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Suburban Train: Part One of a Novel

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Trinity College
Hartford, Connecticut

Thesis

Suburban Train
Part One of a Novel

Submitted by

David Field
Class of 2015

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

2015

Advisor: Professor Ethan Rutherford

Reader: Professor Clare Rossini

Reader: Professor Sarah Bilston

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Chapter 1: One Headlight

It's the Fourth of July again, and Skylar has parked his father's old station wagon on the lip of the town quarry. It's a quiet night. The air outside is unseasonably cold, so he keeps the windows rolled up and burrows deeper into the folds of his sweatshirt. Charlie is curled up next to him in the passenger seat. She stretches her arms, sighs, and rests her head on his shoulder.

Off in the distance, tiny figures mill in a vast crowd around the high school. Children swarm the ice cream trucks while their parents place down blankets and lawn chairs. It seems like half the town has gathered there to watch the fireworks, but Charlie had told him the best view was off near the outskirts of Jefferson, and Skylar has to agree. Snippets of music float to them across the quarry. Bruce Springsteen, it sounds like. "Born in the U.S.A." The sound swells with the wind before dying off like a fading radio signal. The quarry stretches out below them, vast and empty, and the stars are just starting to peer through the deepening purple sky.

"It's so quiet out here," Charlie says, shifting in her seat. "Do you want me to turn on the radio or something?"

"No, I like it this way," he answers. "It's peaceful. Besides, we don't want to miss the first firework when it goes off."

Charlie lifts her head and looks at him again, her cheeks lit up by the glow of the dashboard. She has a brass key dangling from each ear: the latest in a line of unorthodox body piercings. She plays with one of them as she stares over at Skylar. There's a smile on her face. It is slight, mischievous.

"Looks like we've got some time to kill," she says. She runs her finger down the key's grooved edge. "Now how on earth should we spend it?"

"I've got an idea," Skylar replies, and now he's smiling too.

Like a stranger, he watches as his hand reaches out and strokes the back of her hair, his fingers tangling in her curls. Charlie laughs and begins to slip out of her jacket. She has a loose shirt on underneath, one with some cartoon animal prancing across the front. Skylar can't remember who it's supposed to be. Not that it matters. His hand is sliding downward now, nestling in the curve of her neck.

The dashboard casts her pointy shoulders in pale, bluish light, like the wash of color from a television set. It should make her look sickly, but it doesn't – Skylar has always thought that paleness suits her. Now she is leaning in, her face half lit and half in shadow, and he is

leaning into her, and their lips brush with a quick electric tingle. Somewhere across the valley, a tinny child's voice sings about how proud he is to be an American.

Charlie leans in again to whisper something in his ear, but before she can say a word, a wide swath of light spills across her face. Her eyes grow wide as the dashboard blue vanishes from her cheeks. "Skylar!" she shouts. She grabs his shoulders and pulls him roughly across the seat.

Seconds later, another vehicle collides with the driver's door and knocks the old station wagon aside, smashing the side mirror. Skylar falls forward into Charlie's lap. He hears a gasp of breath leave her as the impact jostles her backward and cracks her head against the window.

Their car is tilting now, balancing on the two rightmost tires. The driver of the second car tries to correct his course, but it seems like a losing battle – his brakes are screeching like a wounded animal, driving both of them closer to the edge. Skylar finds himself reaching for his seatbelt, but realizes he is swiping at empty air. He's still sprawled in Charlie's lap. Her jacket spills around her hips like a puddle. He makes a flailing grasp for the dashboard in an effort to drag himself up.

The night sky erupts in a cloud of purple sparks, and faint cheers float to them across the quarry. The sound of the rocket reaches them two seconds later like a cannon blast. In those brief moments, the second car shudders and manages to peel away, its tires leaving jagged streaks on the pavement. Skylar is able to make out the scratched red paint on its fender before the rear headlights glare in his eyes and blind him.

Gravity seems suspended. For a hazy second or two, Skylar feels completely weightless, like an untethered astronaut floating in space. Then the old station wagon falls onto the first rocky plateau, shattering one of the front headlights and throwing Skylar back against the window. Beside him, Charlie lets out a low moan. Skylar notices the wet streaks of red in her hair before the car gives another lurch.

The sky and the ground do a queasy somersault. Through the splintered windshield, Skylar sees a rocket soar through the night and burst into clouds of red and yellow sparks. The colors fall in twisting arcs before fizzling into orange static. Skylar feels his head throb. "The sky's exploding," he says numbly.

His arm whips back into the dashboard, and he feels a sudden flare of pain. It's hot, splintery, and he would cry out if he wasn't being jostled so violently around the inside of the

car. He feels like a loose coin in some hellish washing machine. Fireworks continue to flash across the sky, pounding their insistent, cannonball rhythm into his eardrums.

Then the car hits the ground again, and the driver's door, heavily dented from the initial collision, pops open. A rush of cold air sweeps in and whips Skylar in the face. He clutches his broken arm to his chest and begins to crawl toward the open door. His breathing is ragged, his pulse erratic. He manages to wrap his fingers around the steering wheel before the car gives another flip and launches them out into open space.

Time is starting to slow and elongate. Charlie's body hovers above the seat, her hair floating upwards in defiance of gravity. Her discarded jacket flutters in Skylar's face. He makes a desperate grab at Charlie's arm, but only succeeds in raking his nails across her skin.

The car lurches again, and time speeds up, and suddenly he is falling, falling through the open door, his hands still scrambling for Charlie's. The ground rushes up eagerly to meet him. His body strikes the granite and continues to tumble, and even though he manages to cradle his broken arm, he feels sharp claws of pain rip through his left ankle. Stones and pebbles skid across his palms and leave scrape marks on his skin.

He comes to a stop a few seconds later, but the world continues to spin around him, the sky and the ground bleeding together. He watches through bleary eyes as his father's old car drops out of sight. He hears it glance off the last plateau with a shuddering crunch of metal and a horrible splintering noise, like the sound of a tree toppling. The beam from the one remaining headlight swings through the night like a pinwheel.

Skylar gets to his feet. The bones in his ankles shriek for him to stop, but he limps across the rocky ground anyway, blood pounding in his ears. The car has come to rest at the very bottom of the quarry. Its tires, still spinning feebly, stick up at the sky. There is no sign of movement from the crumpled frame underneath.

"Charlie!" he screams. The word flings itself back at him in a choppy echo: an overlapping chorus of "ee-ee-ee" bouncing off the quarry walls. Off in the distance, the crowd erupts in ghostly cheers. A single red firework has just blasted across the sky.

As Skylar sways on his feet, his bloody fingers scraping against the gravel, he hears a sound that somehow carries over the boom of each firework. It belongs to some other place, some other night; its presence is foreign here. But it also feels like the most concrete part of this nightmare.

It is the slow, steady peal of bells: the dull clanging of a train pulling into some distant station.

Chapter 2: Fell on Black Days

Skylar opened his groggy eyes to a world that had turned sideways. It took him a few seconds to realize that he'd fallen asleep while sitting at a hot metal desk. The left side of his face was pressed against a stack of loose paper. Judging by the long blue scrawl on the closest page, he'd been in the middle of writing something when he drifted off.

He sat up, struggling to stay awake. Some of the papers were still stuck to his cheek. He peeled them off and stared at them blankly, not quite sure what he was looking at.

He was at the warehouse. Right. That much was obvious. The shelves loomed up all around him, looking as rusty as ever under the light of the overhead bulb. Hundreds of cardboard boxes balanced on top of the shelves in increasingly haphazard rows. From the manager's station, where he was sitting, this entire section of the warehouse looked like a child's box fort. One wrong move and the whole damn structure would come tumbling down.

An old fan perched on the edge of the desk, blowing cold air in his face and making a god-awful clattering noise. Skylar shot it a dirty look and began to sort through the stack of papers. He tried to remember what he'd been doing before he nodded off. Inventory? Filing receipts? The sheets in front of him were riddled with numbers and short clipped sentences, but he was still half-asleep and everything looked like a blurry mess. He let the papers fall and began to massage his temple.

That's the third one this week, he thought. It's getting worse.

A door opened somewhere in the warehouse, and Skylar heard the distinctive thunk of Joe McClatchey's boots meandering through the aisles. He was struck by the sudden certainty that his boss would poke his face around the shelves with that typical chip-toothed smile of his, the one that always made it look like he was laughing at some private joke. *Got a new project for you, Chief, he'd say. Some chick in East Jefferson needs us to deliver her piano.*

But when McClatchey turned the corner, he simply reached in his back pocket and pulled out a greasy piece of receipt paper. "Rosebud's needs more paper towels," he said. He handed Skylar the receipt. "We should have a whole stack of 'em somewhere in the back room."

It took Skylar a second to register what McClatchey had just said. "Towels," he replied at last. "Yeah. Sure." He took the receipt and stared down at it, trying to make some sense out of the squiggly marks on the paper.

McClatchey saw him staring and waved a meaty hand in front of Skylar's face. "Earth to Chief," he said. "You feeling sick or something?"

"No, no, I'm fine," Skylar said quickly. "I just – I had a long night. That's all."

McClatchey made a *harrumph* sound in the back of his throat. It sounded like a stalling engine. For a second Skylar thought his boss was going to drag it out, make some sort of joke about partying too hard or taking home some crazy girl; it was the kind of thing he might do. But the moment passed. McClatchey took off his glasses and began to wipe them on his shirt. This only seemed to make them dirtier – his tee was sweaty and stained with gasoline – so Skylar figured the whole exercise was McClatchey's way of avoiding eye contact.

"Yeah, well, you take care of yourself," he said. "And don't forget about those paper towels."

"I'm on it, don't worry," Skylar said. He attempted a smile. For one tense second he thought he wasn't going to make it, but then the corners of his mouth gave a slight twitch, and he managed to turn them upward. It was passable. Good enough for McClatchey, anyway.

The smile was gone by the time he reached the back room of the warehouse. He stuffed the receipt in his pants pocket and began to pull packages of paper towels from the shelves. He worked slowly, automatically. When he had all the stacks he needed on the palette, he headed back to the desk to jot that number in the margins of the latest inventory report, then returned to the back room to collect the towels. He gathered them close to his chest and pushed open the door to the parking lot with his foot.

It was close to midday, and the air outside was oppressively hot. A few feeble clouds tried and failed to hold back the sun. Skylar crossed the lot and carried his packages over to the loading dock, where a beaten-up blue bicycle was chained to the side of the warehouse. Tethered to the back of the bike was a large wooden wagon: sturdy and deep, with enough trunk space to fit a few good sized boxes.

Skylar couldn't help but glance at the bike as he walked by. There was a single playing card clipped to the spokes of the rear wheel. It was the Queen of Hearts, her face bleached by the sun and her corners ragged. She was really quite busty for a woman who was supposed to be flat. Two large pink hearts just barely covered her ample cleavage, and her head was tilted to the side in a sly, suggestive sort of smile. There was a string of numbers scrawled across her face in faded red ink.

His cheeks flushed, Skylar wiped the sweat from his brow and began to lower the towels into the back of the wagon. It was a mindless sort of work. The warehouse was planted at the very edge of the Jefferson business district, and today the distant hum of traffic was putting him on edge. Part of him was still back at the top of that quarry. Part of him would *always* be at the top of that quarry.

An eighteen wheeler zoomed down the highway, and the ensuing rumble sent a nervous shudder through Skylar's arm. He dropped the last package of paper towels into the wagon and took a few breaths to steady himself. It wasn't long before the rumble had died away and the steady white noise of traffic had settled in again.

He unchained the bike and kicked up the kickstand, swinging his legs over the leather seat. The handlebars felt warm under his palms, but despite his sweaty hands, Skylar had no problems keeping his grip. This bike had lasted him most of his life, and he always felt a little bit safer when he was perched on top of it, his sneakers slipping easily into the pedals. For the first time all day, he allowed himself to relax.

The pavement was littered with pebbles, and Skylar did his best to maneuver around them. The wagon was fairly heavy and had a tendency to drag, but by now he knew how to compensate. He steered the bike toward the exit and launched himself down the main road, his hair whipping back in the wind and his feet pumping like pistons in an engine.

Below his seat, he could hear the Queen of Hearts fluttering against the spokes of the rear wheel. The card had become so frayed that it no longer made that satisfying *clickety-clickety* sound; now it was more of a susurrus, a soft, mechanical noise that reminded Skylar of a girl whispering.

One girl in particular.

* * * * *

It was the height of lunch hour traffic when Skylar rode up to the Rosebud Diner. From the outside, the long, red-bricked structure appeared to be packed with customers; some were even spilling onto the sidewalk, making do with a quick coffee or a sandwich to go. Skylar pedaled past the customer parking spaces and headed for the loading dock around back. The light glaring off the car hoods was blinding. He had to squint to see where he was going.

After he'd chained up his bike and made sure the wagon was secure, he picked up the first package of paper towels and pushed open the door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY. Compared to outside, this was like walking into a cooler. The cold air stung his cheeks and made

his eyes water. He blinked a few times as he made his way toward the kitchen, following the sound of clacking plates and the bubbly hiss of the grill.

Jenny Rose was just bringing back a tray of dirty dishes when she spotted Skylar in the doorway. “Oh good, you’re here,” she said. She looked frazzled. There was a flushed spot of red on each cheek and a few stray hairs floating free from her bun, but still, she seemed genuinely glad to see him. “Just leave the towels in the supply closet and I’ll get Jeremy to restock the bathrooms. Keys are in the hallway, as usual.”

Skylar tipped her a quick salute. “You got it,” he said. He shifted the towels to his other arm and headed for the back of the kitchen, inching his way past the sink and the stacks of dirty dinner plates. He got the keys from their designated hook in the hall and propped open the closet door. After finding a spot on the shelves to place the paper towels, he headed back to the exit to unload the rest of the cargo from the wagon. He did it all without having to think about it. He didn’t *want* to think about it. Thinking opened too many doors for him these days, headache inducing doors that were better left untouched.

Jenny caught up with him again just as he was hanging up the keys. “Hey, you’re not in a hurry, are you?” she asked. She had given up on the bun and let her dirty blond hair spill over her shoulders. “My shift gets off in a few minutes. I could bring you the usual and we could do some catching up. I feel like I haven’t seen you around here in ages.”

Skylar’s first instinct was to resist. “I don’t know,” he said, hesitating. He looked uneasily at the exit. “McClatchey won’t be too happy if I get back late...”

“McClatchey’s a moron and you look like you’re starving,” Jenny said. “Come on, you can spare a couple of minutes. I’ll get your table ready.”

Not sure if he was relieved or not, Skylar let Jenny lead him into the diner, where a number of harried-looking business folk were finishing up their lunch breaks. Jenny headed for an empty booth near the window. She pulled out a napkin and wiped up a sodden puddle of salt and soda before offering Skylar a seat. “Don’t go anywhere,” she said, smiling. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

He didn’t sit down so much as slump into the cushioned seat. After watching Jenny disappear back into the kitchen, he turned to the window and stared out across the crowded parking lot. Men in collared shirts wiped their brows and drank from Styrofoam cups of coffee as they climbed into their cars. Even through the glass, he could hear the low, menacing purr of

their engines. He was vaguely aware that his fingers had grown tight and clenched beneath the table.

Then Jenny was back, her waitress uniform replaced by a modest blue blouse, and she placed his order in front of him before slipping into her own seat. “There you go. Black coffee and a lemon poppy seed bagel.”

He couldn’t remember how this particular pairing had become his usual. He supposed he’d ordered it the very first time he came to Rosebud’s, and somewhere along the way it just stuck. Jenny had convinced him to try the coffee black. It was like the taste of unsweetened dark chocolate, a bitter yet savory assault on his taste buds. He loved it. He didn’t think he’d ever tasted anything so satisfying.

Jenny stuck a straw in her glass of water and took a sip. “What has it been, like three weeks?” she asked. “Don’t tell me you found another diner.” She pouted at him over the rim of her glass, but her eyes told him she was joking.

Skylar tried for a weak smile. “No, nothing like that,” he said. “I don’t know. I just haven’t been able to go out much anymore.” He fell silent and looked down into his coffee.

Jenny wrinkled her brow and nodded in understanding. “It’s your mom, isn’t it?” she asked. “Is she giving you trouble again?”

“Yeah,” he said. He didn’t feel like elaborating. Jenny knew enough about the situation with his mother; there was no need to vocalize it. He gave the cup in his hand a slight twirl, creating a little eddy in the surface of the coffee.

Jenny took his silence as a cue to change the subject. She could always tell when a conversation had gotten too touchy, and she was good at steering their talks out of dangerous waters. He had always appreciated that about her. “I feel you,” she said. “Trust me, you’re not the only one with parent issues.” She lowered her voice, shooting a wary look toward the kitchen. “Let’s just say that when Dad gets frustrated at work, he tends to take it home with him.”

Skylar didn’t know too much about Buddy Rose. He’d only seen the man a few times, and those few times had been pretty unremarkable; all he could remember about Jenny’s father was a pronounced jawline and a pair of bushy eyebrows that looked like pipe cleaners. He made a sympathetic noise and stared down at his bagel. It was funny – he’d been so hungry when he first pulled up to Rosebud’s, but now the thought of eating made his stomach churn.

Across the table, Jenny was still wrapped up in her story. Skylar enjoyed her company, he really did; it was nice to have a friend who didn't expect him to contribute much to the conversation. "Anyway, Mom's freaking out because Arty is talking about joining the army again and she can't stand the thought of her precious baby going to war." She rolled her eyes. "This must be the fifteenth time he's threatened to ditch us. If you ask me, I don't think he even cares about the army. He just wants an excuse to get away from our parents."

Skylar looked up from his plate and did a double take. For a moment he thought Charlie was the one sitting across from him, her head tilted and her lips curled up in a knowing grin. But it must have been a trick of the light. Jenny crossed her legs and took another sip of water, and the delusion passed.

"Have you ever thought about it?" he asked her, his voice quiet. "Getting away, I mean."

The question seemed to take her by surprise. She began to twirl the straw around the inside of her glass.

"Yeah," she said at last. "I've thought about it. Not seriously, but I've thought about it. I mean—" She made a careless gesture toward the crowded diner. "This job, this whole place. It's not me. I'm just here to support my dad and make some cash. When I picture my life ten years from now, it's not in this cruddy little diner. It's not in Jefferson. I don't know where, exactly, but it's somewhere else, and it's somewhere better." The flush had crept back into her cheeks, leaving two little red pinpricks.

"Somewhere better," Skylar echoed. He liked the sound of it.

"Where would you go?" she asked, sipping from her glass. "If you could go anywhere."

He looked out the window and picked a few seeds off his bagel. "I don't know," he replied. "I mean, I guess it's kind of lame, but I've always wanted to live in Providence. There's a great college town, you know, and I could go down to the waterfront and watch the gondolas go by on festival nights. I haven't been there since..." His voice drifted off.

Jenny was looking at him now, more intently than before. Something about her face had grown solemn. He could feel her eyes studying him, but he said nothing.

"How long has it been?" she said. "You know. Since Charlie."

Without thinking, his hand went up and began to stroke the thin metal chain around his neck. There was a single key dangling from it: a tiny, scraped-up reminder of Charlie's presence. "A little over a year now," he said finally. He didn't tell her that for him, the memory of the quarry was only hours old. He didn't tell her that he saw Charlie's face everywhere he went,

even if the rest of the world had shelved her away like some old forgotten book. He didn't have to tell her. He got the sense that Jenny already knew.

"Look, I know you're not exactly the talkative type," she said at last. "But I'm always here to listen if you need me. You don't have to be alone in this, Skylar."

"I know," he said. But he couldn't bring himself to say anything else. He stared down into his cup of coffee. For once, the silence seemed too delicate for Jenny to disrupt. Instead, she began to spin the straw idly around her cup again.

They talked for a little while longer, although Jenny did most of the talking; Skylar just sat and listened patiently. When it became clear that the conversation had bled itself dry, Jenny adjusted her blouse and got up from her seat. "That one's on the house," she said. She gave him a smile. It didn't look especially forced, and Skylar did think she was being sincere, but there was something strained about it nonetheless. "And please, Skylar, don't be a stranger. You know where to find me."

"Sure thing," he replied. He gave her a brief wave as she turned to reenter the kitchen. When he saw her again, she had changed back into her red and white waitress uniform and was carrying over a tray of burgers to a rambunctious family of four.

He sat there for a little bit longer, cradling the cup of coffee in his hands. He never took a sip. The aroma was wonderful – intoxicating, even – but he was too afraid his stomach would reject it. So he lingered by the window, watching the parking lot empty itself of pickup trucks and SUVs and sleek black business cars with the windows rolled down.

Somewhere better... what did that mean for him? Was there any road, any potential outcome, that *didn't* end with him stuck in Jefferson? He wished he could share in Jenny's optimism. But whenever he tried to envision a future beyond the next year or so, he felt like he was staring down a hallway of mirrors. His future was just another warped reflection of his past.

Eventually he got up and left. Lunch hour had come and gone and McClatchey was probably wondering where the hell he'd run off to. His eyes lowered to the tiles, Skylar edged his way through the crowd and slipped out through the employee exit. His bike was lying right where he'd left it.

* * * * *

The afternoon was hot, and the hours passed like molasses: slow and sticky. Skylar's shirt was drenched with sweat by the time 6 o' clock finally rolled around. After signing his time card

and wishing McClatchey a good evening, he unhooked his bike from the loading dock and began to pedal back into town.

It was still a few hours to nightfall, and until then, the streets of Jefferson were his to roam. He considered taking back roads down to the riverbank, where he went sometimes to skip a few stones and watch the wavelets lap at the shore. He could always bike down to the high school and kick around an old soccer ball. Or maybe he could just ride – just pedal until his brakes gave out, letting the rise and fall of Jefferson’s hilly streets carry him past evenly trimmed lawns and gas stations and the occasional meadow, where dandelion seeds floated along unseen gusts of wind.

But those options, however tantalizing, were lonely. And he didn’t want to be alone right now. He decided he would pay his friend Lucas a visit. It had been at least two weeks since he’d last stopped by, and a trip like this was long overdue. He figured – or at least, he hoped – Lucas would understand his absence.

The Brays lived in a modest house at the end of Park Street, one with a low hanging roof and white paneling on all four sides. There was a thick line of shrubbery that surrounded the building in a ring of red and yellow flowers. Skylar rode down the short length of driveway and stopped beneath the basketball hoop, as he’d done a thousand times before. He left his bike propped up against the garage and went to knock at the front door.

He could hear sounds of movement from inside: chairs scraping back, television sets being lowered, the pattering of little paws running down the hallway. It was Lucas’s father who finally answered the door. He was wearing a collared shirt and a paisley sweater vest, despite the weather, and he had a steaming cup of tea in his hand. Bosco scampered excitedly around his feet. The little Pomeranian was always happy to see visitors, and by now he was used to Skylar’s face.

“Hi Mr. Bray,” Skylar said. “Is Lucas home?”

Skylar visited Lucas’s house at least three times on the average week, but his father always seemed surprised to find him on their doorstep. “Uh, yes. He’s just finishing up dinner,” Mr. Bray said. He blinked and cleared his throat uncomfortably, throwing a look toward the kitchen. “You can, uh, come in if you’d like.”

“Thanks.” Skylar walked in after him, making sure to wipe his sneakers on the carpet. He reached down to pet the scruffy fur around Bosco’s neck. The dog gave an excited yap and trotted away, disappearing somewhere in the direction of the dining room.

He followed Lucas's father down the hall to the kitchen. As usual, every hallway in the Bray house was brightly lit. Mrs. Bray was a photographer, and most of the wall space in their home was devoted to her pictures. Landscapes, mostly, although there were several photos of friends and relatives interspersed throughout; with a family the size of Lucas's, it was only to be expected. Skylar glanced at one of the photos as he walked past. It was a city skyline, soft and murky. The tips of its skyscrapers jutted through the fog.

Mrs. Bray herself was placing her plates in the dishwasher when Skylar walked in. Unlike her husband, she didn't look surprised to see him. "Hi Skylar," she said. She glanced at him through her framed eyeglasses and offered him a smile. "You know, it's funny, I actually thought you might be dropping by today. It's been so long since you came over for dinner. There's a few extra pork chops on the stove in case you're hungry."

"Thanks, but I'm good," Skylar said. He thought about the untouched bagel he'd left at the diner. "I stopped by Rosebud's before coming over."

Lucas's father hovered in the threshold. "So, uh, how is everything down at the warehouse?" he asked. "Work treating you well?"

Skylar shrugged. "Can't complain," he said. He didn't think Mr. Bray was actually looking for an answer. Lucas's dad was notoriously bad at small talk.

Thankfully, Mrs. Bray broke the silence before things could get too awkward. "If you're looking for Lucas, he took his meal into the living room a few minutes ago."

Skylar excused himself politely and retreated down the hallway. The lights in the living room were off when he poked his head in. Lucas was reclining on the couch, his feet propped up on the coffee table and a half-eaten plate of broccoli and pork chops in his lap. He was watching some sort of documentary about penguins. The light from the TV made his milky white skin look even more transparent than usual.

He looked up when Skylar entered the room. Lucas had a set of dull brown eyes that always looked wide and dazed, so his expression didn't change much when he saw Skylar standing in the doorway. "Oh, hey Skylar," he said. He paused for a moment. "It's been a while. Almost thought you'd stopped coming."

Skylar didn't bother trying to fake another smile; he knew Lucas would see right through it. "I haven't been able to leave the house," he said. "She was in one of her phases again. Wouldn't eat or get dressed unless somebody walked her through. I couldn't leave her alone until I was sure she'd gotten over it." On the screen, some unseen narrator droned about the migration

habits of the Emperor Penguin. “Could we, I don’t know, go somewhere else? Somewhere quiet?” He eyed what was left of the soggy meal in Lucas’s lap. “I mean, I can wait if you’re still eating.”

Lucas promptly shoved the plate onto the coffee table and got up off the couch. He pressed a button on the remote and the Antarctic wastelands disappeared with a tiny blip. “No, let’s go. I hate pork chops.”

He led Skylar down a side hallway, this one plastered with old album covers and posters of dead rock stars. The door at the end was bolted shut from the inside, but Skylar knew that it led to the unused garage, where Lucas had stashed his drum set and other bulky accessories. The two of them took a left turn and walked up the short flight of stairs to Lucas’s room. This door was half ajar, and Lucas had left one of his CDs running – something loud and grungy.

Johnny Cash greeted them with a middle fingered salute as they walked inside. Skylar gave the poster a quick rap with his knuckles, as he always did. It was a force of habit at this point. Lucas waded through the sea of discarded clothing, pushing aside his electric keyboard as he headed for the stereo system. Skylar recognized the song now. It was “Lithium” by Nirvana.

For the third time that day, he felt as if he’d slipped out of time, as if he’d taken a wrong turn and wandered into an old memory. Skylar watched a younger Lucas as he sat on the rumpled sheets of the bed, tuning his guitar. The stereo droned out some punk rock anthem in the background. The voice of that long-ago Lucas floated to him over the music: *Hey, did you hear Kurt Cobain blew his brains out? Some electrician out in Seattle found his body. They said he’d been lying there for three days.*

The stereo cut out suddenly, and Skylar realized that Lucas had switched out the Nirvana CD for another. The past went back to being past. Soon the room was filled with the sludgy chords of Alice in Chains. Lucas hopped onto his bed with an electric guitar in his lap, and Skylar sank into his usual beanbag. He watched his friend tune up each string.

“You know, Dad seemed awfully relieved when you stopped showing up. I’m pretty sure he thinks we’re queer for each other.” Lucas rolled his eyes and plucked the E string. “I bet he’s still disappointed that his son turned out to be some artsy-fartsy musician instead of something more, I don’t know, ‘practical.’”

Skylar glanced around the room. It had always been a mess, but this time he noticed a few new additions to the clutter: textbooks on music theory, stacks of college orientation leaflets,

a suitcase overflowing with ties and folded clothing. “So this Berklee thing is really happening,” he said. “When do you leave?”

“End of August,” Lucas replied. He played a few G chords, frowned, and went back to twisting the tuning pegs. “Like I said, Dad’s not happy, but who cares what he thinks? I’m finally getting to do what I want.” This time the chord was crisp and clear, and he moved on to the next one, satisfied.

There was a lone tambourine lying in the piles of dirty laundry, and Skylar reached down to pick it up. He gave it a halfhearted shake. The little cymbals clashed against each other and produced a brief jingling noise. When the sound died away, Skylar realized that Lucas was staring at him. He’d seen this look before. It wasn’t too different from Lucas’s usual wide-eyed stare, but there was something more intense about it – something hard to put into words.

“You’re not going,” he said. “To college, I mean.”

Skylar tossed the tambourine back onto the pile and sighed. “No,” he said. “How the hell could I afford it? I barely make enough off of McClatchey as it is. Plus, there’s... there’s my mom. I can’t just abandon her. I mean, I’ve thought about it, and I’m not gonna lie, it’s pretty damn tempting. But I can’t. I can’t do that to her.”

Lucas was quiet. He seemed to have forgotten about his guitar; his fingers had grown completely still on the headstock. The stereo had slipped into a quieter, more acoustic track, and Skylar felt a little chill raise the hairs on his skin. This song had always given him the creeps. Something about coming to snuff the rooster.

It was a good few minutes before Lucas spoke again. “You need to get out, Skylar. I don’t know how, exactly, but you need to. Because right now it’s killing you.”

There was a scampering sound from outside the door, and soon Bosco bounded into the room, tail wagging. Skylar picked the dog up and began to scratch the fur under his belly, which made Bosco close his eyes in contentment. His tongue lolled from the corner of his mouth. Happiness came so easily for dogs, and Skylar envied them for it.

“Where could I go, Lucas?” he asked. “Where could I possibly go?”

His friend didn’t have an answer. Instead, he slumped back against his pillow and began to strum along with the music. There it was again: that echo, that strange sense of doubling. Lucas’s guitar overlapped the other song with an eerie kind of resonance, like two tuning forks vibrating at the exact same frequency.

“You should bring Cash over next time,” Lucas said distantly. “Been a while since we had a good old jam session.”

Skylar scratched behind Bosco’s ear. “Yeah,” he replied. “Yeah, I think I will.” He hadn’t realized until then how much he missed making music. It really was the ultimate form of escapism, wasn’t it? Losing yourself in a world of pure sound, where nothing mattered except the frets beneath your fingers and the thrum of each plucked string.

He sat there for another hour or so, soaking in the sounds of grunge rock and listening to Lucas improvise. He would have stayed there all night if he could. But the sky was darkening outside, and Skylar had one more stop to make before the day was over. He’d been putting it off as long as possible.

It was time for him to go home.

* * * * *

The Johnson house was two stories tall, with an unused two-car garage and a wide veranda that looked out onto an empty backyard: a monument to wasted space. Skylar biked down the driveway, narrowly missing the decrepit mailbox with JOHNSON scrawled across the side in black marker. There were weeds climbing up the pole and tiny green leaves poking through the cracks in the wood. Skylar was amazed that the damn thing had lasted so long. Every time he passed it, he had the urge to give it a kick or whack it with a baseball bat. It was a difficult urge to contain.

He dismounted near the open garage doors and tucked the bike inside, making sure it was stowed away safely in the shadows. Then he trudged through the dark until he found the little green door that led inside. He pushed it open as quietly as he could, hoping he could sneak past the kitchen without his mother knowing he was home.

But it was no use. The second he stepped inside, he could hear her footsteps pacing back and forth across the kitchen tiles, and he knew there was no way he could get by her unseen. He took a few tentative steps into the hallway just to be sure. When he peered around the corner, he saw a thin shape standing by the kitchen table. It was his mother.

“Skylar? Is that you?” she said. It was dark in the kitchen, and her body was barely more than an outline against the porch light. She appeared to be wearing nothing but a bathrobe. Her hair was loose and unkempt, and she was balancing a smoky cigarette between two fingers. Its tip glowed a dusky orange.

Without saying a word, Skylar crossed the kitchen and flicked the light switch. The bulb in the overhead light came on: a dull, sickly shade of yellow. The light cast a pale wash over his mother's face. It was red and blotchy, her cheeks runny with smears of makeup, and Skylar wondered if she had been crying.

"Skylar, you're home!" she said excitedly. She took a few steps across the kitchen and flung her arms around him. Skylar stiffened. The cigarette was still smoldering in her hand, and he could feel hot specks of ash burning in his hair. He didn't return the hug. He waited until she had stopped squeezing, then extricated himself carefully and flicked the ashes onto the floor.

"It's been at least eight hours," he said. "Did you have anything to eat?"

As usual, it took a few seconds for his words to get through. His mother stared at him with wide and perplexed eyes. "Um, yes," she said at last. "I made myself a sandwich. And I found some microwave pizza in the fridge." She gestured with her cigarette toward the kitchen table, where two half eaten slices of pizza congealed on a paper plate.

"Good," Skylar said. He looked longingly toward the stairs. It had been a rough day, and all he wanted was to collapse in bed and close his eyes until morning. If only he'd been quieter, if only she hadn't noticed him... "Listen, it's getting late. Let's make you some soup or something. I'll get the stove going if you start pouring the milks."

His mother rocked back and forth on the heels of her feet. "Can we have chicken noodle?" she asked.

Skylar did his best to muster up a smile. "Sure, sure, whatever you want."

His mother stubbed out her cigarette on the counter and strode over to the fridge, while Skylar rummaged through the overhead cabinets for a can of soup. They were running low again, he noted grimly. His mother had gotten out the plastic cups and was now pouring herself a glass of milk. Skylar watched her warily as he turned on the burner. She'd injured her hand trying to cook the other day – nothing too bad, just a heat blister – and he wanted to keep her as far away from the stove as possible.

When the soup was ready, he poured them both a steaming hot bowl and placed them at either side of the table. His mother seized a spoon from the drawer and took a seat, plunging her plastic utensil into the broth. Skylar told her to slow down and let the soup cool a bit so she wouldn't burn her tongue. He demonstrated for her by taking a spoonful of broth and blowing lightly on the surface.

He still wasn't hungry, but he knew that his mother would refuse to eat if he wasn't eating too. He watched her as he lifted each spoonful to his mouth. To him, the soup tasted bland and flavorless, but his mother seemed to enjoy it. She slurped down each noodle with a look of childish joy.

She was halfway through her bowl when a curious, dazed expression came across her face. "Is Abner coming tomorrow?" she asked. "I miss him. He reminds me so much of Aaron."

Skylar dropped his spoon and looked up from his bowl in surprise. When was the last time he'd heard her talk about his father? Months? Years, even? She sat there stirring her soup and staring dreamily out the window, as if expecting her husband to stroll in from the back porch at any second. Skylar had seen her slip into this trance before. He wondered if she was also hearing recycled voices, those faint, audible snippets from a past that refused to stay dead.

"Abner should be coming soon," he answered at last. "He usually visits on Fridays. Plus we're getting low on soup."

His answer seemed to placate her. She returned to her dinner, scooping out the chicken bits and picking at the few remaining noodles. Once she had drained the last of her milk, she sat and stared at the empty glass for a few minutes. Skylar took that to mean the meal was over. He picked up his own bowl and led her over to the counter.

He watched as she drained the leftover broth into the sink and washed the bowl clean using the faucet. Skylar had to stop her from placing the dripping cup back in the cupboard by directing her hand to the drying rack. A brief look of confusion wrinkled the lines on her forehead, but otherwise she didn't react to his touch.

"Come on, it's bedtime," he told her. He led her forward with a hand on her back, guiding her gently toward the stairs. She obeyed without question. From there it was just a short walk up to his mother's bedroom. The bed sheets were crumpled up and tossed every which way. He began to straighten them out while his mother wandered absently around the room. When he looked up again from the bed, he saw her staring at the framed photograph that hung beside her dresser.

He sighed. It was a photo of his parents on one of their honeymoons. Helen and Aaron Johnson were sitting on a balcony in Honolulu, their faces flushed and happy. The ocean behind them sparkled with flecks of captured sunlight. The peak of a lush green mountain – probably a dormant volcano – just barely poked its face above the water.

Skylar had never known the two people in this photograph. The woman who squinted out from the frame was young, carefree, her hair tied back in a long braid and her teeth a healthy shade of white. She looked nothing like the blank faced woman standing before him in her bathrobe. And as for his father... well, Skylar had no memory to compare him to. Photos like this were all he had. Aaron Johnson was just a face in a scrapbook, a voice on a tape recorder, a name on an old gravestone.

“Good night,” Skylar said. His voice was soft – not quite a whisper, but something close to it. Mrs. Johnson didn’t seem to hear him. He slipped out of her room and closed the door, leaving his mother standing by the dresser. She would be okay. Once she got out of this trance of hers, she would find her way to bed and hopefully lie there until morning. Barring any unexpected night terrors, Skylar intended to do the same.

His room was dark, but he didn’t bother flicking the switch when he walked in. There was just enough light leaking in from the street lamps for him to see by. He crossed the room, stared out into the night for a moment, and let himself breathe out: slowly, steadily. The muscles he’d been tensing all day relaxed a bit with each exhale. It helped that the night was quiet. There was no sign of life anywhere else on Park Street, not even a single lit window.

He needed something – anything – to break the silence, so he turned away from the street and began to rummage through his record collection. Lucas had his stereo, but Skylar had always preferred the vintage record player he’d salvaged from their attic. It had his father’s name stenciled across the base, and whenever he used the machine, whenever he heard that satisfying scratch of the needle across the vinyl, he felt like he was stepping back in time. Just a little bit. Just enough to feel the faintest connection to a father he’d never known.

He held each album up to the window, squinting at the names on their covers. He was in the mood for something classic, upbeat, something with a heavy use of piano and acoustic guitar. It was an easy choice. He slipped *The Stranger* out of its case and placed it delicately on the turntable, making sure the needle was aligned with the proper groove. Then it was just a matter of lying back and letting the music wash over him.

When the opening chords of “Movin’ Out” reached his ears, he let out a shaky, pent-up sigh. No matter how shitty he felt, listening to Billy Joel always managed to help him unwind. There was something refreshingly honest about his songs. Something resonant.

Skylar knew all the lyrics to this song by heart, and he mouthed along to the words as he stared up at the ceiling. He was still clutching the album sleeve in his left hand. It was kind of a

creepy cover, wasn't it? Everything bathed in gray. Billy Joel in his business suit, curled up at the foot of a bed, staring down at a black eyed carnival mask. It was eerie, but he liked it. He felt like he belonged in that picture: half in light, half in shadow, stuck in some perpetual in between.

He lay that way for a while, spread eagle on the bed. He was afraid to close his eyes. He was afraid that sleep would bring the Fourth of July, and with it the sounds of screams and twisting metal that haunted his waking hours. But close them he did, and when he finally drifted off in the small hours of the morning, the moon was just starting to sink beneath the line of trees in the distance. He slept peacefully enough. No nightmares, no voices, no dead faces peering out of the dark.

In a few hours he would have to wake up and restart the whole cycle: breakfast, warehouse, taking inventories, filing papers, making deliveries in the cruel summer sun, feeding his mother and getting her back to bed again. But at the moment he was resting. Another sun had set, another black day was behind him, and for now, at least, that was enough.

Chapter 3: Wish You Were Here

“Got a new project for you, Chief. Some chick in East Jefferson needs us to deliver her piano.”

McClatchey’s words are stuck in his head like the buzzing of a gnat, or the chorus of a grating radio anthem; Skylar can’t decide which simile he prefers. It’s another day, another sweltering sun, and he’s pedaling down the back roads of Jefferson with the wagon trailing behind him. His wheels are quieter, smoother, because he has no Queen of Hearts to set his spokes a-flutter. Not yet. There is a Casio keyboard jostling around the back of the wagon, and Skylar has to swerve carefully around each corner to keep it from tumbling out.

The route he is following winds through the heart of town and then veers off into the wilderness, taking him past rows of evergreen trees and sweeping fields of grass. The warehouse doesn’t get many requests from this part of Jefferson, which Skylar thinks is a shame – he would love to come out here more often. The air is lighter, the sounds are crisper. Even the soft clatter of his tires has a musical quality.

The central hub of Jefferson is far behind him now, but there are still several houses sprinkled through the area. Skylar pedals past one woman in the process of pinning a towel to a clothesline. At another house, he draws the attention of a dozing Irish setter. The dog sits up, sees Skylar’s bike disappearing down the street, and decides it would be fun to lumber after him. Two barefoot children chase the dog down the side of the road. Skylar can still hear their shrieks of laughter carry through the air, long after the kids and their dog have vanished from sight.

He cycles for another mile or so before his destination comes into view: a small country house, nestled in a grove of oak trees. The upper floor is almost entirely hidden by a layer of leafy branches. Skylar slows the bike to a crawl as he approaches the house. He knows he shouldn’t be dallying, he should just make the delivery and get going, but he can’t help it – he has to stop and enjoy the view. The little house looks like something out of a fairy tale.

Taking the receipt from his pocket, Skylar climbs up the front steps to ring the doorbell. He lifts his hand, but pauses. There’s no button beside the door. Instead, there’s a small brass knocker shaped like an apple. He glances at the front windows, but the curtains are drawn. It doesn’t look like anybody is home.

He lifts the knocker and lets it fall: once, twice, three times. “Delivery!” he shouts, just in case the knocking hasn’t carried through the house. He looks up at the empty windows, keeping

an eye out for signs of movement. If no one is here, he'll have to prop the Casio up against the porch and hope the weather stays this bright and sunny.

He's just about to return to the wagon when the door swings open.

Skylar's first instinct is to avert his eyes, although he isn't sure if that would be ruder than the alternative. Because the girl standing in the doorway has no clothes on. There's a puffy blue towel wrapped around her chest, which keeps the more revealing parts of her body hidden, but it looks like she just walked out of the shower. Every inch of her pale skin is dripping. Even as she stands there, the girl is wrapping another blue towel around her sopping hair. A few blond strands poke out from beneath the fabric.

Skylar clears his throat and looks down at the receipt. "Sarah Baker?" he asks. His cheeks have grown warm and flushed, and he hopes it isn't too visible. Maybe he could play it off as a sunburn.

"She's out," the girl replies. She twists one idle finger through a lock of hair. "I'm her niece. Charlie."

"Oh," Skylar says. He's afraid to look at her directly. "Um, well, I have a delivery for Sarah Baker. One prepackaged electric keyboard."

Her face lights up. "My Casio!" she says, suddenly excited. "Christ, I thought it would never get here. Is it okay if I sign for that?"

Skylar nods and hands her the receipt. As he fumbles in his back pocket for the pen, he takes a second to glance up at her. She is skinny – bony, almost – but there's a healthy elegance to the curve of her cheeks. Her nose is small and pronounced, her lips pressed together in a thin pink smile. There is something off about her, something he can't quite put his finger on at first. Then he realizes: her eyes don't match. One is a swampy green, while the other is more of a grayish blue, like the sky after a rain storm.

"You've got really cool eyes," he says. The words slip out before he can stop them. He tries to think of something clever to follow it up, but his brain has gone mushy all of a sudden. He produces the pen from his pocket and tries to keep his cheeks from getting any redder.

He's sure she'll laugh or roll her eyes or make some dismissive remark, but Charlie surprises him. "Thank you," she says. She seems genuinely pleased, if a bit taken aback. As she takes the pen and signs the bottom of the receipt, it's her turn to give Skylar a sideways glance. "You know, you've got pretty cool eyes yourself. Nice piercing blue. Gives off a 'let me peer into your soul' sort of vibe."

Skylar has no clue how to respond to that. He smiles weakly and takes the pen back with a quiet “thanks.” It takes him a few seconds to remember why he had come here in the first place. He stows the receipt in his pocket and looks back at the wagon.

Charlie catches him staring. “That Casio is one heavy sucker, isn’t it?” she asks. “Did you really lug it all the way out here by yourself?”

He shrugs. “It’s not so bad.”

“Well, there’s no way I’m going to sit back and watch you drag that thing upstairs. Come on, let me give you a hand.”

He casts her a nervous look as she climbs down the front steps, her bare feet leaving damp footprints on the gravel. “Um... are you sure you don’t want to change first?”

Charlie grins. “Don’t worry about me.” She adjusts the towel around her chest, showing him that it’s tightly secured. “You just focus on carrying your end.”

Together they lift the keyboard out of the wagon and begin to lug it toward the porch. Charlie was right – this sucker is heavy – but it’s much easier to carry now that he has an extra set of hands. She goes first, guiding him backwards up the front steps and into the main foyer.

Everything about the place is oaken and earthy. Charlie leads him past the door to the living room, where he catches a glimpse of a sprawling stone fireplace and two reclining chairs. Vases are perched everywhere – on top of tables, shelves, windowsills, even the occasional decorative stool. There is a scary moment when Skylar’s elbow brushes one of them on an end table near the kitchen. The reddish yellow urn wobbles a bit, but steadies itself instead of crashing to the floor.

They’re halfway up the stairwell when Skylar thinks he heard voices coming from the second floor. There is a strange cadence to the words, a rise and fall that doesn’t sound like ordinary speech. It takes him a second to realize that Charlie had left music running when she came to answer the door. Had she been listening to it in the shower?

They heft the keyboard up the stairs and onto the second floor landing, where they pause to take a breather. The music is much clearer up here. Skylar hears a scratch as a record skips in the next room, a slight hiccup in the otherwise soothing tones of Fleetwood Mac. Rumours is one of his favorite albums – it’s a work of art, a goddamn masterpiece in his opinion – but he hasn’t heard it in ages. To hear it floating now from down the hallway seems somewhat surreal.

“I’ve never met anyone else who still listens to records,” Skylar says. Somewhere far away, Lindsey Buckingham is twanging his way through the eerie finale of “Gold Dust Woman.”

“Oh, no, vinyl is making a comeback,” Charlie says. “Trust me. It’s the wave of the future.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s the wave of the past,” he replies. He’s barely aware that he has spoken. The music is swelling now, and his mind has flown off to another room, another vintage record player.

Charlie shrugs. “Waves go in and out, you know. It’s how the tides work. The stuff that washes out to sea always comes back again.”

Skylar can’t think of a single adequate response to that, so he says nothing. He grips his end of the Casio and watches her inch backwards down the hall, the tips of her hair still dripping onto the carpet.

When they’re close to the end of the hallway, Charlie motions for him to stop. There’s a half open door behind her. “You can stick it in here,” she says, nudging the door all the way open with her hip. “Sorry about the mess. I’m still kind of moving in.”

“Moving in?”

“Yeah, I’m heading to Jefferson College this August,” she explains. “Room and board is stupidly expensive over there, so I’m going to live here with Aunt Sarah and commute to school on weekdays. I haven’t been in town long – one week, maybe two weeks tops. So a lot of my stuff’s still getting shipped from home.”

Skylar glances over her shoulder as they carry the keyboard into Charlie’s bedroom. It’s bigger than he expected. The first thing he notices is a large sketchpad propped against an easel, its wooden legs buried in a pile of charcoal sketches. It looks like Charlie had starting organizing the space to be half bedroom, half artist’s studio. Some of her clothes have already been hung neatly in the closet, but the rest are lying in a disorderly heap at the foot of her bed. Socks are strewn everywhere. Skylar treads on a few of them as he tries to maneuver the bulky Casio box around the bedpost. He’s reminded of all the times he’s waded through the clutter in Lucas’s room, and a small smile comes to his face.

“Here should be good,” Charlie says. She leads him over to a stretch of open floor near the record player, where the Rumours disc now spins in silence. “Okay... you can drop your end. I’ve got mine steady on this side.”

Skylar lowers his knees and lets his side of the box slump onto the carpet. Charlie does the same a few seconds later. The joints in Skylar’s fingers are killing him, and it takes some

effort to keep from wincing. Charlie, on the other hand, looks unfazed. Neither one of her towels has slipped an inch.

“So... how long have you played keyboard?” Skylar asks, grasping for conversation.

Charlie shrugs. “I don’t know. I’ve dabbled in it for a while. I’m not terrific, but I know enough to impress my relatives at Christmas dinners. Which I guess is better than nothing.”

“I’d love to hear you play,” he says. He feels his cheeks grow hot, but he pushes forward before he can stop himself. “You know, me and my friend Lucas, we have jam sessions every so often. I play guitar and he plays... well, whatever he can get his hands on.” He lowers his eyes to the rug. “We, uh, we could really use another keyboardist. If you’re interested.”

Charlie pauses and looks at him. Eventually her lips bend up in a half-smile, a wry shadow of a grin that Skylar can only describe as amused. “Sure,” she says. “Sounds like it could be fun – I’ve been meaning to get out of the house for a while now. Plus, you seem like a pretty cool guy.”

Skylar half-opens his mouth to say something, but the words dry on his tongue. Cool? What is he supposed to say to that? The summer air feels heavy all of a sudden, and he can feel beads of sweat tickling his skin. He can only imagine what Charlie is thinking of him now. But his silence doesn’t seem to bother her. If anything, her smile grows wider.

“Hold on, let me put the music back on,” she says. She turns her back to him for a second. He watches the slope of her shoulders as she lifts the needle from the turntable, her towel clinging firmly to her chest. How did he even get here? How had he ended up in a pretty girl’s bedroom, bonding with her over vinyl records and Fleetwood Mac, while said girl is still dripping wet and wearing nothing but a towel? The fact that he’s still here, that he hasn’t managed to screw up this golden opportunity, is nothing short of miraculous. Not to mention the fact that this strange, fascinating girl actually seems to like him.

Charlie puts the needle back in place and restarts the record machine. Skylar listens for that satisfying scratch, the sound of the needle slipping into its groove, and before long the bedroom is filled with that opening riff he loves so much. This entire album is incredible; that goes without saying. But the “The Chain” has always been his favorite.

“What are those?” Skylar asks, pointing to a stack of lurid playing cards scattered across the dresser. He picks up the one closest to him. It’s the Queen of Hearts, except this doesn’t look like any Queen of Hearts he’s ever seen. She’s leaning out of her frame and giving

him a suggestive wink, her voluptuous lips curled into a mischievous smile. Her breasts are covered – but only just – by a pair of enormous cartoon hearts.

“Oh, those are for strip poker,” Charlie says. “My friend back home got me a whole pack of them. Do you play?”

This time there’s no way to cover up his flushed cheeks. “Um, no,” he says. “I don’t even know how to play regular poker.”

She laughs. “Well, there’s a first time for everything. I could teach you if you like.”

“I, uh... I have to get back to the warehouse,” he replies. “You know, deliveries to make. That sort of thing.”

Charlie responds by taking the card from his hand and walking over to her writing desk, where she begins rummaging through the drawers. She withdraws a large red marker and proceeds to write a string of seven numbers across the Queen of Heart’s face. “There,” she says. She crosses the room and presses the card into Skylar’s sweaty palm. “You’ve got my number now. If you ever want to have a jam session, or play poker, or whatever, you can call me. I’ll be around all summer.”

Now that she’s so close to him, he can smell a whiff of the shampoo she’d been using in the shower: something fruity, like a splash of mango. He realizes that the fingers clutching the Queen of Hearts have started to grow shaky. Shoving the card in his back pocket, he attempts a smile that he hopes doesn’t convey just how mind numbingly nervous he is. Charlie seems to understand all the same. Her smile never dies; it’s sly, knowing, and even the tiniest bit flirtatious.

But nothing else happens that day. Charlie thanks him for bringing the piano, Skylar thanks her for being so helpful, and soon he’s back on the road again, the wagon load much lighter this time. Does he know what the next few months will bring? Maybe, maybe not. But at least he knows that he won’t forget this encounter anytime soon. Even as he pedals away, he can still hear “The Chain” issuing from her record player: the beautiful, haunting echo of a melody that follows him to the warehouse and beyond.

* * * * *

The sky was blue and cloudless on Friday morning. Skylar had retreated to the veranda behind the kitchen and was now sitting forward in a lawn chair, his acoustic guitar resting on his knee. It was an impressive specimen. Built out of dark wood, sleek and black as obsidian, the guitar had a nice weight and a set of steel strings that had worn callouses into the tips of his

fingers. There was a thin white trim encircling the edge. This was Cash, named after the Man in Black himself.

His fingers flew across the frets, but his brain was elsewhere. This tended to happen when he played guitar by himself. He had no one to bounce ideas off of, no one to keep him grounded and make sure he was playing all of his notes correctly. The opening notes of “The Chain” floated across the backyard, a thirty second riff on endless loop, but he wasn’t the one playing it – not really. His hands were on autopilot. Skylar himself was in a sunlit studio, watching a girl in a fuzzy blue towel lift the needle off a record.

The backyard was long and boxy, a forest of overgrown grass caged in by a white picket fence. *I’ll have to mow that soon*, he thought absently. But he didn’t stir from his chair. Somewhere far off, a dog was barking. His fingers kept tapping out that same old melody. He could feel the sun burning his cheeks, but he didn’t get up and carry his guitar into the air-conditioned shade of the kitchen. He liked the burn. It felt like a pleasant tickle.

At half past eight, he finally heard what he’d been waiting for: the sound of gravel crunching, the low hum of an engine pulling into the driveway. At once Skylar heard his mother’s footsteps scampering down the hallway. “He’s here, he’s here!” she cried. She rushed past him on her way to the front door. She was wearing baggy sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt, one with patchy orange stains across the front. Half of her hair was messy and unkempt, floating around her head in a fuzzy cloud. She’d probably been brushing the other half when she saw Abner’s car pull in.

Skylar set Cash down on the veranda and followed his mother to the door. She had flung it open and was now bobbing up and down in the doorway, a broad smile on her face. “Abner!” she shouted, waving to him. “Abner, it’s me! It’s Helen!”

His uncle’s voice sounded distant. “Good morning, Helen.” Skylar inched past his mother and headed down the front steps to the driveway, where Abner was in the process of unloading several large grocery bags from the trunk. Skylar reached out and took a few of them off his hands. His uncle gave him a weary smile of thanks.

“How’s it going, son?” he asked under his breath. “Has she been giving you any trouble?”

Skylar glanced back at the door, but there was no chance of his mother overhearing. “Not since you last saw her,” he said quietly. “She dressed herself this morning, which is a good sign. And I got her to eat some soup last night. But she still drifts in and out.”

Abner sighed and lugged the last bag out of the trunk. “Better than nothing, I suppose. Come on, let’s get this stuff in the house.”

Skylar’s mother could barely contain her enthusiasm. She was like a puppy, running around and tugging at Abner’s sleeve, telling him how much she missed him and how she wanted him to stay even longer this time. Abner took the energetic assault in good stride, throwing in the occasional “I missed you too” or “Of course I’ll stay a while” whenever there was an appropriate lull in the conversation. But Skylar could see that his uncle was tired. He had gray, sickly bags under his eyes, and in the rare moments when he did smile, it was barely a flicker: a flash of good humor that dwindled and died on his lips.

The two of them plunked their bags on the counter and began to sift through them, sorting the items into piles: cans, perishables, drinks, microwave dinners, paper plates, plastic utensils, and cigarettes. Skylar always eyed these packages with some disgust – he hated the smell of tobacco, hated the way it clung to his mother’s clothing. Just being around cigarette smoke made his throat prickle and burn. But his mother was much worse off without them, and Skylar was willing to put up with the stench and a few tickly throats if it saved him some sanity in the long run.

Abner loaded the soup cans in his arms and began to stock the overhead cabinets. While his uncle was busy, Skylar gathered up the drinks and began to line the inside of the fridge with bottles of water. It was just like the inventory work he did at the warehouse – mindless and tedious. When he stood up to grab the stack of perishables, he saw his mother holding out a tray of microwave chicken with a look of wonder on her face.

“Come on, let’s get that in the fridge before it thaws,” Skylar said. He eased it from her hands and placed it on the shelf, right next to the stack of microwave pizzas.

He was surprised when he looked over and saw her holding out another frozen dinner, one with peas and mashed potatoes. “Can I put this one in?” she asked. She sounded sheepish, like a shy child asking her parents for permission.

“Be my guest,” Skylar said. He stepped aside and watched as she slid the tray into the fridge, stacking it carefully on top of the others. When she was satisfied that the trays were aligned properly, she got another one from the counter and began the whole process over again. Every movement was meticulous. Her eyes were glassy, yet somehow she looked intense and focused. Skylar couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen her like this. The cleaning, the organizing, the careful concern, it seemed almost... motherly.

Abner tapped him on the shoulder, and Skylar turned to see his uncle gesturing toward the open veranda door. “How about you and I get some air?” he muttered. “I’ve stocked most of the other stuff. She can handle this part herself.”

Skylar cast his mother another quick look, but nodded. The two of them slipped out of the kitchen and onto the back porch, where the sun still roasted the floorboards. Skylar reached over and picked up Cash by the neck. The guitar was hot, but not so hot that it scalded his fingers, so he settled back into his chair and began to play. Abner looked around the porch, found a second chair, and dragged it up to face Skylar’s.

“That’s a neat tune you got there,” he said. “You come up with that yourself?”

Skylar chuckled. It felt good to laugh, as slight as it had been. “No, actually. It’s from this up-and-coming indie band called Fleetwood Mac. Maybe you’ve heard of them?”

Abner gave him a thump across the knee. “All right, smartass, that’s enough out of you.” His cheeks creased into a smile, one lined with a series of premature wrinkles. With the sun glaring down in his face, lighting up every pore, it struck Skylar just how old his uncle looked. His skin was pale. Not like Lucas’s milky white complexion, but the pallid skin of a person who hasn’t been outside in some time. There was even a touch of gray in his black hair. Skylar knew Abner couldn’t be out of his forties yet – his mother was only forty-five – but right about then he looked closer to sixty.

The two of them talked for about half an hour. Abner asked the usual questions: what was new down at the warehouse, how was the music coming, was he still thinking about going to college one day, had he tried the new special at Rosebud’s? As conversations went it was fairly shallow, but Skylar was okay with that. He just enjoyed having his uncle around. It was nice to have a sympathetic face he could turn to.

Abner didn’t seem willing to share too much about his own life, so Skylar didn’t pry. But he could tell that Abner wasn’t as lively as he used to be. He’d been a constant, energetic presence in the Johnson household for as long as Skylar could remember. His earliest memories were of Abner waiting for him by the bus stop when he got home from school, Abner bringing him oatmeal when he was sick in bed, Abner playing the Beatles on his old acoustic guitar. His mother hadn’t been in such bad shape back then, but even his elementary school self knew she was on the decline. Alzheimer’s was a slow burner, but when it struck, it was merciless. And Abner couldn’t always be there to look after her. So Skylar had grown up. He had no other choice. He became his own mother’s caretaker before he was old enough to drive. It had been

rough, and it was still rough, but he'd always been able to rely on Abner when things got too hard for him to handle. It was his only real consolation.

Abner had grown quieter over the past couple of months, though, and this afternoon was no exception. Whenever the conversation hit a lull, Skylar brought up Cash and played another song, and at a certain point things picked up again. But it never lasted long. After one particularly long stretch of silence, Abner turned and looked back into the kitchen. Skylar's mother was still standing by the counter, staring down at a box of frozen pizza. Her frizzy hair stuck up as if electrified.

"I'm so proud of you, you know," Abner said. "All the things you do for her. And I've never heard you complain. Not once." His eyes grew glazed, distant, and he scuffed the deck with his shoe. "Skylar, you... you're a tougher man than I am. I don't have the kind of strength to do what you do."

Skylar stopped playing the guitar and stared at him. His fingers had slipped suddenly on the strings. "Don't say that kind of stuff," he said. He could feel something twisting in his stomach: sharp, thorny roots of worry. "You know I can't do this without you. You're one of the only reasons I can make it through the week. Whenever I wake up in the morning and I'm feeling like absolute shit, I always think, 'well, at least Abner's coming over soon. At least I won't be alone for much longer.' And it helps. It's the only thing that does."

Abner turned away and stared across the yard. Somewhere beyond the fence, that obnoxious dog was barking again, and a mother was shouting words of faint reproof to her children. But otherwise the morning was hushed and still.

"I just bring you groceries and keep your mother company," he said. "That's all."

"That's all?" Skylar echoed. "What do you mean, 'that's all'? Do you seriously not see what a difference you're making?" He set Cash down on the porch and stood up from his chair. "It's not just the groceries, it's —" He broke off, his cheeks reddening. He couldn't look Abner in the face. "Look, I don't have any parents. Not really. You have to know you're the closest thing I've got to a father. And these trips, these visits, they're not only for *her*. You know they're more than that."

Abner said nothing in response, but the worry lines around his face grew even tauter. Skylar stared at him and felt a curious mixture of emotions fight for dominance inside his head.

"You're my uncle," he said at last. "Don't you get it? I need you around because you make me feel like a normal teenager. Because you keep me sane."

Something subtle changed in Abner's face. He got up from his chair and looked at his nephew for a moment. Then he stepped forward to wrap Skylar in a hug. He hadn't been expecting it. His uncle's jacket was warm, scratchy, and there was something sickly sweet hovering about him – cough syrup, maybe.

"You're right, of course," Abner said. When he let Skylar go, his smile had returned. This time it lingered on his lips instead of flickering out. "Forget I said anything – I'm just having a bit of a gloomy spell. It happens to the best of us."

Skylar was a bit taken aback, but he returned the smile gratefully. Abner responded with a fatherly pat on his shoulder and a quick ruffle of his hair. "Come on, let's go join your mother," he said. They turned to see that Mrs. Johnson had already wandered toward the veranda with a slab of cheese in one hand. She waved eagerly at Abner with the other.

"Lunch time?" she asked hopefully.

It was barely nine o' clock in the morning, but Skylar didn't think she was especially hungry. It was the ritual she was craving, the actual process of sitting around the kitchen table and sharing a meal with her brother-in-law. Abner seemed to recognize this for himself, so he responded by strolling into the kitchen and digging through the last few grocery bags. "Lunch sounds good to me," he said, drawing out a large loaf of bread. "How about grilled cheese? Would you like that?"

Helen's only response was an excited sort of dance, which Abner took to be a yes. He took a plastic knife from the cutlery drawer and began to smear butter across each slice of bread. When that was done, he placed a skillet on the oven burner and turned up the heat dial. Skylar asked if he could help, but Abner insisted that no, he was all set, although he did appreciate the offer. Skylar shrugged and went to retrieve Cash from the veranda. He sat at the kitchen table and plucked his way through some more Fleetwood Mac while the buttery sandwiches hissed and sizzled on the stove.

Abner served the three of them on the new paper plates he'd purchased. They had a garish floral design encircling the edge, all leafy green and pastel petals, and Skylar's mother enjoyed them immensely. She spent half the meal tracing the vines with her fingers and the other half gazing adoringly at Uncle Abner.

Her intense fascination with him had seemed strange and unsettling to Skylar at first, but the reason was clear enough: Abner was a spitting image of her late husband. In her fractured mind, the distinction between the two of them had become blurry. It wasn't Abner who came to

visit her and brought her groceries, it was Aaron Johnson – an Aaron Johnson who was still alive and breathing.

Skylar wondered if Abner had drawn this same conclusion himself. He could only assume so; there wasn't a whole lot Abner didn't pick up on. Skylar watched him as he nibbled at his grilled cheese sandwich. His uncle seemed animated enough – he was eating his food and laughing merrily with Skylar's mother – but there was still that sickly look about him, that underlying sense of weariness that made Skylar uneasy. He'd seen Abner have down days before. Hell, he'd had down days himself, more than he could keep track of. But he didn't like the fatigue he saw in his uncle's eyes. It was different from the exhaustion he was used to. It seemed so absolute, so final somehow, like Abner had fallen into a deep trench from which he'd never be able to climb out again.

Abner stuck around for another few hours, indulging every one of Helen's impulsive questions and playing the occasional card game. Go Fish was the only one Skylar's mother seemed able to grasp, so they played a couple of rounds before she got distracted and moved on to something else. At one point Abner asked Skylar to play them all a song. He figured his mother would appreciate something simple and upbeat, so he decided on a new song he'd been practicing lately: "I Want to Hold Your Hand." Helen loved it; before long she was clapping to the beat and swaying back and forth in her chair. Abner was much more subdued. He smiled and clapped and gave the impression that he enjoyed the song, but there was something sad beneath his smile.

When he finally did leave, he gave Helen a bear hug and a big smooch on the cheek, which made her giggle with excitement. The hug he gave Skylar was much tighter. Skylar caught another whiff of that strange syrupy smell – what *was* that, anyway? – before his uncle whispered four words in his ear. "Take care of yourself." His voice was so soft, he might have just been breathing.

Then he was gone, climbing into the driver's seat of his Chevy. Helen stood on tiptoe in the doorway, waving furiously at Abner's car as he pulled out into Park Street and drove off toward the highway. She was still waving long after his car had disappeared from sight.

Skylar felt those worried thumbscrews digging into his stomach again. The dog had finally stopped barking, all the children had gone off to school, and there was an awful silence in the air – thick, insidious silence. He retreated to the kitchen to find Cash. Right now he could really use some music.

* * * * *

The lights were off when Abner unlocked his front door and stepped into the foyer. The hall was a shadowy minefield of debris: large hulking shapes sitting in darkness. For a moment he contemplated leaving it like this. The effort it would take to cross the room and turn on the lights suddenly seemed exhausting to him. But he did it anyway. The lights came on and the bulky shapes resolved themselves into tables and chairs and shelves.

He didn't lift his hand from the light switch so much as let his fingers slide off it. He unbuttoned his leather jacket and tossed it onto the couch. As he did so, he felt a sharp flare of pain in his back. He sighed. *A man my age really shouldn't be having this many back problems*, he thought. For the umpteenth time he considered calling his physical therapist, but the thought was a fleeting one. Instead, he let himself collapse on the couch, ignoring the second spasm of pain that shot up his spine.

The TV remote was lying on the cushion to his left. He picked it up without giving it any thought and pushed the ON button. The ancient contraption flickered into life: a static riddled image of Alex Trebek announcing the newest set of categories for *Jeopardy*. Abner pointed the remote at the TV and pushed another button. *Click*. A woman in a blue dress was gesturing at a weather chart behind her. *Click*. A professor in thin spectacles was talking about the newest studies in the field of dark matter. *Click*. An overweight comedian was delivering a punch line that had the studio audience in throes of laughter. Image after image flashed across the screen, but none of them held Abner's attention for more than a few seconds.

It wasn't that there was nothing on TV – truth be told, there was too much to choose from. It was just that TV itself had ceased to be interesting to him. He thumbed the OFF button and the image on the screen died with a tiny blip. Now he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. Every shade in the room was tightly drawn, and Abner turned his eyes toward the closest window, as if by staring at it intently enough he could make the blinds snap up and let in the sunlight. Nothing moved. Birds chirped an innocent song somewhere in the front yard, but he couldn't see them.

He'd heard that song before – note for note, it seemed to him. Fifteen years ago on a cloudless summer day, much like this one. The forest had been alive with noises then: branches rustling in an unfelt breeze, squirrels scampering across the soil, dead leaves crunching under the treads of pickup truck tires. They were deep in the Rhode Island wilderness. Abner was crouched behind the wheel of his Chevy – an old bucket of rust, even then – and Aaron was beside him in

the passenger seat, humming along to a Boston cassette. "Peace of Mind" issued from the speakers like the background noise at a county fair.

There were a few other trucks following them down the forest path. One by one, they rolled their way into a large clearing, where some earlier hikers had left behind the blackened cinders of their campfire. A blanket of orange pine needles covered the ground. Each vehicle found a parking spot and settled in, their engines dying and their wheels crunching to a halt.

Abner jumped down from the driver's seat and headed for the trunk to retrieve his rifle. The rest of the men in their hunting party did the same. Nearby, Aaron was already staring down the sights at some invisible target. He lowered the gun and gave his brother a broad, excited grin.

"Think we'll bag a big one today?" he asked.

"Anything's possible," Abner replied. "But a word of advice? *Don't make so much noise this time.* Those deer must've heard you coming a mile away."

Aaron gave him a sarcastic backhanded salute. "Aye aye, sir," he said. "I'll go on tiptoe if I have to."

The two brothers laughed, and right then it seemed like a good start to a good day, the kind of day that could only end with a deer carcass or a few turkeys in the bag, followed by a round of beers at the Corner Tap. They mingled with their party for another few minutes or so while the men finished loading their rifles and figured out which sections of the forest they were going to cover. Aaron was clearly eager to get started. He tossed his rifle from hand to hand, his foot tapping an impatient rhythm on the soil.

At last it was time for the group to disperse. The two brothers found their path and followed it down a rocky slope to a more shaded area of the woods, where low branches waved lazy boughs of pine needles in their direction. Their boots made low crunching sounds in the dirt. Somewhere close, Abner thought he could hear the sound of running water, a steady trickling noise that undercut the rustling of the leaves.

They talked as they walked, catching up on everything they'd missed since the last time they'd seen each other. Abner asked how Skylar was doing, how Helen was handling the little tot, to which Aaron had nothing but positive things to say. In turn, Aaron asked his brother how Joanne was faring these days. Abner's response was less positive. They fell back into silence soon after that.

After walking for another ten minutes, they finally came across the source of the sound: a thin, shallow river that wove its way down the base of the valley, bubbling over rocks and fallen

branches. Now that they were this close, the sound of the stream had become a kind of white noise, a relentless whisper that enveloped the forest in its static.

“There she is,” Aaron whispered, pointing at a patch of trees in the distance. A russet colored fawn was heading for the stream, her tufted white tail twitching back and forth. The pattern of white spots across her flank reminded Abner of a constellation: a bright patchwork of stars knitted into the fur.

Abner positioned himself carefully on the forest floor and aimed his rifle at the deer. Beside him, his brother did the same. Neither moved for a good few minutes. The fawn was perfectly content sipping from the waters of the stream, and she showed no signs of leaving anytime soon. Eventually Aaron’s patience wore thin. His finger tightened on the trigger, and a sudden, sharp *crack* rang out through the forest. The branch next to the fawn’s head exploded into splintery fragments. The frightened animal dashed away immediately, trotting back through the trees and disappearing from view.

“Shit!” Aaron said. He sat up in the dirt and threw his rifle aside. A bright flush had come into his cheeks.

“Hey, it’s all right,” Abner said. “Don’t beat yourself up. Another one will come along before you know it.”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” Aaron replied. “I was just hoping –”

But Abner never got to hear what his brother had been about to say. Another crack came from somewhere within the trees, and Aaron’s head whipped back suddenly, as if he’d been struck by a mallet. Abner always remembered it in slow motion, although the actual event had happened so fast – impossibly fast. He watched as his brother sprawled backward onto the blanket of pine needles. There was a growing red cave where his left eye had been. The right eye was open, but it was blank and sightless: just an opaque blue iris staring up at the sky.

“Aaron?” he whispered. He knew his brother wouldn’t – couldn’t – answer, but he reached out and shook him by the shoulders. “Goddamn it, Aaron, talk to me!” The body in his hands had gone completely limp, but he couldn’t stop shaking it, couldn’t let his brother slip away that easily. He didn’t become aware until much later that his own cheeks were sprayed with blood, a splatter that left his face as spotty as the deer’s hide had been.

He could dimly hear the sound of footsteps approaching him: heavy, thudding steps, the sound of army boots crunching across dirt and twigs. “Oh god, Abner, is he -?” The voice belonged to Bobby, one of the hunters who’d been tagging along with them for the first time.

Other than his name, Abner knew next to nothing about him. Right then, he was only sure of one thing: this man's bullet was lodged in his brother's brain, and there was nothing he could do to bring him back.

Abner looked up at Bobby, seething, his vision blurred with angry tears. Something animal had risen up inside of him – he wanted to slash, punch, kill. He wanted this murderer to feel his brother's pain. But the man in front of him was sobbing, big fat tears seeping into his beard, and Abner watched as he turned around and retched onto the forest floor. The man wasn't a killer. He'd made a bad shot and Aaron had caught the bullet. And that was when Abner first knew that this world was nothing more than a cruel, sick, sadistic game, one that had no rules, one where innocent people could kill or be killed and the world would keep on turning regardless.

The memories rushed back at him like waves of nausea, so strong and so caustic that he almost felt like throwing up. He pulled himself off the couch and staggered over to the kitchen, where he pressed his hands against the counter and tried to draw in steady breaths. He could feel hot tears pricking at the corners of his eyes, but he wouldn't cry – not then, not now, not ever. Each and every breath was a struggle. He was sucking in as much air as possible, but his lungs would never be satisfied. Not really. Not when there were two other sets of young lungs lying in their graves, lungs that would never draw in breath again.

He could feel ghostly arms wrapping around his chest, a soft, soothing voice whispering in his ear. *Sssh. It's okay. Let me make you a cup of coffee and we can talk about it.* The echo felt so real that he lifted his hand to his chest, half expecting to feel her soft skin underneath his palm. But his fingers closed on empty air. A horrible sob escaped from his throat, but he fought the tears back before they, too, could escape.

Not for the first time, his mind turned to the locked medicine cabinet in the third floor bathroom, the one where Joanne had kept her leukemia pills. The thought of cracking open that cabinet again was both tantalizing and terrifying. That was why he'd kept the pills stashed out of sight, in a place he never had occasion to enter. He didn't trust himself to leave them alone. He just didn't have that kind of willpower. Not anymore.

Sssh. It's okay. Let me make you a cup of coffee.

"I've got it, Joanne," he mumbled. Still clutching for an absent hand, he crossed the kitchen and began to shovel spoonfuls of coffee powder into the percolator. He could feel her

hold on him loosening, could feel the tips of her fingers sliding free from his chest. Almost at once he was craving her touch again.

Abner's house was filled with these ghosts, these echoes: a phenomenon which his nephew would have understood quite well, had they ever broached the topic. But Abner had never told another soul that he still heard his wife's voice, still saw his brother's empty eye bleeding onto the pine needles. He was afraid to. Because acknowledging them felt like losing them, and despite everything else, Abner couldn't bring himself to let them go. They were part of a past in which he'd been happy. And even the ghost of happiness was better than no happiness at all.

The coffee was almost ready now, and Abner breathed in its heavy aroma, closing his eyes as he did so. The world behind his eyelids was a safe one. A pleasant one. Joanne slipped by him on padded feet, her sleeve brushing against his, and the rush of this sensation brought a smile to his face. "I love you," he murmured to her, and he could picture her turning, could picture her lips parting as she turned to him, smiling, and said *I love you too*.

But as soon as he opened his eyes, she was gone. Her smile, her skin, the swish of her dress – they had all disappeared into the murky past. He was alone. The only things that remained were the scent of that black coffee and a single bottle of leukemia pills, unused and untouched, calling out to him from the darkness of the upstairs cabinet.

* * * * *

Fridays were like clockwork for Skylar. After Abner had left and his mother was occupied with one of her daytime soaps, he grabbed Cash and snuck out to the garage, where his reliable old bike waited for him in the darkness. He slipped out of the house as quietly as he could before jumping on board. Then it was just him and the road: just the sweet rush of air in his face and, from below, the ever present whispers of the Queen of Hearts.

Cash's guitar case bumped and jostled against Skylar's back as he pedaled up to the familiar iron fence. The gates were hanging open when he reached them, although he wasn't quite sure he could ever describe them as "welcoming"; "not threatening" sounded a little better. The words HARPER'S HILL CEMETERY arched above the gateway. Like the rest of the fence, the iron letters were spiky and covered with chipped black paint.

Skylar rode in through the open gates and slowed to a halt on the gravel. This was as far as his bike could go. He jumped down and walked it over to the cemetery fence, where he

chained the bicycle to one of the iron bars. Then he shifted the guitar case on his back and began to trudge up the path through the headstones.

Harper's Hill wasn't a very distinguished cemetery – Jefferson didn't have many distinguished dead to bury – but there were a few elaborate monuments that rose up from the scenery like irregular bumps on the landscape. Gifts from wealthy donors, most likely. Cross-shaped gravestones were everywhere. Two rows down, a tall marble angel lifted a beseeching hand in his direction, eyes covered as if in mourning.

His footsteps crunched onward. He passed a sandy colored obelisk, a memorial to all the Jefferson veterans who gave their lives in World War II. A collection of wreaths and small American flags were propped against its base. Someone had left a photograph of their loved one lying on the pedestal, but the figure inside the frame was gone. The wash of a thousand rain storms had faded his picture to almost nothing.

Skylar walked along this path for another ten minutes or so. He was the only one in the cemetery at this hour, and the place was quiet. His shoes made loud crunching noises on the gravel. Leaves rustled in a faint, unfelt wind. Birds chirped somewhere far off, but their intermittent tweets sounded distant and somehow unreal. This place felt as if it existed outside of time. It was like a world of its own, just past the borders of the one he knew.

At last he stepped past the low hanging branches of an old oak tree and stopped before a modest looking family plot. Below him stood the grave he'd come to find. It was a simple headstone compared to most of the others – just a rectangular block of granite, rounded at the top, etched with a carving of a single somber rose and the following inscription:

Charlotte Marie Baker
Beloved Daughter and Niece
1977 - 1995

There was a bushel of fresh flowers resting on the dirt: thin-stemmed tulips with red petals, bright as newly plucked strawberries. It looked like Sarah Baker had been here before him. He bent down and touched the tulips, ever so slightly. They were warm. He wondered how long they'd been lying here in the sun.

Skylar hadn't come with any flowers. Instead, he took the guitar case and laid it gently on the grass beside her grave. His hands were steady as he unzipped the case and withdrew Cash

from its cushy interior. Then he settled back into the crooked notch of the oak tree, as he'd done a hundred times before. He tilted his head back, placed his fingers on the strings, and began to play the first song he could think of: "Layla" by Derek and the Dominoes. It didn't have quite the same energy on his acoustic guitar, but it felt right to him, all the same.

He strummed chord after chord until the song had run its course, and then he kept on strumming, letting the flow of the music guide his hand. He'd been rubbish at improvisation until he met Charlie. It was like he'd been grasping for the right sound, the right words, to convey emotions he'd never truly understood. Then she came along. And all of a sudden he *knew*, he knew what he'd been trying to play this entire time, and it was like he'd finally seen the clear blue sky through the fog. With her around, the music came without trying. Without her, he had nothing.

Skylar kept his eyes turned to the sky as he began to arpeggiate the chords he'd just played. String by string, he worked his way up the fret board, plucking each note softer than the one before, until at last the song reached its highest point and disintegrated. He let his pick hand fall into the grass. A breeze picked up, and the blades rustled against his skin. It sounded like the air was sighing.

"That one's for you, Charlie," he said.

He could have sat under the shade of that tree for ages, but evening was slowly approaching, and he had to head back home soon to fix up some dinner for his mother. So he slipped Cash back into the guitar case, slung the case over his shoulder, and pulled himself up out of the notch in the bark. He stared for another few minutes at Charlie's grave. Specks of lichen were already nesting in the hollow space of each carved letter. He reached out and brushed them away.

I'll come back, he promised silently. And he would. Next Friday would roll around, and he would plant himself beneath that shady tree, and he would play her a brand new song that the world would never get to hear. The songs belonged to her and her alone, and as soon as his fingers left the strings, as soon as those songs were out into the blue, he had lost them.

He turned around and began to trudge toward the cemetery gates, his guitar case bouncing off his back with each plodding step. Wind rustled through the trees again, catching on the petals of Sarah Baker's tulips, and the ghost of a breeze tickled Skylar's cheek – almost like a kiss farewell.

Chapter 4: Hurt

On Saturday he returned to Rosebud's for his usual morning special, much to Jenny's delight. Traffic in the diner was slow, so they chatted for a bit while she poured him his coffee. It was wonderful, mindless conversation. Jenny went on about this one TV show she'd seen and how her brother Arthur was making more empty threats about running away, and gosh, wasn't it just so *hot* out lately? Skylar nodded along and took the occasional sip from his cup of black coffee, which he was able to stomach this time, thank goodness. Neither one of them brought up their conversation from Thursday. Skylar got the sense that Jenny was avoiding the subject, which was fine by him.

He spent most of the weekend at Lucas's house, doing the usual stuff. Lucas had dug up an old mandolin from God knows where – some sketchy yard sale, Skylar assumed – and they took it out to the garage to compose some songs with it. The instrument took some getting used to. It was close enough to a guitar that Skylar had no problems with the fingering, but the weight and the size of the thing felt off. He was so used to playing with Cash's big heavy frame on his lap.

Lucas sat himself down behind the drum set and grabbed a couple of nylon brushes, which he used to create a sort of patter effect. Skylar plucked away at the mandolin as he did this. He wasn't entirely sure what they were playing, but it sounded good. The occasional kick of the snare drum sounded like a boom of thunder. When Skylar closed his eyes, he could almost picture himself playing in the rain while he and Lucas floated down a stormy river.

When they got tired of playing music – which, admittedly, took some time – Lucas usually broke out the microwave popcorn and they'd find a movie to watch. This week it was *Pulp Fiction*. Skylar had no idea what he was watching after the first ten minutes, but Lucas insisted that this movie was the absolute shit, so he shrugged and let himself slump against the couch. He and Lucas sat there in silence and munched on their popcorn. When they were about half an hour in, Skylar finally had to admit to himself that it was good. Really fucking strange, but good.

When he heard his father coming in, Lucas made a point to slide down the couch and sit as close to Skylar as possible without actually touching him. Skylar didn't care. He knew Lucas liked to screw with his parents – he went out of his way to poke fun at his mom's photos and his

dad's career whenever Skylar came to dinner – so what was the harm in letting him indulge himself?

The days came and went. Skylar returned to the warehouse Monday morning and spent the rest of his week filing invoices and making deliveries. Small stuff, mostly: this diner needed napkins, that rec center needed toilet paper, this one family needed a box of cutlery that their relatives had shipped in from Minnesota. His wagon was always light. Sometimes it felt like he wasn't even dragging it at all. The sun was still scorching hot and the pavement radiated waves of heat from below, but the wind that rushed in his face as he biked was cool, soothing. He was grateful to get out of the warehouse. Each delivery helped the hours go by just a little bit faster.

Back at home, Helen wasn't giving him too much trouble. She'd become engrossed in her new soap, one with a lot of waspy white women swooning over the same man – a tall, dark foreigner. It was hideously racist and the acting made him cringe, but as long as it kept her occupied, he didn't care. It was nice to have some time to himself for once.

Most of that time he spent listening to his father's old records or working his way through a stack of paperback novels. He'd picked up a few dozen of them at the last Jefferson Library book sale, only 25 cents a pop. It had been several months since the sale, but he still hadn't made much of a dent in the pile. He'd been plodding his way through *The Stand* for the last few weeks. He liked the book, but Jesus, the thing was a doorstop.

That was how he spent his hours: reading, working, watching, playing, listening. It was a routine he'd grown used to over the years. Some weeks were better than others, and this one, at least, felt quiet. His mother was well behaved and the weather was starting to cool again, so Skylar took to spending more time outside with his books or his guitar. Everything seemed to be going okay – all things considered – until the next Friday morning. That was when Skylar came downstairs to find his mother pacing around the kitchen.

"Where's Abner?" she asked when she saw him. Her eyes were wide and slightly bloodshot, although he couldn't tell if she'd been crying or if she'd just had trouble sleeping. "Skylar, I'm worried. Shouldn't he be here by now?"

"Hey, calm down," he replied. He rubbed his eyes, still half asleep. "He's probably just running late. Go watch TV and give him some time."

She did as he said, but there was a heavy shadow of doubt on her face, and she cast a few nervous looks at the front door before retreating into the den. Skylar yawned and headed over to the cupboards to pour himself a bowl of cereal.

He spent the next few hours holed up in his room, kicking back on his bed and listening to Kansas records on loop. *The Stand* was propped open on his desk, but he wasn't sure his brain was up for that today. He was in that drowsy state of mind where nothing sounded better than lying back and letting the sweet chords of classic rock wash over him.

He probably would have nodded off again if his mother hadn't appeared in the doorway. Her eyes looked even more bloodshot than before, and the hair on the right side of her head stuck up in clumps – Skylar wondered if she'd been scratching at it. "Dust in the Wind" was playing in the background. His mother gave the record player an agitated, almost fearful look.

"It's been *so long*," she said. "Can you call him, Skylar? Please?"

Skylar held back a sigh. "Sure," he said. He swung himself off the bed and removed the needle from the vinyl, causing the Kansas song to cut out abruptly. He left the room and headed downstairs with his mother hovering close behind.

The only phone in the Johnson house was the white plastic cordless on the kitchen counter. Skylar picked it up and dialed in Abner's number from memory, listening as the line on the other end began to ring. His mother stared at him expectantly, but he gestured for her to go off and find something else to do. She headed back into the den with a great deal of reluctance.

Skylar tapped his foot on the tiled floor as he waited for Abner to pick up. The ringing was shrill and distant, but headache inducing all the same. He began to massage his forehead after the seventh ring or so.

"Come on, just pick up already," he grumbled. It wasn't like Abner to take his sweet time. *Ring... ring... ring...* what was that, twelve rings now? What could possibly be taking so long? Restless now, he shifted the phone to the other ear and glanced out at the veranda. An unpleasant feeling churned in his gut as he did so: those thumbscrews again, turning, turning, digging their worried hooks into his stomach.

Where the hell are you? he thought.

He let the phone get to twenty rings before deciding that it wasn't worth waiting any longer. His mother heard the phone clatter back onto its stand, and she poked her blotchy face into the kitchen. "Was he there?" she asked timidly. "Is he coming?"

"I'm not sure," Skylar answered. Abner's silence had made him uneasy. He thought back to the way his uncle had looked a week ago – his worry lines, his graying hairs, the way his weariness seemed to have sunk into him like something heavy and final. But he couldn't let himself jump to conclusions. Especially for his mother's sake.

“What are we going to do?” she asked. “Who’s going to bring us soup? Who’s going to make us sandwiches and play card games?”

Skylar crossed the kitchen and put his hands on her shoulders – firm, yet gentle. “Listen,” he said. “Listen to me. Everything is fine. We have plenty of soup. Abner’s probably not feeling so good, that’s all. I’m going to bike out to his house to check up on him.”

Helen’s hand shot up and grabbed his arm. “Don’t go,” she pleaded. “Don’t go. I’m scared.”

Skylar pulled his arm free as delicately as possible and gave her a kiss on the forehead. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done that, but he couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen her so terrified, either. “Stay here,” he said. “Don’t leave the house and don’t do anything dangerous. Sit on the couch and watch your shows. And laugh, okay? I want you to laugh at the funny parts and gasp at the scary parts but no matter what happens, I don’t want you to cry, okay? No matter what happens.”

Her eyes became swimmy and Skylar thought he had lost her already, but she took a shuddering breath and began to blink furiously. “I won’t cry,” she said, more to herself than Skylar. “I won’t cry, I won’t cry. No matter what.”

“That’s the spirit,” he said. He placed a guiding hand on her shoulder and led her back toward the den, where one of the waspy women on TV was delivering an impassioned speech to her lover. Skylar could hear the audience oohing and applauding.

He watched as Helen approached her usual chair and took a seat, her hands trembling slightly but her eyes fixated on the screen. He knew she was still worried sick about Abner, but at least she was letting herself get sucked back into the cheesy world of her soaps, which would keep her occupied for another few hours.

The handsome foreigner made some pithy comment, and suddenly Helen let out a laugh. It was forced and shaky and just a touch hysterical, but she was trying, and that was good enough for him. He left her alone in the den and disappeared down the hall to the garage.

Then he was off. For the first time in months, he wished he still had his father’s old station wagon, because Abner didn’t live even remotely close to this side of Jefferson. At least the ride would help to clear his head. He zoomed past the Park Street sign and headed down toward the heart of town, where he slipped down a narrow set of back roads that would take him halfway across the state.

He was nowhere near Sarah Baker's country house, but the roads were so empty and the fields were so vast that he could feel the echo humming all around him. He rode for a while in relative silence. His bike made clattery noises on the dirt and gravel roads, but the wind was still, and Skylar couldn't hear a single barking dog or birdsong. He thought of the ringing silence on the other end of the phone and began to pedal faster.

Eventually the trees began to thin as suburban neighborhoods sprouted from the soil and spread out across the ground. Pavement reappeared under his tires. Sidewalks unfurled from street corners and people appeared to populate them. He pedaled past a woman pushing a stroller and a little girl riding a trike, her cheeks puffed out and rosy. She was making *vroom vroom* noises in the back of her throat.

At last he pulled into a neighborhood that looked familiar to him. Abner's house was wedged between two others that looked almost identical, aside from their paint jobs. Abner had forsaken the garish reds and blues of his neighbors in favor of a more subdued yellow. Skylar pedaled up the driveway and left his bike leaning against the front stoop. The garage was closed and locked, so Skylar had no way of knowing whether his uncle was home. He climbed up the steps and gave the doorbell a few quick taps.

The bell rang shrilly inside the house – Skylar could hear it clearly from the doorstep – but the curtains didn't shift, and it didn't sound like anyone was moving around inside. He frowned. "Abner!" he called. "Abner, are you there?" The only response was a chorus of tinned laughter, carried over to him from one of the neighbor's TVs.

He knew Abner kept a spare key tucked beneath the welcome mat, but he'd never had to use it before. Now he bent down and lifted the corner to see if it was still there. He was in luck. The key was small and flat, the color of dull silver. He picked it up and slipped it into the lock. There was the softest of clicks, and he gave the door a gentle push. It slid open a few inches. The hallway beyond was empty and unlit, and Skylar could see the flickering of pale bluish shadows that could only be the light from a TV. He cast one last look around the quiet neighborhood before slipping inside.

Two tinny voices were having a lively conversation in the living room – talk show hosts, from the sound of it. Skylar inched toward the source of the noise. "Abner?" he called. His voice was low, hesitant. He didn't want to startle his uncle if it turned out he was just sleeping or something. He was grateful that his sneakers made barely any noise on the carpet.

“I’m just saying, youth these days,” the male voice was saying. “You hear all these horror stories of teenagers running away from home, squatting in abandoned buildings, snorting coke up their nostrils. I’m telling you, the problem’s in the school systems. What we need to do is…”

Skylar poked his head into the living room, where the talk show host was gesticulating wildly about the failings of the education system in America. Skylar wished he would shut up already. He spotted the remote lying on the couch, half buried beneath a throw pillow, and he leaned over to pick it up. The talk show host and his flailing arms disappeared in a blissful blip of static.

The silence that followed felt too still, too heavy for Skylar’s liking. He took another few steps into the room. The window blinds had all been pulled down, and the faint light that managed to seep through cast the furniture in an unearthly orange color. Everything was quiet. For the first time, too, he noticed a pungent odor floating in the air – something cloying and rotten. It made him gag. If it hadn’t been for the TV and that awful smell, he would have assumed Abner wasn’t even home.

“Abner?” he said, louder this time. He walked through the living room and headed for the kitchen, no longer caring how much noise he was making. “Abner, where are –”

He stopped. The stench he had noticed in the living room was ten times stronger in here. In the dim light of the kitchen, he could see his uncle’s figure slouched in a chair by the edge of the table. Abner’s palms and the side of his right cheek were lying flat on the table’s surface; he might have simply fallen asleep in his seat. Skylar waited for him to move, waited for his pointy shoulders to rise and fall with the steady cadence of sleep, but the seconds ticked by without so much as a sound. His uncle’s prone body never stirred.

“Uncle Abner?” he whispered.

He took a few steps into the kitchen. The squeaking his shoes made on the tiles seemed far too loud, and he half expected Abner to wake up and ask what all the noise was about, but there was nothing – no grunt of surprise, no groggy breath, no shifting of limbs. Just the dim bars of light shining through the slats of the window.

Skylar grabbed his uncle’s shoulders and gave them a rough shake. The noxious smell was seeping over him now, filling his nostrils, making his stomach recoil with nausea. “Come on Abner, wake up,” he said. His voice cracked on the second word, and something very close to a sob came out instead. The muscles under his fingers were stiff and tense. Abner’s face seemed to

be stuck to the table, and when Skylar leaned in closer, he saw that his uncle was lying in an old pool of sickly yellow bile. The liquid had dribbled from his lips and dried there like a scab.

For a moment Skylar's field of vision grew swimmy. He let go of Abner's shoulders and took a step back, trying to blink away the dampness in his eyes. He was finding it difficult to breathe. For the first time, Skylar noticed that Abner was clutching an empty bottle of painkillers in his left hand. The name JOANNE JOHNSON was printed across the top in thin black marker.

"You son of a bitch," he said in a choked voice. "How could you do this to me? To *us*?"

He wanted an answer. He *needed* an answer. But the table was bare, the counters were bare, even the fridge was bare. For whatever reason, Abner hadn't bothered to leave a note. Cobain had left the world with that mantra of his, that unsung quote from an old Neil Young song: *it's better to burn out than to fade away*. But that was exactly what Abner had done. He'd slipped away without any sort of fanfare. No gunshot, no fireworks, no crash of splintering metal. Just a dim kitchen and an empty bottle of pills.

I should call a hospital, Skylar thought. It seemed like the right thing to do, even though he knew it was too late, even though there was nothing anyone could do to save Abner now. He fumbled for the phone and tried to dial the number. It took him a few tries. His fingers were shaking too much.

When he finally got through, a voice on the other end of the line said, "9-1-1, what's your emergency?" The connection was faint and staticky. Skylar listened to the crackle and felt his throat constrict. Suddenly he felt incapable of saying anything.

"Hello? Are you still there?" the voice said. Skylar breathed out a trembling sigh and hung up the phone. It would be enough. The police would send a car to investigate the call, and they would find Abner here, and everything would sort itself out.

But did he want to be here when they showed up?

Skylar tried to picture what would happen to him and Helen, now that Abner was gone. He would have to take up extra shifts at the warehouse to pay for all the food they'd need. From dawn to dusk, nothing but making deliveries in the hot sun and filing never-ending piles of receipts. Then he would come home to a needier mother than ever before – one who would no longer be able to look forward to visits from her favorite person in the world. He would have to spend all his free time at home keeping an eye on her. And there would be no breaks. Not ever. This was his life now.

"But it doesn't have to be," he whispered.

An idea was taking shape in his head: a thought he'd been ruminating over for years now, but he'd never been willing to entertain. It was crazy, stupid, and undeniably reckless. But nothing had ever felt so tempting. He decided he should leave Abner's house now, before he could change his mind and start doubting himself again.

He spared his uncle one last look. Abner had been crying when he died. There were two reddish lines trailing from his open eyes, tracks left by tears that had long since dried. Skylar felt a rush of heat come to his own eyes. He wanted to say something in farewell, something to send his uncle off – it only seemed right. But Abner had left no parting words for him, and now, as he tried to think of something adequate to say, he found that the words had escaped him too. Not that it would have mattered. He could say goodbye all he wanted, but there was nobody left to hear it.

So he turned and left his uncle lying there, crossing into the living room and walking through the dusky shadows of his furniture. He couldn't bring himself to look back; he knew he would lose the strength to keep going if he did. The only time he stopped was to lock the front door behind him and leave the spare key in its spot below the welcome mat. Then he grabbed his bike from beside the front stoop and leaped on board, pedaling away from the house as fast as his legs could carry him.

Recycled laughter from the neighbors' TV set followed him to the end of the street, before the sound faded into the whispers of the Queen of Hearts: a fluttering so rapid that it reminded him of the wind whistling through a gutter. The kind of whistling you might hear just before a hurricane.

* * * * *

When Skylar finally got back to Park Street and pedaled down the Johnson house driveway, he thought he saw a pale, wide-eyed face staring out from one of the first floor windows. But it was probably his imagination. There was no clamber of footsteps when he pulled into the garage, no sound of movement from inside. He was sure his mother would have come running the second she saw him arrive.

He dismounted from his bike and left it propped against the wall; he'd be needing it again soon enough. The house was quiet when he cracked open the door and peered into the side hallway. Closing the door as delicately as he could behind him, he made his way toward the kitchen, trying to strike a careful balance between speed and silence.

The only light from this part of the house was a dull flashing from the direction of the den. Dim voices and canned laughter issued from within. Two empty houses, two TV sets left running. He didn't like the echo.

Skylar knew he shouldn't, but as he passed the den, he took a few seconds to glance inside. His mother was slumped in her favorite chair, her head lolled back, her arms dangling limply on the seat cushions. For a moment he was reminded of Abner, and a sense of abject horror swept through him. What if he'd come back here, ready to leave her, only to find...? But no. Her body rose and fell, and a snuffly snore escaped from her open mouth. She was only sleeping. His scare behind him, Skylar let out a shaky breath and continued in the direction of the stairwell.

When he got to his room, he dug under the bed for his old black gym bag and began stuffing whatever he could find inside of it. Shirts, jeans, socks, pairs of underwear, jackets, books, packs of unopened potato chips. *The Stand* even found a place at the bottom of the bag. Then he headed to the bathroom and withdrew with an armful of toiletries: mainly his toothbrush, his razor, and a spare tube of toothpaste.

He spent another few seconds stuffing his clothes into his bag until he felt that he'd packed enough. Then he grabbed a spare jacket from the closet and threw it on, in case the weather got cold again overnight. Before he left, he picked Cash up from the corner and zipped the guitar safely into its carrying case. He swung the gym bag over his shoulder and lifted the case with his other free hand.

When he reemerged in the kitchen, a thought struck him, and he let his luggage fall to the floor. He headed over to the fridge and took down the pad of notebook paper he often used to leave reminders for his mother. Her memory was unreliable at best, and notes like this were the best way to make sure she remembered to eat and dress and do basic things like bringing in the mail. He tried not to dwell on the idea that this might be the last note he'd write to her in a long, long time.

Taking the pencil, he scribbled a quick message:

MOM – GONE TO LUCAS'S HOUSE FOR THE WEEKEND. DON'T WORRY ABOUT ABNER. HE JUST ISN'T FEELING GOOD RIGHT NOW. I PROMISE I'LL COME BACK WHEN I CAN.

After much hesitation, he added *LOVE, SKYLAR.*

The deed was done, and there was no point in staying here any longer. He might lose all nerve to carry through with this if he did. So he grabbed up his gym bag and Cash's guitar case and made his cautious way down the hall. A chorus of laughter burst from the den as he passed, and the sudden blast of noise nearly gave him a heart attack. He shifted his grip on the bags and took a deep breath to steady himself. Then he continued on his way to the garage, bumping the door open with his hip.

He told himself to move faster. Several years ago he'd built a small wagon of his own, a scale replica of the one he used down at the warehouse, and he dug through the piles of junk in the back of the garage until he found the old thing. Then he got to work fastening it to the back of his bicycle. He had built it more for fun than for any practical purposes. He'd only ever used the wagon when he had to lug heavy equipment to Lucas's house for one of their jam sessions. Now he shoved his gym bag inside the little cart and checked to make sure it was securely hitched. He swung the guitar case around so it rested solidly against his back, then lifted up the kickstand and climbed onto the seat.

He rode out into the driveway, but stopped before he went too far. He needed one last look. If he actually carried through with this plan of his, he might not see this place again for a long time, which was both a wonderful and a terrifying thought. He stared back at what was left of the Johnson house. For years it had been a well maintained piece of property – some might have even called it elegant – and God knows Skylar had done his best to keep it that way. But no matter how hard he worked, there would always be more problems to deal with: mold in the basement, weeds crawling up the drainpipe, mice building nests in the insulation. It was a job for a team of home professionals, not one kid who had a mentally fried mother to look after on the side. It had been hard enough even when Abner was around to help. Now it would be impossible.

Skylar knew it was cowardly to run away. He knew people would talk. But damn it, after nineteen years of this same soul crushing cycle, didn't he deserve a chance to get out? To *do* something with his life? Lucas was leaving for Boston in less than two months. He was going somewhere, following his passions. He thought about Jenny Rose, how she could envision a future beyond the diner, beyond Jefferson, and how that option had never been open to him. Even Charlie had been getting ready for college when he met her. They looked at their futures and saw an open road waiting to be traveled, but he only saw the bars of a cage. For a while, that hadn't bothered him. At least it was a gilded cage. He had Lucas, and he had his music, and most of all, he had Charlie, for however short a time. But the cage had lost its golden trimmings.

Charlie was gone. Lucas was going. And with Abner dead, the bars were constricting around him even tighter than before.

He was sick of death, sick of endings. He wanted to begin something for a change.

He thought about waving goodbye, but decided against it. He hitched up his guitar case, placed his shoes on the pedals, and rode away, leaving the driveway of the Johnson house behind him. He didn't look back. For all he knew, the house had melted away as soon as he had gone, and he was simply running away from a bad dream.

He just had one more stop to make before he could leave Jefferson in his rearview mirror.

* * * * *

A cacophony of booms and crashes shook the walls of the Bray house when Skylar rode up to their driveway. The source of the noise came from behind the closed garage door; he could see the wood vibrating slightly with each crash of the drum. Skylar got down from his bike and began to pound on the door. "Lucas, it's me!" he shouted. "Open up!"

The percussive sounds cut off mid beat, the hi-hat hanging in the air like a gasp of breath. Skylar heard a clatter as Lucas set down the drumsticks and began to make his way across the garage. He could practically see his friend tiptoeing around the keyboards and stepping over the rows of discarded string instruments. Then the garage door rattled up into the ceiling and Lucas's milky white face stared out at him.

"Skylar?" he said. His facial expression didn't change, but he sounded surprised. "I wasn't expecting you till tomorrow. What's up?"

Skylar's thoughts were so scattered, so fleeting, that he had trouble sorting through the mess of words in his skull. At last he gave up trying to articulate himself and simply said, "Abner's dead." Until he'd said it out loud, he hadn't realized how unreal the whole thing seemed – like the house, it had the quality of a nightmare, a leftover image from a particularly awful dream. But talking about it suddenly made it real. Abner was dead. Really, truly dead. And he wasn't coming back.

"Your uncle?" Lucas said. A frown tugged at the corners of his mouth. After a few seconds of silence, he asked, "How did it happen?"

Thinking back to the scene of Abner's death brought the memory of that stench back to his nose: like rotting meat drenched in sickly sweet perfume. "Painkillers," Skylar said, his stomach clenching. "He overdosed. Right at the kitchen table. Didn't leave a note or anything."

Lucas didn't come over to hug him, or comfort him, or offer him empty words of sympathy. He didn't have to. He looked at Skylar, and his eyes grew misty for a moment, and Skylar knew that he understood. Part of him had always wondered if Lucas was one of those empathetic types – the kind of person who could read your emotions, who could *feel* exactly what you felt, with nothing more than a look or a touch.

"I'm so sorry," Lucas said at last. He blinked the mistiness out of his eyes and sniffled a little. "Look, man, do you want to stay the night or something? Is that why you brought your stuff? Because I'm more than happy to lend you my room if you need it."

"Lucas, I'm not staying." He cleared a painful lump from his throat. "You were right before. Abner was one of the only people who could keep me going, week after week, and now he's gone. So I'm doing what you said. I'm getting out before it kills me. I'm going to ride down to Jefferson Central Station and I'm going to hop on a train and I'm going to get off wherever it takes me. I don't care where."

Lucas furrowed his brow. "What are you going to do when you get there?" he asked. "Do you even have any money?"

"Abner gave me an emergency debit card a long time ago," Skylar said. He pulled out his wallet and waved the card in Lucas's face, as if there had been any doubt. "I never had to use it before, so I'm sure I'll have enough to book a hotel room and keep myself on my feet while I go job hunting. I mean, I'll probably be in the city. There should be plenty of jobs out there if I look hard enough."

"What about McClatchey?" Lucas asked. "Are you just going to ditch him?"

There was a long pause on Skylar's end. At last he said, "Fuck McClatchey. Fuck him and fuck the warehouse. I don't care if I ever see that place again." His cheeks grew hot and flushed. What he'd told Lucas was more of a half-truth; he wouldn't miss his sexist dick of a boss, and he definitely wouldn't miss all the paperwork, but there was a certain rush he got whenever he made deliveries. There was something liberating about being paid to ride his bike all over town. He would miss that part.

"Go on," he said. "I know what you're thinking. Tell me I'm crazy, that this is a stupid idea and I'm stupid for even coming up with it. Let me hear it. I can take it."

But Lucas only shook his head. "Christ, Skylar. I'm not going to stop you. I'd be a hypocrite if I even tried. You've got this whole thing figured out, haven't you?" He leaned

against the frame of the garage. There was another thought on the tip of his tongue; Skylar could see him struggling to find a way to phrase it.

“Whatever it is, you can tell me,” he said.

Lucas let out a breathy sigh, but it sounded more weary than exasperated. “Skylar, I’m happy that you’re doing this,” he said. “I really am. You’ve had so much shit to deal with all your life and it’s about time you got away from it all. It’s just... what about your mom? Where does she fit into this grand escape plan?”

Skylar’s eyes fell to his shoes. “That’s, um... that’s why I’m here to see you. I can’t just leave her all by herself, you know? So I was wondering if you could check in on her while I’m gone. It wouldn’t have to be too often,” he added hastily. “Just a couple times a week. Enough to make sure she has food to eat and to keep her from getting lonely. She likes Go Fish and she *loves* when people play music for her. It puts her in her own little world, makes her happy and forgetful. You could really do a lot for her just by going over twice a week and playing her a song.”

Lucas’s expression didn’t change; maybe he’d been expecting this answer all along. He crossed his arms and stared intently down the driveway. He didn’t speak for a long time. During the silence, Skylar felt the same eerie sense as before: that sense that Lucas was reading him, *understanding* him, making sense out of the whirlwind of emotions roaring through his brain, even when he himself couldn’t.

“Skylar, look, I’m your friend and all, and I’m happy to do this for you if you think there’s no other option,” he said. “But *is* there another option? I mean, they’ve got places for people like her. Asylums, group homes, whatever you want to call them. They’re out there. So why haven’t you ever given them a call?” He paused, his expression growing strained. “I guess what I’m saying is, why do you feel like you have to put so much of this on yourself?”

Skylar couldn’t meet his friend’s eyes. He stared off down the street instead, watching as blips of tiny headlights streaked across some distant highway. Lucas was right. Why *hadn’t* he taken this second route? Why hadn’t he called to have her shipped off to some institution, where she would be out of his life forever? A while back, he and Abner had thought about hiring a professional caretaker, but money was tight and the idea had fallen through. But that wasn’t why he kept her around, why he didn’t just abandon her to a ward of nurses and sterile hospital beds. The answer to Lucas’s question was simple enough. He’d known it all along.

“Because no matter how bad it gets, no matter how difficult she is, she’s my mother. She’s not disposable. She’s not a broken toy I can just throw away and forget about completely.”

Lucas seemed to understand, as Skylar knew he would. But the answer didn’t seem to make him any less uneasy. He crossed his arms and shifted his position against the garage frame, his eyes fixed on the asphalt.

“You don’t have to do it alone,” Skylar added. He felt as if he was changing the subject, even though Lucas hadn’t said anything else. “There’s a waitress who works over at Rosebud’s who probably won’t mind helping you out. Her name’s Jenny Rose – I don’t know if you know her. Maybe she can save some leftovers from the diner and bring them over.”

Lucas gave a small nod. “Jenny Rose,” he repeated, his voice dim. “Okay. I’ll keep her in mind.”

His friend’s expression was strained, almost miserable, and Skylar felt a sharp pang of guilt twist his stomach. “I’ll call you,” he promised. “As soon as I book a room, I’ll call you. Okay? That way you don’t have to worry about me. I’ll check in whenever I can.” He paused. “Besides, I don’t plan on staying out there forever. This is just a temporary thing. Just a way for me to escape for a bit with my sanity intact.”

“Okay,” Lucas said. “Okay, I’ll do it. As long as you promise you’ll call. Just because you won’t be around doesn’t mean I’m going into this thing without you.”

Then Lucas did something unexpected. He walked forward and hugged Skylar. Not just a quick squeeze, but a tight, lasting hug, his head buried in Skylar’s shoulders. He let out a heaving breath and said, “I’m gonna miss you, man.” And for the first time, Skylar realized that Lucas needed him as much as he needed Lucas. Because who else did they have, aside from each other? Lucas had decent parents and he got along with them well enough, but they certainly weren’t what he would call “friends.” Aside from Charlie, Skylar couldn’t remember seeing anyone else visit the Bray house. He wondered how he had never noticed it before. Mrs. Bray was a photographer, after all, but there were no photos in the entire house of Lucas with friends from summer camp, or kids from the neighborhood, or the girl he was taking to prom. There had to be a reason, didn’t there? Maybe she just preferred landscapes to overly sentimental scrapbook photos. But Skylar didn’t think that was it.

He still remembered the day they’d met. It was the week after Christmas break in sixth grade, when the snow had long since gone away but the air still retained its Antarctic chill. He’d been bounding down the steps of Jefferson Middle School, his cheeks flushed. He was still

coming down from his post-Christmas high. Abner had gotten him his very own acoustic guitar – a cheap old thing, although his twelve year old self couldn't have cared less – and he'd been itching to go home and try it out again. He hadn't been so hot at it back then. His fingers felt too clumsy to form the chord shapes, and his arm too weak to strum for longer than a couple of minutes. But he refused to give up. He'd heard the guitarists from his father's records make magic with those six simple strings, and he couldn't stop until he'd found the magic too.

So his mind had been intently focused on making music when he first heard the sound of somebody plucking away at a guitar. He'd looked around in surprise. Sitting under the bare branches of a crabapple tree, his back against the welcome sign, was a frail boy with blond hair and skin so white it looked almost sickly. He'd had a scarf wrapped around his neck so tightly that his chin was engulfed in tattered red wool. His eyes stared blankly off into the parking lot, but his hands danced across the frets of a guitar with an ease that had been awe-inspiring to the twelve year old Skylar.

"Wow, you're so *good*," he'd blurted. Lucas had started in surprise, his pleasant little tune dying out in a second. Skylar had barely noticed. All he'd been able to think about was the magic he'd been hungering after for weeks. And here it was. This pale, scrawny boy knew how to find that magic.

"I wish I could play like that," he said. "Could you teach me?"

That was the turning point. Lucas could have easily told him to get lost, or – more likely – he could have stared at Skylar with that glazed, empty look of his, until he'd wandered away of his own volition, uncomfortable and slightly disturbed. But he hadn't done any of those things. Instead, he'd shrugged and said, "Sure."

So it was really just a matter of chance. They were two loners who had met in the right place and the right time, whose orbits had just happened to intersect. If Skylar had left the school two minutes later, if Lucas had chosen another tree to play his guitar under... would they still be having this conversation? Would he be talking to someone else? Or would he have packed his bags and left town without a single friendly face to miss him?

He couldn't answer any of those questions, of course, and it was pointless to even try. So he drew away from Lucas's hug with a weak smile and a pang of sadness. He knew it was time for him to go; putting it off any longer could be dangerous. Neither he nor Lucas said a word as he checked the hitching on the wagon and slung the guitar case back over his shoulder. It would

have been redundant. They'd said everything they needed to say. That last hug had been goodbye enough.

Ten seconds later, the kickstand was up again and he was flying down the slowly darkening streets of Jefferson. Skylar couldn't look back at the Bray house. He knew that if he did, his willpower might finally crumble, and he would never be able to get out of this place. But even without looking, he knew Lucas would be watching him go. He saw himself through his friend's eyes: a lone figure crouched above the handles of a bicycle, pedaling through splashes of street lamp orange before the lights became less frequent and the streets gave way to the dim shadows of evening.

Chapter 5: Ticket to Ride

Skylar had never taken a train in his entire life, so he wasn't entirely sure what to expect when he pedaled into the parking lot of Jefferson Central. It appeared to be open, at least; the station windows glowed a musty yellow color, like the dull amber of honeyed lemonade. He could see the outlines of shadowy people through the glass. The light washed over rows of bike racks and empty cars, and there was something a bit creepy about the whole effect. It made the lot look like a graveyard of abandoned vehicles.

He rode up the sidewalk and dismounted from his bike just as he reached the first line of bike racks. As he chained the bicycle to its tether post, he cast a nervous look up at the station. The building he was standing outside of looked like a low bungalow, but other structures sprouted from it on narrow staircases that led up to the top platform. Not every window was lit up. Some were dark and shuttered, as if they had been abandoned ages ago and left to gather dust. The entire complex was unnervingly silent. Skylar wasn't sure what he'd been expecting to hear – people talking, maybe, or the thrum of engines – but there was nothing.

He finished chaining his bike to the post, then gathered his gym bag from the wagon and walked up to the station. A few shadows glided through the orangey light like figure skaters. Taking a deep breath, Skylar shifted Cash's case to his other hand and pushed open the door. The space inside was wide and dimly lit: a long entryway lined with ticket booths, turnstiles, and displays for brochures. Trash was littered everywhere. Empty water bottles, candy wrappers, the occasional crushed cigarette. There was a little café at the far end, but it appeared to be closed. Thin metal bars separated the tables and chairs from the rest of the station.

Not quite sure what to do, Skylar drifted toward the closest ticket booth. Only one of them had an attendant; the others were dark and shuttered, haphazard CLOSED signs hanging from each window. Skylar got in line and waited. There were only a few people in front of him. An old man with a leather briefcase, a business type guy who was constantly checking his watch, a young couple wrapped up in a private whispered conversation, and a girl about his age with light blue backpack. She caught his eye and gave him a slight smile, although Skylar wasn't sure he would have called it a friendly one.

He rocked from toe to toe and stared off into space. Blue Öyster Cult was playing on the radio overhead. The music was so low it was barely audible. This song had always been one of

his favorites, but under the circumstances, it seemed sinister. Mocking, almost. He hummed a few notes from another song and tried his best to shut it out.

The line had dwindled considerably, and now the girl with the backpack was buying her ticket at the counter. Skylar glanced over at the transit map hanging on the wall. The mess of lines – red, green, yellow – crisscrossed one another in a dizzying pattern that looked to Skylar like a spiderweb. The red line managed to break free from the chaos and shoot off toward the edge of the map, where it ended in a large black dot labeled PROVIDENCE.

A low *ahem* came from the ticket booth. “Can I help you, sir?”

Skylar started. He looked over and saw that the backpack girl had disappeared, and now the woman in the ticket booth was staring at him impatiently. His cheeks reddened as he approached the counter. “Uh, one ticket please.”

The ticket seller looked at him with heavy-lidded eyes. She could have been around his age, or she could have been much older; it was hard to tell. Her skin was pale and her eyes were daubed with thick lines of black mascara. She chewed a piece of gum with a practiced level of indifference. There was a sticker on her studded black jacket that read HI! MY NAME IS SHARON.

“Going anywhere in particular?” she asked. She blew a large bubble that promptly popped in Skylar’s face, leaving sticky strands of red across her lips.

“Oh, right,” he said. He cast a nervous look back at the transit map. When he had been throwing his clothes into the bag, when he had been pedaling like a madman to reach this station, every detail of his plan had seemed so crystal clear to him. Now that the moment was here, all that careful calculation had disappeared. Was he insane? Could he actually go through with this?

“One ticket for the red line,” he said, after a long, heavy pause. “No stops. I want to ride it all the way to the end.”

Sharon snapped her gum and leaned over the counter, squinting at him. The whites of her eyes almost seemed to vanish in the field of mascara black. For a moment, there was no sound in the entire station except the crackle of her gum and the scratchy chorus of Blue Öyster Cult from above.

“You seem... different,” she said. “Not like most of the customers I get here.”

“Um, I’m not sure what you mean,” he said. “In what way?”

But Sharon simply shook her head and settled back into her chair. Skylar didn’t know how to interpret that. He felt a warm bead of sweat slide down his neck. What was wrong? Did

he need to flash an ID or something? Did you need a passport or some kind of paperwork before you were allowed to buy a ticket?

“Look, I can pay,” he said nervously. He glanced up at the ticket prices and fumbled in his pocket for his wallet. Whoever had designed this price chart ought to be shot – he couldn’t make heads or tails of the damn thing, and staring at it this long was giving him a headache.

“Here,” he said, handing her a ten. “I don’t know if this enough, but…”

Sharon took the bill from him and stared at it for a moment, as if she wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do with it. Eventually she placed it before her on the counter and began to type some commands on the keyboard to her left. There was a whirr and a *clack clack clack* sort of noise, and then the machine spat out a thin white rectangle of laminated plastic. Sharon pulled it out with two painted fingers and passed it over the counter to Skylar.

“There you are,” she said. “Enjoy.”

The ticket felt hot in his hands – probably still warm from the printer – and it struck him that yes, he was doing this now, there was no backing out. He scanned the few lines of text. **OUTBOUND FROM JEFFERSON CENTRAL STATION** was stamped across the top, followed by today’s date and the time of departure. Below that, the words **RED LINE: ZONE 6** stood out in bright red letters, although it looked like there had been a printer jam of some sort: the 6 had gotten stuck, resulting in a string of red sixes that staggered across the ticket before getting cut off at the edge. Each number in the sequence was lighter and fuzzier than the one before it. The ink must have been running out by the end.

“You can get to the main platform by going through the turnstiles and turning left,” Sharon said. Skylar blinked and looked up from the ticket. “The train gets here every hour, on the hour. If you miss your scheduled time slot, you’ll have to wait on the platform to board the next one.” The ghost of a smirk played at her lips, although it could have just been the way she was chewing her gum. “You’ve got fifteen minutes until the next red line train arrives.”

“Got it,” Skylar said. He stuffed the ticket in his front pocket, right beside his wallet, and shifted Cash’s case back to his other hand. “Um, thanks. Thank you very much.”

This time Skylar was sure he’d seen her smile. “Oh, don’t thank me,” she said. She didn’t elaborate. Instead, she drew the grate down over her booth and shut it with a loud clatter. The **CLOSED** sign was swinging in the window just a few seconds later.

He turned to ask the other customers what he was supposed to do next, but was surprised to find that aside from him, the station was empty. The rest of the passengers must have headed

to the platform while he was having his chat with Sharon. Shrugging, he pushed through the turnstile with a clatter and a dull clunking sound. Then he began to make his way down the long stretch of pavement to his left, following the faded arrows for the red line.

The path took him to a flight of crumbly concrete stairs. He climbed the steps one at a time, his gym bag bouncing off the side of his leg as he did so. It felt unusually heavy. He hadn't packed too much, so he wasn't sure where the extra weight was suddenly coming from. Maybe he was just tired.

When he reached the top of the stairs and stepped out onto the main platform, he saw the rest of the people from the ticket queue waiting beside the train tracks. The couple had stopped whispering to one another and were now slumped on a bench, fanning each other with brochures in order to fight the heat. The teenage girl had her eyes glued to a book. The old man just stood there gripping his suitcase, his shoulders slumped. His unfocused eyes seemed to be staring at something invisible beyond the tracks. The businessman was a speck in the distance. Skylar could see his black outline pacing along the platform: back and forth, back and forth, a constant, agitated loop.

Skylar strolled down the platform for a few minutes before stopping by another one of the transit maps. There was a large advertisement hanging right beside it: an image of a cartoon man with a can of soda in his hand and a broad, almost manic smile on his face. WHEN I GET DOWN, A CAN OF DR. SPRITZ IS ALL I NEED TO PICK MYSELF BACK UP, he proclaimed. His teeth were far too white and just a little too large for Skylar's liking.

He kept on walking until he found another empty bench halfway down the track. He let his gym bag slump on the ground as he swung the case into his lap and took a seat. Now that he was sitting down, he finally felt the stillness of the platform settling over him, and it was putting him on edge. He wondered if it would be rude to take Cash out of his case and start playing. Did people even do that sort of thing at train stations?

There was an elaborate trail of graffiti running down the length of the bench. He traced it with his finger. It was an unusual collection of symbols. Greek letters, comets, smiley faces with crossed out eyes, five pointed stars, even the odd umbrella. There was the obligatory penis, of course, and a crude drawing of breasts: just a rounded lowercase "w" with pencil dot nipples. When he got to the end, he couldn't help but chuckle. Someone had actually carved FOR A GOOD TIME, CALL 867-5309 – ASK FOR JENNY into the wood.

The concrete beneath his feet began to rumble, and a dull, clanging sound echoed through the station, which could only mean one thing – the train was approaching. Skylar felt a curious sense of déjà vu. He'd heard the clanging of those bells before, he was sure of it, but not in a station like this. It was somewhere much more open. Somewhere stranger and more distant.

Ten seconds later, the train itself appeared at the far end of the tracks. It was a big, lumbering thing. The line of blue and silver cars stretched on for what seemed like miles. Each one had an upper and a lower deck, with tinted windows and various ads plastered along the side. The titular red line ran all the way from the first car to the last in one long crimson streak. Skylar caught glimpses of many passengers' faces before the train swept by and they were lost from view. Meanwhile, the front headlight swept across the track while the bells continued to ring out their slow, incessant rhythm. *Clang, clang, clang.*

When the train came to a complete stop, one of the doors closest to him slid open, and an attendant in a thick brimmed cap stepped out. He unlatched a short flight of stairs from inside the car and let them fall down to the floor of the platform. "Watch your step, please, watch your step!" he shouted.

Skylar hoisted his gym bag onto his shoulder and picked up Cash's guitar case. From the corner of his eye, he saw the other few passengers drifting toward their own flights of stairs, bags and briefcases clutched in their hands. Even though the train was still, Skylar could feel the low thrum of the engine vibrating in his sneakers. The attendant gave him a polite nod as he climbed on board.

The inside of the train was strangely cold. Skylar looked left and right. Two short hallways stretched out on either side, each ending with a set of narrow stairs. He flipped a coin in his head and decided to go right. A jet of steamy air whooshed in his face as he crossed the threshold from one car to the next.

He walked past the handicapped seats and began to climb the stairs toward the upper car. Faded posters with safety regulations were plastered on the wall beside his head. One of them only said IN THE EVENT OF AN EMERGENCY, PLEASE REMOV; the rest was smudged out, as if it had gotten wet.

There were at least a dozen people sitting in the upper car when Skylar reached the landing. None of them were facing him. It was a spotty sea of thinning hair, bald domes, and wispy strands of gray. Only a few of the passengers looked anything close to his age. Tightening his grip on Cash's case, he chose an empty seat near the back of the car and nestled up close to

the window. He tucked his luggage under the seat in front of him. There were racks overhead for that sort of thing, but he felt more comfortable leaving his stuff where he could see it.

The train idled in the station for another few minutes or so, as if to wait for any straggling passengers. The platform looked pretty empty to Skylar. He peered out at it from the side window, wiping dust off the glass with the sleeve of his jacket. The manic cartoon figure was the only person he could see. A CAN OF DR. SPRITZ IS ALL I NEED, he grinned.

At last a rumble of motion shook through the train, and Skylar saw the platform beneath his window start to move, as if the long slabs of concrete were the ones slipping away, and they were the ones standing still. The cartoon man slid out of sight. The flaky red arrows marking the red line began to flash by at rapid speeds, until at last it became one stuttering, unbroken streak across the stone. Then it was gone. The station was behind them, and as Skylar craned his neck to peer back, he saw the long brick building recede into the landscape and disappear.

A pleasant ding came from the intercom. "Thank you for riding the commuter rail," an electronic female voice announced. "The next stop is Wickford Junction."

Well, no going back now, he thought with some relief. The choice was officially out of his hands. He settled back in his seat and watched the darkening sky flit past his window. The sun was a low orange disc on the horizon, and telephone wires flashed across it like the shadow of a zip line. Everything beyond the glass had a grayish tint. Buildings rose up out of the scenery and sank back down again. Cars and pedestrians crossed the tracks of the train in a perpendicular line, which soon elongated and became diagonal. He'd never felt this sort of sensation before. It felt like he was traveling in a low flying plane, one that was barely brushing the ground.

A slender figure slipped into the seat next to his. Skylar recognized her as the teenage girl from the platform. She tossed her blue backpack onto the floor and began to rummage through it. Her hair was long and brown, and when she bent down to deal with her luggage, the tips of it almost touched the ground. She brushed it behind her ear and kept on rummaging.

Finally she pulled out a hefty paperback novel. Skylar was only mildly surprised to see that it was *The Stand*. "That's a good one," he said. The girl looked up at him, startled, as if he'd shouted or something. It occurred to him that maybe you weren't supposed to talk to people on trains.

But the girl took it all in stride. "I haven't finished it yet," she said. "I like it so far though." Her eyes were dull gray and ringed with dark, heavy circles. Skylar couldn't decide if

she looked hungover or just sleepy. She held the book in her left hand and peered over at him. Her thumb moved in lazy circles across the cover. "I'm Becca, by the way."

"I'm Skylar." He wasn't quite sure what to do next, so he shuffled his feet and said, "So, um, where are you heading?"

"Providence," she answered. "My grandfather moved up there a few weeks ago, so I'm heading over to stay with him for a bit. How about you?"

"Same," Skylar said. "Well, minus the grandpa part. But I'm going to be living in the city for the next few months and I'm hoping to find a job while I'm out there." He fumbled for something clever to say and came up with nothing. Sustaining conversations on the train was harder than he'd expected. "Well, who knows, maybe I'll see you around," he said.

Becca shrugged. "Providence is a big city, but I guess you never know."

Their chat was interrupted by the sudden arrival of a ticket collector, who seemed to materialize from the shadows of the stairwell. "Tickets please, tickets," he intoned. He was wearing a baggy gray and blue uniform, but underneath he looked almost stick thin; his cheeks were sharp and curved, and the points of his collarbones poked through the shoulders of the suit. His attendant cap was pulled so low that the entire top half of his face was cast in shadow. Skylar couldn't even see his eyes. His thin lips were pressed together in an utterly unreadable expression.

"Tickets," he said again.

"Right, sorry," Skylar said. He withdrew the ticket from his pocket and passed it to the attendant, who took it in his bony fingers. There was a brief pause. The ticket collector had his hole puncher at the ready, but he seemed reluctant to accept Skylar's ticket. He glanced back and forth between Skylar's face and the little laminated square. Those invisible eyes were staring him down, scrutinizing him – he could practically feel them boring into his skin. The sensation gave him goose bumps.

"Is there, uh, some sort of problem?" Skylar asked. He was nervous now – could you be kicked off a train before you got to your stop? Was that how the system worked? He tried to imagine working his way back to Jefferson after all this, but it seemed impossible. One mishap and he would be stranded out here.

But the attendant shook his head. "No, there's no problem," he said. His voice had changed subtly, but Skylar couldn't quite pin down what was different. The attendant brought the hole puncher up to his ticket and punched three rapid fire holes at the top. He handed the ticket

back to Skylar without saying another word. Then he turned and took the ticket from Becca's outstretched fingers. There was no pause for her. He punched three quick holes in her ticket, passed it back, and moved on. His attendant cap bobbed down the aisle as he went to check on the other passengers.

"Wonder what that was all about," Skylar said. He stared down at his ticket, trying to figure out what was wrong with it. He knew very little about train tickets, but everything seemed to be in order. Everything except that row of printed sixes.

"Hey, did you have this problem with your ticket?" Skylar asked. He showed Becca the string of run-on numbers. "The ticket collector kind of freaked out when he saw mine. I wonder if that was why."

Becca glanced down at her own ticket. "Yeah, what do you know," she said. "The same thing happened to me. There must have been some kind of glitch in the printer." She turned it around and showed him: ZONE 6 6 6 6 6 ad nauseam.

They talked for a little while longer. Skylar was grateful to have some way to pass the time, and even though Becca wasn't as easy to talk to as Jenny Rose, she had enough juice in her to keep the conversation going. He learned that she was studying public policy at Rhode Island College and learning about botany from her grandfather. He owned a big greenhouse in the city and taught lectures at some hippy farming school in the summer. She loved nature documentaries but hated late night talk shows. She was a huge Stephen King fan, too, much to the chagrin of her born-again Christian mother. She made some comparison to the mother from *Carrie* that went way over Skylar's head. Skylar listened to her go on and on and wondered when she was going to stop to take a breath.

He threw in details about his own life when he felt able, but there was a lot he had to keep to himself, for obvious reasons. So he talked about Lucas and the warehouse and his Saturday specials at the diner. He knew it wasn't very interesting, but Becca didn't seem to mind. She went on about her boyfriend and how they'd been fighting a lot lately, but she'd finally told him off the other night and damn, it had felt so good. So liberating. Did he have a girlfriend? The question was innocent enough, but it came out of nowhere, and he wasn't ready for it. His cheeks burning, he turned to face the window and mumbled, "Once."

Becca must have understood that this was a touchy subject, so she moved on to another topic of conversation. Something about the growing crime rate. He wasn't sure. At one point she noticed a tiny red stain on the breast of her jacket, and she retreated to the ladies' room to see if

she could wash it off. Skylar sat there in silence while he waited for her to come back. The rest of the carriage felt utterly lifeless; he couldn't hear a single cough or a muffled yawn from the seats in front of him.

He slumped back in his own seat and watched the night flash past his window. The train was racing along at breakneck speeds, turning headlights and neon signs into glowing streaks of color. Reds, blues, and oranges mostly. His eyelids felt heavy. The world outside his window was disintegrating, breaking up into a series of blurred lines and flashing particles. The effect was eerie. Mesmerizing.

Almost like a shower of fireworks.

* * * * *

It's the Fourth of July again, and Skylar has parked his father's old station wagon on the lip of the town quarry.

He's seen this movie before. He knows this script, and it ends in a pillar of smoke, a mess of flaming wreckage. Everything is just as he remembers it: the quarry, the hesitant specks of starlight, the flapping plastic bag, the crowd of tiny figures swarming around the high school. Even the music is the same. The voice of Bruce Springsteen has never sounded so threatening.

He wishes he could grab the wheel and wrench them away from this quarry, but he has no control over his limbs. He is a passive observer in this place. The past is his present and he's powerless to prevent its course. He can only settle back in the driver's seat and wait for headlights to wash over the dashboard, for the squeal of brakes and the crunch of twisted metal.

Charlie rests her head against his shoulder. Her hair is soft and springy, a thick blanket of curls. He places an arm around her and draws her closer. But something is off. Charlie is snuggling in, wrapping her arms so tightly around his chest that he feels the breath being squeezed out of him. And even though he's relived this night a thousand times or more, he doesn't remember this part.

"I never thought I'd hold you again," she says quietly.

Something comes loose – the sensation of elastic snapping – and all of a sudden, Skylar can move his body. He turns his head and looks down at her. She's staring up at him, her eyes glistening, and he knows that somehow, impossibly, they've thrown away the script. The world outside the station wagon takes on a kind of unreality. It's as if they've parked in front of a movie backdrop. He stares into her mismatched eyes and feels a sense of releasing, like a knot coming untangled.

“Charlie?” he whispers.

Bruce Springsteen and the cheers of the faraway crowd cut off as suddenly as someone lifting a needle off a record. The quarry is gone too. Now the windshield of the old station wagon looks out on the gravel driveway and leafy canopy of Sarah Baker’s house.

He wants to speak, to ask if it’s really her, but his throat has locked up. Charlie doesn’t give him the space to think anyway. She reaches up and kisses him, hard – as if afraid that he’ll disintegrate the second she takes her lips away. He doesn’t fight her. Birds chirrup somewhere close by, their shadows flitting past his closed eyelids.

He lets out a gasp of breath as she pulls away, but Charlie is quiet. Her cheeks glow with the blue of the dashboard. A hesitant smile hovers on her face. She looks exactly the same as she had that night above the quarry, except that one of her key earrings is missing. He reaches up and fingers the chain around his neck, the chain that always nests just beneath the fabric of his shirt; so thin and so slight that he sometimes forgets he’s wearing it. He looks down at palms, but they are smooth, unblemished. There’s no sign of the scars he would get from scraping his hands on the rocky ground.

“It’s me, Skylar,” she says. “It’s really me.”

She reaches across the seat and grasps his hand. Her skin is just as smooth as he remembers, if a bit colder, and he can feel that it has weight. It has substance. It has none of the airiness he usually associates with dreams. He runs his thumb across the back of her hand, and he can feel the friction between their skin.

Neither one of them moves, but suddenly the Baker house is gone, and the night is gone with it. The car is now planted at the edge of a crowded parking lot. Rays of sunlight peer through a thin layer of clouds and light up dewdrops on the windshield. There’s a train station in front of them, but it doesn’t look like the one in Jefferson. This one is long and wide, a vast, sprawling structure that seems to have no beginning and no end. The sign above it reads ST. PETER’S STATION in bold blue letters. Skylar can see the train tracks through the closest of the entrance gates. The bars are a polished bronze color that glimmer with drops of pearly dew.

“What is this place?” he asks, finally finding his voice.

“Sssh. Don’t ask questions. Just listen closely,” she says.

Skylar listens. At first he hears nothing. Then little sounds begin to seep through the silence: birds twittering back and forth, the ebb and flow of distant voices, the sound of steady

traffic in some unseen city. And also, strangely enough, the chords of an old Bob Dylan song floating to them from far away. Maybe there's a radio on in the station.

"It's... peaceful," he says at last. "I like it. But where are we?"

Charlie stares out at the station as if she can see the people, the streets, the cars and sidewalks that lie beyond it. There's a wistful look in her eyes. "Believe me Skylar, I would love to talk all about it. But there are rules to this sort of thing." She turns to him. "Did you bring your ticket?"

He fumbles in his pockets for a moment, but sure enough, the ticket is there. He withdraws his hand and brings it out into the sunlight. "Yeah, I've got it, but Charlie –"

As soon as the light strikes the slip of laminated paper, it begins to glow a harsh, angry red, and a sharp flash of heat scalds Skylar's palm. He cries out and drops the ticket. It flutters into the shadows beneath the driver's seat, where the livid red glow soon fades back to white.

"I thought so," Charlie says, eyeing the ticket sadly. "You got on the wrong train, Skylar. You're not going to Providence after all."

"No, no way," he says. "I was clear with the ticket girl. One ticket, as far as the train could take me. And that's Providence."

"Trust me, Skylar. The end of the line, where your train is going..." She looks at the station again, her face wrenched up in an expression of pain. "It's as far from Providence as it's possible to get."

"But what does that even –" he starts to ask. Then the station wagon gives a sudden lurch, and for one horrible, horrible moment he fears he's snapped back to that nightmare on the edge of the quarry –

But it was just the train hitting a bump. He shot up in his seat, his eyes flying open, and all of a sudden the peaceful view of the sunlit station was gone. In its place was a grayish blur of motion. The train was zooming past the open countryside, and a thick fog seemed to have settled over most of the ground.

He slumped back in his seat. Becca was nowhere to be seen, and he would have assumed she was still using the restroom if she hadn't taken her duffel bag with her. She wasn't the only missing face; the rest of the car seemed to have thinned out considerably while he was asleep. How many stops had they passed? Were they almost at the last station?

As if on cue, the ticket collector took that moment to poke his head into the car. "We're approaching our final stop, folks," he said. "Please gather your bags and proceed to the nearest

exit. I repeat, we are approaching the end of the line. All passengers must exit the train at the next station.”

His eyes fell to his ticket, which he'd managed to cling to even after falling asleep. He could still remember that ugly red color so vividly, but the only remnant of it that had survived the jump to the real world was that string of numbers: ZONE 6 6 6 6 6 repeating.

Skylar glanced up at the door, but the attendant had slipped back into the shadows as silently as he'd appeared. Was he going crazy? Was he letting his dreams get the better of him? Abner was gone and Jefferson was long behind him, and for the first time in a long while, he was aware of just how alone he was in the world. So his brain must have churned out a proxy version of Charlie to reassure him and offer him some comfort, however short lived. But that was all. He couldn't kid himself otherwise.

He hoisted up his gym bag and carried Cash's case out into the aisle. Now that he was standing up, he saw that the rest of the passengers had formed an orderly line at the far end of the carriage. The line stretched down the stairs and out into the next train car. It was mostly the older folks with their bald or thinning scalps, but Skylar saw Becca's long brown hair among them. He joined the back of the queue and waited there with the rest of the group.

Skylar could see next to nothing out the windows. Either the sun had set completely or they were now traveling underground; the only flashes of motion he could see were brief lines of gray that zoomed along the length of the car and disappeared. The rumbling had grown louder and more grating. Skylar could only assume that meant they were slowing down and getting ready to pull into the station.

Several more minutes passed, the train continued to slow, and all of a sudden a new platform appeared in the windows to their left. Skylar was taken aback by how packed it was. Jefferson Central Station had been practically deserted, but there were so many bodies pushing their way forward that Skylar couldn't even see the floor of the station. Occasionally a tall pillar interrupted the flow of the crowd, like a jutting stone in the center of a stream, but they just swarmed around it and continued to march steadily onward.

The screeching of brakes from up above made Skylar wince. As the train crawled to a stop, he noticed that many of the other people in the line were reaching up and grabbing onto the overhead luggage racks. By the time he understood why, it was too late. The train came to a sudden, lurching halt, and he almost stumbled into the person ahead of him. He muttered an apology and tried to resume his balance.

The train doors opened with a hiss of steam, and one by one, the line of passengers descended the steps to the platform. The cap-wearing attendant who had welcomed Skylar aboard now ushered everyone carefully out the door. This time there seemed to be a stiffness to his nods, although Skylar could have been imagining that.

Skylar stepped out of the train and right into the midst of the churning crowd. For a moment or two he felt buffeted by the current, and he nearly lost his balance again – which could have been disastrous. He had the feeling that these people wouldn't stop to help a fallen pedestrian. They would just plow straight forward, eyes fixed only on their destination, pushing others aside and stepping over bodies if they had to.

The platform air was gray and hazy. A cloud of smog hovered around the train like a swarm of tiny insects, and bursts of steam seemed to be leaking from invisible pipes in the station walls. He began to cough; slowly, at first, then more convulsively, the way he sometimes got when his mother smoked cigarettes in the house. Each cough was wracked with a phlegmy, hacking sound. No one else seemed to be having the same problem. He wondered if the smog was something you got used to the more you traveled.

The line of passengers he'd followed onto the platform had dispersed and split apart, like tiny drops of water diffusing into a much larger ocean. Skylar scanned the faces around him, searching for Becca with something like desperation. He felt hopelessly lost, and at that point he would have welcomed the presence of any familiar face if it could help him orient himself even a little bit. For a moment he thought he caught sight of her further down the platform, but she was too far away to cry out to, and why would she bother answering him anyway? She barely knew him. He saw Becca's hair swish one last time before the crowd swallowed up her up.

There was nothing else to do but move forward with the pack. The platform seemed to stretch on for miles, but it looked like people were congregating around a set of narrow glass doorways at the tail end of the platform. Through the dirty panes, Skylar could see the lowest steps on a set of escalators as they slid up out of sight.

A harsh whistle smacked into his eardrums, and for a moment Skylar felt as though he'd gone deaf. The muffled bells of the commuter rail began to blare across the station. Attendants in low blue caps stood in each entryway, shouting words that Skylar couldn't hear. He could imagine the gist of it though. "Step back, doors are closing." The train began to crawl forward, picking up momentum with each toll of the bell, and soon it was streaking out of the station in a lengthy silver blur. The blinking red lights at its rear flashed one last time before curving around

the corner of the tunnel and disappearing. The only sign that it had ever been there was the distant rumble of metal against metal.

Skylar found himself staring at the wall where the train had been just seconds before. It was plastered with all sorts of graffiti, although nothing like the scratches he'd found on the empty bench: there were elaborate caricatures of tortured faces, eyes turned upward in despair, riddled with cryptic symbols and vicious streaks of paint. He saw what looked like a trumpet being strangled by a snake with two heads, and a series of marching silhouettes that reminded Skylar of a picture he'd seen in history textbooks: shadow people seared into walls after the bombing of Hiroshima. Scrawled across it all was what appeared to be a quote from the Bible, written in blotchy stripes of white paint: AND THE SMOKE OF THEIR TORMENT ASCENDETH UP FOR EVER AND EVER: AND THEY HAVE NO REST DAY NOR NIGHT – REVELATION 14:11.

“What the hell is this place?” Skylar muttered.

He was drawing closer to the low structure at the end of the platform, where people filed one by one through the smudged glass doors. The process seemed to take much longer than it should have, and he soon saw why: there was a thin attendant standing in each doorway who stopped each pedestrian before he or she could exit the platform. These figures consulted their clipboards before handing each person a tiny slip of paper and waving them through.

Skylar didn't know much about trains, but he was pretty sure that you didn't have to check with customs just to get out of the station. For the first time he began to wonder if he'd made a very bad mistake. He glanced up at the wall above the doorways, and there, in the same streaks of white, he saw another Biblical quotation stretching across the stone: ENTER YE AT THE STRAIT GATE: FOR WIDE IS THE GATE, AND BROAD IS THE WAY, THAT LEADETH TO DESTRUCTION – MATTHEW 7:13.

“What are you talking about?” an angry voice shouted from up ahead. Skylar craned his neck to see who was speaking. It looked like the impatient business type he'd seen at Jefferson Central. The man was leaning over one of the thin attendants and scowling in his face. “What's all this crap about assigning me somewhere?” he said loudly. “I'm a busy man, you know. I don't have time to deal with your bureaucratic bullshit.”

The attendant responded in a low, weary voice, gesturing to something on his clipboard. Skylar couldn't hear what he was saying, but it sounded tired and rehearsed. He got the impression that this kind of outburst was a common one. The man in the suit clearly wasn't in

the mood to hear any explanations. He barged past the attendant and strode toward the line of escalators, shoving aside a few other pedestrians in the process.

He didn't get far. As soon as he crossed the threshold, two looming guards materialized from nowhere, their meaty hands latching onto the businessman's wrists. His skinny frame looked positively puny beside them. "What the hell kind of treatment is this?" he said, his cheeks flushing red. "You can't just rough me up, I'm a paying customer!"

The giant men said nothing in response. They were wearing black suits that stretched across their bulging shoulders and made them look vaguely like gorillas at a costume party, although there was nothing comical about them. Their faces were set in the same expression of dull indifference, their eyes dark and empty. They lifted the man in the suit as easily as a child picking up a toy and began to carry him, flailing and protesting, toward the farthest door on the left. "You'll be hearing from my lawyer about this!" he shrieked. "I'm going to sue every one of your sorry asses so hard you'll be shitting blood for weeks!"

The guards ignored him and carried him back into the station, where the onrushing crowd had become momentarily stuck in traffic. The three of them turned the corner and retreated down a narrow walkway that stretched out beyond the exit building. Once they were out of sight, the businessman stopped his sputtering complaints and suddenly began to scream. It was awful; Skylar felt his flesh crawl as he listened to the sound. He didn't want to imagine what the guards were doing to the man to produce a sound like that. Eventually the screams gave way to a pitiful sort of whimper. The attendant who'd been flashing his clipboard cast a weary look in the direction of the noise. He shook his head sadly, as if to say *what a shame*.

Skylar's stomach was clenched up in knots, and his knees felt so weak he thought he might collapse. He couldn't understand why no one else was reacting to the scene they'd just witnessed. Wasn't someone going to help that poor guy? People in train stations didn't just get pulled aside and beaten up by thugs in black suits. This was insane.

By now he knew he had screwed up majorly by coming here – there was no doubt about that anymore – but his only ride back to Jefferson had left the station a long time ago, and the crowd behind him was surging, swarming forward, driving him closer and closer to those dirty glass doors. He had nowhere else to go. His eyes sought out that Biblical quote again, that blotchy painted warning: ENTER YE AT THE STRAIT GATE. What if you didn't? Did two thugs drag you into the back and break your legs?

The line was moving again now; faster than before, it seemed, as if to make up for lost time. The thin attendants checked their clipboards and handed out slips of paper at a rapid pace. Skylar was pushed forward along with the rest, and before he knew it, the man in front of him had disappeared into the antechamber of escalators. Skylar found himself staring into the unblinking eyes of the attendant.

He'd never seen eyes quite like them before. The irises were black, pitch black, with a tiny circle of red marking the outline of each pupil. There was something almost inhuman about them. The attendant glanced at him briefly, eyeing his luggage, and said, "Name?"

"Matt," Skylar said without thinking. "Matt Smith." He wasn't sure why the lie had risen so quickly to his lips, but he didn't care. He had a feeling that the only way he would make it through this gate was by playing along as much as possible.

"Sweet Lucifer, there's gotta be at least a thousand of you," the attendant grumbled. He began leafing through the massive stack of papers on his clipboard. He paused about halfway down the pile. "You the Matt Smith from New Bedford?"

"That's the one," Skylar answered. *Sweet Lucifer?* Had he heard that right?

The attendant reached out his hand, which now had a slip of paper wedged between two fingers. "This is your new assigned address," he said. His voice sounded dry and rehearsed. "Take the escalators to the upper level and follow the signs for your district. There are workers stationed up above to point you in the right direction if you get lost."

Skylar almost said "Thank you," but stopped himself; it didn't seem right somehow. He simply took the slip of paper and strode out into the antechamber. His heart was pounding so loudly he thought the attendant might even hear it over the bustle of the station. As he stepped onto the bottom step of the escalator and began to ascend to the upper level of the station, he glanced down at the paper he'd been handed. It was bigger than his train ticket, but not by much. Seven words were printed across it in tidy black letters:

NEW ACHERON DISTRICT
APARTMENT 2-DELTA
ROOM 604

It meant nothing to him.

He was about halfway up the escalator now, and he wondered what he would find when he reached the surface. He sensed the crowd up above more than he actually heard them. It was strange. He could hear the scuffling of feet, the rustling of jackets, the rumble of other trains pulling into the station, but he couldn't hear a single human voice in all that bustle. In a crowd this size, surely *someone* would be talking, right?

Skylar didn't know. He thought he'd had everything under control when he packed his bags and left Jefferson behind, but nothing seemed to make sense anymore. Maybe he was still dreaming. Maybe he was still back on the commuter rail, his head slumped against the window, and Providence was waiting for him at the end of the line. But he didn't think so. The heat, the haze, the throng of bodies, it all felt so... present. So oppressive. He could even feel sweat dribbling down his neck and pooling around the collar of his shirt. He had Cash, though, and that was no small consolation. His guitar was like a talisman. It kept him tied to Jefferson, to Lucas, to Charlie, to the world of sanity, and he clutched the handle of the case the same way a falling man might cling to a safety cable.

The steps floated upward, carrying Skylar through the dim shadows of an underground tunnel, until at last they leveled out and deposited him on the floor of the upper station. He wanted to stop and get his bearings, but just like before, he found himself being pushed forward by the constant swell of pedestrians. He had no choice but to grip his bags and stumble along as he tried to figure out where he was going.

The upper station was just as crowded as down below, except this one was cavernous. An enormous ceiling rose up on towering stone arches that met in the center of the room like the bell of a cathedral. Marble columns ran along each wall, sprouting from the station floor like gray sequoias. There were crouched, chiseled figures perched atop each pillar. Gargoyles, Skylar thought, although it was hard to tell from so far away. He squinted at one of them as he passed by. It was a gnarled, ugly thing, with webbed wings, a hooked nose, and bird of prey talons that dug into the stone.

Dangling from the apex of the dome was an enormous black clock. The cracked white face hovered in a sphere of dusky granite, its spiky hands turned approximately to half past 9. Tiny winged figures gamboled around the surface of the globe, frozen in strange and contorted poses. Like the gargoyles, they had webbed wings, but these figures also sported horns, tails, and serpentine tongues. Two of them clung to the bottom of the sphere, hanging upside down by their

clawed toes. Between them they held a sign that read DIS CENTRAL STATION. The sign itself was a creamy white color, but the letters were an inky black.

Skylar noticed that he was the only one looking up at the clock. Just like below, all the pedestrians swarming through the station seemed focused on only one thing: getting to their destination. Unlike him, though, they all seemed to know exactly where they were going. The sea of faces wavered and shifted as people strode every which way, weaving in and out of each other's paths. Most of the large groups were migrating toward gateways set up in neat rows along each wall of the station. Thin electronic banners hung above each gateway. Station names flashed across them in little orange pixels:

STYX CROSSING

GALLOWS HILL

MOUTH OF ORCUS

SLEEPY HOLLOW

MALEBOLGE CIRCLE

SHADY GROVE

Skylar was starting to feel sick to his stomach. The train he'd arrived on may have been long gone, but he needed to get out of this station before the heat and the noise and the chaos of it all drove him insane. He felt sweat running down his brow as he glanced at the little slip of paper. NEW ACHERON DISTRICT. What was that even supposed to mean?

He tried drifting toward the side of the station and was surprised to find that the crowd brushed intuitively aside for him. He inched through as quickly as he could without shoving into other pedestrians. When he reached the wall, he slumped back against one of the marble pillars and drew in a shaky breath. The stone was blissfully cold. Somehow, he had managed to find a pocket of empty space in all the bustle. It felt like a bubble of air in a current of rushing water.

"Can I help you with something?" a voice asked from his left.

Skylar turned, startled, to find a tiny stone kiosk nestled between two of the pillars. The attendant manning the counter was just as thin as the figures checking names downstairs, but her uniform was slightly different: she wore a navy blue vest over her stiff gray shirt and slacks. Her eyes were the same though. Two obsidian chunks, ringed by flecks of red.

Skylar stared into those hypnotic eyes for a few seconds before answering, “Uh, yeah. I’m not sure where I’m supposed to go.” He showed her the card with the strange address. Her dark eyes scanned it for less than a second before she extended a long finger toward the far end of the station.

“Just keep walking until you reach the doors that open to the outside,” she said. “New Acheron is only a few blocks past the station. Keep to the signs on the street and you shouldn’t have any problems finding the place.”

Skylar shoved the card into his pocket. “Um, thank you,” he said. It still seemed like the wrong thing to say – he sensed that whatever she’d just helped him with was nothing to be thankful for – but he wasn’t sure what else he was supposed to do.

The attendant said nothing in response. She only gave him a thin smile, one that didn’t even crease the corners of her cheeks. There was nothing remotely warm about it.

He turned his back on her and forced his way back into the throng of people, trying to put as much distance between himself and those horrible eyes as possible. Suddenly the chaos of the crowd didn’t seem so bad. It was safer to be part of the current, he thought. If you tried to fight it, if you swam against the stream, who knew what kind of black-eyed monsters would be waiting to fish you out?

So he let himself be ushered forward with everyone else. Overhead, a loud ding rang through the station, and a tinny female voice came over the intercom. “*Attention passengers. The next orange line train to Shady Grove will arrive in five minutes.*” A new swarm of walkers adjusted their path at once and began to flood toward the Shady Grove gateway. Skylar managed to cover a good deal of ground in the ensuing shuffle.

He had no idea how long he ended up walking for – long enough to develop blisters on his toes, at least. But eventually he found himself in the tall shadow of the farthest archway, and his heart leapt when he saw the exit doors. He couldn’t see much through the smudgy windows, but that didn’t matter. Beyond those doors was outside: fresh air, open skies, sprawling streets and sidewalks. Right now nothing sounded better. The crowd in front of him poured through each set of revolving doors, a carousel of gray faces that slid behind the dirty glass and vanished into the night.

Soon it was his turn. Clutching his precious luggage to his side, he stepped into the rotating doors and pushed his way through to the other side. Those few seconds in between were eerie and silent, as if both outside worlds had gone away, leaving him in a grimy circle of limbo.

But this feeling didn't last long. Three steps later and he was out, out at last, out of that churning sea of heat and smoke and bodies. A nervous laugh escaped from his throat.

The crowd had dispersed considerably now that it was spilling onto the sidewalk, and Skylar took the opportunity to slip away and get his bearings. He found a lonely wooden bench tucked beneath the shadows of the station. Taking a seat, he watched as the line of pedestrians marched around the corner and disappeared down some side street he couldn't see. He glanced around in case one of those creepy attendants was standing nearby. It seemed ridiculous to think that he would get in trouble for sitting on an empty bench, but after what had happened with the businessman on the lower platform... well, it was better to be safe than sorry.

He'd been so preoccupied celebrating his escape from the station that he'd barely noticed the world he'd stumbled into. Now he found himself staring up at the outline of a city. "Outline" was the best word he could fit to it, because the buildings themselves didn't seem to have a defined shape; their edges were lost in a field of murky fog. Skyscrapers jutted out of the pavement and stuck their pointy noses into the air like they were trying to tear through the clouds. It was a little past 9:30 according to the station clock, but Skylar couldn't see a single star. Even the moon was gone. Occasionally a flicker of static lightning would cut through the blanket, followed by the soft rumblings of thunder.

Skylar had been to Providence only once before, with Charlie and Lucas, and the skyline he was staring at now vaguely resembled the one he remembered. But the similarities ended there. The Providence he knew wasn't occupied by thin, menacing attendants in low brimmed caps who handed out housing assignments and dragged people into alleys for unseen forms of punishment. The Providence he knew wasn't blanketed in this pervasive cloud of gloom and darkness. He pictured those two demonic figurines, and the sign they clutched in their claws, and Charlie's face: pale and pretty and free of scars, staring out the dew soaked windshield. *The end of the line, where your train is going... it's as far from Providence as it's possible to get.* He heard those words echo in the night like a voice in the distance. And he was scared.

"Where am I?" he whispered.

Afterword

When I was a young writer, scribbling stories in the margins of my notebook paper, I always imagined myself being interviewed like the famous authors I admired so much. I had pages filled with character sketches and half-formed plotlines, and I eagerly anticipated the eternal question: “Where do you get your ideas?” Now that I find myself asked that same question, I realize that it’s the hardest question a writer can answer. Some of my ideas come from dreams, some from the world around me, some from this vast, unexplainable well of stories that we all carry around inside us. For me, in many ways, writing is more an act of finding than it is creating. In his incredibly insightful memoir, *On Writing*, Stephen King says that “Stories are relics, part of an undiscovered pre-existing world” (163). I don’t think I could have put it more perfectly. The idea that would one day grow into *Suburban Train* didn’t come into being all at once; I had to do quite a bit of digging and refining to bring that story to the surface.

Suburban Train owes a tremendous debt to Dante, of course. This story wouldn’t exist without the sprawling masterpiece that is the *Inferno*. But I also drew inspiration from contemporary writers such as Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, and China Mieville – writers of the bizarre and supernatural who always keep one foot planted in the real world. I find these types of stories endlessly fascinating. The supernatural is such a valuable element of storytelling because it highlights the natural, the human, by contrast. It creates unlimited possibilities for the writer and allows for the exploration of many complex themes.

The works of David Mitchell are a great example of how literary, character-driven fiction benefits from supernatural elements. His novels *Cloud Atlas* and *The Bone Clocks* delve into a variety of different genres, following the lives of several characters throughout the course of history – and well into the future, too. From dystopian science fiction to seafaring journals to coming-of-age tales, his novels encompass more modes of storytelling than most writers employ in their entire lifetime. But no matter what genre he works in, Mitchell is always fascinated by people. The magical universe he has constructed is usually just a backdrop for the real struggles faced by average people who face the same problem we all do: trying to navigate an increasingly dangerous world. His characters are brought together by a cycle of death and rebirth, a supernatural process of reincarnation that bridges stories from very disparate timelines. In such a vast and genre-bending way, Mitchell shows how connected we are as human beings, and how one ripple effect can spread through time and change the lives of so many others. It helps that his

works tap into the inherent pleasures of genre, making them the perfect vehicles to reach a wider audience. This ability to share thought-provoking ideas with more mainstream readers is why I love reading and writing stories that might be defined as “genre fiction.”

It’s hard for me to place *Suburban Train* in a precise genre category, but if I had to, I would call it dark urban fantasy. It may not be as apparent in these early pages, but after we take the plunge into Hell, the book starts to draw influence from the horror genre as well. A small disclaimer: I’m not a morbid person. My friends and family can attest to that. But ever since I was a kid, I’ve been drawn to stories of the dark, the unsettling, the macabre. I grew up on *Goosebumps* and *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*. Stephen King is obviously one of my greatest inspirations. My favorite novel is *House of Leaves*, a Gothic, labyrinthine descent into nightmares and insanity. I’d like to think I’m pretty diverse in terms of my own writing, but I always feel most at home working in the genre of the uncanny. Why? I don’t think I have a concrete answer. I’m with King when he argues that too many people rely on “the assumption that the writer controls the material instead of the other way around” (159). But if I were to guess, I think it’s because, deep down, there’s a little darkness in all of us. And writing is a socially acceptable way for us to grapple with that darkness, to get our anger and fear and anxiety safely onto the page, where we can confront it face to face. *Suburban Train* is absolutely a story of confronting darkness, both of the literal and figurative kind.

Part of the challenge in adapting Dante’s classic to a more contemporary genre was imagining what aspects of his epic would translate to the modern day. On one level, we can read Dante’s journey as a strict allegory, an instruction manual for good Christian behavior. But what makes the *Divine Comedy* so engaging for me is Dante’s presence as a character within the story. Dante the pilgrim doesn’t exist in stasis. He’s not a faceless everyman. He’s shaped by the actions of his own individual past, by his conflicts with the warring factions in Florence, by his intense, unrequited love for Beatrice. His journey through the afterlife is a deeply personal one. In constructing Skylar’s story, I wanted to imitate that aspect of the *Inferno* and show how his private hell mirrors the quite literal Hell he’s stumbled into. Like Dante, Skylar has the chance to glimpse what lies beyond the veil and purge himself of the guilt weighing down in him: guilt that he couldn’t save Charlie or Abner, guilt that he selfishly abandoned his mother and placed a burden on his best friend’s shoulders. We see at many points throughout the novel how Skylar’s past keeps bleeding into the present. He is haunted by the ghosts of mistakes he can’t undo, of

disasters he couldn't prevent. Hell forces him to exorcise those inner demons. If Skylar learns anything in this city of the dead, it's the importance of going on living.

So where does the novel go from here? Skylar's come so far from home, but his journey has barely begun. Part Two shows us more of the city's infrastructure and introduces Skylar's new roommates, who collectively serve as a Virgil character, navigating Skylar through this dangerous world and aiding him in his plans to escape. Things grow complicated when Skylar realizes that Abner is also trapped in the city, and he formulates a desperate plan to set his uncle free. Charlie also appears to him throughout in various dreams and memories. She's the Beatrice to his Dante, guiding every move he makes, helping him take the straight path through Hell and emerge on the other side with the weight lifted from his heart.

Although Skylar's story is intensely personal, I think there's a universal aspect to it as well. We may not share Skylar's exact pain, but we all have loved ones and sick ones in our lives, and we all have memories from our past that we regret. This is not the stuff of allegory. This is that human connection that Mitchell values so highly, that assertion of one's sanity and strength in a world gone mad. Dante reminds us at the beginning of the Comedy that he has journeyed "half of *our* life's way" (emphasis mine), and he turns to us repeatedly throughout his travels, treating us as a friend and confidante (*Inferno* I.i). Like Dante, Skylar isn't alone in this story – not really. He has Charlie, and he has us. And as Skylar works his way through this hellish afterlife, struggling to cast off his baggage and return home again, maybe we can achieve a catharsis of our own. After all, in the words of Stephen King, "Life isn't a support-system for art. It's the other way around" (101).

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