Tea assumed, they began to see more of each other.

Tea knew that Dad's stories from the road used to remind Mom of some author she liked a lot. He'd once heard Dad say that he and Mom were lucky to be alive after all the cheap wine they'd consumed in those days. Then they were married. And then they had him. And then a year ago, Tea started remembering things.

That was all he knew, but he was sure there was more to know. The conversations that ascended through his heater vent on weekend nights were distorted and garbled, and sometimes he could only pick out one in a dozen sentences, and those were

often in reference to things he already knew. Sometimes their voices grew soft and Tea got out of bed and lay on the carpet with his ear straight on the vent. He didn't like to think his parents had lowered their voices in some deliberate secrecy. Instead, he pretended that he was listening through time, eavesdropping on his parents' youthful conversations from years before he was born, and in doing so, bringing an informed order to the complete story of his life.

The eavesdropping was a slow and mostly fruitless process. The desired revelations seemed too heavy to waft through the heater vent, and by Sunday morning his chances were over. When Tea arose on Sundays, the atmosphere had changed. It was quiet, as though the house itself was anticipating the renewed roar of the rig and Dad's departure by early afternoon.

On Sundays, his parents rarely occupied the same space. Whereas on the other days of the weekend, their voices could be heard in the kitchen reading out stories in the newspaper or finalizing dates on the Family Calendar, or outside in the backyard conversing over yard work, on Sunday mornings they seemed to purposefully avoid each other. Mom would hole up in the garage at the washing machine, preparing Dad's driving clothes and occupying herself with a novel that remained untouched the rest of the week. His father spent the morning in the den, his Motown turned down so low that Marvin Gaye's voice sounded almost apologetic as it exited the speakers. Dad's easiness was gone, replaced by a charged vacancy to his expression that Mom called his Road Eyes. His attention was unsettled and flitted about, from the crinkled paperwork for his next haul, then to a Wyoming road atlas splayed on the den's couch, then to the

shoeboxes that held his tape collection as he searched for new driving music, all the while mumbling mental notes to himself. Periodically, he dropped whatever project was currently in his hands and stepped to the den's window, pulling back the curtain to stare for a minute or so at the rig and tug absently at his beard. Then, just as silently, he'd return to whatever he'd been doing. Each Sunday morning, it was as though Dad was departing in increments for the road, that some unseen piece of him was already gone and rolling through the middle of Wyoming, and that the sheer impossibility of being in two places at once had him thrashing about inside.

Tea remained in the kitchen mostly on Sunday mornings, equidistant from the tense air in both the garage and den. He'd watch cartoons in black and white on the small television near the microwave. The kitchen was a crossroads on that morning. Dad would tiptoe in to forage for leftovers (meals were an individual venture on Sundays), giving Tea a conspiratorial thumbs up while purloining a carton of Goldfish or string cheese packets for the road. Mom would pass through once, always with a basket of Dad's clean laundry and the Family Calendar. She'd deliver his laundry to the den and stare at the calendar while Dad packed, confirming with him for the second or third time upcoming events during his future visits. From the kitchen, Tea could hear Dad grunt affirmatively at each reminder. Then he zipped his duffel bag and Mom always said the same thing: "The Mistress beckons." And Dad, on his way out to pack up the truck, always responded, "The rig, Trina. The rig."

When it was time, Dad would start the rig and pull into the street in front of the house, letting the engine warm as he climbed down from the driver's seat and waited at

the sidewalk. That's when Mom and Tea exited the house and walked down the driveway. The final gathering, every Sunday, was there on the sidewalk, the growling red metal panels of the rig serving as an impatient backdrop, the *O/O* on its door watching the scene. His father always had a nervous bounce to his knees after a morning of thrashing about in the den like a landed fish. Mom was often extra affectionate with Tea, wrapping an arm around his shoulder or linking elbows with him in a manner that felt lifelessly demonstrative. Tea said very little in these final moments and his parents stuck to topics innocuous and pragmatic. Mom would squeeze Tea closer and talk about his upcoming spelling unit or book report like it was earth-shattering news, and his father, like a grand tour guide of truck stops and grocery store loading docks, would tick off his itinerary for the week, all the while cracking his knuckles and looking back at the rig as though checking that it hadn't snuck off without him.

The overall feebleness of this final exchange, its piddling neutrality, could nearly overshadow the warmth of the entire weekend visit; it could nearly throw into question the actual depths of their familial bonds; it could *nearly* make it seem *entirely* possible that the shallow historical outline Tea had of his parents was really all there was to know about them, that indeed Tea's foundation of identity—and of mere *existence*—was frightfully shabby and without mystery: Rich and Trina had met, got married, had him, and then a year ago he'd started remembering things, and beyond that there were no answers to be had, no discoveries to be unearthed, no significance whatsoever to rest a troubled head upon.

Nearly. But that was never the end conclusion. His dad always redeemed things. Each week, Tea weathered the Sunday awkwardness because the final moment of Dad's departure was worth it. Because at some point during the sidewalk gathering—usually after some tense pause in his parent's hackneyed chatter that seemed to signal to Dad an acceptable end to the requisite small talk, an acceptable conclusion to the ridiculousness they'd all been enduring out there on the sidewalk—his father would say it:

“Time to click in.”

Nothing more was said. Hugs were exchanged, and Dad opened the driver's door and climbed into his seat behind the wheel. The door would close tight and through the driver's window, Tea would watch Dad pull the seatbelt across his chest and *click in*. Then, every week, Dad would turn his face away from Tea and Mom for a brief moment, looking straight ahead through the windshield and up the road, and he'd take in one huge, open-mouthed breath, holding it there inside himself. He'd retrieve a cigar from his shirt pocket (contraband within the house) and ready it on the ashtray. He'd pop a cassette into the deck and turn it up so loud that Tea could hear it out on the sidewalk above the engine sounds. Then his hands would find their familiar grips on the wheel. Then, finally, Dad would let that deep breath go. When he turned to look back at them out there on the sidewalk—which he never failed to do—Dad was always changed.

After a year of witnessing this weekly transformation in his father (and likely unremembered years of it before that), Tea still could not pinpoint what it was in Dad's face that heralded the wondrous rejuvenation of clicking in. It wasn't some wide fatherly grin through the driver's window. Not some dramatic release of tension around his eyes.

It certainly wasn't anything he said in that parting moment, as he rarely uttered a word. The change couldn't be charted simply to the extremities of flesh and feature, but seemed to Tea more inward and subtle: Dad was just *more real* after he clicked in. Up there in the cab of the rig, he was no longer thrashing about inside, no longer diluted—as he'd been all morning—by his failing struggle to be in multiple places at once. He was, at that moment, *located*, fully located in the exact place he was supposed to be, so at home with himself that he appeared more-than-real, as though sharply outlined by his own absence of disharmony.

The cab of the rig was obviously filled with a necessary air for Dad, unavailable to him anywhere else, his own personal atmosphere, and each Sunday Tea and his mom safely returned him to it. The gratitude was there in Dad's eyes as he beamed down at them, always rolling down the window, as though even the thin obstruction of glass was simply unacceptable in that final look from him to his family, as though nothing in his thankfulness could afford to be refracted. The window came down, the separate airs from the cab and the neighborhood intermingled, and there was Dad, clicked in, gazing down at Tea and Mom, his tangled beard extending in regal appreciation to these two people before him.

And then he was off, the Pacemaker rolling up the street, Motown careening off the front doors of the neighborhood, the faint trace of cigar smoke trailing back—five days until his next return.

On a recent Sunday afternoon, as Dad rolled away, Tea left his spot next to Mom at the sidewalk. He stepped off the curb to the middle of the street, shading his eyes with a hand to catch the last glimpses of the rig before it crested the gentle hill and disappeared from sight. This was the Sunday preceding Tea's trouble with the grammar sentences and his subsequent trip with Mom to Laurelwood Creek, and in that moment in the street, an immense optimism rushed through Tea, filling him—if even for the briefest duration—with rare levity. He felt lucky just then, as though the sight of his dad leaving was a most favorable omen. He abruptly turned towards Mom and blurted out, “Dad’s happy when he’s driving.”

It came out sounding silly and trite, but he hadn't meant it that way. He was trying to remark on the thrill of seeing a person so located, so precisely where he should be and therefore at his best, that the sight of Dad rolling away made perfect sense, because he looked *expansive* in his truck, like a being of horizons. Tea wished to express how hopeful he felt, both because he'd witnessed this irrefutable triumph in *real life*—not inwardly, not as a rough sketch on the unstable canvas of his whimsy—and, even more significantly, because he, Tea, was the son of this expansive man, a direct descendent of the triumphant, and how, in that moment, it didn't seem too far a stretch to conclude that a bit of that potential triumph was also in himself; yes, he felt sure of it: nestled within him, dormant but nonetheless there, was embryonic ease, the ready seed of harmony. This was what it was, Tea concluded in the street, to really feel lucky: it was the quick flash of certainty that the right things were not only on their way, but already invisibly happening.

His mother, he noticed, had been silently watching his reverie, and now she met him in the street and squeezed his shoulder. “You father really loves you,” she said. This response by her, carried on the saccharine tones of pitying encouragement, seemed totally incongruent to what Tea was feeling—it was the sort of thing you said to somebody who felt bad.

“I know,” he said plainly. Mom continued her sympathetic shoulder kneading, and Tea turned to her and asked, “Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you say that?” Tea pressed.

“That he loves you?” Mom asked, her eyes distant as though she were only half occupied by the conversation. “Because he does.”

“But why—” Tea closed his mouth and looked back up the street, wishing he were alone right then to experience his thoughts clearly. The close company of other people could just turn his mind to static, like the mere presence of another mind and its distinct set of perceptions acted as a disruptive and even a nullifying signal, throwing his own thoughts into confusion.

His mother, further mistaking him in that moment, threw her arm around Tea and stroked his head as though he were upset, which he wasn’t, or at least not in the way that she thought he was, though he was becoming agitated—rapidly so—on a separate front.

“He really, really does, Tea. Love you. He really does.” She edged herself and him towards the house, but Tea held ground and resisted the pull from her arm around his shoulder. Mom turned back and loosed a sympathetic sigh, its intended target unclear.

She shook her head tragically. “Your dad. He just never had time of his own when he was younger.”

“Because of the Twins,” Tea stated. He knew the story well and Mom was aware that he did—Grandma Maggie rehashed versions of it each time they had dinner with her. But, nonetheless, Mom retold it there on the street, her voice a dry lakebed whose tonal flatness was equal parts reverent sincerity and thinly-veiled fatigue towards the subject matter, towards the well-tread bullet points of Dad’s estimated biography: how Dad’s youth, the irretrievable years of his childhood, were spent tending towards his younger brother and sister (known to Tea only as the Twins: the references to these two siblings were always so collectively bound that Tea had begun to imagine them—he’d never actually met them—as *literally* conjoined, a lumpy-twisted mess of symbiosis, sharing various and odd-numbered limbs, going halvesies on organ use, and haggling over excretion times); how Dad’s high school years weren’t underscored by varsity sports, or academic achievements, or dating and socializing, or even the less desirable teenage mischief, but rather claustrophobically epitomized by long afternoons in a small apartment with two kids, waiting for Grandma Maggie to get home from work so he could, perhaps, have a few minutes to himself; and how Dad had been forced to play a dad before he ever was a dad, and all of this due to the absence of his *own* dad (a person Tea had never met, a person who was never referred to as *Grandpa* and therefore seemed to have no claim over that title, and who, as far as Tea knew, had *no* first name and was simply called *Dad’s dad* by his parents and who Grandma Maggie exclusively referred to

as *The Bastard*—none of this parenthetical exposition of nomenclature being mentioned in Mom’s current recitation in the street).

“You know,” Mom continued, “your dad lied about his age so he could start driving trucks early. He was seventeen and a week out of high school, but there was no way he was going to wait until the autumn when he actually turned eighteen. The Twins were old enough to take care of themselves, and he was done with school. He just wanted out.” A wan smile flashed across her face. “He told me that when I met him, that he was driving because he liked space. Because he *needed* space. And he was going to keep driving until he didn’t need it anymore.”

“But you like that he’s a truck driver,” Tea countered. “You like his road stories. Because they remind you of your favorite author.” Tea’s own delicate maneuvering of verb tenses (keeping all Mom’s *likes* in the present) was yet another clear indicator to himself of the vacuum of information he worked with in regards to his parents. He had no concept of time duration here, no idea of the changes that may have taken place in his parents since their meeting (whenever that was), and he surely didn’t know if some of the feelings in those stories of their courtship—the *likes* that linked his mom and dad—had just maybe reached some expiration date. It was a big gaping hole of unknowing.

“You remember everything, don’t you, Tea?” she said, touched but still cautious. “I liked your dad’s stories. I did. I do. They’re fun. But I think that, after a while, after enough time and *space*—” she cut herself off, her lips folding tight on one another, only loosening when she could steer her talk safely back to the known and clinical. “You have to understand, Tea. It was a small apartment. Teeny tiny compared to this house.

And your dad was stuck in there trying to be a father when he was supposed to be a kid. He didn't have a choice then. But now—"

"Because of The Bastard," Tea said, testing his limits. Mom's eyes widened a little at the cuss, but she said nothing. "He didn't have a choice because of The *Bastard*."

"That's right," Mom said quickly. "He didn't have a choice. But now he could—"

"He comes back every Thursday," Tea said. "The Bastard never—"

"Tea." Her voice was low with warning.

"Well he didn't. The Bast—Dad's dad. He never came back," Tea said. He shut his mouth and looked back up the street, in truth not enjoying how he'd caused Mom's hand to now sit limp and hesitant on his shoulder.

He was picking a fight with her and it wasn't to defend his father. Dad had his own defenses against such criticism; his obstinate love for the road acted as a thorough shield, and, if that wasn't enough, Dad was rendered unbeatable by his sheer physical absence. No, Tea wasn't defending Dad here; this was self-protection. The rejection Mom felt at Dad's departures was in direct opposition to what Tea saw in them, in what Tea needed these weekly events to be: a triumph.

A triumph! His dad clicked in and became a man in the right place at the right time, a man who ceased to be a foreigner to the world, who got behind the wheel and trimmed away the buffer that partitioned himself from his life. Tea saw all of this. Clearly. Every Sunday. Each week, he'd been banking on the absoluteness of this moment, banking on the unqualified truth that tending to oneself on the highest of levels, as his father did, was nothing but good and noble and *real*. When, months ago, the

looming presence had crawled upon Tea's shoulder and introduced itself, it was Tea's belief in the divine aloneness he saw in his father that led him to the chain link fence at school, to look at the creek, to mimic such fortified solitude in hopes of eventually kneading it into reality. But how could that happen if what happened with his dad wasn't actually real? And how could it be real when it was obvious that Mom saw something different than Tea every Sunday afternoon? Here she stood, next to Tea in the street, her heavy arm around him, and he could feel the bombardment of her dissonance. He could feel it dulling the bright hues of the triumph, demoting it from the realm of absoluteness to the unpalatable territory of impression. And if what Tea saw in his father's departure was just a personal impression, then it was nothing to bank on. It was probably a mistake. Mom was ruining everything!

"I just think he looks really happy when he drives away," Tea mumbled. He lowered his gaze from the crest of the hill and stared at his shoes.

"And I think he's really happy to be your dad, and he is so happy each time he's home with you," Mom said. The nurture in her voice sounded to Tea (on the verge of his vision's defeat) to be an almost gloating placation. Her arm around him regained life and she pulled him closer, and as the warmth of her embrace made Tea maddeningly aware of her total obliviousness to the ideological skirmish being waged between them, Mom delivered her smiling deathblow. "I think that someday," she said wistfully, "Dad won't even want to drive away anymore. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Tea broke from her hold and stepped forward. He turned and faced her. "How can he be a truck driver if he doesn't drive away?" Tea spat. "He can't."

Mom said nothing, just occupied the seconds after his outburst trying on various faces. A loose-jawed surprise and confusion. A maternal sympathy that reached at him invisibly. A tight-lipped defensiveness coupled with the hurt eyes of the misunderstood. All in a handful of seconds. None of the expressions seemed to take for her. Then she went blank, inwardly withdrawing as she stepped back to the sidewalk and absently plucked dead leaves from the stubby rose bushes lining the lawn's perimeter. Tea turned away and stared at a swaying *For Sale* sign on the lawn of a house up the street. He wondered if Dad had reached the freeway yet.

"Where should we go this summer?" she asked, still tending to the plants. It had been barely a minute of silence, yet her voice sounded replenished and reset. Tea turned back to her and a weariness found him, spurred by the certainty that their dispute was not simply pacified for her but utterly nonexistent, like it had retreated into that same gaping hole that held everything else Tea wanted to know.

Mom smiled at him. "Camping?" Tea shrugged. "Remember the Yosemite trip?" she asked.

"No," Tea said quietly. He made his way back to the sidewalk.

"Sure," Mom said. "It was a couple years ago. In the spring."

"We went camping?"

"Just you and your father," Mom said. She traced a finger through the soil. "I was sick. So you and Dad went. He has a picture of it somewhere. You drove down in the Mistress."

"The rig," Tea corrected. "I've never been in his truck."

Mom stopped picking at the roses. “Don’t you remember?” she asked, dropping a handful of dead leaves to the sidewalk. “Your dad has a picture of it. You loved Half Dome. He said you couldn’t stop staring at it.”

Tea knew what Half Dome was, could even picture its flat face breaching monstrously from the pined mountainside, but the image he had, with its flawless sunset and peach-tinted snow was very definitely from the National Parks map hanging in Mrs. Reed’s class.

“I don’t remember anything,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. I remember it.”

He took Mom’s hand and led her back into house, and he convinced her to read another chapter with him by candlelight out of their shared book, even though it wasn’t Thursday night and they weren’t waiting for Dad to arrive home. Two days later, as Tea stood at the fence overlooking the creek, after having been mocked by the dot over an *i* for a quarter hour, he was dismayed at how easy it was to see Mom’s side concerning Dad’s choice to drive away each week. Dad’s staying away, it made Mom sad or lonely or something, and Dad knew that, but he continued to leave. And though Tea had only known his dad as the weekly visitor, he was the only kid he knew that had such a setup. It wasn’t normal, and maybe that indicated more than just charming deviation. Perhaps a need for space and aloneness was just well-groomed selfishness, and maybe the victorious heat Tea felt each week at his Dad’s departure—a heat Tea was trying to now

generate himself in this shabby imitation at the fence—was a mistaken impression, a false light.

* * *

Then, two days later, Mom brought him to Laurelwood Creek. And she laid claim to him, her son—to *all* of him, including his troubles. And he—shoes and pants and all—waded downstream, away from the dark breeze emerging from the drainpipe, and to a sunny patch in the water, a warm break in the canopy above. Then, for the first time, he clicked in.

But what did that mean?

Well...that idea he'd had about clicking in having something to do with being located? Dead on. At that moment in the creek, *Tea was located*, in the exact right place at the exact right time—indisputably.

What surprised him, though, was *where* he was located.

Because it wasn't knee-deep in Laurelwood Creek.

If he'd had any hopeful expectation about clicking in, it was that it would be an entirely external event. He wanted it to be a super-amplification of his outward perceptions, as though the outside world—in an amatory fit of sympathy for him—would strip away its immediate layer, its modest protective trappings, and display itself for Tea, a tender and shining new surface, so bright and so loud that the meager inner chirpings of his troubled thoughts would drown away and the looming presence would collapse into a heap of ashes on his shoulder. Other times, especially those recess hours spent at the fence, Tea desired clicking in to be even *more* than an external event—he wanted an

externalizing event. He wanted the world to actually remove him from himself, to reach into his body and yank him out, through his mouth or an ear, or through his ass if need be—it didn't matter, he just wanted out. Then, liberated, he would simply be orphaned awareness, psychic plankton, floating about, free to only observe and witness, to be neutral vision without the burdens of body or thought or history or responsibility and all their corresponding traumas; he would glide down to the creek and look back up at his discarded body as it slumped against the fence, as the looming presence plundered it, that spider-legged invader totally unaware that all that was valuable had already abandoned ship.

The point being that, for Tea—who tended to slip deep into the jungles of his inner life, who became lost in the darkness of that inwardness and tripped and tangled himself in the tendrils of his own thoughts—the outside world seemed a pretty good spot, and that's where he wanted clicking in to locate him more fully.

But that's not how it was. He clicked in and Laurelwood Creek did *not* crank up its brightness and volume. Nor was he snatched away from his body. He was still the same boy standing in the same creek, no more outside himself than before.

Then again, he wasn't any further *inside* himself either. That had been Tea's other plausible imagining for clicking in, that it was a deepest-of-deep plunge inward. This option (far less desirable than his fantasies of externalized retreat) was about confrontation, where clicking in was a furious cerebral excavation, down-down-down, until he reached the black lair where thoughts originated, where the looming presence awaited him, and where they'd finally have it out, and when Tea eventually defeated the

presence (the details of which he'd never really worked out) he'd seize back control of the machinery of his thoughts, disentangle the mess that the looming presence had created, and basically give his head such a thorough tune-up that his thoughts would perform perfectly when called upon and afterwards idle so steadily that Tea would barely hear them at all.

Well, that didn't happen either. Tea clicked in and his thoughts, like the cold water flowing past his legs, continued to move just as they had before: they came and went and cycled back again, racing and crawling in equal amounts, magnifying and evaporating, intermingling and twisting into both nightmare and fantasy. He was no more located with them than he had been before.

But, there was a difference: Tea wasn't thinking the thoughts. He clicked in and that became very, very clear. It wasn't a menacing revelation. It was simply true: these thoughts, they weren't his—no more so than the watery current that tickled at his ankles. They were just there, these thoughts—*thinking themselves*.

So...

...The creek moved just as before...

...The thoughts moved just as before...

...The boy named Tea straddled these two currents—one outward, one inward—
just as before...but....

He. Was. Elsewhere.

Where?

Nowhere really. Between outside and inside. Betwixt perception and thought. A singular spot, like the dot over an *i*—no, that was still too big. Far too big, as even a dot commands space. A dot has a location, a *where*. But where Tea was located was not actually a *where* at all, but a *how*. He was located in an action...*his* action...what he now understood to be the secret outpost of his only uncontended claim in life:

Attention. His location was attention.

Thinking, the production of thought, is the toil of an organ. It's meat labor. He understood that now. Thinking was more like breathing in its semi-voluntary status. When Tea felt like regulating his breath, he had a reasonable amount of control over it. But when he forgot to regulate, his lungs, unoffended, respired on without him. Thinking was the same! His brain could do it perfectly fine without him—perhaps even too well. His brain was not malfunctioning, it had not turned treasonous: it was simply working, as always, as it should, with the materials at its disposal, burning the coal of perception and experience.

But attention. Attention! That was something different. Tea's brain, his body, his very *life* were dependent on his command of attention. This was the greatest of all owner-operated endeavors.

Attention *was* his location and it was 100% voluntary.

If he did not direct his attention, then there was none. Period.

If there was no attention, he had no location.

If he had no location, then his life became involuntary, and he was abducted by the various currents within and around him, fractured and divvied and spread thin by their opposing logics, and very far from feeling alive. And that's when the looming presence found him, when he felt least alive.

If Tea had desired clicking in to be anything more dramatic or magical than this, he took back those wishes. This was it, the big truth, the grand reconfiguration: His life wasn't simply the sum of outside and inside, of happenings and thoughts. His life was not merely an ongoing reaction to itself. He was, in fact, a separate agent from the parts of his life, unincorporated yet possibly influential—if he paid attention!

His first decision was an obvious one. Even clicked in as he was, he could feel the instability of his attention, how this located action was on the verge of dropping out from under him at any moment, leaving him once again as just a kid in a creek with a busy head. And if his attention was shaky, it was purely operator error. He knew that. The attention, as a vehicle, was mint—virtually unused.

He needed practice. This was what he decided just as the attention began to unravel. He needed *to* practice. He was sure of that, even as the remaining clicked-in scraps melted away, as the creek and the thoughts reached out to reclaim him once again.

It was time to leave the creek; there was nothing here that he wasn't already carrying with him. Tea plunged his hand into the water up to the shoulder, his fingers skimming the muddy bottom until he came up with a single flat stone, its face an inch square. He put it in a pocket and climbed back onto the warm bank.

It wasn't a magic stone. It wasn't even a lucky one. It was simply a reminder: what had happened that day was real, and he needed to act accordingly.

Chapter 5
Spring 1986

Time sped up for Tea after that day at Laurelwood Creek, as though his brief moment of clicking in had been a sort of catalytic event that set his days onto a forward moving track. The feeling reminded him of the *Timeline of North America* display that hung on a wall in Mrs. Reed's classroom, the way the entire continent had been, for millions of years, in an empty, timeless hush, and then with the arrival of the Native Americans, events quickly punctuated and adorned the landscape. It felt just like that for Tea, and his day at Laurelwood Creek had been the Bering Strait of his young life.

* * *

Tuesday, April 1st. Just days after Laurelwood Creek.

Mrs. Reed tugs down on the world map dangling in front of the blackboard. The map snaps into an upward roll and disappears into its metal holder. There they are on the blackboard—the week's ten grammar sentences.

Tea is perhaps too ready. His hand edges into his desk prematurely and he retracts it. He mouths something short and silent that nobody can hear, then trains his attention on the grammar sentences, slowly scanning Mrs. Reed's impeccable chalk cursive, trying to not simply read but visualize *Bill kicks the ball on the hill* and *Sue picks flowers in the grass*.

Mrs. Reed is giving her usual instructions. Work silently and alone. Approach the desk for any questions. When completed, turn in your grammar sentences to the Finished Basket. Spend the remainder of time until recess in Sustained Silent Reading.

Tea just tries to contain his energy. His left index finger has commenced a dry run of the sentences across the smooth face of his desk. Soon. Students are almost done clearing their desks of everything except a pencil, and Mrs. Reed is about to wrap up her—

Yes, here it is. Mrs. Reed motions to Jimmy Ehrlich, Tea's neighbor at Crocodile Table, his sole competitive nemesis in the timed math quizzes, and—more important to this moment—the classroom Paper Monitor. Jimmy rises from his chair and resets it neatly under his desk, giving it a final shove so it rattles the desks of his three fellow Crocodiles.

With an incomprehensibly straight spine and a way of walking on his toes that resembles a Hanna-Barbera type of stealth, Jimmy Ehrlich makes his way to the rear corner of the classroom, to a nook of bookshelves by the water fountain where all paper and craft supplies are kept in wire baskets. He indulges in his usual performative moment, counting out loud the exact number of students in class that day (jabbing a finger in the air at each kid), then counting out the same number of sheets of brown writing paper. He licks his finger, thoroughly, after each new sheet. Jimmy always wants to have the exact amount of paper so he won't have to make another trip to the basket to return extra sheets—he thinks that's stupid.

There are twenty-seven kids in class today. Tea knows this because he made his own count an hour ago. He allows his hand to reach quickly into his desk and retrieve his flat creek stone, which he squeezes tight, once again mouthing something short and silent.

Jimmy is still counting brown paper sheets. He'll lick that finger fourteen more times. Then he'll walk straight past Crocodile Table—despite it being the closest—and begin his paper-passing at the farthest possible table, then slowly, *slowly* weave his way around the classroom. He varies his route each time, like it's his personal improvisation based upon which tables he hates least that week. But it always stands that Crocodile Table will receive paper last. Jimmy has said that's only fair—why should *they*, his tablemates, get to start the grammar sentences before him? But Tea knows it's because, in the beginning of the year when they had to name their table, Jimmy's nomination of Streptococcus Table (his dad works for Genentech—he's told everyone) was overwhelmingly outvoted.

Jimmy's got the count. He's making a beeline for Bald Eagle Table in yonder farthest corner, counting the papers aloud *again* as he distributes. This is it. Tea's hand shoots into his desk and finds his Water Fountain Ticket right where it should be. He holds up the laminated slip of blue paper, high as he can reach, giving it just a little, unobtrusive shake. Mrs. Reed spots him and, with a silent nod, grants him passage to the fountain.

Tea pockets the creek stone and jumps from his seat, taking two steps and then turning back around, having forgotten to push in his chair. He mouths that same silent phrase to himself, slides the chair in, and makes his way to the water fountain.

He allows the arch of water to simply graze his lips; he's thirsty, no doubt, but he's more concerned that any addition to his nervous stomach may, at this moment, result in disaster. The water continues to run as he silently counts to seven—yesterday's

session of water fountain observation has shown that seven seconds is a convincing and commonplace amount of drinking time. Then, his seven-count completed, Tea performs the maneuver he's been visualizing for days: he snatches two pieces of brown writing paper from the basket and hides them behind his back as he returns to his seat.

The brown paper goes into his desk, followed by his hands. He stares down at the shiny surface of his desk as though he can see through it to the activity going on inside, to his hands affixing one of the papers to a clipboard that he found in the garage at home, the clipboard's wooden back covered in old stickers with faded sayings that employ lots of exclamation points—according to Dad, the clipboard's a relic from Mom's days at Berkeley.

Jimmy is still miles from Crocodile Table. Slowly, Tea brings the clipboard to his lap. He readies his pencil. Then, taking in a deep breath, he repeats that same silent phrase to himself:

“Where are you?”

Pushing his pencil to the secreted brown paper, he starts to answer that question. Where is he? He's with Bill and his ball on the hill. He's doing his dreaded grammar sentences, and he'll be done very, very soon.

That's the key to this whole plan. Get it done. Write fast and don't stop until it's finished. The looming presence wants him to stand still. It catches Tea when he's not paying attention to something, when he's just passively waiting around, which is what he's had to do every week prior: sit there, nervous and unfocused, until Jimmy dignified him with a paper, and in those crucial empty minutes the looming presence had already

crept up his shoulder and set him to worrying. But today he isn't waiting. He's pushing onward, saying bon voyage to Bill on the hill, and now picking flowers with Sue in the grass.

Success is feasible here. His two remaining neighbors at Crocodile Table won't care that he's started early; Mark Maskel is once again playing with the Sergeant Slaughter action figure he hides in his desk, and Esmeralda Cabrero supposedly like-likes Tea and won't even make eye contact with him, let alone sell him down the river. Tea is writing way faster than normal and he's not checking his work, but these seemingly haphazard adjustments have all withstood his home tests. Legibility stays stable at this speed, and he discovered this weekend that he catches spelling errors as they're happening, as though he's not constructing words one letter at a time but in bunches that simply don't *look right* if they're misspelled. And as for his correcting the grammar errors hidden within the sentences, Mrs. Reed uses the same four tricks each week:

- (1) Bad CapitalizatiOn.
- (2) No period at the end of a sentence
- (3) An unnecessary, comma.
- (4) A verb that are conjugated incorrectly.

And then there's the reassurance of this one bit of truth: this stuff is easy. When he pays attention, he knows that to be the reality. It's easy. So he works fast. When he feels himself second-guessing a sentence, he squeezes his creek stone until it hurts, then he keeps writing forward. When he finds himself drifting, staring blankly at the paper, he

heaves in a breath and mouths that phrase—“*Where are you?*” Then he’s back again, with Jack and his dog on the log.

At the periphery of Tea’s attention, he tracks Jimmy’s voice counting the papers. Jimmy stands at nearby Sea Otter Table and his count just reached twenty-three. Which means he’s headed back to the Crocodiles. Tea shoves the clipboard in his desk, and grips the second, still-unused sheet.

Today Tea is thankful for the steadiness of Jimmy’s malice towards his tablemates; as usual, Jimmy grants himself a paper first, placing it square and straight on his desk. Then he flings the three remaining papers like they’re feed for farm animals. The papers scatter across the desks, and Tea leans far forward and uses his body to block Jimmy’s sightline—Jimmy can’t see him slip one extra blank paper into the pile.

Mark Maskel takes a paper.

Esmeralda takes a paper.

Tea takes a paper.

Now Jimmy stares at the table.

“I think there’s one extra, Jimmy,” Tea whispers.

Jimmy’s lips tighten and he looks around for...something—an explanation, a culprit, a hidden camera and studio audience. Tea, offering solidarity, follows Jimmy through the entire panorama of his gaze, and when no answers are discovered, he says kindly to the Paper Monitor, “Sometimes they get stuck together, Jimmy. The papers, I mean.”

Jimmy snatches the extra paper and heads back to the bookshelves, and Tea makes the switch, the blank paper for the near-complete assignment in his desk. He hunches forward so the assignment is impossible for anyone to see beneath his face and chest. Jimmy's back in his seat, taking only the smallest of moments to look over Tea's way, then beginning his sentences.

Tea's in the clear. He hugs the paper in tighter and writes fast, even faster than before

Ruby runs with her red radish.

Alberto hikes on the hidden trail.

The sentences remind Tea of Henry, the make-believe climbing guy from Montana that he and Mom created at the creek. He wonders what Henry is feeling right now and what he's up to—

No. *Where are you? You're almost there!* Tea squeezes his stone even tighter and writes on, not stopping, not stopping until...

He's done.

Tea peeks out. Jimmy is only now wrapping up his time with Bill on the hill. Mark Maskel hasn't yet managed his name on top of the paper. It's technically too early for Tea's completion to be convincing. But he's done, and if he keeps this paper in front of him, if he allows himself empty time to wait and second-guess—

He's up. Out of his seat and headed to the Finished Basket on Mrs. Reed's desk. Now he U-turns, back to his desk to push in his chair. Now he stands there, staring at his desk blankly, debating whether he should check his answers, just once.

“*Where are you?*”

He whispers it a little too loud. A few faces pop up from their work. Jimmy is staring in disbelief. And disappointment. Jimmy looks disappointed, which makes sense, as Tea has long suspected that if anyone enjoys watching him suffer over dots on *i*'s, it's Jimmy.

Tea bolts for Mrs. Reed's desk. Alarm bells are sounding all over his head, but he's ignoring them, thrilled. *Don't run in class*, he tells himself. *Don't run*. He runs.

He's greeted by the thinning perm of Mrs. Reed's down-turned head as she grades last week's math assignments. Her face and red pen rise up in unison.

“Question, Tea?”

He slaps the grammar sentences into the Finished Basket. One of his fingers refuses to break contact with the paper.

“You're finished already?”

He's staring at his writing, wishing he'd placed the paper face down instead.

“Tea?”

“Mrs. Reed.” His head snaps up so fast it startles her. “Are we allowed to take things out of the Finished Basket after we put them in?”

“You mean your grammar sentences?” she asks. “You're free to take them back to your desk. To check them over again, if you'd like.”

“So I *can* take them back out?”

“I suppose,” she says, confused. “Until I start grading them.”

“When will that be?”

“I don’t know, Tea. Not now.”

“Could you grade mine? Really quick?”

Mrs. Reed sits up straighter and the remainder of her eyebrows narrow. Tea jabs himself in the leg with his creek stone. *Where are you?*

“Nevermind. I think they’re okay.” He forces his finger off the paper.

“Go enjoy Sustained Silent Reading, Tea.”

His grammar sentences smolder in the Finished Basket. Tea turns away and tries not to run back to his desk. He runs.

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Sunday, April 20th. Late afternoon.

82-63=

Tea sits at the kitchen table with his weekend math homework. His father departed an hour ago, and the house feels quiet and vacant. Mom is outside the kitchen’s closed glass slider, contending with the sudden heat of the day while she prunes the potted roses that dapple the backyard patio. She sits on an old milking stool, at eye level with a budding Double Delight, the stool one of the only tangible remnants (that Tea, at least, has ever known) from her childhood home in Iowa.

82-63=

He keeps glancing out the glass slider. Backyard gardening on a Sunday afternoon is unusual for Mom. Like much of their time together during the week, the

hours after Dad's departure have generally maintained an almost ritualized rigidity. Dad leaves, then Tea brings his weekend homework to the table, and Mom stations herself at the island in the kitchen's center, the rose-colored tiles of the island covered in her predictable materials: the Family Calendar, a Sunset Magazine, the Sunday edition of the San Mateo Times, her recipe book, and a yellow legal pad for documenting needed grocery items and the occasional inspiration for another mother-son outing. She often bakes on Sundays, which Tea has come to understand as her pretense for remaining there with him in the kitchen; but beyond any pan of brownies, Mom has another more important charge, which is to fill the house's quiet end-of-the-weekend air with lots and lots of talk. She talks her immediate thoughts on this day, a sort of soliloquy unconcerned with content or continuity or significance as she skims and jumps from reports of an upcoming farmer's market, to tales of mountain lion sightings by joggers at the reservoir, to Sunset's newest Tex-Mex recipe, to quiet musings over the contents of refrigerator and pantry, her voice unknowingly performative as it rises and dips in volume and inflection, as it bubbles convincingly over a lukewarm topic. Their Sunday congregating (in the same room they occupied before Dad's Thursday arrival each week) is like a preparation for their new week alone together. Tea in fact believes (though he can't be totally sure) that the first time he noticed himself exiting the haze of his early childhood was a year ago at this table, when Mom's voice issued clearer than ever before, and when Tea at-once understood that he was actually there, listening to her.

But today she is outside pruning roses, with the glass slider shut tight despite the hot air in the house, a move Tea has deemed purposeful on her part and a sign that she

wishes to be alone. And thus he will be alone too. The backyard behind the glass is as muted to Tea as the still air inside, and he watches a silent version of his mother—somehow nostalgic in its lack of sound—as her slight frame in its usual pastel pink sweat pants perches over the milking stool, her brown hair straight and sticking to her neck, her normally tiny hands looking cartoonishly oversized in the gardening gloves.

82-63=

He'd woken that morning to his parents' voices through the heater vent. It was an unpleasant conversation—he deduced that mostly from tone and tempo, as he could make out very little except the word *Saturday* said a half-dozen times. By the time Tea came downstairs, the kitchen was empty. Mom was in the garage like usual, but Dad wasn't stationed in the den where he should be.

He'd finally located his father by the mechanized groan of the rig's hydraulic system. At the den's window, Tea parted the curtains and there was Dad, who'd apparently opted to spend the morning in the driveway, balanced rather nimbly on a stepladder at the side of the rig. The truck's cab and sleeper, a seemingly immobile rectangular mass of metal, was tilted forward by the hydraulics, poised at an impossible 45-degree angle to the driveway and exposing its enormous engine beneath. Dad, his beard tucked into his shirt, leaned into the throng of metal and tubing and groomed the innards of the rig with a wire brush. A socket wrench was nestled into the back pocket of his jean shorts, and below on the driveway, next to a mug of coffee, was his gleaming chrome toolbox.

Tea stood transfixed at the window. His father's work in life was an almost exclusively unseen phenomenon. Dad's job took place hundreds of miles from Tea and Mom—his trade that of constant movement. It was an invisible mastery to which Tea had very little insight. This view from the window was a rare look at his father alone, doing what he knew best. Tea reduced the part in the curtains to the most inconspicuous space—he wanted to watch Dad without his father knowing he was being watched.

“Your dad took an extended job this week.”

Mom stood in the doorway of the den. She set down a basket of Dad's laundry on the couch and picked through it for matching socks.

“He won't be back until Saturday,” she said quietly. “Don't worry. We'll figure out something fun to do.”

Tea looked back out the window. “Is he going cross country?”

“Just to Montana.”

“That's where Henry lives,” he said.

“Henry?”

“The mountain climber,” Tea explained, feeling silly for mentioning it. “Remember? His worries got delivered to me on accident. When he was—”

“Climbing Everest, right?” Mom looked up from the laundry basket. “To save his dog.”

“To save his son. Who was up there to save his dog.”

“That's right,” Mom said, smiling, then adding with a touch of irony, “Maybe your dad will see him.”

“Henry’s not real, Mom. We made him up.”

“Of course.” She hunted through the basket for the partner of a faded gray sock. Tea parted the curtains a little more to watch his father seat himself on the stepladder and gently polish an apple-sized piece of machinery, the smudged metal part delicately cradled in his large hand like a magic lamp or a baby chick.

“Have you felt worried lately?” Mom asked.

“No,” Tea said. He smiled secretly at the window at the thought of his recent success with the grammar sentences.

“That’s good.”

“We should drive somewhere this summer,” Tea said. He looked over his shoulder to her. “Maybe to Montana. In the rig.”

Mom nodded, slightly, and her eyes moved back to the basket, even as her head continued the up-and-down motion, the trappings of agreement. “That’s an idea.”

She was silent as she folded some shirts. “Why don’t you go out there and help your dad?”

Tea shrugged nervously. “That’s okay.”

“I’m sure he’d really like it.”

“He’s busy.”

“He’s your father.”

“I’m fine here.”

Mom shook the static from a shirt, the fabric snapping in the air as her arms whipped it around. “Let’s read a chapter from our book together.”

“In a little while, maybe,” he said, batting the curtain with a finger.

Mom finished her folding and took up the empty basket. “Well,” she’d said, in an overly cheery voice, “one more load to go.” Then she’d returned to the garage.

$$82-63=$$

Tea looks up at the clock above the stove. He’s been staring blankly at the same subtraction problem for five minutes. The clock’s second hand is surprisingly audible.

$$82-63=\textit{Where are you?}$$

He takes up his pencil from the table and converts the problem to up-and-down form.

$$\begin{array}{r} 82 \\ -63 \\ \hline \end{array}$$

Where are you!?!?

This is stupid. Subtraction problems, even the kind with borrowing, are beyond review for Tea. The class has been working on borrowing for a few weeks now, and though some kids like Mark Maskel (who has *no* problem rattling off the stats for Sergeant Slaughter’s strength, intelligence, agility, and firepower levels, as well as the levels for any member of Slaughter’s Marauders) are still boggled by the concept, for Tea this has been easy since Day 1. He and Jimmy Ehrlich were the first kids in class to get it, and he’s been sent to the chalkboard a half-dozen times to demo a problem and explain it out loud to the class.

“This is easy,” Tea says, breaking the quiet in the kitchen. “Watch carefully. The first step is to borrow a 1 from the 8 and give it to the 2.”

Yes, this is a little better. He writes as he explains to his unseen viewers, no different than a demo at the chalkboard. He likes doing the demos for the class—it's like performing some sort of mind-bending trick for an audience.

“You borrow that 1 from the 8 and you give it to the 2. The 8 becomes a 7 and the 2 is now a 12. Ta-da! Now all you have to do is—”

A quick movement outside the glass slider catches his eye. Mom has snagged herself on a thorn that digs into her arm beyond the protection of the gloves. She jerks her body back and the rose bush stubbornly bends and shakes while retaining its hold. Her pruning shears soundlessly drop to the cement. Tea turns his body to the glass slider. With clenched teeth, Mom carefully frees her arm. She catches him watching and gives a reassuring wave, saying something that Tea can't hear.

He returns to his homework. “The 8's a 7 and the 2's a 12. Now all you have to do is subtract. 12 minus 3 equals 9 and...”

Mom has turned on the hose and is crouched on the milking stool, running water over the reddening cut on her arm. The water hits the patio and splashes onto her shoes, but Tea can't hear it.

“Now subtract 7 minus 6. Which equals 1.” His voice sounds hollow. Barely there. “That means the answer is 19.”

Tea doesn't write in the solution, just looks down the page of the worksheet and counts how many problems he has left. For no good reason, he finds himself nervous about the latter problems involving three digit numbers. *Where are you?* The quiet is distracting. And he's not where he should be. He should be focused on this homework.

But these problems—that should be so easy—suddenly look like a lot of toil, and his attention is refusing them. *Just go fast and don't stop.* He wishes to be clicked in again, like back at the creek, if just for a minute or two. It shouldn't be quiet like this. He needs to focus on this work. Instead, he stares blankly, between the homework and the glass slider, and he finds himself wondering if Mom ever milked cows when she lived in Iowa, because she's never said anything about it. A familiar tingle creeps across his shoulder and through his throat.

He's been ambushed. The looming presence followed him home for the weekend—that's never happened. It shouldn't be quiet like this. Mom's voice should be all over this kitchen. She should know better.

What's Henry the Climber doing right now? This is the question circling through his head. Tea has, once again, been sent Henry's worry by mistake. What's Henry got to worry about? Even if Henry's not really real, what's he got to worry about?

He says it out loud. "What's Henry got to worry about?" Again, louder. "What's Henry got to worry about?" Tea lays his pencil across his homework.

"Henry is...Henry...he's...Henry can't remember anything. He can't remember anything since his fall. Remember? He was a famous climber when he was younger. And then he fell one time and he quit climbing for years—forty-seven years—and he sat on his couch and ate chips. But then his son's dog got sick. And his son climbed up Everest to find a special snow that could cure his dog. But then his son got into trouble on the mountain. And Henry got off his couch and climbed Everest to save his son. And he did. And then Henry went back home to Montana, to his farm in Montana, and he was

looking through some old picture albums. And he noticed he didn't recognize the people in the albums, because when he fell forty-seven years ago, it knocked out lots of his memories, and the last thing he remembered from being a kid was milking a cow..."

Something happens to Tea right then. He's listening to his own voice gain speed and echo off the kitchen walls. He's rocking a little, back and forth in his chair at the table, as he makes up the story about Henry.

Then he goes away.

Not Henry. Tea. Tea goes away. His homework goes away. The kitchen goes away. The way it would if he went to sleep.

But this isn't sleep. His own voice is still there, distantly, as though behind a thick fog.

Occasionally his voice penetrates the fog. He hears himself saying things:

"Sixty-three."

"Because it's the only way he can find out."

"Borrowing a bail of hay."

"Needs a hook."

He has only one clear thought in that fog: He's been here before. This is what it was like *before*. Before his mother's voice appeared. This is what it was like.

"There aren't any oceans in Montana."

"Follows the map."

"Because it's a secret."

"It's not a genie. You only get one wish."

There is a rap on the glass slider and he's back, hunched over the table. He opens his eyes. His throat is dry. Mom stands outside with a hand pressed to the glass, her head tilted in concern. She points to the slider's handle and gives it a tug to show that it's locked from the inside. She raps on the glass again.

Tea, still groggy, rises from the chair. A sharp tingle runs through his right leg, which has apparently fallen asleep. He unlocks the slider and opens it.

"Are you alright?" she asks, poking her head in and looking around as though for someone else. "What were you doing?"

His eyes are fixed on the patio, where the puddle from the hose has all but evaporated. "Math," he finally manages.

"Out loud? You were yelling."

He nods, slowly. "I was practicing," he says. "For when we have to do problems on the board."

On the table is Mom's legal pad, smack dab in front of his chair. His homework, along with all the table's placemats, is on the kitchen floor, scattered several feet from the table as though swept out of the way. The top page of the legal pad is covered in sketches very clearly from his hand, and though they aren't much more than glorified stick figures and rudimentary box houses, he can say very clearly that the four-legged animal figure in the top left-hand corner of the page is Henry's childhood cow named Matilda who has a total of sixty-three black spots, including one spot on its right hind leg in the exact shape of Iowa.

Mom looks back at her half-finished pruning of a Sweet Surrender, the milking stool knocked over as though she got up quickly. She pulls the slider further open and steps into the house, and Tea moves out of the way, realizing he'd been blocking her entrance.

She removes her gloves as her eyes again scan the kitchen. "Why did you lock me out?"

There is a guilt creeping through Tea that surprises him, along with a growing resolve to hide whatever it is he's guilty of. Light-headed, he sits in his chair and flips to a blank page on the legal pad. "I guess," he says, "I just walked by the door and locked it. Without thinking about it."

Mom fixes her eyes on him, and he meets her examination for a moment, then smiles dumbly and improvises a subtraction problem on the legal pad. "Borrowing is easy," he says. "This week Mrs. Reed let a few of us start memorizing our multiplication tables. I'm up to the sixes. Fives were easy." He holds up the legal pad and displays his work, and he's relieved when she, seemingly satisfied with his nonchalance, stops looking at him and goes to the sink for a glass of water.

Tea looks back to the slider. He *had* locked it. It was like the fading memory of a dream. He'd gotten up from the chair and retrieved the legal pad from the island, and he'd locked the door on his return trip to the table. But it hadn't been an accident. He'd locked her out. On purpose. He could still feel the sentiment that had propelled him—a sudden and fierce urge to be alone.

"Why are the placemats on the floor—"

“Have you ever milked a cow?” Tea asks, leaving his seat to pick up the scattered objects on the linoleum.

“A cow?” She follows Tea’s gaze outside to the milking stool. “Oh. No. That’s just an antique.”

“There were no cows on your farm?”

Mom smiles. “We didn’t live on a farm.”

He resets the placemats and his math homework on the table. “But you lived in Iowa.”

She laughs and pets his cheek with a warm hand. “Not everything in Iowa is a farm. We lived in a city. My dad, your grandpa, was—is—a university professor.”

Tea shakes off the last bits of grogginess and straightens the placemats. “Does he teach math?”

“Medieval literature. Loooong poems about battles and damsels in distress,” she says, sticking out her tongue. “Those poems were *endless*.”

“You didn’t like them?”

“Not one bit. But he didn’t like the poems I read either,” she says, pausing as her eyes turn reflectively to the ceiling. She catches herself and smiles wide at Tea. “You looked a little like your grandpa when he taught. He’d march around his lecture hall full of college students and just rant. Like he didn’t even have time to stop for a breath. And he’d swing his arms around and do different voices. Just like you were.”

Tea steadies himself against the kitchen island. He’s aware that Mom is engaged in the very rare act of volunteering details about her Iowa days, about her father who

Tea—as far as he can recall—has never met. But his mind can't at this moment savor the information, as it, his mind, is engaged in a more pressing matter: everything that she'd described—the swinging of the arms, the different voices, the *ranting*—he'd done all of that without knowing it. But it had happened. He is certain of it. She had watched him, and in the midst of that fierce haze of his actions, he'd never noticed her behind the slider.

“Can we bake some brownies?” he blurts out.

“I suppose,” she says. “Nothing's bothering you?”

He shakes his head reassuringly. “I want to help with the brownies.”

“I like that idea,” she says. “Let me change out of these sweaty clothes.”

Mom heads upstairs and Tea, alone again, attempts to gather himself. He traces his fingers along the drawings on the legal pad. The wall clock's second hand ticks away. He is very sure he knows what each one of these drawings and doodles means, as though they are elements of a story he's had seamlessly memorized since forever.

How does he feel? The tingle in his throat is gone, its worried pressure for the moment replaced (or transformed) by the budding force of something new, something that, it feels to Tea, as if he's had a hand in creating. He glances at his homework. The problems once again look easy, as they should.

He walks slowly, lightly, around the island and breaths deeply.

He feels...good.

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Tuesday, April 28th.

Jimmy Ehrlich is a real stickler for rules. It's beyond a level of simple obedience with him, beyond some sense of larger morality or the belief that the school day runs better for all involved if the kids can just stay within certain parameters of behavior. Tea could perhaps relate to Jimmy if this were the case for his rigidity—even admire him for such a compulsion. But that's not why Jimmy likes the rules. There's something else there, something that Tea doesn't yet understand about his next-door Crocodile neighbor, and whatever that mystery is, it's the reason Tea has to be careful. Jimmy remains a constant danger to his plans.

Like now, for instance. Jimmy's watching him, closely—watching him and losing time on the grammar sentences that Tea has once again completed and turned in at a surprising speed. He's watching Tea stand his Pee Chee folder at the front of his desk like a screen, then doing the same with his Social Studies book (the tallest classroom text) on the desk's right side. Jimmy's view has effectively been blocked out, but Tea knows he's still watching.

Jimmy may be suspicious about these screens, but there's nothing he can do; it's very much within Tea's classroom rights to, as Mrs. Reed calls it, “make a nook” at his desk during Sustained Silent Reading. It's just that Tea has never once during this year made a nook, and this has Jimmy thrown off.

The classroom clock dangling above the horizon of the Pee Chee folder says 9:50. Five minutes until Group A Recess. Tea is thankful the early heatwave hasn't yet broken.

His nook complete, Tea retrieves *How to Eat Fried Worms* from his desk, his official SSR book according to his reading level. He opens to his bookmark and takes a breath—he simply has to make it for five minutes. Just five minutes, or three pages of steady, concentrated reading according to the averages of his home trials.

Fried Worms is not the issue. Tea likes the story well enough. The problem is that the looming presence is no slacker. And the looming presence (it/he/she/?) is opportunistic and resourceful in catching Tea, even during SSR. Tea had never known this until the last few weeks. Before then, the grammar sentences had taken him so long that he'd never had more than a handful of minutes for reading before the 10:15 bell rang and he was outside for Group B Recess. But recently, due to his new strategy, he's had all the time in the world for SSR, and he's discovered that even doing something pleasurable, like reading about kids eating worms, is a challenge in maintaining attention strong enough to evade an ambush by the looming presence. It's the *sustained* portion of Sustained Silent Reading that has forced Tea to concoct yet another plan.

The bell rings for Group A Recess. Tea steadies himself. Ever since it heated up last week, Mrs. Reed has been keeping the classroom door open, and ever since that door has been open, Tea has watched Jimmy stop whatever he's doing at his desk to stare out at the droves of passing Recess A kids running and laughing and yelling through the

corridors (all of which is technically not lawful corridor behavior) as they made their way to the schoolyard.

Jimmy's head is up and visible over the top of the Social Studies book. The sound of oncoming kids fills the corridor outside. Now Jimmy turns to look out the door. Tea loses a moment to wondering what Jimmy is thinking right now, then he dives into action, silently pulling from the on-deck position within his desk two additional books. One is a photo-filled nature volume simply called *Whales*, the other a book of jokes and riddles. Both are checkouts from the school library. Neither are acceptable SSR books.

The contraband books go underneath *Fried Worms* and Tea is set. He goes back to *Fried Worms*, reading slower and more carefully than before, trying to somehow savor the words by mouthing them silently and caressing them with a finger that slides slowly across the page—both the bad habits of a much lower reading level, but nonetheless tactics he's discovered aid attention. Two pages in, his focus, as expected, starts to falter, and in a quick movement, he switches *Fried Worms* to the bottom of the book pile. Up comes *Whales* and Tea scans the caption beneath the underwater photo of a narwhal pod, then stares at the picture. He finds he can now recite the caption by memory, so he whispers it over and over again as he traces his finger around the body of a narwhal and up the spiral of its tusk (it's a *tusk*, not a horn—that what the caption says). Two minutes later, Tea makes the next switch, opening randomly to a page in the riddle and joke book.

The plan is working. He'll focus on the joke book for another couple minutes, then start the cycle again with *Fried Worms*. There's no trace of the looming presence.

He laughs, quietly triumphant. A curt *shhh* erupts from behind the wall of his Social Studies book.

“Hey Jimmy?” Tea whispers, the success of his plan inspiring a risky playfulness that is rare to him.

“Shh.”

“What did the Popsicle say to the hairdryer on its birthday?”

“Shhh!”

Seven more minutes until Group B Recess. He’ll make it. He’s juked the looming presence again.

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Sunday morning, May 4th.

“Four.”

“Five.”

“Six. Kiddo, another one.”

They are all seated at the kitchen table, watching Dad twist spoons into his beard until they disappear within the thick sandy hair. Tea hands his father a seventh spoon from the pile on the table, and Dad, sweeping the spoon dramatically through the air with a magician’s flourish, inserts it into the clanking tangle hanging from his chin.

“We could take this show on the road,” Dad says, twisting the spoon deeper.

“What do you say, Trina? You could be my lovely assistant.”

“Tempting,” Mom says smilingly.

“And our boy here could walk around the crowd with a hat and collect tips. We’d be a sensation. Seven! Another spoon!”

It’s a Sunday and they’re all in the same room, on Mom’s surprising insistence earlier that morning that she make breakfast for everyone. The kitchen table is busy with jam bottles, glasses of orange juice, and plates splashed in solidifying streaks of syrup and the sickled wedges of uneaten pancake scraps. Tucked in a corner of the table is the Family Calendar, which Mom had dutifully retrieved at the meal’s conclusion, and the sight of which had thrown Dad into his performative fit with the spoons.

Tea watches his father swing the heavy load in his beard like the pendulum of some great clock, Dad laughing as spoon number eight loses its hold and clatters down to his plate. He finds himself a bit jealous of his dad, in the ease he displays, which Tea attributes to his father’s absolute confidence that in less than an hour he will, like every Sunday, climb into his seat in the rig and click in.

As the weeks have passed for Tea without any repeat performance of that splendor that found him in Laurelwood Creek, he’s become increasingly tempted to simply ask Dad for some tips—a few friendly tidbits for how to click in with more regular and predictable fashion. It’s not that Tea isn’t thankful for the collateral improvements that have stemmed from that moment in the creek; in many ways, the galvanizing energy that has driven him to outsmart the looming presence in the classroom—and the ongoing success of those experiments—has been the very outlet that has subdued his anxiousness to click in again. But with second grade drawing to a close,

Tea has several liberated months approaching, and he'd surely like to spend some of that time in that wondrous middle space of pure attention.

Sitting there at the table, Tea can feel it on his tongue, the urge to just blurt out, "*How do you do it? How do you make it happen when you want it?*" But the idea of Dad suddenly turning to him, his beard now nine spoons deep, and replacing that goofy grin on his face with a sage-like stoicism so that he can explain to his son the finer points of the invisible art of pure attention, it just doesn't seem to fit. Dad and he have never had even *close* to such a conversation (Tea's still waiting for his father to call him by his *name!*) and the thought of such a sudden evolution in their interactions makes Tea simultaneously ecstatic and squirmy with discomfort. So Tea says nothing. Plus, there are worse possible outcomes to such an interaction than mere squirminess, like for instance, if he finally found the courage to ask Dad about clicking in and his father had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. And what if he then teased Tea about it, in the playful manner that he needles Mom about her impeccable shopping lists or her passion for the Family Calendar? If his Dad needled him, if he made a joke out of clicking in, then it might just confirm for Tea a concern that has slowly gained quiet voice over the weeks: that what happened in the creek hadn't really happened at all, that his memory has a new dimension of faultiness: instead of simply dropping that day at Laurelwood Creek into the black void of his forgetfulness, perhaps his memory had actually gone the opposite route, waxing overly poetic about the event and painting it with such brilliant relevance that Tea now attaches an inappropriate amount of significance to what had happened. The whole thing might just be a story he's been

telling himself, one that has stuck in his head as resolutely as his fierce fictional creation about Henry the Climber a month before. Tea just can't tell. He has his creek stone. He squeezes it often. He knows why he'd picked up that stone in the first place. But the voice of doubt still remains.

“Okay Richey, kindly return all kitchen utensils to the table,” Mom says, sliding the Family Calendar in front of her. “We have some family business to get through before you leave—”

“Which reminds me,” Dad interrupts. He hunts for the final spoons in his beard. “I've got a little bit of a hang-up with one of our big events coming up.”

His father, surprisingly, turns to him, and Tea feels his back press hard into the chair. “Buddy, you're dad made a big boo-boo a while back and accidentally scheduled a haul on the week of your birthday—”

“Rich!”

Dad waves her off and keeps his eyes on Tea. “I messed up, kiddo. I wasn't thinking when I took the job.”

“Then cancel it, Rich.”

“I can't,” Dad says to her. “It's too close to the hauling date at this point.”

“It's your truck,” she fires back. “You're an *owner operator*. I thought that meant you called your own shots.”

“And I get those shots because I'm reliable. I can't cancel now. If I'd figured it out a month ago, even a couple weeks ago, I could've changed it. But—”

“So you've known for *how long* that you wouldn't be at your son's birthday?”

“I didn’t know, Trina,” Dad says slowly. “I wasn’t thinking when I scheduled the job and it only dawned on me recently.”

“That’s why we have the Family Calendar.”

“I realize that. It was a mistake.”

Mom leans in closer to Dad. “When is your son’s birthday?”

“Christ, hon.” Dad shakes his head. “June fourth. Like I said, it was a slip-up.”

“It’s called compartmentalizing.”

“I don’t miss my son’s birthdays,” Dad says, turning to Tea. “I don’t miss your birthdays.”

Tea is nodding excitedly in what must appear a responsive agreement to his dad’s statement. In reality, the bouncing of his head is more an endorsement of the entire conversation. There isn’t a time he can recall such a passionate discussion between his parents—and one where *he* happens to be the central topic. They are arguing...over him. A heightened state, perhaps fear, is certainly circulating through him at the moment, but he thinks he might just *like it*, the way his skin is warm and an aching void has overtaken his stomach, the way in which these sensations tell him he’s witness to a moment both treacherous and significant. It feels vastly preferable to the hushed muffle of voices through a heater vent, voices that may or may not be talking about him; and how could it not?—his mother is throwing a sharp-edged wing of protection over him, and Dad, well, Dad has just made the first fatherly proclamation that Tea has ever heard.

“You don’t miss birthdays,” Mom says, flipping the calendar to June and tapping at the first Wednesday of summer vacation, labeled *Tea’s Birthday—Waterslides!!!*. “But you’re missing this one.”

“I’m not like that, Trina. You know that.”

“Like what? Like *Arnold*.”

She says the name like it’s a cuss. His father, both deflated and wounded, abandons whatever retort he has readied in the chamber, and Mom, though not appearing altogether remorseful for whatever slight she has cast, makes the conciliatory gesture of sitting back in her chair and lowering her gaze.

The kitchen clock ticks the seconds away at the table. Mom taps her finger on the fourth of June and Dad absently stacks the spoons near his plate.

“Who’s Arnold?” Tea pipes up.

Mom looks almost surprised he’s still there at the table. “Arnold is your dad’s dad.”

“The Bastard?” Tea asks.

Now both his parents are looking at him. Tea traces a meek finger through the syrup on his plate.

Mom squeezes his shoulder. “Why don’t you go upstairs and start your homework.”

“He doesn’t have to leave, Trina,” Dad says. “This is a *family* discussion.” His voice is softer than before, but with a commanding steadiness, and his eyes are entirely

on Tea. “Bud, I know it wouldn’t technically be your birthday, but how would you feel about postponing the waterslides for a couple more days—”

“That’s not fair, Rich—”

“We can still get all your friends to go,” Dad continues. “How’d you feel about that?”

Mom slaps a palm down on the calendar. “It’s not fair. He’s your *son*. He adores you. Of course he’ll agree to that.”

His father meets her gaze. “How about you let *our son* do what he wants to do.”

Tea looks to her for a reaction, and in doing so he realizes that both he and Dad are now staring at Mom, rendering her the unaligned third at the table. Does he really *adore* his father? Would he really agree to whatever Dad suggests? The occasion to answer such questions had never before presented itself. Now, in the midst of such a moment, Tea doesn’t know how he feels. But his eyes stay on his mother. Finally, with a relinquishing huff, she thrusts the Family Calendar to the side, her chair scraping across the linoleum as she stands and begins clearing the dishes to the sink.

Dad’s attention returns to Tea. He shrugs his huge shoulders. “Your choice, bud. What do you want to do about your birthday?”

Tea pauses in his response, but that hesitant moment, he knows, is only for the comfort of his mother, who has stationed herself at the sink. “That’s okay,” he says. “We can have my birthday a little later.”

“You *sure*?” Dad says.

“I’m sure.”

Mom turns the sink to full blast and works at the syrup on a plate with a Brillo pad. Dad, after a final approving nod to Tea, collects the jam jars and orange juice carton. “Let’s help your mom get this kitchen back in working order.”

Tea grips the juice glasses and heads for the sink. His mother’s eyes are firmly on her scrubbing. She doesn’t look at him as he places the glasses on the counter nearest the sink. Meekly, Tea extends one of the glasses towards her, and as his arm invades her sightline, she turns and shouts, “I almost forgot!”

The glass leaves Tea’s hand, bounces off the counter’s edge and shatters on the linoleum. The shards scatter around his bare feet.

“Nobody move. Broom on the way,” Dad says, opening the pantry door.

“Wait! Richey. We didn’t tell Tea about the surprise.”

“The supr—Babe, he doesn’t have any shoes on.”

Mom turns from the faucet. “Stay put, Tea. Your dad will come over here and pick you up. I almost forgot the big news.”

His dad shuffles items in the pantry. “Just let me get the—”

“*Rich*. Pick up your son.”

The faucet continues to run water. Dad is motionless, still facing the pantry. Tea edges his foot away from a sizeable shard touching his big toe. Then his father abruptly turns from the pantry and heads straight for Tea, crossing the broken glass in his slippers. His hands wrap around Tea’s waist, and with a grunt from his father, the linoleum falls away from Tea and the ceiling rushes towards him. Tea hears himself shriek in the way the girls sometimes do on the playground, and he forces his mouth shut as Dad

maneuvers him in the air, over his head and onto the wide perch of his shoulders. Straddling Dad's neck unsteadily, Tea looks to grasp his father's balding head, but instead reaches for the ceiling. He wobbles and his father reaches up and grabs Tea's arms, forcing them down until Dad's hands envelope his own up to the wrists. Tea situates himself, his heart thumping. His father's hands stay put around Tea's, his calloused palms sweaty and sticky in places from the syrup.

They face Mom, whose eyes stay on the final dishes in the sink. "Tea, listen up," she says, speaking rapidly. "Your dad and I got to talking this weekend, about your summer vacation and what we're going to do." Dad's head makes no movements whatsoever, nor does Mom wait for any, but continues on. "I told Dad about how much you want to drive somewhere. In *The Mistress*. Well he loved the idea—didn't you, Richey—and he suggested that *you two* can make it another father-son trip. Like Yosemite a couple years ago." She shuts off the faucet and turns to them, her head tilted upwards, bypassing Dad and staring right at Tea. "What do you think of that, mister?"

The room gets quiet yet again. Mom, smiling, waits for his response. Tea looks around the kitchen, then down to Dad's head, unable to see his father's expression. His dad's shoulders are still and his grip loosens a bit on Tea's hands.

"Really?" Tea asks. Mom nods, then crosses the kitchen on tiptoe to the pantry, retrieving a hand broom and dustpan. Dad's head tracks her movements.

She kneels on the linoleum and sweeps up the shards. "That's what you said you wanted to do, isn't it?"

“Where will we drive to?” Tea asks. He fidgets his legs to get Dad’s attention, but his father is busy watching Mom empty the dustpan into the garbage.

“Maybe to Montana,” she says, dusting her hands off with quick, satisfied movements. “That would be nice, wouldn’t it?” Her gaze finally settles on Dad.

“How come,” Tea asks, his voice thin, “just us two?”

“Oh, there’s barely enough room in that old truck for two people,” Mom explains. “Besides, it’s important for fathers and sons to have time alone together. Richey, did you know that Tea doesn’t even remember the Yosemite trip?”

“Yes I do!” Tea spits out. “Half Dome. *Half Dome.*” There is nothing believable in the way he says it.

“Your dad wants you to have more memories of time together than *that.*” She returns the broom and dustpan to the pantry.

His father’s at last breaks in. “We’ll go anywhere you want, bud.” Dad’s voice is loud with a sudden enthusiasm that resonates through his thick neck and, alarmingly, into Tea’s crotch and midsection. He tightens his grip on Tea’s hands. “Anywhere you want. Except overseas. The rig don’t float too well. Ha! But anywhere we can reach by road.”

“Let’s do,” Tea says, freeing one hand and shaking it out, “a long haul.”

“Coast to coast? Now you’re talking.” He claps Tea hard on the knee. “A long haul will take a bit of organizing—”

“Tea can help you with the plans!” Mom says, a smile painted across her face that Tea wonders if his father shares.

“Sure he can. And I’ll call some of my older contacts. Employers from my long haul days.”

“You can put me down now,” Tea says.

“Oh. Yeah.” Dad lowers him to the linoleum, all the while continuing to list possible long haul routes and sights to see. He doesn’t look at Tea, but keeps his gaze fixed on Mom. His usual sly grin is there, though it’s bigger than usual, perhaps exaggerated, and it renders his expression ambiguous. Dad, noticing Tea staring at him, wraps a hairy arm over Tea’s shoulder and pulls him in close. “We might have to shoot for late summer. Maybe even the fall after third grade’s started. But that’s okay. We can just pull you out of school for a week. Or two, right Trina?”

Mom steps forward, and in a gesture Tea has never seen before, she strokes Dad’s beard, grasping it gently in one tiny hand and petting the entire length, chin to tip. “That’s the beauty of being an owner operator,” Mom says. “You call your own shots.”

They stand there, his parents, staring at each other, their smiles unceasing.

“Can we stop in Iowa?” Tea blurts out.

Dad releases a thunderous laugh, his head tilting to the ceiling. “Iowa,” he says. “Hell yes, we’ll stop in Iowa.” He raises his eyebrows to Mom as she twists a sandy lock of beard around her index finger.

“Bud,” Dad says, his chin arched forward from the pull of Mom’s finger, “did I ever tell you what Grandma Maggie said about your mom the first time we met her?” Tea shakes his head and Dad claps a firm grip on his shoulder. “Me and your grandma

were going to a special club in San Francisco. To see these belly dancers that performed there every Thursday.”

“The Hungry I,” Mom breaks in, smiling. She relinquishes Dad’s beard for a dishtowel and moves to the sink.

“A hungry what?” Tea asks.

“That was the name of the club. The Hungry *I*,” Dad says, drawing the *I* in the air with a finger. “This was not a nice place, but your grandma liked the belly dancers. So that night, me and her arrive right before showtime, and we’re about to go in the club when we see your mom. She’s standing at the front of the building, just shaking her head and staring at this poster of a woman wearing nothing but a—”

“He’s seven years old, Richey.”

“And your mom, she’s fresh from Iowa. Been in the city a couple weeks. And she’s got on this dark blue dress and a—what do you call it, babe?” Dad asks, tapping the top of his head.

“A beret.”

“A beret! A red beret. This is not the type of thing people wear to this club. So I ask her if she’s lost, and she says ‘I’m looking for the Hungry I.’ Well, I tell her she’s found it. But she won’t believe me. She actually tells me that I must be mistaken, even though the poster she’s staring at, with the woman—well it says *Hungry I* right there on the top. But she tells me no, this *isn’t* the place, because she knows all about the Hungry I, and she’s read about it for years, and she knows *for a fact* that it’s a—what did you call it?—I always get this part wrong.”

“A cultural hub of music and poetry.”

“A hub of poetry and music! Your grandma hears this and starts laughing, and she tells your mom there’s no poetry going on in here, just a lot of...just a lot of stuff that isn’t poetry.”

“I wasn’t completely wrong.”

“You mom’s right. She wasn’t. I explain to her, I say that the place she’s looking for, the cultural hub, it closed up a few years back, and this joint, the one we’re standing in front of, they just bought the rights to the name *Hungry I*. And I tell her, in all honesty, I don’t think this club is her type of place. And you know what she does, bud? You know what your mother does? She cocks her head up and looks me right in the eyes and tells me that I’m full of shit. Full of shit!”

“Full of shit.”

“Tea, do not repeat that.”

“Sorry, Mom.”

“She tells me I’m full of shit, and she pulls that beret on tighter and marches right through the entrance of the club, right past the bouncer without paying to get in. The bouncer takes off after her, and me and your grandma are right behind. I catch the bouncer and give him a couple bucks for your mom. And by the time I find your mom, the show has already started, and these belly dancers are onstage dancing to tambourines, but your Mom’s voice is drowning out the music. Because, see, she’s got the manager of the club cornered, and she’s giving this poor guy a piece of her mind, telling him *shame on you* for—what did you say?”

“For sully—”

“For sully our nation’s artistic legacy. Shame on you! And I finally get her away from that poor guy and seated at our table with a glass of wine. And that’s when your grandma leans over and pinches me on the arm, and she points at your mom and says, ‘That’s a stubborn woman.’”

“She said that I was a *determined* woman.”

“Lovebug, considering you couldn’t even walk out of the club that night without help, I’m sticking with my version of what Grandma said. What do you think of that, bud?”

“But,” Tea asks, “What’s a hungry i?”

“Kiddo, I’ll explain when you have some hair on your balls.”

“Rich!”

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Tuesday, May 20th.

At his desk, Tea’s head rests on the pile of books secreted behind the screens of his nook. He presses a pencil to the scrap of drawing paper that he’s smuggled in his shirt pocket, whispering rapidly to himself. Drawing isn’t really part of his now-established SSR routine; the books, now up to six volumes, have been more than sufficient in keeping his focus tight these May weeks. But today he treats himself with the drawing paper, a reward for a job well done, for conquering the final set of grammar

sentences of the year, and in record time. He even caught Mrs. Reed's end-of-the-year trick in the last sentence, where she threw in all four of her stand-by errors, as well as the doozy of a direct quote, which the class only learned about last week. Tea takes in a satisfied breath and sketches the jagged descent of a seaside cliff in Greenland, adding tufts of grass in a few crags.

It's all over. He's made it. Next week, the last week of school, will be a breeze. Mrs. Reed fought tooth and nail and managed to secure one of the school's film projectors for the majority of the final week, and she's reserved the most popular reels, including *The Red Balloon* (a perennial favorite among all grades), a geography film where Meadowlark Lemon of the Harlem Globetrotters will teach them about longitude and latitude, as well as the infamous earthquake safety short in which that guy from *Three's Company* supposedly drinks water from a toilet tank. Between those treats, Mrs. Reed has arranged all kinds of arts and crafts projects and a trip to the beach in Half Moon Bay. And after that, it's summer vacation.

Next to him, Jimmy scoots out his chair and stands, grammar sentences in hand, and with a practiced reflex, Tea slides *Fried Worms* over the drawing paper and extra books and hugs the whole pile close in to his chest. Jimmy makes his way slowly to the Finished Basket, pausing briefly at random desks to peer down at the occupants working. Over his Pee Chee folder, Tea watches Mark Maskel abandon his work to stare menacingly at Jimmy, still obviously upset at the Paper Passer for getting his Sergeant Slaughter action figure taken away yesterday.

Jimmy lingers at Yellow Bellied Sapsucker Table. He, Jimmy, is still probably five minutes ahead of any other student finishing, but nonetheless, April and May have been a perpetual second-place for him with the grammar sentences. If he's mad about that fact (which Tea sort of hopes he is) Jimmy's not showing it; he has, surprisingly, lost any signs of interest in Tea's newfound ease, and has even ceased tapping at the Social Studies book that separates their two desks and claiming that Tea's nook is invading his space. Jimmy toe-walks slowly in the general direction of the Finished Basket, taking a moment to slide his butt along the edge of Kate Wenzel's desk.

The bell rings for Recess A, and Tea relaxes his surveillance of Jimmy and peers left, out the classroom windows. Kids file out and coax the school yard to life, and Tea's focus ventures past the playground where the first cherrydrop of the recess is being performed by an upside-down girl whose summer dress hangs over her face, then past the muddy field where the larger fifth grade boys have recommenced their ongoing Smear the Queer tournament, then out to the metal softball backstop and the chainlink fence behind it. Tea's spot. Or his former spot. He hasn't been back there to stare at the creek in nearly two months.

There still hasn't been another moment of clicking in, but that fact has bothered Tea less recently, not because he's ceased to desire that second taste—nor has he abandoned his count of the days since that blessed event (today is, in fact, Day 54 since Laurelwood Creek)—but simply because his thoughts have, in the last couple weeks, been elsewhere, busying themselves in the gnawing and picking and downright dissecting of a new arrival in his mind: the surprising and not-a-little disappointing reaction he's had

to the upcoming long haul adventure with Dad. The dates of the haul are still being decided, but the trip itself is a reality—it *will* be happening—and with that certainty, Tea has managed to conjure in himself the exact *opposite* response appropriate for such great tidings.

He's become shy around his father. Shy and nervous—embarrassingly nervous. When Dad speaks to him now, Tea is increasingly tongue-tied with his responses, at times stumbling over the articulation of the most basic thoughts. And even when they aren't speaking but simply occupying the same space, whenever Dad's eyes drift to him, Tea suddenly finds stupid fascination with the empty corners of the room. He's caught himself spying on his father from safe distances, tracing the size of his arms, the way he snorts in air and clears his throat, the way he scratches at his barreled chest and midsection and how all of him, his physical presence, dominates the surrounding space. It all suddenly makes Tea nervous. Just yesterday, his dad had called from the road—a rare occurrence in itself—and when Tea heard Mom answer the phone, he'd instantly left the house, right out the front door and up the block, lingering at the empty house with the *For Sale* sign in front so he could avoid sputtering long-distance to his father.

The trip *will* be happening. He and Dad *will* be sharing the tight space of the rig, and this groaning fact has given birth to squirming litters of concern. How does peeing work on a long haul, and how often—and *where*—does it occur, especially considering the vast disparity in peeing regularity between Tea and his father (he's noticed this lately) and the fact that Tea has, in the past, had trouble coaxing out his stream in what would be considered the most benevolent of public toilets? What about pooping? Oh man,

pooping? And how will they sleep with only one bed present in the sleeping compartment? Will they share it, crammed together for nights on end, with Dad's hulking mass, his smoky cigar breath, and the incredible heat he generates (another recent observation) smothering Tea's slight frame?

Tea works his pencil in tiny swirls, adding a curly beard to the stick figure standing atop the seaside cliff. Though he has shied away from asking his father to elucidate any of these basic mysteries of the road (to do so would require he *talk* to Dad), Tea has, this last week, taken to battling back against his own head and the phantom concerns it endlessly generates about the trip. Like, for instance, the fear that he and Dad might not have much to talk about. Was that a possibility? Yes, but so was the likelihood that their conversations could take on dimensions and rhythms of much greater magnitudes, that perhaps prolonged, undistracted time was the necessary ingredient to rich and comforting talk—that certainly was the case with Tea and Mom. And then there is the fluttering apprehension that Dad might find him uninteresting, or disappointing, or a total drag. Tea has taken a firm stance against this thought, based not simply upon his mother's constant reassuring remarks (inserted into any and all types of moments) about how much his father *loves* being around him, but in the utter lack of historical precedent backing the fear itself: Dad always looks glad to see him, and though Tea's pretty sure this long haul trip was all Mom's idea, Dad has claimed it as his own and has approached the early planning stages with gusto—he likes Tea and he wants to take him on an adventure, and any inward doubts to that fact are just unwanted thoughts thinking themselves, or, as his mother once said, thoughts that are *full of shit*.

But, in the end, it comes back to this: the trip *will* happen. It will, and all these concerns over logistics and biology and interaction are really the minor moons orbiting around the primary and puzzling body of worry: namely, that he and Dad will be alone together, just them two, for unimaginably longer than ever before, for weeks, and for thousands and thousands of miles. Why that should worry Tea, he does not know. But the shyness, the nervousness, the downright *fear*, it's all radiating from whatever is there at that mysterious center, that which remains veiled in its own abstractness, that which Tea can only view peripherally, as a lurking dread of being alone with Dad, of being *near* him.

With a discouraged grunt, Tea sweeps the pencil down the length of the paper, making a line that extends from the outstretched hands of the stick figure to the ocean waves below the cliff. He feels ridiculous. It's as though his body has an abnormal predilection for woe—a bulging, elephantine gland solely dedicated to fret production, and this long haul trip has sent it into overtime.

He stops drawing.

Something isn't right. There's a quiet abnormality in the classroom, he can sense it. Tea cranes his neck over the Pee Chee and scans the area. Most of the kids continue to work on the grammar sentences. A few make their ways to the Finished Basket where Mrs. Reed sits at her desk correcting worksheets. Tea's breathing catches; he looks to the empty desk to his right, and that's when he feels it, something lurking at his shoulder.

Even without turning, Tea can see Jimmy's shoes, maroon Velcro, stationed behind his chair. He looks back and there's Jimmy, hovering above him, a slight upturn

at the corners of his mouth, his eyes avoiding Tea's and staring straight down at the drawing paper, at Tea's sketch of Henry the Climber standing on the edge of a Greenland cliff, a fishing line dangling from his hands and down-down-down into the water, the fried worm squirming enticingly on the end of the hook, and beneath the waves, a bulbous and speckled narwhal examining the crispy treat with its tusk (not a horn, a *tusk*—that thought actually passes through Tea's mind in this moment) and back up on the cliff is Henry, waiting, exhausted after his perilous journey from Montana to Greenland, yet still with an expectant smile on his bearded face as he waits for the narwhal to bite so he can haul it up and wish upon that magic tusk for his memory to reappear.

Instinctively, Tea jerks the drawing paper towards his lap, only managing to knock over the pile of contraband books and putting them in easier display for Jimmy, who continues to stand behind him quietly. Tea doesn't look back again, just wrangles *Fried Worms* over the whole mess and hunches over it.

The clock on the wall reads 10:08—still seven minutes until Recess B. Tea stares at *Fried Worms* without any attempt to actually read. He listens for Jimmy's movements, waiting for him to make his way to Mrs. Reed's desk to tell on Tea. But Jimmy is staying put, right over Tea's shoulder—he can hear Jimmy's nose whistling, and Mark Maskel's angry eyes are locked to a spot above Tea.

Then, shockingly, Jimmy pulls out his own chair and sits, his eyes directed forward towards Mrs. Reed's desk, not even a glance at Tea's nook. There is a pleased grunt, very quiet, that carries over the top of the Social Studies book, and then Jimmy's

hand goes up—way up—his double-jointed elbow straining his arm to an obtuse angle. He, Jimmy, sits that way, on the edge of his hard plastic seat, his back straight, his arm high, and the whole of him menacingly still.

Jimmy Ehrlich is going to make this public. He's going to sit there and wait, for as long as it takes, until Mrs. Reed looks up from her correcting and calls on Jimmy, so that he can announce to the whole class that Tea has spent SSR drawing stupid pictures, and probably has done so for weeks.

Mark Maskel is making threatening faces at Jimmy and mouthing *I hate you* over and over. Now Esmeralda looks up from her work. Jimmy's eyes stay locked forward to Mrs. Reed's downturned head. A few kids at Banana Slug Table are watching and whispering, confused—Jimmy shouldn't be raising his hand right now. Not during SSR. The rule during SSR is to approach Mrs. Reed's desk for any questions, but *Jimmy Ehrlich* is breaking that rule. Tea scrambles, shoving the contraband books and the drawing into his desk, then shifting the Social Studies book so Jimmy can view the cleared surface. But Jimmy won't look.

Stupid. Tea was stupid. He should have kept monitoring Jimmy the whole time that rat had been out of his seat. But he hadn't. He'd drifted and let his usual focus slip. It's his own fault that this is happening. Tea crumples the drawing paper inside his desk, squeezing it tight in his fist, just as a familiar pressure invades his cheeks, as the looming presence pounces.

Where are you? The question circles half-noticed through Tea's mind, even as the looming presence pushes against the back of his eyeballs, pushes in a way it hasn't

managed in two months. He's going to cry. Again. Just like he did on the day of his trouble with the dot over the *i*.

*Where are you?
You have to be somewhere.
Where is your attention?
Where should it be?
You must be somewhere!*

Tea looks down at *Fried Worms*, but he can tell instantly that reading won't save him. The words on the page are no longer the words of a story—they are barely even words, barely collections of interconnected letters, but just a mishmash of squiggles in his blurry eyes. His attention isn't on the book. *Where are you? Don't let it get you. Where are you?* He wishes he were at Laurelwood Creek, clicked in and alone, hidden under the leafy canopy.

Something washes over Tea. Not calm or relief—something with more density. He is, in fact, as tense as he can be, but he begins to lean into the tension, pushes it to the forefront, gathers it all to his eyes. Then, his hands shaking, Tea folds up the Pee Chee and returns it to his desk, then does the same with the Social Studies book. Jimmy's eyes dart for the slightest second his way and he raises his hand even higher, his butt leaving the plastic seat. Tea closes *Fried Worms* and puts the book away. His desktop now clear, he lays both hands on it, his fingers interlaced and squeezing together, white-knuckled. Tea turns his head right, towards Jimmy.

His attention will be here, on Jimmy. This is what's happening, right now. Tea can't stop what's happening, so he'll watch it. He'll watch Jimmy do it. Because this is what's happening.

Jimmy doesn't look at him, just grows more still, his unraised hand ceasing its anticipatory stirring. His breath quickens, Tea can see it in the movement of Jimmy's chest. The slightest rosy rush travels across Jimmy's freckled cheeks and down his mole-ridden neck.

Tea can feel his own face, the tightness in his forehead and around the bridge of his nose, and he knows his own expression is not unlike Mark Maskel's. Internally, he forms the words *I hate you*, and repeats them, directing the phrase through the pressure in his eyes towards Jimmy, even as he notices, for the first time, how tiny Jimmy's ear is, how its bottom doesn't terminate in dangling lobe but connects straight to his neck with the most delicate attachment of skin. He follows the severely trimmed angles of Jimmy's haircut, then the tangle of creases surrounding Jimmy's eye—creases that, Tea realizes, are always present on that face, because Jimmy squints, always, he keeps his eyes small, like he's hiding them. Tea slackens the flesh around his own eyes and releases his clenched jaw, gradually, until his whole face relaxes and communicates nothing, no internal message at all, but merely lingers there as a frame for his eyes and their focus on Jimmy.

You won't die from this. These words arrive in his mind and Tea knows he's starting to once again think his own thoughts. There is reassurance in the statement's starkness. Jimmy will surely succeed in telling on him—and who cares? What would happen? Mrs. Reed might hold Tea in from recess? Big whoop. It was a game of tetherball, and besides, before Tea had invented all these tricks to keep his focus straight, he'd voluntarily missed recess a half dozen times just to finish his work. He wouldn't die

from *that*. And he wouldn't die even if Mrs. Reed's anger went well above expectations and she, say, made him spend next week sitting outside in the corridor—or even up in the office with the *really* bad kids—during the movies and crafts projects. Even if he was barred from the beach trip. Fine. He'd see all his friends soon after for his birthday at the waterslides. Sitting there, staring at Jimmy, Tea can scan the entire inventory of worry that his mind has to offer, and he will die from none of it.

Jimmy bites absently at his lower lip and switches his raised hand, the first now laying limp and bloodless on his desk. It's marvelous how unashamed Tea feels, even on the verge of getting in trouble. He would never have suspected such unabashed poise to be at his disposal, and it's mostly due to the discovery he's just made about his neighbor: Jimmy Ehrlich never looks at anybody. Jimmy only looks at *things*, at baskets of paper, at the chalkboard, at his special Genentech pencil, even at the tops of people's heads or at the backs of their necks in smug inspection. But he never looks *at* anybody, only things.

That's why Tea doesn't trust Jimmy, and that's why, in this unashamed moment, Tea also knows for sure he doesn't *like* Jimmy either. Jimmy Ehrlich doesn't look at other people because he doesn't want them looking back at him, and this overriding distaste in him for being viewed—an aversion that presents itself in all facets of Jimmy Ehrlich, from his squinty eyes, to his stubborn refusal to do math problems at the chalkboard, to the gaggle of first graders he commands around at recess (none of whom are tall enough to look him in the *eyes*)—this repugnance in Jimmy towards being seen, well, it strikes in sharp discord to a certain sacredness in Tea that, up until this moment,

he wasn't really aware of, a reverence that he doesn't have a word for and won't for another few years, and that word, if he knew it, would maybe be *dignity*.

But Tea isn't concerned with the right word in this moment; he's watching Jimmy, and his mind is surveying the entire idea of *visibility*, how he, Tea, spends every moment under the perpetual assumption of being viewed—*perpetually*, whether by his mother, by Mrs. Reed, by his classmates, by the looming presence, by the audience of imaginary kids who he explains subtraction to, by Henry the Climber, by the words in a book, by birds on a telephone wire, by trees and rosebushes, by clocks on a wall, by pencils and erasers, by litter that blows in the street, by the dot on an *i*. And in some strange reciprocal arrangement, he has felt and now feels that the collected Tea-views of these known and unknown witnesses, the combined vision of this watchful entirety, is actually the *same thing* as Tea's own view of himself—it is sheer similitude, and this fact (which, if it had a name, might be *dignity*) is and always has been Tea's primary compass: he lives in a situation of visibility and unending display, and he is sensed (not just viewed, but *sensed*) by the world around him, in a million ways he will probably never even know, and he therefore has to act accordingly, and by doing so he is part of the world, a member of that sensing coalition.

But not Jimmy Ehrlich, and this is *exactly* why, in this moment, Tea reaches into his desk, his eyes never leaving Jimmy, and retrieves the crumpled ball of drawing paper, then straightens and smoothes it out on his desktop and lets it lay there in full display for Jimmy or Mrs. Reed or whoever wants to see it. He does this all because Jimmy never would.

“You can’t draw during SSR,” Jimmy whispers, tilting his mouth towards Tea without averting his forward gaze. Tea says nothing, just places his creek stone on top of the drawing and his hand on top of that, and he continues to watch his neighbor, fully.

Jimmy does not believe he’s sensed by the world. He *will not* believe it—he, in fact, actively attempts to sever that tether to the world around him. Jimmy opts for separateness; he nurtures a personal invisibility and its corresponding liberty from having to view or sense others, and by doing so (or rather, by *not* doing so), he excuses himself from a basic compulsion, from the most elemental of living suspicions: namely, that anybody else is really *there* at all.

Jimmy glances over, his eyes low, at the drawing. “You’re supposed to be reading,” he says, his tone higher-pitched than normal, the result more appeasing than demanding, as though his own voice edges toward a personal treason, towards a truce with Tea from this silent confrontation. Tea says nothing. There is the sound of papers shuffling at Mrs. Reed’s desk and Jimmy snaps his gaze back to her. From the way he again lays into his lower lip and now supports his tired airborne arm with the other, it’s clear Mrs. Reed hasn’t noticed him. Tea doesn’t take his eyes off Jimmy to look at the clock, but he hears the whistles of the yard duty teachers summoning the Recess A kids back to class.

Jimmy’s hard-fought invisibility could, in itself, be a forgivable crime—Tea would be a liar if he claimed he’d never felt the urge to disappear. But it’s Jimmy’s employment of that invisibility that Tea can’t and won’t abide by, the way that Jimmy loiters in a world he doesn’t even believe in, the way he masters its rules and procedures,

the way he amasses the secrets and weaknesses of those around him, just so he can use this information as fodder, as game pieces, in his ongoing recreation against all the non-entities he travels amongst. That's what it is: Jimmy is like a—

“Stop,” Jimmy whispers. Reluctantly, his head turns to Tea, though his eyes travel no higher than Tea's chest. “Stop.” Tea doesn't.

Jimmy is like a ghost, not of this world but happy to haunt its inhabitants. He wishes to be untouchable and insensible and *un-sensible*, just so he can lurk.

“Stop.”

Just so he can *loom*.

“Stop!” He yells it, loud.

At the corner of his vision, Tea sees Mrs. Reed stand. “Is there a problem at Crocodile Tabl—”

The bell for Recess B rings and a dozen kids stand at once, and in a defeated counter-movement, Jimmy retracts his raised arm, quickly, and his elbow slams down onto the sharp edge of his desktop. He clutches at his elbow, his mouth open but soundless, and for the first time, he looks up, directly at Tea's staring face, and it's as though an aging dam beneath Jimmy's flesh loses its hold, the splits and fissures spreading quickly to the outer surface, to the violent twist in his jaw, to the strained and taut neck tendons, to those eyes closed so tight now that they might just swallow themselves.

The kids make their ways out the door, including Mark Maskel who mockingly holds his own elbow and whimpers *Stop, Stop* as he exits the classroom. Jimmy is up

now, the tears and snot starting to seep through his face. Mrs. Reed approaches and Jimmy backpedals to the water fountain, to his sacred corner of baskets and paper. He is wailing now, with a single unbroken note that fills the air of the classroom.

Tea rises. He leaves the drawing where it lays on his desk. Slowly, slowly, he walks towards the door, his eyes never leaving Jimmy at the fountain. He stands in the doorway, watching, as Jimmy takes in a heaving breath and resumes that single haunting note, as he wails and runs water across his elbow, as Mrs. Reed comes up behind Jimmy and places a gentle hand on his back, moving it in slow circles, and as Jimmy, in a sudden twisting of his shoulders, shakes her hand away.

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Friday, May 30th. The final day of second grade.

Tea stands at the open front door of the house and hunts down space in his bulging backpack for his lunch. He shifts around the various and odd-sized books in the backpack, then crams his sandwich into a gap behind *Whales* and maneuvers his orange and a fruit roll-up between *The Math of the Mayas* and *Iowa: Fields of Opportunities*. He grasps the zipper and tugs, the zipper slowly and achingly sealing the backpack, its plastic teeth straining like overtaxed sutures. This is an unusually large load for Tea, but yesterday, after the class returned from Half Moon Bay, Mrs. Reed handed out plastic bags and the kids spent the last half hour of the day emptying their desks and scrubbing the insides with Windex and paper towels. Tea had lugged home two bags worth of his

secreted books—now up to a dozen—which he will today return to the school library before class.

He hoists the backpack onto his shoulders and tests his balance with the hanging load. Satisfied, he peers out the glass of the screen door, at the surprising fog that has rolled in on an ocean wind, across Half Moon Bay, then up and over the steep hills that border the reservoir and into San Mateo, a journey that took Tea and his class nearly an hour yesterday in a yellow school bus. Dad's truck dominates the driveway, its CB antennae disappearing upward into the fog, though Tea can hear the flapping of the small American flag attached at the tip of it.

Mom is still cleaning up the kitchen after their special waffle breakfast, and Tea looks towards the windshield of the rig. There are a few scattered papers on the dashboard, and a pair of jean shorts lays draped across the passenger seat. Since his father arrived home last night—the rumble of the rig through the kitchen walls making Tea so nervous that he stopped his out-loud reading with Mom at the table—Tea has been sneaking peeks at the truck through various windows of the house. Now he presses his nose to the glass screen and stares at the passenger seat of the rig, placing himself there and trying to picture the space inside the cab. There would be maps in there, obviously—loads of them—and, knowing his dad, they're probably crammed into every available nook and corner. Tea knows that someplace, probably in the sleeper, is a milk crate full of Mom's old college books; it's his parent's ongoing joke each Christmas, Mom wrapping one book and presenting it to Dad, and he every year making a solemn oath to read it “cover to cover” during his hauls. Dad also has a hunting knife in the sleeper, a

knife that Tea has never seen, but he's heard about it, and he knows that it dwells under a pillow and that Dad refers to it as Ol' Justin Case. Tea shudders and grasps at his backpack's shoulder straps. And there are photographs somewhere in the rig, probably in an album, of Dad's long-haul days before Tea was ever born, when Dad would visit national parks and roadside attractions. According to Mom, there's even a picture in there of Tea and Dad at Yosemite.

He pulls his nose from the glass screen. A gust of wind sets the antennae's flag snapping and clears the fog from the rig. Tea's hand goes to the latch on the screen door, and he estimates the height from the rig's metal foot runner to the driver's side window, wondering whether he's tall enough to climb on the runner and look inside. He opens the screen door and takes a step out.

"All ready to go?" Mom stands near the foot of the staircase. She presses a finger to her lips and motions him over. Tea steps back inside and closes the screen, hoisting his backpack higher on his shoulders as he approaches her.

Mom straightens his hair with a gentle sweep of her hand. She gives his backpack a tug, surprised by the weight. "Library books," he says.

"The scholar's burden," Mom replies, looking upstairs. She turns back to him and smiles. "Your dad wants you to give him a hug before we go."

Tea suddenly feels like he kind of has to poop, badly. "But," he says, "he's sleeping."

"That's alright," Mom says, climbing the first few stairs and reaching back her hand to him. "Your dad will go right back to sleep. Trust me."

Tea stays put. The closed door to his own room is visible directly up the stairs, and to the left of that, on the far side of the landing, is his parent's bedroom. The door stands slightly ajar. "Why?" he asks quietly.

"Because," she says, "he wants to wish you good luck on your last day of school."

"We're just watching movies in class. It's no big deal."

"Then he can congratulate you," Mom says. "We're all going to Benihana tonight. To celebrate." She wraps her arm around his shoulder.

Slowly, Tea ascends the stairs with her, his eyes on the bedroom door. He dislikes seeing that door open. Last night, when he left his parents in the kitchen and went to bed, he found that door open and quickly shut it before retreating to his own room. He, in fact, *always* closes that door if it stands open.

Tea stops midway up the staircase, nearly tripping Mom. "But it's his day off. He's sleeping."

"He asked me to tell you," Mom says. "Last night. He said he wanted a morning hug from his handsome young man."

Tea examines her face for truthfulness. Despite his recent nerves around Dad, Tea likes the idea of his father making this request, though he's certain Dad had *not* referred to him as his handsome young man. It's hard to picture his father having such a forthright tender desire, let alone voicing it to anyone. Maybe on the road in the rig—Tea can somehow picture that; the cab of that truck seems a realm of unlikely possibilities, like Dad barreling down Highway 50 in Nevada, the loneliest road in America (and Dad's favorite), clicked in and clutching the steering wheel, tears drenching his long

beard, blasting Johnny Adams and howling through the open window to the bare mountains and ramshackle ghost towns about how much he truly, truly wants his son, his handsome young man—and a second grade graduate at that—to come into the bedroom while he’s sleeping and give him a good morning hug.

“He didn’t say that,” Tea replies.

“He *did*,” Mom says. She steps down one stair and her arm leaves his shoulder. She turns to Tea, their eyes now level with each other. “Please.”

He shrugs in concession, which isn’t easy with the backpack on. She takes his hand and leads him up the stairs.

The rumble of Dad’s snoring is audible from the landing. Mom opens the door a little wider, and her hand presses to Tea’s shoulder and urges him in, then breaks its contact with him.

He turns, whispering, “Aren’t you—”

“Just a quick hug. Please.” She apparently won’t be joining him.

Tea quietly adjusts his backpack straps and takes a step in.

Except for the light trickling from the cracked door behind him, the darkness in the bedroom is near complete, its substance made more real by the hot, thick air of the space. It’s sleeping air. Well-deserved sleeping air: Tea knows Dad’s road stories, knows the man sometimes functions on mere hours of sleep over several-day periods. It’s not unusual for him to rise at noon or beyond when he’s home, *especially* the first morning home after a five-day haul, which this morning happens to be.

Tea looks back towards the door, unable to tell if Mom is standing behind it and monitoring. He sidesteps what he thinks is his parent's dresser, and pauses, taking a deep inhale. The smell of this room with its thick air is familiar, but in a way that feels anciently so. It summons an image of his hand guiding a metal Tonka truck along the room's carpet while someone slept in the bed above. Apparently it's a memory of his.

He edges his way through the blackness towards his father's snoring, stepping carefully; he can't recall a definite instance that he's entered this space in the last year, or maybe even longer. Somewhere in a corner near the covered window, he believes he remembers a wicker rocking chair, though he can't spot it now. If he'd really played Tonka trucks on this carpet in this air, he'd done so in the hazier period of his life, before things became less muted.

It can't be that far to the bed, but it feels that way. His shoes skim across the carpet, and that sound is familiar too, like maybe he's done this before, maybe tried to walk extra quiet along this carpet while someone lay silently in the bed. An anxious pressure generates in his throat—there's danger in this room and Tea wants out, out of the stillness and darkness and into the El Camino with Mom on the way to school.

He at last locates the soft edge at the foot of the bed with his fingers, then traces its perimeter up the length of the mattress. The flat plane of flannel sheets abruptly rises to form Dad's sleeping outline, just a vague and irregular shape, a nebulous black spot within the darkness. Tea can tell that he's sleeping on his back, simply by the volume of his heavy breaths.

He stands above his father and stares down. This isn't right. Dad is a person who hugs *you*, usually in some sneak-attack-over-the-shoulder-bear-hug fashion. His hugs aren't soft or quiet; your feet are swept away from the ground and the air is squeezed from your chest, and you can do nothing but relinquish to that demonstrative force, to that affectionate terror that can and will grasp you until *it* feels like letting go. But this situation, this hug by request, with Dad lying flat and unconscious and Tea leaning over him, this is different. He's never seen his father sleeping—never—and Tea finds at this moment that he can't really picture Dad at all. All he can concentrate on is that unmuzzled breathing coming from the black spot before him. It's a raw-throated vibrating hiss. A periodic wet bubbling. The smack of jowls. The whistle of hot air forced past teeth and coarse hair.

Tea is an intruder here, in a room where, judging from the tightness in his throat, he doesn't belong. He thinks of his father's hunting knife in the rig's sleeper. Ol' Justin Case. Maybe his father keeps a knife under the pillow at home too.

The black spot shifts in the bed and Tea jumps back, his hands wrapping protectively over his midsection and clutching at his testicles. The weight of his backpack seizes control and he falls back onto the carpet, his body arching over the mound of books. The sounds from the bed cease.

"Dad?" Tea whispers, barely able to hear himself. He sits up and tucks his knees to his chest. "Are you asleep?"

No answer. No snoring even. Just silence. Everything is muted. Like the scrap of Tonka truck memory. Tea sits there on the carpet, just as he apparently had at an

earlier time he can't name, and he breathes in the air. The black spot on the bed is still, and Tea's throat further tightens; his father might be awake right now, watching him in the darkness and silence, watching his thoughts as they drift into the empty space, as though Tea, invisible in the darkness, no longer possesses the physical boundaries to corral and control those thoughts. An image appears of their future long-haul trip, of Tea waking in the sleeper and Dad lingering above him, but not really Dad, just a dark spot where he should be, growling, then plunging the hunting knife into Tea's guts.

"Tea?" Mom's voice drifts in from behind the door. Her beautiful voice, breaking the muted air. He doesn't answer, just waits for her voice again, for the safety of that sound. "Tea?" The voice that named him. His father once told him that; Mom had been the one who'd decided on his name. "Tea?" That same voice, naming him again, returning him to his body, deeming him separate from the darkness and silence. He lets out the breath he's been holding.

"He's really sleeping, Mom," Tea whispers.

"That's okay, honey," she says, her face peeking in. She speaks at normal volume, and Tea raises a finger to his lips even though she obviously can't see it. "Richey, wake up."

"Mom, it's okay." Tea stares at the black spot on the bed. It doesn't move. It just keeps staring back at him. He hugs his legs tighter to his midsection. "Mom, I don't want to wake him."

"Richey." She steps into the room. "Richey. Tea is trying—"

"Be quiet!" Tea shoots back at her.

Mom mumbles a tiny, embarrassed *oh*, and retreats from the room.

“Mom?” His face gets hot and an aching nausea creeps into his guts. He can hear her stepping away from the door and towards the stairs.

“Mom?” His voice won’t go above a whisper. He’s hurt her, and the black spot saw him do it. He’s hurt her. An immense sorrow washes over Tea, one that feels as ancient as the thick air, as ancient as the scrap of Tonka truck memory. Mom had been the one lying in the bed then, lying there while Tea played alone on the carpet. And she hadn’t been asleep. Not always. Just silent. Silent and *sad*. And Tea used to watch her, lying there in her sadness, he was sure of it. That is the mute thickness of this room. Sadness. It hangs permanently in here.

He wants to go to her, to get off the floor of the bedroom and go to her. He wants to yell out to her that he’s sorry. But he’s stuck there, on the carpet. Stuck and silent, and that powerlessness in itself feels horribly familiar. The black spot continues to watch him.

A gust of wind sends the branches of a nearby tree to tapping at the bedroom window. Beyond that, distantly, Tea hears the flapping flag on the rig. He listens, holding that sound, holding it and staring back at the black spot on the bed. A picture emerges, finally, of his father, from a few weeks prior, when Tea had watched Dad through the den window as he worked on the rig, when the cab of the truck was tilted forward on its hydraulics, looking like some giant beast bowing its head, and there was Dad, sitting on his stepladder, cradling a metal part and sweeping a rag across its surface, delicately, thoroughly. There had been no music playing that morning, Tea realizes that

in the darkness. His father, who is never without music, had not turned on the massive speakers in the rig. Not that morning, Tea is sure now; it had been quiet in the driveway as Dad tended to his vehicle, to his beloved, and the rig knelt patiently beside him, the two of them in the driveway, sharing a reverent hush. Dad tended to the rig, and the rig, it tended to him.

Tea finds the creek stone in his pocket, and he caresses it there in the darkness. It isn't a magic stone. It isn't even a lucky one. He had claimed the stone as a reminder, of something that had *happened*, that was—is—very real. Something that he can tend to, that he can beckon back, patiently, delicately, in solitude and in quiet.

“Tea?” His mother has returned to the door. She’s whispering. “Honey, we’ll just take you to school.”

“I’ll be right out,” Tea says.

He releases the grip around his shins, letting his legs straighten on the carpet, his midsection exposed. He’s not in danger. This room contains no danger. It houses sadness, remnant sadness. But his mother, all of them, they aren’t sad now.

Tea gets to his hands and knees and crawls, slowly forward, towards the bed. The black spot doesn’t move. It’s not watching him. It, Dad, is asleep. He’s tired, that’s all. He’d looked tired last night when he’d pulled the rig into the driveway. Mom had laid his plate in front of him, and he’d done little but poke around at the food. She’d returned to the table with the Family Calendar, and while Dad rubbed at his eyes and chewed occasionally, she filled the air with talk, poring over the month of June, identifying its unoccupied days and weighing the various options—outings or visits or chores—that

could fill those still-blank boxes on the calendar. Dad had twisted a finger through his beard and stared at his plate, so obviously tired. But he'd responded to her scheduling questions and he'd nodded at her suggestions. Mom is the architect. She's building something for all of them, looking ahead, her talk a perpetually enthusiastic march forward, away from this sadness.

He reaches the bed and pokes his face above the mattress. His father's breathing has deepened into a contented hum. Maybe Mom and Dad are just like him. Maybe things have only recently become less hazy and muted for them, and maybe they can't remember much at all before that. Maybe that was, is, a good thing.

Tea quietly stands. He bends slowly at the waist, heading towards the warm breeze of that contented hum. His arms stretch wide, and just as his backpack comes dangerously close to drooping towards his bowed head and perhaps clobbering Dad, Tea finds his father's chest and lays his face against it. His beard is warm against Tea's neck.

"Dad," Tea says. He nudges his chin at his father's chest. "Dad."

A massive hand finds the back of Tea's neck and gently investigates along his spine, as though trying to figure out who is there. "Buddy? Everything okay?"

"Dad, can I go in the rig?"

No response. He's fallen back asleep.

"Dad."

"What?"

"Can I go in the rig?"

"Does your mom need something out of there?"

“No. Can I go in the rig?”

“Now?”

“No. Later maybe?”

“Just go in?”

“Just sometimes.”

“Sure, bud. Just keep it under seventy-five on the interstate.”

“I’m going to school now.”

“Okay, kiddo. Enjoy yourself.”

Tea holds the pose, sandwiched between his father and the backpack, for another few seconds, and in that time Dad falls back asleep. His father had not requested this morning hug. But that’s okay. More than okay. They’re moving forward. Because that’s what you do.

* * *

When Tea’s mother picked him up from school that day, she told him there was a surprise waiting for him at the house. A gift from his father. Dad wasn’t home when they arrived—he’d gone bowling with Duke, an old trucker friend who now was the neighborhood UPS driver. But sitting there on the kitchen table was Tea’s gift, not wrapped or adorned in any way: a massive key, in a color that looked like ancient gold to Tea. His mother opened the garage door and led him out to the rig, and she helped him get the key into the door handle and hoisted him into the driver’s seat. She asked if he wanted her to stay outside and he said no, that he was fine. Mom smiled and shut the driver’s door, walking back into the garage, and Tea settled into the seat and placed his

hands on the wheel, and before the garage door had even finished its closing descent, he was already clicked in.